15th ANNUAL QUANTITY SURVEYING RESEARCH CONFERENCE 2025

NAVIGATING DISRUPTION, COLLABORATION, AND A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

11-13 NOVEMBER 2025

CAPE TOWN
SOUTH AFRICA

THE SA COUNCIL FOR THE QUANTITY SURVEYING PROFESSION
Established in terms of the Quantity Surveying Profession Act 2000 (Act No 49 of 2000)

University of Cape Town • iYunivesithi yaseKapa • Universiteit van Kaapstad

CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

EDITORS: PROF KATHY MICHELL | DR ROLIEN TERBLANCHE | ELMARIE EDWARDES | KAREN LE JEUNE

South African Council for the Quantity Surveying Profession
Established in terms of the Quantity Surveying Profession Act 2000 (Act No 49 of 2000)

ISBN: 978-1-83492-219-5

15th SACQSP INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH CONFERENCE 2025
Theme "QS and the Built Environment: Navigating Disruption, Collaboration and a Sustainable Future"

Book of Proceedings of the 15th SACQSP International Research Conference 2025, held at the Lagoon Beach Hotel, Milnerton, Cape Town, South Africa on 11th – 13th November 2025.

Edited by Professor Kathy Michell, Dr Rolien Terblanche, Elmarie Edwardes and Karen Le Jeune, Department of Construction Economics and Management, University of Cape Town.

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Printed in South Africa (February 2026)

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Published by
Department of Construction Economics and Management
University of Cape Town
Cape Town
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As per the “Policy and Procedures for the Measurement of Research Output of Public Higher Education Institutions” by the Department of Education the conference proceedings are:

- Scholarly in nature
- Not previously published
- Double-blind Peer reviewed and
- Based on research

The conference is therefore allocated one-half of a unit (0,5) if all authors are affiliated to the claiming institution. In the case where authors are affiliated with two or more institutions, the subsidy is shared between the claiming institutions.

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Academic Administration Committee Declaration

All papers in the conference proceedings were double-blind peer-reviewed at abstract and full paper stages by at least two members of the Scientific and Technical Review Committee as per the peer review process documented below.

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Ms Alice Moeti, Chairperson, Conference Organising Committee, SACQSP board member

Dr Josephine Llale (University of Witwatersrand), Vice President of SACQSP, SACQSP board member

Mr Mfezeko Gwazube, Registrar of SACQSP

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Dr Rolien Terblanche (University of Cape Town), UCT representative

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Scientific and Technical Review Committee Members

All papers submitted to SACQSP 15th Annual Research Conference were subjected to a double-blind (peer review) refereeing process. Referees were drawn from an expert panel, representing respected academics from the built environment research community. The conference organisers wish to extend their appreciation to the following members of the panel for their work, which is invaluable to the success of conference.

Prof Yewande Adewunmi, University of Witwatersrand, South Africa

Prof Clinton Aigbavboa, University of Johannesburg, South Africa

Dr Christopher Amoah, University of the Free State, South Africa

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Dr Lara Tookey, Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand
Prof Patricia Tzortzopoulos, Nottingham Trent University
Prof Benita Zulch, University of the Free State, South Africa

The Peer Review Process

A rigorous two-stage blind peer-review process by at least two acknowledged experts and members of the Scientific and Technical Committee was undertaken for each abstract and paper in this conference. The peer-review process was strictly adhered to so as to maintain the high standard of the conference proceedings and to comply with the requirements for a subsidy of the South African Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET).

Each abstract received was twice blind-reviewed in terms of the following criteria:

- Academic rigour;
- Coherence, clarity and focus of abstract;
- Originality of the subject matter;
- Relevance to the conference theme, and
- Rigor of empirical research undertaken.

A total of 103 abstracts were received. Authors whose abstracts were accepted after the first stage of the review process were provided with the anonymous reviewers' comments and requested to submit their full papers noting and addressing the comments received. The submitted papers were twice blind-reviewed in terms of the following criteria:

- Academic rigour;
- Criticality of the current literature review;
- Appropriateness of the research methodology;
- Empirical research findings and robustness of analysis;
- Contribution to knowledge and to industry development;
- Originality of the subject matter;
- Overall presentation, and
- Relevance to the conference theme and objectives.

All papers were submitted to Turnitin for a plagiarism check. The final papers were only included in the conference presentation programme and the conference proceedings after evidence was provided of how the comments of the double peer-review process had been addressed. At no stage was any member of the Scientific and Technical Review Committee or the editor of the proceedings involved in the review process related to their own authored or co-authored papers.

Of the 92 full papers originally received, 87 papers were finally accepted for presentation at the conference and inclusion in these proceedings. Accepted papers were from multiple institutions and complies with the DHET 60-40 percentage policy as depicted in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Summary of 2025 SACQSP International Conference Paper Contribution per Academic Institution

Institutional Affiliation	Sum of Author Count Per Paper	% Per Institution
University of the Witwatersrand	18,50	21,26%
University of Johannesburg	16,22	18,64%
Central University of Technology	10,50	12,07%
Nelson Mandela University	9,83	11,30%
University of the Free State	6,33	7,28%
University of Cape Town	5,00	5,75%
Durban University of Technology	3,83	4,41%
Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Ghana	2,20	2,53%
Federal University of Technology, Minna, Niger State, Nigeria	2,00	2,30%
Tshwane University of Technology	2,00	2,30%
Cape Peninsula University of Technology	2,00	2,30%
Walter Sisulu University	1,67	1,92%
University of Pretoria	1,67	1,92%
University of KwaZulu-Natal	1,50	1,72%
Kumasi Technical University, Ghana	1,00	1,15%
Midlands State University, Zimbabwe	1,00	1,15%
College of Science and Engineering, Westcliff University, USA	0,67	0,77%
DiPaloPalo Actuarial Consulting	0,50	0,57%
Loughborough University, UK	0,33	0,38%
William V.S. Tubman University, Liberia	0,25	0,29%
Total	**87,00**	**100,00%**

A total of twelve papers, with abstracts initially published in the Book of Abstracts, have been subsequently excluded from the Book of Proceedings as a result of author-requested retractions or due to the authors' failure to attend and present at the 15th SACQSP International Research Conference.

FOREWORD

Mr Arthur Quphe
President
South African Council for the Quantity Surveying Profession

It is my honour to present this Book of Abstracts for the 2025 SACQSP International Research Conference, held under the theme “QS and the Built Environment: Navigating Disruption, Collaboration, and a Sustainable Future.”

This collection represents the intellectual and professional contributions of researchers, academics, and practitioners who continue to advance the discipline of Quantity Surveying within a rapidly evolving built environment. The topics explored reflect our shared commitment to addressing emerging challenges from technological transformation and environmental sustainability to social impact and innovation in practice.

At a time when the profession’s role extends far beyond cost management, this publication underscores the significance of research as a bridge between knowledge, policy, and professional application. It affirms the Council’s mandate to promote thought leadership, ethical excellence, and a forward-looking approach to education and professional development.

The insights contained in these abstracts not only inform the future of our profession but also highlight the collaborative spirit required to build a more resilient and inclusive built environment.

I extend my sincere gratitude to our academic partner, the University of Cape Town, our sponsors, and all contributors who have made this publication possible. May these pages inspire further dialogue, innovation, and shared purpose among all who are committed to shaping the future of Quantity Surveying.

Mr Arthur Quphe
President
South African Council for the Quantity Surveying Profession

FOREWORD

Mr Mfezeko Gwazube
Registrar
South African Council for the Quantity Surveying Profession
Conference Organising Committee

It is a pleasure to welcome you to the 2025 SACQSP International Research Conference. This year's theme, "QS & the Built Environment: Navigating Disruption, Collaboration and a Sustainable Future," reflects the exciting and sometimes challenging changes taking place in our profession.

The role of the Quantity Surveyor is evolving every day. From digital innovation to sustainable construction and shifting economic demands, we are expected to adapt, lead and support the creation of infrastructure that improves people's lives. The SACQSP's 13 statutory mandates guide this work by ensuring strong professional standards, ethical conduct, ongoing development and the growth of new knowledge.

This conference directly supports these responsibilities. It provides the space where research, learning and practice come together to help us strengthen our competence, understand emerging issues and remain relevant in a rapidly changing built environment.

I encourage you to participate fully: connect with others, share your insights and take home ideas that can help drive positive change in your own work. Together, we can continue to build a profession that is future-ready, trusted and committed to serving society.

Thank you for joining us. Wishing you an inspiring and productive conference.

Mr Mfezeko Gwazube
Registrar
South African Council for the Quantity Surveying Profession

FOREWORD

Ms Alice Moeti
Nonku Ntshona & Associates Quantity Surveyors (Pty) Ltd
Chairperson of the Conference Organising Committee
SACQSP Board Member

Welcome to Cape Town and to the 2025 SACQSP International Research Conference. We are delighted to gather with you as we explore new ways of working, new technologies and more sustainable solutions for the built environment.

Our theme this year reminds us that progress happens when we are willing to collaborate, learn from one another and rethink traditional approaches. This conference brings together academics, students, industry professionals, and leading experts who are passionate about improving our profession and our world and are eager to challenge conventions to elevate our standards. You are an important part of that conversation.

I would like to thank the Conference Organising Committee for their commitment and teamwork in putting this event together. They worked tirelessly to put together a programme that is engaging and an environment that allows conversations that will inspire change. I am honoured and privileged to have led a team that is dedicated to making sure that the conference is a success. Our sincere thanks to our sponsors for their generous support, which has been vital to the success of this conference and the continued growth of our field. Your contributions make it possible for us to create a space where learning and innovation truly thrive.

Over the next few days, I hope you'll take the chance to connect with new colleagues, share your experiences and explore fresh ideas. Our programme is brimming with discussions that explore every facet of collaboration, disruption and how to envision a sustainable future for our industry. From tackling today's challenges to uncovering the potential of disruptive technologies, each presentation is designed to spark ideas and inspire action. I hope you leave with renewed motivation to challenge convention, innovate boldly, and redefine what's possible in our field. The relationships and insights formed here will continue to shape the future long after we leave this venue.

Thank you for being here. We look forward to a meaningful, successful and memorable conference with you.

Ms Alice Moeti
Chairperson: Local Organising Committee
2025 SACQSP International Research Conference

FOREWORD

Dr Rolien Terblanche
Department of Construction Economics and Management
University of Cape Town

UCT Academic Administration Committee
(Chairperson)
Conference Organising Committee
(UCT Representative)

It is my distinct pleasure to welcome you to the 15th SACQSP International Research Conference, hosted in partnership with the University of Cape Town, under the theme "QS and the Built Environment: Navigating Disruption, Collaboration, and a Sustainable Future."

We gather at a pivotal moment when the built environment sector is experiencing rapid transformation. Technological advances (from digital twins, AI, and data analytics to automation) are reshaping how we plan, design, build, and maintain our infrastructure. Simultaneously, pressing needs of environmental sustainability, resilience, and social equity demand that practitioners and researchers re-examine traditional models. In the midst of disruption, Quantity Surveyors must not only adapt but lead; leveraging collaboration across disciplines to co-create sustainable and innovative solutions.

This conference is a platform for advancing that leadership. These proceedings engage with a rich body of work exploring digital transformation, risk and regulatory change, life-cycle cost approaches, circular economy models, collaborative contracting, and ethics in evolving practice. The diversity of submissions in methodology, geographic context, and thematic focus, speaks to both the vibrancy and urgency of scholarship at this intersection.

As the academic anchor for this conference, the University of Cape Town is honoured to support this gathering. Our institution is deeply committed to excellence in research, capacity building, and thought leadership in the built environment. I encourage you, as participants, to read with curiosity, engage in debate, challenge assumptions, and forge new collaborations.

Thank you for your participation, and I wish you a stimulating, insightful, and transformative conference and proceedings.

Dr Rolien Terblanche
Chairperson of UCT Academic Content Administration Committee
November 2025

FOREWORD

Professor Kathy Michell
Department of Construction Economics and Management
University of Cape Town

Academic Content Administration Committee
(Chairperson of SACQSP 2025 Scientific and Technical Review Committee)

The Fifteenth (15th) International South African Council for the Quantity Surveying Profession (SACQSP) Research Conference provides an internationally endorsed forum for academics, post-graduate researchers and practitioners to address and debate the evolving role of Quantity Surveyors in addressing modern challenges within the built environment sector. As the construction-value chain faces rapid technological advancements and increasing sustainability demands, Quantity Surveyors play a pivotal role in inter- and multi-disciplinary collaborations to promote the integration of innovative technological and sustainable solutions. Hence the conference theme “QS and the Built Environment: Navigating Disruption, Collaboration, and a Sustainable Future".

The main objectives of the conference are to bring together academics, postgraduate researchers and industry representatives from Southern Africa and further afield to discuss and deliberate issues of common interest with the aim of advancing the quantity surveying profession. The 2025 conference seeks to explore cutting edge research relevant to the present and future state of development of the professions and industry, nationally and globally.

Authors were invited to respond to the following themes:

Navigating Disruption in the Built Environment

- Emerging Technologies and Digital Transformation
- The Impact of Technological Innovation on Cost Management
- Economic and Market Volatility
- Legal and Regulatory Changes
- Risk Management

Collaboration for Resilient and Efficient Projects

- Integrating QS with Multidisciplinary Teams for Project Success
- Stakeholder Engagement and Communication
- Public-Private Partnerships
- Contracting Models and Dispute Resolution
- Leveraging Data
- BIM

Sustainability and the Role of the QS in Climate Action

- Sustainable Cost Management
- Green Procurement Strategies
- Life Cycle Costing
- Net-Positive and Circular Economy

- Carbon Accounting
- Environmental, Social, and Governance
- Innovative Sustainable Construction Materials and Methods

The Evolving Role of QS and the Built Environment Professionals

- The Changing Skillset
- Ethics and Professional Responsibility
- Entrepreneurship
- The Future of QS Education

The content of these double-blind peer reviewed papers contributes to the body of professional and technical knowledge and supports improvement in services that we, as quantity surveyors, provide to our clients.

A read through of the accepted papers reveals that the coverage of this conference is both specific and wide-ranging in terms of the development of a collaborative sustainable future for the profession.

We wish you all fruitful deliberations and networking opportunities at what is sure to be an enjoyable conference.

Professor Kathy Michell
UCT Academic Content Administration Committee
Chairperson of the SACQSP 2025 Scientific and Technical Review Committee
November 2025

PREFACE

Dr Rolien Terblanche
Department of Construction Economics and Management
University of Cape Town

Conference Organising Committee – UCT Representative
Academic Content Administration Committee – Chairperson

Professor Kathy Michell
Department of Construction Economics and Management
University of Cape Town

Academic Content Administration Committee
(Chair of Scientific and Technical Review Committee)

Elmarie Edwardes
Department of Construction Economics and Management
University of Cape Town

Academic Content Administration Committee

Karen Le Jeune
Department of Construction Economics and Management
University of Cape Town

Academic Content Administration Committee

The Department of Construction Economics and Management at the University of Cape Town was appointed by the SACQSP to administer the collation of academic content for the 15th Annual SACQSP International Research Conference.

The main theme of the conference is the "QS and the Built Environment: Navigating Disruption, Collaboration, and a Sustainable Future" which seeks to explore the evolving role of Quantity Surveyors in addressing modern challenges within the built environment sector. As the construction-value chain faces rapid technological advancements and increasing sustainability demands, Quantity Surveyors play a pivotal role in inter- and multi-disciplinary collaborations to promote the integration of innovative technological and sustainable solutions.

We are indebted to the members of the Scientific and Technical Review Committee for reviewing the abstracts and papers. Your constructive feedback and comments assisted authors with the development of their papers.

We also wish to acknowledge the tireless efforts of the SACQSP Conference Organising Committee (COC) in taking the lead in the overall planning and decision-making required to organise the conference, handling logistics, scheduling, marketing, sponsorship, and much more.

Administration Organising Committee
University of Cape Town
November 2025

Keynote Speakers

Theme – Foresight

Mr Isaac Nkama

Isaac Nkama is a formally qualified *Foresight Strategist/Professional Futurist* and diversely educated and experienced executive. He holds a *Postgraduate Diploma in Futures Studies* and an *MPhil in Futures Studies*. He began his career in the motor industry and has held management, executive and board positions in the manufacturing, rail, technology, aviation and real estate sectors. He is a member of the Governing Board of Stellenbosch University's *Institute for Futures Research* (IFR). This is the first and only Futures Institute of its kind in Africa. His strong passion for this field and the desire to use its technical forecasting methodologies and scientific techniques led him to take a study sabbatical during his business career in order to obtain formal qualifications in it.

He is also a long standing member of the National Governing Council of the *South African Institute of International Affairs* (SAIIA), Africa's oldest and largest independent think-tank on international affairs and economic diplomacy.

He is an expert in analysing how various components of the future might unfold, and uses these possible outcomes to empower organisations and leaders with valuable and important global, continental and local insights. He combines Strategic Foresight/Futures Studies with his other qualifications, as well as business experience, in order to contextualise issues from a unique perspective that is both broad and interconnected.

Over the years, he has built high level business and political networks across the continent, and has also done extensive work in various sectors. He has also led several high level delegations of major corporations in exploring opportunities in various parts of Sub-Saharan Africa. His understanding of the continent is further enhanced by the benefit of having lived in different countries.

A global citizen with a world view on issues, he is both passionate and extremely knowledgeable about Africa and African affairs. Born in Zambia, Nkama attended primary school at the International School of Bonn, West Germany; secondary school at the International School of Lusaka, Zambia; and completed his high school at the International School of Lesotho. He runs *Foresight Africa Consulting* https://foresightafricaconsulting.com/.

Mr Isaac Nkuma
Foresight Africa Consulting
foresightafricaconsulting.com

Theme – Entrepreneurship

Professor Mamogethi Phakeng

Dr Mamokgethi Phakeng is a renowned academic, boasting a wealth of experience spanning over two decades as an executive across various institutions of higher learning in South Africa. Most recently, she held the position of Vice-Chancellor at the University of Cape Town, the top university on the African continent, before opting for early retirement in March of the present year.

Dr Phakeng holds a doctoral degree (PhD) in Mathematics Education from the University of the Witwatersrand and has been granted two honorary doctorates: a Doctor of Science (Hon. DSc) from the University of Bristol in the United Kingdom in 2019 and a Doctor of Education (Hon. DEd) from the University of Ottawa in Canada in 2022. Her contributions to research and community engagement have garnered numerous accolades, including the Order of the Baobab (Silver) bestowed upon her by the President of South Africa in April 2016. In addition, CEO magazine recognised her as the most influential female academic in Africa in August 2014, and Forbes included her in their inaugural list of the 50 Most Powerful Women in Africa in 2020. In September 2022, Dr. Phakeng became the inaugural recipient of the Africa Education Medal, a distinction presented by T4 Education and HP. In December 2023, she was awarded the Global Lifetime Achievement Award by Women in STEM for her contribution in opening doors for women and girls in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics and her wide-reaching impact in the STEM field.

In 2004, she founded the Adopt-a-learner Foundation, an initiative dedicated to providing financial and educational support to South African students from underprivileged areas, enabling them to pursue higher education qualifications. Notably, when assuming her role as Vice-Chancellor in July 2018, she donated 20% of her monthly salary and 100% of proceeds from her public speaking engagements to scholarship funds administered by UCT.

Following her early retirement, she was appointed by the President of the Republic of South Africa to serve on the Presidential Advisory Council on National Orders. Currently, Dr Phakeng is a businesswoman, with diverse interests spanning media, agriculture, and consulting particularly in the education sector. She is a member of the Advisory Board of the German University of Digital Science and in the President's Council of the University of the People.

Dr Mamokgethi Phakeng
PhD(Wits); Hon DSc(UoB); Hon DEd(UoOttawa); GCOB (Silver); MASSAf; FAAS; FTWAS; AfricaEdMedal
Email: Mamokgethi@me.com

Theme – Sustainability

Dr Eugene Seah

Associate Professor Eugene Seah is a highly esteemed professional in the construction and project management industry, with over 25 years of experience in cost and contracts management, sustainability, digital and technology, and construction law, including alternate dispute resolution. He has supervised and worked on a diverse range of developments, including commercial buildings, hotels, residential, institutional, airports, infrastructure projects, industrial facilities, mobility projects, transit-oriented developments (TOD), and sports complexes. His extensive experience and expertise make him a well-respected figure in both the construction sector and the academic community.

Throughout his career, Eugene has held several key leadership positions. He currently serves as the CEO of DLS Consultancy Pte Ltd and has previously been the , COO of Meinhardt Singapore and their Global Board Member, Senior Director at Surbana Jurong, Country Head and CEO at Arcadis, and Director/Partner at Davis Langdon & Seah. His extensive project experience includes significant commercial buildings, hotels, residential developments, and infrastructure projects, with notable projects such as Capella Singapore, St Regis Hotel, and various high-profile data centers.

Eugene's contributions to the field have been recognized with numerous awards, including the PAQS Best Presenter Award, ICEC Chairman's Award, and BCA-SGBC Green Building Individual Awards – Green Advocate. He is also a prolific member of various professional organizations, holding leadership roles in the Singapore Institute of Surveyors and Valuers, Building Smart Singapore, and the International Council of Cost Engineers, among others. His broad expertise, significant project portfolio, and numerous accolades underscore his position as a leading figure in the construction industry, making him an ideal keynote speaker for our event.

A/p Sr Dr Eugene Seah
Chairman International Cost Engineering Council
SEA Chairman, APAC Board Member, Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors
2nd VP of Singapore Institute of Surveyors and Valuers
CEO, DLS Consultancy Pte Ltd
President Commission, PT DLS Consultancy Indonesia

Theme – Economics

Professor François Viruly

Professor François Viruly is a property economist with over thirty years' experience in the analysis of the South African property market. Professor Viruly lectures in Urban Economics, Property Development and Portfolio Management at the University of Cape Town in the School of Construction Economics and Management.

François held the position of Chief Economist at the Chamber of Mines. He was Head of Research at JHI Professional Services and Acting Head of School of the School of Construction Economics and Management at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. He been the President of the International Real Estate Society (2021-2022) and held the position of President and Executive Director of the African Real Estate Society. He heads the UCT-Urban Real Estate Research Unit at the University of Cape Town. He was a Non-executive Director and Chair of Remuneration Committee of the Accelerate Property Fund. He is the Director of Viruly Consulting (Pty) Ltd and a Fellow of RICS (Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors).

Prof Viruly has undertaken extensive research into the South African property cycle, the drivers of the South African property market and the relationship between urban economics and property markets in Sub-Saharan Africa. Recent assignments have focused on ensuring that urban policies and interventions consider the role of real estate markets. This includes the mechanics that drive property markets and the factors that influence decision making by different player being the investors, tenants and banks. Prof Viruly dedicates time to the development of small-scale property developers, supporting their role in the economy and urban regeneration initiatives.

François Viruly
Associate Professor University of Cape Town and
Director of Viruly Consulting
Francois.viruly@uct.ac.za

Navigating Disruption in the Built Environment

SACQSP2025-23

Impact of Blockchain Technology on Commercial Real Estate Project Cost Management in Abuja, Nigeria

Olusola Kehinde Olaniyi[1], Joseph Makinde[2]

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Abstract

Abuja's ever-growing real estate industry is facing pressure to manage project costs effectively due to inefficient project budget issues, cost overruns, lack of transparency, and project delays. Hence, this study assessed the influence of blockchain technology on the project cost management (PCM) of commercial real estate in Abuja by evaluating the challenges undermining project cost management and blockchain technology, the perceptions relating to the nexus between different blockchain attributes and their utility in resolving identified project cost management challenges, and the challenges of blockchain adoption in commercial real estate PCM. The data for this study were obtained with the aid of questionnaires administered to Abuja chapters of the Nigerian Institution of Quantity Surveyors (NIQS) and Chartered Institute of Project Managers of Nigeria (CIPMN). One hundred and thirteen (113) and sixty-seven (67) questionnaires administered to the Quantity Surveyors and Project Managers were retrieved, representing a response rate of 77.4% and 67% respectively, and a total response rate of 73.17%. The data collected were quantitatively analysed using a frequency distribution table, weighted mean score and standard deviation. The weighted mean score analysis revealed that the foremost challenges undermining commercial real estate PCM are delayed funding, cost overruns, and lack of transparency, with scores of 3.86, 3.76, and 3.71, respectively; and standard deviation of 0.946, 1.021, and 0.9, respectively. The attributes of blockchain in resolving these challenges are cost leakages reduction, cost accountability and transparency, with mean scores of 4.19, 4.12 and 4.12, respectively. The quantitative analysis shows that the main challenges of blockchain adoption include a lack of knowledge, resistance to change and insufficient infrastructure. The study, therefore, recommends adequate sensitisation of cost and project management professionals in Nigeria to overcome ignorance and change resistance, and the provision of an adequate infrastructure by the government to support full blockchain adoption.

Keywords: Blockchain Technology, Cost Management, Project Management, Real Estate.

Introduction

Technological changes, economic fluctuation, and varying regulations have caused monumental shifts in the built environment around the world that could lead to a massive transformation in the real estate industry. At a session of the International Real Estate Federation (FIABCI) world real estate congress in Lagos, Nigeria in June 2025, a prominent Nigerian real estate developer recounted his experience on a recent mixed-use development designed to transform the Lagos real estate landscape. The project was successfully conceived and planned but encountered challenges at the execution stage. The challenges include unrealistic cost estimate, wastage of materials, a lack of real-time cost tracking, inadequate communication among stakeholders, inadequate cost monitoring and control, and cost overrun, among others. The attendees left with the reflection from the anecdote that, despite the challenges, embracing disruptive technology to tackle long-standing issues in the real estate industry is germane for its transformation.

Real estate developers in Abuja frequently encounter cost overruns, delays, and poor resource management challenges. Communication between stakeholders is often inefficient and broken, which makes these problems even more challenging to solve (Nwosu, Egolum & Oladejo, 2023). A highly complex issue at the core of the challenges is frequently characterised by fragmented, fuzzy, and

error-prone project cost management. Traditional cost management methods, which rely on paperwork, manual record-keeping, and intermediaries for approval, result in poor transparency, project delays, and stakeholder disagreements. Usually, stakeholders are not always aware of the cost in real time, nor of the payments, or even the progress.

Abuja real estate industry challenges include cost estimation accuracy exacerbated by unreliable market data and fluctuating market conditions, which significantly impact the ability of project managers to stay within budget (Nwosu, Egolum & Oladejo, 2023). Some studies have indicated that unrealistic budgets, financial mismanagement, and delayed payments are endemic, leading to an increase in project budgets (Olayinka, 2024; Osho & Olaniyi, 2024). The decline in profit of many corporate entities is mainly due to project cost overruns resulting from a lack of financial transparency, rigid traditional contract management, and weak project cost management practices (Amade et al., 2024; Okanlawon et al., 2024). Leung, Ojo and Ahmed (2024) observed that the dishonest behaviour of some real estate contractors evidences the exacerbation of the effects of poor project cost management. Despite the sustained efforts of the Nigerian government and the private sector to address the challenges and related matters, nothing positive has come out of it; the industry thus remains underdeveloped with unaffordable housing for the average Nigerian, and a deficit of over 28 million units (Adebisi, Afolabi & Olaniyi, 2025).

One of the technologies that sparked interest in the built industry is blockchain, for its potential to transform the industry to overcome challenges that impede project management (Zavvar Kazim, Sharif & Ahmed, 2023). Blockchain technology has been observed as a solution with the highest potential to deal with such challenges. Blockchain technology has been recognised as a solution with the highest potential to deal with such challenges and related issues. The improvements include unbundling and implementing real-time cost control through an automated payment system to curb corruption, delayed payments, and cost overruns. A new shift could be ushered in with the introduction of blockchain technology. Though associated with Bitcoin, the technology's versatility transcends cryptocurrencies. Abuja's commercial real estate development is poised for a revolution through embedded opportunities for increased efficiency, transparency, and collaboration via blockchain. In contrast to the growing popularity of blockchain technology in real estate, the studies on its applications for real estate project management in developing nations, such as Nigeria, remain limited. Several works have explored various applications of blockchain in the real estate sector (Adebisi, Afolabi & Olaniyi, 2025; Danda, Vijay & Ronald, 2021; Ekemode et al., 2019); however, very few have effectively utilised blockchain technology in terms of implementing cost management, especially within the commercial real estate subsector of Abuja.

The objective of this research is to assess the influence of blockchain technology on the project cost management (PCM) of commercial real estate in Abuja by evaluating the challenges undermining project cost management and blockchain technology, the perceptions relating to the nexus between different blockchain attributes and their utility in resolving identified project cost management challenges, and the challenges of blockchain adoption in commercial real estate PCM. Despite the viability of the real estate sector, commercial property development faces numerous challenges. Real estate development projects in Abuja, Nigeria, tend to experience construction cost overruns, project delays, and some occurrences of funds misappropriation, as recent studies on commercial estate developments in Abuja revealed that more than 62 per cent of project costs were above the initial contract award (Olayinka, 2024; Iroha, Watanabe & Satoshi, 2024; Osuizugbo, 2025).

This paper is subdivided into five sections, with the first section serving as the introduction, and the following section reviewing the existing literature on the use of blockchain in real estate. This section examines the current project cost management practice and addresses gaps in prior studies, thereby filling the theoretical and practical gaps in project management. The methodology section includes a discussion of the research approach used and the methods employed to collect and analyse data. The results section interprets the researchers' findings and discusses the study's findings. The conclusion section summarises the key findings from the research on the importance of blockchain implementation in Abuja's real estate sector and make recommendations for its full adoption.

Project Management and Commercial Real Estate Cost Project Management

Project management involves planning, organising, leading, and controlling resources to achieve a specific project goal, accomplished through the application of knowledge, skills, tools, and techniques to project activities from inception to completion, ensuring the project meets its requirements (Manjo,

2021). Project cost management is a knowledge area of project management involving budgeting, estimation, and control of project costs to ensure project completion within the approved budget (Project Management Body of Knowledge, PMI, 2021). The primary aim of project cost management is cost minimisation while maintaining quality and projewct delivery time.

Real estate is a long-term, lucrative, but risky investment class, categorised into residential, commercial, mixed-use, and industrial (Jackson and White, 2005; Adeogun et al., 2017; Glaeser, 2020; Ngoc, Tien & Hieu, 2023). Commercial real estate development differs from conventional real estate development in scale, objectives, and complexity. Conventional real estate projects involve development for purposes distinct from financial objectives, such as family dwellings, prestige and political power. Commercial real estate, on the other hand, is developed for income generation, profit maximisation, and capital value appreciation, such as office buildings, shopping malls, hotels, and industrial uses. The commercial real estate sector is larger in scale, involving more stakeholders, and higher financial risks as a result of massive capital outlay (Simon-Eigbe, Aiminhiefe & Bankole, 2022). The involvement of investors, financials, contractors, professionals and tenants in commercial real estate development adds layers of complexity. Commercial real estate projects require regulatory compliance, longer construction timelines, detailed financial projections and modelling, and complex lease agreements (Nwosu, Egolum & Oladejo, 2023). Project management and project cost management are pivotal to the success of real estate development projects to mitigate the risks of poor resource allocation, cost and time overruns, delay in completion time, and unattained financial objectives (Alu et al., 2024).

Application and Utilisation of Blockchain Technology to Real Estate Project Cost Management

There are existing studies on the benefits of blockchain in project management (Wahab et al., 2023; Prince, Femi & Ayorinde, 2024; Ibrahimy et al., 2025). Project cost management is a crucial component of project management with its associated constraints. Therefore, some aspects of project cost management, which are predominantly applicable to the quantity surveying profession, such as bills of quantity, project budgeting, scope creep approvals, payments on interim valuation, and cash flow analysis, are areas of potential blockchain application. Project management practices that do not take cost management into account usually result in budget inadequacies and cost overruns. Some reasons for cost overruns may be problems in terms of unavailability of human resources, delayed payments, erroneous cost information, and procurement management inefficiencies (Leung, Ojo & Ahmed, 2024). Blockchain can be deployed to facilitate effective project cost management through the use of smart contracts, thereby eliminating bureaucracy, fund mismanagement, and fraud (Wahab et al., 2023).

Additionally, all project stakeholders can leverage the immutability feature of blockchain to manage project expenditure, hence facilitating project cost monitoring and control (Ibrahimy et al., 2025). Ibrahimy et al. (2025) promote the integration of blockchain in project cost management, for its capacity to reduce administrative downtime and improve decision-making. Zhan et al. (2025) opined that the benefits of using blockchain technology are the prevention of corrupt practices and the removal of human errors, which may be a significant cause of corruption. On the contrary, the result indicated that trading blockchain data without proper quality assurance mechanisms is futile, and there will be no ultimate results for any given blockchain project. This counterargument suggests that simply feeding blockchain with data does not guarantee the successful implementation of any intended project unless the data has undergone some form of scrutiny.

The challenges of commercial real estate project cost management include inaccurate project budgets, unwarranted delays, inappropriate financial management, contract disputes, improper supply chain management, and resource allocation (Olayinka, 2024; Osho & Olaniyi, 2024). The solutions for these constraints can be provided by blockchain technology to improve the project cost management process. Blockchain is an innovative solution for many inefficiencies and challenges that exist in real estate project management, especially transparency issues, costs, and safeguarding the integrity of data (Adewale, Olorunyomi & Odonkor, 2022; Ajayi, Daramola & Adhuze, 2024; Chen et al., 2024; Prince, Femi & Ayorinde, 2024). Similarly, traceability is essential, especially for project cost management, as it assists in the early identification of cost impacts, thus preventing cost overruns (Osho & Olaniyi, 2024). Furthermore, the use of smart contracts that are built around blockchain enables automatic payment of executed contracts as soon as predetermined scope, specifications, and

quality are satisfied, thus reducing labour costs on administrative activities, all of which have a bearing on the costs of the project (Luo et al., 2019).

Blockchain facilitates economic and efficient resource allocation and reduces or addresses disputes relating to real estate development projects (Wahab et al., 2023). Blockchain technology enables effective contract agreements with the proper scope of work, material, and quality specifications, appropriate supply chain management, adequate resource allocation, and monitoring and evaluation (Sedlmeir et al., 2022; Osuizugbo, 2025). Due to its scalability, error detection, and data security capabilities, blockchain is a valuable tool for forecasting and budgeting. Project managers striving to avoid the pitfall of cost overruns apply blockchain for accurate historical data management, budgeting, budget trend monitoring, and future cost projection.

In addition, one of the key benefits of blockchain in project cost management is its ability to mitigate financial risks. Since blockchain ensures all transactions are accountable and traceable, it helps to minimise the occurrence of fraud and financial malfeasance, as well as other problems associated with real estate project management, through the use of smart contracts. Payments and milestones for the project are hit only when certain conditions are triggered. It is also helpful in supply chain management by enabling more efficient chain management to reduce wasteful expenditures related to obtaining, maintaining, and delivering materials, resulting in less downtime and paperwork. It ensures the timely procurement of materials, thereby preventing budget overruns. Blockchain transparency fosters trust among project stakeholders as they have access to the same information, therefore promoting greater collaboration and accountability. Therefore, project managers can help project sponsors better understand the cost limitations and ensure project completion within the cost and time frame.

Adoptability of blockchain technology in commercial real estate project cost management can reshape the sector by providing all stakeholders with real-time data to improve transparency, eliminate ambiguities and corruption (Adilieme, Abidoye & Lee, 2024). With each project transaction traceable to a specific contract, stakeholders can access real-time financial data, which thereby facilitates accurate project forecasting and budgeting, and reduces disputes (Alozie, 2025). Blockchain adoption speeds up decision-making by providing a single, reliable and trusted information source. A centralised information system helps prevent unclear project scope and delays in commercial real estate projects. Additionally, blockchain makes payments and audits more efficient, cutting down on administrative costs and minimising the risk of financial errors during the project. The full adoption of blockchain in project cost management will minimise the need to operate in isolation and remove operational obstacles to project delivery. As the adoption of blockchain in real estate projects increases, its application in project cost management is projected to increase and thereby create a new horizon for project delivery without cost overruns.

Among the advantages of blockchain in real estate transactions are improved confidence, faster transaction processes, lower expenses, and guaranteed safety from fraud (Prince, Femi & Ayorinde, 2024). At the same time, there must be a solid understanding of the above technology; its opportunities and threats should not be exaggerated, as they are currently portrayed. For the vision of adoption of blockchain technology in real estate to prove successful, all stakeholders must join forces to address the challenges created by bureaucratic restrictions, the high cost of deployment, technological gaps, and a lack of encouragement (Zhan et al., 2025).

The application of blockchain technology in Nigerian real estate has several limitations. Various participants in the Nigerian real estate industry do not comprehend what blockchain and smart contracts mean, making them an impossible concept to embrace without robust sensitisation campaigns and policy framework (Kuppuswamy et al., 2023; Adilieme, Abidoye & Lee, 2024). Without such campaigns, technology may never gain significant use, particularly given the poorly illuminated legal framework regarding blockchain and smart contracts in Nigeria. There must be some recognition of blockchain and smart contracts to apply these transaction modalities effectively, and that is certain. Additionally, there should be some prerequisites in place for blockchain implementation in real estate in Nigeria or any other territory to be effective. This assistance ranges from internet access and the presence of blockchain technology to the ability of stakeholders to interact digitally.

Research Methodology and Method

This research adopted quantitative research design involving descriptive survey approach to collect data from the target research population of Abuja Chapters of the Nigeria Institute of Quantity

Surveyors (NIQS) and the Chartered Institute of Project Managers of Nigeria (CIPMN) as the two professional bodies responsible for project cost management and project management, with 380 and 262 members, from the membership directories as of December 2024 respectively. The sample size of 246 professionals was determined from the Yamane formula with a 5 per cent margin of error at a 95 per cent confidence level (Mohanasundaram & Harsha, 2024), comprising 146 Quantity Surveyors and 100 Project Managers. The total sample was proportionately stratified to ensure proportional representation of NIQS and CIPMN, which include 146 and 100 members, respectively, for proper comparison. Afterwards, the respondents were selected through random sampling. This study aimed to justify the research objectives based on the existing level of adoption of blockchain technology in commercial real estate project cost management, drawing inferences and forecasts.

The survey instrument used is a questionnaire drawn from the existing literature, adapted to the Nigerian perspective. It was evaluated and pretested by academia and professionals and modified based on their constructive criticism. The questionnaire used a Likert scale for closed-ended questions with a 1-5 rating scale of strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree and strongly agree, respectively, to allow a detailed understanding of the participant's views and attitudes towards the construct. The questionnaire was completed by 113 Quantity Surveyors and 67 Project Managers, representing the response rates of 77.4% and 67% respectively, and a total response rate of 73.17%. The retrieved data were analysed quantitatively using descriptive statistics, specifically, a frequency distribution table and weighted mean score.

Respondents who participated in the study consented voluntarily; the confidentiality of their identities was also maintained. The study remained within research ethics and the professional code of conduct of both NIQS and CIPMN. Although the research adheres to the standards of a study, there were a few departures from the norm. Due to the requirement of respondents' professions, most of the questionnaires were completed online; time was a significant constraint for high-ranking professionals; nevertheless, adequate time was given for convenience and in-depth response.

Research Results and Discussion

This section of the study presents the analysis of data collected through the questionnaires administered to Abuja Chapters of NIQS and CIPMN in assessing the impact of blockchain technology for effective project cost management in commercial real estate project development.

Demographics Characteristics of Respondents

The demographic structure of the respondents of the study was evaluated by showing the classifications and categories of the professionals, years of experience, number and size of real estate projects undertaken, number of questionnaires, and response rate as presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Classification	Category	Frequency	Percent (%)
Role in the real estate sector	Quantity Surveyor	113	62.8
	Project Manager	67	37.2
	Total	**180**	**100**
Years of experience in the real estate industry	Less than 5 years	6	3.3
	6-10 years	74	41.1
	more than 10 years	100	55.6
	Total	**180**	**100**
Number of real estate projects over the years	1-5 projects	50	27.8
	6-10 projects	75	41.7
	11-20 projects	27	15.0
	more than 20 projects	28	15.6
	Total	**180**	**100**

Typical project size handled	Small-scale (less than 1,000m²)	29	16.1
	Medium-scale (1,000m² - 5,000m²)	100	55.6
	Large-scale (more than 5,000m²)	51	28.3
	Total	**180**	**100**

The demographic distribution presented in Table 1 provides data on the professional background and experience of the respondents who participated in the study for contextualising the reliability, depth, and relevance of the data provided, particularly given the technical and managerial implications of blockchain integration in real estate project cost management.

A larger part of the respondents (62.8%) are quantity surveyors, while 37.2% are project managers. These illustrate that the result was mainly perceptions of seasoned real estate construction cost management professionals, which enhances the credibility of this study. More than half of the respondents (55.6%) reported having over 10 years professional experience in the construction industry, while 41.1% had between 6 and 10 years of experience. Only a small proportion (3.3%) had less than 5 years of experience.

Fellows and Liu (2013) opined that extensive professional experience is a critical factor in the adoption of innovative technologies in the construction industry. More than a third of the respondents (41.7 %) were involved in between 6 and 10 real estate construction projects, while 27.8% worked on 1 and 5 projects. About 30.6% have handled more than 10 projects. This depth of exposure suggests that the participants have experience in years and hands-on involvement in multiple projects of various sizes, with a majority (55.6%) on medium-scale projects, 28.3% on large-scale, and 16.1% on small-scale real estate development.

Challenges Undermining Project Cost Management (PCM) in Commercial Real Estate (CRE) Projects

The results presented in Table 2 below provide the respondents' perception of the challenges undermining commercial real estate project cost management in Abuja, Nigeria. The findings reveal the severity of the challenges that professionals consider detrimental to effective project cost management.

Table 2 Challenges Undermining Project Cost Management in Commercial Real Estate Projects

Challenges of Commercial Real Estate Project Cost Management	Mean	Std. Dev	Rank
Delayed Funding	3.86	0.946	1st
Cost Overruns	3.76	1.021	2nd
Lack of Transparency	3.71	0.9	3rd
Poor Budgeting/ Cost Planning	3.62	1.094	4th
Overreliance on Individual Expertise	3.48	0.954	5th
Fraud/Corruption/Theft	3.43	1.114	6th
Poor Documentation	3.41	0.961	7th
Ignorance/Lack of Knowledge	3.35	0.924	8th
Policy/Governance Issues	3.21	0.865	9th

The biggest challenge in managing the costs of commercial real estate projects is delays in funding. With a mean score of 3.86 and a standard deviation of 0.946, this challenge is most significant. Most of the respondents agree that disruption to the project fund schedule is detrimental to effective project cost management. In real estate projects, successful outcomes rely heavily on proper resource allocation. Therefore, delayed funding can lead to cost overruns and breach contracts, making it harder to keep the project cost on track as observed by Adaku et al. (2024).

Closely following in the second rank is cost overruns, with a mean of 3.76. Cost overruns stem from inadequate feasibility and viability appraisal, and unrealistic cost estimations, leading to resource misallocation and ineffective project cost management. This result supports Olayinka's (2024) study that inaccurate cost projection and budgeting hinder effective project cost management.

In third place is the lack of transparency (mean = 3.71), indicating that ambiguities in project cost reporting and decision-making are a critical concern. Inadequately documented project capital inflows and expenditures become challenging for accountability, increasing the risk of mismanagement and weakening project oversight mechanisms which is in line with Adewale, Olorunyomi & Odonkor's (2022) study.

The fourth-ranked challenge, with a mean of 3.62, is poor budgeting and planning, indicating that a major contributor to ineffective project cost budgeting at the pre-construction phase. Inappropriate budgeting, lack of contingency costs, and inconsistent adherence to the project's financial plan are among the factors that are detrimental to the overall performance of the project, leading to the appearance of unexpected cost-related difficulties.

Over-reliance on an individual's expertise is the fifth-ranked, with a mean score of 3.48 and a standard deviation of 0.954. It suggests that over-reliance on an individual's expertise within the organisation is a systemic issue, leading to a lack of institutional knowledge and collaborative cost management practices. Dependence on a few experts and the absence of standardised processes result in errors, wrong judgments, and subjective decisions.

Fraud, corruption, and theft have been ranked sixth among the challenges studied (mean = 3.43, standard deviation 1.114), which implies that they are occasional events rather than structural challenges. Nevertheless, fraud and allied practices reduce trust and lead to financial misappropriation.

Poor documentation is ranked seventh in this study (mean = 3.41), attributable to poor recordkeeping and contract management practices. Inadequate documentation complicates and slows audit processes, thereby delaying claims processing and loss of traceability of financial transactions. Therefore, the project cost becomes difficult to evaluate, which in turn makes transparency difficult.

Ignorance and lack of financial literacy among project cost management staff are ranked eighth among the factors considered in this study (mean score, 3.35 and standard deviation, 0.924). Such financial literacy gaps could lead to inappropriate financial data, poor decision-making, and deviation from financial control measures that are considered the best practices in financial management.

Policy and governance issues were at the bottom of the challenges, with a mean score of 3.21 and a standard deviation of 0.865. Although the governance system is a substantial financial accountability influencer, the ranking suggests that the internal operational processes of the project organisation are more important than the external regulatory frameworks.

The dominant role of operational and managerial challenges is made apparent, and the moderating factors of the commercial real estate project cost management are funding delays, inaccurate budget preparation, and a lack of transparency. These challenges necessitate improvements in budget preparation and management, financial control strengthening, and the institutional granting of checks and balances for project cost monitoring to mitigate project cost management inefficiencies in commercial real estate projects.

Assessment of Respondents' Perceptions Relating to the Nexus between Different Blockchain Attributes and their Utility in Resolving Project Cost Management Challenges

To assess the impact of blockchain technology on project cost management in commercial real estate projects, respondents' perspectives were sought regarding the above, and the results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 Assessment of Respondents' Perceptions Relating to the Nexus between Different Blockchain Attributes and their Utility in Resolving Project Cost Management Challenges

Statements	Mean	Std. Dev	Rank
The use of blockchain reduces the risk of fraud, cost leakages, and corruption in real estate project execution.	4.19	1.204	1st
Blockchain improves accountability by helping to identify responsible parties for project-related expenditures.	4.12	1.24	2nd
Blockchain enhances cost transparency in real estate projects by making all financial transactions visible and traceable.	4.12	0.803	3rd
Blockchain allows for real-time tracking of project costs, site conditions, and inventory usage.	3.62	1.229	4th
Blockchain can improve the accuracy of cost estimation through predictive data analysis and detailed recordkeeping.	3.46	1.396	5th
Blockchain contributes to faster and more efficient project execution by reducing the need for intermediaries and streamlining administrative processes.	3.41	1.361	6th
Smart contracts powered by blockchain can automate payments and project milestones, reducing manual errors and delays.	3.27	1.232	7th

Table 3 shows the perception of the study respondents on the effectiveness of blockchain technology in resolving project cost management challenges through the inherent attributes of blockchain technology in Abuja, Nigeria. Among the seven tested attributes of blockchain technology, the highest-ranked statement is that blockchain reduces risks of fraud, cost leakage, and corruption, with a mean of 4.19 and a standard deviation of 1.204. The finding implies there is a strong consensus among the respondents that blockchain serves as a critical instrument in safeguarding financial integrity and decreasing financial misappropriation, which are key contributors to budget overruns in project cost implementations which is in line with Adewale, Olorunyomi and Odonkor's (2022) research finding. In second and third place, with an equal mean score of 4.12, are those items referring to the blockchain's ability to provide greater accountability and cost transparency. The second item elaborates on blockchain being used to assign responsibility for expenditures made in a project and thus enhance accountability of stakeholders.

The third-ranked item underscores blockchain's potential to increase cost transparency by ensuring that all financial transactions are accessible and traceable. The reasonably low standard deviation value of 0.803 for the third item indicates a greater level of agreement among the respondents, indicating public visibility provided by the blockchain is a key advantage in cost monitoring and control. The fourth ranked is blockchain for real-time monitoring of project costs, site conditions, and inventory consumption, with a mean value of 3.62, indicating moderate acceptance of the respondents on the value of blockchain for operational monitoring. It implies its effectiveness in cost control through timely and accurate data flows. Real-time monitoring of project cost may be rated less than the others for its perceived dependence on technological infrastructure.

Ranked fifth with a mean value of 3.46, the respondents acknowledged blockchain's role in enhancing cost estimation accuracy through predictive analytics and detailed recordkeeping. This result implies recognition of blockchain technology as a data-driven mechanism to improve budgeting. Nevertheless, its full power might not have been utilised or universally understood by practitioners. The sixth-ranked statement, with a mean score of 3.41, pertains to blockchain's ability to streamline project execution by minimising reliance on intermediaries and administrative bottlenecks. The moderate ranking suggests that, although there is a theoretical acknowledgement of the benefits, there are widespread challenges in its practical implementation, integration, and adoption.

Finally, the lowest-ranked item refers to the application of smart contracts for automating payments and managing project milestones, with a mean value of 3.27. The table revealed that automation through smart contracts is the least accepted among the roles of blockchain in curbing cost overruns by the respondents. It may be due to a lack of exposure, regulatory uncertainties, or technical hindrances within the confines of the current practices and frameworks of the real estate project delivery.

In summary, the findings indicate that blockchain technology is valuable in resolving project cost management challenges through the blockage of cost leakage and corruption, providing accountability and transparency, real-time project cost tracking and accurate cost estimation. Conversely, the attributes of predictive analytics and smart contracts are acknowledged but are limited in practice. The implications are that blockchain, although accepted as a strategic tool in enhancing cost control and reducing inefficiencies in real estate project management, is being progressively adopted.

Potential Challenges for Blockchain Technology in Commercial Real Estate (CRE) Project Cost Management (PCM)

To identify the challenges for blockchain technology in the real estate industry, respondents' opinions were sought regarding the above, and the responses were subjected to a weighted mean score. The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4 Potential Challenges for Blockchain Technology in the Commercial Real Estate Project Cost Management

Potential Challenges for Blockchain Technology in the CRE Project Cost Management	Frequency	Percent (%)
Lack of understanding or knowledge about blockchain	161	89.4
Resistance to change from stakeholders	74	41.1
Insufficient infrastructure or technology	106	58.9
Regulatory challenges	82	45.6
Cost of implementation	19	10.6

Table 4 provides crucial insights into the perceived challenges that may impede the acceptance and effective implementation of blockchain in real estate cost management. The majority of the respondents (89.4%) identified a lack of knowledge about blockchain as one of the significant challenges, leading to misconceptions, difficulties in decision-making, and limiting the practical implementation which corroborated the observation of Kuppuswamy et al. (2023). Furthermore, 58.9% of respondents highlighted insufficient infrastructure or technology as a challenge. The result implies that the existing ICT infrastructure of the real estate industry may not be sufficient to accommodate blockchain technology; therefore, implementing blockchain solutions becomes severely constrained which is in line with the submission of Adebisi, Afolabi and Olaniyi (2025).

The result indicated that 41.1% of the respondents reported that resistance to change is a constraint to blockchain adoption and implementation. Resistance to change in organisational culture and tradition can delay adoption and cause conflicts during the implementation of blockchain. Moreover, 58.9% of respondents reported that inadequate IT infrastructure is a barrier, indicating that existing project management frameworks are not supportive of integrating blockchain.

In addition, 45.6% of respondents identified regulatory challenges, most especially the lack of the necessary legal and institutional framework for the utilisation of blockchain in managing the cost of real estate projects, as affirmed by Ogundu (2025). Lastly, 10.6% of respondents reported that the substantial initial investment hampered the implementation of blockchain technology. Such a low percentage suggests that, though cost may be an issue, the benefit of adoption far exceeds the initial investment.

Conclusion

This paper highlights the impact of blockchain technology on commercial real estate project cost management in Abuja, Nigeria. The research pinpoints the challenges undermining effective cost management, including delayed funding, cost overruns, a lack of transparency, poor budgeting, and lack of organisational knowledge in project cost management. Blockchain technology offers real-time project cost estimation and tracking, accountability and cost transparency, reduced fraud, and. These attributes could resolve the challenges, such as cost leakages and corruption, leading to more efficient project execution. However, the challenges undermining the application of blockchain in commercial real estate cost management are ignorance, change resistance, and insufficient infrastructure. Despite these challenges, blockchain's potential remains a veritable tool for transforming commercial real estate project cost management.

This study makes contributions to enrich the academic body of knowledge on the emerging blockchain technology and commercial real estate cost management by proffering solutions addressing the challenges of PCM in commercial real estate projects. For the industry, it underscores the practical benefits of blockchain technology to improve CRE project cost management to improve cost transparency, accountability, and successful project execution.

Recommendations

Practical application of blockchain technology in real estate project cost management requires professionals to prioritise increasing awareness and knowledge of its capabilities through capacity-building initiatives to overcome resistance to change. Additionally, government and industry leaders should collaborate to improve the necessary infrastructure to support blockchain adoption. Policymakers should integrate blockchain technology into regulatory frameworks to promote transparency and accountability in the sector. Innovative solutions to knowledge and infrastructure gaps to full deployment of blockchain in project cost management should be explored in future research.

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SACQSP2025-48

The Impact of Built Environment Professionals using Building Information Modelling to Perform Quantity Surveying Services: Quantity Surveyors' Perspectives

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Abstract

The research paper aims to evaluate to the extent the quantity surveying profession has experienced other built environment professionals using BIM prosses to perform quantity surveying tasks and the potential impact on the quantity surveying profession. A quantitative research study was conducted within the positivism paradigm using a deductive approach. An online questionnaire was conducted to evaluate to what extent quantity surveying professionals have experienced other built environment professions using BIM technologies to perform quantity surveying tasks, and the potential impact on the quantity surveying profession. The target population of this research was registered professional quantity surveyors who are also members of the Association of South African Quantity Surveyors (ASAQS). Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the data. The results revealed that while built environment professionals other than quantity surveyors possess the capability to use BIM for certain quantity surveying functions, this overlap does not pose a significant threat to the profession in South Africa. Although respondents acknowledged the benefits of BIM, they emphasised the need for safeguards to prevent non-registered professionals from undermining the distinct role of the quantity surveyor. The research focussed only on the views of registered quantity surveyors in South Africa. Quantity surveying firms can adopt strategies to accommodate the change in the digital construction landscape. This research paper will add to the limited literature on the impact of BIM use by built environment professionals to perform quantity surveying tasks, offering a foundation for further exploration on this topic and similar studies in the field.

Keywords: Building Information Modelling, Quantity Surveyors, Built Environment, "Architect, Engineering, and Construction" (AEC).

Introduction

The integration of Building Information Modelling (BIM) within the Architecture, Engineering, and Construction (AEC) industry is revolutionising traditional project workflows, enhancing project visualisation, accuracy, and efficiency (Ademci & Gundes, 2018). BIM has been successfully implemented in the construction sectors of many countries worldwide, though its adoption in South Africa has progressed at a slower rate. The introduction of BIM in the South African construction industry will impact on the quantity surveying (QS) profession both positively and negatively, thus the profession will need to change to adapt to this modern technology (Monyane & Ramabodu, 2014).

BIM is recognised as an asset within the quantity surveying field, offering benefits in accuracy, efficiency, and collaboration for cost estimation, project management, and contract administration throughout different phases of a construction project. However, quantity surveying tasks are being completed by professionals from other disciplines using BIM (Lahiani, 2020). This can potentially pose a threat to the QS profession and their role within the built environment. Chiu and Lai (2016) argued that it is crucial to recognise that the integration of BIM should not be perceived as a threat but rather as a catalyst for redefining the roles of all professionals within the built environment.

In South Africa, this role overlap is further exacerbated by a lack of an Identification of Work (IDoW) framework among various professions, which could help outline responsibilities and prevent the encroachment of non-QS professionals into the QS domain (CBE, 2018).

Despite the significant implications for the QS profession, research on the specific impact of BIM adoption on the quantity surveyors' role remains limited (Llale et al., 2020). Most studies have focused on BIM's technical benefits and general challenges within the AEC industry, without addressing the long-term implications for the QS profession specifically. This research gap underlines the importance of examining BIM's effect on quantity surveying roles, particularly regarding role overlap, professional boundaries, and the need for regulatory standards. The research paper aims to assess the extent to which the quantity surveying profession has observed other built environment professionals using BIM technology and processes to perform quantity surveying tasks, as well as the potential impact of this on the profession.

Literature review

Global BIM Adoption

Building Information Modelling (BIM) has gained global traction, with adoption rates and strategies differing across countries. Smith's (2014) study highlights key nations, including the United Kingdom, United States, Finland, France, Denmark, Singapore, United Arab Emirates, China, and Australia, as leaders in BIM integration within the construction industry. However, while BIM adoption is widespread, South Africa's progress in BIM implementation remains limited. While BIM is used in some large infrastructure projects, the country faces challenges due to an absence of national mandates or standardised guidelines, leading to inconsistent application across projects and regions (Wortmann et al., 2016). This gap in policy frameworks has slowed the country's BIM integration compared to other nations with more robust digital construction mandates. According to a study conducted by the Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB, 2023), the findings indicate that architects are the primary adopters of BIM in the South African construction industry.

Quantity Surveyors using BIM

Quantity surveyors, also known as the cost consultant / engineer or building economist, are essential to construction projects globally, offering expertise in cost management and contributing to project planning, estimation, and procurement (Wao & Flood, 2016). Traditionally, quantity surveyors administer tasks such as measurement, preparing Bills of Quantities (BoQ), and cost planning, yet the profession has been slow to adopt BIM, complicated in South Africa by various barriers, including the high cost of the software, limited training opportunities, and a lack of government mandates and standardised regulatory protocols (Ahmed, 2018; Haupt & Naidoo, 2016). In South Africa, quantity surveyors have a moderate understanding of BIM's potential, recognising its advantages in producing precise cost estimates and reducing BoQ preparation time, though many remain uncertain about its full impact on their role (Haupt & Hefer, 2016). While Artificial Intelligence (AI) may pose a greater challenge to traditional QS roles, BIM alone is unlikely to replace QSs specialised skills in cost management and contract administration (Monyane & Ramabodu, 2014; Llale et al., 2020). Akinsiku (2026) stated that BIM can support, rather than replace QSs who bring unique expertise that is irreplaceable within the industry.

AEC Industry using BIM

The integration of BIM in the architecture, engineering, and construction (AEC) industry, has accelerated due to increasingly complex project demands and advancements in technology, with clients, architects, and contractors benefiting from improved planning, management, and collaboration capabilities (Ademci & Gundes, 2018). BIM enhances client understanding of project requirements, supports architects and engineers in concept development, and assists contractors with activity scheduling via 4D modelling (Latiffi et al., 2016). However, the adoption of BIM is challenged by high software costs, the need for training, and legal issues, as countries continue to develop varied strategies for BIM implementation. Notably, BIM allows non-quantity surveying professionals to perform tasks traditionally managed by QSs, potentially leading to errors if BIM competence is lacking (Otasowie et al., 2023). While BIM presents significant potential for efficiency and cost savings, clear role definitions within the AEC industry are essential to prevent confusion and ensure project success.

Threat to the Role of Quantity Surveyors

Without a comprehensive framework, South Africa has seen inconsistent BIM implementation across regions and projects, which significantly impacts the roles and responsibilities within the AEC industry (Wortmann et al., 2016). One major concern is the lack of an Identification of Work (IDoW) policy, which clearly defines tasks, roles, and responsibilities for each professional. Without this structure, the responsibilities of quantity surveyors overlap with those of architects, engineers, project managers, and other built environment professionals, creating ambiguity in BIM practices, inefficiencies in delivery, and increased risk of error (CBE, 2018).

Figure 1 from the African BIM report (2022) shows the percentage of different professions within the AEC industry using BIM within Africa, with 24% of the respondents originating from South Africa (Saka et al., 2022). Figure 1 further shows the main adopters of BIM are civil/structural engineers and architects.

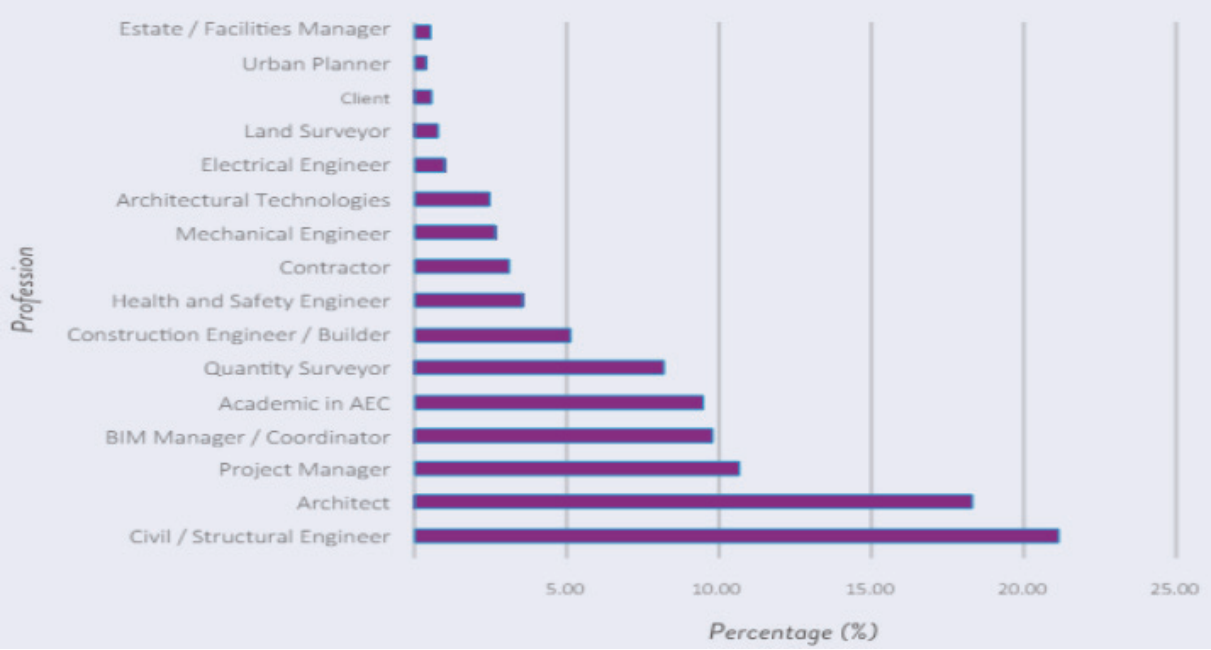

Figure 1 Percentage of Different Professionals using BIM

The absence of an IDoW has enabled other AEC professionals to perform tasks traditionally delivered by QS professionals, such as cost estimation and material quantification. Architects can leverage BIM to estimate project costs during the design phase and optimise costs by balancing design and functionality. Similarly, engineers can use BIM to generate detailed material lists and control costs, thus taking on quantity surveying roles such as material quantification and cost analysis. This overlap results in quantity surveyors having reduced influence in the early stages of project cost management and shifts their focus to verifying the estimates of others, rather than producing them independently (Moreno et al., 2019).

Project managers, too, use BIM to track project costs, manage budgets, and oversee cost changes. This integration of budget and change management tasks reduces the scope of QS involvement and challenges QS professionals to adapt by integrating with project management teams or developing similar skills. Contractors, who utilise BIM for estimating, bidding, and procurement, further narrow the QS role by generating in-house estimates and handling cost-related tasks independently (Moreno et al., 2019).

The SACQSP IDOW clearly indicates work to be performed by persons registered in terms of Act 49 of 2000. It also specifies overlaps in terms of work which persons registered in terms of other legislations wish to perform in contravention of that work being reserved for performance by persons registered in terms of the quantity surveying profession Act 49 of 2000.

The impact of BIM-driven role overlap extends beyond task redundancy could create legal uncertainties, inconsistent data quality, and fragmented practices that threaten the QS profession

(Wortmann et al., 2016). For QS professionals, this erosion of roles implies the need for skill adaptation, including expertise in BIM, data analysis, and interdisciplinary collaboration, and encourages specialisation in areas such as legal cost management and risk mitigation, where the QSs expertise remains valuable (Monyane & Ramabodu, 2014). As such, the establishing of an agreed IDoW policy framework among various built environment professions is essential to define and protect QS responsibilities within the AEC industry, ensuring that QS can continue to add value without the threat of role dilution by other AEC professionals. While all built environment professionals may use BIM as a collaborative and analytical tool, only registered quantity surveyors are legally entitled to perform and accountable for quantity surveying services.

Methodology

Paradigm

The positivist paradigm is grounded in deductive reasoning, where hypotheses are formulated, tested, and defined operationally to explain questions and predict outcomes based on quantifiable results. Therefore, the research was conducted within the positivism paradigm, and the quantitative method was implemented to perform the analysis.

Population and Sample

The target sampling population comprised professionally registered Quantity Surveyors (PrQS) with the South African Council for the Quantity Surveying Profession (SACQSP), who are also members of the Association of South African Quantity Surveyors (ASAQS). According to SACQSP registration statistics dated 30 September 2024, a total of 2,633 Quantity Surveyors were professionally registered. Based on this population size, Leedy and Ormrod (2010) recommend that a sample size of approximately 400 would be sufficient.

Research Design

This study employed a deductive research approach, utilising a mono-method design and a cross-sectional time horizon. The purpose was to assess the extent to which built environment professionals applying Building Information Modelling (BIM) processes to deliver quantity surveying services and to evaluate its impact on the quantity surveying profession.

An online questionnaire was used to collect data, a simple sampling strategy used to identify the individuals to whom the questionnaire was distributed. The online questionnaire was divided into four sections. The first section was related to the demographics of the participants, the second and third section includes 5-point Likert scale questions relating to the extent the participants have experienced other built environment professionals use of BIM to perform quantity surveying tasks, and the impact on the quantity surveying profession. The fourth section was an open-ended question asking the participants to add any further comments, if any, related to the study.

Data Collection Methods

An online questionnaire was developed using the QuestionPro platform. Upon the receipt of ethics approval, a request was made to the Association of South African Quantity Surveyors (ASAQS) to upload the questionnaire to their website. The online survey was also distributed to various QS firms with the condition that only professionally registered quantity surveyors, who are ASAQS members, be allowed to complete the questionnaire. After the initial upload of the survey on the ASAQS website, the survey was also included in the ASAQS weekly newsletter for a period of five weeks. The data was retrieved and converted into an Excel spreadsheet to be analysed and interpreted after the expiry date for the completion of the questionnaire. All duplicated, or incomplete responses were removed before the analysis commenced.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistical methods, i.e. mean, standard deviation, were used to analysis the data collected. Mean values were used to indicate the level of agreement or opinion on the extent of built environment professionals using BIM to perform quantity surveying tasks and the impact it has on the QS

profession. The standard deviation was used to indicate the degree or strength of the deviation between the participants answers.

Results

The focus of the findings is aimed to evaluate to what extent built environment professionals are using BIM to provide QS services, and the impact thereof on the sustainability of the QS profession. A total of 506 individuals viewed the questionnaire during the data collection process. Of those, 43 began the survey, only 32 completed the survey which represents a response rate of 8%. Schoeman and Cumberlege (2022) indicated that low response rates is expected during built environment research and is thus reasonable and acceptable. In addition, the response rate satisfies a minimum of 30 responses for valid statistical analysis (Chigara & Moyo, 2014). Figure 2 illustrates the extent to which professionally registered Quantity Surveyors (PrQSs) observed built environment professionals applying BIM processes. The results are presented and analysed based on their mean scores.

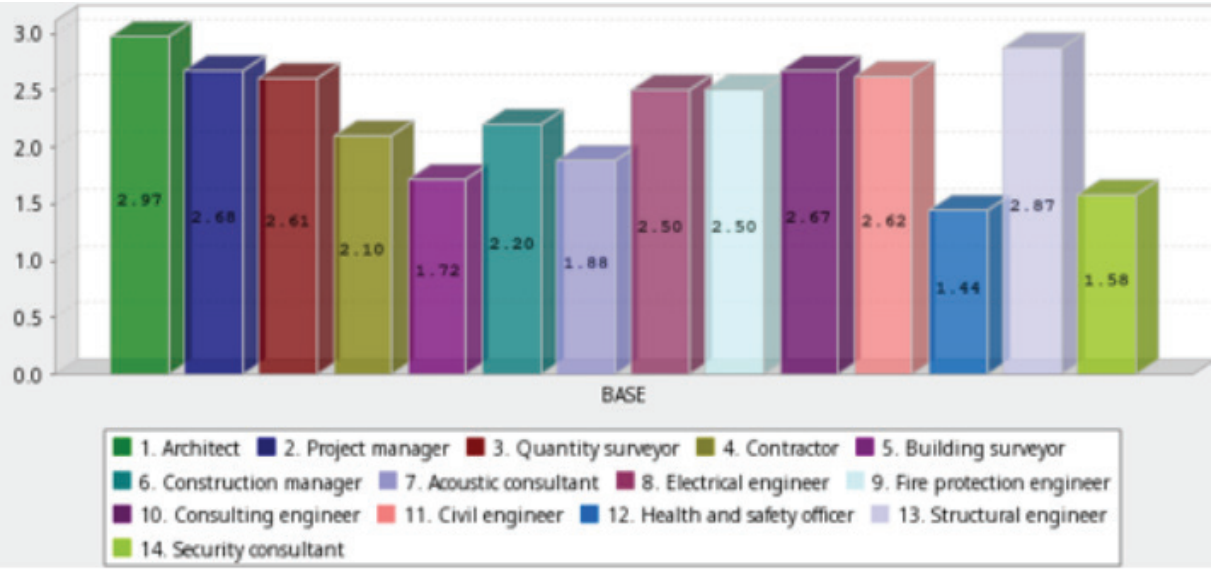

Figure 2 Experience with Built Environment Professionals Applying BIM

The results shows that the top three professionals applying BIM processes were the architect, project manager and structural engineer which is also confirmed by the African BIM report (2022).

Table 1 indicates the participants level of experience with other built environment professionals, other than a quantity surveyor, using BIM to perform quantity surveying tasks.

Table 1 Non-QS Built Environment Professionals Using BIM to Perform QS tasks

Tasks	Mean	Std.Dev.	Rank
Preparing estimates	1.66	1.04	1
Contract documentation	1.63	1.07	2
Procurement	1.63	0.96	2
Bill of Quantities	1.62	0.91	4
Aid in cost development.	1.57	0.77	5
Final accounts	1.56	0.84	6
Interim valuation and payments	1.53	0.97	7
Feasibility studies	1.52	0.77	8
Life cycle costs	1.47	0.86	9
Cash flow analysis	1.43	0.90	10
Aid in Property development.	1.43	0.82	10
Tender Evaluation	1.30	0.60	12
Aid in Legal disputes incl. dispute resolution.	1.21	0.42	13

The results in Table 1 show that all respondents have a low level of involvement with non-QS built environment professionals using BIM to perform QS tasks. Although literature disclosed that there is a potential threat to the QS profession where architects, project managers and structural engineers are using BIM to perform certain QS tasks (Moreno et al., 2019), the results show that it does not currently have a large impact on the QS profession in South Africa.

All participants believed that the Identity of Work policy does not consider the ethical implications of work distribution and that professionals need to be registered in their respective fields to perform the tasks defined by the given registration. This shows a correlation with the literature that there is a lack in standards and regulations with regards to the distribution of work (CBE, 2018).

The Impact on the Sustainability of the Quantity Surveying Profession

Table 2 indicates the participants level of perception relating to the sustainability of the quantity surveying profession with built environment professionals using BIM to perform quantity surveying functions.

Table 2 Sustainability of the Quantity Surveying Profession

Statement	Mean	Std.Dev.	Rank
Unregistered professionals using BIM to perform quantity surveying tasks may lead to inconsistencies in project documentation and reporting	4.00	1.41	1
Unregistered professionals using BIM to perform quantity surveying tasks negatively impact the quality of quantity surveying services	3.66	1.50	2
The credibility of quantity surveying profession is jeopardised by unregistered professionals utilising BIM	3.35	1.58	3
The use of BIM by unregistered professionals undermines the value of registered quantity surveyors	3.28	1.53	4
The sustainability of quantity surveying profession is compromised by the use of BIM by unregistered professionals	3.12	1.58	5

All the participants had a medium to high level of agreement indicating that it can potentially pose a threat to the profession if unregistered AEC professionals use BIM to perform QS tasks. The participants believed that adopting BIM can provide many benefits to the profession while some of the respondents believe that there is other, more affordable software, that allow the QS to compete with other professionals and enhance the QS professional services.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The built environment needs to adjust its business approach if it to become productive and efficient, and live up to the infrastructure delivery expectations. The findings underscore both the opportunities that BIM presents for advancing the quantity surveying (QS) profession and the challenges it poses to its long-term sustainability in South Africa. Although BIM adoption has gained momentum globally, its integration in South Africa remains limited, primarily due to the absence of national mandates and standards. This lack of regulatory guidance has resulted in inconsistent implementation across the industry. Establishing clear standards, such as those outlined in the IDoW, is therefore crucial to safeguarding professional boundaries and preventing role overlap among AEC professionals.

While BIM offers benefits such as improved project planning, cost estimation, and collaboration, it also enables other AEC professionals - including architects, engineers, project managers, and contractors - to undertake tasks traditionally performed by quantity surveyors. However, the findings indicate that although these professionals can use BIM for certain quantity surveying functions, this overlap does not currently represent a major threat to the QS profession in South Africa. Respondents acknowledged the advantages of BIM but stressed the importance of implementing safeguards to prevent non-registered professionals from diminishing the distinct role of the quantity surveyor.

Participants further highlighted that professional registration should remain a prerequisite for undertaking specialised tasks, reinforcing the need for updated regulatory frameworks. By introducing

comprehensive IDoW guidelines and national BIM standards, South Africa can both protect the integrity of the QS profession and foster more effective, collaborative BIM adoption across the AEC sector. While BIM holds significant potential to enhance the QS profession, achieving sustainable integration will require regulatory adaptation and ongoing professional development to meet the demands of an evolving digital landscape.

Further research could be undertaken to examine the long-term impact of BIM use by AEC professionals performing quantity surveying services, considering evolving standards and regulations within the IDoW, changes in training practices, and developments within the built environment. Such studies would enable researchers to determine whether a correlation exists between the time frame analysed and the degree of change in the impact of BIM on quantity surveying services.

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SACQSP2025-56

Unlocking Institutional Enablers for Sustainable Housing: A Critical Appraisal of Success Factors in South Africa's Integrated Residential Development Programme (IRDP)

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the institutional enablers that underpin the effective implementation of South Africa's Integrated Residential Development Programme (IRDP). It identifies and validates the critical success factors (CSFs) that enhance programme performance and contribute to sustainable housing delivery. Framed within the SACQSP 2025 theme "Navigating Disruption, Collaboration and a Sustainable Future," the study contributes to the discourse on institutional readiness, governance effectiveness and the evolving role of the Quantity Surveyor in driving integrated and resilient housing outcomes.

A quantitative, cross-sectional research design was employed, utilising a structured questionnaire administered to 125 built-environment professionals, municipal officials and housing practitioners across four provinces: Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, North-West and the Free State. Data were analysed using IBM SPSS Version 30, applying descriptive statistics and Exploratory Factor Analysis (Principal Component Analysis with Varimax rotation) to identify latent institutional constructs. Sampling adequacy and scale reliability were confirmed (KMO = 0.826; Bartlett's $p < 0.001$; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.934$). Four factors with eigenvalues greater than one explained 72.8 % of the total variance, validating the robustness of the institutional model.

The analysis revealed four key enabler dimensions shaping IRDP performance: (1) Strategic Planning and Alignment, (2) Leadership Continuity and Administrative Stability, (3) Intergovernmental and Community Coordination and (4) Organisational and Financial Capacity.

Institutional coherence, professionalised leadership and cross-sector collaboration are central to sustaining housing delivery. The findings underscore the strategic value of quantity surveyors as boundary-spanning professionals who translate policy intent into implementable frameworks. Embedding these enablers into municipal delivery systems can improve governance resilience, fiscal transparency and community trust. By linking validated institutional dimensions to practical reform levers, the study offers a replicable evidence-based model for strengthening sustainable housing delivery across South Africa and the wider Global South.

Keywords: IRDP, CSF, Institutional Enablers, EFA, Sustainable Housing.

Introduction

South Africa's housing landscape continues to grapple with the enduring legacy of apartheid-era spatial inequality and systemic service-delivery inefficiencies. Nearly three decades into democracy, the demand for adequate, inclusive housing remains acute, reflecting both the scale of the challenge and the institutional weaknesses that shape policy implementation. As Turok and Borel-Saladin (2016)

observe, the persistence of fragmented governance, uneven municipal capacity and weak coordination continues to constrain transformation within the built environment.

The Integrated Residential Development Programme (IRDP) was introduced by the South African government as a transformative housing initiative to redress these inequities, enhance tenure security and promote inclusive, mixed-income communities. Implemented under the Breaking New Ground (BNG) policy framework, the IRDP integrates serviced land, housing and infrastructure within a unified delivery model designed to advance spatial justice, economic inclusion and environmental sustainability. Despite this progressive intent, implementation has often faltered due to administrative instability, fragmented governance and weak intergovernmental coordination, conditions symptomatic of broader dysfunctions in South Africa's infrastructure and service-delivery systems (Charlton & Kihato, 2006; Marutlulle, 2021).

While much of the academic and policy literature has emphasised barriers and inefficiencies, comparatively limited attention has been devoted to the institutional enablers, the success factors that make effective implementation possible under complex, real-world conditions. Understanding these determinants is crucial for strengthening governance resilience, aligning policy intent with operational capability and embedding evidence-based reform within the housing sector.

This paper responds to that gap by empirically identifying and validating the institutional enablers that differentiate high-performing municipalities from those with persistent delivery backlogs. It aligns with the SACQSP 2025 conference theme, "Navigating Disruption, Collaboration and a Sustainable Future," by examining how organisational design, leadership continuity and professional collaboration shape the effectiveness of integrated housing-delivery systems amid disruption and capacity asymmetries. The study adopts a quantitative, positivist approach and analyses responses from 125 built-environment professionals and municipal housing officials across four provinces, Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, North-West and the Free State.

By reframing the Quantity Surveyor as a boundary-spanning professional and strategic actor within this institutional ecosystem, the paper advances a performance-based and sustainability-oriented perspective on governance, accountability and housing delivery in South Africa. The paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 reviews relevant literature on institutional enablers and critical success factors in housing delivery; Section 3 outlines the research methodology; Section 4 presents and analyses the results; and Section 5 concludes with key insights and recommendations for policy and practice.

Literature Review

Critical Success Factors (CSFs) represent the institutional capabilities and strategic conditions that determine project success or failure (Chan et al., 2004). In the context of public-sector infrastructure and housing delivery, these factors serve as essential levers for navigating governance complexity, fiscal constraints and technological disruption. Contemporary scholarship emphasises that effective implementation is contingent upon integrated planning systems, visionary leadership, inter-sectoral collaboration and institutional capacity to manage uncertainty (Gurran & Whitehead, 2011; Aigbavboa et al., 2021).

Globally, comparative experiences illustrate how institutional coherence and adaptive governance underpin successful housing reform. In India, participatory upgrading initiatives demonstrate how decentralised planning and community co-production enhance scalability and long-term resilience (Agarwal et al., 2022). Kenya's devolved governance framework shows that subsidiarity and local accountability strengthen delivery efficiency and citizen trust (Tipple & Speak, 2009). In the United Kingdom, continuity in policy and legal frameworks has ensured consistent performance through predictable resource allocation and professional accountability (Hilber & Schöni, 2016). Across these contexts, the literature converges on three enabler domains: strategic alignment of policy instruments, leadership stability within institutions and cross-stakeholder collaboration for sustainable outcomes.

Within the African and South African contexts, discourse remains dominated by analyses of structural deficiencies, spatial inequality, under-resourced municipalities and fragmented governance (Tissington, 2010; Marutlulle, 2021). While such diagnoses illuminate systemic barriers, they seldom quantify the conditions that enable programme success. This analytical gap limits the development of empirically grounded performance frameworks capable of informing reform and replication across municipalities.

This study directly addresses that gap by employing Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) to derive latent dimensions of institutional success within the IRDP empirically. The approach moves beyond conceptual speculation to statistically validate interrelated governance variables, thereby quantifying their collective explanatory power. In doing so, it responds to the SACQSP 2025 conference agenda of *"Navigating Disruption, Collaboration and a Sustainable Future"* by positioning institutional enablers as resilience mechanisms through which quantity surveyors and other built-environment professionals can reinforce systemic stability.

Through its synthesis of international precedents and local empirical validation, the review establishes a foundation for a performance-oriented paradigm that reconceptualises housing delivery as an institutional process, one requiring coherence, accountability and adaptive capacity to achieve sustainable transformation.

Methodology

A quantitative design was deemed appropriate because it allows objective validation of relationships between institutional variables and delivery performance. The study adopted a positivist research paradigm, employing a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to empirically evaluate the institutional enablers influencing the effectiveness of South Africa's Integrated Residential Development Programme (IRDP). This approach enabled the systematic collection of measurable data on stakeholder perceptions, ensuring objectivity and reproducibility in the analysis of complex institutional dynamics.

A structured questionnaire comprising twenty-four Likert-scale items was developed based on themes derived from the literature and policy review. The instrument was designed to capture the relative significance of governance, leadership, coordination and capacity-related variables associated with IRDP implementation. The target population included built-environment professionals, municipal housing officials and public-sector practitioners directly involved in housing delivery processes. Using a stratified random sampling technique, 130 questionnaires were distributed across four provinces—Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, North-West and the Free State, with 125 valid responses obtained, representing a 96.2% response rate.

Data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 30). Descriptive statistics, including mean item scores (MIS) and standard deviations, were computed to determine the relative importance of individual success factors. Internal consistency was evaluated through Cronbach's α (> 0.90) across constructs, confirming high reliability. The dataset's suitability for multivariate analysis was verified using the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure (0.826) and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity ($p < 0.001$).

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted using Principal Component Analysis (PCA) with Varimax rotation to extract latent dimensions of institutional success. Four components with eigenvalues greater than one were retained, cumulatively explaining 72.8% of the total variance. These factors were subsequently interpreted and thematically labelled to reflect their conceptual significance within the institutional framework of sustainable housing delivery. The extracted factors informed the thematic interpretation discussed in Section 4.

Results and Discussion

Descriptive Rankings

The descriptive analysis revealed that stakeholders identified several institutional success factors as essential to IRDP performance. The highest-ranked factors included *Availability of skilled built-environment professionals* (Mean Item Score [MIS] = 4.61), *Effective interdepartmental coordination* (MIS = 4.54) and *Clear planning and budget alignment* (MIS = 4.51). These findings underscore the centrality of human capital, structured planning regimes and governance synergy in driving project outcomes. High MIS values across most variables suggest strong consensus among respondents regarding the importance of institutional coherence in enhancing delivery effectiveness.

Table 1 presents the five highest-rated success factors based on their mean scores and standard deviations.

Table 1 Top Five Ranked Critical Success Factors for IRDP Implementation (n = 125)

Critical Success Factors	Mean	Std. Deviation	Rank
Effective communication between stakeholders	4.60	0.65	1
Stakeholder cooperation	4.57	0.65	2
Effective budgeting	4.57	0.69	2
Access to social services	4.52	0.69	4
Favourable social environment	4.50	0.67	5

These descriptive results provide an empirical foundation for the factor analysis presented in the following section. The ranked outputs reaffirm that technical capability, inter-agency coordination and fiscal coherence are perceived as the top enablers of IRDP success, reflecting the broader governance conditions necessary to sustain integrated housing delivery.

Exploratory Factor Analysis

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted to identify and validate the underlying constructs influencing IRDP implementation. The analysis confirmed the multidimensional nature of institutional success factors. Sampling adequacy and correlation strength met all accepted statistical thresholds, confirming data suitability.

Table 2 KMO and Bartlett's Test for Critical Success Factors

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		0.826
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	5541.709
	df	276
	Sig.	<0.001

The high KMO value (0.927) and significant Bartlett's test ($p < 0.001$) demonstrate excellent sampling adequacy and inter-variable correlation, validating the robustness of the dataset for factor analysis.

Table 3 Total Variance Explained by Extracted Factors

Factor No.	Thematic Label	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	Strategic Planning and Alignment	27.8%	27.8%
2	Leadership Continuity	18.1%	45.9%
3	Intergovernmental & Community Coordination	15.2%	61.1%
4	Organisational & Financial Capacity	11.7%	72.8%

This multi-dimensional structure confirms that institutional enablers in the IRDP context are not singular, but interdependent constructs rooted in governance systems, planning capabilities and stakeholder dynamics. The Scree Plot (Figure 1) visually supports the decision to retain four components, as evidenced by the clear inflexion point appearing after the fourth factor.

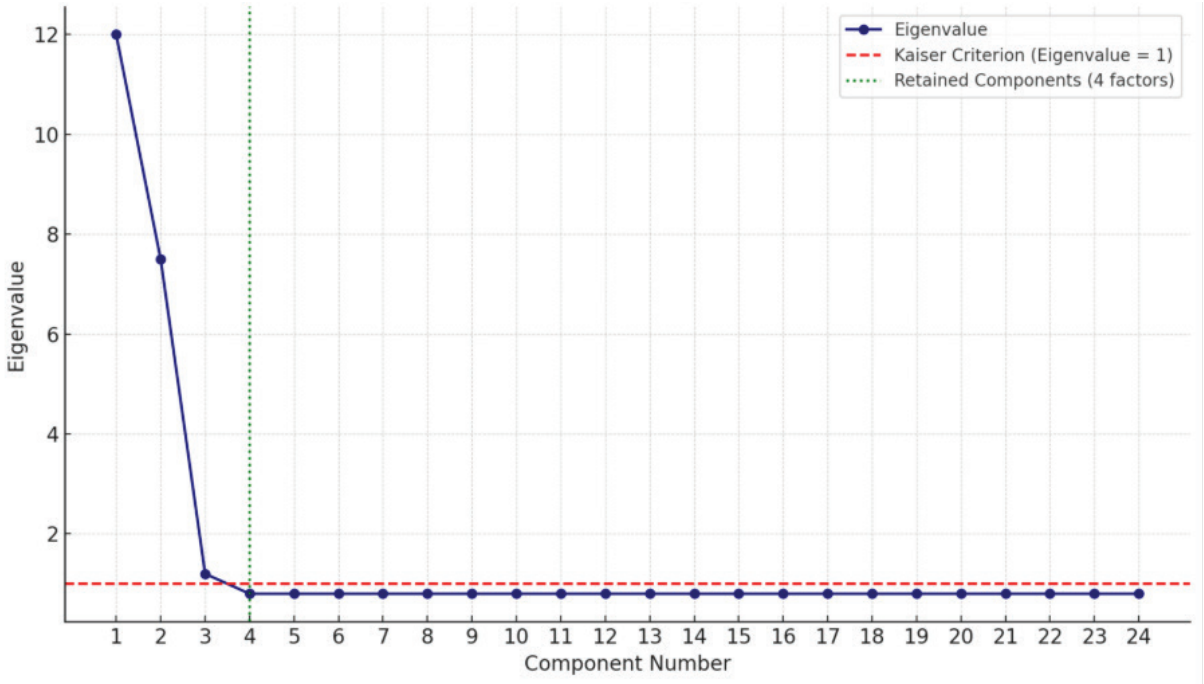

Figure 1 Scree Plot Showing Retained Factors

The four retained components cumulatively explain 72.8 percent of total variance, confirming a well-structured factorial solution. Each component represents an independent institutional dimension underpinning IRDP effectiveness.

Table 4 Rotated Factor Matrix for Critical Success Factors (Varimax Rotation)

CSF Item	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
Clear project scoping	0.781			
Budget alignment	0.763			
Municipal readiness	0.749			
Stable leadership tenure		0.822		
Continuity of technical staff		0.803		
Depoliticised oversight		0.767		
Community engagement			0.744	
Inter-sphere coordination			0.721	
Beneficiary platforms			0.705	
Internal delivery units				0.771
Procurement efficiency				0.736
Budget ring-fencing				0.723

The rotated component matrix demonstrates clear factor loadings exceeding 0.70 across variables, confirming high internal consistency and construct validity. The four components were thematically labelled as:

The EFA outcomes statistically substantiate that IRDP effectiveness is determined by an interlocking framework of planning coherence, leadership stability, participatory coordination and institutional capability. Together, these validated components illustrate how systemic governance factors shape delivery performance and provide quantitative evidence for professional interventions aimed at institutional resilience. The findings also demonstrate the opportunity for quantity surveyors to leverage their project-management expertise in strengthening governance alignment, budget integrity and accountability across municipal housing programmes.

These validated components provide the empirical foundation for the interpretive analysis presented in Section 5, which examines their conceptual and policy significance within the IRDP implementation framework.

Discussion

The empirical results confirm that the Integrated Residential Development Programme (IRDP) operates within a complex and interdependent institutional ecosystem, where success depends on the coherence of planning, the stability of leadership and the adequacy of organisational capacity. The Exploratory Factor Analysis statistically validated four complementary dimensions that collectively explain 72.8 percent of the variance in perceived programme effectiveness. Each dimension represents a distinct yet overlapping domain of institutional performance that enables municipalities to translate policy intent into measurable housing outcomes. The following discussion interprets these dimensions within the context of South Africa's evolving governance landscape and the broader SACQSP 2025 conference themes of disruption, collaboration and sustainability.

Strategic Planning and Alignment

The first and most influential factor, accounting for 27.8 percent of total variance, underscores the centrality of strategic planning coherence and budgetary alignment in effective IRDP delivery. Respondents emphasised that projects falter when planning instruments such as Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) and Housing Sector Plans are not synchronised with medium-term expenditure frameworks. This finding supports Chan et al. (2004) and Gurran and Whitehead (2011), who argue that public-sector project success depends on the harmonisation of policy, finance and technical scoping. Within the SACQSP theme of navigating disruption, strategic alignment acts as a stabilising mechanism that allows municipalities to adapt to fiscal volatility, political change and sustainability mandates. For Quantity Surveyors, the implication is a paradigm shift from cost control to strategic value management, embedding financial discipline within long-term planning frameworks that enhance resilience and delivery continuity.

Leadership Continuity and Administrative Stability

The second factor (18.1 percent variance) highlights the decisive influence of leadership tenure, institutional memory and depoliticised oversight on programme performance. Stable leadership ensures consistent decision-making, preserves project knowledge and sustains technical momentum despite political turnover. This resonates with Hilber and Schöni (2016), who found that policy inconsistency erodes delivery capacity in UK local authorities. In the South African municipal context, frequent administrative reshuffles disrupt procurement cycles and mentorship continuity, undermining institutional accountability. Sustained leadership continuity thus acts as an institutional buffer, mitigating governance shocks and fostering a culture of evidence-based management. This dimension also aligns with the collaboration theme, reinforcing the value of professional networks and mentorship systems that preserve institutional competence beyond individual tenures. For Quantity Surveyors, this calls for visible leadership in cross-functional coordination and mentorship to institutionalise professional integrity.

Intergovernmental and Community Coordination

Accounting for 15.2 percent of variance, the third component validates the significance of vertical and horisontal collaboration in IRDP implementation. Respondents ranked community engagement platforms and inter-sphere coordination mechanisms as critical enablers of delivery effectiveness. This aligns with international evidence: Agarwal et al. (2022) demonstrated that participatory planning and co-production in India's housing programmes enhance project fidelity and community ownership, while Kenya's devolved housing governance (Tipple & Speak, 2009) illustrates how shared accountability between national and local actors improves responsiveness. Within South Africa's IRDP framework, coordination remains a persistent weakness, often constrained by administrative silos and fragmented mandates. Strengthening cross-sphere collaboration and meaningful beneficiary participation directly advances the SACQSP themes of collaboration and sustainability. Quantity Surveyors can play a bridging role in this space—linking fiscal oversight, project design and stakeholder communication through transparent reporting and lifecycle costing.

Organisational and Financial Capacity

The fourth factor (11.7 percent variance) reflects the structural and resource-based foundations necessary for sustained housing delivery. Internal delivery units, efficient procurement systems and budget ring-fencing emerged as key indicators of institutional capability. Tissington (2010) and Aigbavboa et al. (2021) similarly observed that under-resourced municipalities often struggle to maintain delivery pipelines despite robust policy frameworks. In this study, respondents linked organisational capacity to human-resource stability and the availability of skilled professionals, consistent with Olajide et al. (2018). Adequate resourcing not only ensures technical competence but also strengthens audit compliance, transparency and public trust. From a sustainability perspective, financial discipline and transparent expenditure tracking underpin the credibility of housing investment. This factor situates the Quantity Surveyor as a custodian of financial stewardship, ensuring that value for money, lifecycle cost optimisation and compliance are embedded within multidisciplinary delivery systems.

Integrated Interpretation

Viewed collectively, the four dimensions demonstrate that IRDP effectiveness depends less on isolated technical interventions and more on the systemic integration of planning, leadership, coordination and capacity. Their interaction forms a resilient institutional architecture capable of absorbing disruption and sustaining long-term performance. This synthesis resonates with the systems-thinking paradigm underpinning the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 11) and South Africa's National Development Plan, both of which emphasise institutional coherence as the foundation for inclusive growth. By statistically validating these enabler dimensions, the study reframes the housing-delivery discourse from diagnosing barriers to understanding the drivers of success under constrained conditions.

For the Quantity Surveying profession, these findings reaffirm an expanded and strategic role that transcends cost estimation to encompass governance assurance, institutional learning and policy translation. As boundary-spanning professionals, Quantity Surveyors can mediate between fiscal accountability and social value creation, bridging the technical and administrative divides that often undermine delivery. Within the SACQSP 2025 thematic frame, this represents the embodiment of collaboration across disciplines, the capacity to navigate disruption through evidence-based practice and the pursuit of a sustainable future through integrated institutional performance.

Conclusion

Evidential Bridge

The four empirically validated enabler dimensions, Strategic Planning and Alignment, Leadership Continuity and Administrative Stability, Intergovernmental and Community Coordination and Organisational and Financial Capacity, constitute the evidentiary foundation of this study. These factors collectively explain 72.8 percent of the variance in IRDP performance and serve as the analytical link between data, interpretation and the ensuing recommendations. Each dimension operationalises a distinct component of institutional functionality, demonstrating how coherence, capability and collaboration translate policy commitments into tangible delivery outcomes.

Synthesis of Findings

The findings confirm that the effectiveness of the Integrated Residential Development Programme (IRDP) is determined not merely by resource availability but by the integrity of the institutional architecture that governs its implementation. Strategic planning alignment emerged as the most influential success factor, underscoring the need for synchronised project pipelines, budget certainty and evidence-based decision-making. Leadership continuity and depoliticised oversight reinforce this foundation by maintaining administrative stability and institutional memory across political cycles. The analysis further establishes that sustainable delivery depends on robust coordination mechanisms, both across government spheres and within beneficiary communities, that institutionalise participation and accountability. Finally, organisational and financial capacity remains indispensable: municipalities require skilled technical staff, efficient procurement systems and ring-fenced budgets to deliver consistently at scale.

Collectively, these interlocking dimensions reveal that the IRDP's success lies in institutional integration rather than isolated project interventions. Municipalities that perform well are those that maintain cross-functional alignment, safeguard leadership stability and embed performance monitoring within their delivery systems. Conversely, weaknesses in any of these domains generate cascading failures, manifesting as project delays, cost overruns, or community resistance.

Implications for Practice and Policy

The study advances both theoretical and applied understanding of institutional effectiveness in housing delivery. Empirically, it validates a multidimensional framework for assessing readiness and resilience in municipal housing programmes. Practically, it positions the Quantity Surveyor as a strategic governance actor, bridging financial accountability, technical scoping and stakeholder coordination. Within the broader discourse on *navigating disruption, collaboration and a sustainable future*, this role extends beyond cost control to institutional stewardship and performance assurance.

Concluding Reflection

The research demonstrates that South Africa's quest for sustainable housing will depend on the strength of its institutions as much as on the adequacy of its budgets. By operationalising the validated success factors, policymakers and practitioners can move from policy aspiration to implementation certainty. Institutionalising project pipelines, stabilising leadership structures and fostering collaborative governance are not peripheral reforms—they are the structural conditions for lasting impact. The IRDP thus stands as both a policy instrument and a test of institutional maturity: its continued success will hinge on how effectively the built-environment professions, led by Quantity Surveyors, embed integration, transparency and accountability within the everyday practice of public housing delivery.

In reaffirming the study's contribution, this paper aligns squarely with the SACQSP 2025 conference theme, "Navigating Disruption, Collaboration and a Sustainable Future." By empirically validating the institutional enablers that underpin effective housing delivery, it advances the professional discourse on governance, resilience and integration in the built environment. It further reinforces the evolving role of Quantity Surveyors as strategic stewards of sustainable development, professionals who translate policy intent into measurable social, economic and environmental outcomes across South Africa's housing landscape.

Recommendations

Building on the four validated institutional enabler dimensions, this study proposes an integrated set of reform pathways aimed at strengthening the effectiveness and sustainability of the Integrated Residential Development Programme (IRDP). The recommendations are clustered into four thematic domains: policy and governance reform; leadership stability and capacity development; intergovernmental and community coordination; and performance and accountability systems. Each cluster operationalises specific critical success factors (CSFs) identified through Exploratory Factor Analysis, ensuring a coherent link between empirical evidence and strategic intervention.

Policy and Governance Reform

Policy reform must prioritise the institutionalisation of long-term project pipelines and the synchronisation of IRDP planning with municipal Integrated Development Plans (IDPs), Human Settlement Sector Plans and Medium-Term Expenditure Frameworks. A centralised project-tracking and performance-reporting mechanism should be implemented across provinces to improve accountability and transparency. These measures will mitigate governance fragmentation and reduce project duplication; a key weakness identified across many municipalities.

From a Quantity Surveying perspective, governance reform should embed value-management processes and lifecycle costing within early project stages, ensuring that fiscal planning supports sustainable outcomes. Strengthened policy coherence directly advances the SACQSP theme of *navigating disruption* by creating resilient institutional frameworks capable of adapting to political and economic volatility.

Leadership Stability and Capacity Development

Leadership instability remains a major constraint on programme continuity. Municipalities should institutionalise succession planning and mentorship frameworks that retain technical expertise despite political turnover. Continuous professional development, particularly through collaboration with statutory councils and professional bodies such as SACQSP, ECSA and SAICE, should be prioritised to sustain competence and promote a professionalised public service.

The Quantity Surveyor's role extends into governance capacity-building through project audits, cost benchmarking and training in performance-based budgeting. These interventions enhance resilience and accountability within administrative systems, directly supporting the SACQSP theme of collaboration through cross-professional learning and leadership continuity.

Intergovernmental and Community Coordination

Effective delivery under the IRDP requires institutionalised coordination platforms between national, provincial and municipal actors. Formal intergovernmental steering committees should be mandated to integrate housing, infrastructure and land-use planning within a shared results framework. At the community level, participatory planning and co-production models must be expanded to include beneficiaries in project prioritisation, design and monitoring. This ensures legitimacy and long-term settlement sustainability, echoing the participatory governance models observed in successful international cases.

Embedding these mechanisms operationalises *collaboration* as both a process and a governance principle, bridging administrative silos and promoting collective ownership of outcomes.

Performance and Accountability Systems

Performance management and monitoring systems are vital for translating institutional enablers into measurable results. Municipalities should adopt integrated Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) tools that align budget releases and procurement approvals with project-readiness criteria and milestone completion. This approach will reduce fiscal inefficiencies and improve risk visibility across the project lifecycle.

The Quantity Surveyor's professional tools, cost modelling, value-for-money audits and expenditure forecasting should be formalised within the IRDP's accountability framework. Embedding these systems supports the SACQSP theme of *a sustainable future* by institutionalising evidence-based decision-making and transparent governance practices.

Summary

The recommended clusters collectively reinforce the institutional scaffolding necessary for sustainable housing delivery. By consolidating planning coherence, leadership stability, intergovernmental coordination and performance accountability, these interventions transform the IRDP from a policy aspiration into a replicable model of institutional resilience. Strengthening these enablers aligns the housing delivery agenda with South Africa's broader developmental imperatives and exemplifies the pivotal role of Quantity Surveyors in advancing governance reform and sustainable infrastructure delivery.

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SACQSP2025-62

Balancing Productivity, Innovation, and Labour Preservation in South Africa's Construction Industry: An Inclusive Path to Industry 4.0

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Abstract

South African construction Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) face pressure to adopt Industry 4.0 while safeguarding low-skilled employment. This study examines how SMEs can achieve productivity gains without labour displacement. Interpretivist qualitative narrative inquiry using semi-structured interviews (n = 4: two owners, one project manager, one site supervisor) with South African construction SMEs. Data were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis with constant comparison. Five interlinked themes show adoption is socially negotiated rather than purely technical: (1) workforce capability is the primary readiness constraint; (2) low-cost, visible wins (e.g., messaging and cloud file-sharing) dominate under fragile infrastructure; (3) a labour-preserving ethic guides technology choices; (4) trust and reputation operate as informal infrastructure shaping procurement and change; and (5) constrained futures—curiosity about advanced tools persists, but funding, training, and policy barriers limit uptake. Together, these indicate a people-centred route to productivity that protects jobs. The small, qualitative sample limits transferability and reflects mainly owner/manager perspectives; future longitudinal and comparative studies should track adoption trajectories and worker experiences. SMEs should prioritise on-site digital skills, pilot low-cost tools for scheduling, quality assurance, and reporting, and sequence change from people capability to process digitisation before automation. Policymakers can enable labour-preserving adoption via training incentives, infrastructure support, and SME digital clusters. The study introduces the People-Centred Digital Integration Model, extending the Technology–Organisation–Environment perspective to show how construction SMEs can pursue Industry 4.0 with—not instead of—their workforce, offering a practical, ethically grounded pathway for inclusive productivity.

Keywords: Industry 4.0, Construction SMEs, Skills Development, Informality, Inclusive Digitalisation.

Introduction

South Africa's construction SMEs are told that BIM dashboards, IoT sensors and AI will deliver faster, safer builds—but on the ground, uptake is cautious and stepwise, governed as much by cashflow, infrastructure and governance as by the tech itself (Nair et al., 2019; Lü et al., 2019). In local firms, internal constraints and stubborn skills gaps continue to blunt experimentation and scaling, keeping many initiatives at the pilot stage (Musonda & Okoro, 2021). At the same time, human-centred Industry 4.0 perspectives warn that productivity gains are fragile unless digital tools are coupled to workforce capability and ethical leadership (Maddikunta et al., 2022; Ligarski et al., 2021). These realities pose the problem this paper addresses: how to harness Industry 4.0 for measurable productivity—without displacing low-skilled workers—by treating people, culture, and practical capability-building as the decisive infrastructure for an inclusive transition.

South Africa's construction SMEs operate in volatile, cost-pressured markets where digitalisation is associated with potential gains in time, quality and safety. However, adoption typically proceeds incrementally and under tight risk controls (Lü et al., 2019; Nair et al., 2019). In this study, "Industry 4.0 (I4.0)" refers to integrating data-centric tools—such as mobile data capture, BIM-enabled workflows, and sensing—into routine site and back-office processes. The feasibility of this approach in SME contexts is conditioned by interoperability, affordability, and connectivity constraints (Lü et al., 2019).

Organisational factors, including leadership commitment, process discipline and role-aligned training, are frequently decisive; persistent internal constraints and skills gaps have limited many initiatives from pilot scale to scale-up within local construction settings (Musonda & Okoro, 2021). Complementary Industry 4.0 perspectives emphasise that productivity effects are unlikely to be durable unless tool adoption is coupled with workforce capability development, job redesign and ethically grounded leadership (Ligarski et al., 2021; Maddikunta et al., 2022). Collectively, these strands indicate that the conditions for inclusive I4.0 adoption in construction SMEs lie at the intersection of technology, organisation, and environment—the terrain mapped by the Technology–Organisation–Environment (TOE) framework (Tornatzky et al., 1990).

Existing research on digitalisation and Industry 4.0 (I4.0) in construction and SME settings identifies technical promise and adoption antecedents, yet offers limited, context-specific guidance for how South Africa's construction SMEs can secure productivity gains without displacing low-skilled workers. Studies emphasise technological and organisational readiness, affordability, interoperability and connectivity constraints (Lü et al., 2019; Nair et al., 2019), and document persistent internal constraints and skills gaps in the local construction sector (Musonda & Okoro, 2021). However, the literature remains sparse on labour-preserving adoption pathways tailored to small firms operating under volatile demand and tight margins—specifically, on sequencing low-cost tools, role redesign and micro-training required to convert access to technology into inclusive productivity outcomes. Moreover, while the Technology–Organisation–Environment (TOE) framework is widely used to structure adoption factors, applications seldom operationalise labour-preserving design criteria or specify measurement of productivity improvements with job retention for low-skilled roles (Tornatzky et al., 1990). This leaves a consequential, researchable gap at the intersection of I4.0 adoption and inclusive employment in South Africa's construction SMEs.

This paper aims to investigate how Industry 4.0 technologies can be integrated into South Africa's construction SMEs to improve productivity while preserving employment opportunities for low-skilled workers. Guided by the Technology–Organisation–Environment (TOE) framework, the study pursues three objectives: (1) to examine barriers and enablers of Industry 4.0 adoption within South African SMEs; (2) to identify strategies that allow productivity gains without displacing low-skilled workers; and (3) to generate insights that inform industry practice and government policy for inclusive workforce transitions. This study therefore investigates how South African construction SMEs can adopt Industry 4.0 to improve productivity without displacing low-skilled workers.

Labour-preserving productivity gains in construction SMEs are feasible when adoption follows a sequenced pathway that prioritises low-cost, interoperable digital tools, embeds role redesign and targeted micro-training, and evaluates outcomes against explicit job-retention criteria. The People-Centred Digital Integration Model (PCDIM), grounded in the Technology–Organisation–Environment (TOE) framework, formalises this pathway by linking capability building and governance of micro-experiments to measurable workflow efficiency improvements without displacing low-skilled workers.

The paper first delineates the South African construction SME context and relevant Industry 4.0 literature, then outlines the qualitative narrative design and analytical approach. The findings are presented thematically across TOE domains to surface barriers, enablers and labour-preserving mechanisms, followed by the articulation of PCDIM and a practitioner playbook. The paper concludes with implications for industry and policy, limitations, and avenues for further research.

Literature Review

Industry 4.0 (I4.0) adoption in construction SMEs is a socio-technical transition shaped by technology, organisation and environment rather than a simple technology substitution. Reviews and readiness studies indicate that value from BIM, IoT and analytics materialises when tools align with organisational capability and contextual constraints, while South African evidence highlights skills gaps and governance limitations that condition uptake (Li & Kassem, 2019; Çınar et al., 2021; Ghobakhloo et al., 2022; Musonda & Okoro, 2021). These strands motivate a focused review of the adoption context, human and relational readiness, pragmatic sequencing under constraints, and the ethical, labour-inclusive outcomes that anchor the study's contribution.

Industry 4.0 Adoption and the SME Context in Construction

In construction SMEs, I4.0 adoption typically proceeds incrementally under resource constraints and project-based uncertainty. Evidence from TOE-informed studies points to relative advantage, compatibility and complexity as decisive factors, with benefits emerging when digital tools are embedded in everyday routines, data practices and governance rather than deployed as standalone technologies (Li & Kassem, 2019; Çınar et al., 2021; Ghobakhloo et al., 2022). Maturity and readiness models show staged progress—early, visible wins such as clash detection or mobile data capture often precede heavier integrations—reflecting affordability, interoperability and connectivity limitations common to SMEs in developing contexts (Gupta et al., 2018; Švarc et al., 2020). Accordingly, context-fit and organisational capability are as critical as technical specification in explaining realised productivity gains.

Human Capital and Digital Readiness (with Relational Enablers)

Human capital remains the primary enabler or bottleneck in the digital uptake of construction. Studies highlight persistent gaps in digital literacy and the need for practice-proximate training, apprenticeships, and experiential learning to sustain use on-site (Aghimien et al., 2022; Musonda & Okoro, 2021; Ebekozien et al., 2022). Beyond individual skills, inter-organisational relationships, innovative capability and absorptive capacity shape readiness in developing economies, indicating that social capital and trust networks influence knowledge flow and problem-solving during adoption (Zia et al., 2022). Therefore, readiness assessment for SMEs should incorporate workforce capability and relational strength alongside technology availability and governance maturity.

Pragmatic Innovation under Constraint: Sequencing and Toolchains

SMEs commonly pursue pragmatic, staged innovation that sequences low-cost, high-impact tools into expandable toolchains. Empirical and conceptual work shows firms prioritise quick-ROI steps—pilot BIM for coordination, mobile data capture, basic sensing—before moving to platform-level integration; frugal-innovation and dynamic-capabilities perspectives explain how existing assets are recombined to progress under tight margins (Ghobakhloo et al., 2022; Gupta et al., 2018; Ghosh et al., 2022; Vrchota et al., 2019; Arias-Pérez et al., 2021). Such sequencing reduces risk, builds organisational learning and aligns capability growth with progressively more complex digital work. Evaluating "readiness" therefore requires attention to order, modularity and governance development, not merely the presence of specific technologies.

Ethics, Labour, and Inclusive Productivity: Synthesis and Gap

Digitalisation in construction SMEs should be governed as a dual agenda of productivity and labour preservation. Research on insider risk, data protection and supportive climates during organisational change, together with evidence on SME constraints, indicates that ethical leadership and skills upgrading are linked to smoother transitions and retention, mitigating the risk of displacement for low-skilled workers (Al-Harrasi et al., 2021; Nwankwo et al., 2020; Akbiyikli, Eyüpoğlu & Akbiyikli, 2023; Purba et al., 2022). The literature remains thin, however, on operationalised, labour-preserving adoption pathways tailored to construction SMEs in high-unemployment contexts, particularly regarding the sequencing of tools, role redesign and micro-training tied to measured productivity outcomes. This under-specification defines the gap addressed by the present study.

Research Methodology and Method

Paradigm and Research Design

The study was grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, which holds that knowledge is socially constructed through interaction and context. Interpretivism is appropriate when the aim is to understand how actors perceive and make sense of their organisational world (Saunders et al., 2023). This stance aligns with the focus on how South African construction SME stakeholders interpret Industry 4.0 while seeking to preserve employment for low-skilled workers. Within this paradigm, a narrative research design was adopted to elicit lived experiences of technological change. Narrative inquiry examines how individuals construct and sequence events to assign meaning to their work and identity (Saunders et al., 2023; Leedy & Ormrod, 2015). Treating accounts as stories rather than isolated statements provided a coherent structure for interpreting reflections on innovation, productivity and labour.

Alignment with Research Aim

The design aligned directly with the primary aim: to investigate how Industry 4.0 can be integrated to improve productivity without displacing low-skilled workers. Narrative inquiry foregrounded participants' sense-making at the intersection of opportunity, cost and social responsibility, enabling a nuanced understanding of how technology adoption is negotiated in small-enterprise settings.

Sampling Strategy and Participants

Purposive sampling selected information-rich participants able to speak to digital decision-making (Saunders et al., 2023; Leedy & Ormrod, 2015). Four participants (from Eastern Cape and the Western Cape) were interviewed: two SME owners, one project manager, and one site supervisor, who had strategic to operational roles in residential, renovation, commercial fit-out, and infrastructure work. Although small, the sample was methodologically adequate for narrative analysis. Interpretive studies often employ four to twelve participants when the group is relatively homogeneous, and the aim is depth (Saunders et al., 2023). Consistent with Leedy and Ormrod (2015), adequacy here rested on information power: each participant held first-hand responsibility for, or exposure to, technology choices and labour implications, yielding rich and relevant data.

Data Collection Methods

Data were generated through semi-structured narrative interviews, in which participants were invited to recount their experiences with technology and workforce management in their own words. Interviews (45–60 minutes) were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. The guide opened with broad prompts about technological change and then invited reflection on barriers, training and workforce effects, allowing participants to direct the flow while linking events and consequences (Saunders et al., 2023). This flexible design preserved the integrity of each story and enabled analytic comparison across accounts.

Data Analysis

Analysis combined narrative interpretation with a systematic thematic procedure. First, narratives were examined for content and structure—specifically, the sequencing of events, turning points, and identity work—consistent with the thematic narrative analysis described by Saunders et al. (2023). Second, the study followed the six-step systematic thematic process proposed by Naeem et al. (2023): familiarisation; keyword extraction guided by the six Rs of keyword selection (Realness, Richness, Repetition, Rationale, Repartee, Regal); coding using the six Rs of coding (Robust, Reflective, Resplendent, Relevant, Radical, Righteous); theme development via the four Rs of theming (Reciprocal, Recognisable, Responsive, Resourceful); conceptualisation; and model integration, which produced the People-Centred Digital Integration Model (PCDIM). Braun and Clarke's (2021) principles informed code organisation and theme refinement, while the Rs-based framework ensured consistency, traceability and transparency from keywords to themes and conceptual outputs. This hybrid approach retained participants' language while systematically connecting individual experiences to higher-order categories.

Data Adequacy and Saturation

Saturation was assessed in relation to the distinctions between code saturation and meaning saturation (Saunders et al., 2023). By the third interview, no new first-order codes relevant to the aim emerged; the fourth interview added confirmatory depth without introducing novel categories, indicating that meaning saturation had been reached. An audit trail documented emergent codes and frequencies, evidencing the point at which additional data no longer generated new understanding. In line with Saunders et al. (2023) and Leedy and Ormrod (2015), saturation was judged on analytic sufficiency rather than numerical thresholds.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was granted by the Nelson Mandela University Research Ethics Committee (Human), REC-H 2179, valid from 11 July 2025 to 10 July 2026. Informed consent, confidentiality and the use of pseudonyms were assured. Interviews were conducted sensitively, given concerns about job

security, and all digital files were stored on password-protected devices in accordance with institutional standards.

Trustworthiness and Methodological Integrity

Trustworthiness was addressed through credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability. Credibility was supported by preserving participants' voices through direct quotations. Dependability was ensured via an audit trail that recorded keyword extraction, coding decisions and thematic development. Reflexive notes acknowledged the researcher's interpretive stance, enhancing confirmability. Thick description of organisational and project contexts supports transferability to similar SME environments.

Rationale for Methodological Choices

Methodological choices accord with established guidance. Narrative inquiry is suitable for exploring the "how" and "why" of behaviour in small interpretive samples (Saunders et al., 2023), and qualitative inquiry prioritises depth of human experience over statistical generalisation (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015). Integrating Naeem et al.'s (2023) systematic thematic analysis introduced an auditable, criterion-led process that strengthened rigour and reproducibility in a small-sample design, while Braun and Clarke (2021) provided widely accepted procedures for coding and theming.

Research Results and Discussion

This section reports how South African construction SMEs integrate Industry 4.0 technologies to enhance productivity while safeguarding low-skilled employment. Based on four narrative interviews analysed through systematic thematic analysis, five interrelated themes were identified, each capturing technological, organisational, and ethical dimensions of digital adoption.

The findings reveal a consistent pattern of pragmatic, people-centred digitalisation. SMEs adopt technology incrementally, striking a balance between affordability, trust, and moral responsibility toward their employees. As shown in Figures 1–5, digital readiness depends less on infrastructure than on human capability, relational strength, and ethical judgment. The following discussion interprets each theme in relation to the literature, demonstrating how human, social, and moral factors collectively shape inclusive Industry 4.0 transformation within South Africa's construction sector.

Human Capital as the Core of Digital Readiness

Figure 1 depicts Theme 1, which positions workforce capability and learning culture as the principal determinants of digital readiness in construction SMEs. Readiness advances where tacit site knowledge is connected to role-aligned, practice-proximate training; it stalls where skills gaps and time/cost constraints prevent such linkage.

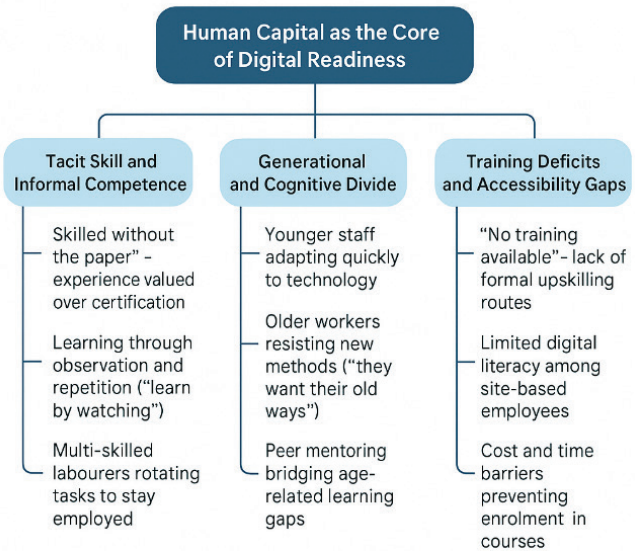

Figure 1 Coding Tree for Theme 1 – Human Capital as the Core of Digital Readiness

Participants consistently framed productivity as a function of human competence rather than hardware, noting that progress "depends on the people, not the machines" (Interviewee 2). Experience-based learning dominated: most site workers "never went to college—they just learn by watching and doing" (Interviewee 2). Generational dynamics shaped uptake; while "the young ones are quick with phones and apps," "the older hands know the job better," creating complementary strengths but uneven digital fluency (Interviewee 1). Formal upskilling opportunities were scarce and difficult to schedule; as one manager put it, "training costs money and time we don't have; if we stop to train, the site stops too" (Interviewee 3). In response, teams leaned on peer coaching and minor task redesign, with supervisors using "show-and-do" methods to embed new tools on site (Interviewee 4).

These patterns affirm that realised value from BIM, mobile data capture, and sensing depends on alignment with organisational capability and context (Li & Kassem, 2019; Çınar et al., 2021; Ghobakhloo et al., 2022). The dominance of tacit, on-the-job learning and mentoring echoes South African evidence on capability bottlenecks and the need for practice-embedded training (Aghimien et al., 2022; Musonda & Okoro, 2021; Ebekozien et al., 2022). Affordability and scheduling barriers that keep initiatives at pilot level mirror broader constraints reported for SMEs under fragile infrastructure and tight margins (Purba et al., 2022). Taken together, the data support an Ability–Motivation–Opportunity reading in which empowerment and situated learning drive innovation behaviour (Akbiyikli, Eyüpoğlu & Akbiyikli, 2023), while also underscoring that organisation—people, routines, and mentoring networks—acts as the decisive TOE domain: misaligned tools underperform regardless of technical promise. Hence, in this context, human capital functions as the decisive infrastructure through which Industry 4.0 must be sequenced and scaled.

Pragmatic Innovation within Constraint

Figure 2 presents Theme 2, which illustrates how construction SMEs pursue incremental, low-risk innovation under financial and operational limitations. Rather than adopting advanced, capital-intensive systems, firms focus on visible and affordable improvements that fit within fragile site conditions. Pragmatism governs decision-making: new tools are trialled when they clearly save time or reduce error and are abandoned when they disrupt production or exceed budgets.

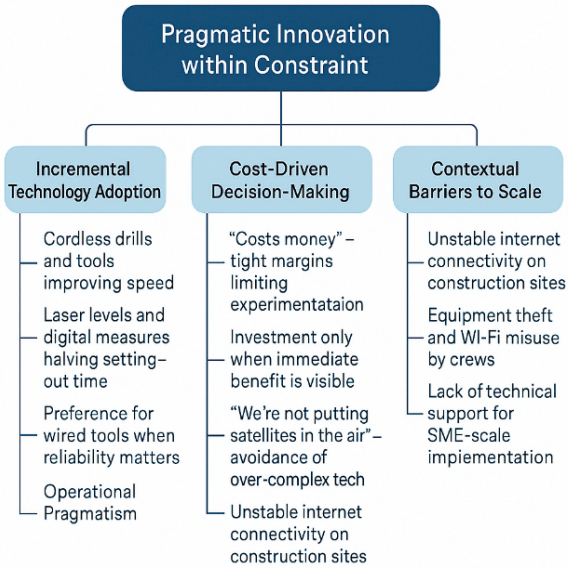

Figure 2 Coding Tree for Theme 2 – Pragmatic Innovation within Constraint

Across the interviews, participants portrayed innovation as a process of doing what works with what is available. Interviewee 1 stated, "We use what we can afford — cordless drills, laser levels — things that save time straight away." Cost was the overriding filter for decision-making. As Interviewee 3 explained, "Everything costs money — we buy only what we know will work." Simplicity guided adoption choices, with most firms relying on basic communication and storage tools to coordinate work. Interviewee 2 noted, "We keep it simple — WhatsApp for site updates, Google Drive for drawings; big software just confuses people." Yet infrastructural fragility frequently interrupted digital use. Interviewee 4 recounted, "Wi-Fi gets stolen; sometimes the data runs out mid-job — there's no

backup plan." These accounts depict innovation as cautious, context-aware, and strongly shaped by the realities of resource limitation and site volatility.

These findings resonate with TOE-based research showing that SME adoption hinges on relative advantage, compatibility, and complexity rather than on access to high-end tools (Li & Kassem, 2019; Çınar et al., 2021; Ghobakhloo et al., 2022). The participants' emphasis on visible, affordable benefits mirrors the frugal-innovation pathways described by Ghosh et al. (2022) and Vrchota et al. (2019), where firms pursue quick, low-risk pay-offs under tight margins. The sequencing of simple tools before platform-level integration reflects the staged maturity models observed by Gupta et al. (2018) and Li et al. (2019). Environmental constraints such as unreliable connectivity and limited technical support, widely reported in South African SME contexts (Nair et al., 2019; Lü et al., 2019; Purba et al., 2022; Al-Harrasi et al., 2021), explain why innovation often remains at a pilot scale.

Ethical Productivity and Labour Preservation

Figure 3 presents Theme 3, showing that construction SMEs govern digital adoption through an employment-protection ethic. Productivity is pursued within social and moral boundaries: managers favour retraining, role reassignment, and paced change over labour shedding. Policy and union oversight are viewed as stabilisers that keep adoption compatible with local employment realities.

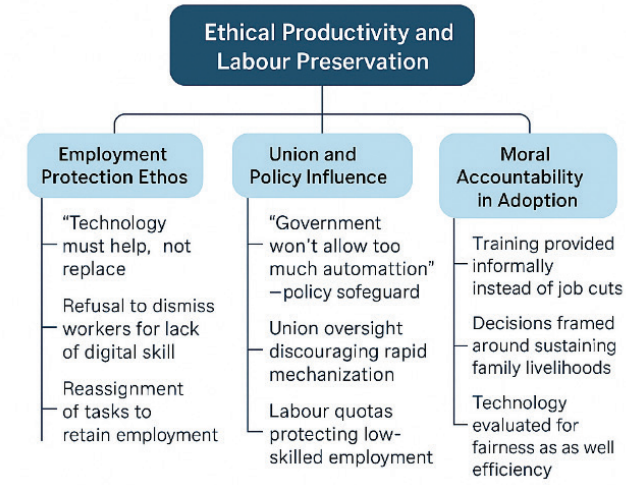

Figure 3 Coding Tree for Theme 3 – Ethical Productivity and Labour Preservation

Participants consistently articulated inclusion as a guiding norm. Interviewee 1 stated, "technology must help, not replace my people." The same stance underpinned day-to-day decisions: Interviewee 2 explained, "we'd rather train a guy again than send him home because he can't use a gadget." Public policy was described as a brake on disruptive automation: "Government won't allow too much automation—it keeps people working" (Interviewee 3). Where digital tools created friction for particular workers, managers opted to redeploy rather than dismiss: "if someone struggles with tech, we move them to another role—nobody gets cut for that" (Interviewee 4). Together these accounts depict a moral calculus in which job security, family livelihoods, and community expectations shape the acceptable pace and form of technology use.

The findings align with the paper's review that durable productivity depends on workforce capability development and ethically grounded leadership, not technology alone (Maddikunta et al., 2022; Ligarski et al., 2021). The preference for augmentation over substitution operationalises the study's central claim that adoption in South African SMEs is socially negotiated under cash-flow, infrastructure and governance pressures (Nair et al., 2019; Lü et al., 2019). Retraining and reassignment reflect organisational strategies to cope with internal constraints and skills gaps that keep many initiatives at pilot scale (Musonda & Okoro, 2021). Framed within the TOE perspective, this theme locates labour preservation in the environmental and organisational domains: normative expectations and policy signals moderate automation, while managerial choices embed job retention into process change (Tornatzky et al., 1990). In the proposed PCDIM, this becomes an explicit design criterion—sequencing adoption from people capability to process digitisation before automation so that productivity gains are achieved with, not instead of, the workforce.

Relational Resilience in SME Operations

Figure 4 presents Theme 4, which shows that construction SMEs rely on trust, loyalty, and client networks as an informal infrastructure for getting work done and for pacing technological change. Day-to-day coordination, supervision, and even procurement are mediated through relationships, which in turn shape which digital tools are acceptable and how quickly they are normalised.

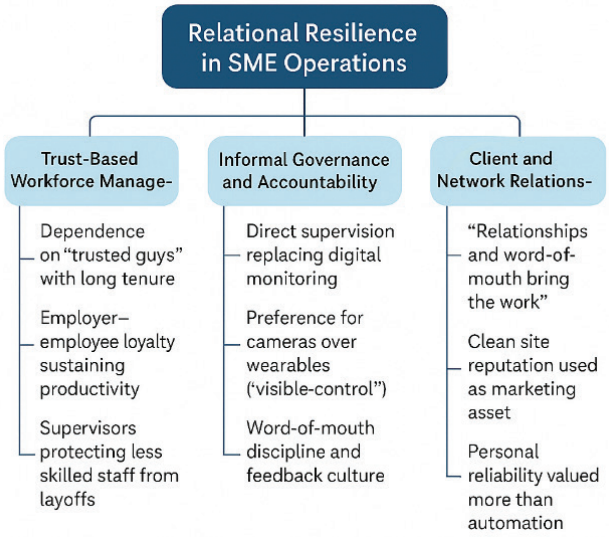

Figure 4 Coding Tree for Theme 4 – Relational Resilience in SME Operations

Participants described trust as the foundation of productivity and continuity. Interviewee 3 stated, "we depend on our trusted guys—they've been with us for years," and Interviewee 1 added that "there's no need for fancy trackers—we can see what's happening on site." Oversight was intentionally visible but not intrusive: "cameras are enough; wearables make people feel watched," explained Interviewee 2. Externally, reputation and word-of-mouth were central to securing projects; as Interviewee 4 put it, "most of our jobs come from word of mouth—a clean site and good relationships bring more work." Together these accounts depict a relational operating system in which loyalty stabilises crews, supervisors' privilege person-centred control, and networks channel opportunities.

These findings accord with the paper's review that adoption in South African SMEs is socially negotiated under cash-flow, infrastructure and governance pressures (Nair et al., 2019; Lü et al., 2019). Relationships and mentoring operate as readiness assets, supporting knowledge flow and problem-solving during uptake—consistent with evidence that inter-organisational ties and social capital shape absorptive capacity in developing-economy SMEs (Zia et al., 2022). Where such ties are strong, low-cost tools (such as messaging, shared files, and basic sensing) can be embedded in everyday routines despite environmental fragility, reflecting the staged, context-fit progress identified in the literature (Gupta et al., 2018; Ghobakhloo et al., 2022). Framed within TOE, relational resilience belongs to the organisational domain and acts as a filter: SMEs favour technologies that reinforce visibility and accountability within trusted teams, pacing change to protect client reputation and employment continuity (Tornatzky et al., 1990; Musonda & Okoro, 2021).

Visionary but Constrained Innovation Futures

Figure 5 presents Theme 5, which captures SMEs' forward-looking but cautious stance toward advanced Industry 4.0 tools. Curiosity about 3-D printing, drones, AI and generative tools coexists with structural limits in finance, training and enabling policy. Managers signal conditional readiness: they will experiment when costs, capability and supportive partnerships align.

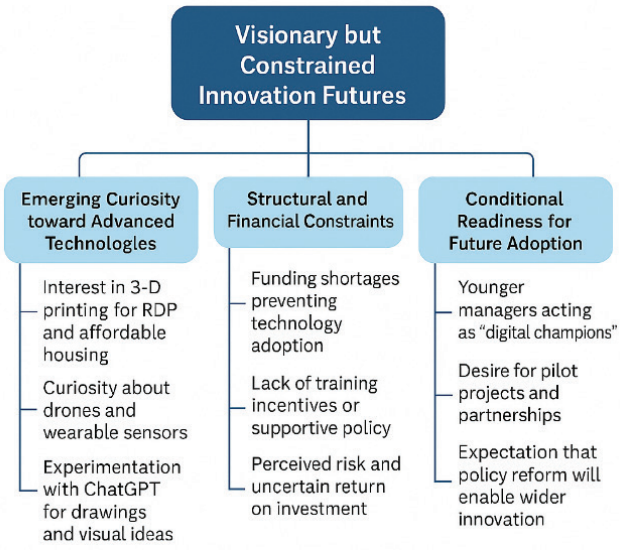

Figure 5 Coding Tree for Theme 5 – Visionary but Constrained Innovation Futures

Participants expressed enthusiasm for frontier technologies while stressing feasibility constraints. Interviewee 1 remarked, "We've seen videos of 3-D printing houses—it's amazing, maybe one day for RDPs." Experimentation was tentative and exploratory: "I tried ChatGPT once—it gave ideas for drawings" (Interviewee 2). Capacity gaps constrained momentum: "We'd love to try new tools, but funding and training are not there" (Interviewee 3). Progress was seen as contingent on coordinated support: "if government supports pilot projects or training, we'll jump in" (Interviewee 4). Younger managers positioned themselves as catalysts, describing their role as "digital champions" who could shepherd trials when conditions allowed (Interviewee 2).

The pattern of curiosity under constraint matches the paper's review: adoption in South African SMEs is socially negotiated and proceeds incrementally under cash-flow, infrastructure and governance pressures (Nair et al., 2019; Lü et al., 2019). Conditional readiness—pilots when payback and support are clear—reflects the TOE logic that relative advantage, compatibility and complexity determine uptake (Tornatzky et al., 1990) and explains why many efforts remain at pilot scale amid persistent skills and capability gaps (Musonda & Okoro, 2021). The interest in 3-D printing, drones and AI alongside quick trials of generative tools echoes early-awareness phases noted in SME digitalisation (Li & Kassem, 2019; Çınar, Zeeshan & Korhan, 2021) while calls for policy-linked pilots, training incentives and ecosystem support speak directly to the need for enabling environments that reduce risk and unlock experimentation. In the proposed PCDIM, these findings reinforce a sequenced pathway—people capability → process digitisation → selective automation—with pilots and partnerships as bridging mechanisms that can translate vision into inclusive productivity gains without displacing low-skilled workers.

Conceptual Framework

The People-Centred Digital Integration Model (PCDIM) (Figure 6) extends the Technology–Organisation–Environment (TOE) framework to explain how South African construction SMEs adopt Industry 4.0 technologies in ways that raise productivity while protecting employment. It reframes digitalisation as a socially negotiated and ethically governed process rather than a purely technical shift.

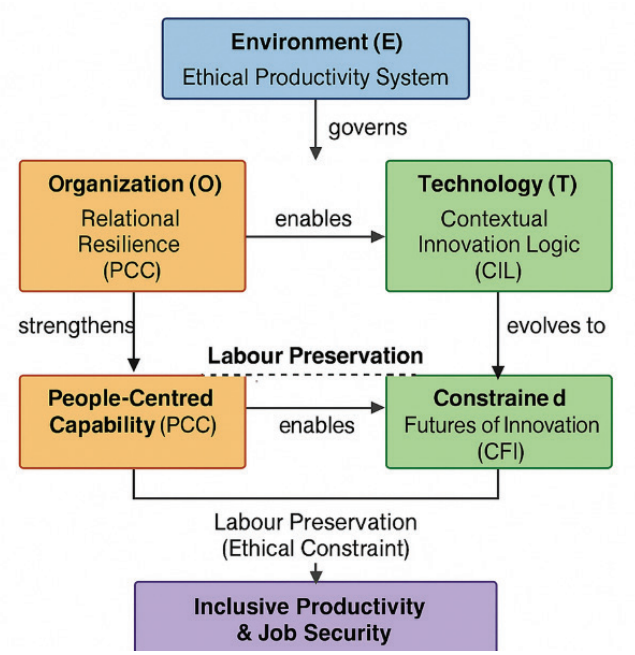

Figure 6 The People-Centred Digital Integration (PCDIM) Model

At the environmental level, the Ethical Productivity System (EPS) establishes the principle that technology should help, not replace, people. This moral boundary governs the pace and form of innovation, guiding managerial decisions and policy expectations in a labour-intensive economy.

Within the organisational domain, Relational Resilience (RR) and People-Centred Capability (PCC) form the human and social foundations of readiness. Trust, loyalty, and reputation stabilise operations (RR), while tacit skill, mentorship, and experiential learning enable effective tool use (PCC). Together, they allow firms to adapt incrementally and sustain productivity despite limited resources.

The technological domain unfolds through two stages. Contextual Innovation Logic (CIL) reflects SMEs' reliance on affordable, practical tools that deliver quick gains, while Constrained Futures of Innovation (CFI) represents cautious curiosity about advanced technologies such as drones or 3-D printing, limited by finance, training, and policy support.

Across all domains, labour preservation acts as the ethical constraint linking people, organisation, and technology. When human capability and relational trust are strong, innovation advances without displacement. The model thus formalises a sequenced pathway—people capability → process digitisation → selective automation—culminating in inclusive productivity and job security for the construction SME sector.

Conclusion

This study investigated how South African construction SMEs can integrate Industry 4.0 technologies to improve productivity while preserving employment opportunities for low-skilled workers. The findings reveal that digital transformation in this sector is not a linear technological upgrade, but a people-centred negotiation shaped by human capability, relational trust, and ethical responsibility.

Three insights emerge. First, digital readiness depends less on infrastructure and more on people-centred capability—the tacit, experiential knowledge that allows SMEs to adapt technology to their contexts. Second, innovation follows a pragmatic and ethical logic: adoption occurs incrementally, bounded by financial constraint and a moral duty to safeguard livelihoods. Third, relational resilience—encompassing trust, loyalty, and reputation—functions as the invisible infrastructure sustaining productivity in uncertain times.

These outcomes collectively address the study's objectives: identifying barriers and enablers, revealing strategies for productivity without displacement, and informing inclusive digital-transition practices.

The research contributes theoretically through the People-Centred Digital Integration Model (PCDIM), which extends the Technology–Organisation–Environment framework by embedding labour preservation and moral governance within its structure. Empirically, it illuminates a realistic pathway for SMEs in developing economies to pursue inclusive productivity: achieving technological progress without eroding social stability.

Industry 4.0 in South African construction SMEs is viable when innovation advances alongside people, rather than apart from them.

Recommendations

The findings of this study highlight that achieving inclusive digital transformation in South African construction SMEs depends on aligning technological progress with human development and ethical governance. Policy makers, industry bodies, and SME leaders must therefore pursue strategies that strengthen workforce capability while preserving employment stability.

First, workforce development should build on the tacit and experiential knowledge that underpins the sector's productivity. Rather than replacing existing workers, digital upskilling should formalise and extend their competencies through accessible, on-site short courses and recognition of prior learning programmes. Such initiatives would convert practical expertise into accredited digital readiness, ensuring low-skilled workers remain employable within modernised workflows.

Second, policy and financial frameworks must embed labour-preserving conditions within digitalisation incentives. Targeted grants, tax relief, or subsidised training for SMEs that integrate automation with retraining commitments would encourage ethical adoption. These instruments should explicitly reward firms that link technological investments to job retention and workforce development.

Third, collaboration among SMEs can catalyse digital capability. Establishing shared *"digital clusters"* or regional technology hubs would enable smaller firms to pool resources, access technical support, and exchange lessons learned, reducing costs and risk across the value chain.

Future research should extend and validate the People-Centred Digital Integration Model (PCDIM) in other sectors and developing economy contexts to test its generalisability. Longitudinal and mixed-methods studies could further examine how relational trust, ethical leadership, and policy interventions interact over time to sustain inclusive innovation.

In essence, the study underscores that the success of Industry 4.0 in construction SMEs will depend on advancing technology through people, ensuring that digital transformation strengthens—not supplants—the human foundations of productivity and social stability.

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SACQSP2025-75

Building Resilience: Countering South Africa's Construction Mafia Through Stakeholder Collaboration in the Construction Industry

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Abstract

This paper explores strategic responses to mitigate the influence of the 'construction mafia'- an understudied form of organised crime disrupting the South African construction industry. The study addresses a critical knowledge gap by identifying and evaluating stakeholder strategies that promote project continuity and resilience in volatile environments. Adopting an interpretivist, inductive approach, this study employed a cross-sectional qualitative design to conduct semi-structured interviews with seven experienced construction managers, selected through purposive and snowball sampling. Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns in stakeholder engagement practices in response to organised crime on construction sites. Findings reveal the significance of instituting early, inclusive, and transparent stakeholder engagement as a defence against project disruption. Effective practices include proactive collaboration with law enforcement, structured involvement of ward councillors and traditional leaders, and establishing transparent, inclusive project steering committees (PSCs). These measures enhance community acceptance, facilitate open communication, and pre-empt criminal interference. This paper underscores the importance of proactive collaborative governance and holistic stakeholder engagement frameworks in high-risk project environments. Recommendations include formalising stakeholder analysis, integrating social facilitation, and embedding PSCs with community and institutional representation to strengthen early-warning systems. This paper advances construction criminology by providing context-specific, empirically grounded mechanisms for mitigating organised crime. It resonates with the conference's focus on navigating disruption, collaboration, and sustainable futures, offering actionable insights for construction professionals, researchers, and policymakers.

Keywords: Construction Mafia, Organised Crime, Stakeholder Engagement, Collaborative Governance, Risk Mitigation.

Introduction

Organised crime in South Africa's construction sector has evolved into a sophisticated and deeply entrenched phenomenon that threatens infrastructure delivery, undermines governance, and disrupts community trust. In 2014, the emergence of the Delangokubona Business Forum in Durban's Umlazi signalled the inception of what has subsequently become known as South Africa's 'construction mafia' (Irish-Qhobosheane, 2022). Within a remarkably short period, this shadowy entity swept through the eThekwini Municipality, intimidating contractors, disrupting project timelines, and bypassing formal procurement processes (Hans, 2016). Under the shared ideology of 'radical economic transformation', the Youth in Action movement emerged a year later (Slabbert, 2018), with the two entities merging to form the Federation for Radical Economic Transformation, later rebranding as the Black Business Federation to mitigate reputational damage associated with escalating violence (Erasmus, 2021). Their activities have permeated the country, with copycat groups routinely demanding 30% of contract values to allow construction work to proceed (Irish-Qhobosheane, 2022; Armstrong & Meyer, 2022). This growing interference on construction sites has hindered the successful delivery of projects, prompting a need to explore collaborative mechanisms to counter this threat.

Since 2019, 712 cases have been reported, yet only 52 convictions have been secured (Webb, 2023). The situation is compounded as victims are deterred from pressing criminal charges against the mafia, attributing their reluctance to the police's dismissive approach and allegations of police involvement

with mafia entities (Armstrong & Meyer, 2022). Consequently, disruptions and intimidation become normalised within project settings.

Recent studies have begun to examine the emergence and impact of the construction mafia within South Africa's construction industry, highlighting how these groups disrupt projects, exploit regulatory gaps, and create economic and operational challenges. For instance, Nyangiwe et al. (2023) and Siteto et al. (2024) investigated regional dynamics and project disruptions, while Kalbach (2024) highlighted how governance and policy factors can create conditions that enable organised crime. Similarly, Dladla et al. (2025) and Aghimien et al. (2025) documented the economic and operational consequences of violence and extortion on construction sites, with Dladla et al. (2025) further recommending collaborative approaches to mitigate these threats. Collectively, these studies provide valuable insights into the nature and impact of the construction mafia. However, they primarily describe the phenomenon and do not examine the effectiveness of strategic or collaborative interventions.

Building on this foundation, the present study aims to bridge the gap by examining the role of early community inclusion and collaborative governance in promoting resilient project environments. The objectives of this research are, therefore, to:

Identify specific collaborative initiatives that have been established to combat the construction mafia, and

Analyse the effectiveness of collaborative initiatives by examining their successes and shortcomings.

If left unchecked, the repercussions could be grave. Ongoing extortion and project disruptions can deter foreign investment, waste public funds, and hinder economic growth. Furthermore, the mafia's manipulation of contract allocation in favour of affiliated entities can stifle competition, marginalising legitimate contractors in an already constrained industry. If not systematically studied and addressed, the growing influence of such groups may make it harder to dismantle these criminal networks, allowing them to become further entrenched within the construction sector and the broader economy.

The burden of addressing this complex phenomenon has rested disproportionately on contractors for too long. Reclaiming the industry from such forces requires a coordinated, multi-stakeholder approach that includes construction companies, communities, government entities and law enforcement. This study demonstrates how the deliberate inclusion of key actors in governance structures, such as PSCs, combined with strategic, trust-building engagements prior to project implementation, can foster local support and strengthen resistance to mafia interference.

The following section reviews the existing literature on organised crime and cooperative governance, situating the construction mafia within both South African and international contexts. This is followed by an outline of the methodological framework and thematic analysis approach. The paper then presents and discusses the findings under three core themes, before concluding with practical recommendations and theoretical contributions to construction criminology.

Disrupting Organised Crime Through Collaboration

Conceptualising the 'Construction Mafia'- Origins and Definitions

The term "mafia" is often sensationalised in media and public discourse; however, it has strong historical roots. Originating in Italy, the term denotes a specific form of organised crime, capable of embedding itself in legal economies and politics, exploiting corruption to secure lucrative public projects (Sciarrone & Storti, 2014; Savonna, 1995). This enabled criminal organisations such as the Cosa Nostra, 'Ndrangheta, and Camorra to position themselves as intermediaries between construction firms and political actors, soliciting payments in exchange for lucrative public projects.

Similarly, the South African construction mafia mobilises support from marginalised communities, secures political backing and infiltrates projects with violence and intimidation (Irish-Qhobosheane, 2022), mirroring the definitional criteria of organised crime, as outlined by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2018). Although there are parallels between the Italian and South African cases, the former emerged from entrenched corruption, while the latter capitalises on post-apartheid grievances and exclusion from economic opportunities (Irish-Qhobosheane, 2022). In South Africa, the construction mafia has also exploited misinterpretations of the Preferential Procurement Policy

Framework Act (Nortier, 2024), a policy that a study by Sibanda and Tshikovhi (2022) found is often misunderstood by public sector supply chain professionals. Such misinterpretation within government procurement structures indicates a systemic policy weakness that has inadvertently facilitated the emergence and operation of the construction mafia.

The South African Response

Initial responses to the South African construction mafia were predominantly fragmented, with contractors left to grapple with the challenges without coordinated support (Irish-Qhobosheane, 2022; Armstrong & Meyer, 2022). However, industry stakeholders have recently recognised the need for a collective response. The Bargaining Council for the Civil Engineering Industry (BCCEI) asserts that a collaborative effort involving contractors, clients, communities, and governmental entities is imperative to counter the influence of the construction mafia (3SMedia, 2022). Similarly, the Western Cape Property Development Forum advocates for early engagement of communities through ward councillors and credible Community Liaison Officers (CLOs) who are known by the communities they serve (Western Cape Property Development Forum, 2022).

Effective collaboration, however, extends beyond social coordination. Aigbavboa et al. (2024) highlight that cost-cutting measures during construction heighten risks to end users, particularly when mafia-affiliated, inexperienced SMEs obtain work through coercion and subsequently employ substandard materials and labour. Similarly, Zerihun et al. (2025) emphasise the importance of subcontractor prequalification as a safeguard for quality and accountability. These insights suggest that collaborative frameworks must integrate both relational and procedural dimensions—engaging stakeholders collectively while also ensuring procurement integrity, quality control, and oversight mechanisms that can mitigate risks associated with criminal infiltration.

Rathenam and Dabup (2017), Theessen (2023), and Nagogo (2022) emphasise that early community involvement is pivotal for identifying grievances, managing expectations, and communicating potential constraints. Similarly, research indicates that insufficient stakeholder engagement can intensify conflict, making proactive relationship-building essential (Kujala et al., 2022; Mickel, 2024). Collectively, these studies underscore that proactive and inclusive engagement not only facilitates smoother project implementation but also strengthens resistance against criminal interference. In this context, collaborative governance becomes critical—not merely for information sharing, but for coordinating responses to emerging threats, aligning objectives, pooling resources, and fostering trust among stakeholders (Scott & Thomas, 2017). Such cooperation ultimately enhances the collective capacity to anticipate risks, manage disputes, and safeguard projects from criminal influence.

However, contradictions were revealed in the perceived role of law enforcement within these initiatives. While some participants endorsed law enforcement involvement, others perceived their inclusion as a trigger for further conflict, reflecting broader concerns over police human rights violations (Armstrong & Meyer, 2022). In South Africa, trust in law enforcement has been deeply eroded by a legacy of brutality under the apartheid regime, further compounded by the Marikana massacre and widespread reports of police violence during the COVID-19 lockdown (Ndofirepi, 2023; Magwaza, 2020). These historical and contextual experiences with violence shape public perception of police, as well as the development of policing strategies (Eck et al., 2021). Although early consultations with communities are widely highlighted, this tension indicates that their success depends on the socio-political context, including community trust and the legitimacy of state actors.

A clear research gap emerges- there is limited empirical evidence on the effectiveness of early community engagement in volatile environments. This study seeks to go beyond existing literature by not only identifying collaborative initiatives but also examining their successes and limitations.

International Collaborative Models Against Organised Crime

Civic Engagement and Public-Private Partnerships

The Addiopizzo movement in Sicily and public-private partnerships in Central America offer compelling examples of coordinated resistance to organised crime. Addiopizzo, founded in response to widespread extortion, is a non-governmental organisation that mobilises businesses to reject mafia protection payments. It promotes a certified list of extortion-free establishments through coordination with local law enforcement (Bonello et al., 2021; IESE Insight, 2016; Partridge, 2016). Similarly, El

Salvador's Sugar Association established public-private partnerships with the government, combining industry resources with trained law enforcement to dismantle extortion networks (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, 2019). Although partnerships with law enforcement helped mitigate organised crime in both contexts, the nature of these collaborations varied. As Addiopizzo depended on social mobilisation to pressure authorities into action, the El Salvadorian model embedded state actors directly within their operations. Aligning with Elsenbroich (2016), these examples demonstrate how bottom-up civic engagement, reinforced by law enforcement support, plays a crucial role in disrupting extortion networks – offering important lessons for strategies to counter construction mafia activities in South Africa. Elsenbroich's study, however, is based on an agent-based model, which is criticised as overly abstract and has no relation to real-world data. However, it remains relevant for exploring the interdependencies of complex social phenomena.

The effectiveness of these collaborative initiatives, however, is highly dependent on the context in which they operate. Addiopizzo's success relies heavily on a courageous society, close collaboration with law enforcement and strong legal backing – conditions that may not exist in South African construction, where contractors face site invasions by armed gangs and contractual penalties for delays, often causing contractors to rationalise that paying the extortion fees is more cost-effective than enduring the repercussions of disruption or non-compliance with mafia demands (Armstrong and Meyer, 2022). Furthermore, contractors are reluctant to publicly speak out, as acknowledging their compliance with extortion demands may implicate them in illegal activity. Similarly, Central American public-private partnerships also presented limitations, though distinct from those experienced by Addiopizzo. In Honduras, intelligence-sharing initiatives protected participating firms but excluded the broader community, demonstrating the risk of uneven benefit distribution (Bonnello et al., 2021; Clavel, 2019).

The effectiveness of these partnerships hinges on shared objectives, mutual trust, and careful expectation management (Meerts et al., 2025), yet political complicity can erode their credibility (Irish-Qhobosheane, 2022). The literature fails to address how public-private partnerships can function when government actors themselves may be complicit in criminal enterprises. Addressing this gap is directly aligned with the research aims, as understanding the enabling conditions and constraints of collaborative initiatives is essential to evaluating their successes, shortcomings, and applicability in the South African context.

Leveraging Technology for Anti-Extortion Efforts

Comparable to the collaborative initiatives described in the Addiopizzo and Central American contexts, mobile reporting mechanisms in Guatemala and Mexico demonstrate how technology can further strengthen collective efforts between communities and law enforcement agencies. These mobile applications allowed citizens to report extortion attempts and cross-reference calls with existing criminal databases (Enact, 2023; Bonnello et al., 2021). However, despite their promise, replicating such technological interventions in countries with lax regulations and weak regulatory oversight can present several challenges.

South Africa is particularly vulnerable, as offenders can easily evade these tracing mechanisms by frequently changing SIM cards, which are readily available through the informal sale of illicit pre-RICA'd SIM cards in spaza shops (Enact, 2023). Furthermore, significant privacy concerns have been associated with applications such as TrueCaller (Stefanovic & Ghilezan, 2020; Ferguson, 2001; Zhang et al., 2020), which compile and store users' mobile phone contacts in centralised databases without explicit consent. Such applications may conflict with the provisions of the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA), which mandate informed consent for collecting, processing, and sharing personal data. Consequently, any prospective development of an anti-extortion mobile application must align with the POPIA and be supported by a robust legislative framework.

Several lessons emerge across these international case studies: the power of collaborative resistance, the value of public-private partnerships, and the usefulness, yet limitations, of digital leveraging. However, very little is known about how these models can be adapted to the South African context, where politicians are complicit, the levels of inequality are high, and the trust in government and law enforcement institutions is severely eroded due to rampant corruption. This study addresses this gap by evaluating construction managers' collaborative initiatives to counter mafia interference on their projects and assessing their successes and limitations.

Research Methodology and Method

Research Paradigm

Acknowledging the dynamic nature of the social world, the study adopted the interpretivist paradigm as the researcher deemed generalisability less crucial within the constantly evolving context of the construction mafia. An inductive research approach was employed to facilitate the development of unique, contextually relevant theories by interpreting the data. Utilising a mono-method qualitative design, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather primary data over a cross-sectional time horizon, providing a snapshot of the phenomenon at a specific moment.

Sampling and Participants

The study focused on South African construction managers with direct experience working with the construction mafia. Construction managers were purposefully selected because they occupy a strategic position—managing sites and serving as key points of contact between internal and external stakeholders, including community representatives, PSCs, councillors, law enforcement, government departments, and business associations such as Business Against Crime South Africa and the Master Builders Association. These associations frequently deliberate on issues related to the construction mafia, sharing experiences, strategies and challenges among members.

To ensure that only individuals with the required expertise were included, non-probability purposive sampling was employed to maintain data accuracy. Potential participants were initially identified through publicly available email addresses on their company websites or via their LinkedIn profiles. Given the challenges in identifying suitable participants, snowball sampling was further utilised to expand the sample size and locate participants who might have been inaccessible (Adu & Miles, 2024).

There are no fixed rules for determining qualitative sample sizes (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015:280); however, Saunders et al. (2016:297) note that four or more interviews may suffice if data saturation is achieved. In this study, saturation was reached after seven interviews, as no new insights emerged. Given the participants' extensive experience and direct engagement with the construction context, each interview produced rich data, making further interviews unlikely to yield additional value. The final sample comprised seven construction professionals representing public and private sector projects across four provinces. A summary of the respondent profiles is provided in Figure 1 below.

Respondent Profiles

Participant	Experience (years)	Occupation	Province	Sector
A	10-15	Construction manager	Eastern Cape	Public and Private
B	25-30	Construction project manager	Gauteng	Public
C	10-15	Construction manager	KwaZulu Natal	Public and Private
D	5-10	Construction manager	Mpumalanga	Private
E	10-15	Construction manager	Eastern Cape	Public
F	25-30	Construction project manager	Gauteng	Public
G	10-15	Construction project manager	Gauteng	Public

Figure 1 Respondent Profiles

Data Collection Methods

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews, a method that is well-suited for capturing complex and nuanced insights. Interviews followed a flexible protocol comprising open-

ended questions to address the study's objectives of identifying collaborative initiatives against the construction mafia and evaluating their effectiveness. Questions on existing collaborative efforts and the stakeholders involved aimed to document the specific initiatives established within the industry. Follow-up questions on positive outcomes and the factors contributing to success highlighted which strategies yielded tangible results and why. Further questions on operational challenges and the strategies used to overcome them provided insight into the limitations of collaborative initiatives and adaptive responses.

Interviews were conducted remotely via MSTeams for accessibility and ranged from 30 to 75 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim.

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness, credibility was established by building rapport with participants, following up for clarification, and using probing questions to explore responses in greater depth. Additionally, participants with relevant experience and expertise were selected to provide rich and informed insights. Throughout the study, the researcher maintained a reflective journal to capture contextual observations and emerging insights, supporting reflexivity in the interpretation of data. Analytical rigour was further reinforced through peer debriefing, in which an academic colleague reviewed preliminary codes and challenged interpretive assumptions. In addition, detailed respondent profiles—including role, sector, years of experience, and project location—were provided, thereby strengthening the transferability of the findings by enabling readers to assess their applicability to similar populations and contexts.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was adopted to uncover, analyse, and report themes within the dataset. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phased approach, the researcher engaged in a rigorous process of data familiarisation, coding, theme development and refinement, utilising the Atlas.ti software for data organisation and analysis. This facilitated the generation of themes and sub-themes that reflected participants' perspectives and experiences, which were then compared to existing literature to enhance contextual understanding. Given its adaptivity and compatibility with various research questions, sample sizes, and data collection methods (Clarke & Braun, 2017), thematic analysis proved well-suited to this study. Its application enabled the researcher to uncover surface-level and latent meanings, facilitating the exploration of how construction managers construct and navigate collaboration in complex and often volatile environments.

Ethical Consideration

Given the sensitive nature of the research, ethical clearance was obtained from the Nelson Mandela University Research Ethics Committee (Reference No. REC-H-2025-1438). All participants were provided with a detailed information sheet outlining the study's purpose, risks, and voluntary nature. Informed consent was obtained prior to each interview, and participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. No identifying information was included in transcripts or published results, and all recordings were encrypted and securely stored in accordance with ethical protocols aligned with institutional guidelines and the POPIA.

Rationale for Methodological Choices

The chosen interpretivist, qualitative approach was deliberate and well-suited to the study's exploratory objectives. Given the absence of established models addressing construction mafia resistance through collaboration, an inductive and narrative-driven design enabled the emergence of context-specific insights. Semi-structured interviews allowed flexibility and responsiveness, while thematic analysis enabled descriptive and analytical exploration. The use of purposive and snowball sampling was justified, given the sensitive, low-visibility nature of the research population.

Research Results

The findings of this study are organised under three main themes that capture the essence of stakeholder responses to criminal interference. Furthermore, all three themes were divided into interrelated sub-themes to better unpack them. **Theme 1** (Figure 2 Code Tree for Theme 1) explores cooperative governance through strategic stakeholder coalitions, highlighting how proactive

engagements with key stakeholders can ensure that projects are more resilient against mafia influences. **Sub-theme 1.1**, enabling social cohesion through proactive engagement, demonstrates how early stakeholder consultation and community inclusion strengthen project resilience; **Sub-theme 1.2**, purposeful stakeholder integration, highlights how social facilitation and stakeholder analysis help mitigate risks; **Sub-theme 1.3**, collaborative governance for project continuity, shows how the deliberate inclusion of key actors contributes to successful project delivery.

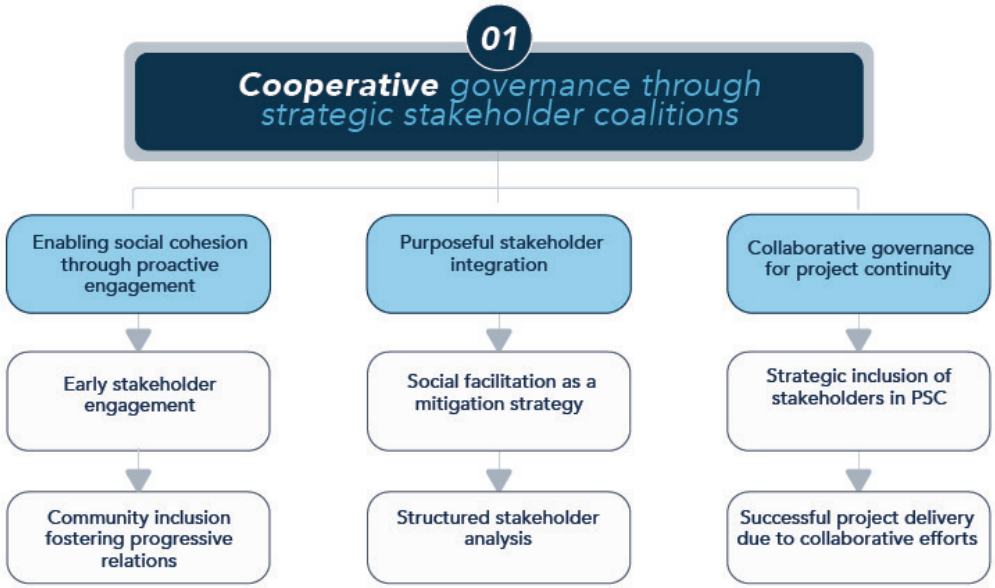

Figure 2 Code Tree for Theme 1

Theme 2 (Figure 3 Code Tree for Theme 2) examines how fragmented collaboration and systemic vulnerabilities hinder collective action against the influence of the construction mafia. **Sub-theme 2.1**, declining standards and disrupted delivery, uncovers the impact of mafia-affiliated subcontractors on project quality and timelines; **Sub-theme 2.2**, illicit control through criminal coercion, reveals how the mafia maintains control through threats and manipulation; **Sub-theme 2.3**, community volatility and fragmentation, demonstrates how social disintegration and exclusion destabilises projects, **Sub-theme 2.4**, criminal influence enabled by institutional weaknesses, exposes how regulatory ambiguity and enforcement failures create fertile ground for extortion.

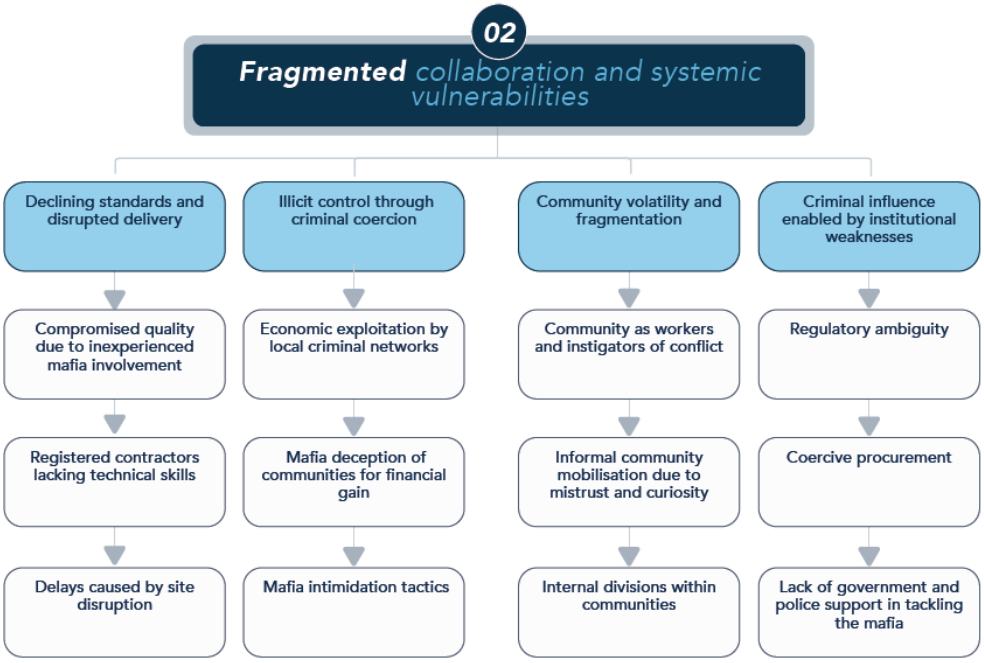

Figure 3 Code Tree for Theme 2

In contrast, **Theme 3** (Figure 4 Code Tree for Theme 3) focuses on forging legitimacy through strategic developmental collaborations, demonstrating how competent small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), inclusive project steering structures, and transparent communication can foster trust, mitigate conflict, and enable more sustainable stakeholder partnerships. **Sub-theme 3.1**, formalisation and competence as drivers for project stability, illustrates how competent SMEs and procedural safeguards protect against disruptions; **Sub-theme 3.2**, community representation to manage disruption, highlights how involving community representatives helps prevent conflict; **Sub-theme 3.3**, transparency and protective alliances, shows how collaboration and open communication foster trust and project security. Together, these themes provide a nuanced understanding of how collaboration—when intentional, inclusive, and well-structured—can mitigate the risks posed by the construction mafia.

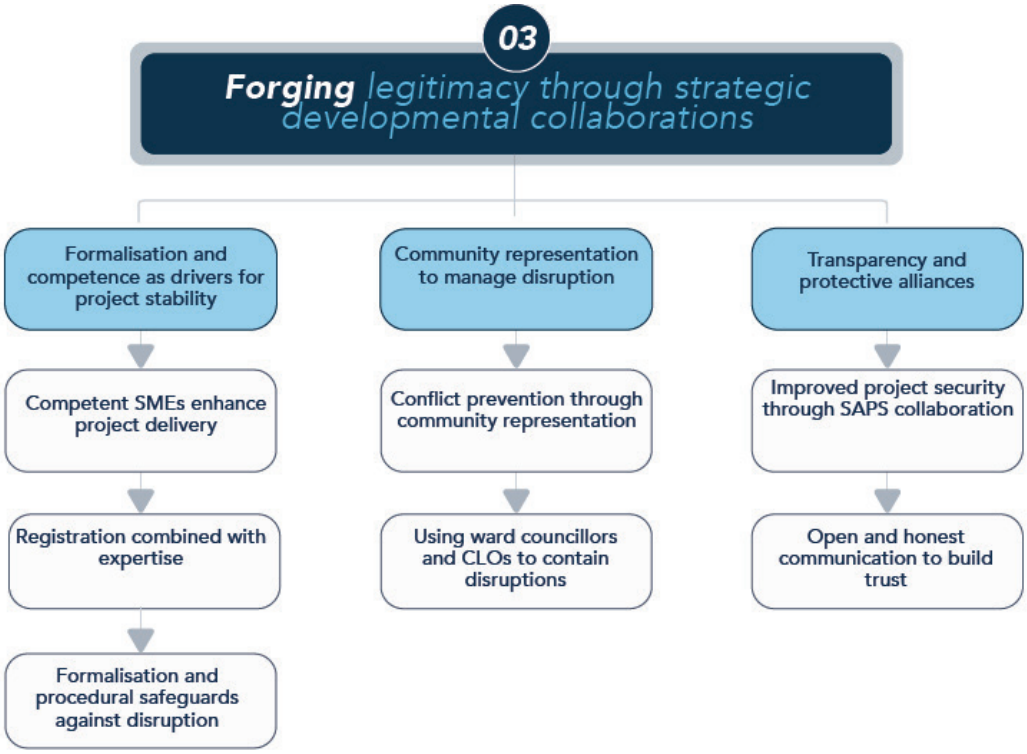

Figure 4 Code Tree for Theme 3

Discussion

This discussion presents the key themes from the study, illustrating the vulnerabilities that enable the construction mafia to thrive and the collaborative strategies that can counteract their influence. These themes provide insight into how collaboration can either fail or succeed in resisting mafia interference in South Africa's construction sector.

The first theme, cooperative governance through strategic stakeholder coalitions, sets the foundation for understanding how early, intentional collaboration can serve as a critical defence against mafia-related disruptions in the construction sector.

Theme 1: Cooperative Governance Through Strategic Stakeholder Coalitions

This theme encapsulates the role of collaborative governance as a deliberate and strategic response to the threats posed by the construction mafia. Central to this is the importance of early, purposeful consultation with stakeholders, fostering a sense of ownership and inclusion within communities. These partnerships, rooted in trust and constructive relations, encourage project support and help keep it on track. As one participant put it:" I tend to believe that the construction mafia element tends to show itself in projects where stakeholder engagement was not done properly". This aligns with findings that underscore early stakeholder consultation as instrumental in building and maintaining productive dialogue between project teams, communities, and other stakeholders (Nagogo, 2022).

A critical element of this process involves identifying the right people to collaborate with. Participants have repeatedly described social facilitation and stakeholder analysis as more than routine project management exercises- they are essential for identifying and managing influence. One participant described social facilitation as a new profession born out of the threats posed by the construction mafia: "Because of this construction mafia element we have now created a profession, which is social facilitation, where we send this person into the community to go and understand the dynamics of that community and to report on mitigation strategies.", with another highlighting the significance of stakeholder analysis: "The key is to understand which ones have the most influence and the most interest in your project and how they can sway your project either positively or negatively".

Although cumbersome, these processes enable project teams to bring prominent stakeholders together strategically- often through structures like PSCs, where their influence can help make projects more resilient and less susceptible to criminal interference. PSCs exemplify collaborative governance regimes by enabling the distribution of influence among stakeholders. According to Scott and Thomas (2017), such power-sharing structures enable stakeholders to access resources and exchange information, facilitating swift responses to potential threats and enhancing their ability to positively shape project outcomes. This is demonstrated by a participant who strategically includes the South African Police Service (SAPS) in their PSCs to foster project support and proactive responses to issues: "Other stakeholders are like the South African police who then becomes part of our project steering committees so that if there are slight interruptions, they are well aware of it and we normally have their support and intervention quite soon". Another participant reinforced this statement, highlighting how properly constituted PSCs can contribute to the early diversion of potential threats.

While these strategies appear effective, their success is highly dependent on accurate stakeholder identification and engagement. Misidentifying influential actors or failing to include key community representatives could inadvertently create vulnerabilities or allow manipulation by criminal elements. Overall, Theme 1 highlights both the potential and constraints of collaborative governance, suggesting that ongoing monitoring, adaptation, and empirical evaluation are necessary to ensure that such interventions translate into measurable improvements in project continuity and security.

Theme 2: Fragmented Collaboration and Systemic Vulnerabilities

This theme reveals how fragmented collaboration between key stakeholders and socio-political instability collectively impedes efforts to resist construction mafia interference. Rather than occurring in isolation, participants described how a combination of poor governance, volatile community dynamics, ambiguous regulatory frameworks, and limited support from law enforcement integrates to support an environment that is conducive to mafia interference. Irish-Qhobosheane (2022) states that weak government and law enforcement responses allow these criminal groups to flourish. Similarly, Nortier (2024) emphasises how criminal entities exploit procurement policies to coerce contractors into allocating 30% of a project's value to mafia-affiliated subcontractors. The impacts of these practices are tangible and devastating for the sector: projects are delayed, budgets are overrun, and quality is compromised. Meanwhile, internal divisions within communities create competing factions, complicating efforts to foster collaboration. The following sub-themes provide a more detailed examination:

Sub-theme 1: Declining Standards and Disrupted Delivery

This sub-theme demonstrates how mafia involvement compromises project quality and timelines. Participants described how the forced inclusion of inexperienced, mafia-affiliated subcontractors and suppliers leads to substandard workmanship and delays. One participant recalled experiencing project delays after hiring defective plant from a mafia-affiliated supplier: "*I remember there was a whole week that it could not work because it had a breakdown".* Another participant indicated the mafia's tendency to supply substandard material: *"Some would come with these substandard materials, which are not approved".* These cost-cutting measures by mafia-affiliated subcontractors- aimed at profit maximisation- often compromise quality, posing serious safety risks for end users (Aigbavboa et al., 2024).

Sub-theme 2: Illicit Control Through Criminal Coercion

This sub-theme demonstrates how criminal entities establish control over construction sites through manipulation, exploitation, and threats. Participants demonstrate how these groups deceive

communities into surrendering employment opportunities by portraying them as financially unviable. Once employed, they produce substandard work at inflated rates, exerting pressure on contractors through threats of violence and disruption. One participant added: "*If you decide to cooperate, you will be experiencing exuberant rates, impacting your operations and costs*". Another participant noted how some mafia subcontractors are motivated purely by financial gain, offering no labour or service to a project: "*There is no real drive to do work, just demand*". This reflects a pattern of extortion, a tactic widely associated with the construction mafia and frequently exploited against contractors, as noted in a study by Armstrong and Meyer (2022). This creates a climate of mistrust, eroding contractors' confidence in legitimate SMEs genuinely pursuing work opportunities.

Sub-theme 3: Community Volatility and Fragmentation

This sub-theme describes how community instability and internal divisions among them can influence their interactions with the project. It shows how the exclusion of communities during the early stages of a project can create suspicion and mistrust, prompting informal mobilisation that can destabilise projects. Simultaneously, internal divisions and conflicting interests create unstable environments, threatening overall cohesion. Another participant experienced how the very communities employed on projects may also act as instigators of conflict. The lack of early involvement might fail to establish trust and likely underpins the community's inclination to create tensions, revealing how neglected stakeholder engagement can exacerbate conflict (Kujala et al., 2022). Aligned with theme one, early social facilitation may mitigate these challenges by coordinating communities around a shared objective, making it easier to manage divisions that threaten project stability.

Sub theme 4: Criminal Influence Enabled by Institutional Weaknesses

This sub-theme illustrates how institutional shortcomings, such as vague and ambiguous regulations and weak police oversight, enable conditions for the proliferation of criminal networks. Participants consistently referenced the misinterpretation of the procurement regulations as a tool used by the construction mafia to justify their practices. The confusion centres around local participation goals and creates opportunities for manipulation. Supporting this observation, Sibanda and Tshikovhi (2022) found that 61.9% of public sector supply chain professionals reported that suppliers do not fully understand the requirements of the Preferential Procurement Policy Framework Act, highlighting the widespread regulatory ambiguity that often undermines compliance. This procedural confusion, coupled with weak enforcement (Irish-Qhobosheane, 2022), provides the construction mafia with opportunities to exploit procurement processes, allowing coercive practices to persist.

This is corroborated by a participant who recalled how confusion surrounding labour rates fuelled disruptions on site, reinforcing the importance of clear guidelines accompanying legislative and regulatory frameworks. The failure to clearly define regulations and limited government and law enforcement intervention undermines efforts to distinguish legitimate businesses from criminal entities, discrediting formal procurement processes. Participants consistently described how mafia-affiliated businesses would demand access to smaller jobs like site security and bricklaying, leaving contractors with little power to resist.

Overall, Theme 2 shows that fragmented collaboration, weak institutions, and socio-political instability amplify the risks posed by the construction mafia. Systemic weaknesses in regulation, law enforcement, and community engagement interact with coercive actors to disrupt projects, highlighting the need for strategic, coordinated interventions—including early stakeholder engagement, targeted social facilitation, and clear institutional support—to strengthen project resilience and counter organised crime effectively.

Theme 3: Forging Legitimacy Through Strategic Developmental Collaborations

This theme explores the effectiveness of collaborative strategies in mitigating the construction mafia by investigating how stakeholder inclusion, SME competence and law enforcement support enhance project stability. According to the data, collaboration is impactful when it is purposefully geared towards skills development and refinement, conflict prevention and project continuity. Participants identified competent SMEs as essential to successful project delivery, noting fewer quality concerns when skilled subcontractors are involved. One participant highlighted the streamlined workflow that results from appointing SMEs with both the necessary technical expertise and industry board registrations, stating: *"Once you have a guy who is registered with the NHBRC and knows exactly what he is doing, you do*

not have to follow behind him, checking that everything is done properly". This distinction is important, as registration alone (specifically at the CIDB grade 1 level) does not guarantee competence. The entry qualifications for this grade do not require any demonstrated experience, facilitating easy entry into the sector. A study by Sciarrone and Storti (2014) found that the absence of entry barriers in an industry facilitates the proliferation of organised crime.

To counteract this, participants emphasised the importance of formalisation and procedural safeguards. These include vetting subcontractors, enforcing written agreements and formal tender procedures, and imposing financial penalties for substandard work. A participant illustrated this: *"We did a skills audit and verified it with the ward councillors"*. This view is corroborated by Zerihun et al. (2025), who highlight the importance of demonstrated reliability and technical expertise in the subcontractor selection process.

Another recurring view was the preventative role of community representation within decision-making structures, particularly PSCs. Ward councillors, CLOs, and traditional and political leaders acted as intermediaries, voicing community concerns before they escalated, thereby reducing hostility and fostering greater project support. One participant emphasised that a well-structured PSC could manage communities and circumvent site disruptions, demonstrating how community representation acts to diffuse threats that can otherwise result in protest. There also appeared to be a shared consensus that involving ward councillors and CLOs effectively contained disruptions, as these individuals are generally well-respected figures in their communities. Another participant observed*: " In our society, and I am talking about the black society, they tend to respect traditional councils, ward councillors and so on".*

Findings by Rathenam and Dabup (2017) support these views and identify communities as vital stakeholders with extreme influence over project costs and timelines. Interestingly, however, the same study also identified the community, CLO and PSC among the top five stakeholders that had negatively impacted project outcomes. This contradiction may reflect shortcomings in how stakeholders have been engaged, suggesting that a mere inclusion of communities is insufficient without genuine collaboration. Additionally, these findings emanated from a single case study, limiting their generalisability.

Moreover, participants highlighted the value of SAPS inclusion in PSCs, noting that it enables them to proactively gather intelligence that can prevent site disruptions before they occur, especially in hostile communities. Participants further explained that SAPS involvement prompts proactive responses, reducing the likelihood of site disruptions, with one participant indicating, *"I will use the SAPS as an example. If we are aware of any site interruptions that might take place, the police are able to mobilise and come and protect the site because of their inclusion in our project steering committee".*

Open and honest communication was repeatedly cited as vital to fostering stakeholder trust. Participants explained that transparency regarding project plans, rates and timelines cultivates cooperation. As one participant noted: *" We have found that most of the time, if people feel part of the process and they are part of the process, they are less likely to give you uphill".* This is supported by Mickel (2024), who identified "having character" as a key collaborative communication practice to foster cooperation. The study defines a person with "character" as someone who portrays positive personality traits, such as the willingness to disclose information openly. Transparency in financial matters, along with clear, comprehensive communication, was found to be central to building trust and promoting collaboration. These qualities are relevant in community-based projects, where financial transparency through employment and other developmental initiatives is essential for sustaining local support.

In line with the study's objective to analyse the effectiveness of collaborative initiatives by examining their successes, the data show that intentional, well-designed collaborative initiatives should incorporate technical expertise, community representation, and institutional involvement to create an environment that limits the infiltration of mafia networks. The triumphs of these strategies rest on their ability to foster sustainable stakeholder relationships, fostering project stability and improved social outcomes.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings reveal that collaboration is not a silver bullet; it only holds potential when implemented with strategic intent and institutional backing. It demonstrates how cooperative governance is vital in curbing mafia-related disruptions when rooted in early, intentional stakeholder engagement. Social facilitation and stakeholder analysis proved essential for pinpointing influential stakeholders whose strategic inclusion in collaborative structures like PSCs can help drive project objectives. However, these efforts are constrained by weak institutional oversight, poor communication, regulatory ambiguity and socio-political tensions, enabling an environment in which coercive practices can thrive. Furthermore, the findings show that collaborative practices are most impactful when they are aimed at community upliftment through skills development, mitigating conflict and promoting project continuity. This is especially true for social infrastructure projects, where delays adversely affect communities. Empirically, this study promotes the field of construction criminology by offering practical insights into how legitimacy is cultivated and contested in volatile environments. Theoretically, it contributes to a deeper understanding of cooperative governance by highlighting the role of institutional robustness, procedural safeguards and social cohesion in ensuring project continuity in vulnerable contexts.

The results have important implications for practice. It is recommended that government authorities take a proactive stance by establishing guidelines incorporating a methodical stakeholder analysis and social facilitation model to comprehensively map stakeholder influence. This requires a concerted effort from key government actors, such as the Departments of Public Works and National Treasury, SAPS, and the Special Investigations Unit. Formalising these preparatory measures is central to mitigating disruptions caused by inadequate stakeholder consultation. Furthermore, the inclusion of ward councillors, CLOs, SAPS and traditional councils in PSCs must be institutionalised to enhance early warning systems.

Future studies could adopt diverse methodological approaches to deepen and extend the current findings. A longitudinal design would be valuable for tracking the implementation and sustainability of collaborative strategies over time, offering insight into both their immediate and evolving impacts on project resilience. In addition, comparative provincial case studies could be undertaken to examine regional variations in stakeholder dynamics, construction mafia activity, and institutional responses, thereby highlighting context-specific differences. A mixed-method approach, combining targeted surveys with in-depth interviews, could further enhance both contextual richness and generalisability. Lastly, participatory action research involving contractors, community representatives, and law enforcement could support the co-design and testing of engagement frameworks within real-world project environments.

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SACQSP2025-76

Professional perceptions: Conservation vs Development of a Mid-Century Modernist Structure in Bloemfontein, South Africa

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Abstract

This paper investigates a demolished modernist chapel in Bloemfontein, South Africa, once belonging to the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints. The structure was demolished in 2013, but it remains an example of the challenges facing the conservation of modernist architecture in the Free State. The aim is to explore how professionals in the built environment perceive the value of such structures, beyond traditional heritage criteria, and to reflect on the implications for Quantity Surveyors working in a context where historic and material value may not align. A qualitative, perception-based approach is used, based on a specific case study. The study combines archival research, architectural drawings and a survey of built environment professionals and academics. The survey gauged awareness of the demolished building and assessed views on its architectural, historical, and material significance among 40 respondents. Numerical responses were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods, open-ended questions were subject to thematic analysis. The study reveals a general lack of awareness of the demolished chapel; however, a correlation is observed between awareness and support for preservation. The findings demonstrate that modernist structures, although often unprotected within existing heritage legislation, may hold significant professional and architectural value if supported with awareness and involvement. As a perception case study, the findings are not generalisable but provide a foundation for further inquiry into modernist structures within heritage and sustainable development contexts. The paper encourages Quantity Surveyors to engage more actively with heritage conservation, particularly regarding modernist buildings often overlooked in conservation efforts. The paper contributes to heritage discourse by linking conservation with professional perception beyond the architectural field, offering insights into how the built environment values loss and legacy in the context of modernist architecture in comparison to development.

Keywords: Modernism, Heritage, Conservation, Concrete, Bloemfontein, Development.

Introduction

Why should a Quantity Surveyor be concerned with the demolition of a small chapel replaced by a parking lot in central South Africa? Isn't this the realm of architectural historians alone? This paper challenges that assumption by exploring how even modest, lesser-known modernist buildings hold value that extends beyond their material costs and physical site. This research is situated within the discourse relating to the tension between development and conservation. It argues that greater awareness of architecturally significant structures can play a crucial role in their conservation and may contribute to sustainable development. Previous studies on the loss of South African modernist buildings have largely focused on architectural history or narratives related to renowned architects and prominent structures (Barker, 2015; Robinson, 2009). While the architectural history of this chapel has been documented (Odendaal, 2022), the perspectives of broader built environment professionals on the 'value' of such buildings remain underexplored.

The case study focuses on the Chapel of the Church of the Latter-day Saints, located on Nelson Mandela Drive in central Bloemfontein. This chapel, completed around 1959, was the sole project of the brief partnership between R Roberts (1923–2007) and GC Cassells (1919–1955). Despite its unique architectural qualities, the building was demolished in 2013 to make way for a parking lot serving the new FNB Wesbank One building, designed by Bomax Architects. While demolition is often an inevitable part of urban development, this case is more than a routine loss. Figure 1 provides a Google Maps view of the site where the chapel was situated, located along one of the main arterial roads in the Bloemfontein city centre. Figure 2 shows the northern elevation of the demolished building.

Figure 1 Location Map of the Chapel in Central Bloemfontein. Site indicated in red
Source: Google Maps, 2025: online

Figure 2 Photograph of the Northern Elevation of the Chapel 2013

Figure 3 presents the chapel before its demolition and the subsequent replacement with a parking area from the same point of view. Figure 4 provides a redrawn AutoCAD drawing of the chapel, depicting its floor plan and elevations, based on copies of 1956 drawings obtained through the municipality.

Roberts and Cassells ca 1956. The southern side of Chapel of the CLDS viewed from Nelson Mandela Drive
Source: Du Preez, 2005

Site after demolition and construction of the parking lot from Nelson Mandela Drive
Source: Odendaal, 2022

Figure 3 Comparative Photographs of the Chapel Site Between 2005 and 2022

At the time of demolition, the chapel was not deemed sufficiently significant architecturally, historically, or socially to merit protection under the National Heritage Resources Act (25 of 1999), nor was it old enough to merit the limited protection offered by the 60-year section (section 34), requiring buildings older than 60 years to have a permit issued by local heritage authorities before changes or demolition. It may have also carried the same burden as many modernist buildings in South Africa. As Robinson (2009: 8) stated, they are often "un-loved, misunderstood…under threat from a public, including developers and authorities, that are of the persuasion that they are ugly, impractical and no longer serve the purpose for which they were intended."

The architects of this chapel, although not widely known, produced a design with elegant volumes: a vaulted main space paired with an undulating roof over the administrative block as can be seen in the elevations and section in figure 4. This design thoughtfully responded to its residential context, with a northern elevation featuring a pergola that provided necessary shade in Bloemfontein's climate. The curved roof elements interacted with the intense Free State light, casting dynamic shadows and emphasising the building's form. These are typical design elements that can be traced to Brazilian modernist influences such as the works of Oscar Niemeyer. The demolition thus resulted not only in the loss of a rare example of Brazilian modernist influence in Bloemfontein but is also a loss in terms of material value, considering the sustainability principle that "the greenest building is one that is already built" (Elefante, 2012), and the building was situated next to a private higher education provider that may have allowed for adaptive reuse.

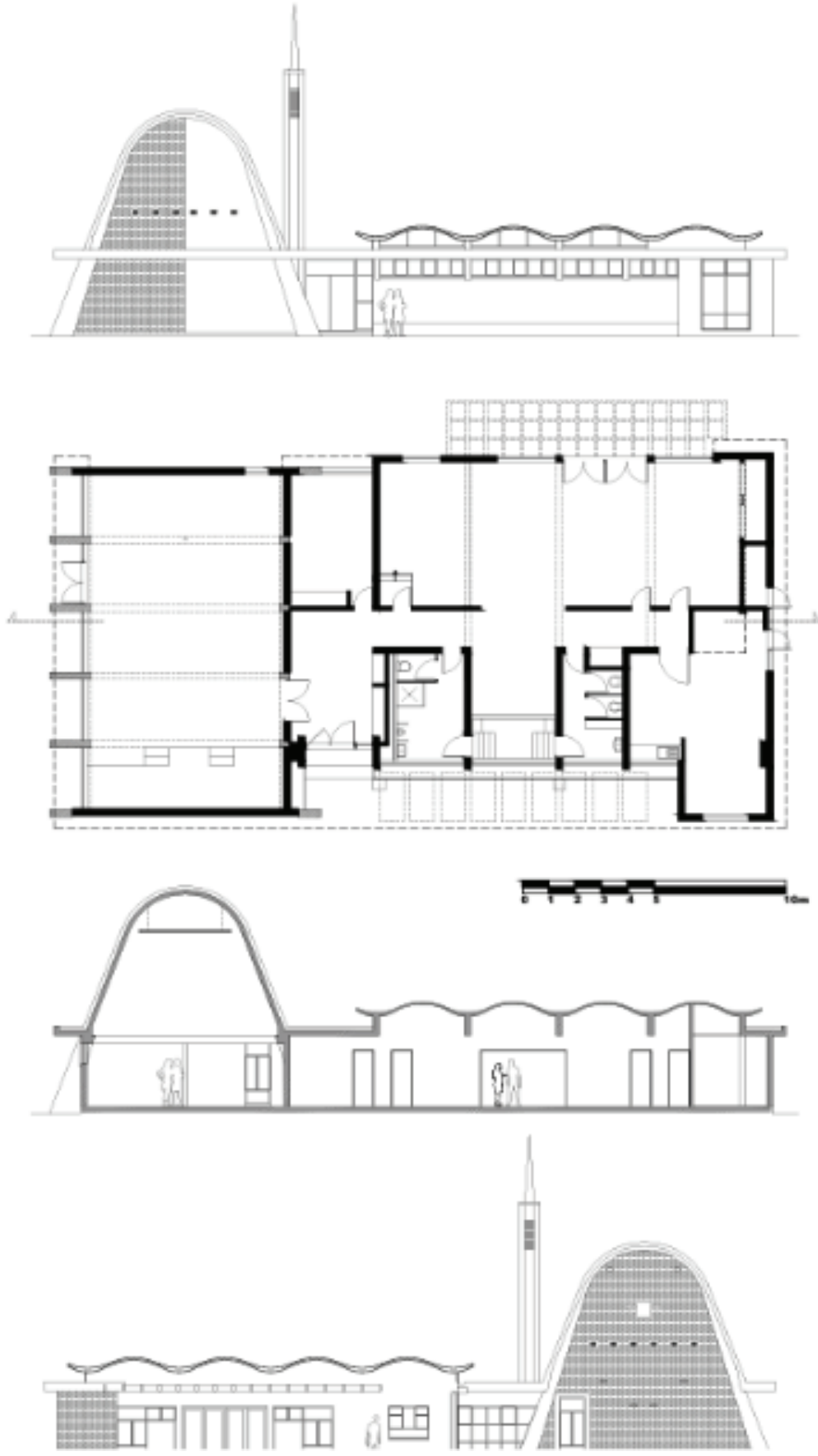

Figure 4 Diagram of Architectural Features of the Chapel, Indicating the South Elevation, Plan, Basic Section and North Elevation, AutoCAD Drawings by Raubenheimer, 2013, and Redrawn by Odendaal, 2025. [Not to scale]

This raises a critical question: if statutory heritage protection were absent, could heightened awareness of a building's aesthetic and modernist value have supported its conservation or adaptive reuse? Secondly, in cases where these buildings cannot be conserved, may digital documentation serve as a conservation tool?

Quantity surveyors, among other built environment professionals, often face projects where a building's material or historic value does not align with market or redevelopment pressures. This research surveyed 40 built environment professionals in the Bloemfontein context, revealing a correlation between awareness of the chapel's architectural significance and the belief that it ought to have been conserved.

As many mid-20th-century modernist buildings near the 60-year threshold that allows limited protection under the National Heritage Resources Act (Act 25 of 1999), conversations about their conservation are increasingly urgent, given contemporary economic and developmental pressures. This study combines academic analysis with insights from built environment professionals, gathered through a questionnaire, to understand these buildings' significance in practice. This approach is crucial as more modernist structures become subject to heritage oversight (albeit limited), where quantity surveyors and other professionals will influence budgetary and project decisions.

This study investigates the relationship between professional awareness and perceived conservation value of modernist architecture, using the demolished Bloemfontein chapel as a focal point.

The study objectives are:

- to determine whether enhanced understanding of modernist heritage could offer alternative preservation pathways when formal heritage legislation falls short.
- this research broadens the conservation discourse to include the broader built environment community, beyond the traditional focus on architectural historians and how this may contribute to sustainable development practices.

Literature Review: Conserving Modernist Architecture in the South African Context

Modernism, as framed within this study, refers to the architectural movement that gained prominence after World War II, particularly during the 1950s and 1960s. This design ethos rejected ornamentation in favour of volume, asymmetry, and functionality. The global discourse on conserving and retrofitting modernist buildings has been well established (Winter, 2007; Harrer & Gaudette, 2019; Jablonska & Wojciechowski, 2022), yet the South African context remains somewhat underexplored.

In South Africa, scholarly attention has been directed at modernist architecture from various critical perspectives. These include post-apartheid and post-colonial critiques (Murray, 2013), documentation of landmark buildings, and conservation studies of works by renowned architects (Barker, 2015; 2017; Bodei & Harber, 2021). The challenges relating to the conservation of local modernist architecture, specifically, have received attention (Robinson, 2009). The need for updated registers of modernist heritage or more critical stances on the conservation of these buildings has been stated. However, such discussions are largely situated within architectural or architectural historical domains, often excluding allied built environment professionals from the discourse and focused on architectural or cultural value. Although challenges facing South African heritage practitioners have been acknowledged (Chirikure, 2013; Qwatekana et al., 2021; Van Vollenhoven, 2024), the perspectives and contributions of key role players in the development and repurposing of buildings, quantity surveyors, engineers, and project managers remain largely overlooked.

Within the Quantity Surveying profession, existing research tends to focus on refurbishment, adaptive reuse, and maintenance in general heritage contexts (Ismail et al., 2018; Lekarapa & Grobbelaar, 2022), rather than on stylistic or historical typologies such as modernism. Similarly, while adaptive reuse of church buildings has received architectural attention (Wong, 2023; Velthuis & Spenneman, 2007; Verster, 2013; Kiley, 2004), the intersection of architectural value, policy, and professional practice in the case of modest, mid-century structures has not been widely interrogated. Internationally, the public perception of architectural styles has been studied (Chesne & Ioannidis, 2024), but local equivalents remain scarce. This paper seeks to add to the literature by exploring how built environment professionals perceive and engage with the conservation value of a selected modernist case study.

The case study under investigation has been examined previously from an architectural-historical standpoint (Odendaal, 2022) but has not been contextualised within a broader heritage or professional practice framework. South Africa's approach to the conservation of modernist buildings is shaped by the National Heritage Resources Act (Act 25 of 1999). It provides a legislative framework for buildings of national, provincial or local significance. This significance can be linked to various tangible and intangible factors. In the case of lesser-known modernist buildings, Section 34(1) requires a permit for the alteration or demolition of any structure older than 60 years. While this provision provides basic protection, it tends to equate significance with age alone, potentially overlooking buildings of architectural merit that lack specific historical or cultural associations. This is problematic for post-war modernist buildings, which may be undervalued due to their minimalist aesthetic or political associations in South African history. A permit requirement also does not necessarily mean any form of protection or conservation will be required.

Wolff (2009) identifies four critical threats to modernist heritage in South Africa: (1) the perception of functional obsolescence, (2) undervaluation of era-specific design, (3) commercial speculation, and (4) the pressures of adaptation. These forces pose challenges for conserving modernist architecture, especially in urban contexts where redevelopment potential is high.

In the case of the demolished chapel, its stylistic roots in Brazilian modernism offer a unique layer of regional architectural identity. As noted by Barker (2017), Brazilian modernism influenced architectural education in Pretoria after World War II, which later extended into the Free State. Both Roberts and Cassells, the architects of the chapel, were trained during this era and would have been exposed to these influences through the University of Pretoria, where the curriculum had begun to reflect regionalised interpretations of international modernism (Barker, 2012).

The cultural value of such buildings remains difficult to define in contemporary South Africa. As Van der Merwe (2019:135) points out, cultural significance can include aesthetic and architectural merit, yet these are frequently undervalued in practice. The use of digital modelling and records may offer a potential conservation strategy for buildings with architectural but limited broader cultural significance, or publicly perceived aesthetic value.

Finally, modernist structures face another layer of complexity when associated with apartheid-era legacies. As Murray (2013) argues, engaging with these buildings requires a critical approach that goes beyond formal qualities to address their socio-political context. Even celebrated architects' works may be challenging to conserve, and not without merit, not all buildings necessarily need to be conserved. Where commercial value outweighs heritage concerns, varying approaches that include adaptive reuse or digital conservation may be suitable.

Research Design and Method

This study employed a phenomenological design within a case study framework, aiming to explore how built environment professionals perceive the heritage value of lost modernist architecture, with specific reference to a demolished building in Bloemfontein. Because the building no longer exists, the research was interpretive and relied on documentary reconstruction, archival research and contemporary professional perceptions.

As mentioned, the study relied heavily on archival materials, including photographs, personal correspondence, previously unpublished surveys, and architectural records. These materials were drawn from diverse and unsystematically presented sources. The available architectural drawings were of low quality; however, based on this documentation and survey data, the building was digitally reconstructed using AutoCAD and ArchiCAD software to facilitate analysis and visual interpretation as seen in figure 5. The building was treated as an artefact, examined within an interpretive framework of "evidence collection, evaluation and narration" as outlined by Groat and Wang (2002:151).

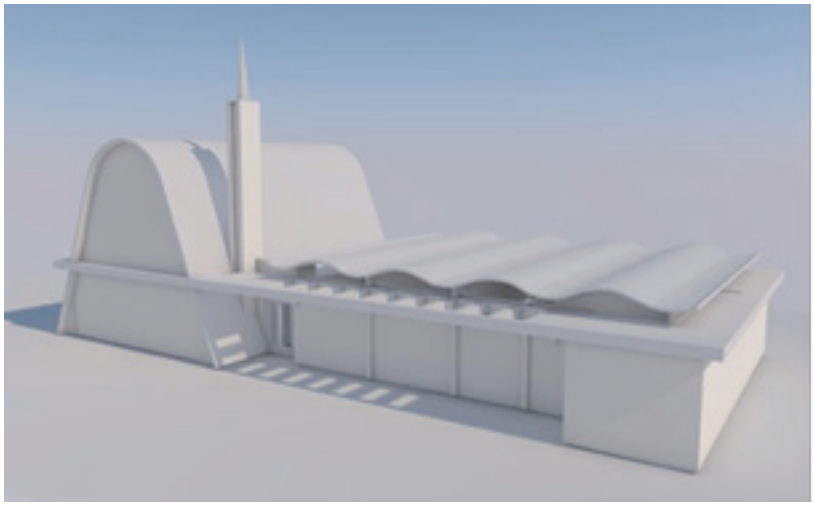

Figure 5 Reconstructed basic ArchiCad model of the Chapel

To capture professional perceptions, a qualitative online survey was developed and distributed using purposive sampling. The central research question guiding this component was: "How do built environment professionals perceive and assess the heritage value of lost modernist architecture, with reference to a specific local case?" The target population included built environment professionals with knowledge of Bloemfontein's architectural context. Forty (40) valid responses were received. Distribution channels included direct outreach to academic institutions, local voluntary associations, and professional networks via LinkedIn.

The survey instrument was semi-structured, comprising eleven questions:

- Seven structured items, including role identification (e.g., architect, quantity surveyor), and awareness of the demolished chapel;
- Three Likert-scale questions, which gauged respondents' views on: The design quality of the building (from "not good" to "excellent"); Their knowledge of the era in which it was built (from "none" to "extensive"); Agreement with the statement that digital preservation is a sufficient means of conserving such structures (from "disagree completely" to "agree completely"); and
- Four open-ended questions, which explored respondents' perceptions of the building's design, reasons for its demolition, and challenges related to the construction of the main hall vault.

Quantitative responses were analysed statistically to identify trends and associations. Open-ended responses were subjected to thematic analysis, with statements coded and categorised in Microsoft Excel. Terms and themes were quantified to reflect relative frequency, enabling the identification of dominant perceptions and recurring concerns among respondents.

Research Results

Statistical Analysis

In parallel with the historical investigation, the authors surveyed built environment professionals to assess their awareness of the demolished chapel. Despite the respondents presumed familiarity with the urban context of Bloemfontein, awareness of the building was limited. Of the total responses, 24 participants indicated that they were aware of the chapel, while 16 reported no prior knowledge of its existence. These results suggest that, even among professionals working in the region, the building was not widely recognised, underscoring its marginal position in the collective architectural memory of the city. This aligns with Robinson (2009:8), about how modernist buildings are often misunderstood, or in this case, not even recognised.

To explore perceptions of architectural value, respondents were asked whether they had direct experience working on buildings with similar formal characteristics, such as those featuring arched or curved concrete elements. A clear majority indicated no such experience, suggesting that this design language is uncommon in contemporary practice in Bloemfontein. This finding reinforces the architectural distinctiveness of the chapel and highlights the rarity of its morphological features in the

local built environment. Additional questions addressed respondents' opinions on the building's design, their understanding of its historical context, and their views on the role of digital preservation following demolition.

Table 1 Numeric Value Summary

Count	Min	Q1	Median	Q3	Max	Description
40	1	3	4	5.00	5	What is your opinion of the design of the demolished chapel of the CLDS? Where 1 is not good and 5 is excellent.
40	1	2	3	4.00	5	The building was built around 1959. What is your knowledge of construction methods during this era? Where 1 is none and 5 is extensive knowledge.
40	1	1	3	3.25	5	Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: Digital records such as BIM models, photos and scans provide enough information to preserve heritage buildings in cases where the building was demolished. 1 is disagree completely and 5 is agree completely.

The numerical survey responses were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods. For each question, the responses were summarised by calculating the mean, standard deviation, standard error of the mean, and the 95% confidence interval for the mean. In addition, an expected value was established under the null hypothesis that the responses were attributable to random variation or noise. Corresponding p-values were calculated to test this null hypothesis. This statistical approach enabled the researchers to evaluate whether observed patterns in professional awareness, perceived design value, and attitudes toward digital preservation were statistically significant or simply the result of random response behaviour. Where p-values were below the commonly accepted threshold of 0.05, the null hypothesis was rejected, supporting the conclusion that the results reflected meaningful professional perspectives rather than incidental variation.

Table 2 Numeric Response Summary

Question	Mean	Std.Dev	SE	Lower	Upper	Null	p-value
1. Opinion of Design	3.575	1.238	0.196	3.179	3.971	3	0.006
2. Construction Method	2.825	1.107	0.175	2.471	3.179	3	0.323
3. Digital Records	2.650	1.388	0.219	2.206	3.094	3	0.119

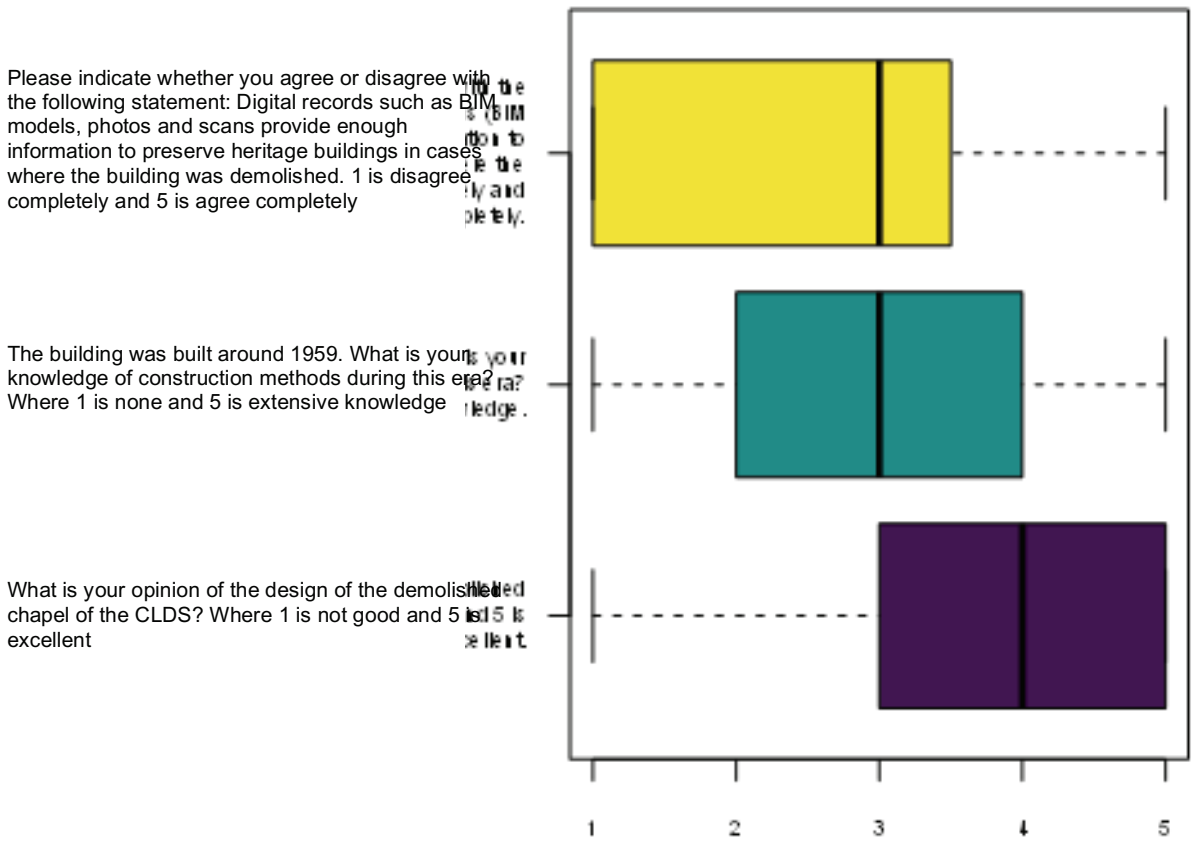

Figure 6 Box Plot of The Numeric Data Linked to the Questions of Knowledge of The Era of Construction, Use of Digital Preservation and Opinion on The Demolition of the Building

The survey data provided insights into participants' perceptions of the case study building and its historical context. Three Likert-scale questions were analysed to determine central tendencies and significance.

First, regarding respondents' opinions of the design of the demolished chapel (*Opinion of Design*), the mean rating was 3.575, which falls between "average" and "good." A statistically significant p-value of 0.006 suggests that this distribution is unlikely to be due to chance. The results indicate that the majority of built environment professionals held a generally favourable view of the chapel's architectural design.

Second, respondents were asked to rate their knowledge of construction methods from the era in which the chapel was built (circa 1959) (*Construction Method*). The mean response was 2.825, indicating a moderate level of familiarity. However, the p-value of 0.323 suggests that the variation in responses is statistically non-significant, implying a broad range of understanding among professionals. This reflects inconsistent familiarity with mid-20th-century construction methods within the sample group.

Thirdly, on the question of whether digital records are an adequate substitute for the preservation of heritage buildings (*Digital Records*), the mean rating was 2.650, reflecting a slight tendency toward disagreement. The p-value of 0.119, however, indicates no statistical significance, implying that opinions on this issue were diverse and that a different sample might yield different results. Thus, no strong consensus exists within this sample regarding the use of digital documentation as a preservation method.

In summary, while the design of the demolished chapel was broadly appreciated, professional knowledge of historical construction methods was uneven, and the utility of digital records as a form of preservation remains a topic of varying opinion among respondents.

Statistical Correlation

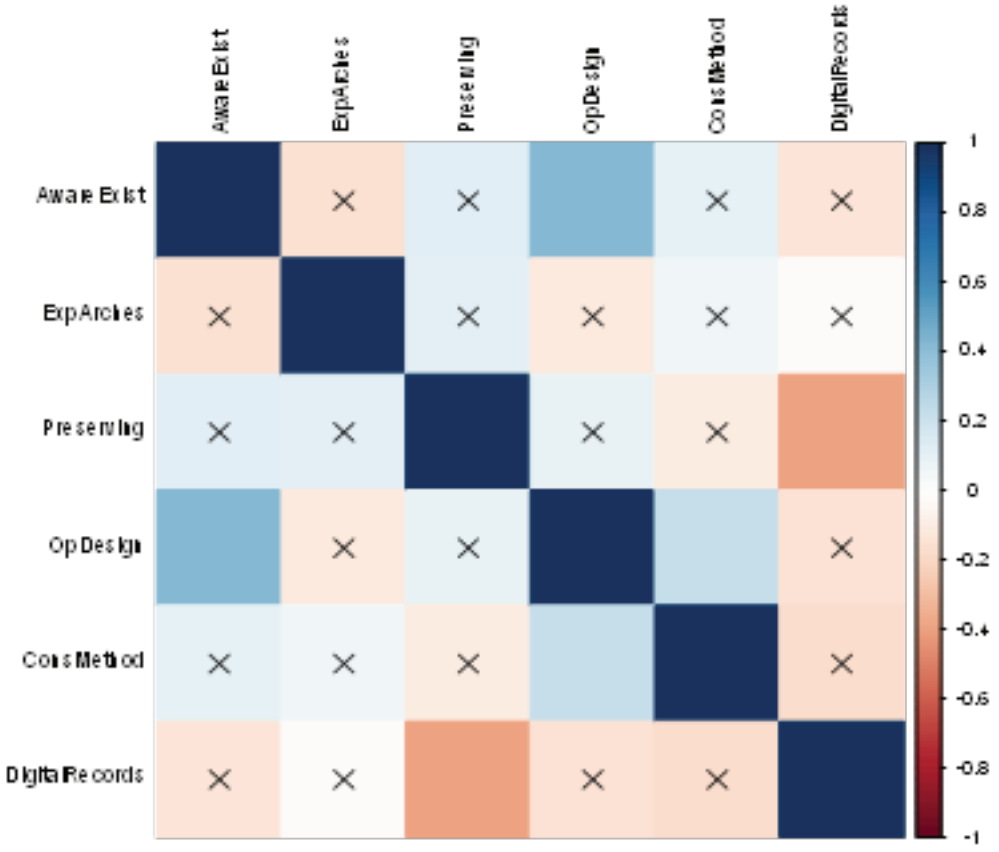

Figure 7 Correlations Indicated in Terms of Awareness, Views on Preservation and Opinion of the Design of the Building

The statistical analysis revealed three noteworthy correlations, two positive and one negative, which offer insights into professional perceptions regarding the demolished chapel.

First, there is a moderate positive correlation (r = 0.426) between respondents' awareness of the chapel's existence (AwareExist) and their opinion of its design (OpDesign) as seen in Figure 7. This indicates that professionals who were more aware of the building before its demolition tended to hold more favourable views of its architectural design.

Second, a weaker but still positive correlation (r = 0.225) was observed between the opinion of the chapel's design and respondents' familiarity with the method of construction. This suggests that appreciation of the design was somewhat associated with a higher level of knowledge regarding the building's structural techniques, such as the vaulting system.

In contrast, a moderate negative correlation (r = –0.400) was found between the support for digital preservation (DigitalPreserve) and the belief that the building should have been physically preserved (Preserving). This inverse relationship implies that respondents who placed greater value on digital documentation were less inclined to advocate for the physical conservation of the chapel. These correlations underscore the interplay between awareness, technical knowledge, and attitudes toward both design appreciation and preservation methodologies.

Thematic Analysis

Data were collected through open-ended survey questions with Architects/Architectural Technologists, Quantity Surveyors, Engineers, Academics, Construction Managers, Historians/Researchers and Town Planners in Bloemfontein. Thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process. Five themes emerged from the responses received, revealing views on the loss of the building, emotional responses as well as tensions between conservation and development. The themes and key insights are set out in Table 3.

Table 3 Thematic Analysis

Theme	Sub-Theme	Description	Responses
1: Loss of Architectural and Cultural Heritage Key Insight: Strong emotional and architectural significance	1.1: Irreplaceable Historical Value	Many responses emphasise the building's unique architectural and historical significance, expressing that its demolition represents a loss that cannot be undone.	*"A great piece of architecture is forever lost."* *"Such mistakes can never be rectified."* *"A part of history was erased from Bloemfontein's urban fabric."*
	1.2: International Influence and Design Legacy	The building was seen as an important example of international architectural influence, with reference to Brasília and Oscar Niemeyer.	*"It was a unique example of how international influences were far-reaching…"*
2: Critique of Decision-Making and Authorities Key Insight: Distrust in policy and city planning processes	2.1: Lack of Protection and Oversight	Frustration is directed toward heritage authorities and city planning departments, perceived as ineffective in preserving architectural heritage.	*"The fact that heritage authorities in the Free State do not have any legal gravitas to stop developers... is a crying shame."* *"Bloemfontein has lost decades in the endeavour of documenting the historical fabric..."*
	2.2: Short-Term Thinking and Policy Gaps	Some respondents cite a culture of short-sightedness, with a tendency to prioritise development over preservation.	*"Shortsightedness, a culture of disregard for things old."* *"Removes the essence of preserving historical buildings."*
3: Emotional and Sentimental Responses Key Insight: Demolition invoked strong emotional and nostalgic responses		Respondents expressed sadness, anger, and emotional loss, often using vivid or strong language to reflect their disappointment. The comments suggest that emotional attachment to architectural heritage plays a role in shaping opinion.	*"It breaks my heart."* *"Disheartened."* *"A sad, sad, sad story!"*
4: Sustainability and Development Tensions Key Insight: Conflicting views on modern development vs. preservation	4.1: Heritage vs. Progress	A few participants acknowledged the need for modern development, suggesting the decision is acceptable if balanced with sustainable and quality replacement.	*"Only acceptable if the replacement structure is high quality and compliments the environment."* *"There will be space to allow for modern designs... built in consideration to the sustainable development goals."*

	4.2: Missed Sustainable Opportunities	Others viewed the demolition as unsustainable, both in terms of material waste and cultural loss.	*"It was unnecessary and from a point of sustainability a loss, a bad investment."* *"Buildings like these motivate young designers to create art not just Architecture."*
5: Divergent and Nuanced Views Key Insight: Not all respondents agree—some sought more context	5.1: Contextual Considerations	Some respondents withheld judgment, emphasising the need for more context, such as the building's use, historical documentation, or cost-benefit analysis.	*"Without knowing its history or a bit more about it it's very difficult to make a simple yes/no call."* *"I don't have context of why it was demolished…"*
	5.2: Architectural Subjectivity	Not all respondents considered the building exceptionally valuable. A few expressed neutral or contrary views, focusing on aesthetic subjectivity or practical use.	*"Neutral, the building is not as beautiful like the majority of other historic buildings..."* *"It was probably not convenient for it to serve as a chapel in that specific route…"*

Discussion

The findings of this study partially align with, but also challenge, existing literature on modernist building conservation. Previous work has typically centred on the historical or stylistic value of mid-century architecture, often focusing on well-known buildings or the legacies of prominent architects (Barker, 2015). In contrast, this paper foregrounds the perceptions of built environment professionals—particularly those not traditionally included in conservation discourse, such as quantity surveyors and engineers—regarding a lesser-known modernist building that had limited statutory protection. The correlation between increased awareness and support for conservation recorded in this study suggests that attitudes can shift with knowledge. This challenges the notion that heritage value is inherently subjective or discipline-bound and opens the door for broader, interdisciplinary engagement in heritage conservation decision-making.

The results suggest that non-architectural professionals are not inherently opposed to conservation. Rather, they may lack the contextual or aesthetic frameworks to identify non-material value in modernist buildings. This distinction is important, as it indicates a gap in education or professional exposure rather than a fundamental divergence in values. These findings suggest that professional development initiatives or interdisciplinary collaboration could significantly influence outcomes in contested demolition decisions or influence alternative conservation techniques such as digitisation.

To refer to Elefante's (2012) assertion again that "the greenest building is one already built," which emphasises the environmental rationale for conservation, the case of the chapel shows that sustainability arguments alone may not be sufficient. Without formal heritage status or public advocacy, buildings that may otherwise be repurposed may still be lost to development. This implies that while sustainability is an increasingly important criterion in conservation discourse, it may not yet carry decisive weight in practice—particularly when weighed against commercial pressures.

The chapel was not protected under the National Heritage Resources Act. Yet, the data suggest that professional opinion on its value was mixed and could have supported an alternative conservation route. This disconnect calls into question whether the existing statutory criteria adequately reflect the evolving understanding of modernist heritage.

Conclusion

The demolition of the Chapel of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints in Bloemfontein highlights the ongoing challenges surrounding the conservation of South Africa's mid-century modernist architecture. This study contributes through the exploration of a particular example to architectural and heritage discourse but broadens the subject to include not only architects. It offers insights into how the broader built environment profession may engage with similar structures. This study examined how built environment professionals perceive such structures, the link between awareness and support for conservation, particularly relating to modernist buildings that no longer exist physically and fall outside the thresholds of traditional heritage frameworks.

The findings suggest that while awareness of the chapel's existence and significance was limited, professionals who were familiar with the building expressed appreciation for its design quality and contextual sensitivity. Notably, as mentioned, there appeared to be a correlation between awareness and support for physical conservation. It also points to the potential value of increasing interdisciplinary engagement in identifying and advocating for at-risk modernist structures.

This study, therefore, advocates for a more integrated and proactive approach to modernist heritage conservation, one that combines awareness-building, documentation, and interdisciplinary collaboration. While statutory protection may be limited, built environment professionals can play a critical role in recognising and advocating for the cultural, spatial, and environmental value of South African modernist architecture. Only through such engagement can the material and intangible legacies of the Modern Movement be preserved for future generations or serve as built assets for future adaptation and reuse.

Recommendations

This study has shown that the findings support aspects of existing literature while also revealing a gap in interdisciplinary engagement. This research points to the need for further investigation. Future work could explore whether similar awareness-to-conservation correlations exist in other South African cities, or whether different legislative or community advocacy mechanisms could support the conservation of modernist structures. Studies on the efficacy of digital preservation techniques as an alternative or supplement to physical preservation are also needed. Studies that engage with the broader built environment community regarding the balance between conservation and development within a sustainability framework are also needed.

By broadening the conservation conversation beyond the architectural circle, this work advocates for a more inclusive and responsive approach to valuing and debating South Africa's modernist architectural heritage. Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

- The promotion of interdisciplinary heritage advocacy: Built environment professionals, planners, and academics should collaborate on heritage advocacy platforms to raise awareness of under-recognised building types and influence public policy and the challenges associated with these projects.
- The enhancement of professional and public education on modern heritage: - Curricula in architecture, quantity surveying, and related fields should include case studies of local modernist buildings, highlighting the role of 20th-century architecture in shaping contemporary urban identity as heritage buildings.
- The investigation of digital preservation methods as tools to promote awareness or as documentation when typical conservation is not possible.

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SACQSP2025-81

Observed variability in the pricing of preliminaries in South Africa

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Abstract

Measuring the experienced variability that the ratio preliminaries bear to construction cost is essential, because it can shed light on the risk posed by preliminaries as a trade. This knowledge can heavily influence the skillset of a Quantity Surveyor. The risk was identified based on the significant variance observed in the literature's reported ratio of preliminaries to construction cost. The study methodology included obtaining and analysing tender reports on projects tendered in the last ten years. Each tender report included as many contractors as possible and where feasible the consultant estimate. A total of 18 projects were investigated. Descriptive statistics were used to report the findings. Based on the tender reports obtained the average preliminaries were approximately ten percent. This was in line with a substantial number of reports from recent studies. The variance among contractors on the same tender was investigated to assess the levels of variability under similar conditions (the same project). The variance found where more than one contractor tendered was eight percent. It was found that of all the trades in Bills of Quantities preliminaries pose a more substantial risk than any other trade in regarding unpredictability. It is recommended that consultants carefully consider and evaluate the variances observed in the pricing of preliminaries when analysing tender reports to manage construction projects responsibly.

Keywords: South Africa, Preliminaries, Tender Reports, Estimation.

Introduction

The risk posed by the preliminaries trade was investigated with a special focus on the variability of the preliminaries trade. The aim was to identify if there is substantial variance among different tenderers on the same project. Some substantial variances were observed in the literature. Towey (2017:128) reported that preliminaries could be between 8% and 15% of the construction cost. In just one example from one author the reasonable range constituted a near doubling in the percentage allowance. It was assumed that it was not meant as a range on the same project, but rather a range for different types of projects.

Consider that this is significant because it is a ratio (or a percentage), and it does not measure actual value. The expression of preliminaries as a ratio is commonplace (Bowen, Hall & Edwards, 1996; Cruywagen, 2010; Segalla, 1991) and provides a basis for comparing apples with apples. Thus, any large variances in the ratio indicate that the cost drivers for each of those projects had a major impact on the cost and the amount of work or cost involved in that section of the work. It is questionable if such levels of variance would be acceptable for other trades such as masonry or roof covering. In conjunction with that it should also be noted that some researchers reported variance due to differing interpretation among tenderers on the same project (Abas et al., 2017:9).

The study aims to establish if preliminaries are a volatile trade in the pricing of construction projects, and if so, how volatile. The level of volatility will be tested by comparing tender responses from different contractors on the same project. On a macro level, the variability for preliminaries on all the tender reports obtained will be evaluated to determine if there is usually variability in the pricing of tenders and if the general representation matches the reports in the literature. The overall risk posed by preliminaries will also be considered, because if preliminaries is highly volatile and pose a risk, the

question is whether it is a major risk for the construction industry. Consider major variances in the rate of mirrors, for example, because it is typically a minor value trade which does not pose a major risk to the project.

Preliminaries, A General Overview

Preliminaries can be defined as the items used for the execution of the project, that is not related to any single outcome (Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, 2012:14), such as a brick wall or a concrete column. Sources regarding the pricing of construction work sometimes address the pricing of preliminaries related items under a synonym phrase such as overheads, indirect costs or general conditions (Chan & Pasquire, 2002:53; Chao, 2010:287; Peterson & Dagostino, 2015:66). Some items incorporated into the preliminaries trade include insurance, occupational health and safety, site accommodation and major plant such as cranes (Chartered Institute of Building, 2018:53).

Preliminaries is the trade that is most often not measured in detail by the consultant QS. Often in the procurement document, some items would be quantified in detail, brickwork, brick force and lintels are just a few examples. Yet, the site accommodation is not specified or explicitly quantified. Sometimes, a minimum requirement for size and ventilation is made (JBCC (a), 2018:11). The preliminaries as a trade is not likely to include a specification for a site store, site office, or crane specification. It is mainly left to the contractor's interpretation. When contractors need to provide site accommodation such as site offices and storerooms, one contractor may need to rent a site office, while another may choose to erect a makeshift building to act as a site office. The cost of each approach would differ and could drive variability in the cost of preliminaries.

To assess the risk associated with the preliminaries trade, the prevalence of the use of a preliminaries section in construction should be understood. The standard methods of measurement were consulted and all of them incorporate preliminaries, indicating the prevalence of the preliminaries trade in global construction (RICS, 2012:38; Association of South African Quantity Surveyors, 2015:5; International construction measurement standards, 2019:14). Considering that several books regarding construction cost estimation include preliminaries which confirms the prevalence of the trade (CIOB, 2018:51; Towey, 2017:128; Brook, 2008:246). The trade often occurs in construction contracts and is often used for more than allocating overhead costs to the project, such as when it is used to adjust the cost of additional time granted on the project (JBCC (b), 2018:13).

Trends in Preliminaries

Knowing the preliminaries and the like is often included in construction procurement documents, the focus turns to the impact and contribution the trade has on the cost of construction projects. Preliminaries may be viewed as an inconsequential part of the construction cost with reports of preliminaries mostly falling in the region of 7% or 8% (Bowen et al., 1996:5; Chan & Pasquire, 2002:53). Other researchers report the general percentage as 7% to 15% (Towey, 2017:128). Some long-standing sources indicate that preliminaries were as low as 5% (Segalla, 1991:45). More recent studies found that preliminaries were often priced at approximately 10% (Cruywagen, 2010:5; Enshassi, Aziz & Karriri, 2008:42). It would be worth investigating the current situation to evaluate whether any further increases in the percentage preliminaries has occurred. Interestingly, the expected percentage is doubled in one example, which shows the range of expected variability.

With the literature reporting that the percentage did increase somewhat in the past forty years, the focus turns to the variance among tenderers on the same project. It is assumed that the varying percentages for preliminaries should not occur on a single project but rather on different projects. The unique nature of a project (Project Management Institute, 2017:4) makes it difficult to control for the exclusive circumstances that the unique project characteristics may cause. Thus, a situation should be investigated to assess the disparity when controlling for the distinctive nature of projects. No study was found comparing the dissimilarity of preliminaries on a specific project. Comprehending the deviation in pricing among tenderers would greatly assist in understanding the risks associated with the preliminaries trade. If major variances occur, it could confirm that there are differing opinion regarding the items to be included in the pricing of preliminaries, as touched on by Abas et al. (2017:9).

Possible Risks Associated with Preliminaries

The costs included in some preliminaries' items can be allowed for in multiple places in the preliminaries trade bill or the bills of quantities. It has been reported that head office overheads should be incorporated as a pro-rated allowance to each item in a construction procurement document, where itemised procurement documents are used (CIOB, 2018:176). Alternatively, CIOB (2018:205) suggest that head office overheads could be priced separately from unit rates. Some items, such as profit allocation, are often recommended to be included with every item (Peterson & Dagostino, 2015:304). Yet, the possibility to include profit as a lump sum in the preliminaries trade, could be conceived. It is important to take note that no allowance is made for profit as an individual item in preliminaries trade, but it is not specifically included in other items such as the masonry trade bill either (ASAQS, 2005:106). Situations where contractors may allow for profit on provisional sums (ASAQS, 2005:370).

Theorise a situation where the profit and attendance associated with the provisional sums are partially or wholly allocated to preliminaries, instead of the provisional sum (ASAQS, 2005:370). Because the adjustment of the provisional sums could cause a decrease in the allocated profit (JBCC (c), 2018:23) if the provisional sum decrease, the contractor may mitigate the associated loss of profit by allocating the actual allowance to preliminaries and not the provided space for declaration. It may be offered that getting profit on an item despite the item being omitted may motivate contractors to price creatively. Understanding if major variances in the cost of preliminaries occur and if it is a trend is essential in addressing possible risks to clients, after all dishonourable behaviour in pricing tenders is a frequently researched topic (Soni & Smallwood, 2024; Bowen et al., 2015). Understanding the variances in priced preliminaries may assist in mitigating those risks.

Research Methodology and Method

The methodology consisted of a survey aimed at obtaining tender reports from relevant stakeholders. The tender reports were considered to authoritatively communicate what general trends could be observed when testing the prices from contractors on projects that were tendered. Tendered data was more accurate because it provided a snapshot of the actual market conditions during the tender stage. The tender reports were also regarded as beneficial because they provide a snapshot of the contractor's estimates on the same projects. The tender report data could be considered quality data as it is not clouded by biases which Christensen, Johnson and Turner (2014:335) classifies as social – desirability bias and selection bias commonly associated with survey research.

Practical Considerations

The population consisted of individuals involved in property development such as Quantity Surveyors and developers. The population size was based on the number of projects approved by municipalities as reported by Statistics South Africa (2019), to be one million projects over a ten-year period. Small projects not registered at the municipality, such as minor renovations, were not included because it was deemed unlikely that a tender report would be done for such small projects.

It is also necessary to acknowledge that the population estimate may be somewhat large because it would include other minor construction, generally done on a quotation basis. Quotations were not included in the study because it does not necessarily include preliminaries as a trade. To have a confidence level of ninety-five percent and a five percent margin of error, 384 projects needed to be included (Research advisors, 2006).

The whole population was sampled using non-probability sampling techniques because no known sample frame could be accessed. The sampling method utilised consisted of a combination of convenience and snowball sampling. The data was of such a confidential nature that it was not easy to find participants, thus driving the need to use a convenience sampling method. It was also noted that the quality of the data collected did not depend on the randomness of participants, thus further supporting the use of purposive sampling methods. Luckily several projects obtained had information for more than one contractor providing the opportunity to assess the volatility in the pricing of preliminaries.

Quality of Data and Analysis Methods

Only eighteen projects were obtained because of the data's sensitive nature. That resulted in a confidence level of 80% and a 15% margin of error. The data did not achieve the aimed statistical strength, but it provides a preliminary indication of possible trends. The methods of assessment utilised as part of the data analysis process included only descriptive statistics. Using the coefficient of variance was contemplated, but abandoned, because the data sets showed means close to zero, causing misleading results.

Demographic Data

Of the eighteen projects, seven had only one tenderer. For three of the projects the consultants estimate of the quantity surveyor could not be obtained, but the tender summaries of all the tender responses were obtained for those two projects. The maximum number of responses obtained for one tender was eight, the minimum was one. When considering all the tender responses and estimates the total was seventy-seven. All the final summaries were included for assessment because the preliminaries cannot be viewed in isolation from other project demographics. With the methodology and demographic data discussed the focus turns to the study's findings.

Research Results

The research results were reported to address the aim of determining volatility in the pricing of preliminaries. Preliminaries was shown as a percentage of the contract value, because for several projects the basic data for each project differed. This was often the method of reporting encountered in the literature (Bowen et al., 1996:5; Chan & Pasquire, 2002:53). The results were considered on a macro level for all projects analysed and the results for each tender were also investigated to examine the volatility in the controlled environment of the tender process on a single project.

General Trends in Priced Preliminaries

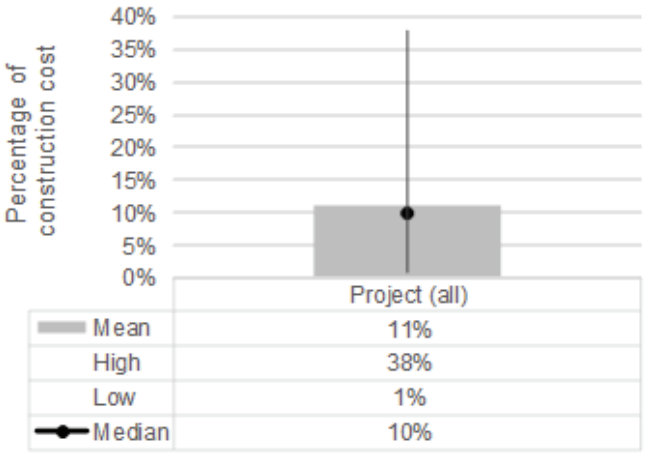


Figure 1 Descriptive Statistics for all Tenderers and Estimates

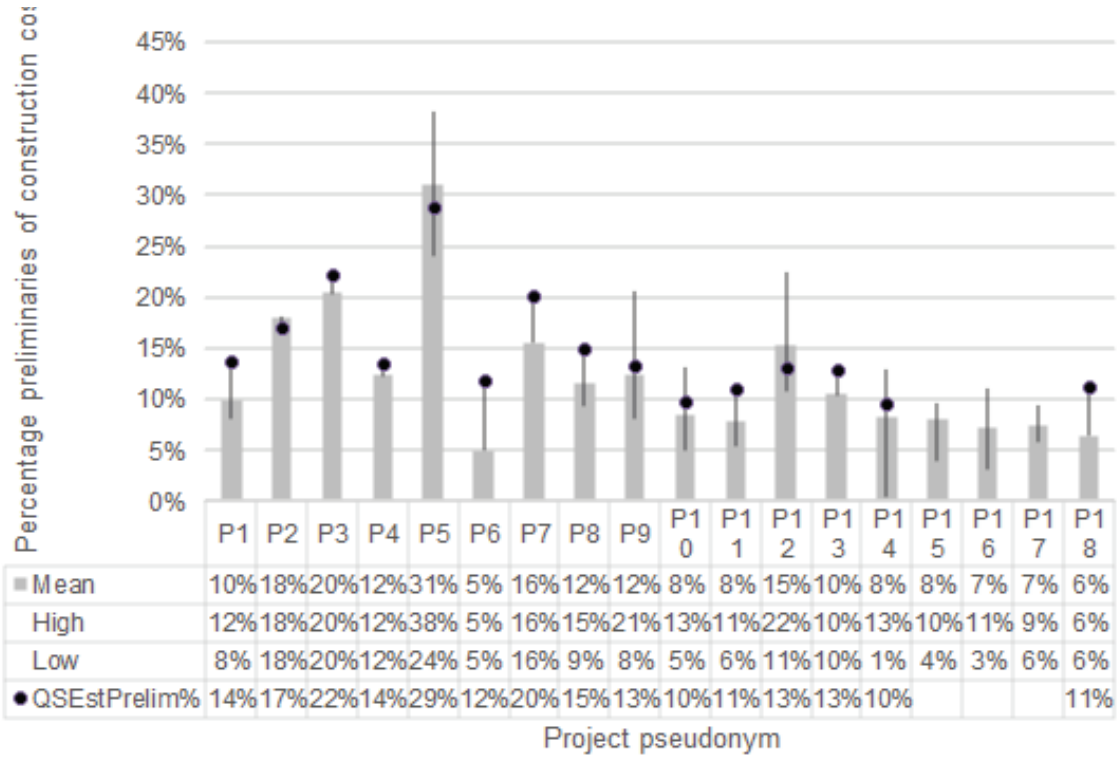
On a macro level, the average of all the tender responses and estimates was investigated to establish the average cost of preliminaries when expressed as a percentage of the construction cost. The results were indicated on a stock chart (Figure 1). The chart indicates the difference between the highest and lowest preliminaries with a line, thus the longer the black vertical line, the higher the variance. The average percentage is indicated with a grey bar and the median with a black spot. The average percentage of preliminaries was 11%, and the mode (most frequently encountered) was 10%. The most interesting occurrence was the variance between the highest and lowest ratio for preliminaries. The highest preliminaries percentage encountered was 38% while the lowest was 1%. That does confirm the possibility of high variance in the ratio of preliminaries for different types of projects.

Variance in the Pricing on Different Tender Reports

The variance of the percentage of preliminaries when comparing different projects was not the only matter of interest. The variance among different tenderers on the same project was also of interest. The observed variance would provide an interesting perspective of the variance that could be expected among contractors on the same tender. Because each project is unique it is interesting to see the levels of agreement among contractors on the same project, thus controlling for the unique nature of each project. In addition to the variance in preliminaries the variance in all trades was investigated to establish the most volatile trades in the BOQ.

The descriptive statistics, relating to preliminaries, for each project were indicated in Figure 2. The stock chart indicates the average preliminaries per project with a bar, and the Quantity Surveyor's estimate is indicated with a dot. The vertical line represents the variance among tenderers, or if only one contractor tendered or the highest and lowest percentage was the same (thus no variance) the line just connects the estimate and average, such as P2, 3, 4, 6, 13 and 18. The highest variance observed in a single tender report, comparing tenderers for the same project, was 14% (P5). Such high levels of variance were observed on four of the eighteen projects (P5, 9, 12 and 14).

Consider that of the 18 projects 7 had only one contractor (P2, 3, 4, 6,7, 13 and 18). Thus 4 out of 11 projects had a variance of more than 10% among tenderers. That means approximately 36% of the projects had a more than 10% variance in the priced preliminaries The average variance was 8% with 6% and 4% occurring twice (mode). To understand if 10% variance in the pricing of one trade is significant, it is worth investigating if there are also high levels of variance in other trades, such as concrete and plastering.



	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11	P12	P13	P14	P15	P16	P17	P18
Mean	10%	18%	20%	12%	31%	5%	16%	12%	12%	8%	8%	15%	10%	8%	8%	7%	7%	6%
High	12%	18%	20%	12%	38%	5%	16%	15%	21%	13%	11%	22%	10%	13%	10%	11%	9%	6%
Low	8%	18%	20%	12%	24%	5%	16%	9%	8%	5%	6%	11%	10%	1%	4%	3%	6%	6%
QSEstPrelim%	14%	17%	22%	14%	29%	12%	20%	15%	13%	10%	11%	13%	13%	10%				11%

Figure 2 Preliminaries Value as Percentage of Construction Cost: Comparison of High, Low, Mean and QS Estimate on Individual Projects

Table 1 Variances in the Pricing of Trades for Different Reports

Trade name	Average variance	Min variance	Max variance	Average TR*
Preliminaries	8%	1%	14%	11%
Provisional sums	4%	0%	17%	34%
Metalwork	4%	0%	33%	4%
Electrical work	3%	0%	23%	8%
Concrete, formwork and reinforcing	3%	0%	12%	7%
Mechanical work	2%	0%	10%	4%
External works	2%	0%	6%	10%
Masonry	2%	0%	4%	6%
Plumbing and drainage	1%	0%	7%	2%
Ground Anchoring	1%	0%	7%	1%
Roof coverings	1%	0%	6%	2%
Carpentry and joinery	1%	0%	6%	4%
Ceilings etc.	1%	0%	5%	2%
Ironmongery	1%	0%	4%	2%
Earthworks	1%	0%	4%	2%
Waterproofing	1%	0%	3%	1%
Paintwork	1%	0%	3%	2%
Alterations	1%	0%	3%	1%

In Table 1, the variance observed in all trades is indicated. The table is structured to show the trades with the highest average variance at the top. The variances are not indicated per project but rather as an average of the relevant trades (e.g. masonry and plastering) for each tender report analysed. All percentages are calculated based on the trade cost as a percentage of the construction cost, with the variance calculated based on the specific trade percentage.

In Table 1 the minimum variance will often be 0% because for some of the trades the representation of the trade as a percentage of the contract value is 0%, thus the difference between 0% and 0% is 0%. Those trades are at the bottom of the table and include lateral support, prefabricated buildings and precast concrete. Another reason for 0% variance is because the contractors did not have large discrepancies in their cost for those specific trades, consider tiling and structural steel, both very close to the bottom of table one, with an average variance of 0% and maximum variance of 1%. This shows high levels of agreement between contractors. In fact, the average variance among tenderers on measured trades seldom exceeded 3%.

The most variable trades include Preliminaries in first place, Provisional sums in second place and Metal work in third place. Interestingly, the preliminaries are the only trade where the minimum

variance is not 0%, but rather 1%. Thus, preliminaries always had at least 1% variance (based on the construction cost), whereas all the other trades had a minimum variance of 0% as a percentage of construction cost. On average preliminaries also had the highest variance of all trades at 8%, followed by provisional sums and metalwork at 4% average variance. While knowing the trades with the highest variability it is also useful to know the trades with the highest impact on the cost of the project. Where high influence and high variability meet, a high-level of risk can be identified.

The trades that, on average, had the highest value representation in the Bills of quantities were indicated on the right-hand side of the table and were indicated as a percentage of the construction cost. That means for each tender report, the trade representation was calculated as a percentage of the construction cost, and those percentages were averaged and reflected in the table. The highest contributors to the construction cost in the sampled tender reports were provisional sums, preliminaries and external works. Knowing that preliminaries and provisional sums are usually the most significant project drivers with the most considerable variability poses an interesting question.

One interesting anomaly found in the data was regarding metalwork. In one of the tender reports, one of the three respondents had an unusually high value towards metalwork. The other two respondents were close together in the value of metalwork. The high allocation of funds on that one tender skewed the current results. If the metalwork of that one tender report is pulled in line with the other two tendered on the project the variance of metalwork comes down from 4% to 2% and the max variance comes down from 33% to 8%, thus emphasising the risk associated with assessing data based on averages. When correcting for the outlier in metalwork the Electrical trade moves into third place.

Discussion

General Trends in the Pricing of Preliminaries

The general trends reported in the literature varied somewhat but the most recent reports indicated that preliminaries often represent about 10% of the construction value (Cruywagen, 2010:5; Enshassi et al., 2008:42). The other report had lower percentages (Segalla, 1991:45; Bowen et al., 1996:5), but the increase could have been caused by legislation placing a larger burden of responsibility on contractors (*Occupational Health and Safety Act 85 of 1993,* 1993). In general, the findings also showed that there is a wide variance in the pricing of preliminaries consider how the lowest percentage for preliminaries was 1% and the highest was 38%. This confirms that project specific characteristics influence the overall cost of preliminaries (Bowen et al., 1996:2) and high levels of variance in the cost of preliminaries.

The project with 38% preliminaries did stand out but the other tender and the quantity surveyor also had the preliminaries estimated in a higher-than-normal bracket (29% & 24%). Suggesting that the client had extraordinary requirements, because all the participants indicated higher than normal preliminaries. The highest tenderer had the preliminaries at 9% higher than the estimate and 14% higher than the other tenderer. It was also the project with the highest variability among all tender reports analysed. Consider that the variance between the two tenderers exceeds the normal allowance for preliminaries. Thus, even in this instance on one tender the variance in preliminaries was of such an extent that it made the range suggested by Towey (2017:128) seem negligible. The variance in pricing found in tender reports was the study's most significant finding.

Variance in the Pricing on Different Tender Reports

Abas et al. (2017:9) reported low levels of agreement among contractors regarding the items that need to be included in preliminaries. The data confirmed significant variances not only when comparing all the tender responses in general, but also when comparing the variance among tenderers on the same project. Consider that on P5 the variance among two tenderers was 14% and the overall percentage was 38%, almost half of the project cost. That suggests very low levels of agreement on the scope of work to be included under the preliminaries trade. It should be considered that there was never complete agreement on any tender when it comes to preliminaries there was always at least 1% variance. In other trades low variance was encountered among tenderers on the same project.

The probability of low agreement about the constituents of preliminaries as the only cause of variance should be considered. Some researchers reported that preliminaries are estimated based on standard schedules (O'Leary & Vaz-Serra, 2025), most recommend this. Some discrepancies reported by some

include head office overhead costs among others (CIOB, 2018:176 & 205). These items could be included in each direct cost item or in preliminaries as a whole or in part as seen in the literature review. Thus, some creative pricing may occur in the preliminaries trade. It is fascinating to see that the two most variable trades were preliminaries and provisional sums. The way provisional sums are priced in South Africa (ASAQS, 2015:4) provide the opportunity to lower the profit allocation in provisional sums and increase it in preliminaries, or the other way round.

When considering the variance in preliminaries it is important to note some questions that may assist in determining if the variance is due to some creative pricing or because of varied needs associated with the project requirements. Possibly the easiest way to assess this is to compare the estimate the consultant did with the tendered rates. The consultant's estimate for the project with the highest preliminaries allowance (P5) was similar to the contractors' tenders, thus suggesting that the client had special requirements or the estimate was leaked. That specific project was not reported to pose a high risk to the developer, thus indicating that the cost of preliminaries was not driven by perceived risk. That project had characteristics similar to those of other projects, but because the full bill of quantities was available it can be confirmed that the client had special requirements. It should be considered that the consultant estimates (on preliminaries) often exceeded the contractor average and sometimes the consultant estimate was even the highest (P1, 3, 7, 8 and 11) in the tender report. That suggests that the contractors mainly did not price preliminaries too out of line.

Variance in the Pricing of Trades in Tender Reports

To determine the significance of an 8% variance it was also considered to test the variance noted on other trades. If the measured trades such as masonry and ironmongery also indicated high levels of variance the variance in preliminaries could be concluded to be insignificant. Just after preliminaries, the highest variance was 4% on provisional sums, metalwork and electrical, followed by an average variance of 3% variance among tenderers on the same project. When considering the variances that occurred on the measured trades (e.g. plaster, paint etc.), it was clear that there was never another trade that varied around 8%.

The variance that occurred on preliminaries was more than double that of other measured trades. Also, note that the variance among tenderers was mostly inconsequential in work trades. With items that can efficiently be priced to include the relevant labour and material cost showing much lower variances, it is clear that the preliminaries trade exhibits at least double the variability of other trades (CIOB, 2018:178). This does provide strong evidence that the preliminaries trade is still somewhat too interpretive as suggested by Abas et al. (2017:9) may pose some risk to the client on construction projects. While taking note of the data presented it is only responsible to acknowledge any shortcomings and limitations associated with the data.

The metalwork trade represented 4% variability in the analysis of the data. However, it was observed that one project (P10) had an outlier in the metal work trade. The metalwork for that one tenderer represented 43% of the construction value. For the other tenderers it varied between 10% and 16%. The outlier caused the overall average to be skewed to make the metalwork trade appear more variable than might be accurate. This is a well-known problem with using averages, thus often combining averages with modes. When a correction is made to correct the metalwork representation, it lowers to 2% of the construction value, and electrical work shifts into the third position.

Based on the demographic data, the results cannot be considered a perfect demonstration of the population, but the data could be considered more exploratory. What counts in favour of the collected data is that it was based on rates from actual tenders, thus it was market tested and considerably more accurate than opinion testing often conducted with questionnaire research. Because the estimation methods of the participants were not known the accuracy of their estimates may be a little faulty.

Conclusion

As pointed out earlier it generally seems that preliminaries as a trade is not that important, especially when considering the scant research published on the topic. Yet, it was interesting to find that considering the overall scope representation in Bills of Quantities preliminaries had quite a significant impact. As seen in Table 1, only provisional sums exceeded the percentage representation of preliminaries. Based on the sample observed many quantity surveyors included items such as metalwork, electrical work and the likes as lump sums to be managed on a quotation basis, causing

the representation of provisional sums to be that high. With preliminaries being one of the most significant cost drivers and the most variable cost driver in the construction cost of a building the trade does poses substantial risks in the construction industry.

The preliminaries trade can be considered somewhat volatile mostly because the items for inclusion may sometimes be interpreted differently. There was also a high variance in the reported acceptable range of preliminaries in the literature. Because the preliminaries range reported was found to be unpredictable it was aimed to investigate the average percentage that occurred in actual tenders. The average ratio of preliminaries to building work was 10%. The median was 11%. It was higher than the BER assumption (Segalla, 1991:45), but in line with other reports.

The analysis confirmed that the variance in the preliminaries trade can be somewhat high (8%). Because some readers may perceive 8% as inconsequential it was compared to the variance observed in measured trades such as structural steel and roof coverings. It was found that the maximum variance observed in measured fields was 4% for provisional sums and metalwork. That means that preliminaries are at least twice as volatile as measured trades and pose the most significant risk in pricing to all work groups. Because of the way preliminaries are adjusted and often managed in certain contracts it is essential to implement methods of managing the risk fairly and transparently.

Recommendations

Quantity surveyors should take note of the risks posed by the volatility of preliminaries to manage those risks proactively. Preliminaries priced too high pose a risk to the client in the form of escalated adjustment costs in relation to additional time. Preliminaries priced too low pose the risk that the contractor could not perform and provide the necessary requirements, such as health and safety equipment among others. Attempts should be made to facilitate further clarity in the pricing of preliminaries, because of the recurring referencing to the low levels of agreement regarding constituents of preliminaries (Abas et al., 2017:9). One solution could be to request that the preliminaries must be priced in detail. Another consideration may be to structure bills of quantities in a way that requires a declaration of material labour and profit, thus facilitating clarity on the allocation of resources. Construction industry professionals may also consider adjusting the method preliminaries are worded to make it easier to understand and price.

Recommended future investigations include attempting to find factors causing the volatility, to improve the understanding regarding the pricing of preliminaries. Only considering non- consensus regarding the constituents of preliminaries is not acceptable, because it is unlikely to be the only cause. Factors such as the contractor's financial capabilities could be tested by comparing published financial statements of publicly noted contractors to establish how plant ownership impacts the cost of preliminaries. Another factor that may be investigated is the variance between the consultant estimate and the contractor tender to assess if the ratio of preliminaries can be anticipated accurately. That could be combined with a replica of the study Bowen et al. (1996) did to establish if those findings still represent the status quo. Knowing the consultant's estimates may illuminate high-level estimation accuracy in the preliminaries trade. Consultants do not have sufficient cost data to do detailed calculations for the preliminaries cost of a project.

The increase from the acceptable 5% to 10% should be investigated because it means that preliminaries related costs increased faster than other construction costs. Lastly very few peer-reviewed studies on preliminaries can be found, mainly the body of knowledge consists of conference presentations and books regarding construction cost estimation. The higher prevalence in conference papers addressing research into the pricing of preliminaries could indicate an unwillingness from journals to publish research regarding preliminaries. This could also be investigated by means of interviews with journal editors.

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SACQSP2025-95

A Systematic Review of Server-Centric BIM Approaches for Enhancing Energy Retrofits through Improved Data Exchange

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Abstract

The Architecture, Engineering, and Construction (AEC) industry is undergoing a transformative shift toward digitalisation, a fact catalysed by the incorporation of server-centric solutions enabling better design coordination, simulation precision, and information management. The use of Building Information Modelling (BIM) together with energy modelling tools has been identified as a crucial enabler in the effort to foster the development of energy-efficient design, construction, and operational practices in buildings. Nevertheless, the ongoing inability to fully achieve software interoperability and inefficient exchange of information is one of the primary impediments to fully realising the potential and business value of BIM in retrofit scenarios. This paper reviews peer-reviewed articles to investigate the server-side requirements that enable efficient data exchange and to emphasise their role in supporting energy-efficient retrofit initiatives. In accordance with the systematic literature assessment methodology, five (5) databases were systematically queried using a predefined search string. A total of 24 journal articles met the established inclusion criteria and were subjected to a detailed review. The analysis of these studies revealed their significant role in advancing and supporting energy-efficient retrofit initiatives. The review of the journal articles revealed that several energy modelling and simulation tools, including Autodesk Insight, IESVE, and EnergyPlus (via OpenStudio/DesignBuilder), demonstrate significant potential to enhance energy-efficient retrofit initiatives. These tools support interoperability by enabling performance-based analysis, predictive modelling, and informed decision-making, thereby contributing to improved building performance and alignment with sustainability objectives. This study revealed that limited software interoperability and inefficient information exchange remain key barriers to realising the full potential of BIM in retrofit scenarios, underscoring the need for solutions that enhance data integration and support energy-efficient outcomes.

Keywords: Server-centric BIM, Energy-efficient Retrofit, Data Interoperability, Sustainable Design, Digital Infrastructure.

Introduction

The global demand for sustainable built environments has intensified the need to optimise energy performance throughout the building lifecycle. While substantial emphasis has traditionally been placed on the design phase, there is a growing recognition that post-design and post-construction stages offer significant opportunities for improving operational energy efficiency. Within this context, the integration of Building Information Modelling (BIM) with advanced energy modelling and simulation tools has been identified as a critical mechanism for promoting energy-efficient practices across design, construction, and operational domains. The ability of BIM to combine multidimensional data offers a basis for monitoring and predictive analysis of the performance alongside decision-making, which complements sustainability objectives (Gürtler, Baumgärtel & Scherer, 2015:236). BIM energy simulation tools applied in the context of post-construction building management allow stakeholders to analyse real-time building performance, recognise the inefficiencies, and recommend retrofit or operational approaches to improve the energy use (Giuda, Villa & Piantanida, 2015:1046). This is especially

essential in regions such as South Africa where environmental pressures, the cost of energy, as well as changes in policies are currently driving the construction sector towards more responsible and energy sensible behaviours (GBCSA, 2021:18). Nonetheless, the potential of energy modelling and simulation during the post-construction stages of BIM is yet to be fully realised with the unfavourable factors spanning technical proficiency gaps, interoperability, and cost issues. Conversely, these challenges present an opportunity for the adoption of server-centric BIM, as BIM implementation traditionally relies on file-based systems where model data is exchanged through standardised formats such as Industry Foundation Classes (IFC) or Green Building XML (gbXML) (Sanhudo et al., 2018:10). While these methods aid in fundamental interoperability, they usually result in fragmented workflows, versioning problems, and a lack of efficiency in the integration of energy simulation tools with design and operation models. Due to the increasing need to identify performance in real time and to optimise lifecycle energy use, the paradigm shift is towards server-centric BIM, a design that concentrates data in cloud-based or Common Data Environments (CDEs) (Daniotti et al., 2022:9).

This facilitates easy cooperation, constant model improvement, and the incorporation of external energy analysis platforms using open Application Programming Interface (APIs) (Francis, Miresco & Melhado, 2025:175). BIM Server-based design approaches have demonstrated potential to enhance data interoperability and enable energy simulations that can be used to make retrofit decisions. They enable the dynamic connection of design models to performance feedback, hence improving the accuracy and responsiveness of retrofit planning and performance (Scherer & Katranuschkov, 2018:58; Utkucu & Sözer, 2020:8). Despite these developments, the area is still disjointed, and there is a scarcity of synthesis of the current research on the specific contribution of server-based BIM systems on data exchange and the improvement of performance in energy retrofit settings.

In contrast to the current BIM-energy integration reviews that either focus mainly on the accuracy of the simulation or on the interoperability standards, the study presented is primarily focusing on server-centric data exchange architectures as the facilitating infrastructure of successful energy retrofits. The paper summarises the recent advances in cloud BIM, CDEs, and API-based systems and adds to the current knowledge about how centralised data environments can help transform the retrofit processes, promote digital collaboration, and manage building performance in the long term.

This discourse unfolds the prospects of the effective use of BIM-based energy simulating tools at post-design and post-construction stages to improve energy performance. Based on other pertinent case studies and recent practices in the industry and digital construction developments, it reflects on the opportunity that the tools have in transforming building management strategies and in meeting long-term energy efficiency goals (Gholamzadehmir et al., 2025:5).

New developments in digital construction technologies have placed Building Information Modelling (BIM) as the embodiment of sustainable building practices. Although historically BIM has been used when designing and constructing buildings, the scope of using BIM is increasingly recognised in post-design and post-construction periods, with progressively more literature on BIM among the energy performance of structures and its management (Wong & Zhou, 2015:158). With BIM platforms, these energy modeling and simulation tools, which include Design Builder, Integrated Environmental Solutions Virtual Environment (IES VE), and Green Building Studio, can offer dynamic analysis tools in addition to BIM platforms that perform only static performance evaluations. These tools enable the simulation of energy consumption patterns, HVAC performance, lighting efficiency, and thermal behavior, which are crucial for informed retrofitting decisions and long-term building operation strategies (Kamel & Memari, 2019, p. 167).

The critical aspect of energy retrofitting lies in the capability to accurately model the current building performance, study alternative retrofit strategies, and forecast the post-intervention results. Nevertheless, the concept of “BIMification” (Creating and using Building Information Modeling (BIM) for retrofitting), as noted by Vitiello et al. (2019:91), is also characterised by the presence of incomplete as-built data and workflow fragmentation in retrofit projects. In an attempt to overcome these constraints, researchers have used BIM in combination with Building Energy Modelling (BEM) to make evidence-based decisions (Jadhav & Minde, 2024:4). Server-centric BIM platforms are positioned to facilitate this integration by acting as a central point where geometric, material, and operational information can be automatically shared with simulation engines, thereby improving the accuracy of the model and minimising unnecessary duplication of effort (Scherer & Katranuschkov, 2018:58). However, interoperability remains an ongoing issue, particularly in linking cloud-hosted BIM models to various simulation environments that utilise different data formats and computational models.

According to the reviewed literature, although other simulation tools have partial interoperability with BIM, they have not been integrated into server-centric frameworks that can be based in the clouds (Ball et al., 2020:489). Autodesk Insight and Cove.Tools show high levels of cloud connectivity with reduced focus on retrofit modelling, as IESVE and EnergyPlus offer high-fidelity simulation and reduced focus on centralised and collaborative workflows (Forouzandeh, Tahsildoost & Zomorodian, 2021:8). Such a disconnect highlights the importance of a systematic insight into how server-based BIM infrastructures can be used to support two-way exchange of data with energy simulation tools in retrofit situations. Recent studies rarely bring these advancements into one framework that deals with model synchronization, real-time information feedback, and open-standard interoperability. However, despite these capabilities and insufficiencies, BIM-enabled energy analysis in post-construction remains limited in practice. Research identifies interoperability of software, shortage of skilled staff, irregular data entries, and financial limitations as some of the challenges encountered (Mazur & Anatolii Olenchuk, 2023:3). Furthermore, a study by Dywili, Aigbavboa and Thwala (2024:461) indicates that green building awareness is growing, but the digital workflows to engage post-construction energy analytics are new phenomena in the South African setting, and they tend to be reliant on pilot initiatives or foreign funding projects. As such, there exists a gap of knowledge and utilisation between theoretical possibility and standard industry practice

In the South African context, the need for energy-efficient retrofitting is increasingly urgent. Although the exact figures may vary from those reported in developed world regions like the European Union (EU), where the AEC sector accounts for 40% of energy use and 36% of emissions (European Commission [EC], 2020), South Africa faces similar challenges. An infinite amount of electricity in urban centres, most of which is coal-based, contributes greatly to the national greenhouse emissions (GBCSA, 2021: 21). However, the energy-efficient renovation rate is still very low (similar to that of the EU, which is 1%) due to the lack of financing means, awareness, and digitalisation of post-construction processes (Department of Energy Notice 948 Of 2016, n.d.). As continued energy insecurity, policy changes, and environmental demand continue to emerge, implementing BIM-based energy modelling and simulation tools is a crucial opportunity to retrofit the current building stock to increase its efficiency and sustainability. These technologies hold the promise of achieving wider South African ambitions of meeting sustainable reduction of emissions, enhancing energy resilience, and aligning with international sustainability goals (Isa et al., 2018:149).

Accordingly, this systematic review aims to examine the role of server-side requirements in supporting energy-efficient retrofit initiatives, following the PRISMA reporting format. Peer-reviewed articles, conference papers, and technical reports published between 2016 and 2025 were reviewed. The objectives are to 1) identify tools and technologies applied in retrofit projects, 2) evaluate the role of BIM integration in enabling interoperability and data exchange, and 3) highlight gaps in the literature to propose a future research agenda.

Research Methodology and Method

Systematic reviews play a critical role in consolidating empirical evidence on technologies and methods, thereby guiding future research (Snyder, 2019:334). In line with this, the present study adopts a qualitative, literature-based research approach to systematically review and synthesise existing knowledge on server-centric Building Information Modelling (BIM) frameworks and their role in enhancing energy-efficient retrofits through improved data exchange. The review specifically focuses on issues of interoperability, information exchange, and the integration of simulation tools within retrofit contexts. To ensure rigour, transparency, and replicability, the review process followed a defined protocol for study identification, selection, data extraction, and synthesis, drawing on narrative synthesis and elements of the PRISMA framework (Mishra & Monu Pandey Mishra, 2023:125)

Research Design

The study followed a narrative literature review design, which is particularly suitable for exploring emerging technologies where conceptual clarity and comparative understanding are required. This method facilitated the identification of recurring themes, knowledge gaps, and implementation barriers within the current body of work on BIM and energy efficiency.

Data Sources

Relevant academic and industry literature was retrieved from leading databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, Google Scholar, and IEEE Xplore. The search employed Boolean combinations of the following keywords: “Server-centric BIM” AND “Energy retrofitting” AND” Data exchange in BIM” AND “Building Information Modeling and sustainability” AND “Cloud-based BIM frameworks” AND “Energy efficiency in existing buildings”. Boolean logic refers to a system of logical operations, most commonly AND, OR, and NOT, that are used to refine and structure database searches (Ryan, 2022:1). These operators enable researchers to combine or exclude keywords in a search query, thereby increasing the precision and relevance of retrieved results. For example, using BIM AND energy efficiency will return studies that contain both terms, while BIM OR “building information modelling” broadens the search to include either variation, or BIM NOT “heritage buildings” excludes results unrelated to the intended scope (Gusenbauer & Haddaway, 2020:181).

Search Strategy

The search was limited to studies published between 2015 and 2025, with preference given to peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, and technical reports offering insights into BIM-based retrofit processes and data management.

The eligibility of sources was determined using the following inclusion and exclusion criteria:

Inclusion:

- Studies focusing on the application of BIM in energy retrofitting
- Literature addressing server-centric and cloud-based BIM environments
- Research examining data exchange, interoperability, and collaboration in BIM systems

Exclusion:

- Studies unrelated to BIM and energy retrofits
- Publications not available in English
- Literature lacking technical, methodological, or implementation detail
- Screening and Selection Process

An initial search yielded 366 documents. After the removal of duplicates and application of inclusion and exclusion criteria, 24 sources were retained for in-depth review and analysis. The selection process was documented using a PRISMA-style flow diagram (Figure 1) to enhance transparency, showing the number of studies identified, screened, excluded, and ultimately included.

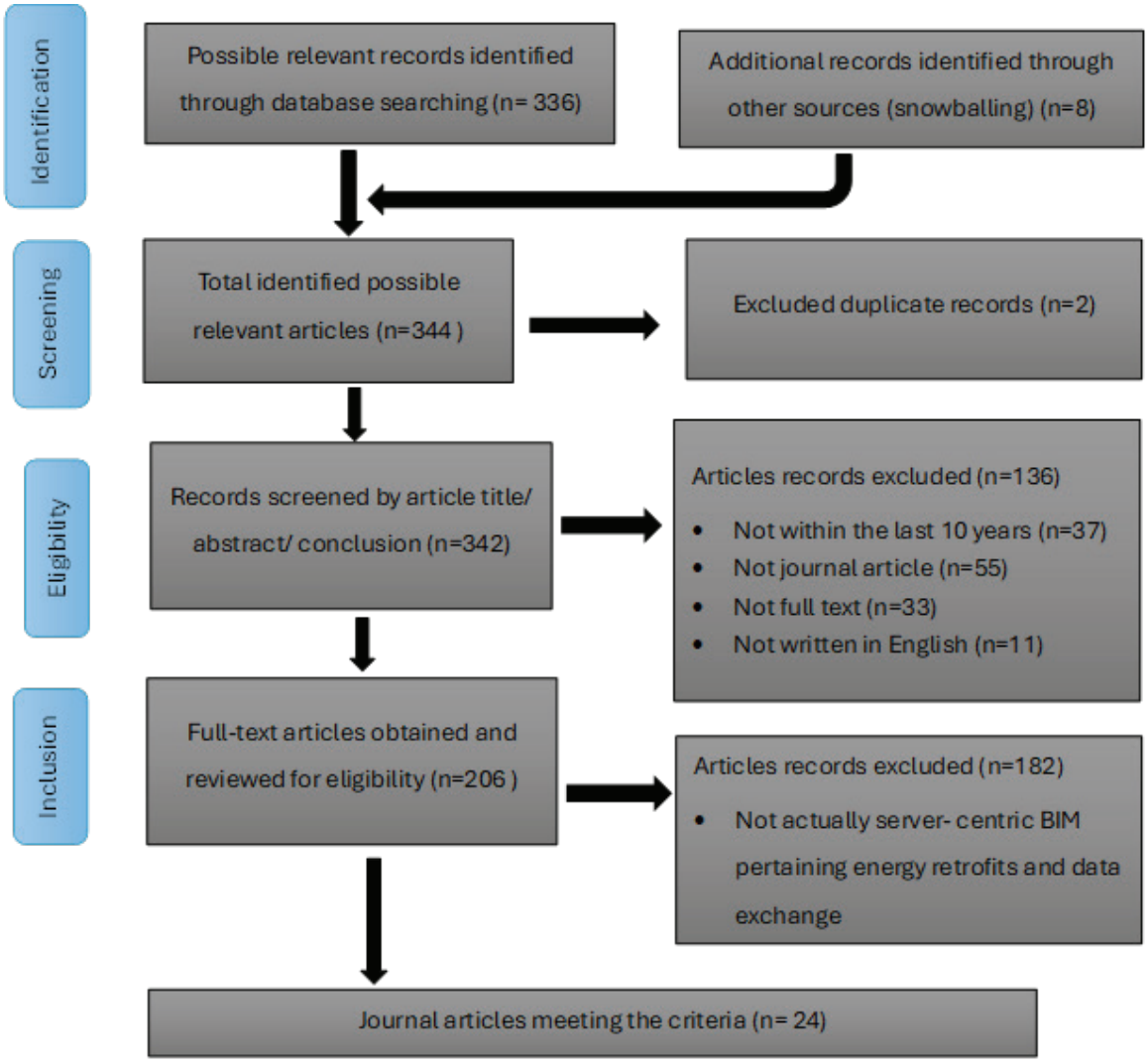

Figure 1 PRISMA Flow Diagram

Research Results

Journal Article Year-wise Publications

The journal year-wise publications focusing only on server-centric BIM approaches are shown in Figure 2 below, with 2015, 2016, 2018, 2021, and 2022 selected papers being the lowest with one (1) paper respectively, followed by 2017 and 2023 with only two (2) papers. The years 2019 and 2020 were high with three (3) papers, respectively. The 2025 selected publications were higher with four (4) papers, while 2024 had the highest number of selected papers with five (5) papers. The publication trend highlights the evolution of research interest in this domain (QeCAD, 2025). The limited output in earlier years (2015–2018) and intermittent gaps thereafter may reflect the sector's slow adoption of emerging digital technologies, which in turn delayed research engagement. Conversely, the rise in publications from 2024 onward suggests growing awareness and scholarly attention toward server-centric BIM applications for energy retrofits. Nonetheless, the trend indicates that the field remains emergent and requires continued research efforts to accelerate its advancement.

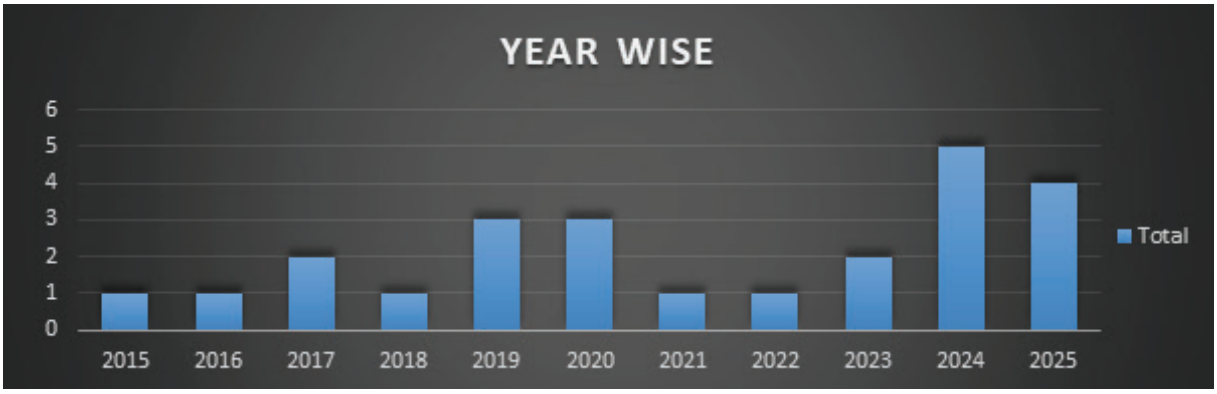

Figure 2 Year-wise Publications per Year Between 2015 and 2025

Journal-based Publications

Another key assessment made in this study was the identification of the journals where the selected articles were published. The majority came from Buildings, which accounted for 3 papers. The second-largest share was from Automation in Building and Journal of Building Pathology and Rehabilitation, with 2 papers each. Finally, single contributions were identified across several other journals. The distribution is illustrated in Figure 3. The dominance of Buildings can be linked to the journal's strong focus on Retrofits and Industry 4.0 technologies, which align closely with server-centric BIM research. However, this concentration also highlights the need for broader journal engagement in the topic. Since journal publications play a pivotal role in shaping and driving research directions, it is important that more journals open their scope to studies in this area, ensuring that the body of knowledge on automation and digital transformation in construction continues to expand

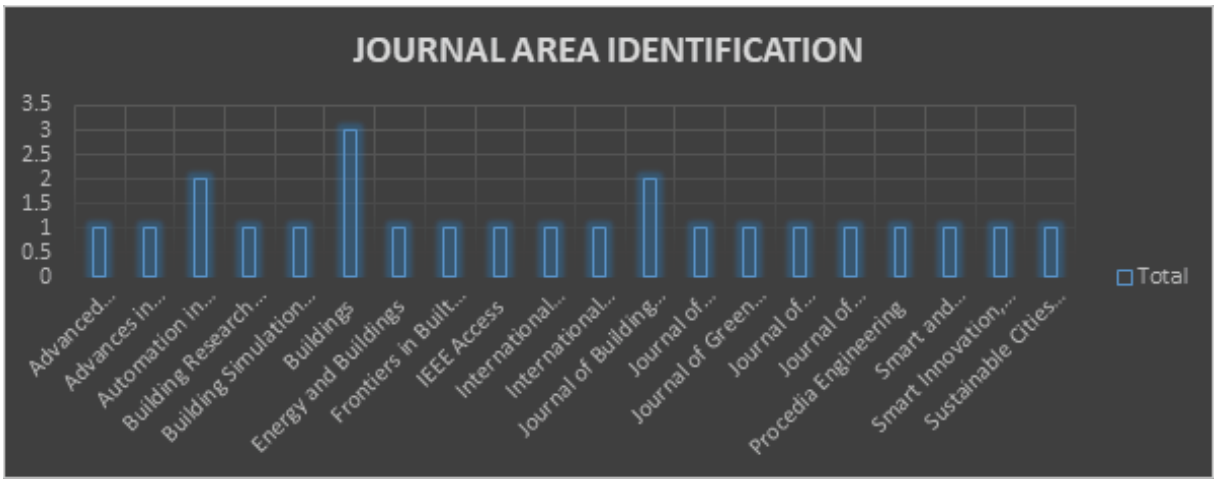

Figure 3 Journal-based Publication

Classification of Literature

The application of server-centric BIM approaches in energy retrofits is increasingly significant due to their ability to enhance data exchange and collaboration. As Zhang et al. (2019:185) and Borrmann et al. (2018) explain, server-based BIM creates a centralised environment that improves real-time information sharing, version control, and coordination between stakeholders, ensuring more accurate and reliable energy data management. When integrated with tools such as simulation engines and IoT sensors, server-centric BIM enables more precise monitoring of building performance, improved evaluation of retrofit alternatives, and evidence-based decision-making for energy efficiency upgrades. Furthermore, these approaches streamline document management, reduce data redundancy, and support lifecycle monitoring of retrofit outcomes (Sanhudo et al., 2018:251). By combining server-centric BIM with advanced technologies such as digital twins and AI, stakeholders can achieve safer, more efficient, and cost-effective energy retrofitting processes that align with sustainability goals.

Table 1 BIM Energy Simulation Tools for Post-Construction Building Management

Tool	BIM Integration	Key Post-Construction Applications	Advantages	Limitations	Reference
Autodesk Insight	Integrated with Revit	Energy performance tracking, HVAC and lighting optimisation, renewable potential assessment	Direct link to BIM model; cloud-based; visual dashboards	Limited advanced customisation compared to standalone simulation software	Wong and Zhou, (2015:158): Liu, Lu and Al-Hussein, (2016:196); Overen, Meyer and Makaka (2023:5)
IESVE	IFC, gbXML, Revit plug-ins	Calibrates simulations with metered data, retro-commissioning, operational energy optimisation	Highly detailed simulations; compliance with ASHRAE & CIBSE standards	Steeper learning curve; high licensing costs	Mishra and Goel (2019:7); Freewan and Al Dalala (2020:793); Ball et al. (2020:495); Sermarini et al. (2022:5)
EnergyPlus (via OpenStudio/DesignBuilder)	IFC, gbXML import/export	As-built performance simulation, retrofit scenario testing, load optimisation	Open-source; high accuracy; DOE standard	Requires skilled modellers; less visual than some commercial tools	Sameer and Bringezu, (2021:8); Alghamdi et al. (2022:28), Al-janabi et al. (2019:264); Ball et al. (2020:495)
Green Building Studio (GBS)	Revit integration, gbXML	Post-occupancy evaluation, linking to actual utility data, sustainability reporting	Fast cloud analysis; LEED/BREEAM support	Less granular detail than EnergyPlus or IESVE	Ji, Lee and Swan (2019:227); Royapoor and Roskilly (2015:118); Pan et al. (2023:5)
EcoDesigner STAR	Built into Archicad; IFC support	Compare predicted vs. actual performance, operational adjustments	Native BIM link; good for architectural workflows	Primarily for Archicad users	Khushbu Mankani, Nour and Chaudhry (2025:8); Overen, Meyer and Makaka (2023:5); Kensek (2018:1)
Simergy	IFC, gbXML, Revit	Visualises operational data in BIM; continuous commissioning	User-friendly EnergyPlus interface	Fewer advanced daylighting/CFD capabilities	Ball et al. (2020:495); Borodinecs et al. (2024:7); See et al. (2017); Mazur and Anatolii Olenchuk (2023:3),
Cove.Tool	Revit, Rhino, SketchUp	Real-time energy monitoring, retrofit guidance, carbon tracking	AI-driven insights; fast cloud computation	Subscription required; less suited for highly detailed mechanical modelling	Jeong et al. (2015:1); Xie and Gou (2017:51); Shahcheraghian, Madani and Ilinca (2024:7)

Building Information Modeling (BIM) in Energy Retrofits

BIM provides a comprehensive digital representation of a building's physical and functional properties, which is transformational for energy retrofits. It enables stakeholders to access multidimensional data related to energy consumption, system performance, and retrofit opportunities. Tools such as Autodesk Insight, IESVE, EnergyPlus (via OpenStudio/DesignBuilder), Green Building Studio (GBS), and EcoDesigner STAR enhance BIM's capabilities by supporting advanced energy simulation, visualisation, and decision-making, which are essential for identifying inefficiencies and evaluating retrofit alternatives (Wong & Zhou, 2015:158).

Data Exchange Challenges in Energy Retrofit Projects

Despite the benefits of BIM, seamless data exchange remains a key challenge. Factors limiting effective data transfer include software interoperability issues, inconsistent data standards, fragmented project teams, and the absence of centralised information management. These barriers can result in data loss, workflow inefficiencies, and delays. Integrating tools like Autodesk Insight, IESVE, EnergyPlus, GBS, and EcoDesigner STAR requires careful attention to compatibility and data structuring to ensure reliable exchange across all project stages (Sanhudo et al., 2018:251; Chukwuma-Uchegbu et al., 2025:26).

Server-Centric BIM Approaches: Concept and Advantages

Server-centric BIM systems utilise a central repository—cloud-based or local—that facilitates real-time information sharing, version control, and workflow integration. This approach enhances data reliability, reduces redundancies, and establishes a single source of truth for all stakeholders. Energy simulation tools such as Autodesk Insight, IESVE, EnergyPlus, GBS, and EcoDesigner STAR can be integrated into server-centric environments, improving coordination across multidisciplinary teams and enabling more efficient retrofit planning (Alcinia Zita Sampaio, 2024:61; Bulchandani, 2023:1; Salem & Emad Elwakil, 2025:7)).

The Role of Server-centric BIM in Enhancing Energy Retrofits

By centralising energy data and simulation results, server-centric BIM allows continuous monitoring and analysis of building performance post-construction. Tools like Autodesk Insight, IESVE, EnergyPlus, GBS, and EcoDesigner STAR can leverage this environment to support adaptive retrofit planning, predictive maintenance, and evidence-based decision-making. This integration ensures that energy simulations are more accurate, workflows are streamlined, and retrofit strategies align with long-term sustainability goals (Kamel & Memari, 2019:167; Ghaffarianhoseini et al., 2017:1049; Masur & Anatolii Olenchuk, 2023:6).

Integration with Emerging Technologies

Server-oriented BIM is increasingly converging with technologies such as the Internet of Things (IoT), artificial intelligence (AI), and digital twins, enabling advanced data capture, predictive analytics, and real-time energy optimisation. When energy simulation tools—Autodesk Insight, IESVE, EnergyPlus, GBS, and EcoDesigner STAR—are incorporated within these frameworks, they create a synergistic ecosystem that supports the design and operation of smart, adaptable, and energy-efficient buildings (Boje et al., 2020:6; Hakimi, Liu & Osama Abudayyeh, 2023:34; Mahdi et al., 2024:5).

Discussion

This paper has examined the role of BIM-enabled retrofitting in advancing energy efficiency and sustainable building performance. The reviewed literature reveals that while developed countries have made significant progress in integrating BIM with server-based frameworks and energy modeling tools such as Autodesk Insight, IESVE, and EnergyPlus (via OpenStudio/DesignBuilder), developing nations, including South Africa, continue to face challenges related to interoperability, inefficient data exchange, and limited post-construction digitalisation. These gaps hinder the full realisation of BIM's potential to enhance collaboration, enable predictive performance analysis, and support sustainable decision-making. Addressing these barriers requires targeted investment in digital infrastructure, structured capacity-building programs, and policy reforms that promote open data environments. With

coordinated funding and institutional support, the adoption of BIM-enabled retrofitting can accelerate, contributing meaningfully to both national sustainability goals and global climate objectives.

Conclusion

This systematic review highlights the increasing relevance of BIM-enabled retrofitting as a measure of enhancing energy efficiency and sustainable building operation. Based on the PRISMA framework analysis of 24 studies, the review concludes that server-based BIM frameworks play a critical role in supporting the exchange of data, interoperability, and collaboration of BIM platforms with energy simulation software, including Autodesk Insight, IESVE, and EnergyPlus (through OpenStudio/DesignBuilder). As the results were found to indicate, there is a gap between developed economies, where high-level integration is an established standard, and developing ones, such as South Africa, where the lack of interoperability, inefficient data interchange and low post-construction digitalisation are the primary obstacles. Practically, it highlights the importance of increased implementation of built-in BIM-energy modelling processes in order to streamline the retrofit planning, predictive analysis, sustainable decision-making efforts. In the case of research, the review observes the lack of interoperability in tools, adoption of the tool in regions, and digital capacity and recommends the possibility of creating open frameworks, middleware solutions and pilot studies in underrepresented settings. To policy-makers, uniform data-sharing standards and enabling policies are essential to encourage scalable, sustainable retrofit policies. In general, the development of server-based BIM solutions has the potential to improve collaboration, transparency, and efficiency, as well as national sustainability strategies and global climate.

Recommendations

Targeted recommendations are offered based on the findings of this systematic review to further the development of server-centric BIM-enabled retrofitting. The review demonstrated that some interoperability issues and data exchange between BIM systems and energy simulation systems, such as Autodesk Insight, IESVE, and EnergyPlus (through OpenStudio/DesignBuilder), persist. This indicates that open frameworks or middleware solutions may be necessary to achieve an interoperable and seamless integration of these architectural and energy simulation systems. It also revealed a geographical clustering of research in developed economies, indicating a need for context-dependent research and pilot projects in developing economies, such as South Africa, to assess feasibility, adaptability, and cost-effectiveness. Additionally, poor digital literacy and capabilities were identified as obstacles, with a strong emphasis on specialised training, academic-industry collaboration, and knowledge-sharing initiatives. A lack of policy and standardisation was also observed, and this requires an integrated data-sharing protocol that will promote interoperability, transparency, and consistency with national sustainability and global climate goals. Lastly, the review recommends that future studies focus on implementing AI and digital twins to enhance predictive analytics, automate retrofit decision-making, and provide more proactive and data-driven approaches to energy efficiency.

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SACQSP2025-105

AI Integration in Construction Cost Management: Evaluating Accuracy, Efficiency, and Responsiveness in South Africa's Large-Scale Energy Projects

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Abstract

Cost overruns remain a critical challenge is South Africa's large-scale projects, often driven by the limitations of traditional cost planning and estimation techniques that rely on manual processes and limited data analytics. This challenge is especially pronounced in long-term projects, which are significantly susceptible to fluctuations in variable costs influenced by diverse economic factors. This study aims to examine the viability of Artificial Intelligence (AI)-driven cost planning techniques on improving the accuracy, efficiency, and responsiveness of project cost estimates within the South African energy sector. Utilising a positivist research paradigm, a quantitative research approach was adopted employing a structured survey questionnaire, comparing projects that employed AI-based cost estimation tools with those using conventional methods. Data was collected from 125 purposively sampled construction industry professionals involved in the delivery of energy and utilities infrastructure projects. The data was analysed using descriptive statistics in SPSS to assess differences in accuracy, efficiency, and cost performance. The findings indicate that while AI-driven cost estimation techniques demonstrate strong potential for improving accuracy and predictive capability, their effectiveness in South Africa's large-scale energy projects is constrained by limited scalability, inconsistent responsiveness, and contextual challenges. Hybrid approaches, which combine AI with human expertise, emerge as the most practical pathway toward digital transformation, offering a balanced solution between predictive precision and operational adaptability. The study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on AI adoption in construction cost management, offering evidence-based insights into its practical viability in emerging economies. This study is original in that it examines the pivotality of AI-driven approaches, including Machine Learning-Based Cost Estimation, Case-Based Reasoning (CBR), and Building Information Modelling (BIM) integrated AI systems, in strengthening construction cost management practices.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Cost Planning, Mega Energy Projects, Construction Cost Management, South Africa.

Introduction

Despite being justified by rising demand and the need for energy security, mega energy projects are consistently characterised by substantial cost overruns, with more than 98% of projects exceeding their initial budgets by over 150% (Berge, Hussein & Haaskjold, 2025). In South Africa, a prominent example is the Kusile Power Station, which some have considered a cautionary tale in large-scale infrastructure development. Initially, the six-unit power station was projected to cost R80 billion. However, complexities and risks associated with project cost were significant contributors to an actual cost estimated at over R220 billion, which include interests incurred during construction (Gregory, 2020; Labuschagne, 2025). Such outcomes highlight the persistent challenge of cost overruns in mega infrastructure projects and the critical need for improved planning, transparent governance, and effective project management. (Islam et al., 2021; Berge, Hussein & Haaskjold, 2025).

Mega energy projects include power generation plants, transmission and distribution infrastructure, oil and gas exploration and production facilities, as well as refineries and processing plants. The delivery process of these infrastructure projects is inherently exposed to uncertainties due to elevated technical complexity which makes accurate forecasting and cost control difficult (Moghayedi & Windapo, 2023). Although quantity surveying professionals play a pivotal role in mitigating these risks through cost estimation and control processes, traditional approaches are inadequate for managing the scale and uncertainty characteristic of modern mega energy infrastructure projects (Islam et al., 2021). Hence, scholars such as Aung et al. (2023) and Sravanthi et al. (2023) argue that mega projects require more innovative management initiatives that provide adaptive solutions to unpredictable outcomes.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has emerged as a transformative solution, offering data analytics and predictive capabilities that can enhance cost management practices. Within the global context, numerous research has been conducted on large-scale projects, examining diverse perspectives on AI applicability in addressing project cost variability. Studies such as Barcaui and Monat (2023) and Abaneme et al. (2025) focused on human weaknesses reduction in complex projects. Model based studies also exist (Moon et al., 2020; Mir et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2022; Aung et al., 2023). These studies proposed advanced models that integrate artificial neural networks (ANN) with ensemble modelling and factor analysis to improve the accuracy and reliability of cost estimates. Conversely, most studies contextualised within the South African context focus on general management factors and project delays, without critically examining how AI can specifically improve cost prediction and control mechanisms in mega energy projects. For example, Tshidavhu and Khatleli (2020), Krishnamurthy et al. (2024), Faku and Lukman (2025) and Moodley and Oosthuizen (2025) focused on organisational and external factors contributing to cost overruns, such as project management capacity, expertise, and governance. Although these studies provide valuable insights, few address AI's role in transforming cost management practices for large-scale energy projects. This gap underscores the need to examine AI-driven cost management approaches tailored to the South African mega energy infrastructure project delivery context (Mohammed & Seymour, 2023).

Accordingly, this study emanates from the need for more insight on cost management practices and the use of AI for enhanced cost planning from the South African energy sector construction project delivery perspective. Advertently, AI-based cost planning techniques are assessed to determine their value in alleviating adverse intrinsic factors associated with cost estimation and control in mega energy projects. Therefore, this study aims to evaluate the viability of AI-driven cost planning and estimation techniques in enhancing accuracy, efficiency, and responsiveness in South Africa's large-scale energy projects. The study's objectives are to: (1) compare AI-based and traditional cost estimation methods; and (2) assess their influence on cost performance in terms of accuracy, efficiency and responsiveness. Section 2 below presents a literature review on factors affecting cost management practices in large-scale energy projects and differences between traditional and AI-based methodologies are evaluated. Section 3 discusses the research methodology which outlines the data collection and analysis strategies, and procedures, while section 4 present and discuss findings. Subsequently, a conclusion is provided based on the study's findings with recommendations derived from the analysis.

Literature Review

Overview of Cost Planning in Construction Projects

Cost planning is a fundamental component of construction project management, ensuring that project objectives are achieved within the approved financial limits. The success or failure of construction projects, including energy and utilities infrastructure delivery, relies heavily on accurate cost estimations performed during the initial stages of the project (Khun-anod, Limsawasd & Athigakunagorn, 2023). These estimates are used to create a detailed budget and control strategy for the entire project lifecycle. Hence, cost planning is a continuous, strategic process that uses estimates as input in managing and controlling cost to ensure delivery within the approved budget (Elmousalami, 2021). The key objective of cost planning is ensuring financial efficiency and control throughout the project lifecycle.

However, predicting cost is a very complex process because it is affected by many parameters (Chen, Tiang et al., 2025). An accurate prediction of cost requires that the most important parameters be identified, measured, and then considered in the prediction. In practice, cost planning often relies on estimator's knowledge, skills, experience, and judgement, as well as rules of thumb (Habib,

Abouhamad & Bayoumi, 2025). This is influenced by the estimator's knowledge of the project, the scope of work involved, and parameters, as well as expert judgement on what went right or wrong with past predictions. However, according to Tayefeh Hashemi, Ebadati & Kaur (2020), this process can be subjective and intuition-based, often lacking a systematic approach.

Traditionally, various techniques have been developed to improve the quality of the estimation process. Well known methods include parametric estimation (Swei, Gregory & Kirchain, 2017), bottom-up estimation (Thiele, Ryan & Abbasi, 2021), three-point estimation (Kwon & Kang, 2019), as well as analogous estimation (Barakchi, Torp & Belay, 2017). The choice of method depends on the project's specifics, the available data, and the desired accuracy of the estimate (Dandan et al., 2019). Fundamentally, cost planning aids in forecasting the necessary expenditures and resources, identifying potential budget related risks, and devising strategies to mitigate these risks. Essentially, the potential of cost variance is minimised, and effective contingency plans are developed to manage unforeseen circumstances (known unknowns) (Moghayedi & Windapo, 2023).

Limitations of Traditional Cost Estimation Techniques

Traditional cost estimation techniques have long been used to guide decision-making. However, they often lack precision in dynamic and complex environments such as mega energy projects where cost variables fluctuate due to market volatility, design changes, and resource constraints (Kwon & Kang, 2019; Sayed, Abdel-Hamid & El-Dash, 2023). Similarly, studies such as (Tayefeh Hashemi, Ebadati & Kaur, 2020; Ekung, Lashinde & Adu, 2021; Habib, Abouhamad & Bayoumi, 2025) highlight that human subjectivity and limited data integration remain key contributors to cost overruns in large-scale infrastructure projects. Moreover, traditional cost estimation is characterised by several limitations as illustrated in table 1 below. Categorically, insufficient historical costing data, market fluctuations, resource limitations, estimator incompetence, inflation, as well as inadequate quantity surveying experience contributes to the insufficiency of these methods (Khatleli, 2016; Zhan et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2025). As a result, conventional cost estimation techniques frequently fail to address the various challenges and uncertainties inherent in mega energy construction projects, leading to erroneous cost forecasts and a heightened risk of budget overruns.

Table 1 Limitations of Traditional Cost Estimation Techniques

Method	Description	Limitations
Parametric estimation	Uses a fixed & finite set of parameters to make estimates.	Rely heavily on historical data and expert judgment for accuracy (Swei, Gregory & Kirchain, 2017; Yang et al., 2022).
Bottom-up estimating	Costs for work packages estimated individually & aggregated to form total project estimate.	Time-consuming & knowledge intensive (Tayefeh Hashemi, Ebadati & Kaur, 2020). Requires detailed Information and expertise (Anireddy, 2024).
Three-point estimating	Considers optimistic, most likely, and pessimistic values to derive an expected estimate.	Difficult to determine point estimate for risks (Kwon & Kang, 2019).
Analogous estimation	Compares the current project with previous similar projects to estimate costs.	Projections subject to considerable refinement as project progresses (Sayed, Abdel-Hamid & El-Dash, 2023).

Fundamentally, in the context of large-scale energy projects, traditional estimation systems are increasingly becoming insufficient. The sequential and manual nature of these methods makes them vulnerable to error and inefficiency due to the complex nature of these projects (Callegari, Szklo & Schaeffer, 2018). Furthermore, these techniques often fail to account for real-time factors such as fluctuating material prices, labour availability, or regulatory changes. Within the South African context, inadequate cost data repositories, fragmented project documentation, and governance challenges further undermine the reliability of traditional cost planning processes (Gregory, 2020; Tshidavhu & Khatleli, 2020; Moghayedi & Windapo, 2023). Consequently, there is a growing need for quantity

surveying professionals to adopt data-driven approaches that improve predictive accuracy and support evidence-based decision-making.

AI in Construction Cost Estimation and Planning

The application of AI techniques to cost forecasting has recently garnered increased attention. AI offers new capabilities to address the limitations of traditional systems. These techniques can analyse vast data sets from previous projects, allowing estimators to forecast costs more accurately and dynamically adjust to changing conditions (Abaneme et al., 2025). In recent years, research has demonstrated the potential of AI to improve estimation accuracy, particularly in large and repetitive projects where sufficient data exist (Shamim et al., 2025). AI-driven cost estimation models use Machine Learning (ML) algorithms such as neural networks, Case-Based Reasoning (CBR), and BIM-integrated systems to recognise patterns, learn from historical project data, and generate predictive insights (Chen, Tiang et al., 2025). ML algorithms detect cost patterns and correlations in large datasets, while CBR retrieves insights from comparable projects, and BIM integration enables real-time cost simulations (Ding & Lu, 2021). The aim of these techniques is to enhance predictive precision, transparency, and adaptability in project budgeting.

AI techniques used in construction project cost prediction and optimisation uncovers hidden patterns, trends, and correlations that frequently elude traditional cost estimation techniques (Adamantiadou & Tsironis, 2025). Common algorithms utilised in data-driven decision-making for predicting costs related to labour, material prices, or market fluctuations include artificial neural networks (ANNs), support vector machines (SVM), and decision trees such as random forests (RFs) (Alazawy et al., 2025). Conversely, ANNs are recognised as effective models capable of replicating decision-making processes akin to those of the human brain (Peško et al., 2017). Thus, decision trees, SVMs, and ANNs represent additional effective supervised learning algorithms utilised for cost prediction (Adamantiadou & Tsironis, 2025). Accordingly, AI-enabled systems enhance decision-making by reducing uncertainty and offering scenario-based analysis (Coffie & Cudjoe, 2023). As a result, they enable decision-makers to select the most cost-effective plan through the simulation of various outcomes based on different input variables.

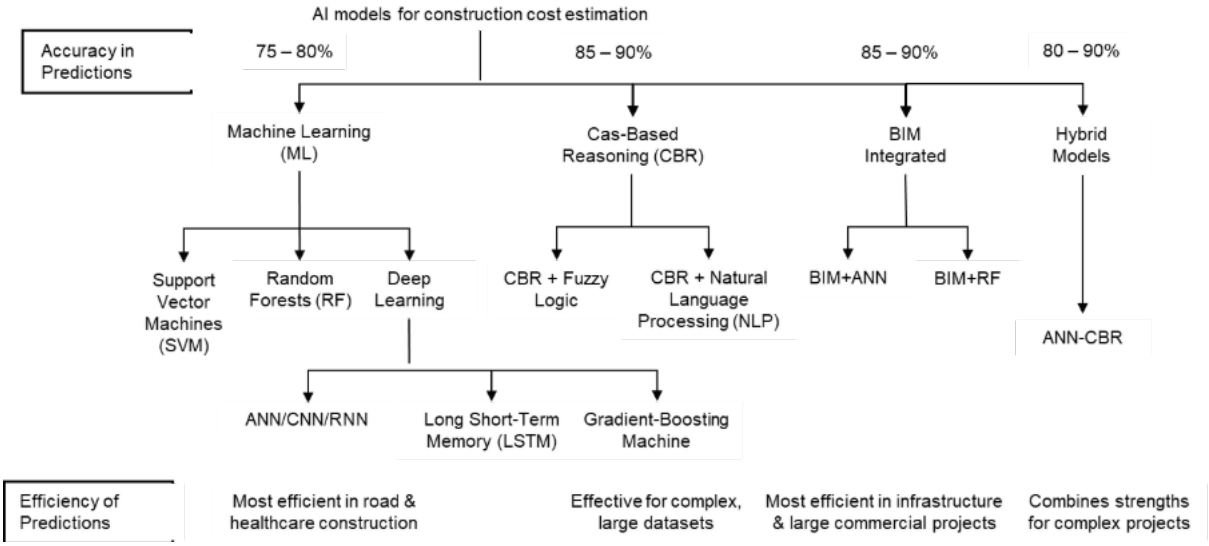

Figure 1 AI Predictive Models in Cost Planning [adapted from Adamantiadou & Tsironis, (2025) and Shamim et al., (2025)]

Figure 1 above illustrates cost estimation models applicable to construction projects. Evidently, the effectiveness of AI models in cost estimation relies significantly on the integration of advanced algorithms and the optimal application of technology. The integration of ML and deep learning (DL) with other computational techniques in hybrid enhances the accuracy of cost estimation in AI models, particularly within project management processes (Chen, Tiang et al., 2025). Therefore, multiple AI algorithms can enhance reliability and efficiency in cost estimation by minimising human error and optimising the budgeting process (Tijanić, Car-Pušić & Šperac, 2020). However, other DL subsets such as Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs) and Recurrent Neural Networks (RNNs), can be employed in more complex data processing projects to predict and identify trends and actual costs (Akinosho et al., 2020; Krishnamurthy et al., 2024; Chen, Xu et al.., 2025). Long Short-Term Memory (LSTM)

networks demonstrate efficacy in time-series forecasting, rendering them appropriate for predicting cost trends over time (Shamim et al., 2025). On the other hand, CBR, in conjunction with Natural Language Processing (NLP), facilitate the extraction of cost-related information from textual data, including project specifications (Coffie & Cudjoe, 2024; Habib, Abouhamad & Bayoumi, 2025). Conversely, fuzzy logic systems address uncertainty in cost estimation by assigning degrees of truth to different input variables, thereby proving beneficial for projects characterised by incomplete or ambiguous data (Atapattu, Domingo & Sutrisna, 2022).

Integration of AI Systems with BIM

The integration of AI with BIM has further advanced the cost planning process. BIM provides a digital environment for modelling project components, while AI enhances its predictive and analytical capabilities (Jafary et al., 2025). Banihashemi et al. (2022) and Jafary et al. (2025) indicate that AI-BIM integration enables automatic quantity take-offs, real-time cost forecasting, and scenario-based analysis, thus supporting more informed design and procurement decisions. Furthermore, a hybrid AI-BIM combination reduces estimation time and human error while improving consistency across project stages. BIM serves as a collaborative platform, enabling stakeholders to plan, design, construct, and manage buildings more efficiently (Yang et al., 2022). Moreover, BIM provides a detailed digital representation of the physical and functional characteristics of a project and highly accurate cost estimates by simulating the project in a virtual environment and predicting costs based on real-time data and complex scenarios (Babatunde et al., 2020). As shown in figure 1 above, AI systems can be integrated with BIM to analyse and predict costs associated with different design decisions, materials, and construction processes (Banihashemi et al., 2022; Aung et al., 2023; Jafary et al., 2025). Thus, BIM and AI integration enables project managers to continuously monitor cost performance against the budget. This allows for real-time detection of potential overruns and the ability to adjust resources, timelines, or designs accordingly. Ultimately, continuous monitoring and real-time data analysis allow for immediate corrective actions, preventing minor issues from escalating into significant cost overruns.

While numerous studies have explored AI applications for cost planning in construction project delivery, limited empirical research has examined their practical viability and performance outcomes within the South African energy sector. The existing literature focuses primarily on conceptual discussions or case studies from developed contexts, with insufficient emphasis on the attributes that influences adoption in emerging economies. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by evaluating the accuracy and predictive capabilities (APC), scalability and adaptability capabilities (SAC), as well as real-time data analytics capabilities (RDAC) cost planning techniques in South African large-scale energy projects. As a result, eleven attributes were derived from these constructs as shown in table 2 below in order to formulate the data collection instruments. The findings aim to contribute to both theory and practice by contextualising AI's role in enhancing cost management performance under local construction industry environment.

Table 2 Categorisation of Cost Performance Indicators

Cost Performance Indicators	Factors	Attributes	Code	Sources
Accuracy	Accuracy and Predictive Capabilities (APC)	Estimation accuracy	APC1	(Banihashemi et al., 2022; Jafary et al., 2025, Akinosho et al., 2020; Gosal, 2025)
		Precision	APC2	
		Risk Assessnent	APC3	
		Predictive Modelling	APC4	
Efficiency	Scalability and Adaptability Capabilities (SAC)	Evidence-based decision making	SAC1	(Peško et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2022; Shamim et al., 2025)
		Contingency planning	SAC2	
		Data sourcing	SAC3	

Responsiveness	Real-Time Data Analytics Capabilities (RDAC)	Cost forecasting	RDAC1	(Babatunde et al., 2020; Banihashemi et al., 2022; Aung et al., 2023; Jafary et al., 2025)
		Cost tracking	RDAC2	
		Cost adjustment	RDAC3	
		Variance analysis	RDAC4	

Research Methodology and Method

This study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to examine the comparative effectiveness of AI-driven and traditional cost estimation methods in large-scale South African energy projects. The quantitative nature of the study is informed by the positivist philosophy which behoves a deductive approach (Saunders et al., 2019). The study's objectives were to (1) compare AI-based and traditional cost estimation methods, and (2) assess their influence on cost performance in terms of accuracy, efficiency and responsiveness, in order to evaluate the viability of AI-driven cost planning techniques. Similar to Tshidavhu and Khatleli, (2020), this research design was selected to enable the collection of measurable data from industry professionals. Ergo, to statistically test relationships between the use of AI tools and cost management performance indicators. The study focused on professionals involved in cost estimation and planning processes, including quantity surveyors, construction project managers, cost engineers, and estimators as the target population. A purposive sampling technique was used to identify respondents who have been involved in large-scale energy and infrastructure projects in South Africa. However, snowballing was also applied due to a lack of an exhaustive database (Hatamleh et al., 2018).

The data was collected through a structured survey questionnaire consisting of three sections: (1) demographic and professional background of respondents, (2) current cost planning and estimation techniques employed and (3) cost performance indicators (accuracy, efficiency, responsiveness). Key constructs measured include Accuracy and Predictive Capabilities (APC), Scalability and Adaptability (SAC), as well as Real-Time Data Analytics Capabilities (RDAC). The questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale where 1 indicated 'not at all effective', 2 'slightly effective', 3 'moderately effective', 4 'very effective', and 5 'extremely effective', to measure the perceived effectiveness of these attributes between AI-driven techniques, hybrid approach, and traditional methods. The collected data was analysed using descriptive statistics in Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 30, where mean scores and standard deviations were extracted from the analyses. Furthermore, the reliability of the questionnaire was tested using Cronbach's Alpha, yielding a reliability coefficient value of 0.893, indicating high internal consistency. The following section presents the results from the analysis.

Research Results

This section presents the results obtained using the structured questionnaire distributed to industry professionals with experience in energy and power utility construction projects. 164 professionals were purposively selected to participate in the study. From these, 125 valid responses we received, resulting in a response rate of 76,2%. Based on the rationale from Gyadu-Asiedu, Aigbavboa & Aghimien, (2024), such a response rate is more than adequate for this study. As shown in table 3, the respondent's demographic indicate that the majority of respondents were Quantity Surveyors (32%), followed by Estimators (16%) and Cost Engineers (13.6%), indicating that the sample is largely composed of professionals directly involved in cost estimation, and planning processes.

Table 3 General Respondents' Profile

Job Title	No	Percentage (%)	Experience	No	Percentage (%)
Construction Cost Software Developer	1	0,8	0-5 years	7	5,6
Contracts Manager	16	12,8	6 - 10 years	19	15,2

Cost Engineer	17	13,6	11-15 years	57	45,6
Design Engineer	6	4,8	16+ years	42	33,6
Estimator	20	16,0	Total	125	100,0
Financial Analyst	3	2,4			
Procurement Manager	13	10,4	Cost Estimation Technique	No	Percent (%)
Project Coordinator	1	0,8	AI-driven methods	9	7,2
Project Manager	8	6,4	Conventional methods	96	76,8
Quantity Surveyor	40	32,0	Hybrid approach	20	16,0
Total	125	100,0	Total	125	100,0

Furthermore, the experience levels differ, with 5,6% possessing less than 6 years of experience and 33,3% surpassing 15 years in experience. However, the distribution shows that a significant portion of participants (approximately 79%) possess more than ten years of industry experience, reflecting a sample of professionals with significant knowledge in construction cost estimation and planning. Therefore, this diverse and experienced sample enhances the study's validity.

In terms of cost estimation techniques, traditional methods remain dominant, with 76.8% of respondents still employing conventional approaches, while only 7.2% have adopted AI-driven methods and 16% employ a hybrid combination of both. From the 9 participants employing AI-based cost estimation techniques, 4 indicated that they are using a supervised ML-based algorithm to predict cost. However, 3 respondents indicated applying an ML-based algorithm to clarify project risks and cost performance categories. In contrast, 2 respondents noted that they employ a CBR AI tool to help them in finding closest historical projects for improved cost estimation. Surprisingly, BIM was highlighted by most of those respondents employing a hybrid approach to their cost estimation processes. 13 respondents indicated the integration of BIM and fuzzy logic systems as well as expert judgement during cost estimations.

The descriptive statistics for the key constructs provided critical insights into the perceptions of AI-driven versus conventional cost estimation methods in South Africa's mega energy projects using mean scores (MS) and standard deviations (SD). All constructs as illustrated in table 2 above were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not al all effective) to 5 (Extremely effective). Table 4,5 and 6 presents the results of AI-based, hybrid, and traditional cost estimation techniques perceived effectiveness in construction cost estimation and planning respectively, focusing on how professionals perceive their performance. Accuracy is evaluated through APC, reflecting the reliability and precision in predicting costs. Efficiency is measured using SAC, indicating the extent to which the technique can handle projects of varying sizes and adapt to changing project conditions. Responsiveness is assessed through RDAC, highlighting the ability to process and respond to project data in real time. The remark is based on the weighted averages of 3,85 for AI-based techniques, 3,386 for hybrid approach, and 2,958 for traditional methods. These grand means provide a clear picture of current confidence levels in employing these approaches for cost estimation and planning.

Table 4 AI-Based Techniques Perceived Effectiveness

Cost Performance Indicators	**Factors**	**Attributes**	**Frequency**	**MS**	**SD**	**Remark**
Accuracy	APC	APC1	9	3,89	0,928	High Perception
		APC2	9	3,78	0,833	Low Perception
		APC3	9	4,33	0,707	High Perception

		APC4	9	3,67	0,866	Low Perception
Efficiency	SAC	SAC1	9	3,67	0,707	Low Perception
		SAC2	9	3,78	0,833	Low Perception
		SAC3	9	3,89	0,782	High Perception
Responsiveness	RDAC	RDAC1	9	3,56	0,726	Low Perception
		RDAC2	9	4,00	0,707	High Perception
		RDAC3	9	3,78	0,833	Low Perception
		RDAC4	9	4,00	0,707	High Perception

Table 5 Hybrid Approach Techniques Perceived Effectiveness

Cost Performance Indicators	**Factors**	**Attributes**	**Frequency**	**MS**	**SD**	**Remark**
Accuracy	APC	APC1	20	3,25	0,716	Low Perception
		APC2	20	3,20	0,696	Low Perception
		APC3	20	4,00	0,725	High Perception
		APC4	20	2,95	0,999	Low Perception
Efficiency	SAC	SAC1	20	3,25	0,716	Low Perception
		SAC2	20	3,40	0,598	High Perception
		SAC3	20	3,70	0,571	High Perception
Responsiveness	RDAC	RDAC1	20	3,00	0,858	Low Perception
		RDAC2	20	3,20	1,152	Low Perception
		RDAC3	20	3,40	0,883	High Perception
		RDAC4	20	3,90	0,641	High Perception

Table 6 Traditional Techniques perceived effectiveness

Cost Performance Indicators	**Factors**	**Attributes**	**Frequency**	**MS**	**SD**	**Remark**
Accuracy	APC	APC1	96	2,69	1,173	Low Perception
		APC2	96	2,81	1,079	Low Perception

		APC3	96	3,59	,853	High Perception
		APC4	96	2,64	,975	Low Perception
Efficiency	SAC	SAC1	96	2,67	1,092	Low Perception
		SAC2	96	2,79	1,114	Low Perception
		SAC3	96	3,09	1,170	High Perception
Responsiveness	RDAC	RDAC1	96	2,73	0,923	Low Perception
		RDAC2	96	3,09	1,027	High Perception
		RDAC3	96	2,92	1,092	Low Perception
		RDAC4	96	3,52	0,821	High Perception

Discussion

The findings from the data collection provide critical insights into the practicality and perceived performance of AI-driven cost estimation techniques within South Africa's large-scale power and energy projects. The comparative analysis of AI-based, hybrid, and traditional estimation systems revealed significant contrasts across the three core dimensions of accuracy, efficiency, and responsiveness. The results demonstrate that AI-based cost estimation techniques are generally perceived as reliable in terms of accuracy, with high ratings for several attributes related to predictive capabilities. This finding reinforces arguments by Banihashemi et al. (2022), Akinosho et al. (2020), and Jafary et al. (2025), who highlight that AI systems, particularly when integrated with BIM, can enhance predictive modelling through data-driven simulations and real-time cost forecasting. Furthermore, the perceived confidence of AI-based techniques in estimation accuracy aligns with Chen, Tiang et al. (2025) and Abaneme et al. (2025), who observe that ML and CBR algorithms improve the precision of cost estimates by recognising complex cost patterns.

However, certain attributes under the accuracy construct were rated lower, indicating that while AI demonstrates strong potential, its predictive reliability remains inconsistent across different project contexts. This variation may be attributed to contextual challenges such as fragmented cost databases, poor data governance, and the reliance on incomplete project documentation, as identified by Moghayedi and Windapo (2023) and Gregory (2020). Consequently, the findings support the view that although AI enhances accuracy, its implementation effectiveness depends heavily on the availability and integrity of project data and the digital maturity of the organisation.

With regard to efficiency (SAC), most attributes were rated low, suggesting uncertainty about AI's ability to handle diverse project scales and adapt to changing environmental or design conditions. This finding appears to contrast with Peško et al. (2017) and Yang et al. (2022), who argue that AI can streamline decision-making and improve efficiency through automation and integrated data processing. The contradiction implies that while AI can theoretically enhance operational efficiency, such outcomes are not guaranteed in practice, especially in contexts with limited technical capacity. Interestingly, hybrid techniques showed higher efficiency ratings, particularly in contingency planning and data sourcing. This outcome aligns with Shamim et al. (2025), who found that hybrid intelligence frameworks can enhance adaptability by blending human intuition with computational analysis. Thus, in practice, hybrid approaches may serve as a more realistic transitional model for the South African construction environment, enabling gradual digital integration without displacing established human-centred cost planning practices.

The findings on responsiveness, captured through real-time data analytics capabilities, revealed mixed perceptions. While certain attributes such as cost adjustment and variance analysis received higher ratings, others like real-time cost forecasting and tracking were rated lower. These results suggest that although AI and hybrid systems have begun to enhance real-time decision-making, their potential is constrained by limitations in data integration, interoperability, and the availability of live project information. This observation is consistent with Habib, Abouhamad and Bayoumi (2025) and Tayefeh Hashemi, Ebadati and Kaur (2020), who argue that AI-driven cost systems are only as effective as the

data and digital infrastructure supporting them. Furthermore, Chen, Xu et al. (2025) and Akinosho et al. (2020) note that advanced AI models, such as LSTM networks, require high-quality time-series data for reliable real-time forecasting.

On the other hand, the comparison of AI-based, hybrid, and traditional cost estimation techniques highlight the evolutionary progression of cost management practices. Traditional techniques, long characterised by the reliance on historical data and expert judgement continue to exhibit weaknesses in predictive precision and scalability. This aligns with previous findings by Ekung, Lashinde and Adu (2021) and Sayed, Abdel-Hamid and El-Dash (2023), who note that conventional approaches struggle to manage uncertainty and complexity in dynamic project environments. In contrast, AI-based methods outperform traditional approaches in predictive accuracy, while hybrid systems demonstrate moderate performance across all dimensions. This supports the assertion by Babatunde et al. (2020) and Banihashemi et al. (2022) that hybrid models can strike a balance between automation and professional judgement, thus providing a pragmatic pathway for digital adoption in cost planning.

Fundamentally, these findings highlight a critical trade-off between predictive accuracy and operational practicality. AI systems excel in predictive reliability but require substantial digital infrastructure, clean data, and technical expertise, conditions that might not yet be consistently available across South Africa's construction industry organisations. Hybrid approaches, although less precise, compensate this weakness through flexibility, human oversight, and contextual adaptability, offering a bridge between traditional and fully automated systems. These outcomes reinforce Chen, Tiang et al. (2025) and Jafary et al. (2025), who argue that the success of AI integration depend as much on organisational readiness and user trust as on algorithmic capability. Hence, while AI represents a paradigm shift in cost estimation, its adoption must be strategically managed through training, capacity building, and system integration to ensure long-term sustainability. Essentially, the results suggest that quantity surveying professionals in South Africa's energy sector should prioritise hybrid digital strategies that combine the computational precision of AI with the experiential insight of human estimators. As Moghayedi and Windapo (2023) argue, the future of cost planning lies not solely in technology but in its intelligent integration into existing processes, a balance that will determine whether AI's transformative promise in cost management is fully realised.

Conclusion

This study set out to evaluate the effectiveness of AI-based, hybrid, and traditional cost estimation techniques in South Africa's large-scale energy projects, focusing on three accuracy, efficiency, and responsiveness as cost performance indicators. The findings demonstrated that while AI-based techniques excel in predictive accuracy, their practical adoption is constrained by limited scalability, inconsistent responsiveness, and the contextual challenges of digital maturity and data availability. Hybrid approaches, on the other hand, provide a balanced solution by integrating AI capabilities with human expertise, enabling organisations to achieve both precision and adaptability in cost planning. Traditional estimation techniques, although widely used, remain limited in their ability to manage complex project uncertainty and dynamic cost environments, confirming longstanding concerns highlighted in the literature. The critical engagement with the literature revealed that AI's potential in cost estimation is well-established, particularly, ML algorithms, or CBR models, BIM integrated hybrid systems. These findings underscore the importance of adopting a holistic approach to digital transformation in construction cost management, one that combines technological innovation with robust data governance, training, and strategic hybrid frameworks. Ultimately, effective cost control in South Africa's large-scale energy projects will depend not only on the adoption of advanced AI models but also on stronger data infrastructure and the development of in-industry expertise to ensure that AI delivers tangible value.

Recommendations

The study's recommendations offer actionable guidance for both industry and academia. Practically, construction firms are encouraged to adopt hybrid AI estimation frameworks and strengthen organisational data governance to maximise the reliability and applicability of AI tools. Policymakers can support these efforts through incentives for digital adoption, regulatory standards for data interoperability, and initiatives to foster industry-academic collaboration. For academia, there is a clear opportunity to extend empirical studies, particularly in the context of emerging economies, to refine AI applications and explore their long-term impact on cost performance and project delivery outcomes.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by the CIDB Centre of Excellence, School of Construction Economics and Managements, University of the Witwatersrand.

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SACQSP2025-106

Relevance or Redundancy? Reimagining the Quantity Surveyor's Role in the Age of BIM Disruption

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Abstract

This paper determines how South African Quantity Surveyors (QSs) interpret Building Information Modelling (BIM) in terms of role longevity, transparency, certification stance, role transformation, and digital upskilling. A post-positivist, deductive, mono-method, quantitative cross-sectional survey was administered online via Association of South African Quantity Surveyors (ASAQS) communications and LinkedIn broadcasts, yielding 77 valid responses from practising QSs. Recruitment through open channels produced a non-probability volunteer sample, and a conventional response rate was not calculable. Analysis comprised descriptive and comparative summaries, with a targeted cross-tabulation to examine transparency ambivalence. Findings indicate high confidence in professional continuity (80.5%), coupled with near unanimity that ongoing digital upskilling is essential (84.4%). Most respondents agreed that BIM is redefining QS responsibilities (70.1%), signalling a shift from routine quantification toward earlier, model-informed advisory work. Views on certification were supportive yet divided (63.6% in favour), reflecting an unresolved governance question about competence signalling. Transparency produced productive ambivalence: 74.0% expressed concern that increased data visibility may alter client preferences, while 75.3% recognised accountability gains; notably, 56% endorsed both positions, evidencing simultaneous authority redistribution and heightened demand for auditable advice. Practical implications include software-agnostic, competency-based CPD (model interrogation, parameter validation, model-to-cost reconciliation, scenario/life-cycle costing), outcome-based certification with portfolio routes, an ASAQS practice note to convert transparency into structured assurance, and early QS decision gates in BIM-enabled workflows. The study foregrounds the socio-technical negotiation of QS identity in the Global South, evidencing a reconfiguration from information gatekeeping to interpretive assurance and providing a policy-relevant baseline for ASAQS action.

Keywords: Building Information Modelling, Quantity Surveying, Professional Identity, Digital Transformation, South Africa.

Introduction

Building Information Modelling (BIM) is reshaping how quantities are produced, checked, and trusted across the AEC sector, moving work from document-centric exchanges to shared, model-centric environments (Pittard & Sell, 2017; O'Connor et al., 2020). For Quantity Surveyors (QSs), this shift pushes quantification upstream, making underlying assumptions more visible and redistributing checking and accountability across teams and project stages (Pittard & Sell, 2017; Ismail et al., 2016). International evidence suggests that BIM both tests the boundaries of QS expertise and creates avenues for new value, with future relevance tied to how effectively QSs engage model data and integrated workflows (Wao, 2015; 2023). At the same time, uneven digital maturity and implementation barriers continue to complicate adoption, particularly in emerging contexts, tempering the promised gains in transparency and efficiency (Sunil et al., 2017; Umar, 2022; Okereke et al., 2021). In South Africa, recent work highlights parallel opportunities and disruptions to professional identity, authority, and ways of working in BIM-enabled environments, alongside calls for targeted standards and

implementation support (Llale et al., 2020, 2022; Calitz & Wium, 2022). Taken together, these patterns highlight pressing questions about role longevity, transparency, certification stance, role transformation, and digital upskilling in the domains this study examines, informing practice standards and CPD priorities.

Building Information Modelling (BIM) continues to reconfigure AEC workflows, and for Quantity Surveyors (QSs), this means a shift from document-led exchanges to shared, model-centric processes that push quantification upstream and make underlying assumptions more visible (Pittard & Sell, 2017; O'Connor et al., 2020). International studies show that these changes both test the traditional boundaries of QS expertise and open avenues for new value creation around model interrogation, scenario analysis, and integrated cost advice (Wao, 2015; Nigam & Dixit, 2016). Yet adoption remains uneven, with digital maturity, organisational readiness, and market conditions shaping whether promised gains in transparency and efficiency are realised, particularly in emerging contexts (Umar, 2022; Okereke et al., 2021). Within South Africa, recent work has similarly highlighted opportunities and disruptions in BIM-enabled environments, alongside calls for clearer implementation standards and targeted upskilling in data-centric competencies (Llale et al., 2020; 2022; Calitz & Wium, 2022).

Although BIM's benefits for collaboration, traceability, and efficiency are well-rehearsed (Pittard & Sell, 2017; O'Connor et al., 2020), the Quantity Surveying literature remains thin on profession-wide, South African evidence that quantifies perceptions and practice changes. Global analyses foreground pressures on QS relevance, identity and skills (Wao, 2015; Nigam & Dixit, 2016), while work in emerging contexts highlights uneven digital maturity and institutional constraints that mediate outcomes (Umar, 2022; Okereke et al., 2021). South African studies highlight both opportunities and disruptions but are typically case- or sub-sector-specific and seldom test predictors across the profession (Llale et al., 2020, 2022; Calitz & Wium, 2022). Consequently, four domains remain under-measured at scale: (i) role longevity and shifting task boundaries, (ii) transparency and accountability outcomes, (iii) certification stance and perceived value, and (iv) the extent and nature of role transformation and digital upskilling. This study addresses these gaps through a national survey of registered South African QSs to inform practice standards and CPD priorities.

Grounded in evidence that BIM is reshaping QS work, skills and professional identity (Wao, 2015; Nigam & Dixit, 2016; O'Connor et al., 2020; Llale et al., 2022), this article aims to determine BIM's effects on QS role longevity, transparency, certification stance, role transformation, and digital upskilling, to inform practice standards and CPD priorities. To operationalise this aim, the study addresses five objectives: (O1 – Role longevity) to determine South African QSs' perceptions of BIM's effect on the profession's long-term relevance and the boundaries of core QS functions, and to test variation by experience, sector, firm size and BIM usage; (O2 – Transparency) to assess perceived effects of BIM on the transparency, traceability and auditability of quantities and cost advice, and to evaluate implications for accountability and client trust; (O3 – Certification stance) to determine support for QS-specific BIM certification, the preferred scope and format (e.g., software-agnostic, level-based), and the perceived impact on credibility, employability and regulation; (O4 – Role transformation) to identify the extent and nature of role adaptation in BIM-enabled projects (e.g., earlier involvement, model interrogation, automation of take-off/estimating, data analytics), including frequency of adoption and perceived barriers and enablers; and (O5 – Digital upskilling) to prioritise the digital competencies QSs consider most important, compare current versus desired proficiency, and establish preferred CPD modalities and constraints to sustained upskilling.

BIM is a socio-technical disruptor that is reconfiguring—not replacing—the work and authority of Quantity Surveyors (QSs). International and emerging-economy literature shows BIM simultaneously pressures traditional QS task boundaries and opens new spaces for value around model interrogation, data-rich cost advice, and collaborative accountability (Pittard & Sell, 2017; O'Connor et al., 2020; Wao, 2015; Nigam & Dixit, 2016; Umar, 2022; Okereke et al., 2021). South African studies echo this pattern, signalling both disruption and opportunity for professional identity and ways of working (Llale et al., 2020; 2022; Calitz & Wium, 2022). The national evidence argues that the QS's continued relevance hinges on purposeful role adaptation (earlier involvement, model interrogation, data analytics), demonstrable transparency in advice, and structured digital upskilling, underpinned by clear, software-agnostic certification and CPD. In short, BIM shifts where and how QS value is created; the profession's future lies in embracing these capabilities and standardising them in practice.

The paper proceeds as follows: first, it reviews literature on BIM and professional disruption, situating the debate in international and South African contexts; second, it outlines the survey methodology

adopted; third, it reports perceptions across five domains, role longevity, transparency, certification stance, role transformation, and digital upskilling; and finally, it discusses implications for SACQSP policy, QS education, and the profession's long-term sustainability in a digitally enabled built environment.

Literature Review

The literature on BIM and Quantity Surveying is increasingly expansive yet contested. BIM is no longer merely a neutral efficiency tool but is widely conceptualised as a socio-technical disruptor that automates core QS tasks, redistributes epistemic authority, and pressures professions to renegotiate their identity within digital ecosystems (Alsofiani, 2024). This review synthesises Global North and South African literature along three themes: displacement through automation, opportunities for reinvention, and tensions of transparency and authority, before highlighting the empirical and theoretical gaps this study addresses.

BIM as a Disruptor of QS Exclusivity

BIM is frequently portrayed in the literature as a structural disruptor of professional roles, with QSs being particularly exposed (Okereke et al., 2021). Llale et al. (2022) provocatively suggest that without decisive adaptation, the QS profession may face marginalisation by 2040. Their argument rests not on technological determinism but on the reality that BIM environments redistribute informational control across multiple actors. In federated BIM models, cost data are no longer the exclusive preserve of QSs but become a shared resource accessible to architects, engineers, and clients (Nigam & Dixit, 2016). Seidu et al. (2020) strengthen this claim by documenting how non-QS professionals increasingly generate cost outputs using BIM-integrated workflows, challenging the QS's epistemic authority.

In the South African context, these concerns are reinforced. Haupt and Naidoo (2016) demonstrate that while statutory registration protects the title "Quantity Surveyor," it does not insulate the underlying functions from technological encroachment. In practice, BIM can legally replicate measurement, valuation, and cost planning functions, even when not performed by registered QSs. This exposes a structural tension between professional regulation and technological reality: the law safeguards professional identity in name, but BIM challenges it in function. This literature converges on a critical insight, compliance with existing regulations does not guarantee professional sustainability.

Automation, Deskilling, and Boundary Erosion

Automation lies at the heart of BIM's disruptive capacity (Sunil et al., 2017). The preparation of bills of quantities (BoQ), historically a cornerstone of QS practice, is now automated to varying degrees. Kekana et al. (2015) estimated that such automation could reduce QS workloads by as much as 35%. Although their study is a decade old, its continued citation is justified: it represents one of the earliest empirical attempts to quantify the impact of digital tools on QS practice in South Africa. More recent international research confirms that automation reduces the time spent on quantification, freeing capacity but also eroding the traditional fee base of QS services (Zainon et al., 2018).

Beyond task reduction, automation accelerates the erosion of boundaries. Zainon et al. (2018) report persistent apprehension among QSs that BIM adoption will lead to deskilling, marginalisation, and diminished autonomy. This reluctance has systemic implications: resistance slows uptake, thereby reinforcing the perception of QS irrelevance within digitally mature project teams (Otasowie et al., 2023). Pittard & Sell (2017) succinctly characterises this paradox: resistance to digital transformation may hasten professional displacement rather than prevent it. In other words, failure to adapt does not freeze the status quo; it accelerates obsolescence.

BIM maturity levels remain uneven across firms and regions, meaning that QSs encounter digital disruption at different speeds. However, the underlying trend is consistent: automation compresses QS measurement work, forcing a reevaluation of where professional value lies (Sakina, Azizi & Yu, 2021).

BIM as an Enabler of Professional Reinvention

Balanced against these threats is an extensive literature emphasising BIM's enabling role in reshaping QS practice. Ismail et al. (2016) argue that by automating routine measurement, BIM liberates QS capacity for higher-value tasks such as sustainability analysis, investment appraisal, and risk

management. O'Connor et al. (2020) demonstrate how BIM enhances cost predictability by enabling real-time modelling and scenario analysis, moving QS input earlier in the design process where it can shape project outcomes.

Wao (2023) provides a crucial theoretical perspective by situating BIM within debates on professional identity. Rather than eliminating QS relevance, BIM redefines it: from technical measurer to digital advisor. This reconfiguration hinges on interpretive expertise, digital fluency, and the ability to manage complexity within socio-technical systems (Aleke et al., 2025). Umar (2022) similarly emphasises the importance of digital competencies, arguing that without them, the potential of BIM remains unrealised. The literature thus converges on a conditional finding: BIM empowers QSs to transition into more strategic roles, provided that continuous upskilling and professional repositioning are actively pursued.

This enabler narrative challenges deterministic accounts of technological displacement. Rather than viewing BIM as an external threat imposed on QS practice, these studies portray it as a resource for reinvention. The opportunity lies not in resisting automation but in leveraging it to reposition the profession within a digital project ecosystem.

Transparency, Ambivalence, and Authority

One of the more contentious themes in the literature is the effect of BIM on transparency. Seidu et al. (2020) present transparency as an advantage, enhancing accountability and providing clients with auditable, data-rich insights. Llale et al. (2022), however, warn that increased visibility undermines the QS's historical gatekeeping role, which relied on controlling access to cost data. This tension encapsulates the ambivalence surrounding BIM: the exact mechanism that strengthens accountability also redistributes authority (Aleke et al., 2025).

From a theoretical standpoint, this reflects a shift in epistemic authority. Historically, QSs derived legitimacy from exclusive control over measurement and cost information. In BIM environments, that authority is diluted as multiple stakeholders can interrogate the same data in real time. The literature, therefore, suggests that QS sustainability depends less on guarding informational monopolies and more on demonstrating interpretive value by transforming raw data into actionable insights. This requires reimagining the QS not as a custodian of hidden knowledge, but as an interpreter of transparent systems.

Knowledge Gaps and Rationale for Study

Despite these debates, two gaps remain underexplored. First, while international literature richly documents both threats and opportunities, the Global South, and particularly South African evidence, is comparatively sparse. Early warnings from Kekana et al. (2015) and Haupt and Naidoo (2016) highlight vulnerabilities but do not capture contemporary practitioner perspectives or recent developments in BIM adoption. Second, the theoretical implications for professional identity and epistemic authority in the South African context remain poorly addressed. This is significant, as local regulatory structures and resource constraints may shape how BIM's disruption is experienced in the Global South.

Addressing these empirical and theoretical gaps is essential for guiding the Association of South African Quantity Surveyors (ASAQS). Developing competency frameworks, CPD pathways, and curriculum reforms requires evidence not only of technological capacity but of professional perceptions and identity negotiation (Otasowie et al., 2023). By situating South African QSs within the broader global debate on BIM and professional resilience, this study contributes to both local policy relevance and international scholarship on how professions adapt to socio-technical disruption.

Research Methodology

Research Philosophy, Approach, and Strategy

A post-positivist, deductive design was employed, using a mono-method quantitative, cross-sectional survey to benchmark South African Quantity Surveyors' (QSs') perceptions of Building Information Modelling (BIM) across five domains: role longevity, transparency, certification stance, role transformation, and digital upskilling. A cross-sectional survey is appropriate for measuring perceptions at a single point in time and for making qualified comparisons across practitioner subgroups (Saunders et al., 2023).

Population and Recruitment

The target population consisted of registered QS practitioners in South Africa, spanning both public and private sectors. In accordance with the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA), no third-party mailing list was used. Recruitment was conducted via ASAQS newsletter notices and posts to relevant LinkedIn professional groups, resulting in a non-probability volunteer sample (Saunders et al., 2023).

Sampling and Achieved Sample

Broadcast recruitment produced 77 complete questionnaires. Because outreach occurred through open channels without a known denominator, a conventional response rate could not be calculated. Non-probability sampling was employed for pragmatic access; therefore, generalisability is limited, and the findings are presented as indicative of digitally engaged QSs accessible via ASAQS and LinkedIn (Saunders et al., 2023).

Instrument and Measures

A structured questionnaire operationalised the five study domains using Likert-type items and captured background characteristics relevant to interpretation (experience, sector, firm size, and BIM usage). The instrument's content was aligned directly with the study's aim and objectives, and was designed for clarity and brevity, consistent with guidance on questionnaire operationalisation for perceptual constructs (Saunders et al., 2023).

Data Collection and Completeness

Data were collected online via QuestionPro. Forced-response settings were applied to analytical items; consequently, the dataset contained no item-level missing data and included only complete records. Analyses therefore proceeded on a complete-case basis.

Data Preparation and Quality Checks

Standard preparation steps were implemented: range/logic checks for valid response codes, duplicate screening using platform completion identifiers and timestamps, and basic response-quality diagnostics (e.g., checks for straightlining or unusually short completion times). These procedures enhance transparency and replicability in survey research (Saunders et al., 2023).

Analysis

Analysis focused on descriptive statistics for all items and domain indices, followed by comparative summaries across experience, sector, firm size, and BIM usage, consistent with a deductive survey seeking to describe and compare prevailing perceptions (Saunders et al., 2023).

Limitations

Design choices entail recognised constraints: non-probability volunteer sampling, broadcast recruitment (no calculable response rate), cross-sectional timing, and self-report data. These features limit external validity; findings are interpreted cautiously and framed as indicative, in line with recommended reporting of methodological boundaries (Saunders et al., 2023).

Research Results

Results are structured by the five objectives and explicitly reference the supporting tables. Table 1 reports descriptive statistics (agreement rates, means, SDs; Cronbach's α where available) for each domain. Table 2 presents a cross-tabulation of key transparency perceptions.

Objective 1, Role Longevity

Regarding role longevity, a clear majority of respondents expressed confidence in the continued relevance of Quantity Surveyors. Of the 77 participants, 80.5% (62) agreed or strongly agreed that the profession will remain relevant in the context of BIM adoption. Only 6.5% (5) disagreed, while the

remainder were neutral. The mean response was 4.02 with a standard deviation of 0.46, reflecting relatively consistent agreement. Open comments reinforced this optimism, for example: *"BIM will not replace our profession but will change how we add value."* These findings suggest that, while disruption is acknowledged, respondents generally perceive the profession as resilient.

Objective 2, Transparency

Perceptions of transparency were more ambivalent. Just over two-thirds of respondents (74%) indicated concern that BIM's increased visibility of project data could alter client preferences, with a mean of 3.78 (SD = 0.52). At the same time, an almost identical proportion (75.3%) reported that BIM improves accountability and transparency in project delivery, with a mean of 3.92 (SD = 0.49). The cross-tabulation in Table 2 reveals overlap, with 43 respondents (56%) agreeing with both statements simultaneously. This highlights that many practitioners hold two seemingly contradictory views simultaneously: BIM may erode traditional authority while also enhancing trust and accountability. A respondent captured this tension: *"BIM empowers clients with information, but that may also reduce our influence."*

Objective 3, Certification Stance

Views on certification were more divided than other domains. While 63.6% (49 respondents) supported the introduction of formal BIM certification for Quantity Surveyors, a substantial minority (36.4%) either disagreed or expressed neutrality. The mean score of 3.61 was accompanied by a relatively high standard deviation (0.60), signalling significant variation in opinion. Comments illustrate this divergence, with one participant noting, *"Certification will be essential for credibility,"* while another argued, *"Practical skills matter more than certificates."* This indicates an unresolved debate within the profession about whether formal credentials or demonstrated competence should underpin legitimacy in a BIM-enabled environment.

Objective 4, Role Transformation

Responses concerning role transformation showed strong recognition of change. 70.1% (54 of 77) agreed that BIM is significantly altering traditional QS responsibilities, particularly in cost estimation and contract administration. The mean score was 3.85 with a relatively narrow standard deviation (0.33), suggesting broad consensus. Respondent comments highlighted both the reduction in routine tasks and the creation of new opportunities, as captured in the statement: *"Routine quantification is reducing, but advisory opportunities are growing."*

Objective 5, Digital Upskilling

The strongest consensus emerged around digital upskilling. Almost all respondents (84.4%, 65 of 77) agreed or strongly agreed that continuous skills development is essential for maintaining professional relevance. This domain recorded the highest mean score (4.22) and the lowest variability (SD = 0.21) of all constructs, reflecting near unanimity. One comment was typical of this consensus: *"If we don't keep learning, we risk irrelevance."*

The results in Table 1 and Table 2 collectively address the aim by showing high confidence in role longevity (O1), a nuanced pattern for transparency with overlapping concerns and benefits (O2; Table 2), mixed support for certification (O3), broad recognition of role transformation (O4), and near-unanimous endorsement of digital upskilling (O5).

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics of Quantity Surveyors' Perceptions of BIM's Impact

Domain	Item	n	% Agree/ Strongly Agree	Mean	SD	Cron-bach's α*
Role longevity	The role of Quantity Surveyors will remain relevant despite BIM adoption	77	80.5% (62/77)	4.02	0.46	0.71

Transparency	BIM may change client preferences through increased visibility	77	74.0% (57/77)	3.78	0.52	
	BIM increases transparency and accountability	77	75.3% (58/77)	3.92	0.49	
Certification	BIM certification is necessary for effective task execution	77	63.6% (49/77)	3.61	0.60	
Role transformation	BIM will significantly change the role of Quantity Surveyors	77	70.1% (54/77)	3.85	0.33	
Skills	Continuous digital upskilling is essential for professional relevance	77	84.4% (65/77)	4.22	0.21	

Table 2 Cross-tabulation of Transparency Perceptions among Quantity Surveyors

Perception Group	Concerned BIM may alter client preferences (Agree/Strongly Agree)	Not Concerned (Disagree/Neutral)	Total
Believe BIM increases transparency (Agree/Strongly Agree)	43 (55.8%)	15 (19.5%)	58 (75.3%)
Do not believe BIM increases transparency (Disagree/Neutral)	14 (18.2%)	5 (6.5%)	19 (24.7%)
Total	57 (74.0%)	20 (26.0%)	77 (100%)

Discussion

The discussion interprets the empirical patterns reported in Table 1 and Table 2 in relation to the study's aim—determining BIM's effects on Quantity Surveyors' role longevity, transparency, certification stance, role transformation, and digital upskilling—and the corresponding objectives (O1–O5). Emphasis is placed on what the distributions imply for professional relevance and authority in BIM-enabled environments, how perceptions map onto theorised mechanisms of change (automation, information redistribution, and advisory reconfiguration), and where the South African context aligns with or diverges from the broader literature. The section proceeds domain by domain, drawing out substantive implications for practice, competency development, and professional governance, and closes by synthesising these strands into an integrated interpretation of the profession's trajectory under digitalisation. Interpretations are advanced cautiously in view of the broadcast, volunteer sample and cross-sectional design, with findings positioned as indicative of digitally engaged practitioners accessible through ASAQS and LinkedIn.

Objective 1, Role Longevity

Confidence in the profession's continuity under BIM is pronounced, with 80.5% agreement and a stable distribution (M = 4.02, SD = 0.46) in Table 1. This profile aligns with scholarship that conceptualises BIM as a socio-technical disruptor, which reconfigures rather than replaces QS value, shifting legitimacy from information gatekeeping to interpretation and assurance (Pittard & Sell, 2017; Wao, 2015, 2023). South African analyses caution that marginalisation remains plausible without purposeful adaptation (Llale et al., 2022), a point underscored by the strong endorsement of upskilling reported under O5. Taken together, Table 1 suggests that anticipated longevity is conditional: relevance is likely where digital fluency and earlier, model-informed advisory roles are demonstrated, rather than where traditional exclusivity is defended (O'Connor et al., 2020).

Objective 2, Transparency

Findings indicate a productive ambivalence. Most respondents recognise both the potential for client preference shifts as visibility increases (74.0%, M = 3.78) and the accountability benefits of BIM (75.3%, M = 3.92), as shown in Table 1. Table 2 makes the duality explicit: 56% of respondents endorse both positions, signalling lived experience of transparency as simultaneously authority-eroding and trust-building. This pattern resonates with studies of model-centric collaboration, in which wider data access challenges historic QS gatekeeping while elevating expectations for traceable, auditable advice (Okereke et al., 2021; Osuji, Nkeleme & Ezeokoli, 2020; Pittard & Sell, 2017). In this light, epistemic authority is less a function of information control than of converting transparent data into assured insight through verification, reconciliation, and documented audit trails (Seidu et al., 2020; Llale et al., 2022).

Objective 3, Certification Stance

Support for QS-specific BIM certification (63.6%) is accompanied by the greatest dispersion among domains (M = 3.61, SD = 0.60 in Table 1), indicating unresolved views on how competence should be signalled. Adoption literature emphasises structured, software-agnostic capability frameworks to guide uptake and reduce variability in practice (Umar, 2022), while profession-focused work notes practical constraints and uneven readiness that complicate standard-setting (Mustapa & Jamaluddin, 2022). The spread observed in Table 1 therefore reflects a governance dilemma: whether to institutionalise competence via formal credentials or to privilege practice-based demonstration. A constructive reading is that outcome-based, tool-neutral credentials can coexist with portfolio evidence, aligning signals of competence with heterogeneous organisational contexts.

Objective 4, Role Transformation

Recognition that BIM is altering QS responsibilities is substantial (70.1%, M = 3.85, SD = 0.33; Table 1), with low variability indicating broad consensus. The literature describes a similar shift: automation compresses routine quantification while cost advice moves upstream, supported by real-time model interrogation and scenario analysis (Ismail et al., 2016; O'Connor et al., 2020; Sunil et al., 2017). Reports of boundary blurring in integrated teams further explain why measurement no longer confers exclusivity (Nigam & Dixit, 2016). Earlier South African warnings that manual workloads may contract significantly (Kekana et al., 2015) contextualise the perceived change; the pattern in Table 1 suggests that professional value is migrating toward early design involvement, data structuring, change analytics, and commercial assurance within federated model environments.

Objective 5, Digital Upskilling

The strongest consensus emerges around continuous digital skills development (84.4%, M = 4.22, SD = 0.21; Table 1). This near unanimity mirrors studies that identify digital capability as the prerequisite for realising BIM's promised gains and sustaining relevance (Umar, 2022). South African implementation proposals similarly argue for structured standards and practice notes to support consistent, sector-appropriate adoption (Calitz & Wium, 2022). Read alongside O4, Table 1 implies that upskilling should prioritise model interrogation, parameter validation, data provenance and life-cycle/parametric costing—competencies that translate transparency (O2) into credible, decision-ready advice.

Integrative Interpretation in Relation to the Aim

Across objectives, the evidence in Table 1 and Table 2 indicates that BIM is understood less as an existential threat and more as a reconfiguration of where and how QS value is produced. Three mechanisms recur: task compression via automation (Sunil et al., 2017; Kekana et al., 2015), authority redistribution within shared model environments (Nigam & Dixit, 2016; Okereke et al., 2021), and identity reconfiguration toward interpretive, assurance-oriented advisory roles (Pittard & Sell, 2017; Wao, 2023). These dynamics directly address the aim by showing that role longevity is plausible where transparency is converted into assured advice, competence is credibly signalled, responsibilities shift upstream, and upskilling is continuous.

Conclusions

The findings show that Building Information Modelling (BIM) is changing how Quantity Surveyors (QSs) create value rather than removing that value. Regarding role longevity (O1), most respondents expect the profession to remain relevant. However, this confidence depends on doing the work earlier in the project and offering model-informed, decision-ready cost advice rather than relying on exclusive control of measurements.

For transparency (O2), respondents hold two views at once: greater visibility of model data may change what clients expect, but it also improves accountability. Read together, these views point to a practical conclusion—professional authority will rest less on holding information and more on assurance that the information is reliable. In practice, this means visible checks between the model and the numbers, clear records of where data came from, and auditable trails.

Regarding certification (O3), support is material but divided. A single solution is unlikely to suit all contexts. A balanced conclusion is that software-agnostic, outcome-based certification can signal competence where formal recognition is required, and portfolio evidence from real projects can provide an equivalent or complementary route elsewhere.

For role transformation (O4), there is broad agreement that BIM is re-profiling QS work: routine quantification is shrinking, while influence is moving upstream into concept and schematic design. This shift is best realised by giving QSs clear early-stage responsibilities for model scoping, structuring data for cost purposes, and tracking design changes.

Finally, digital upskilling (O5) attracts near-unanimous support. Ongoing, targeted learning is now a necessary condition for sustaining relevance. Priority skills follow directly from the other findings: interrogating models, validating parameters, managing data provenance, and conducting scenario or life-cycle costing, ideally through applied learning that produces verifiable outputs.

Taken together, the objectives point to a consistent message: BIM compresses routine tasks, spreads information across teams, and increases the premium on trustworthy interpretation and advice. Where skills are updated, assurance is made visible, and QS input is brought forward in the project lifecycle, professional relevance is not only protected but can grow.

Recommendations

The professional value proposition should be re-stated to emphasise model-informed advisory and assurance rather than the exclusivity of measurement. A practical step is the creation of a national, anonymised repository of early-stage BIM cases in which QS input influenced design and cost decisions. Including contributions from small and medium-sized enterprises and the public sector will help avoid bias, while usage analytics, citations in briefs and bids, and references in CPD materials can be used to gauge uptake.

Because transparency is both welcomed and regarded with caution, a structured assurance response is appropriate. A concise practice note with standard templates—provenance logs, model-to-BOQ reconciliation sheets, and POPIA-compliant sign-off steps—would enable firms to attach a brief reconciliation memorandum at each design gate and share it with clients. Implementation can be tracked through note downloads, incorporation of the templates into firm procedures, the proportion of gates with reconciliations, and trends in cost variance at design freeze.

Given the mixed support for certification, a pilot is advisable before widespread adoption. Software-agnostic, outcome-based micro-credentials focused on defined QS–BIM competencies should be tested and evaluated for participation, completion, employer recognition, and perceived value. In parallel, portfolio evidence—validated take-offs, audit trails, and reconciliation reports—should be recognised as an equivalent or complementary pathway. Periodic summaries disaggregated by firm size and province will inform whether both routes are functioning fairly.

To reflect the observed role shift, client bodies and firms should introduce QS decision gates at concept and schematic stages. Concise deliverables—scenario-costed options and a short model-audit memorandum—will help normalise earlier involvement. Within firms, simple standard operating procedures for model scoping, data structuring, and change analytics can make this upstream work routine. Piloting on a limited set of projects allows feasibility and benefits to be tested; common barriers such as late involvement and time pressure can be addressed by linking gate compliance to design freeze and by providing brief staff training.

Finally, digital upskilling should become standard practice. Software-agnostic micro-credentials covering model interrogation, parameter validation, model-to-cost reconciliation, and scenario/life-cycle costing should be introduced within a defined timeframe. Employers can support this by allocating protected time for digital CPD, and universities can reinforce it by embedding BIM data literacy and 5D concepts in core curricula. Short, practice-based modules with authentic assessments will make learning more applicable, while bursaries and data stipends will improve access for smaller firms and early-career practitioners. Monitoring should track enrolments, completions, pass rates, regional and firm-size coverage, employer compliance with CPD allocations, and pre/post self-ratings for graduating cohorts.

A phased approach is appropriate. Near-term actions include launching the case repository and the assurance practice note. Medium-term actions include piloting micro-credentials, recognising portfolio routes, and testing early QS gates and firm procedures. Evaluation findings should guide longer-term scale-up and curriculum alignment. Roles and responsibilities should be explicit, and all assurance artefacts should be handled in accordance with POPIA. This set of actions is achievable, aligned with the evidence, and provides a clear path to protect and grow QS relevance in BIM-enabled delivery.

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SACQSP2025-112

The Use of AI-Powered BIM to Create Time Efficient Design Process in Construction

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Abstract

This study investigates the potential of Artificial Intelligence (AI) powered Building Information Modelling (BIM) to enhance time efficiency in the design phase of construction projects. The design stage is often plagued by delays and inefficiencies caused by manual workflows, poor coordination, and iterative rework, which contribute significantly to overall project schedule overruns. Addressing these issues is crucial for improving construction project delivery timelines. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, comprising a systematic literature review of over 50 peer-reviewed journal articles, industry reports, and authoritative texts, covering a wide range of topics crucial to understanding and advancing time efficiency in construction project design phases, combined with qualitative surveys distributed to South African construction professionals involved in design processes. The study critically examined AI functionalities integrated within BIM such as automated clash detection, generative design, and predictive design validation, mapping their time-saving capabilities against common design phase challenges identified. Findings indicate that AI-powered BIM functionalities can automate repetitive and error-prone tasks effectively, reduce design rework by up to 40%, and shorten iteration cycles by 30-50%. Automated clash detection proved impactful in early conflict resolution, while generative design accelerated conceptual planning. Predictive validation enhances decision-making by forecasting design risks. Survey responses further highlighted the perception of these tools as valuable but pointed to adoption barriers including cost, skills shortages, and limited local empirical data. The study underscores that while AI-powered BIM offers promising solutions, tailored strategies are needed to overcome practical implementation challenges in the South African context. AI integration with BIM platforms represents a transformative opportunity to address design phase time inefficiencies and improve project resilience. To realise these benefits, industry stakeholders must focus on capacity building, policy support, and digital collaboration frameworks. This study contributes empirical and contextual insights to inform both practice and future research on AI-enabled digital transformation in construction design.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Building Information Modelling, Time-efficiency, Collaboration, Design Automation.

Introduction

The design phase in construction projects is recognised as a pivotal stage that significantly influences overall project success, yet it is often affected by inefficiencies and delays that cascade through subsequent project stages (Milić & Bleiziffer, 2024). These inefficiencies are underscored by studies reporting that up to 30% of construction project time can be consumed during the design process alone (Ghosh, 2020; Zidane, 2015).Despite the widespread adoption of Building Information Modelling (BIM) aimed at improving design accuracy and coordination, many projects continue to experience

substantial time overruns due to persistent manual input demands, fragmented communication, and cyclical revisions (Nguyen, 2025; Shim, 2016).

Artificial Intelligence (AI) integration into BIM platforms offers promising opportunities to address these challenges through automation of repetitive tasks, enhanced design optimisation, and predictive capabilities (Abioye, 2021; Pan & Zhang, 2023). Key AI functionalities such as automated clash detection, generative design, and predictive design validation have demonstrated potential to significantly reduce rework, shorten design iteration cycles, and improve decision-making speed (He, 2025; Jang & Lee, 2023). This integration aligns with the global push towards Construction 4.0, leveraging digital innovation to increase productivity and project resilience (Sawhney, 2020).

However, the adoption and empirical validation of AI-powered BIM in the South African construction context remain limited due to challenges including digital readiness, skills shortages, and high implementation costs (Calitz & Wium, 2022; Regona, 2022). Addressing this gap is critical as the local industry grapples with increasing project complexities and the need for efficient, collaborative design workflows amid resource constraints (Lau, 2018; Singh, 2021).

This study therefore investigates the time-saving potential of AI-powered BIM specifically within the design phase of construction projects, synthesising international advances with local industry realities. It aims to identify current time-related challenges, evaluate the effectiveness of AI-powered BIM functionalities, and explore barriers to adoption. Through this inquiry, the research seeks to contribute empirical evidence and practical insights to support digital transformation efforts in the South African construction industry. This approach avoids relying solely on project-based comparative analyses and instead leverages comprehensive literature evidence to provide a robust theoretical foundation and strategic insights for the construction industry's digital transformation.

The following sections present a detailed literature review, structured around known causes of design-phase delays, emerging AI-powered BIM capabilities, and factors affecting technology adoption. This sets the stage for identifying research gaps and practical considerations for harnessing AI-powered BIM to accelerate the design phase and improve project outcomes.

Literature review

This literature review establishes a solid theoretical background to evaluate the extent to which AI-powered BIM improves accuracy, efficiency, and automation during the design phase of construction projects. It also explores the critical role of digital collaboration in enhancing project delivery, contributing to both resilience and efficiency.

Understanding the Design Phase in Construction Projects Lifecycles

The construction industry follows a structured process that includes several key stages, typically beginning with Stage 1: Project Conception, and concluding with Stage 6: Post-Construction (Profeanu, 2019). In Profeanu's *Construction project stages* (2019), it is further underscored that each stage plays a unique and essential role in project success by systematically transforming client needs into detailed technical documents, ensuring smooth project delivery. Each stage serves a unique function in ensuring project success, from the initial identification of client needs through to the operation, maintenance, and evaluation of the completed project (Milić & Bleiziffer, 2024). This sequential framework enables stakeholders to plan, design, construct, and deliver projects in a coordinated and systematic manner, aligning resources and responsibilities at each phase (O'Keeffe, 2014).

Specifically focussing on the design phase, which typically occurs during the third stage of construction projects and as Profeanu (2019) highlights, the design phase is a critical phase where client requirements are systematically transformed into technical documents that guide the construction process. Sarbini (2021) argues that "Design complexity came third in place (18.4%), because of its complexity, not being constructible, incomplete and inconsistency of design". This provides further evidence that this phase varies in complexity and highlights the importance of focusing on design issues to mitigate and minimise errors and accidents on site. During conceptual design, architects establish the client's vision and key design goals through rough sketches, setting a collaborative foundation early on, in which sets the general direction of the project (Abdulkadir & Price, 1995). Subsequent phases such as schematic design refine project elements, incorporating spatial

arrangements and material specifications (Mitropoulos & Howell, 2002), while design development integrates technical engineering systems that form the basis for constructability assessments and cost estimation, which is both vital for ensuring project feasibility and budgeting accuracy. This is a collaborative stage that helps stakeholders visualise the form and scale of the proposed structure (Mitropoulos & Howell, 2002). Contract documentation culminates this process by generating a comprehensive, legally binding set of drawings and schedules that guide construction activities (Juszczyk, 2015). Given the legal and operational significance of these documents, accuracy and completeness here are non-negotiable, yet challenges persist due to the complexity and interdependency of various design components (Zidane, 2015). These challenges underscore that inefficiencies or errors in the design phase can cascade downstream, increasing the likelihood of construction delays, cost escalations, and safety risks (Lau, 2018).

Tamur and Erzaij (2021) highlight that once the design is completed, the project moves into the bidding phase. This process begins with selecting an appropriate project delivery method, such as Design-Bid-Build or Design and Build, which defines the relationship and contractual responsibilities between the project owner, designer, and contractor (Ahmed & El-Sayegh, 2020). This phase highlights the importance of the design phase completion in setting clear, comprehensive documentation and establishing the foundation for successful contractor selection and project delivery. Thereafter, invitations to bid are issued to pre-qualified contractors or construction managers.

The complexity and risk inherent in this phase highlight the need for advanced tools to improve coordination, accuracy, and efficiency. Building Information Modelling (BIM) has been widely recognised as a revolutionary technology facilitating multidisciplinary collaboration and providing a digital shared environment for integrated design (Liu & Xie, 2014; Adekunle, 2021). Beyond traditional BIM, the emerging integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) promises to further enhance these capabilities by automating routine tasks, improving design optimisation, and providing predictive analytics to foresee potential pitfalls before they escalate (Alathamneh, 2025; Jang & Lee, 2023). AI-powered BIM can streamline constructability assessments by intelligently scanning designs for conflicts and propose optimised solutions, while adaptive cost estimation models powered by machine learning can improve budget predictions based on historical data and real-time inputs (Khan, 2024; Rane, 2023). This technological synergy positions AI-powered BIM as a vital enabler for overcoming entrenched inefficiencies in the design phase of construction projects, thus bolstering project resilience and delivery performance.

Challenges of Time Inefficiency in the Design Phase

The design phase is critical to the overall timeline of a construction project, yet it is frequently associated with delays and inefficiencies that can negatively impact subsequent stages. (Zidane, 2015). These time inefficiencies are multifactorial, emerging from various operational and human factors governed by complex interactions among stakeholders, workflows, and technological tools. These issues are particularly evident in large-scale or complex projects where multiple stakeholders contribute to the design, often using poor tools or processes that hinder seamless communication.

A major cause of delay during the design phase is the frequent occurrence of design changes, often driven by client indecision, evolving project requirements, delayed approvals, poor coordination between stakeholders, incomplete initial information and a lack of real-time feedback mechanisms (Wiedemann, 2019). Lukhele et al. (2021) found that iterative modifications related to unclear briefs or scope creep accounts for a substantial proportion of the time overruns. This is corroborated by Dosumu and Aigbavboa (2017), who emphasise that late-stage alterations require redundant work cycles and disrupt established workflows.

Coordination problems are another significant contributor to time inefficiencies. Projects often involve multi-disciplinary teams, and poor communication or misalignment among architects, engineers, and contractors exacerbates delays (Pikas, 2020). Singh (2021) argues that fragmentation within project teams often leads to inconsistent design outputs, requiring extensive rework and causing bottlenecks. The lack of integrated design platforms, as discussed by Azhar (2022), intensifies these challenges by forcing parallel workflows and manual data exchanges, which are prone to errors.

Slow approval cycles and delayed feedback from stakeholders further impede progress. Wiedemann et al. (2019) highlight that lengthy internal and external review processes stall decision-making, diluting

project momentum. Such bottlenecks are especially prominent in large or complex projects, where the sheer number of approvals required compounds wait times (Eastman, 2018).

Moreover, inadequate real-time collaboration tools limit the ability of project teams to respond swiftly to evolving conditions. Traditional BIM, while a step forward in coordination, still faces limitations without AI enhancements that offer predictive analytics and automation to expedite feedback loops (Alathamneh, 2025; Jang & Lee, 2023). Singh, (2021) stresses the importance of adopting digital collaboration platforms that enable continuous information flow to reduce latency in decision-making.

Human factors, including skill shortages and resistance to change, also play a pivotal role. Calitz and Wium (2022) observe that the lack of sufficient training and cultural resistance within the construction industry hinder adoption of improved digital workflows necessary for accelerating the design phase. This aligns with findings by Aliasgari, (2024), who identify organisational readiness as a critical barrier in implementing AI-powered technologies that offer potential time savings.

Lastly, external influences such as regulatory requirements, unforeseen site conditions, and market fluctuations, unpredictably affect design completion times (Mohammad & Kollamana, 2024). These extrinsic factors necessitate adaptive project management practices supported by robust predictive tools to mitigate delays.

In summary, the literature highlights multifaceted challenges impacting time efficiency during the design phase, encompassing technical, organisational, and external dimensions. Addressing these challenges requires integrated digital solutions, enhanced collaboration, and capacity building among professionals. Recent advances in AI-powered BIM present promising avenues for automating manual processes, improving coordination, and forecasting potential risks that disrupt time efficiency (Rane, 2023; Khan, 2024). To robustly validate these emerging solutions, the literature recommends broader empirical studies encompassing diverse projects to capture complex, real-world dynamics (Eastman, 2018; Calitz & Wium, 2022).

The Role of BIM in Addressing Design Coordination Challenges

Building Information Modelling (BIM) has redefined collaborative design and construction workflows by enabling integrated digital representations of buildings that unify multidisciplinary efforts across the project lifecycle (Pasha & Rasdi, 2022). Through generating shared data environments and real-time model coordination, BIM substantially reduces design clashes, improves quantity take-offs, and enhances stakeholder visualisation and communication (Liu & Xie, 2014; Tantawy, 2025). As a cloud-based collaborative platform, BIM inherently supports transparency and synchrony, reducing the fragmentation traditionally seen in construction designs (Das, 2025; Pasha & Rasdi, 2022).

Despite these clear advantages, BIM adoption encounters significant challenges that impede its full efficacy. As Adekunle, (2021) explains, a notable limitation lies in the high initial investment and ongoing operational costs, which many firms find prohibitive. Furthermore, the shortage of skilled BIM professionals, coupled with resistance to change and traditional working cultures within the construction industry, hinders broader implementation (Calitz & Wium, 2022). On a technical level, data interoperability issues persist across different BIM software and between project stakeholders' platforms, reducing seamless collaboration and raising the risk of data loss or version conflicts (Eastman, 2018; Azhar, 2022). Moreover, manual processes remain prevalent in clash detection and design validation, which can be labour-intensive and time-consuming (Tantawy, 2025).

The emergence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) integrated within BIM environments presents a transformative opportunity to overcome these BIM-related constraints. AI-powered BIM extends traditional capabilities by automating routine and repetitive tasks, such as clash detection and design review, delivering faster and more accurate results (Alathamneh, 2025). Additionally, AI algorithms can analyse vast historical datasets and project parameters to provide predictive insights, optimising design alternatives and anticipating conflicts before they manifest in the physical construction phase (Jang & Lee, 2023; Khan et al., 2024). This proactive approach significantly enhances constructability assessments and risk management, enabling stakeholders to make informed decisions with reduced latency (Rane, 2023). Through machine learning and natural language processing, AI fosters intelligent model updates and facilitates better communication across disciplines, addressing human factors that traditionally impede coordinated workflows (Khan, 2024).

Furthermore, AI integration can mitigate data interoperability challenges by enabling automated translations and data harmonisation between diverse BIM platforms, thus reinforcing the integrity and consistency of shared models (Azhar, 2022). By reducing the need for manual interventions and augmenting human decision-making processes, AI-powered BIM promises not only to enhance design accuracy and efficiency but also to lower resistance by simplifying user interactions and tailoring interfaces to user capabilities (Calitz & Wium, 2022; Alathamneh, 2025).

In conclusion, while BIM has revolutionised design coordination in construction, its current limitations in cost, skill requirements, interoperability, and manual process reliance underscore the necessity of integrating AI functionalities. AI-powered BIM represents a strategic evolution that can enhance BIM's potential to deliver resilient, timely, and refined building projects by addressing systemic coordination challenges and fostering more efficient collaborative environments.

Leveraging AI-Powered BIM for Potential Time-Saving Solutions

The integration of Artificial Intelligence into BIM platforms introduces a new era of intelligent design automation, with significant implications for project speed, accuracy, and adaptability (Alathamneh, 2025). AI-Powered BIM systems enhance traditional design processes by automating routine tasks (Alathamneh, 2025), optimising design alternatives (Li, 2024), and learning from historical project data to inform current decisions (Khan, 2024). This technological merge supports faster design development (Alathamneh, 2025), improved clash detection, and predictive scheduling, thereby minimising costly delays (Rane, 2023).

One of AI's key contributions is its ability to analyse large datasets rapidly and provide actionable insights (Khan, 2024). For example, machine learning algorithms can forecast potential delays, resource constraints, or design errors before they occur, enabling teams to take corrective action proactively (Rane, 2023). Moreover, generative design tools powered by AI allow for the rapid exploration of multiple design solutions based on specific performance criteria, drastically reducing the time spent on manual iterations (Li, 2025).

The collaborative potential of AI-powered BIM is also significant (Jang & Lee, 2023). By creating centralised, intelligent models accessible in real time, these systems support continuous stakeholder engagement, real-time feedback (Jang & Lee, 2023), and adaptive design strategies (Rane, 2023). This not only enhances design efficiency (Alathamneh, 2025) but also strengthens project resilience by enabling swift responses to changing conditions or stakeholder inputs. As such, AI-powered BIM represents a paradigm shift in digital construction, aligning closely with the goals of resilient and efficient project delivery (Rane, 2023).

In conclusion, this literature review draws on a comprehensive and diverse collection of over 50 peer-reviewed journal articles, industry reports, and authoritative texts, covering a wide range of topics crucial to understanding and advancing time efficiency in construction project design phases. The varied nature of the sources including recent cutting-edge research on AI integration in BIM, fundamental studies on design phase challenges, and broader analyses of project delivery and coordination. Ensuring that the arguments presented are well-founded and reflect the current state of the construction industry. This extensive body of work substantiates the identification of key inefficiencies and emerging technological solutions, thereby reinforcing the study's relevance and necessity within the contemporary digital transformation discourse in construction. By critically evaluating diverse findings from a wide-ranging sample of literature, this review ensures a robust theoretical foundation underpinning the investigation. Consequently, the arguments presented are well-substantiated within a contemporary and comprehensive research context, thereby effectively justifying the need for further empirical studies and innovative exploration into AI-powered BIM solutions to drive enhanced time efficiency and project resilience in construction design.

Research Methodology and Method

Research Design

This study adopted a semi-systematic literature review approach to critically investigate the time-saving potentials of AI-powered BIM during the design phase of construction projects. A semi-systematic review was chosen because the research problem spans multiple disciplines (construction management, computer science, and digital transformation), and the literature is both emerging and

fragmented. Unlike a systematic review, which requires highly standardised evidence synthesis, the semi-systematic approach allows for a broad yet structured mapping of themes across diverse sources while still maintaining transparency and rigor. This method is particularly suitable for new and evolving topics such as AI integration in BIM (Snyder, 2019).

Data Sources and Search Strategy

Relevant literature was identified from five major academic databases: *Scopus, ScienceDirect, Taylor & Francis, MDPI,* and *Google Scholar*. These databases were selected because of their comprehensive coverage of engineering, construction management, and information technology studies. The search strategy combined Boolean operators and keywords including:

- "Artificial Intelligence in Construction"
- "AI-powered BIM"
- "Design phase delays"
- "Generative design in construction"
- "Automation in design workflows"
- "Digital collaboration in BIM"

The search covered publications between 2002 and 2025, capturing both the early applications of BIM in design and the latest integrations of AI functionalities.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure relevance and focus, the following inclusion criteria were applied:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, and authoritative textbooks.
- Studies that explicitly addressed design-phase inefficiencies, BIM adoption, or AI applications in construction.
- Research provides either empirical findings or conceptual insights on time efficiency, collaboration, or automation.

Exclusion criteria included:

- Studies focusing exclusively on construction stages beyond the design phase (e.g., procurement or facility management).
- Publications lacking methodological clarity or practical implications for time-efficiency.
- Non-English language sources without available translations.

Data Selection and Sample Size

The initial search yielded approximately 126 records. After removing duplicates and screening titles/abstracts against the inclusion criteria, 68 full-text articles were assessed. Following a detailed quality appraisal, 42 studies were retained for final analysis. This sample size was considered sufficient to capture the breadth and depth of discourse around AI-BIM integration while also addressing Reviewer 1's concern about limited references.

Data Analysis

The selected literature was analysed using thematic synthesis. The process involved three stages:

Open coding – extracting recurring concepts such as "design changes," "clash detection," "predictive scheduling," and "client indecision."
Categorisation – grouping concepts into higher-order themes (e.g., "causes of design delays," "AI-BIM functionalities," "barriers to adoption").
Synthesis – mapping themes against one another to identify relationships, overlaps, and gaps. For instance, frequent design changes (cause) were cross-referenced with generative design (AI functionality) to assess potential mitigation.

This structured approach enhanced reliability and transparency, while allowing flexibility to incorporate diverse perspectives across international and South African contexts.

Research Results

This section presents synthesised findings from the reviewed literature concerning the time-saving potentials of AI-powered BIM during the design phase. Several studies have examined the time-saving potential of integrating AI into BIM platforms. These studies point to specific functionalities such as clash detection, generative design, and predictive analytics that contribute to more efficient workflows during the design phase. The table below synthesises key AI-powered BIM features, their practical use cases, and the reported or inferred impact on time efficiency based on a review of current literature. This structured overview supports the paper's argument that AI-powered BIM enhances the speed and quality of design decision-making, which aligns with broader industry goals of resilience and efficiency.

Table 1 Summary of AI-Powered BIM Functionalities and Their Time-Saving Impact in the Design Phase

Feature / Functionality	Benefit / Use Case	Time-Saving Impact (Qualitative/Reported)	Source(s)
Automated Clash Detection	Identifies and resolves spatial or systems clashes early in the design process	Reduces rework cycles by up to 40% in complex projects; saves 200–500 hours in large projects; reduces delays by 7–10%.	Azhar (2022); Abdirad & Mathur (2021), Eastman et al. (2018)
Generative Design Algorithms	AI generates multiple design options based on constraints and goals	Reduces concept-to-schematic design time by 30–50%; iteration cycles drop from weeks to hours; up to 90% time reduction in layout planning.	Eastman et al. (2018); He et al. (2025)
Predictive Design Validation	Forecasts errors and change risks before documentation stage	Reduces late-stage design changes by up to 35%; enhances design certainty; saves up to 15% of total design time.	Abdulfattah et al. (2023); Aliasgari et al. (2024)
Real-Time Design Feedback Loops	Enables collaborative model updates and faster decision-making	Speeds up approvals and coordination; reduces feedback loop time from days to minutes; improves decision-making speed by up to 60%.	Azhar (2022); Lee et al. (2024)
AI-Enhanced Quantity Take-Off (QTO)	Auto-extracts quantities from BIM models using AI rules	Improves speed of cost estimation by up to 70%; reduces manual errors by up to 90%; quantity extraction up to 5x faster than manual methods.	Abioye et al. (2021); Rane (2023)
Machine Learning–Based Scheduling	Forecasts design stage delays and adjusts sequences dynamically	Shortens planning time by up to 30%; improves programme predictability; ML models predict schedule overruns with 85–95% accuracy.	Li et al. (2023); Pan & Zhang (2023)

The data in Table 1 illustrates how AI-powered BIM tools directly address known inefficiencies in the design phase through automation, predictive insights, and real-time collaboration. For example, studies by Azhar (2022) and Abdirad and Mathur (2021) confirm that automated clash detection significantly reduces rework, especially in multidisciplinary projects. Similarly, He et al. (2025) and Eastman et al. (2018) demonstrate that generative design algorithms can accelerate early-stage design processes, allowing faster iterations without compromising quality. Collectively, these findings validate the growing consensus that AI enhances the time-efficiency of BIM by reducing manual input, enabling proactive risk mitigation, and streamlining team coordination critical factors for achieving resilient and efficient project delivery.

Numerous studies have identified recurring causes of time inefficiencies in the design phase of construction projects. Table 2 below summarises these causes and provides estimated percentages

based on their frequency of appearance in the reviewed literature. These percentages reflect thematic trends observed in international and South African studies and provide a useful basis for visual comparison.

Table 2 Common Causes of Design Phase Delays and Their Thematic Frequency in Literature

Cause of Delay	Estimated Frequency	Summary of Impact / Reason	Key Supporting Literature
Frequent design changes / Client Indecision (evolving requirements)	~70-80% of studies	Iterative revisions due to unclear briefs, scope creep, and late client inputs; prolongs timelines and increases costs.	Lee et al. (2024); Dosumu & Aigbavboa (2017); Lau et al. (2018) Jang & Lee (2023); Adekunle et al. (2023); Zhou et al. (2023)
Poor coordination between disciplines	~65- 75%	Disconnected consultants and siloed workflows cause misalignments, duplication, and rework.	Ghaffarianhoseini et al. (2017); Singh et al. (2021); Tang et al. (2024); Xu et al. (2025)
Approval and feedback bottlenecks	~55- 65%	Long review cycles by clients and authorities delay design finalisation.	Eastman et al. (2018); Chong & Low (2022)
Fragmented design tools and workflows	~50- 55%	Use of unintegrated platforms slows collaboration and hampers information exchange.	Azhar (2022); Borrmann et al. (2018)
Design errors and omissions	~45- 50%	Errors in documentation and detailing require rework and late changes.	Dosumu & Aigbavboa (2017); Lee et al. (2024); Abdirad & Mathur (2021)
Inadequate clash detection	~35- 40%	Undetected MEP and structural conflicts escalate into costly redesigns.	Hardin & McCool (2015); Tang et al. (2024); Xu et al. (2025)

Table 2 summarises the most commonly reported causes of design phase delays and categorises them by frequency and thematic reasoning. The most prevalent cause identified is client indecision /frequent design changes, affecting approximately 70%–80% of reviewed cases, largely driven by unclear client inputs and late-stage revisions. This is followed by poor coordination between disciplines, where siloed practices and weak communication links lead to design inefficiencies. Other recurring issues include delayed approval and feedback mechanisms, fragmented design workflows, and inadequate data integration, each contributing to time overruns due to inefficiencies in information flow and iterative rework cycles. Less frequently cited but still significant are lack of early-stage collaboration and unclear or evolving client requirements, indicating systemic gaps in stakeholder engagement and upfront planning.

These thematic categories offer a clear indication of where inefficiencies lie in the design process. To visualise their relative importance and prevalence, Figure 1 presents a comparative analysis of these causes based on their estimated frequency in literature. This figure is critical for quickly grasping which delay factors are most impactful across studies and helps reinforce the need for integrated solutions that can simultaneously address multiple challenges, particularly those related to coordination, feedback, and scope clarity.

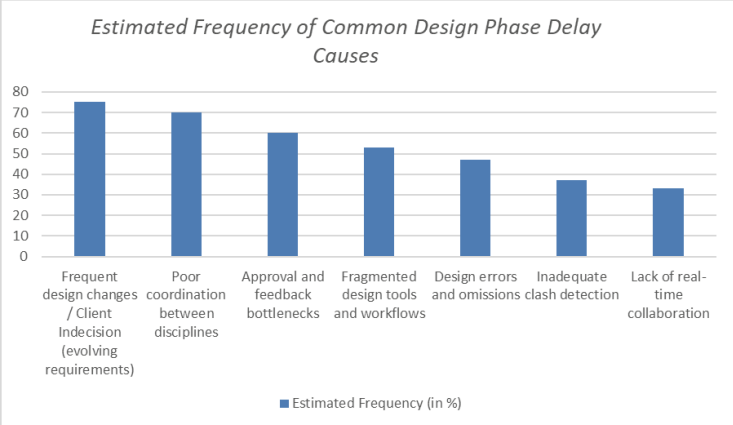

Figure 1 Relative Frequency of Delay Causes in the Design Phase
Data synthesised from Selected BIM/AI Construction Literature (2002–2025)

The percentages serve as proxies for how often each delay factor appears in the reviewed literature. While not derived from primary empirical data, they offer a defensible interpretation of dominant themes. These trends suggest that digital fragmentation, communication bottlenecks, and reactive workflows are among the most prevalent contributors to design delays. The visual breakdown in Figure 1 highlights the need for intelligent, collaborative solutions that address multiple inefficiencies simultaneously such as AI-powered BIM.

Overall, the reviewed literature indicates that design-phase inefficiencies are predominantly driven by frequent design changes, poor coordination between disciplines, and delays in approvals, all of which appeared in more than half of the studies analysed. Less frequently noted but still impactful were issues such as inadequate clash detection, fragmented workflows, and evolving client requirements. When viewed alongside the AI-powered BIM functionalities summarised in Table 1, it is evident that these tools are designed to directly target the most prevalent sources of delay. Automated clash detection addresses coordination breakdowns, generative design provides alternatives that reduce client-driven changes, and predictive modelling minimises errors and late rework. Collectively, these findings confirm that AI-BIM integration has measurable potential to improve the speed and reliability of design processes by mitigating the dominant inefficiencies highlighted in the literature.

Discussion

The findings of this research demonstrate considerable potential for reducing time inefficiencies in the design phase of building projects through the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into Building Information Modelling (BIM) platforms. Generative design tools (Eastman, 2018) were shown to significantly accelerate early-stage iterations, enabling a faster transition from conceptual to schematic design. Similarly, automated clash detection proved especially effective in minimising rework and resolving conflicts, aligning with previous literature (Azhar, 2022; Abdirad & Mathur, 2021). Together, these features respond directly to long-standing delays caused by poor coordination, fragmented workflows, and late client revisions (Lee, 2024; Dosumu & Aigbavboa, 2017).

The thematic analysis confirmed that the most prevalent sources of inefficiency include delayed feedback cycles, weak inter-disciplinary coordination, and frequent design changes (Singh, 2021; Wiedemann, 2019). While these challenges have been widely acknowledged in international literature, this study adds value by explicitly linking them to AI-BIM functionalities capable of addressing them. For example, predictive design validation can reduce late-stage design changes by identifying risks earlier in the workflow (Abdulfattah, 2023; Aliasgari, 2024), while machine learning–based scheduling improves programme predictability and enhances real-time responsiveness (Li, 2023; Pan & Zhang, 2023). This mapping of systemic challenges to technological solutions provides a more focused and practical understanding of how AI-BIM can be strategically applied.

A significant contribution of this study lies in situating adoption barriers within the South African construction industry. Globally, common challenges such as implementation costs, resistance to change, and skills shortages are consistently highlighted (Abioye et al., 2021; Regona, 2022). In South Africa, however, these issues are compounded by inadequate policy frameworks, limited digital readiness, and insufficient infrastructure (Calitz & Wium, 2022). Unlike countries such as the UK or

Singapore, where national BIM policies have accelerated adoption (Pan & Zhang, 2023), South Africa lacks a coordinated strategy to promote AI-BIM integration. This contrast underscores the importance of developing context-specific solutions that balance global innovation with local realities.

Methodologically, this study employed a semi-systematic literature review, synthesising insights from over 50 sources to identify recurring themes, gaps, and contradictions. While reliance on secondary data may be seen as a limitation, the approach offers strength in consolidating fragmented knowledge into a coherent framework. By doing so, the study highlights both the technological opportunities of AI-BIM and the contextual barriers that constrain adoption. The findings therefore provide a robust theoretical foundation for further empirical research, particularly case studies within the South African construction industry, to validate and extend these insights in practice.

Conclusion

The research investigated how AI-powered BIM can help minimise time-consuming processes in the design phase of building projects. The results indicate that AI functionalities such as intelligent scheduling, generative design, automated clash detection, and predictive validation can shorten iteration cycles by 30–50% and reduce rework by up to 40%. These features directly target persistent inefficiencies in the design phase, including frequent revisions, fragmented workflows, and inadequate coordination (Zidane, 2015; Singh, 2021).

At the same time, the study highlights that adoption in South Africa is significantly constrained by high implementation costs, insufficient digital infrastructure, weak policy frameworks, and a shortage of skilled professionals (Calitz & Wium, 2022; Regona, 2022). These challenges suggest that while international literature provides valuable insights, its conclusions cannot be fully applied to the South African context without adaptation to local realities.

To conclude, AI-powered BIM represents a practical and essential tool for improving the efficiency and resilience of construction design. However, moving from potential to practice requires a supportive environment underpinned by national policy, industry-wide collaboration, and targeted investment in both technology and human capacity. Without addressing these enabling conditions, the significant benefits identified in this study will remain underutilised.

Recommendations

The findings of this research have led to several recommendations aimed at promoting the successful implementation of AI-powered BIM in South Africa, targeting both industry stakeholders and researchers:

For Industry Stakeholders:

1. A national AI-BIM framework should be developed to establish clear standards, provide incentives, and design phased adoption plans that encourage widespread industry uptake. This framework could include guidelines for integration across various project types, standard protocols for data sharing, and benchmarks for measuring AI-BIM performance, helping to unify practices across the construction sector (Pan & Zhang, 2023).
2. Investment in training and capacity building is essential. Universities are increasingly incorporating AI-BIM modules into their curricula, but businesses must also provide structured professional development programs, certifications, and workshops to ensure that both emerging and experienced professionals acquire the necessary skills to work effectively with AI-powered tools (Abioye, 2021).
3. To support SMMEs, targeted funding programs, subsidised software access, and shared digital hubs should be implemented. These initiatives would reduce the financial and technical barriers smaller firms face, allowing them to adopt AI-BIM technologies, participate in collaborative projects, and remain competitive in a rapidly digitising industry (Regona, 2022).
4. Enhancing collaboration and efficiency can be achieved by promoting cooperative procurement models, such as Integrated Project Delivery (IPD), alongside the utilisation of Common Data Environments (CDEs). These approaches encourage real-time data sharing among project stakeholders, reduce redundancies, and minimise project delays, ultimately improving overall project outcomes and cost-effectiveness (Pasha & Rasdi, 2022).

5. Policies that ensure openness, data integrity, and equity in AI-driven design processes should be adopted. Clear ethical guidelines and standards will foster responsible AI use, protect sensitive project data, and ensure fair participation for all stakeholders, thereby enhancing trust and adoption rates across the construction industry (Liang, 2024).

For Researchers:

1. Empirical case studies should be conducted to validate the anticipated time-saving benefits of AI-powered BIM in real-world South African projects. Such studies would provide concrete evidence of efficiency gains, helping to build confidence among industry practitioners and policymakers regarding AI-BIM adoption.
2. Research efforts should extend beyond the design stage to explore AI-BIM's potential in facilities management, construction, and procurement. Understanding how AI can optimise these phases could unlock additional value by improving maintenance planning, resource allocation, and cost control across the project lifecycle (Rane, 2023).
3. Assessing sectoral readiness by comparing the digital maturity of large versus small firms, as well as public versus private sectors, will help identify gaps and guide targeted adoption strategies. This assessment can reveal which areas require capacity building, infrastructure investment, or policy intervention to facilitate successful AI-BIM implementation.
4. Investigating change management approaches is critical to overcoming organisational and cultural resistance to digital transformation. By studying practical techniques such as stakeholder engagement, training programs, and leadership strategies, researchers can provide actionable recommendations to ensure smooth adoption of AI-powered BIM technologies (Yangluxi, 2025).

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SACQSP25-114

Towards an AI-BIM Framework for Sustainable Operations and Maintenance of Built Assets

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Abstract

The operations and maintenance (O&M) phase of a built asset is the most resource-intensive stage of the lifecycle, with significant implications for sustainability, lifecycle costs and service delivery outcomes. Despite advances in digital construction technologies, O&M remains under-digitised and poorly integrated with earlier project phases. This paper examines the potential of an AI-driven BIM framework to enhance sustainability-oriented decision-making during the O&M phase. A structured critical literature review was undertaken. Peer-reviewed articles, conference papers and industry reports published between 2010 and 2024 were systematically identified from major databases and leading South African journals. Sources were screened using predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, then thematically analysed to capture intersections between Building Information Modelling (BIM), Artificial Intelligence (AI) and sustainability indicators. The review also compared global findings with South African contexts to highlight region-specific challenges. The analysis reveals that while AI-BIM integration has been widely theorised, implementation is constrained by interoperability challenges, incomplete data handovers and limited post-construction model updates. Current applications of AI rely on high-quality datasets, which are rarely available in emerging markets. Furthermore, existing digital sustainability tools disproportionately track environmental metrics, while economic and social dimensions are inconsistently embedded in O&M processes. This study identifies a critical gap in adaptable frameworks that support real-time, data-driven O&M decisions across all three pillars of sustainability. To address this, the paper proposes the development of a conceptual AI-BIM framework designed to compute and visualise sustainability metrics under low-to-moderate digital maturity conditions. The framework aims to support predictive asset management, reduce lifecycle costs and enhance service delivery outcomes. By addressing these challenges, the study contributes to reshaping digital innovation towards inclusive, lifecycle-based sustainability and provides a pathway for practitioners and policymakers to unlock value from AI-BIM integration in both advanced and resource-constrained contexts.

Keywords: Building Information Modelling, Artificial Intelligence, Sustainability, Operations and Maintenance, Built Assets.

Introduction

The O&M phase of built assets can account for more than 80% of their total lifecycle cost, yet it is also the phase most neglected in terms of strategic planning, digital integration and sustainability tracking (Nydahl et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2025). As buildings and infrastructure become more complex and performance-driven, ensuring efficient and sustainable O&M is therefore vital, not only for asset longevity but also for achieving broader environmental and service delivery goals.

Despite the growing importance of this phase, most sustainability efforts in construction remain frontloaded into design and construction, with limited attention paid to post-handover performance (Diaz Caselles & Guevara, 2024; Too et al., 2023). This disconnect has become a critical weakness in realising long-term value from infrastructure investment. Digital transformation offers potential

solutions. BIM enables structured capture of spatial and performance data, supporting more efficient asset tracking and decision support (Wijeratne et al., 2024; Omar, Ismail & Motawa, 2024). AI provides tools for predictive maintenance, energy optimisation and real-time diagnostics (Amangeldy, 2025; Arun et al., 2025). When combined, BIM and AI have the potential to shift facilities management from reactive to proactive, enhancing sustainability, reducing costs and extending asset lifespans.

Yet, AI-BIM integration remains the exception rather than the norm. Weak interoperability, inconsistent data models and limited user capacity continue to constrain adoption (Araszkiewicz, 2017; Naghshbandi, 2016). Many BIM models are developed primarily for construction documentation, overlooking the needs of facilities managers (Tsay, Staub-French & Poirier, 2022). AI tools, meanwhile, rely on high-quality structured datasets that are rarely available in resource-constrained contexts. As a result, many built assets enter the O&M phase with outdated or incomplete data, compromising informed, sustainability-focused decisions (Omar, Ismail & Motawa 2026).

Another challenge lies in the uneven treatment of sustainability indicators. Environmental metrics such as energy and emissions are increasingly measured using smart meters and simulation tools (Hollberg & Ruth, 2016). In contrast, economic indicators such as lifecycle cost and operational ROI are poorly tracked post-construction (Salvado, Almeida & Azevedo, 2019), while social indicators, such as health, safety, equity and comfort, are even more neglected due to the difficulty of quantification (Kordi, Belayutham & Ibrahim, 2022; Rajabi et al., 2022). Without a balanced, dynamic and context-sensitive approach, O&M processes risk undermining both asset performance and broader social mandates.

On the other hand, the convergence of BIM and AI presents a timely opportunity to address these gaps—if such technologies can be tailored to the digital and institutional realities of emerging markets. The critical question is: how can AI-BIM frameworks support sustainability-based decision-making in O&M, even when digital maturity is low and datasets are incomplete? Failure to address this question risks ongoing inefficiencies, escalating operational costs, and persistent underperformance of infrastructure assets.

This paper responds to that gap by critically reviewing existing literature on AI-BIM integration and its application to sustainable O&M. It highlights the structural and contextual barriers limiting adoption and proposes a new conceptual model for embedding sustainability indicators—environmental, economic and social—into O&M decision-making. The aim is to establish a theoretical foundation for an AI-driven BIM framework that enhances sustainability performance under conditions of low-to-moderate digital maturity, particularly within public sector and large-scale infrastructure portfolios.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews existing literature on BIM, AI, and sustainability in O&M; Section 3 outlines the research methodology; Section 4 presents findings and the proposed conceptual framework; and Section 5 concludes with implications and recommendations for practice and further research.

Digital Innovation for Sustainable Operations and Maintenance in the Built Environment

Rethinking Sustainability in the O&M Phase

The O&M phase of a built asset is the longest and most cost-intensive stage in the lifecycle, accounting for up to 80% of total costs (Nydahl et al., 2022). This stage is also critical for sustainability, influencing energy use, emissions, maintenance efficiency and user comfort. Yet, prevailing delivery models and digital systems remain biased toward earlier phases, leaving O&M underrepresented in performance tracking and strategic decision-making (Diaz Caselles & Guevara, 2024).

Facilities management (FM) systems are commonly deployed during O&M but remain limited in scope. For example, FM systems often operate in silos and fail to adequately support sustainability monitoring or lifecycle optimisation (Motawa & Almarshad, 2013). Moreover, FM systems are seldom integrated with BIM, which leads to fragmented data and missed opportunities for predictive analysis. For public infrastructure especially, the absence of consistent O&M data impedes longitudinal sustainability evaluation (Dixit et al., 2019).

This shows that while the literature has long acknowledged O&M as a high-impact stage, digitalisation and sustainability integration in this phase remain underdeveloped, particularly when compared to the attention afforded to design and construction.

BIM for O&M: From Static Models to Dynamic Asset Intelligence

BIM has been widely promoted as a tool for sustainable O&M due to its capacity to capture spatial data, asset tagging and links to performance indicators. Research demonstrates that BIM-based FM can improve asset visibility, condition monitoring and preventive maintenance (Wijeratne, 2024; Motawa & Almarshad, 2013). However, in practice, BIM's potential is rarely realised. Models are often "frozen" at handover, with limited use in Computer-Aided Facilities Management (CAFM) or Integrated Workplace Management Systems (IWMS) (Omar, Ismail & Motawa, 2024).

The main barrier lies in interoperability. While the IFC schema facilitates geometric data exchange, it fails to support the dynamic, real-time needs of FM environments (Araszkiewicz, 2017). Furthermore, models are rarely authored with downstream O&M use in mind, producing inconsistent data and irrelevant parameters (Naghshbandi, 2016). The problem intensifies in contexts with low BIM maturity, where FM teams lack resources or training to maintain living digital twins post-construction.

Some international case studies show success. For example, BIM has been used to optimise energy management through real-time monitoring (Petri et al., 2017) and automate maintenance scheduling (Chen et al., 2018). However, such examples are exceptions and often assume advanced digital readiness. In developing contexts, such levels of integration remain aspirational rather than practical (Succar & Kassem, 2015).

Thus, while global literature highlights strong theoretical and case-based potential, the gap between research prototypes and operational practice—especially in emerging markets—remains wide.

Artificial Intelligence as an Enabler of Smart O&M

AI extends BIM's potential by enabling predictive, prescriptive and adaptive strategies for asset management. Applications include energy optimisation through usage forecasting (Wang, Yan & Xiao, 2012) and early fault detection (Khajavi et al., 2019). When coupled with BIM, AI can unlock deeper insights from asset data, providing benchmarking, compliance checks and automated diagnostics (Pan & Zhang, 2023).

Yet, most AI approaches rely on large, structured datasets—a resource scarce in many contexts (Lu et al., 2023). This creates a paradox: AI can deliver substantial benefits, but only if the data environment is sufficiently mature. To overcome this, scholars have called for "minimum viable data" approaches that allow AI-BIM systems to function effectively with partial or legacy datasets (Akbari et al., 2024). Despite this recognition, practical demonstrations remain limited.

This suggests that while international research is advancing AI-enhanced O&M, much of it presupposes ideal data conditions that rarely reflect real-world or emerging market contexts. Addressing this mismatch is essential to make AI-BIM integration globally relevant.

Sustainability Indicators for O&M Decision-Making

Sustainability frameworks such as BREEAM, LEED and Green Star traditionally emphasise design-stage certification rather than operational performance (Leite Ribeiro, Piccinini Scolaro & Ghisi, 2025). Consequently, many certified buildings underperform during occupancy due to insufficient monitoring (Too et al., 2023).

Within O&M, environmental indicators (energy, water, waste, carbon) are the most researched, but economic and social dimensions remain underdeveloped. Life Cycle Costing (LCC) is rarely revisited post-handover, and user-centric metrics such as air quality, comfort and spatial equity are inconsistently measured (Kordi, Belayutham & Ibrahim, 2022; Rajabi et al., 2022). Furthermore, BIM models often lack parameters for these indicators, and FM teams seldom update models with actual performance data.

This uneven attention across sustainability's three pillars highlights a gap: tools and frameworks are needed that can dynamically track, visualise and adapt sustainability indicators during operations. AI-

BIM offers a promising avenue, but the literature lacks a transferable, context-sensitive methodology that reconciles feasibility with impact.

The reviewed literature shows that:

- The O&M phase offers the greatest opportunity for lifecycle sustainability improvements.
- BIM-FM integration is technically feasible but rarely operationalised.
- AI can unlock smarter O&M, but data limitations remain a critical barrier.
- Sustainability indicators are inconsistently applied across the environmental, economic and social dimensions.

Crucially, international case studies tend to be based in high-resource settings, leaving their applicability in emerging or low-maturity contexts uncertain. This confirms a major research gap: there is no established AI-BIM framework tailored to O&M sustainability that functions under conditions of fragmented data and institutional constraints.

This study directly responds to this gap by proposing a conceptual AI-driven BIM framework for sustainable O&M. Unlike most prior work, the proposed framework will focus on adaptable data requirements, integration of all three sustainability pillars and applicability across both public and private sector portfolios.

Research methodology

This study employed a qualitative, critical literature review as the primary methodology, aimed at developing a conceptual digital decision-support framework for sustainable operations and maintenance (O&M) of built assets. This approach was appropriate given the interdisciplinary and exploratory nature of the research, which cuts across digital construction, sustainability science, and facilities management.

Rationale for Qualitative Methodology

Qualitative methods are particularly suited to examining complex and evolving phenomena where theory building and conceptual synthesis are required (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The objective of this study was to critically interrogate how existing knowledge across BIM, AI and sustainability could be integrated into a context-sensitive framework for decision-making in the O&M phase. Since AI-driven sustainability in O&M is still an emerging field—especially in developing economies—empirical data is scarce. A qualitative, document-based strategy, therefore, provided the flexibility to accommodate diverse evidence types, including academic research, technical standards, and industry practice reports.

Research Design: Critical Literature Review

The review followed a structured process aligned with recommendations by Snyder (2019) for systematic yet conceptually driven reviews.

- Database Selection
  Searches were conducted across leading academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect and Google Scholar, to capture peer-reviewed research. Supplementary sources were drawn from industry reports (e.g., McKinsey Global Institute, IEA, UNEP) and international standards (e.g., ISO 19650, IFC, COBie) to incorporate practitioner and regulatory perspectives often absent in academic literature.
- Keywords and Search Strings
  To capture the intersection of BIM, AI and sustainability in O&M, targeted search strings were developed. Examples included: “Building Information Modelling” AND “operations and maintenance” AND “sustainability”, “Artificial Intelligence” AND “facilities management” AND “decision-making”, and “Digital twin” AND “O&M” AND “sustainability indicators”. These terms were refined iteratively during the search to maximise coverage and relevance.
- Timeframe
  The search was restricted to publications from 2000 to 2025, reflecting the period during which BIM adoption became mainstream and AI applications began to mature in built environment research.

Earlier seminal works were included selectively where they provided foundational insights into lifecycle costing, sustainability or digital modelling.

- Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria
  Studies were included if they examined BIM or AI in the context of O&M or facilities management, explicitly addressed at least one dimension of sustainability (environmental, economic or social), and were published in English in peer-reviewed journals, conferences or recognised industry reports. Studies were excluded if they focused exclusively on design or construction stages without O&M relevance, or if they presented purely conceptual discussions with no link to sustainability outcomes.
- Screening and Selection
  The initial search yielded approximately 950 articles. Titles and abstracts were first screened for relevance, after which full texts were reviewed in detail. Duplicates, low-quality publications, and non-relevant studies were discarded. The final dataset comprised 72 sources, forming the evidence base for the critical review.

Analytical Procedure

Document analysis (Bowen, 2009) was employed to systematically extract and synthesise findings.

- Extraction
  The first phase involved identifying key concepts, sustainability indicators and recurring challenges in AI-BIM-enabled O&M. Particular attention was paid to issues of interoperability, data continuity and indicator coverage across the three pillars of sustainability.
- Classification
  The second phase organised the extracted data into thematic categories. To enhance transparency, findings were explicitly grouped under the three pillars of sustainability: environmental (e.g., energy use, emissions), economic (e.g., lifecycle cost, ROI) and social (e.g., user comfort, equity, safety). This structure enabled the identification of imbalances in research emphasis across the sustainability spectrum.
- Synthesis
  The final phase integrated the classified findings into a conceptual framework that links BIM-based data inputs, AI-driven analytical processes, and sustainability-related outputs. This synthesis provided the theoretical foundation for a framework that is adaptable to contexts with low-to-moderate digital maturity and fragmented datasets.

This structured review approach ensured transparency and replicability, while also accommodating the breadth of interdisciplinary evidence. Organising findings by sustainability pillars highlighted imbalances in existing research—such as the dominance of environmental metrics and the relative neglect of social and economic indicators. These insights informed the design of a conceptual framework that prioritises adaptability, integrates multiple dimensions of sustainability, and is sensitive to contexts with low-to-moderate digital maturity.

Research Results

This section presents findings from a structured analysis of over 70 scholarly and industry sources relating to BIM, AI, and sustainability in the O&M phase of built assets. The central research question guiding this analysis was:

What core components and data requirements are necessary to structure an AI-powered BIM framework capable of supporting sustainability-based decision-making during the O&M phase, particularly in contexts with varying levels of digital maturity?

The results are presented thematically across three areas: (1) sustainability indicators relevant to O&M, (2) AI techniques for O&M optimisation, and (3) conceptual framework design. To enhance transparency, findings are organised according to the three pillars of sustainability: environmental, economic and social.

Sustainability Indicators Relevant to the O&M Phase

A synthesis of 22 scholarly and industry sources identified key sustainability indicators applicable to O&M. Indicators were prioritised based on frequency in the literature, relevance to FM decision-making and feasibility of digital or AI-supported measurement (Table 1).

Table 1 Sustainability Indicators Relevant to O&M Phase of Built Assets

Dimensions	Indicator	Frequency in Literature	Notes on Data Sources
Environmental	Operational Energy Use	21/22	BIM-linked utility data
	CO_2 Emissions	18/22	Utility metering
	Waste Generation	16/22	Derived from energy profile
Economic	Maintenance Costs	12/22	Maintenance reports
	Lifecycle Cost	20/22	FM system or Excel logs
	Asset Downtime	17/22	Estimated via AI models
Social	Occupant Comfort (thermal/lightning)	13/22	Reactive work orders
	Indoor Air Quality (IAQ)	12/22	IoT sensors or proxy data
	Safety Incident Rate	10/22	H&S reports

Figure 1 visualises the frequency of indicator appearance across the reviewed literature. Environmental and cost-related indicators dominate, while social indicators are underrepresented, highlighting a skew toward energy-centric frameworks despite recognition that social and economic factors are critical for long-term O&M performance.

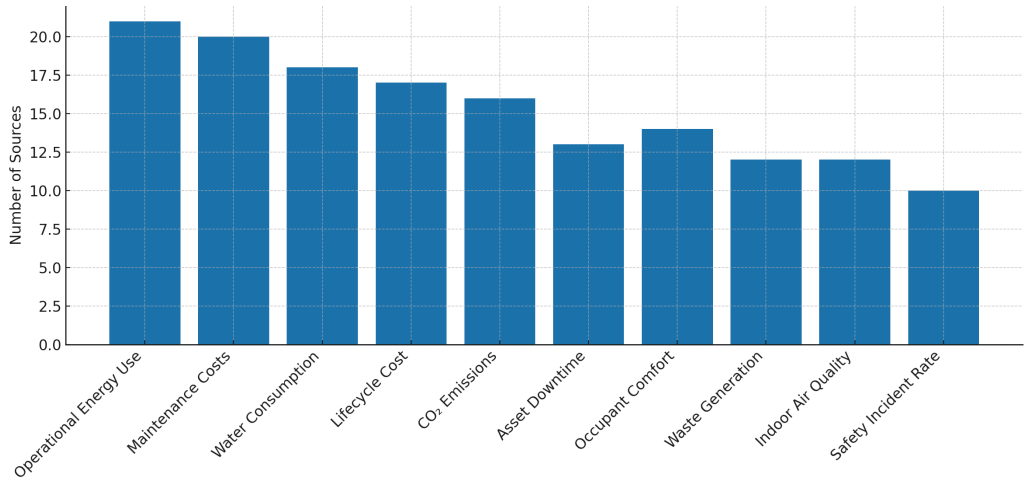

Figure 1 Frequency of Sustainability Indicators Cited in Reviewed O&M Literature

A comparison across contexts shows that high-resource facilities employ digital twins, IoT sensor networks, and AI-twinning platforms to capture environmental, economic and social indicators in near real-time (Lu et al., 2023; Akbari et al., 2024). In contrast, low-resource environments rely on legacy FM systems and proxy data, limiting the comprehensiveness of O&M monitoring. This contrast emphasises the need for an adaptable framework that accommodates both high- and low-data contexts.

AI Techniques Identified for O&M Optimisation

The analysis of 24 sources (18 peer-reviewed articles and 6 industry reports) revealed the following AI techniques commonly applied to O&M (Table 2).

Table 2 AI Techniques Applied to O&M Optimisation, Summarised from 24 Sources

AI Technique	Use Case	Data Input Required	Frequency in Literature
Machine Learning	Energy consumption prediction	Smart meters, occupancy patterns	15/24
Decision Trees / SVM	Fault classification and anomaly detection	Sensor logs, HVAC behaviour	10/24
Natural Language Processing	Work order categorisation and triage	Text from maintenance tickets	4/24
Artificial Neural Networks	Predictive maintenance and failure risk	Equipment logs, IoT device data	9/24
Reinforcement Learning	Dynamic system control (e.g. HVAC, lighting)	Real-time sensor + feedback loops	3/24

The figures above are not mutually exclusive; several studies employed more than one AI method concurrently

Machine Learning (ML) dominates, often used for energy forecasting and performance pattern recognition. More advanced techniques, such as Reinforcement Learning (RL) and NLP, remain uncommon due to high data and implementation requirements. Notably, only a few studies addressed sparse or fragmented datasets typical of developing-country FM contexts (Zhang et al., 2013; Chen et al., 2025). Emerging tools like AI-twinning and digital twin simulations provide richer decision-support capabilities in data-rich settings but are rarely applied in low-maturity contexts.

Significance of Proposing a Framework Structure

The synthesis of sustainability indicators and AI techniques underscores the rationale for developing a conceptual AI-BIM framework (Figure 2). The framework addresses three priorities identified from the literature:

1. Multidimensional sustainability tracking – encompassing environmental, economic and social indicators.
2. Context adaptability – capable of operating in both data-rich/high-digital maturity and data-poor/low-maturity environments.
3. Scalable AI integration – supporting incremental adoption of AI techniques based on data availability.

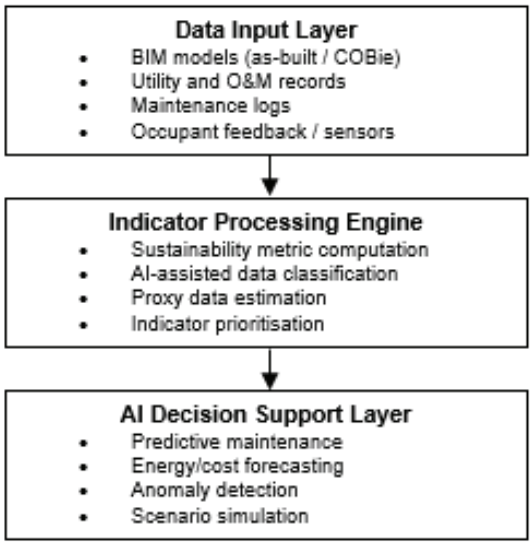

Figure 2 Conceptual Framework for an AI-Driven BIM System to Support Sustainable O&M

The framework comprises three interdependent layers:

1. Data Input Layer – Captures all available asset data, including BIM models (COBie-compliant or as-built), utility datasets, maintenance logs and occupant feedback or sensor outputs. This layer accommodates traditional FM systems and legacy data formats, enabling deployment even with limited BIM maturity.
2. Indicator Processing Engine – Computes key sustainability metrics, uses AI-assisted classification for unstructured data, and applies rule-based inference to estimate missing or proxy data. It prioritises indicators aligned with organisational sustainability targets.
3. AI Decision Support Layer – Hosts AI modules for predictive maintenance, anomaly detection, energy/lifecycle cost forecasting, and scenario simulation for decision trade-offs. Models are modular: facilities with limited data may start with decision trees, while advanced users can implement neural networks or reinforcement-based optimisation.

The proposed framework addresses the critical gap identified in the literature: no existing AI-BIM system supports sustainability-driven O&M decision-making across variable digital maturity contexts, integrating all three sustainability pillars and accommodating fragmented data.

Discussion

The findings of this study align with the broader literature in recognising that current FM practices in the O&M phase remain largely reactive, fragmented and constrained by limited data integration (Volk, Stengel & Schultmann, 2014; Motawa & Almarshad, 2013). Similar to Eastman et al. (2018), this research confirms that BIM is rarely extended into post-construction use, with operators often lacking the capacity to maintain digital models over time. However, this study extends previous work by demonstrating how a framework can remain functional even under low levels of digital maturity, contrasting sharply with international models that presume advanced infrastructure and highly structured datasets.

A key divergence emerges when comparing contexts. In high-income, data-rich environments, studies report promising outcomes from AI-enabled digital twins, which integrate real-time sensors and advanced analytics to optimise energy, maintenance and user comfort (Opoku et al., 2021; Pan & Zhang, 2023). Yet, such solutions are not readily transferable to developing contexts, where fragmented data, legacy systems and limited technical expertise remain the norm. The framework proposed here responds directly to these challenges by embedding adaptable data requirements, modular AI integration and rule-based estimations that can compensate for incomplete inputs. This comparative perspective underscores that while digital twin and AI-twinning platforms represent state-of-the-art tools in advanced economies, their assumptions about data quality and availability limit their relevance in digitally constrained settings.

The treatment of sustainability indicators also reveals both alignment and departure from prior work. Consistent with Wijeratne (2024) and Hollberg & Ruth (2016), environmental metrics such as energy and carbon emissions dominate in the literature. However, this study challenges the narrow focus of such approaches by reaffirming the importance of economic and social indicators—maintenance costs, downtime and occupant comfort—which directly affect lifecycle performance yet remain underrepresented in most models. This rebalancing suggests that frameworks premised solely on environmental efficiency risk overlooking dimensions that determine operational resilience and user satisfaction.

These findings also expose methodological weaknesses in prior approaches. Models that assume abundant, continuous data streams are only partially applicable in practice and may overstate their sustainability impact when deployed outside high-income contexts. By contrast, the proposed framework demonstrates that staged, modular adoption strategies can bridge this gap, aligning with McArthur et al. (2015) and Kamel & Memari (2019) in calling for human-centred, incremental implementation.

Finally, while this study contributes a conceptual foundation, further investigation is required to validate the framework's adaptability in practice. Comparative case studies between high- and low-income contexts, alongside prototyping exercises that test integration with existing FM platforms, will help determine whether the theoretical benefits—such as improved decision quality and balanced sustainability tracking—translate into measurable outcomes. Such empirical work is also critical to positioning the framework in relation to rapidly evolving alternatives such as AI-enhanced digital twins.

Figure 3 illustrates the conceptual AI–BIM framework developed in this study, highlighting its layered structure and adaptability to data-rich and data-constrained environments.

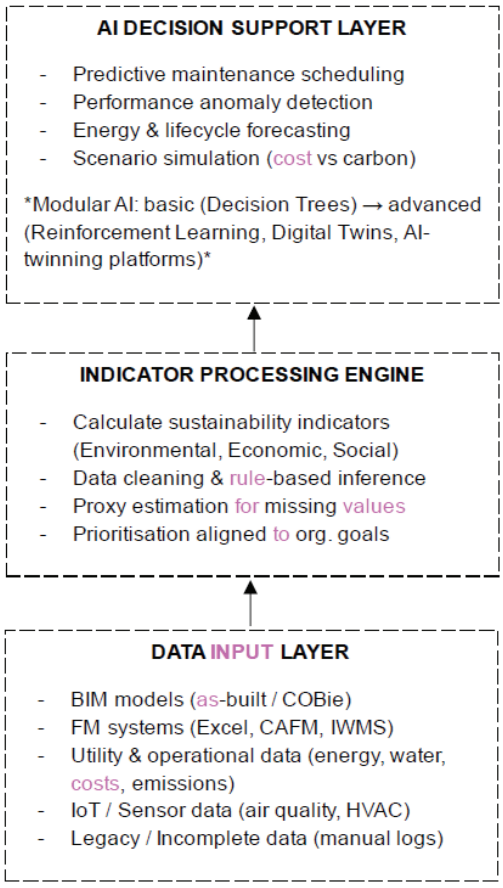

Figure 3 Conceptual AI–BIM Framework for Sustainable O&M, Showing the Layered Structure from Raw Data Inputs to AI-enabled Decision Support

NOTE: Adaptable across both data-rich (digital twins, advanced AI) and data-poor (rule-based, fragmented legacy data) contexts

Conclusion

This study investigated how AI integrated with BIM can enhance sustainability-oriented decision-making during the operations and maintenance phase of built assets. The findings confirm that current FM practices are largely reactive, fragmented and constrained by limited data integration, particularly in contexts with low digital maturity. While AI offers significant capabilities—ranging from predictive maintenance to energy forecasting—its practical application is often hindered by incomplete BIM models, legacy systems and inconsistent or fragmented datasets.

In response, the study proposes a conceptual AI-BIM framework that is flexible, modular and adaptable to varying levels of digital readiness. Unlike existing models that presume ideal sensor coverage and fully structured datasets, this framework supports staged adoption, rule-based estimations for missing data and integration of environmental, economic and social sustainability indicators. By addressing these gaps, the framework offers a pathway for organisations to improve lifecycle performance, operational efficiency and sustainability outcomes, even under resource and data constraints.

Ultimately, the study demonstrates that sustainable O&M is not solely a technological challenge but also an organisational and process-oriented one. Effective implementation requires tools that can evolve with organisational capacity, prioritise human oversight and balance the three pillars of sustainability, thereby bridging the gap between high-end digital twins in data-rich settings and the realities of digitally constrained environments.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, several recommendations are proposed to advance both research and practice in AI-powered BIM for sustainable O&M. First, there is a need to develop and validate a working prototype of the proposed framework in real-world operational settings. Such empirical testing, including comparative case studies across high- and low-income contexts, will provide insights into its practical utility and inform iterative refinement of the model. Second, capacity building for facilities managers and asset teams is essential to ensure effective adoption. Training programs, phased implementation strategies, and intuitive user interfaces will help practitioners interpret AI-generated insights and integrate them into daily decision-making, particularly in environments with low digital readiness. Third, the framework should be adapted to function effectively under conditions of incomplete or fragmented data, using minimum data requirements and rule-based approximations where full BIM datasets or sensor inputs are unavailable. Fourth, organisations should adopt a holistic approach to sustainability by incorporating not only environmental metrics but also economic and social indicators, including maintenance costs, downtime, occupant comfort and safety. Finally, policy and institutional support are critical to enable widespread adoption. Regulators and asset owners should provide guidance, funding incentives, and standards for digital asset management, ensuring that technological innovations align with operational realities and sustainability objectives. Collectively, these recommendations provide a practical roadmap for translating the conceptual framework into measurable improvements in O&M performance and long-term asset sustainability.

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SACQSP2025-118

Mapping Research Trends on Risk in Construction Data Management in the 5th Industrial Revolution: A Bibliometric Review

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Abstract

This research aims to explore the complex nature of risks in construction project data management, with a focus on identifying various risks encountered when undertaking projects with the view to mitigating and reducing risks. A bibliometric analysis was conducted to identify trends and themes. The current research focused on Scopus-indexed peer-reviewed literature in the field of computer science and engineering to explore risk management. The main themes were extracted and analysed. The review period spanned from 2015 to 2025 to capture recent trends while including enough studies and excluding outdated ones; 133 documents were relevant and used keywords such as "construction industry" OR "construction sector" AND "data management" OR "data governance" OR "information management" AND "risk" OR "risk assessment" OR "risk management" OR "Cyberattacks". The study identified four key themes, including Operational Safety and Data-Oriented Risk Prevention, Digital Intelligence and Decision-Making, Design-Level Risk, and the Core Concepts of Risk Evaluation and Control. While risk management is very important, it was found that there is a lack of empirical research on risks in construction project data management, especially in Global South, which are regions where digital and infrastructural challenges are still prominent. Practitioners should adopt physical and data-driven risk management techniques to enhance workers' safety and prevent project interruptions. Consequently, training on risks and cybersecurity measures must be strengthened to support a safe working environment. The value of this research lies in mapping the evolution of this field for project managers, researchers, quantity surveyors, construction managers, and engineers. It also provides a platform for risk awareness in construction and future studies

Keywords: Construction Industry, Risk, Data Risks, Industry 5.0, Data Management.

Introduction

The construction sector, being a complex and challenging environment, faces numerous project uncertainties and risks that affect project execution. These risks include falls from heights, electrical exposure, dust inhalation, and weather exposure. Therefore, managing these risks becomes essential to ensure the successful achievement of construction project objectives (Renault & Agumba, 2016; Zhao, 2024). Abd El Khalek et al. (2016) stated that risk involves any quantifiable and identifiable element that can lead to project delays, budget overruns, and adverse impacts. Safety on construction sites is primarily managed through IoTs such as Ultra-Wideband (UWB)-based and real-time location systems (RTLSs), which help to collect, track, store, and share data among stakeholders to ensure workers' safety. However, this data can be manipulated in the face of cyber risks, thereby creating additional hazards. To achieve comprehensive risk mitigation through digital technologies, data risk management must also be taken into account (Umer & Siddiqui, 2020). Additionally, Rahman et al. (2014) highlighted that nowadays, no construction project can proceed without effective collaboration among stakeholders through sharing project data at various levels. This data sharing helps strengthen contractual relationships among project members and enables faster project delivery. Furthermore, Häikiö et al. (2020) and Alwashah et al. (2024) emphasised that construction relies on advanced digital tools such as building information modelling (BIM), RFID, virtual reality, augmented reality, IoT, and other cloud-based tools to manage data effectively over the long term and maintain control over the

project, workers' safety, and personnel information. However, these tools have several drawbacks, including a lack of policies and standards, financial constraints, difficulties in maintaining digital tools, and a limited understanding of new technologies. According to Tambwe et al. (2025), the use of digital technologies has increased data risks such as data loss and unauthorised manipulation of information, extortion, and phishing within the construction sector. Bendovschi (2015) added that other data risks include extortion, spamming, phishing, spoofing, spyware, viruses, Trojans, password sniffing, website defacement, and breaches of access. Cains et al. (2021) emphasised that data risks include various factors such as unauthorised access to information systems, software and maintenance errors, espionage, loss of support services, incorrect data entry, user errors, earthquakes, and information leakage. These data risks can be addressed through the application of proper data management (Tambwe et al., 2023).

The management of construction data involves the systematic process of collecting, storing, retrieving, and ensuring the interoperability, accessibility, and reuse of construction data (Ayodele et al., 2023). This is crucial as the world transitions from the fourth industrial revolution to the fifth, which builds upon the foundations of the previous one. With increased engagement with digital technologies, the construction industry will become more vulnerable to risks (Onik et al., 2019; Ziatdinov et al., 2024). Also, Wang et al. (2025a) research paper analysed 207 cases of falling accidents in the Chinese construction industry from 2014 to 2024 using the Factor Analysis and Classification System (HFACS) model to assess environmental, supervision, behaviour, and organisational causes. This initiative aims to reduce the number of accidents and promote a safe construction environment. Wang et al. (2025b) work presents a platform using Blockchain and Interplanetary File System (IPFS) to manage ready-mixed concrete (RMC) quality. Additionally, it discusses challenges such as weak traceability, fake data, and fragmented oversight. Furthermore, Hong and Teizer (2025) introduce a Digital Twin for Construction Safety (DTCS) framework that integrates Building Information Modelling (BIM) with real-time trajectory tracking. It also uses RTK-GNSS sensors to monitor workers and equipment with centimetre-level accuracy. This system detects hazards, unauthorised entries, and close worker-equipment interactions, generating incident data, density maps, and root cause analyses. Unlike previous studies discussed above, which focused on specific safety issues, technologies, or case-based analyses, this study adopts a holistic bibliometric approach to systematically map how risks in construction data management are researched during the fifth industrial revolution. This study fills the gap by moving from isolated risk or technology perspectives to a broad, evidence-based overview of both physical and digital risks, revealing patterns, gaps, and future directions across the research landscape. Thus, the following question guides the study:

- What physical and digital risks affect construction projects?

Research Methodology

This research employed a bibliometric review to examine Risks in Construction Data Management during the 5th Industrial Revolution. The bibliometric method was chosen for its ability to enable a quantitative and systematic analysis of existing scholarly literature, thereby revealing research trends, key themes, and influential contributions in this field, as highlighted by Kumar (2025). The Scopus database was selected to gather relevant literature because of its comprehensive coverage across diverse academic disciplines and its effectiveness in bibliometric research (Aghimien, Aigbavboa, Oke, 2020). Careful consideration was given to the keywords used to collect bibliographic data for the study. Using two main Boolean operators [“OR” and “AND”], the search protocol targeted Title, Abstract, and Keywords within a ten-year period [2015-2025] to capture recent trends while including enough studies and excluding outdated ones: “construction industry” OR “construction sector” AND “data management” OR “data governance” OR “information management” AND “risk” OR “risk assessment” OR “risk management” OR “Cyberattacks”. To ensure greater relevance, the database was limited to specific document types such as journal articles, conference papers, and book chapters. Additionally, filters were applied to restrict results to publications in English, only final or accepted papers, and within the “computer science” and “Engineering” subject areas. These criteria reduced the dataset to 133 relevant documents out of 248. The publication stage was limited to final and accepted versions; the subject area was restricted to “Engineering” because construction is classified under the wide engineering domain; and document types were limited to “Articles, Conference papers, and Book Chapters”, resulting in 133 relevant documents. For analysis, Vosviewer software was used to visualise bibliometric networks, including keyword co-occurrence and publications per country. This tool helps map research trends and identify thematic clusters within the literature. Vosviewer highlights dominant research themes and emerging topics by visualising connections between studies (Hassan &

Duarte, 2024). The findings from this bibliometric analysis offer insights into the growing interest in data management solutions in construction, underscoring the importance of identifying and managing risks to prevent project disruptions. Figure 1 below shows the detailed methodology process.

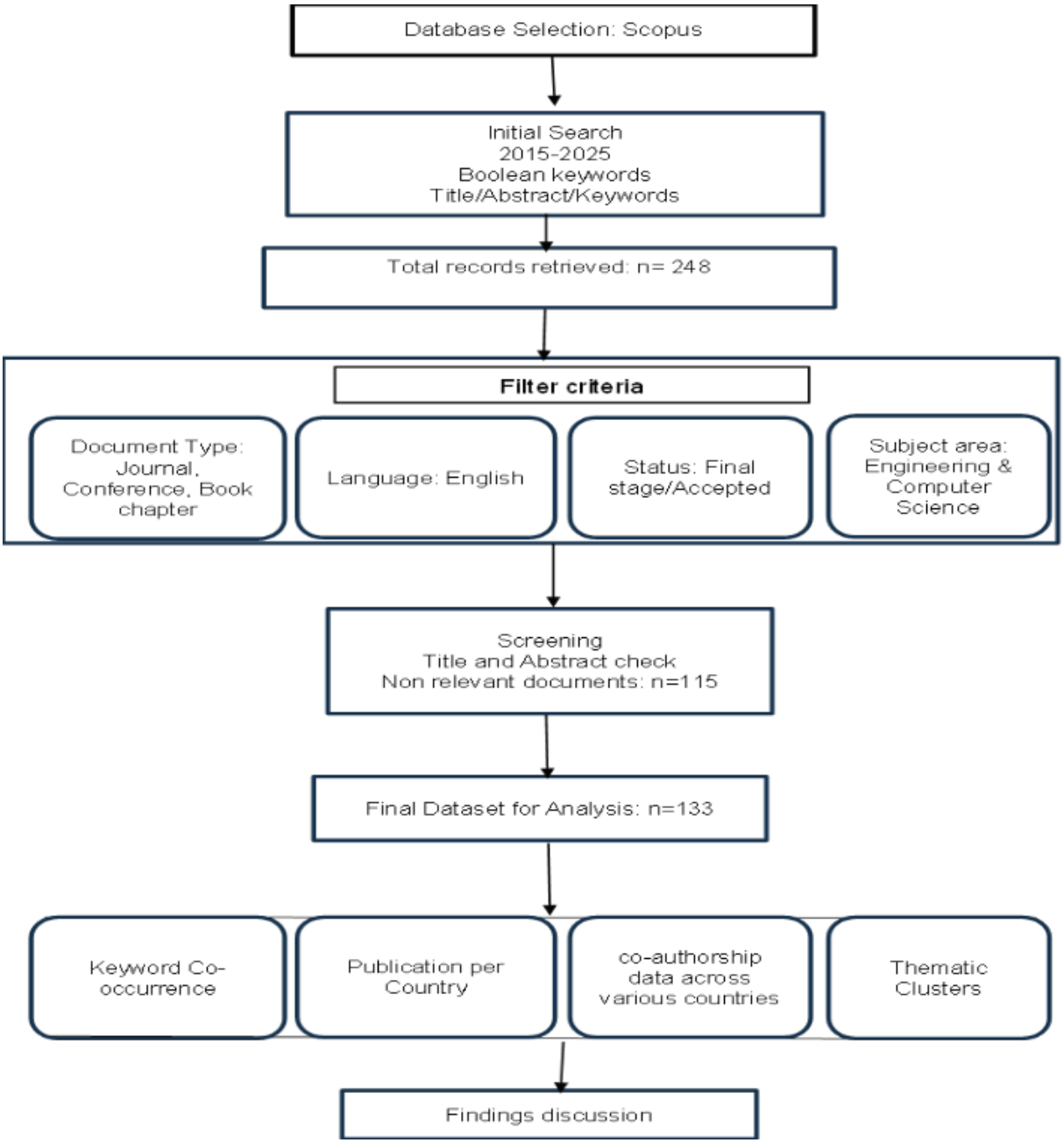

Figure 1 Methodology Process

Research Results

Annual Distribution of Publications

The Scopus database results reveal the yearly distribution of research papers on risk in Construction Data Management. This spans the ten-year review period from 2015 to 2025. A total of 133 documents were retrieved: 4 book chapters, 69 articles, and 60 conference papers. Figure 2 shows the annual distribution of publications from 2020 to 2025.

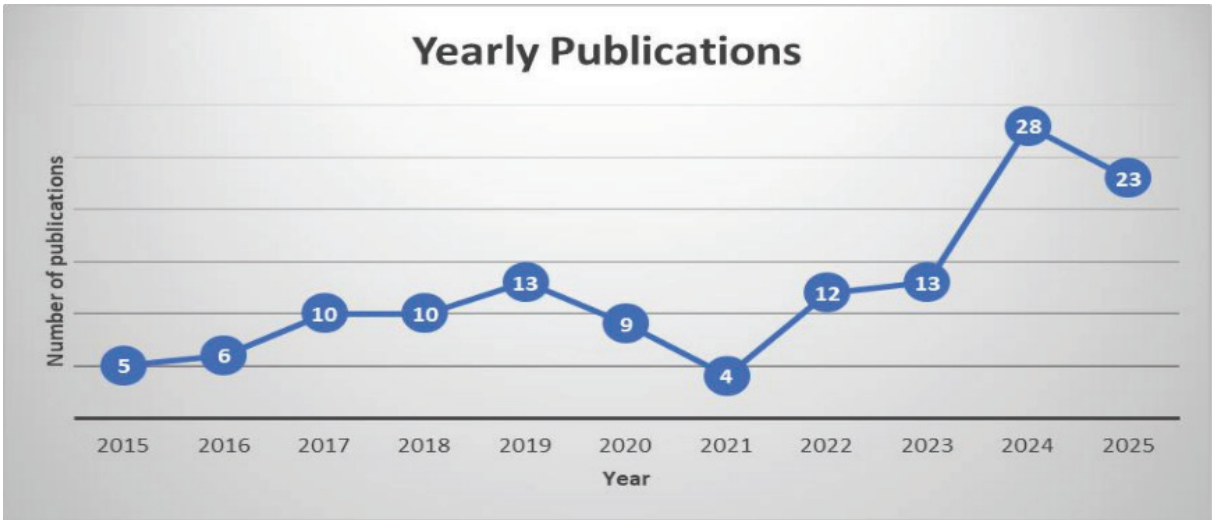

Figure 2 Annual Distribution of Publications

Figure 2 above highlights how research publications on risk in construction data management have shown increasing interest over the ten-year period, especially within the context of the 5th Industrial Revolution. Between the beginning of 2015 and the end of 2021, the number of publications remained low, averaging around 8 per year. Additionally, the years 2015 and 2016 had 5 and 6 publications, respectively, marking the early stages of academic interest, conceivably reflecting a promising understanding of both digital risk and data management in construction. Furthermore, a consistent rise was noted across the years 2017, 2018, and 2019, with publication counts reaching 10 documents in 2017 and 2018 and increasing to 13 documents in 2019. This indicates a growing academic interest in digital transformation risks. A steady decline occurred in 2020, with (9) publications, and 2021, with (4) publications, which may partly be due to the global disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, shifting research focus to the pandemic and impacting outputs in other fields. Nevertheless, from 2022 onwards, the field experienced a sharp and sustained increase, as 2022 recorded 12 publications while 2023 recorded 13 publications, showing recovery and renewed growth interest. It did not end there; a notable increase occurred in 2024 with 28 publications, followed by 23 in 2025, marking the highest figures observed during the two-year period. This demonstrates that the efforts authors invest in publishing within the domain align with broader international initiatives to digitise the construction sector and mitigate associated risks, which are fuelled by the introduction of technologies such as big data, IoT and AI. Furthermore, it also reflects a growing academic recognition of data management as a crucial factor for success in modern construction risk management strategies.

Global Distribution of Publications

As displayed in Figure 3, out of 45 countries, only 11 met the inclusion criteria, which were 5 documents published per country, each with at least 2 citations. China leads in the number of publications with 33, but has a low citation count of 103, which can be attributed to limited international collaborations or language barriers. The United States follows in publication count with 17 documents and 555 citations, demonstrating productivity in publishing, while the United Kingdom has the highest number of citations with 757 across 14 documents, indicating a substantial output of high-quality research. South Korea produced only 9 documents but received an impressive 358 citations, reflecting the country's focus on producing high-impact, quality documents in the field. This may be due to national investments in both 4IR and 5IR capabilities. India and Australia each produced 7 documents, with 153 and 127 citations, respectively, signalling significant engagement in data risk-related topics. Other notable contributions include Spain with 6 documents and 126 citations, Turkey with 7 documents and 94 citations, Malaysia with 6 documents and 57 citations, Canada with 6 documents and 40 citations, and South Africa with 7 documents and 33 citations. Although South Africa has the lowest citation count, it indicates a rising involvement of African nations in risk management research within emerging countries. The findings reveal that countries with strong academic funding and advanced construction technologies conduct most research on risk and data management in construction, which is typical of the Global North, as they are dominant. Furthermore, Africa, being the last continent based on publication numbers, highlights a gap in global collaboration and underscores

the necessity for increased investment and partnerships in developing project risk management research in developing countries.

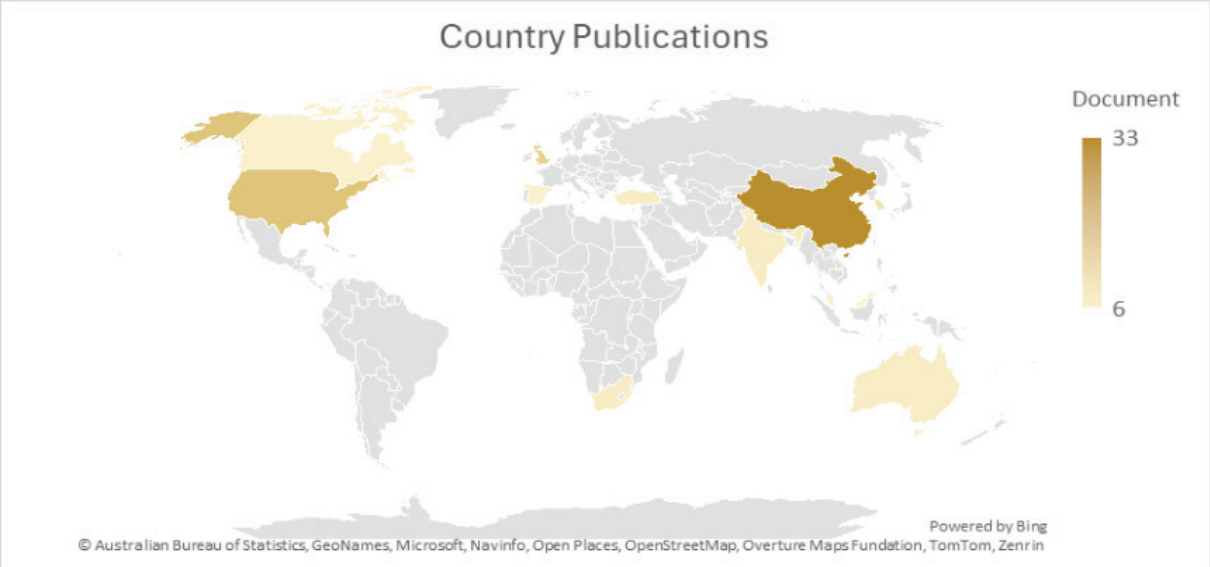

Figure 3 Global Distribution of Publications

Co-authorship from Various Nations

Figure 4 presents the network-based bibliometric map created from co-authorship data across various countries. According to the map, researchers from China collaborate with those in the United States (US), Australia, Malaysia, while researchers from the United Kingdom (UK) publish with those from South Africa (SA), Turkey, India, and Canada. Furthermore, the US has South Korea, Canada, China, and the UK as co-authors. Meanwhile, South Korea collaborates with authors from the US and Canada. Malaysian authors publish more papers with colleagues from Australia and China.

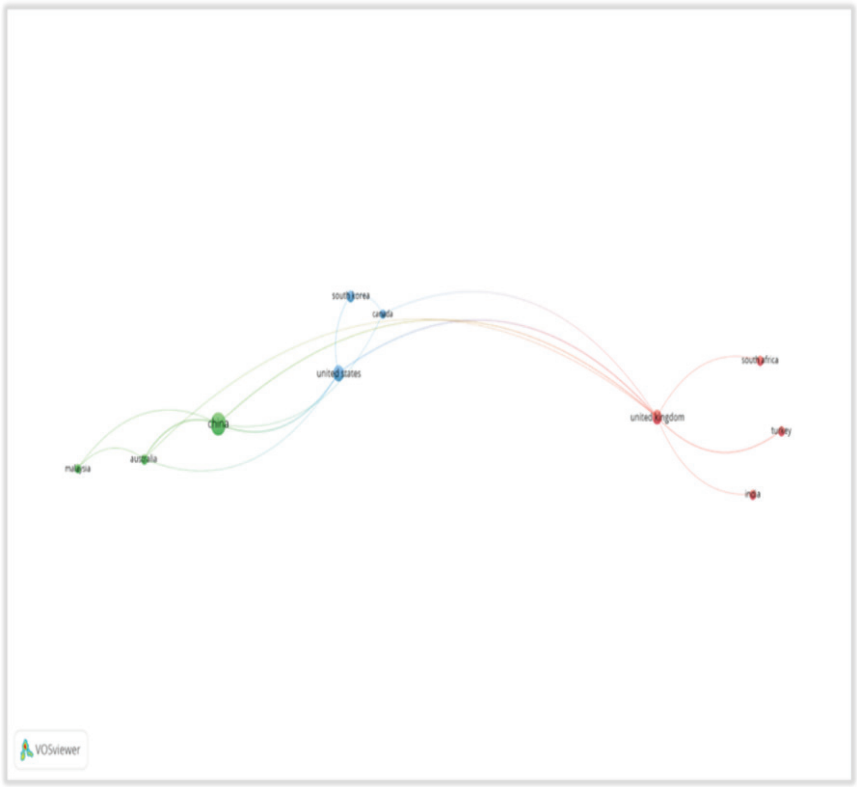

Figure 4 Co-authorship from Various Nations

Discussion

Research Focus Discussion

A keyword co-occurrence analysis was performed using bibliographic data from the retrieved literature. Of the 1445 keywords extracted, 32 met the threshold of at least 7 occurrences. However, some terms, such as Building Information Modelling (BIM), and BIM, appeared repeatedly, with some documented as abbreviations; therefore, some keywords were manually removed, leaving 29 of the most frequently occurring keywords. As shown in Table 1, the keyword 'Information management' had the highest frequency, appearing 118 times with a total link strength of 564, establishing it as the central concept around which other keywords revolve. 'Construction industry' appeared 105 times with a link strength of 512, highlighting the importance of digital technologies in achieving positive project outcomes. 'Project management' had 78 occurrences and a total link strength of 373, reflecting its vital role in discussions related to data risk and construction data. 'Risk management', 'Architectural design', and 'Risk assessment' occurred less frequently, with 41, 31, and 26 appearances and total link strengths of 225, 187, and 149, respectively. These keywords underline the significance of integrating information and risk strategies within the construction industry, particularly in the technology-driven and data-intensive environment characteristic of the sector.

Table 1 Research Focuses on Co-occurring Keywords

Keywords	Occurrence	Total Link Strength
Information Management	118	564
Construction Industry	105	512
Project Management	78	373
Risk Management	41	225
Architectural Design	31	187

Thematic Cluster and Gaps Discussion

A network visualisation map was further generated using Vos Viewer as presented in Figure 3, which also revealed Information management positioned at the centre, while all other keywords form interlinked clusters representing the principal themes in contemporary risk within project data management research. The map displays four clusters of keywords. Analysing these clustered keywords helps to understand the connections between diverse concepts. The red cluster includes keywords such as construction industry, information management, human resource management, accident prevention, safety management, accidents, occupational risks, construction companies, data management, and construction equipment. The green cluster comprises keywords such as project management, building information modelling, decision making, safety management, and risk perception. The blue cluster features keywords such as architectural design, information theory, and construction management. The yellow cluster contains keywords such as construction projects, risk assessment, risk management, and risks. A narrative discussion on these keywords and conceptual mapping is conducted accordingly. Figure 5 presents the network visualisation map. This network map reinforces the idea that risk management has the potential to transform overall construction data management practices.

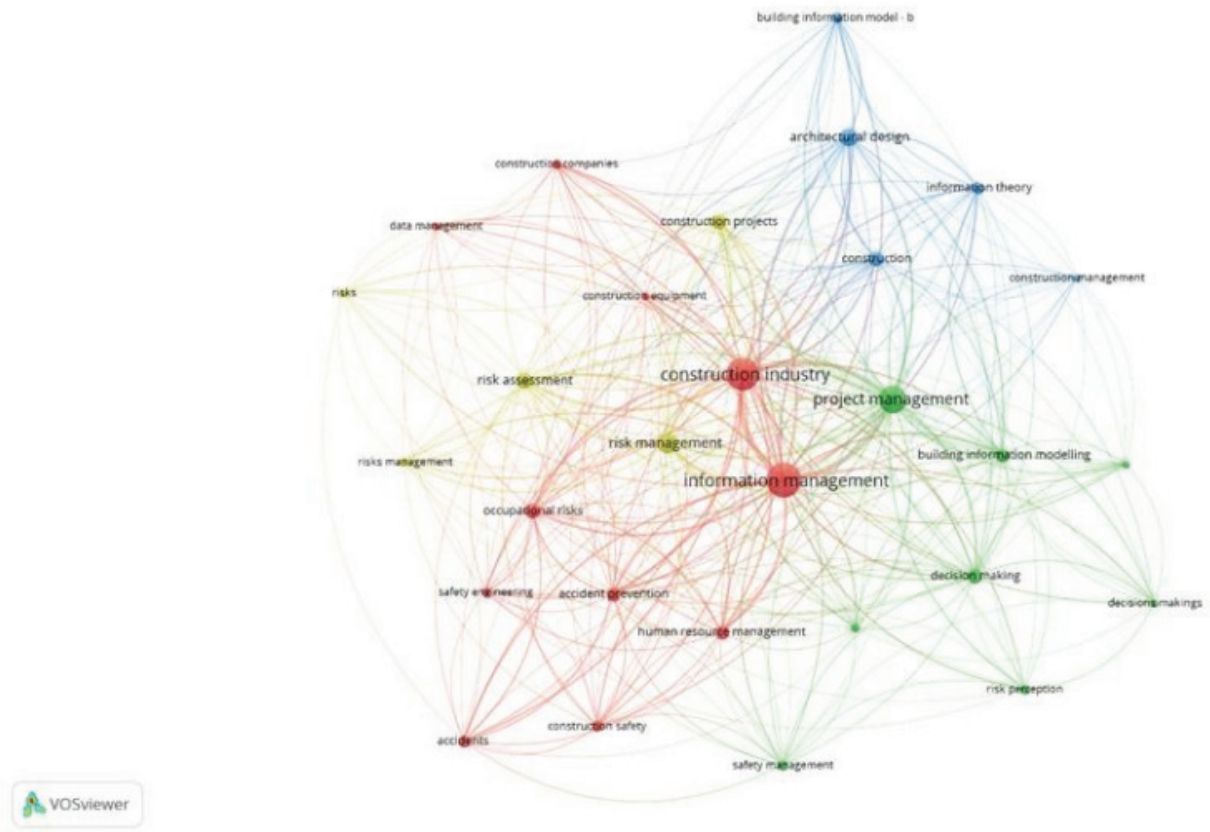

Figure 5 Network Map Visualisation

Cluster 1: Operational Safety and Data-oriented Risk Prevention

This cluster revolves around safety in various construction activities, directing attention to occupational risks, accident prevention, as well as data-driven safety procedures. According to Forteza et al. (2017), the construction sector experiences a high number of worker injuries and fatalities while on duty, which directly impacts the project budget. This directly means that the sector is impacted, and accidents need to be prevented. This cluster further mentions information management and data management, which highlights the role of data in reducing accidents on various construction sites. It is justified by the fact that data and information enable the collection, storage, and analysis of all equipment failures, ensuring that workers follow all safety protocols and weather warnings through tools such as Internet of Things technologies (Häikiö et al., 2020). Moreover, the integration of Human Resource Management in this cluster demonstrates how workforce practices significantly influence safety outcomes. Al-Mekhlafi (2024) stressed that the human resource department is to ensure workers' safety in organisations by influencing positive behaviours and attitudes about safety among workers before and during project execution. Additionally, the cluster highlights the practical issues faced daily in project execution and the increased utilisation of data systems to address these issues.

Cluster 2: Digital Intelligence and Decision-making in Risk Management

This group is focused on the use of digital technologies such as AI and BIM to enhance safety management and risk decision-making. The integration of these two tools empowers intelligent systems that enable budgeting, site safety, real-time clash detection, scheduling, and quality control, demonstrating its importance in risk management (Rane, 2023). The cluster further explores how advanced technologies assist in risk perception, resource allocation, and project management in large construction projects (Nabeel, 2024). Additionally, the theme emphasises how intelligent systems enable predictive, proactive risk management and decision making, especially in the fifth industrial context, through better forecasting, monitoring, and planning of site activities. This is supported by Jayakannan (2025), who stressed that conventional methods were dependent on past experience and expert opinion, which often involved personal bias and were reactive. However, with the use of technologies such as AI and machine learning, risk management strategies have shifted from reactive

to proactive, enabling stakeholders to tackle risks before they occur and reduce project delays and extra costs.

Cluster 3: Design-Level Risk Considerations and Theoretical Foundations

According to Goral (2007), numerous construction projects are undertaken worldwide every day, progressing through various stages from design to post-construction, and require informed decision-making. Ensuring effective risk identification and analysis from the initial stages, regarding specifications and construction drawings, will determine the success of risk management throughout the construction process, especially when using appropriate digital technologies, as accurate specifications can prevent project failure (Shio, 2013). This proactive approach aligns with the construction 5.0 vision of integrating advanced technologies with human expertise to achieve successful project outcomes. In cluster 3, the early planning and design phases of construction are outlined, as these are the stages where risk management begins. This is particularly important because the integration of Building Information Modelling and architectural design demonstrates how modelling environments can both control and anticipate risks before they occur on site (Rane, 2023). Additionally, the mention of information theory in this cluster suggests a more analytical and conceptual view, illustrating how theoretical models influence risk management strategies.

Cluster 4: Core Concepts of Risk Evaluation and Control

This cluster focuses on the fundamental language of risk in construction, including important terms such as risk management and risk assessment, and highlights strategies used in project execution. Risks encompass factors like legal expenses, fines, productivity losses, and reputational damage (Forteza et al., 2017). However, risk should be regarded as a combination of physical risks such as environmental hazards (natural disasters), safety risks (worker injuries due to inadequate safety measures), technical risks (electrical issues, ergonomic concerns, explosions), and data-related risks, particularly in the context of the fifth industrial revolution, where advanced technologies are utilised. Hackers may exploit these tools to manipulate all project data collected, including safety-related information on site, and compromise stakeholder information (Agumba, 2016; Tambwe et al., 2025). This can jeopardise the well-being of employees. Thus, risk management and data risk management are equally important. According to Rane et al. (2021) and Tambwe et al. (2023), the study of both risk management and data risk management and their application in construction projects is becoming the centre of attraction for many researchers, as it has the potential to enhance overall project fitness. This helps construction companies' reputation, saves money and time, and protects sensitive project information. The cluster also identifies the various strategic dimensions of managing risks and uncertainties in projects, such as risk identification, evaluation, eradication, and transfer frameworks. The various risk management strategies include risk reporting, record keeping, the application of risk breakdown matrix, event tree analysis, checklisting, probability matrix, fuzzy set analysis, Monte Carlo simulation, risk acceptance, risk avoidance and risk transfer (Shio, 2013; Renault & Agumba, 2016). The various data risk management strategies include the use of antivirus, encryption, firewalls, intrusion detection systems, and secure authentication to prevent cyber threats, as well as hardware protections to safeguard physical and digital assets. It also involves educating personnel on data security, cyber threats, and proper data handling procedures, ensuring data management practices adhere to relevant laws and standards to avoid penalties, and continuously monitoring systems for potential threats while preparing response plans for data breaches or cyber incidents. (Tambwe et al., 2023; Tambwe et al., 2025). This theme also supports all the listed clusters above, serving as a conceptual foundation of risk research in the field.

This review highlights a lack of empirical research on risks in construction data management in projects, especially in the Global South, which are regions where digital and infrastructural challenges are still prominent. Despite advancements in digital safety technologies, there is a lack of integrated frameworks that address the intersection between cyber risks and physical safety risks in construction, particularly regarding how malicious alterations to safety monitoring data could directly endanger workers.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This bibliometric study highlights how construction data risks negatively impact the digital construction revolution, whereas this digital revolution aids in managing physical risks, particularly in construction project data, which is beneficial. This study provided tips on how to benefit from the digital revolution

for both physical and data-related risk management. Through the four thematic clusters, Cluster 1 discusses Operational Safety and Data-Oriented Risk Prevention with the aim of shifting safety from reactive to proactive management. Cluster 2 focuses on Digital Intelligence and Decision-Making in Risk Management, utilising technologies like AI and BIM. In contrast, Cluster 3 explores Design-Level Risk Considerations and Theoretical Foundations to assess risk outcomes prior to project commencement. Cluster 4 emphasises the Core Concepts of Risk Evaluation and Control to improve stakeholders' preparedness, understanding, and awareness of risks in construction projects. As emerging economies, such as South Africa, seek to adopt risk management, these findings provide strategic guidance on identifying risks for developing digital capabilities, proactive project delivery, and safety-enabling systems in the construction sector. Future research should establish context-specific, human-centric Industry 5.0 adoption within construction management, focusing on the complete mitigation of risks. Additionally, future studies can use longitudinal and empirical approaches to assess the impact of Industry 5.0 on long-term risk strategic decision-making and risk detection. This type of research will be vital in improving practical application, guiding policy, and steering the construction sector towards safe and intelligent future development. The study, therefore, recommends that stakeholders develop a cyber-physical safety framework to help protect workers and project information from malicious activities. Additionally, professionals should promote the use of digital tools to improve proactive risk management for physical risks and cyber detection. The government should offer subsidies and incentives, especially for small and medium companies that cannot afford the high costs of digital tools, to give every company the chance to protect its workers. Furthermore, leadership should invest more in risk awareness and in training and workshops to improve overall knowledge of cyber-physical risk intersections.

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SACQSP2025-120

A Framework for Adoption of Built Environment Fourth Industrial Revolution Technologies at Higher Education Institutions in South Africa

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Abstract

This study aims to develop a theoretically grounded framework to integrate Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) technologies, such as Building Information Modelling (BIM), Virtual Reality (VR), and Internet of Things (IoT), into Business Education within the built environment (BE) sector in South African higher education institutions (HEIs). It addresses the critical challenge of overcoming barriers to 4IR technology adoption in resource-constrained contexts, enhancing digital equity and industry alignment to prepare students for a digitally transformed built environment industry. An integrative literature review was conducted, systematically searching Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar for peer-reviewed studies for a period between (2015–2025) on 4IR technology adoption in HEIs. Forty-two studies were synthesised using Digital Pedagogy Theory, Diffusion of Innovation Theory, and the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology. Thematic analysis identified key barriers and enablers to technology integration. The resulting framework addresses infrastructural (e.g., limited digital access), pedagogical (e.g., outdated teaching methods), institutional (e.g., policy gaps), and cultural (e.g., resistance to change) barriers. It proposes actionable solutions, including curriculum redesign for BIM and VR integration, faculty training, and stakeholder partnerships to foster digital literacy, equitable access, and industry-relevant skills in built environment programs. The framework offers HEIs practical strategies to modernise curricula and align education with the built environment industry's digital demands, particularly in developing countries like South Africa. Theoretically, it advances global discussions on 4IR technology adoption by integrating established theories. As a conceptual study, it requires empirical validation, but its emphasis on digital equity and industry preparedness makes it a valuable tool for HEIs navigating digital transformation.

Keywords: Built Environment, Fourth Industrial Revolution, Higher Education Institution, South Africa.

Introduction

The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) has catalysed a profound transformation across industries, including the built environment (BE) sector, driven by digital technologies such as Building Information Modelling (BIM), Virtual and Augmented Reality (VR/AR), the Internet of Things (IoT), and Web 2.0 and 3.0 applications. These tools are reshaping construction practices through enhanced collaboration, sustainability, and efficiency (Moghayedi et al., 2020a). However, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), tasked with producing the next generation of built environment professionals, often struggle to embed these technologies effectively within their curricula. Conventional lecture-based pedagogies, limited infrastructure, and resistance to change have constrained innovation in built environment education, particularly in developing countries such as South Africa (Ruxwana & Msibi, 2018).

Integrating 4IR technologies into built environment education is vital for equipping graduates with the digital competencies required for a rapidly evolving industry. Yet, the pace of adoption remains slow, reflecting deep-rooted barriers that are infrastructural (poor connectivity, inadequate resources), pedagogical (outdated teaching models), institutional (weak governance and strategic planning), and cultural (technophobia, inequitable access). Despite the transformative potential of tools such as BIM and VR for immersive learning and industry simulation, their use in HEIs remains sporadic and uneven (Balogun, 2024; Ohei & Brink, 2019).

The knowledge gap is twofold. First, while global research extensively examines technology adoption in construction management and engineering education, there is limited theory-driven scholarship contextualised within the Global South. Less than 1% of studies on 4IR in business and built environment education originate from developing countries (Moghayedi et al., 2020b), creating a pronounced epistemic imbalance. Second, existing frameworks focus on infrastructure or pedagogy in isolation, with few attempts to propose an integrated, context-sensitive model that accounts for institutional strategy, cultural values, and socio-economic realities.

This study therefore asks:

How can a theoretically grounded framework support the systematic adoption of digital technologies in Built Environment education to enhance equity, innovation, and alignment with industry needs in developing countries such as South Africa?

Addressing this question, the paper proposes a 4IR Integration Framework for HEIs that unites technological, pedagogical, institutional, and cultural dimensions. Guided by Digital Pedagogy Theory, Diffusion of Innovation Theory, and the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), the framework aims to advance scholarly understanding of how digital technologies can be systematically adopted to promote inclusivity and innovation in built environment programs.

The problem is particularly acute in South Africa, where structural inequalities and resource constraints intersect with digital transformation imperatives. Many institutions lack the bandwidth, hardware, and software access such as BIM and VR platforms needed for effective digital learning (Moghayedi et al., 2020a). Faculty reluctance and technophobia also persist, particularly among educators accustomed to traditional didactic methods (Tondeur et al., 2017). This resistance is compounded by limited training and cultural beliefs that view digital tools as distractions rather than pedagogical enablers. Similarly, ethical and legal concerns such as data privacy, intellectual property rights, and digital security further restrict institutional readiness (Ohei & Brink, 2019).

Despite these constraints, the potential benefits of digital integration are substantial. VR and AR enable immersive, experiential learning; Web 2.0 and 3.0 foster collaboration, personalisation, and global engagement; and IoT-driven analytics can enhance sustainability and operational efficiency (Chawinga & Zinn, 2016; Mexhuani, 2024). For developing countries, these innovations represent not only technological progress but also opportunities for social inclusion, curriculum renewal, and alignment with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on quality education and innovation.

Accordingly, this study contributes both conceptually and practically. Conceptually, it advances theoretical understanding of technology adoption in higher education by integrating pedagogical, institutional, and cultural variables within a unified model. Practically, it provides actionable guidance for HEIs to modernise curricula, improve digital inclusion, and strengthen alignment with industry needs in resource-constrained contexts.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews key literature on digital transformation in built environment education and theoretical frameworks informing technology adoption. Section 3 outlines the integrative literature review methodology. Section 4 presents the proposed 4IR Integration Framework and its four interdependent domains. Section 5 discusses implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

Research Methodology

This study employed an integrative literature review (ILR) to develop a conceptual framework for the adoption of digital technologies in built environment education within HEIs. Given the transdisciplinary nature of the research spanning construction management, pedagogy, digital transformation, and

educational policy the integrative literature review design was appropriate for synthesising diverse evidence and theoretical perspectives to guide future practice (Lubbe et al., 2020; Snyder, 2019).

Research Paradigm and Rationale

The study is situated within a constructivist–interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that knowledge about technology adoption and digital transformation in education is socially constructed and context-dependent. This philosophical stance supports the study's aim of interpreting how institutional, pedagogical, and cultural factors intersect in shaping 4IR adoption in South African HEIs. The integrative literature review was thus selected not only for its capacity to integrate empirical and conceptual evidence but also for its alignment with an interpretive logic that values multiple perspectives and contextual nuance.

Integrative Review Approach

Unlike systematic reviews that privilege quantitative evidence or meta-analyses that aggregate numerical data, integrative reviews accommodate qualitative, quantitative, and conceptual studies, allowing for richer theoretical synthesis (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005; Oermann & Knafl, 2021). This pluralistic approach is particularly suited to emerging fields such as built environment digitalisation where evidence is fragmented across disciplines and often embedded in policy or institutional reports. Following Torraco (2016), the inclusion of grey literature (e.g., government strategies, white papers, and institutional frameworks) ensured the review's practical relevance, especially for the developing country context.

Search Strategy and Data Collection

The literature search followed a structured, transparent process across multiple sources. Major academic databases included Scopus, ScienceDirect, EBSCOhost, and Taylor & Francis Online, complemented by institutional repositories and government databases (e.g., DHET, CIDB, and UNESCO reports). Searches covered publications from 2013 to 2024, reflecting the contemporary evolution of 4IR technologies in education. A Boolean-based search strategy was used with combinations of the following keywords:

"Fourth Industrial Revolution" OR "4IR" AND "Built Environment education" OR "construction education" AND "digital pedagogy" OR "technology adoption" OR "VR" OR "AR" OR "BIM" OR "IoT" AND "South Africa" OR "developing countries".

Inclusion criteria required sources to:

- Address digital technology adoption or pedagogical innovation in higher education;
- Focus on Built Environment or related disciplines (engineering, architecture, construction);
- Offer conceptual, empirical, or policy-relevant insights;
- Be published in English between 2015–2025.

Exclusion criteria eliminated studies that:

- Focused solely on technical system design without educational context;
- Were opinion pieces lacking methodological grounding;
- Did not explicitly relate to digital transformation or 4IR.

Data Evaluation and Analysis

Each document was first assessed for credibility, methodological rigour, and contextual relevance following the quality appraisal guidelines of Oermann & Knafl (2021). The retained sources were then coded inductively using a thematic synthesis approach (Lubbe et al., 2020), where recurring concepts were identified, clustered, and refined into higher-order themes.

The coding process occurred in three stages:

- Open coding – identifying recurring patterns related to barriers, enablers, and pedagogical strategies.

- Axial coding – linking themes under broader categories such as infrastructural readiness, pedagogical innovation, institutional policy, faculty digital competence, and cultural acceptance.
- Selective coding – integrating the categories into a coherent structure that informed the 4IR Integration Framework.

The credibility and dependability of the analysis were enhanced through iterative cross-referencing between sources and alignment with theoretical lenses (Digital Pedagogy Theory, Diffusion of Innovation Theory, and UTAUT). Divergent findings were retained to preserve theoretical richness and avoid homogenisation.

Ethical Considerations

Although this study did not involve human participants, ethical integrity was upheld through transparent reporting, accurate citation, and acknowledgment of intellectual property across all sources. The inclusion of grey literature adhered to principles of responsible scholarship, ensuring that institutional and policy materials were critically evaluated rather than uncritically accepted. This approach aligns with the University Johannesburg Research Ethics Policy on literature-based studies.

Methodological Contribution

The integrative review process systematically synthesised fragmented yet complementary literature into a coherent framework that addresses the multifaceted challenges of digital transformation in BE education. By bridging global and local perspectives, this methodology not only identifies current deficiencies but also constructs a forward-looking model for 4IR readiness in developing contexts. The resulting conceptual framework provides a theoretically informed and contextually grounded foundation for future empirical validation and policy formulation.

Integrative Literature Review

The transformative potential of the 4IR in built environment education has triggered a worldwide transition toward integrating digital technologies such as BIM, VR/AR, the IoT, and advanced Web 2.0/3.0 platforms. Despite global progress, adoption within HEIs, particularly in the Global South, remains inconsistent and fragmented. This integrative literature review critically synthesises theoretical, empirical, and grey literature to guide the development of a framework for digital technology adoption in built environment education. The use of the integrative review methodology (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005) enables pluralistic inclusion of qualitative, quantitative, and policy-based evidence, which is essential in a dynamic field shaped by technological and pedagogical convergence (Lubbe et al., 2020; Oermann, 2021).

Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations

This review draws on three complementary theories: Digital Pedagogy Theory (McLoughlin & Lee, 2010), Diffusion of Innovation Theory (Rogers, 2003), and the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) (Venkatesh et al., 2003). Digital Pedagogy Theory foregrounds learner-centred, technology-driven instruction particularly valuable for visual, design-based disciplines such as architecture and construction management (Santoveña-Casal & López, 2024). Diffusion of Innovation Theory, meanwhile, explains adoption through institutional readiness, perceived benefits, and alignment with organisational culture (Ruxwana & Msibi, 2018; Mexhuani, 2024). UTAUT complements these perspectives by emphasising behavioural intentions and enabling conditions that shape both educator and student acceptance of new tools (Kamaranaman et al., 2019).

While these theories differ in focus pedagogical, organisational, and behavioural they converge in recognising that technology adoption in education is a systemic process involving infrastructure, skills, and institutional culture. Integrating these theories thus supports the development of a multi-dimensional framework that reflects both technological affordances and human factors. This synthesis informed the identification of five key dimensions pedagogical innovation, institutional readiness, technological infrastructure, faculty competence, and inclusion that underpin the conceptual framework presented hereafter.

Scholarly Literature

The scholarly literature provides evidence of persistent structural and pedagogical barriers to digital adoption in built environment education. Moghayedi et al. (2020a) identify infrastructural inequities in under-resourced HEIs, including limited access to BIM software, poor internet connectivity, and inadequate staff training. Windapo and Moghayedi (2020) further link these barriers to weak industry–academia collaboration, where emerging technologies such as GIS and BIM remain underutilised despite their capacity to enhance construction efficiency and sustainability.

However, Jin et al. (2018) and Mexhuani (2024) demonstrate that immersive technologies (VR/AR) enable interdisciplinary, project-based learning promoting the very competencies the built environment sector demands. Their findings contrast with Ohei and Brink (2019) and Tondeur et al. (2017), who show that institutional inertia and technophobia among faculty hinder such pedagogical innovation. This contrast suggests that digital transformation requires not only infrastructure but cultural and behavioural change, underscoring the importance of professional development and institutional leadership.

Furthermore, Chawinga and Zinn (2016) and McLoughlin and Lee (2010) show that Web 2.0 and 3.0 tools foster collaboration, reflection, and constructivist learning yet these benefits are rarely scaled across institutions. Chetty et al. (2018) and Abousoliman (2017) argue that digital literacy extends beyond technical skills, requiring critical thinking and pedagogical redesign. Balogun (2024) adds a sociocultural dimension, revealing inequities in participation among underrepresented communities due to systemic exclusion and limited exposure to digital disciplines.

Collectively, these studies reveal a fragmented but evolving ecosystem: technological innovation is outpacing pedagogical and institutional adaptation. Few studies, however, interrogate how institutional contexts mediate adoption outcomes, limiting transferability across regions. This gap reinforces the need for a framework grounded in local realities particularly the South African higher education setting.

Grey Literature

Grey literature adds critical depth by linking theoretical insights to policy and implementation realities. International reports from the World Bank (2011) and the OECD (2018) emphasise national investment in digital infrastructure, public–private collaboration, and flexible curricula that align with global digital competencies. Yet, these recommendations often assume high baseline capacity, making their applicability uneven in developing countries.

South African policy documents, notably the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) National Digital Transformation Strategy (2023), stress equitable access to devices, broadband, and digital content creation as essential enablers of transformation. This aligns with findings from Corner (2024) and Ruxwana and Msibi (2018), who highlight that systemic inequality and outdated pedagogical models limit the depth of reform. Similarly, professional bodies such as the Institution of Civil Engineers (ICE) (Whyte, 2017) advocate continuous digital upskilling and lifelong learning frameworks that align educational outcomes with industry evolution.

Unlike peer-reviewed research, grey literature foregrounds administrative feasibility, policy coherence, and ethical considerations such as data governance and intellectual property in digital learning environments. Together, these sources illustrate that policy design and institutional governance are as vital as technological capacity in realising sustainable digital transformation.

Synthesis and Implications

The synthesis of scholarly and grey literature highlights a fragmented but maturing discourse on the digital transformation of BE education. Empirical and theoretical sources collectively suggest that successful integration of digital technologies into higher education must be underpinned by a multidimensional framework addressing infrastructure, pedagogy, governance, human capital, and inclusion. The Digital Pedagogy Theory, UTAUT, and insights from constructivist learning paradigms provide conceptual clarity for modelling digital adoption behaviour among faculty and students. These are bolstered by bibliometric trends that validate rising scholarly attention to immersive and data-driven education technologies in BE disciplines (Fernández et al., 2023).

Implications for practice are clear. A robust framework must:

- Build technological capacity through scalable, equitable access to digital tools.
- Foster pedagogical innovation via project-based, learner-centric models grounded in co-creation and multimodal interaction.
- Ensure institutional readiness through policy reform, leadership buy-in, and professional development incentives.
- Promote cultural responsiveness to widen participation and foster diversity within digital disciplines.
- Leverage scholarly and grey literature to ensure that theory informs practice and policy is rooted in empirical insights.

This synthesis directly informed the conceptual framework developed in section 5, which integrates these five domains into a coherent model for digital transformation in built environment higher education. The framework moves beyond descriptive accounts of adoption barriers by proposing systemic interlinkages showing how governance, pedagogy, and infrastructure collectively determine the pace and depth of technological integration. In summary, this integrative review establishes a robust evidence base linking global theory to South African educational realities. By critically combining scholarly and policy insights, it advances a contextualised understanding of digital transformation in built environment education and sets the foundation for actionable, institution-wide strategies aligned with 4IR imperatives.

Framework Development

The development of a framework for integrating digital technologies into Built Environment education is firmly underpinned by theoretical and empirical evidence derived from the provided literature. Partelow (2023) asserts that frameworks are vital scientific instruments that connect theory and practice by structuring inquiry and implementing intricate concepts in practical settings. The meta-framework, which includes empirical generalisation, theoretical fitting, application, and hypothesising, offers robust justification for this study's framework's iterative and context-sensitive characteristics. Palinkas et al. (2015) emphasise the significance of intentional sampling and stakeholder engagement in implementation research, emphasising the necessity of integrating varied academic, technical, and student viewpoints in framework development to guarantee transferability and institutional pertinence. In addition to these insights, Whyte (2023) demonstrates that effective integration of digital infrastructure in construction and education requires systemic alignment among technology, pedagogy, organisational culture, and stakeholder coordination. Collectively, these sources substantiate the creation of a multi-dimensional, evidence-based framework designed to tackle infrastructural, pedagogical, cultural, and institutional obstacles in the digital transformation of business education.

The Proposed Framework

This framework comprises five interrelated pillars that collectively facilitate the digital transformation of Built Environment (BE) education at HEIs: Technological Infrastructure, Pedagogical Innovation, Institutional Readiness and Policy Alignment, Human Capital Development, and Equity and Cultural Responsiveness. Theoretical foundations for these pillars include Digital Pedagogy Theory (McLoughlin & Lee, 2010), which advocates for learner-driven, collaborative instruction utilising digital tools; Diffusion of Innovation Theory (Rogers, 2003), which elucidates the rate and adoption of innovations within institutions; the UTAUT (Venkatesh et al., 2003), which considers behavioural and institutional factors affecting technology adoption; and Constructivist Learning Paradigms (Santoveña-Casal & López, 2024), which promote student-centered learning through exploration and co-creation of knowledge. Each theoretical model corresponds to a distinct pillar; for instance, UTAUT and Diffusion of Innovation underpin technological infrastructure and policy alignment, whereas Digital Pedagogy Theory and Constructivist Learning bolster pedagogical reform and human capital development. Empirical studies (e.g., Moghayedi et al., 2020a; DHET, 2023; Jin et al., 2018) substantiate these pillars by identifying significant obstacles, including restricted access to BIM and VR tools, resistance from inadequately trained faculty, and the lack of comprehensive institutional strategies that promote equitable access and lifelong learning. Figure 1 depicts the developed

theoretical and conceptual framework, while Table 1 provided the framework mapping.

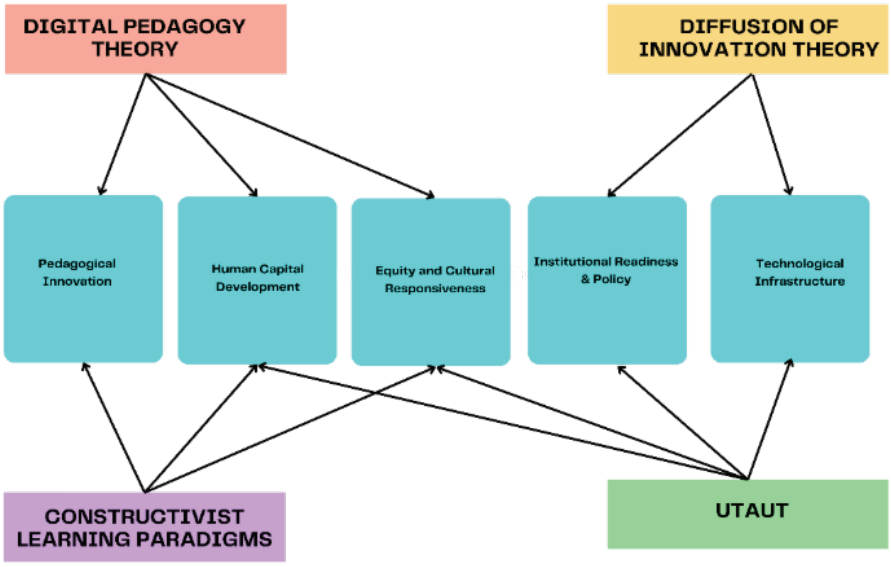

Figure 1 Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Table 1 Framework Mapping

Pillar	Digital Pedagogy Theory	Diffusion of Innovation	UTAUT	Constructivist Learning
Technological Infrastructure		✓	✓	
Pedagogical Innovation	✓			✓
Institutional Readiness & Policy		✓	✓	
Human Capital Development	✓		✓	✓
Equity and Cultural Responsiveness	✓		✓	✓

Each pillar comprises actionable focus areas to implement the framework. Institutions must guarantee equitable access to digital platforms such as BIM, AR/VR, and IoT by investing and forming strategic public-private partnerships (Moghayedi et al., 2020a). Pedagogical innovation entails transitioning from lecture-centric to learner-focused and project-oriented approaches, augmented by digital tools that enhance peer collaboration and global interaction (Chawinga & Zinn, 2016; McLoughlin & Lee, 2010). Institutional readiness necessitates policy reform, funding mechanisms, and leadership endorsement congruent with national strategies, including the National Digital Transformation Strategy for Higher Education (DHET, 2023). Human capital development prioritises ongoing professional advancement for faculty and the integration of digital skills into student curricula (Tondeur et al., 2017; Mexhuani, 2024), whereas equity and cultural responsiveness necessitate inclusive digital learning strategies designed for under-represented groups, including Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) learners (Balogun, 2024). The implementation strategy is incremental, commencing with pilot initiatives and expanding through iterative feedback loops guided by input from students, faculty, and industry

stakeholders. Monitoring and evaluation systems utilising performance indicators will facilitate adaptive learning and institutional alignment with the imperatives of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the Sustainable Development Goals (Whyte, 2017; OECD, 2018; World Bank, 2011).

Conclusion

This study developed a theoretically grounded framework for advancing the integration of 4IR digital technologies within the built environment education at HEIs. The framework's five pillars Technological Infrastructure, Pedagogical Innovation, Institutional Readiness and Policy Alignment, Human Capital Development, and Equity and Cultural Responsiveness offer a holistic lens through which HEIs can navigate digital transformation. Unlike existing descriptive models, this framework synthesises the Digital Pedagogy Theory, Diffusion of Innovation Theory, UTAUT, and Constructivist Learning Paradigms into a unified conceptual structure that links technological adoption, institutional behaviour, and learner transformation. The study contributes theoretically by positioning digital transformation as both a technological and socio-pedagogical process, where adoption depends not only on access to tools but also on cultural inclusivity, institutional vision, and cognitive readiness. Practically, it delineates an adaptable roadmap for policy makers and educational leaders to enhance digital equity, pedagogical innovation, and industry alignment within the built environment sector. The findings suggest that effective digital transformation requires systemic coordination, cross-sector partnerships, and context-sensitive leadership capable of reconciling global technological imperatives with local institutional realities.

While the study is conceptual in nature, it lays the foundation for future empirical research to test, refine, and contextualise the framework across varying HEI environments in the Global South. By doing so, it advances scholarly understanding of how 4IR technologies can drive not only educational efficiency but also sustainable, inclusive, and future-ready learning ecosystems.

Recommendations

Future research should focus on empirical validation and contextual testing of the proposed framework through longitudinal and comparative case studies to evaluate its applicability and effectiveness across diverse institutional and socio-economic contexts within the Global South. In addition, targeted faculty capacity building is essential; universities should implement continuous professional development initiatives to enhance digital competence, pedagogical agility, and innovation culture among academic staff, aligning with the principles of Digital Pedagogy Theory and the UTAUT. To ensure sustainability, policy alignment and strategic governance must be prioritised by integrating digital transformation objectives into institutional policies, accreditation standards, and national 4IR agendas while aligning with global sustainability frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Furthermore, inclusive infrastructure development should be pursued through equitable investment in digital tools and systems such as BIM, VR/AR, and the IoT with a particular focus on extending access to under-resourced campuses to bridge the digital divide. Finally, collaborative industry partnerships between HEIs, government, and industry stakeholders should be strengthened to co-develop responsive curricula that meet evolving Built Environment sector demands, thereby enhancing employability and innovation capacity among graduates. Collectively, these recommendations strengthen the bridge between theory and practice, ensuring that digital transformation in Built Environment education is not merely technological but also strategic, inclusive, and sustainable.

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SACQSP2025-122

Digital Pathway Towards Zero-waste Construction Industry: Barriers to Digital Technologies Adoption for Construction Waste Minimisation

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Abstract

The construction industry plays a vital role in economic development but remains a significant contributor to environmental degradation due to the vast amounts of waste it generates. In response, the concept of a zero-waste construction industry has emerged, advocating for sustainable practices and efficient use of resources. Digital technologies—such as Building Information Modelling (BIM), Artificial Intelligence (AI), Internet of Things (IoT), and blockchain—offer transformative potentials to reduce construction waste and support sustainability goals, therefore achieve a zero-waste construction industry. However, despite their proven scholarly potentials for construction waste minimisation, these technologies face numerous barriers hindering their large-scale adoption. This study conducted a systematic literature review using the PRISMA framework to identify key obstacles hindering their widespread implementation for construction waste minimisation. Drawing from 31 peer-reviewed publications retrieved from Scopus and Web of Sciences databases, the study identified financial constraints, resistance to change, lack of technical expertise, inadequate infrastructure, and limited stakeholder collaboration as barriers hindering the widespread adoption of digital technologies for construction waste minimisation. The findings underscore the need for a holistic, multi-stakeholder approach involving supportive policies, industry-wide cultural shifts, targeted training, and collaborative frameworks to unlock the full potential of digital technologies in minimising construction waste, therefore achieving a zero-waste construction industry.

Keywords: Zero-waste Construction industry, Construction waste minimisation, Digital technologies.

Introduction

The construction industry is a driver of both economic development and social progress of many countries (Khaertdinova et al., 2021) and environmental degradation such as biodiversity loss, habitat destruction, water, soil and air pollutions linked to the large amount of waste it generates (Ajayi et al., 2015; Chen et al., 2021). Annually, it is estimated that around 10 billion tons of construction waste (CW) are generated globally (Chen et al., 2021), of which the United States of America (USA) and the European Union (EU) generate around 1.5 billion tons are attributed to the United States of America (USA) and the European Union (EU) (Wu et al., 2020), China over 2.3 billion tons (Zheng et al., 2017), and South Africa between 5 to 8 million tons (Fitchett & Rambuwani, 2022). Over 35% of global

construction waste generated occupy landfills and illegal dumping sites (Wang et al., 2019). These figures represent not only a global environmental crisis, but also failure of the construction industry to align with global sustainability imperatives as advocated by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as well local regulations and frameworks such as the Green Economy Accord, the National Greening Framework and the Green Building Council (Simpeh & Smallwood, 2015). As a universal framework, SDGs address global most pressing issues including those related to uncontrolled waste streams such as construction and demolition waste (CDW) (Sachs et al., 2019). While aligning with SDGs and supported by global sustainability bodies such as the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP), a zero-waste construction industry (ZWC) can be achieved by reducing waste generation and maximising material recovery and reuse by designing out waste throughout the construction lifecycle (Akinade et al., 2018; UNEP, 2023).

Studies suggest that adopting digital technologies (DTs) in construction waste (CW) minimisation offers alternative solutions in addressing sustainability issues related to CW (Pellegrini et al., 2020; Thirumal et al., 2024). DTs are advanced information and communication technologies (ICT) and tools amplifying productivity across the construction life cycle (Chowdhury et al., 2019). Providing significant ways of achieving sustainability and ZWC, DTs are perceived as the future of the industry (Kang et al., 2022; Sun et al., 2015). These include Building Information Modeling, (BIM), Artificial Intelligence (AI), Machine Learning (ML), Internet of Things (IoT), Blockchain, 3D printing, Digital twins (Windapo, 2021; Talla and McIlwaine, 2022). While enabling effective, efficient and sustainable practices DTs can facilitate early clash detection, optimisation of material quantification and off-site manufacturing (Zhao et al., 2025); real-time material tracking through sensors and radio frequency identification (Dave et al., 2015); process stimulation for errors and cutting waste prevention (Sepasgozar et al., 2020) and predictive maintenance, material's lifespan extension, lowering renovation frequencies (Rane, 2023).

Despite various studies highlighting the potentials of DTs in minimising CW, statistics portrays their slow adoption for waste minimisation objectives (Ikuabe et al., 2020; van Wyk et al., 2024). It is in this regard that this study aims to explore the barriers hindering the adoption of digital technologies for construction waste minimisation. Specifically, the study seeks to identify key challenges hindering the widespread adoption of digital technologies for construction waste minimisation and to propose strategic interventions supporting their adoption.

Literature review

Minimising construction waste is a major step toward achieving a zero-waste construction industry (Tripathy, 2021). It is a global call that needs to be adhered to and implemented in every CW minimisation strategy such as the 3R strategy, lean construction, circular economy. With the shift towards digitalisation in the construction industry, DTs aid to reduce CW generation, therefore achieve a zero-waste construction industry.

Building Information Modeling

BIM is an innovative technology enhancing construction waste management by incorporating material specifications and quantities in 3D models, thus facilitating a virtual visualisation of the project and material assessment for reuse and recycling (Kang et al., 2022). With 33% of construction waste caused by inadequate design and unforeseen design changes being due to reasons such as stakeholders' miscommunication (Won et al., 2016), BIM provides a platform for virtual visualisation and enhanced communication among all project stakeholders, resulting in better communication detection of design error susceptible to cause reworks and unnecessary changes leading to waste generation. BIM-integrated software such as Revit aid accurate quantity take-offs, therefore eliminating up to 20% of material over-ordering (Hosny et al., 2023). BIM enhances circularity in the industry by facilitating the identification of reusable and recyclable materials prior the selection of appropriate demolition methods for specific materials for renovation and demolition projects (Cheng and Ma, 2013). By comparing material requirements with available demolition waste streams BIM enables the quantification and identification of material reuse opportunities, further enhancing circularity in the construction industry (Pellegrini et al., 2021).

Blockchain

Blockchain technology enables the establishment of smart contracts, hence guaranteeing a responsible construction waste management and compliance with waste management policies (Baralla

et al., 2023; Pellegrini et al., 2020). Blockchain technology enhances construction waste minimisation practices by providing traceability and transparency through a supply chain tracking, allowing for a sustainable sourcing of construction materials, tracking of materials' origin, shipments, handling and disposal, therefore enhancing accountability in the process, proactive planning for material reuse and recycling, and subsequently reducing material waste (Costa et al., 2022; Jiang et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2015; Shojaei et al., 2021).

Internet of Things

The use of IoT is deemed crucial in promoting waste minimisation in the construction sector (Liu et al., 2022). IoT sensors offer real-time monitoring of waste production, identification of high-waste areas, tracking material waste volumes, types, disposal patterns across construction sites and finding waste reduction opportunities during the construction stage, therefore accurately tracking waste management patterns and reducing the likelihood of material waste generation (Nandini, 2023; Rejeb et al., 2022). By monitoring and tracking the entire waste materials' lifecycle, IoT technology enhance CE in the construction industry by enabling effective and efficient reuse and recycling of construction materials and reducing material waste (Rejeb et al., 2022).

Intelligent Automated Technologies

IAT are advanced systems integrating technologies aiding the forecasting of material waste generation and improving minimisation strategies (Iyiola et al., 2024). These systems include artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning (ML), deep learning (DL). Although fewer studies exist on the use of IAT in waste minimisation, Coskuner et al. (2020) inform that ML can predict construction waste generation from various sources by using a multi-layer perception, and artificial neural networks. Akanbi et al. (2020) developed a DL model estimating material waste to be recovered after demolition in the United Kingdom (UK). material waste estimation estimations of construction material recovered after demolition. IAT systems enable construction companies to plan for waste reduction at source, therefore enhancing environmental sustainability and circularity (Lu et al., 2021; Song et al., 2017).

Methodology

This study employed the systematic literature review in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) framework. This framework involves a structured process anchored on identifying relevant literature from selected databases, screening and selecting articles for reviews, and reporting the findings after synthetising them (Page et al., 2021). The following subsections discuss all the above-mentioned steps.

Search of Relevant Literature

The search and identification of relevant literature for review was conducted on Scopus and Web of Sciences databases for their wide coverage of Architecture, Engineering and Construction (AEC) research and theirs all-encompassing nature and rigorous methodological criteria for content inclusion an exclusion (Díaz-García et al., 2015). For systematic literature review studies, Okoro et al. (2022) recommends the search of relevant literature on a single day to mitigate any potential bias that might result from ongoing updating of selected databases, therefore the search of relevant literature was conducted on 22 June 2025 using the following keywords:

- *((“Digital technolog*” or “Building Information Modeling” or “BIM” or” Artificial Intelligence” or “AI” or “Block chain” or “Digital twin” or “Internet of Things” or “IoT”))*
- *AND ((“Industry 4.0” or “Industry 5.0” or “Sustainable construction*”))*
- *AND ((“Construction waste*” or “Waste minimi*ation” or “Zero waste” or “Circular economy”))*
- *AND ((“Barrier*” or “Hinder*” or “Obstacle*” or “Technolog* accept*” or “adopt*”))*

Article Selection and Eligibility Criteria

To select the appropriate articles for review from the data bases, three inclusion criteria were applied. These are:

- Criterion 1: Peer-reviewed articles published in conference and scientific journals, in English Language, published between 2014 to 2024.

- Criterion 2: Articles related to the engineering, environmental sciences, green sustainable science technology, construction building technology, civil engineering fields.
- Criterion 3: Articles with abstracts relevant to the study.

Article Screening, Retrieval and Review

The title, authors, year of publication, and abstract of eligible articles were exported to Microsoft Excel from each database for screening and selection of articles that are relevant to the study. After carefully screening them based on their abstracts and relevance to the study, the full texts of the selected articles were carefully retrieved before extracting the necessary data and carefully coding them. The extracted information from the selected articles was organised into a narration to fit the purpose of the study.

Results

Figure 1 shows the results of the literature search that yielded to the selection of the 36 articles for this study. Initially, a total of 458 publications were retrieved from both databases, split as 244 and 214 publications from Scopus and Web of Sciences respectively. The number was then reduced to 427 publications (214 from Scopus and 213 from Web of Sciences), then to 246 (147 from Scopus and 99 from Web of Sciences), which were exported to Microsoft Excel for further screening and application of criterion 3.

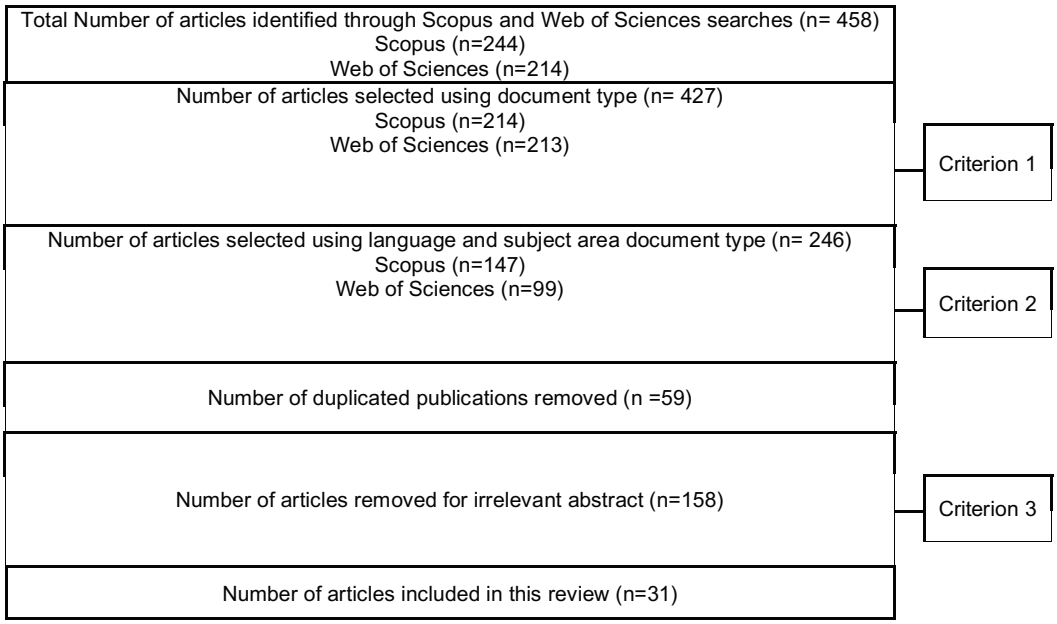

Figure 1 The Results from the Literature Search and the Selection Process Source: Author's diagram adapted from (Page et al., 2021).

Discussion

From the review of the literature, barriers hindering technology adoption for sustainable and zero waste construction industry are categorised into nine items: 1) low waste minimisation objectives, 2) Dependency on project data and adoption time, 3) Redundancy of construction practitioners and resistance to change, 4) Economic and financial constraints, 5) Lack of adequate infrastructure, 6) Lack of compatibility and interoperability between digital technologies, 7) Lack of government regulations, 8) Economic and financial constraints, and 9) Lack of stakeholders' collaboration.

Low Waste Minimisation Objectives

Minimising construction waste is less prioritised as compared to other objectives such as undertaking within the allocated time and cost (Guerra et al., 2020; Meshref and Ibrahim, 2024). Waste minimisation objectives are perceived as secondary as architects and project designers believe that it is a site and contractors'-related responsibility only (Ajayi et al., 2017; Bilal et al., 2016). Additionally,

contractors and construction companies manifest a strong interest on achieving short terms cost and time savings, often undermining environmental potentials of investing into digital technologies aiding to waste minimisation solutions (Jayarathna et al., 2025; Omer et al., 2025). Further exacerbating the barrier is the perception that integrating DTs in waste minimisation practices require additional planning and coordination efforts, leading to productivity loss and delays of higher priority project activities (Bilal et al., 2016; Won et al., 2016). Organisational inertia is another element of this barrier as many practitioners prefer established workflows over technology-driven solutions due to perceived disruptions to productivity (AL-Zubaidi and AlZaidi, 2025; Mitera-Kiełbasa and Zima, 2025). The perceived low productivity risk coupled with the low prioritisation CW practices further reduces the impact DTs in addressing CW generation issues.

Dependency on Project Data and Adoption Time

DTs such as BIM are dependent on complete and accurate data input while developing models, therefore inaccurate and incomplete data input often lead to wrong waste estimations due to discrepancies arising between as-built structures, BIM models and contractors and practitioners' records (Guerra et al., 2019). Technical limitations further deepen the barrier as DT platforms without project-specific parameterisation are unproductive in any field, thus emphasising the need for accurate data input for effective and substantial waste minimisation results (Quiñones et al., 2021). Furthermore, data reliability and processing capabilities are strained by the rise of resource-intensive "Big BIM Data" from integrated BIM workflows (Bertin et al., 2020). More often, DTs' adoption is decided after the completion of projects' designs, therefore limiting their efficacy and preventing proactive waste minimisation potentials. Won et al. (2016) note the frequent application of BIM prior the beginning of site activities, hence nullifying the opportunity of addressing design errors susceptible to generate waste in later stages through unnecessary reworks.

Redundancy of Construction Practitioners and Resistance to Change

Despite scholarly proven evidence of DTs' attributes in waste minimisation, some construction practitioners, regarded as "experts" confidently argue that the expertise they have acquired throughout the years of practice enable them to detect design errors without the help of any digital tool, subsequently dismissing their value for waste minimisation objectives (Won et al., 2016). This sceptical perception minimises the value and impact BIM in early clash detection and design validation, regarded as inconsequential to project outcomes (Won et al., 2016), thus reflecting construction experts' preferences for traditional waste minimisation methods over digital technologies which are as redundant rather than complementary (Yuan et al., 2024). Another factor contributing to this barrier is the fact that construction practitioners deem CW generation as unavoidable, therefore minimising all technology-enabled mitigation strategies (Bilal et al., 2016; Pellegrini et al., 2021).

Lack of Adequate Infrastructure

Infrastructural deficiencies constitute a fundamental barrier impeding the widespread of waste minimisation strategies as physical recycling infrastructures remain undeveloped especially in developing and under development countries, evidenced by inadequate facilities for waste stream processing, nullifying technology's-enabled waste minimisation potentials amid the effectiveness of planning strategies (Guerra et al., 2020; Kang et al., 2022). Inadequate recycling facilities, underdeveloped markets for recycled materials and space constraints on construction sites in high density areas further contribute to the limitations in practical implementations (Eze et al., 2022). Additionally, market infrastructure with underdeveloped recycled material markets and certification systems contributes to the failure in the implementation of circular economy aided by digital technologies (Bertin et al., 2020; Yuan et al., 2024), particularly in developing economies where digital access disparities exacerbate these issues (Omer et al., 2025).

Lack of Compatibility and Interoperability Between Digital Technologies

The lack of seamless compatibility between BIM platforms and other technologies disrupts data integration and workflow efficiency in waste minimisation objectives. Interoperability gaps between BIM software lead to information losses and incompatibility errors during model exchanges, undermining inventory analysis critical which are for waste quantification (Cheng et al., 2022). The lack of compatibility and weak interoperability between BIM and lifecycle assessment tools complicate environmental impact assessments of waste streams (Akbarieh et al., 2020). Cross-platform

inconsistencies such as divergent reporting functionalities in BIM-integrated software such as ArchiCAD, and Revit, impede automated waste quantification (Quiñones et al., 2021). Han et al. (2021) reinforce this position by highlighting the inability of BIM to integrate waste management tools such as Smart Waste, hence limiting real-time analytics for recycling optimisation.

Lack of Government Regulations

Governmental regulatory systems supporting digitalisation in the construction industry are essential for driving the awareness on waste minimisation practices. The lack and/or non-enforcement of government policies regulating and mandating sustainability and circularity practices such as material reuse and recycling in bidding processes as well government initiatives incentivising the use of digital technologies in waste reduction by rewarding organisations and contractors promoting their use and adoption constitute a huge impediment to their adoption (Yuan et al., 2024; Omer et al., 2025). Additionally, municipalities often lack compulsory waste management plans, undermining national policies and forfeiting waste infrastructures' fundings (Leite et al., 2023). Furthermore, the misalignment in regulatory frameworks such building codes restricting the use of recycled materials to a certain extent, contradict and minimise digital tracking of use reusable materials (Rodrigo et al., 2023; Akbarieh et al., 2020). Bertin et al. (2020) note the deterring absence of certified quality assurance bodies and liability frameworks initiated and supported by governments for digitally tracked materials for reuse.

Economic and Financial Constraints

The initial costs for implementing digital technologies remain an obstacle to their widespread adoption as the required initial investment in software licenses such as BIM platforms, specialised hardware such as IoT sensors, laser scanners, as well as well-established technological supporting infrastructure are high (Gasue et al., 2024; Hosny et al., 2023, Jayarathna et al., 2025). Additionally, upfront training requirement for stakeholders further inflates the initial implementation costs (AL-Zubaidi & AlZaidi, 2025; Guerra et al., 2019), often burdening small and medium companies despite their willingness to shift towards digitalised waste minimisation practices (Mitera-Kiełbasa & Zima, 2025). Technology adoption is conditioned to the value that must be gained on the construction projects as the economic viability of digital technologies need to be justified against the value they provide in waste minimisation process (AL-Zubaidi & AlZaidi, 2025).

Lack of Awareness and Skills Deficiency

The application of digital technologies requires adequate knowledge about their potential in minimising waste; however, many stakeholders are unaware of such attributes (Ganiyu et al., 2020). Further exacerbating this barrier is the lack of adequate education and training programmes as well as by the lack of technical competencies of various construction stakeholders. Construction industry practitioners and stakeholders often lack adequate and comprehensive knowledge on digital technologies due to non-integration of topics related and/or promoting their use into academic programmes and continuous professional development activities (Omer et al., 2025). The management, integration and processing of large volumes of high-precision data into BIM-models are critical, therefore require specialised training skills which construction practitioners often lack due the absence of technology-related education and training programmes (Xiao et al., 2023). Insufficient training and development opportunities further deepens contractors' difficulties in applying and integrating innovative technologies, subsequently impacting their awareness on such technologies (Pellegrini et al., 2021). There is a need for specialised expertise such as data analysis, programming and automation for integrating digital technologies which will enhance stakeholders' awareness of technology adoption for waste minimisation (Mitera-Kiełbasa & Zima, 2025, Rodrigo et al., 2023).

Lack of Stakeholders' Collaboration

The construction industry is a collaborative environment involving various stakeholders such as architects, quantity surveyors, material suppliers, contractors, project sponsors; therefore, the successful implementation and adoption of DTs for sustainable construction is partially dependent on the robust collaboration and engagement among the different stakeholders, which is however undermined by the lack of collaboration among stakeholders (Senaratne et al., 2021). A fragmented supply chain with key actors working in isolation while pursuing independent objectives constitutes an obstacle to the widespread adoption of DTs in construction waste minimisation, thus emphasising poor

project planning, poor material coordination and mismanagement of construction materials leading to unnecessary reworks and other CDW generating activities (Xue et al., 2021). Exacerbating this barrier is the lack of shared digital platforms with centralised and accessible databases preventing the efficient communication and exchange of information among stakeholders on material available, tracking, quality and reuse potential, paving the way for missed construction waste reduction opportunities and circularity (Rodrigo et al., 2023). Additionally, the lack of consequent incentives such as grants and tax relieves for firms adopting DTs for reducing construction waste contributes to the causes of this barrier with stakeholders focusing on short-term cost minimisation due to financial and economic constraints, therefore deprioritising waste minimisation promoted by other stakeholders such as non-government organisations advocating for sustainability, hence creating conflicts stalling effective collaboration among stakeholders (Itanola et al., 2024).

Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore the critical role digital technologies can play in achieving a zero waste construction industry. Despite their transformative potential, adoption remains hindered by a range of barriers including financial constraints, resistance to change, lack of technical expertise, and inadequate infrastructure. By systematically reviewing the literature, this research has highlighted the need for a coordinated, multi-stakeholder approach to overcome these challenges.

Addressing these challenges require a concerted, multi-pronged strategy involving stakeholders including policy makers and industry leaders. This could be through prioritisation of investment in digital infrastructure, targeted training programs, and fostering collaborative environments that support innovation. The integration of technologies such as BIM, AI, IoT, and blockchain should be guided by strategic frameworks that align with sustainability goals and local contexts. Future research should focus on developing practical models for implementation, particularly in developing regions where the impact of construction waste is most pronounced. Ultimately, embracing digital transformation is not only a technological shift but a cultural one which require commitment across all levels of the construction ecosystem. With the right support and vision, digital technologies can serve as powerful enablers of sustainable, efficient, and resilient construction practices.

Recommendations

Drawing on the findings and conclusion, the following recommendations are made to bridge the gap between the theorical potential of digital technologies and their large-scale practical adoption:

To construction Industry Practitioners:

- Promotion of a strategic cultural shift with senior managements incorporating construction waste minimisation objectives as key performance indicators and promoting construction waste minimisation strategic initiatives as an added value to their organisations rather than a cost centre.
- Adopting phased and strategic implementation plans gradually implementing digital technologies from pilot projects before deciding on a full scale digital transition.
- Investing in skills development to move beyond basic software trainings to skills development programmes on various digital technologies and their various attributes such as clash detection for waste prevention.

To Policymakers and Government Bodies:

- Developing digital and circular frameworks mandating the use of technologies such as BIM for all government funded construction projects with specific requirement for waste management plans embedded into tendering processes.
- Creating a carrot-and-stick regulatory environment by implementing stringent and rigorous landfill tax to discourage illegal dumping and simultaneously incentivising organisations promoting construction waste reduction through grants and preferential scoring in tender evaluations for projects embedding digital technologies for waste minimisation objective such as material reuse and recycling.
- Investing in development of regional construction and demolition waste recycling hubs and mandating the use of recycled materials to a certain extend in government funded projects.

To Academic and Training Institutions:

- Embedding digital technologies and waste minimisation practices such as BIM modules, IoT applications in construction, circular economy and 3R strategy into their curricular and regularly revising them to align with the current imperatives of waste minimisation.
- Creating joint programmes and modules between various built environment programmes and developing short courses and certification programmes to industry practitioners on the application and use of emerging digital technologies for construction waste minimisation.

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SACQSP2025-123

Assessing the Evolution of Blockchain Applications in Construction Procurement Processes: A Bibliometric Review

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ABSTRACT

Blockchain technology has emerged as a transformative innovation with the potential to revolutionise various industries, including finance, supply chain management, and construction. Various schools of thought have since alluded a growing concern regarding the prevailing ethical misconduct within the contractor procurement process. The fundamental innovation of blockchain technology is the provision of a decentralised and tamper-resistant ledger system that ensures transparency, security, and efficiency in the process of recording and verifying transactions, thus alleviating existing problems within procurement process like contractor selection. There is, however, a low adoption rate of this technology within the construction industry, despite its commendable advantages. For this reason, this study conducts a comprehensive bibliometric review to assess the evolution of blockchain applications in construction procurement processes. By systematically analysing publications in the Scopus database, it identifies key patterns, emerging research themes, and potential research gaps. Unlike prior reviews that examined blockchain in the construction industry more broadly, this paper focuses specifically on procurement-related applications, providing a detailed mapping of how blockchain adoption has evolved in this field. The findings offer new insights into global research trends and reveal thematic clusters driving current innovation. This contribution strengthens understanding of blockchain's role in improving transparency and efficiency in procurement and sets the foundation for future empirical and policy-oriented studies.

Keywords: Blockchain, Procurement, Construction Industry.

Introduction

Blockchain technology has emerged as a transformative innovation with the potential to revolutionise various industries, including finance, supply chain management, and healthcare (Treiblnaier, 2018; Yli-Huumo & DeokyoonKo, 2016). As observed by Dakhli (2019), the construction industry is amongst the various industries where blockchain has shown significant potential, particularly in the construction procurement process. Its fundamental innovation lies in providing a decentralised and tamper-resistant ledger system, ensuring transparency, security and efficiency in recording as well as verifying transactions (Kiu, Chia & Wong, 2022). In essence, Kiu et al. (2022) believe that blockchain allows for the creation of a shared database accessible to multiple parties, eliminating the need for intermediaries and reducing the risk of fraud or manipulation. Nofer, Gomber, Hinz and Schiereck (2017) believe that this technology holds promise for revolutionising traditional processes by enhancing trust and accountability in the construction industry.

Various schools of thought including Agyekum, Adinyira, and Amudjie (2021) suggest that there is a growing concern regarding the prevailing ethical misconduct within the contractor selection process. In contrast, current methods often rely on manual documentation, fragmented information systems and subjective decision-making which leads to inefficiencies, disputes, delays and unethical practices. To

give an illustration, Pishdad-Bozorgi and Han Yoon (2022) state that unethical practices in the selection process include bid peddling and bid shopping, whereby confidential project information is shared to bidders of interest to ensure they are selected for the proposed project. Li Zhang and Xu, (2022) believe that blockchain technology is a solution to these challenges. However, Pishdad-Bozorgi and Han Yoon (2022) are of the concern that despite the potential benefits of blockchain within the construction industry, there remains to be persistent challenges in procurement processes.

Despite the known advantages of blockchain technology (BCT) application in the construction industry, various studies as recent as 2022, still show a concern over the rate of adoption of it. Prabhakara, Xaviera and Abubeker (2023) state that the adaptation of BCT is lagging compared to other industries such as supply chain management and finance. Prior studies have explored broader implications of BCT, but focused examination of its impact on procurement remains limited (Agyekum et. al., 2021). Li et al. (2022) elaborates that this may be attributed to complex internal structures within the industry, lack of training, as well as lack of funds. Apart from all these challenges, the construction industry is known for its inadequate investment in research and development (Chilipunde, 2010; Fadhil & Tan, 2001). The lack of research and knowledge creation on how blockchain technology impacts the procurement processes of the construction industry could play a significant role in the evolution of blockchain applications.

Therefore, this paper seeks to address the gap in understanding how blockchain technology has been applied and evolved within construction procurement processes. Unlike prior studies that focused on general blockchain adoption in construction, this study concentrates specifically on procurement, where transparency, accountability, and ethical conduct are critical challenges. By employing a bibliometric review and mapping the evolution of related scholarly research, the study provides an evidence-based understanding of research trends, influential authors, key themes, and geographic distributions of blockchain research in procurement.

The objectives of this study are threefold:

- RO1: To assess the evolution and growth of blockchain research in construction procurement over time.
- RO2: To identify the key thematic areas, influential publications, and global research trends driving this field.
- RO3: To highlight existing knowledge gaps and propose future research directions for advancing blockchain adoption in procurement.

This paper begins by reviewing existing literature on blockchain technology and its applications within the construction industry, particularly focusing on procurement processes. It then outlines the bibliometric analysis methodology employed, followed by the presentation of key findings and trends. Finally, the paper discusses the implications of the results, identifies research gaps, and offers recommendations for future studies.

Blockchain in Construction Procurement Processes

Overview of Blockchain Technology

Blockchain technology, a decentralised and distributed digital ledger, records transactions across multiple computers with key features such as transparency, immutability, and decentralisation, making it attractive to sectors like finance, healthcare, and construction (Nawari & Ravindran, 2019). Unlike traditional databases controlled by a central authority, blockchain operates on a peer-to-peer basis, eliminating intermediaries, enhancing trust, and reducing risks of manipulation or fraud (Zheng et al., 2018).

There are three main types of blockchain relevant to industry applications. Public blockchains (e.g., Bitcoin, Ethereum) are fully decentralised and open, but face scalability and privacy concerns, limiting their suitability for sensitive industries (Chen et al., 2020). Private blockchains (e.g., Hyperledger) are permissioned and controlled by a single entity, making them faster and more confidential for corporate use (Yang et al., 2023). Consortium blockchains strike a balance by being managed collectively by multuple organisations, offering both decentralisation and control (Li et al., 2020).

Blockchain's integrity is maintained through consensus algorithms, which validate transactions across the network. Proof of Work (PoW), used in Bitcoin, relies on solving complex problems to secure the blockchain but is energy-intensive (Nakamoto, 2008). Proof of Stake (PoS), by contrast, validates transactions based on coin holdings, making it more energy-efficient and scalable (Fanti, 2019). These mechanisms create a trustless environment where no central authority is needed.

In procurement-intensive sectors like construction, blockchain's immutability and automation via smart contracts can be transformative. Smart contracts are coded agreements that self-execute when predefined conditions are met, removing the need for intermediaries (Scott, 2021). This ensures transparency, minimises delays, and provides secure, permanent transaction records across all stakeholders (Turk & Klinc, 2017).

Blockchain in the Construction Industry

Blockchain technology, as discussed by Badi and Ochieng (2021), offers solutions to persistent inefficiencies in the construction industry, particularly in procurement. This process, encompassing tendering, bidding, contracting, and supply chain management, often faces challenges such as lack of transparency, fraud, and inefficiency. With projects becoming increasingly complex, blockchain's decentralisation, transparency, and immutability present an innovative approach to improving trust and efficiency (Turk & Klinc, 2017).

Its ability to create an immutable, transparent ledger can enhance accountability among stakeholders by automatically recording and verifying transactions. In tendering, blockchain securely documents the bidding process, preventing alterations post-submission and ensuring fairness (Penzes et al., 2018). It also provides tamper-proof records during evaluation and awarding, reducing corruption risks. In supply chain management, where construction networks are often fragmented, blockchain can track material movements in real-time, ensuring accountability and reducing disputes (Li et al., 2020). It also enables verification of suppliers and ongoing performance tracking, improving quality and efficiency (Sustanty et al., 2024).

Smart contracts, self-executing agreements triggered by predefined conditions (Nawari & Ravindran, 2019). They can automate payment milestones, enforce penalties for delays, and reduce reliance on intermediaries, lowering administrative costs and mitigating payment disputes (Scott et al., 2021). This improves liquidity and ensures timely payments (Turk & Klinc, 2017). Beyond financial and logistical benefits, blockchain can also certify materials and processes. By recording origin, quality, and compliance data, it ensures that only approved materials are used (Nanayakka et al., 2021). This is especially critical for large-scale, safety-sensitive infrastructure projects.

Evolution of Blockchain in Construction Procurement

The integration of blockchain into construction procurement has seen an upward trend in research and adoption over the past decade. The early discussions around blockchain in construction procurement focused largely on its potential to solve the industry's long-standing issues of fraud, inefficiency, and lack of transparency. This is evident in the increasing number of publications exploring blockchain's transformative role in construction. A bibliometric analysis of this literature reveals significant growth in research output from 2016 onwards, coinciding with the rise of Blockchain 3.0, which emphasises the use of blockchain beyond cryptocurrencies into broader industrial applications (Maesa et al., 2020). This period also marked the beginning of the exploration of blockchain applications in sectors like procurement, supply chain management, and contract automation.

Prominent milestones in the adoption of blockchain for construction procurement include the first significant use cases in supply chain tracking and the automation of contract execution through smart contracts. These developments garnered attention, particularly in journals like Automation in Construction and Journal of Construction Engineering and Management, where blockchain's ability to secure and streamline processes began gaining academic recognition (Dobrucali et al., 2024). The literature highlights three distinct phases in blockchain's integration into construction: the initial exploration phase (2015–2017), marked by theoretical discussions; the pilot project phase (2018-2020), where real-world case studies began emerging; and the current phase, where empirical evidence and scalable applications are being actively researched and implemented (Singh et al., 2021).

Key contributors to blockchain research in construction procurement have been scholars from institutions such as Tsinghua University, University College London, and Stanford University. Notably, authors like Chen, Xu, Chong and Chi have made substantial contributions to the understanding of how blockchain can be effectively applied in procurement processes, particularly in the areas of contract management and supply chain transparency (Xu et al., 2021). These authors have often collaborated with researchers in related fields, creating a global network of scholars pushing forward the boundaries of blockchain applications in construction procurement.

The global research on blockchain in construction procurement is led by countries with advanced digital infrastructures, such as China, the United States, and the United Kingdom. China, particularly, has been at the forefront of blockchain innovation due to its investment its government has made in digital technologies and smart contracts, contributing a substantial volume of the research output (Ahn et al., 2024). Collaboration between universities, research institutes, and industry stakeholders has fostered a diverse network of contributors, promoting cross-border research that is shaping the future of blockchain in construction procurement.

Classification of Blockchain Applications in Construction Procurement

Blockchain technology has proven itself to be a versatile tool in addressing various challenges in construction procurement, particularly by offering a more transparent, secure, and efficient means of managing complex processes. The applications of blockchain in procurement can be classified into several key clusters: tendering and bidding, contract management, supply chain management, and payment processing. Each of these clusters benefits uniquely from blockchain's decentralised and immutable nature.

In the realm of tendering and bidding, blockchain helps secure the integrity of tender documents and bids, reducing the risk of manipulation or corruption. Traditionally, procurement processes are vulnerable to tampering, especially when dealing with multiple contractors and stakeholders. Blockchain ensures that once a bid is submitted, it cannot be altered, providing greater transparency in how bids are evaluated and awarded (Kiu et al., 2020). Smart contracts further enhance this by automatically executing contractual agreements once predefined conditions are met, minimising human intervention and associated errors (Baliga et al., 2016).

Contract management is another critical area where blockchain is transforming construction procurement. Through the use of smart contracts, terms and conditions of agreements between contractors and clients can be encoded directly into the blockchain. These smart contracts automatically trigger actions such as payment disbursements, approval workflows, and penalties when certain conditions are met or violated (Kiu et al., 2022). This reduces disputes, delays, and misunderstandings, creating a more streamlined contract management process.

In supply chain management, blockchain provides traceability and accountability for materials and products moving through the construction supply chain. By recording every transaction on an immutable ledger, blockchain enables stakeholders to track the origin, movement, and quality of materials, ensuring compliance with specifications and standards (Lu et al., 2021). This heightened visibility reduces the risks of fraud and counterfeit materials, promoting trust and efficiency across all supply chain activities.

Lastly, payment and financial management in procurement also stand to benefit from blockchain's secure, decentralised features. Payment delays have long been a challenge in the construction industry, often causing financial strain on smaller contractors. Blockchain facilitates more timely and transparent payments by linking payment releases to contract milestones, using smart contracts to automate financial transactions as specific project stages are completed (Kim et al., 2020). This ensures that contractors are paid on time, improving cash flow and reducing disputes related to delayed payments.

Several real-world examples highlight the potential of blockchain in construction procurement. For instance, the use of blockchain in large-scale infrastructure projects has improved the tracking of materials and reduced administrative overhead through the automation of contracts and payments (Zadeh et al., 2023). These examples demonstrate the tangible benefits of blockchain adoption and suggest that its role in construction procurement will continue to grow as technology matures.

Challenges of Blockchain Adoption in Construction

While blockchain technology presents immense potential for improving procurement processes in the construction industry, its adoption faces significant barriers. One of the primary challenges is the construction industry's notoriously low level of digitisation. As one of the least digitised industries globally, construction has struggled to integrate digital solutions into its workflows (Li et al., 2022). This low level of digital adoption poses a significant hurdle to implementing blockchain, which relies heavily on robust digital infrastructure and standardised data input systems.

A significant factor contributing to the slow adoption of blockchain in construction is the fragmented nature of the industry itself. The construction industry comprises numerous small- to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that often lack the resources or technical expertise to implement advanced digital technologies like blockchain (Chen et al., 2021). Many firms continue to rely on traditional, paper-based procurement methods, which can be incompatible with the digital frameworks required for blockchain integration. These SMEs may also be resistant to change due to the high initial investment costs associated with blockchain implementation, including training, technology upgrades, and system integration (Pradhananga et al., 2021).

Another key challenge is the lack of standardisation across construction procurement processes. For blockchain to function effectively, it requires accurate, uniform, and digitised input data across all stages of the procurement process. This is particularly important when integrating smart contracts, as blockchain relies on these contracts to automatically enforce terms and trigger actions based on predefined conditions (Li et al., 2020). However, the absence of standardised data models in construction hinders the automation and interoperability necessary for blockchain-enabled procurement (Perera et al., 2020).

Different firms often use varied formats and systems to manage their procurement activities, making it difficult for blockchain to harmonise and process data across the entire supply chain (Nanayakkara et al., 2021).

Moreover, the legal and regulatory framework surrounding blockchain remains underdeveloped in the construction industry. The use of smart contracts and blockchain for contract management raises legal uncertainties, particularly regarding liability, enforcement, and dispute resolution (Badi et al., 2021). Since blockchain records are immutable and decentralised, it can be challenging to address errors or disputes in procurement activities, where contract terms might need to be renegotiated. The legal enforceability of smart contracts also remains a concern, as many jurisdictions lack clear regulations governing their use in the construction sector (Turk & Klinc, 2017). This regulatory uncertainty discourages widespread adoption of blockchain, as firms are hesitant to implement a technology that operates in a legal grey area.

In addition to regulatory hurdles, blockchain adoption faces technical challenges related to scalability and performance. While blockchain is inherently secure, the process of validating transactions across decentralised nodes can be time-consuming and resource-intensive, particularly for large construction projects involving numerous stakeholders (Li et al., 2020). The scalability of blockchain systems to handle the volume of data generated in complex construction procurement processes is still under development, with many current platforms unable to support large-scale operations without compromising speed and efficiency (Lin et al., 2022).

Finally, there is a significant knowledge gap and lack of skilled professionals in blockchain technology within the construction industry. Many industry practitioners are unfamiliar with the technical aspects of blockchain technology, and firms may struggle to find personnel capable of implementing and managing blockchain systems (Jahani et al., 2021). This lack of blockchain literacy not only slows adoption but also increases the risk of unsuccessful implementations, as firms may be unable to fully leverage the technology’s capabilities or integrate it seamlessly into their procurement processes (Perera et al., 2020).

While blockchain technology offers promising solutions to the inefficiencies and ethical challenges of construction procurement, its adoption in the industry is impeded by a variety of factors. Low levels of digitisation, lack of standardisation, regulatory uncertainty, technical scalability issues, and a shortage of skilled professionals are among the most significant barriers. Overcoming these challenges will

require coordinated efforts between industry stakeholders, regulators, and technology providers to create a more conducive environment for blockchain adoption in construction procurement.

While the existing literature demonstrates significant progress in understanding blockchain technology and its potential applications in construction procurement, several gaps persist. Most prior studies have been conceptual or exploratory, focusing on theoretical benefits rather than empirically validating blockchain's effectiveness in real-world procurement settings. Furthermore, many reviews have examined blockchain adoption in the construction industry as a whole, overlooking the specific complexities and ethical dimensions of procurement processes. There is also limited bibliometric evidence that maps the intellectual structure, thematic evolution, and geographic distribution of this emerging research field. This study therefore addresses these gaps by conducting a bibliometric review that systematically analyses scholarly contributions, highlights dominant research themes, and identifies opportunities for future research on blockchain-enabled procurement.

Methodology

The study focuses on assessing the evolution of blockchain applications within construction procurement processes through a bibliometric review. To achieve this, a bibliometric approach was used to analyse and map the development of knowledge in this field by identifying research trends. Data was gathered only from the Scopus database, which according to Stahlschmidt and Stephen (2020) is the largest database of research items of sufficient quality that can be found. It is well-known for its extensive coverage of many scientific disciplines and is regularly used by researchers to gather literature for these kinds of analyses. A literature search was done in fields related to construction, such as engineering and computer science, using keywords like "blockchain" and "procurement" or "supply chain" and "construction" on Scopus. The search was conducted on August 1st, and an initial total of 363 articles were identified, spanning various subject areas including Engineering, Computer Science, Physics and Astronomy, Chemistry, Biochemistry, Genetics and Molecular Biology, Social Sciences, Earth and Planetary Sciences, and Arts and Humanities. These articles were first refined by publication year (2014-2024) to capture recent developments in blockchain in procurement processes over the past decade. A second refinement restricted the results to the subject areas of Engineering and Computer Science to ensure the studies were grounded in domains most pertinent to construction cost estimation, computational modelling, and artificial intelligence applications, reducing the number to 134. Further filtering to include only conference papers and journal articles published in English was undertaken to ensure the inclusion of peer-reviewed and accessible scholarly work, resulting in 105 articles. Finally, limiting the results to open access documents, to show transparency, reproducibility, and accessibility of research outputs, left 90 articles, which were then exported in CSV format and analysed using VOSviewer (version 1.6.20).

Research Results and Discussion

Publications per Year

Figure 1 shows that over time, there has been notable changes in the publishing trends regarding blockchain in construction procurement. The field gained traction from starting off slowly in 2018 with only 1 publication to achieving 12 publications by 2019. A significant increase was seen in 2020, with 23 publications, driven by the global rise in interest in digital transformation due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This probably sparked the construction industry's interest in blockchain technology in order to create more reliable and transparent procurement procedures. Despite the growing interest in 2020, a drop was seen in 2021, which suggests that while research increased, implementation in practice may still be lagging due to technical and organisational barriers identified in the literature (Li et al., 2022). This demonstrates a continuing need for applied research that connects blockchain theory with procurement practice.

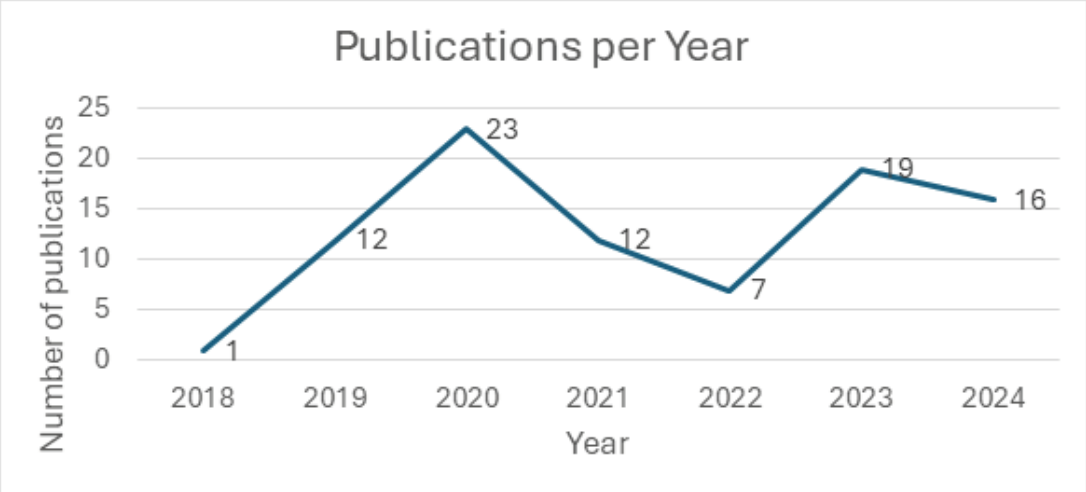

Figure 1 Publications per Year

Publications per Country

Figure 2 showcases the distribution of publications and citations by country, reflecting the global interest in blockchain applications in construction procurement. China is a leading contributor with 24 publications and 495 citations, underscoring its active role in adopting and researching blockchain within the construction industry. The United States follows (16 documents and 536 citations), United Kingdom (15 publications and 177 citations), South Africa (7 publications and 50 citations), Australia (6 publications and 192 citations), India (6 publications and 24 citations), Turkey (5 publications and 63 citations), South Korea (4 publications and134 citations), Malaysia (4 publications and 18 citations) ending with Hong Kong (3 publications and 160 citations).

This reveals a clear gap in blockchain research between developed and developing countries. Developed nations like China and the United States, as stated by Saif, Islam, Haque, Akhter, Rahman, Jafrin, Rupa, and Mostafa (2022), have greater financial resources and research infrastructure. In contrast, developing countries such as India and South Africa have limited resources for such research. This gap highlights the need for more support and investment to help developing countries advance in blockchain technology and achieve more balanced global progress.

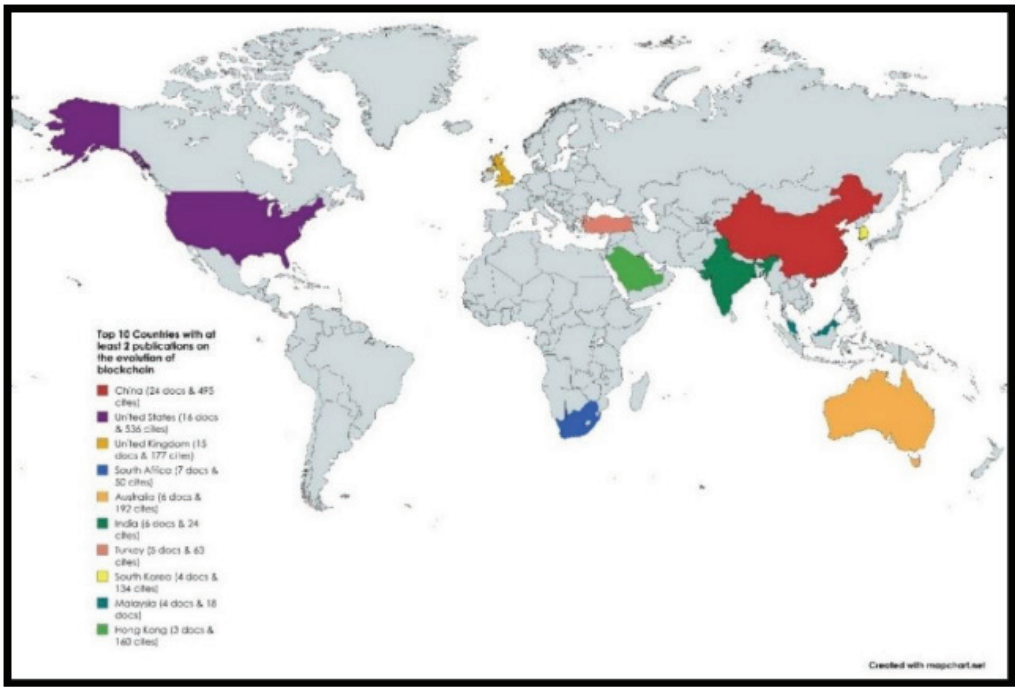

Figure 2 Number of Publications per Country

Most Cited Publications

To fully comprehend the direction in which the research of blockchain technology in the construction industry has taken, it was necessary to identify and analyse documents which were the most cited as well as their theme of research. The most cited studies shown in Table 1, reveal a clear focus on the potential of blockchain rather than empirical validation in live construction projects. Works by Wang (2020) and Lu (2021) dominate due to their exploration of smart contracts and supply chain transparency, which remain central themes. However, the absence of high-impact empirical case studies suggests that while scholarly attention is substantial, practical demonstration of blockchain's procurement value is still limited a gap that future research should address.

Table 1 Top 10 Most Cited Publications

Author	Title	Citations
Wang (2020)	Application of Blockchain Technology in Value Chain of Procurement in Manufacturing Enterprises	329
Lu (2021)	Exploring smart construction objects as blockchain oracles in construction supply chain management	91
Kim (2020)	A Study on the Application of Blockchain Technology in the Construction Industry	87
Hamledari (2021)	Construction payment automation using blockchain-enabled smart contracts and robotic reality capture technologies	74
Rodrigo (2020)	Potential Application of Blockchain Technology for Embodied Carbon Estimating in Construction Supply Chains	57
Shojaei (2019)	Exploring applications of blockchain technology in the construction industry	57
Elghaish (2023)	Digitalised circular construction supply chain: An integrated BIM-Blockchain solution	43
Elghaish (2022)	Applications of Industry 4.0 digital technologies towards a construction circular economy: gap analysis and conceptual framework	41
Hamledari (2021)	Measuring the impact of blockchain and smart contracts on construction supply chain visibility	37
Liu J (2022)	A Hybrid Blockchain Model for Trusted Data of Supply Chain Finance	31

Research Focus Based on Co-occurring Keywords

The keywords which appeared the most were generated and analysed on a network as presented below in figure 3, by using the VOSviewer software. The minimum frequency for each keyword was set to 5 and a total of 31 keywords were identified. VOSviewer classified the keywords into four clusters, identified by their colours as seen on the network visualisation below, which also shows keywords of "blockchain" and "construction industry". The nearer the keywords are to one another, the higher their co-occurrence (Van Eck & Waltman, 2014).

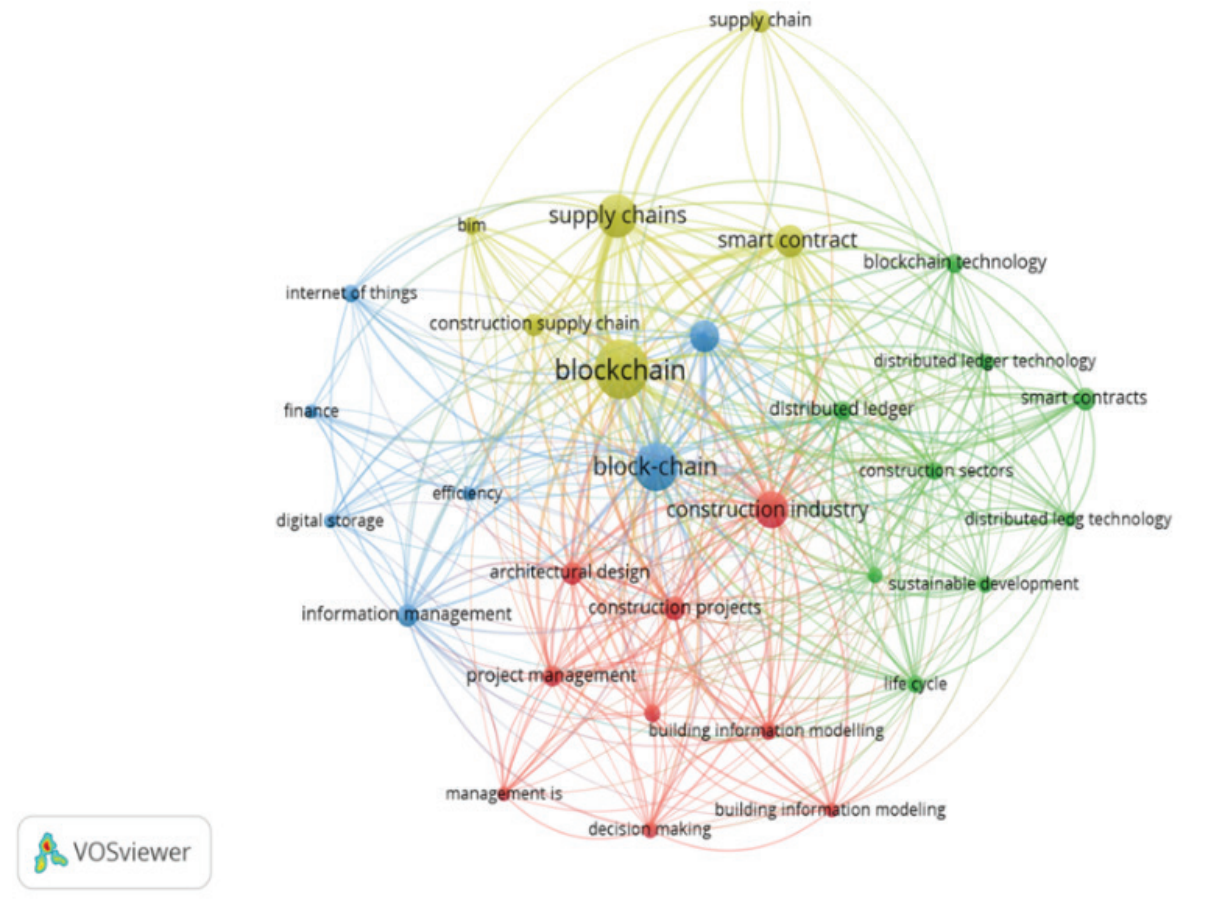

Figure 3 Map Showing Research Focus Based on Co-occurance in Keywords

Cluster one - Project Delivery: is shown in the red coloured nodes, consisting of 9 keywords, namely construction industry, architectural design, construction projects, project management and decision making, amongst others.

Cluster two - Innovative Technology: is shown in the green coloured nodes, consisting of 9 keywords, namely sustainable development, smart contracts and distributed ledger, amongst others.

Cluster three - Optimising Information Management: is shown in the blue coloured nodes, consisting of 7 keywords, namely finance, efficiency, information management, etc.

Cluster four - Integration: is shown in the yellow-coloured nodes, consisting of 9 keywords, namely BIM, construction supply chain and smart contract, amongst others.

Research Focus Base on the Year of Publication

Figure 4 below is a network visualisation map which shows the co-occurring keywords from the years as indicated. With a threshold of a minimum 5 on co-occurrence, the network shows the research between mid-2021 and 2022 leaned more towards supply chain. From 2022 to mid-2022, focus gradually shifted to smart contracts, information management and distribution ledger technology and from mid-2022 to 2023, research focus was on building information technology, sustainable development and life cycle.

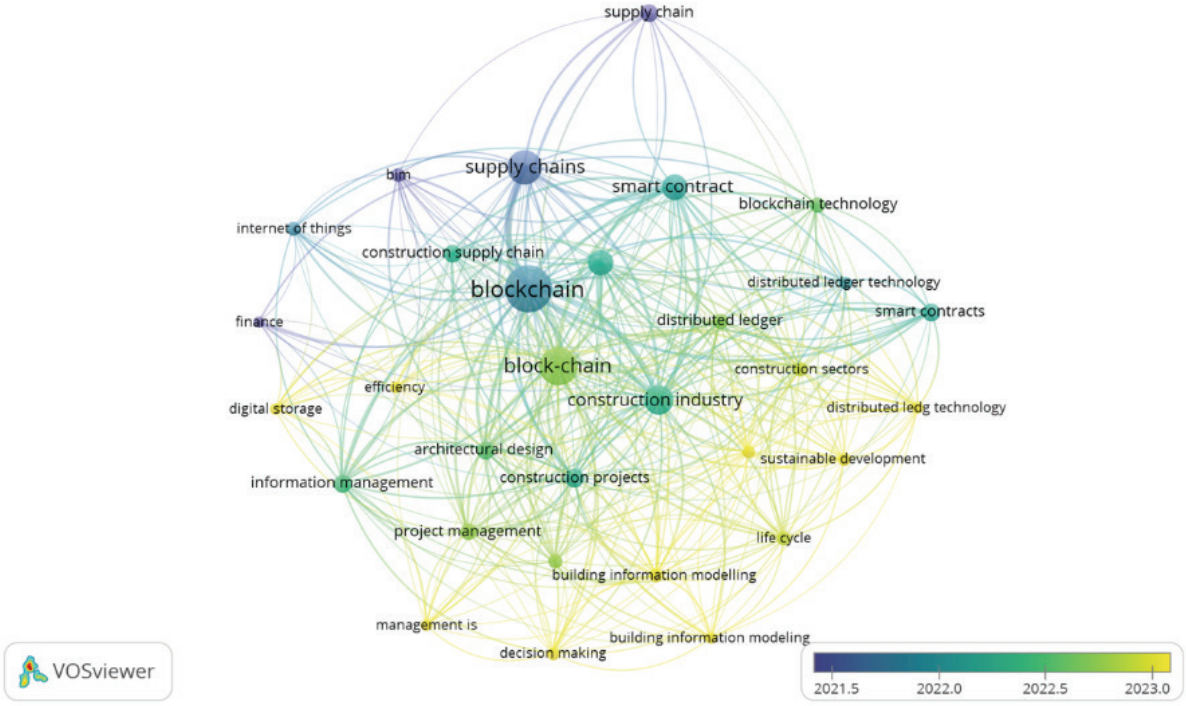

Figure 4 Map Showing Research Focus Based on the Year of Publication

Knowledge Gaps and Future Research Directions

Despite the promising applications of blockchain technology in construction procurement, several significant knowledge gaps persist that warrant further exploration. Identifying these gaps is crucial for advancing the academic discourse surrounding blockchain and its practical implications for the construction industry.

One of the primary areas where research is lacking pertains to the long-term impacts of blockchain on procurement processes. While numerous studies have demonstrated the potential benefits of blockchain, such as enhanced transparency and reduced fraud, there is a need for longitudinal studies to evaluate how these benefits manifest over time and influence overall project outcomes. Understanding the sustainability of blockchain's advantages will be critical for convincing stakeholders to invest in its implementation (Saphuthanthri et al., 2022).

Another significant gap lies in the integration of blockchain with Building Information Modelling (BIM). As both technologies are positioned to revolutionise the construction industry, research exploring their synergistic effects is limited. Investigating how blockchain can enhance BIM capabilities, particularly regarding data security, transparency, and interoperability, could provide valuable insights into optimising procurement processes and project delivery (Amiri et al., 2022).

Additionally, real-time implementation of blockchain technology in large-scale construction projects remains under-researched. While pilot projects and small-scale implementations are increasingly documented, there is a lack of comprehensive studies analysing the challenges and successes of deploying blockchain on a larger scale. Future research should focus on developing frameworks for effective blockchain integration in extensive construction projects, considering the unique challenges associated with scale and complexity (Elghaish et al., 2020).

Emerging interests in blockchain technology intersecting with other innovative technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the Internet of Things (IoT) present another fertile area for future research. The integration of blockchain with these technologies could lead to even more significant advancements in procurement processes, facilitating improved decision-making, automation, and data management.

Investigating these intersections can provide deeper insights into how combined technologies can address existing challenges within the construction industry (Wu et al., 2022).

To further advance the field, proposed future studies should focus on empirical validation of blockchain applications in real-world settings. Conducting case studies that document successful implementations, as well as the challenges faced, will provide practical insights and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of blockchain's role in construction procurement. Additionally, exploring the regulatory frameworks that support or hinder blockchain adoption in different regions can help inform policymakers and industry leaders on best practices for fostering innovation (Zheng et al., 2018).

In summary, addressing these knowledge gaps through targeted research initiatives will be essential for unlocking the full potential of blockchain technology in construction procurement. By exploring the intersections with other technologies, the long-term impacts of blockchain, and the challenges of large-scale implementation, researchers can contribute valuable knowledge that supports industry-wide transformation.

Conclusion

This bibliometric review comprehensively mapped the evolution of blockchain applications in construction procurement, revealing a dynamic and rapidly expanding research field. The analysis identified increasing scholarly attention post-2020, coinciding with the global digital transformation agenda. China and the United States emerged as leading contributors, reflecting their investment in research and technological innovation, while developing nations remained underrepresented pointing to global research inequality in blockchain adoption.

Thematic analysis of co-occurring keywords revealed four dominant research clusters: project delivery, innovative technology, information management, and integration. These clusters highlight the expanding role of blockchain in enhancing transparency, accountability, and automation within procurement processes. Notably, the growing focus on smart contracts, BIM integration, and supply chain management suggests a gradual transition from theoretical exploration to practical implementation. However, despite promising progress, the findings reveal persistent challenges such as limited empirical research, inadequate standardisation, and low digital readiness in the construction sector. The slow adoption of blockchain in procurement underscores the need for interdisciplinary collaboration among academia, industry practitioners, and policymakers to translate research insights into real-world practice.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the understanding of how blockchain technology is reshaping construction procurement and offers a consolidated view of global research trends. It provides a foundation for future studies seeking to explore empirical validation, develop standardised implementation frameworks, and promote inclusive blockchain adoption strategies that address both developed and developing contexts.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this bibliometric review, several recommendations are proposed to advance research and practice in the adoption of blockchain technology within construction procurement processes. Firstly, future studies should move beyond conceptual discussions toward empirical investigations that validate blockchain applications in real-world projects. Secondly, stronger interdisciplinary collaboration between construction professionals, technologists, and policymakers is needed to promote standardisation and knowledge exchange. Furthermore, the development of clear regulatory frameworks governing smart contracts, data privacy, and digital signatures would enhance legal certainty and build trust in blockchain systems. In addition, developing countries should prioritise capacity building and digital readiness through targeted training and infrastructure investment. Moreover, future research should explore integration with complementary technologies such as Building Information Modelling, Artificial Intelligence, and the Internet of Things to enable smarter and more transparent procurement systems. Finally, policymakers are encouraged to create incentives and pilot programmes that foster innovation and accelerate blockchain adoption in the construction sector. Collectively, these recommendations provide a practical roadmap for transforming procurement into a more transparent, efficient, and ethical process through blockchain technology.

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SACQSP2025-142

Dividend Policy and Financial Success of Real Estate Investment Trusts: Evidence from South Africa

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Abstract

The association between dividend policy and firm financial standing persists as one of the most critical areas of research in corporate finance yet relatively underexplored in the context of Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs) in emerging markets. In South Africa (SA), REITs are legally mandated to distribute at least 75% of their distributable earnings as dividends, creating a distinctive environment where dividend policy is not merely discretionary but strategically intertwined with regulatory compliance, investor expectations, and firm performance outcomes. This study investigates the influence of dividend policy on the financial success of the top 20 Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE)-listed REITs between 2013 and 2023. Employing a quantitative panel data, the examination incorporates financial data from annual reports and Bloomberg databases, applying regression models to test the link between dividend payout ratios, dividend yield, earnings retention, and key performance indicators such as return on assets (ROA) and return on equity (ROE). The findings are expected to clarify whether higher dividend payouts enhance financial success through investor confidence and market signalling, or whether excessive dividend distribution constrains reinvestment capacity and long-term growth. In doing so, the study contributes to the scarce empirical literature on emerging market REITs and provides new insights into how dividend policy functions under regulatory mandates, macroeconomic volatility, and capital market dynamics unique to SA. The study also advances policy and practice by informing REIT managers, regulators, and investors on optimal dividend strategies that balance short-term income distribution with long-term financial sustainability. Our empirical analysis reveals a statistically significant negative association between dividend yield and financial success metrics, specifically return on assets and return on equity, across 2013–2023. This suggests that elevated dividend distributions can constrain reinvestment capacity and limit growth opportunities within the South African REIT regulatory framework, where mandatory distributions intersect with firm-level investment decisions.

Keywords: REITs, Dividends Policy, Returns.

Introduction

The role of dividends policy in shaping performance remains one of the sought after areas of research in corporate finance, with various perspective ranging from irrelevance proposition of Modigliani and Miller (1961) to signalling based and agency-based arguments emphasising dividends as a tool for information transmission and managerial discipline. Adnan and Islam (2022) dividend policy is a controversial topic in corporate finance among both practitioners and academics. This debate arises from the various factors that can influence dividend pay-outs. Dividends are derived from an entity's profits, with a portion disbursed to equity holders as compensation for their investment, in addition to any capital appreciation (Dahmash et al., 2023). The remaining earnings are typically retained to foster the company's growth by investing in new opportunities or acquiring assets. Dividend policy continues to be a significant component of investigative studies in corporate finance. They highlight the diverse perspectives that seek to explain dividend policy and its potential impact on a firm's value. This discussion stems from a long-standing debate between Black (1976) and Miller and Modigliani (1961), who argue that dividends have no effect on company value, and Williams (1938), Lintner (1956), and Gordon (1959), who contend that dividends enhance value. Black (1976) famously described dividends

as “like a puzzle,” suggesting that they may not influence firm value but could be detrimental. This concept is known as dividend irrelevance theory, which suggests that dividend payments do not enhance company value and may negatively impact it by reducing available cash for reinvestment. In contrast, Williams (1938), Linter (1956) and Gordon (1959) argue that dividends are essential for enhancing firm value.

This study undertakes a comprehensive examination of the link between dividend payout policy and firm success, utilising a panel regression examination of the top 20 Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE)-listed Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs) over the period 2013-2023. By focusing on a cohort of large, consistently reporting firms, we ensured data integrity and comparability, thereby facilitating a nuanced understanding of the subtleties between payout policy and financial success within the context of South Africa's mandatory distribution regime. The empirical design employed in this study enabled the estimation of economically meaningful relationships between payout policy and performance, while controlling for unobserved heterogeneities. Furthermore, to mitigate potential model risk, we conducted a series of robustness checks across alternative model specifications, thereby enhancing the reliability and validity of our findings.

The goal of financial success is to maximise profits, improve returns on assets, and enhance shareholder value (Junaid et al., 2016). A company's overall health is vital as it indicates its ability to grow and expand. In January 2017, the market capitalisation of JSE listed REITs was valued at R320 billion, comprising 31 South African REITs (Centre for Affordable Finance, 2017). In 2023 January market capitalisation was almost R500 (JSE, 2023). Investors regard the JSE as a key indicator of financial market performance, providing reliable metrics to assess the financial health of companies and, consequently, their value. Dividend policy and the financial success of JSE-listed REITs remain under-researched. While extensive research has explored dividend behaviour in conventional corporate settings, the literature on REITs, particularly in emerging markets, remains limited. REITs represent a unique class of financial intermediaries where dividend policy is not solely a discretionary financial decision but is mandated by regulation, requiring the distribution of at least 75% of distributable earnings to maintain tax-efficient status (JSE, 2023). The SA REIT market has grown significantly since its inception, becoming a critical channel for both domestic and foreign investment in commercial, retail, and industrial real estate. The top 20 JSE-listed REITs represent a substantial portion of the listed property sector, collectively shaping market trends, liquidity, and capital allocation strategies. Despite this prominence, there is a paucity of empirical evidence examining how dividend policies—encompassing payout ratios, dividend yield, and retention policies—affect financial success metrics such as return on assets (ROA), return on equity (ROE), net asset value growth, and total shareholder returns. This gap is particularly pronounced in emerging markets where macroeconomic volatility, liquidity constraints, and regulatory idiosyncrasies can significantly influence both dividend strategies and performance outcomes.

This study aims to refine our understanding of the relationship between dividend policy and financial success. To achieve this, we pursue three interconnected objectives. Firstly, we quantify the link of dividend policy, measured by dividend yield and payout ratio, and the financial sucess of JSE-listed REITs over the period 2013-2023. Secondly, we assess the robustness of our estimates by applying alternative model specifications and controls. Finally, we interpret our findings within the context of South Africa's regulatory framework governing REIT distributions, thereby ensuring the external validity of our results

Research Problem

Dividend policy has been widely researched in more developed economies, there is limited evidence on why firms decide to distribute dividends, particularly within the South African real estate sector (Firer et al., 2008). Investors primarily aim to maximise their share value by seeking increases in positive returns. To achieve this, they look for opportunities that provide the highest returns relative to the associated risks. Real estate is typically viewed as a safer investment option compared to other asset classes, particularly stocks. According to Wolski (2017), traditional risk rankings classify bonds as the safest investments, followed by real estate, while stocks are viewed as the riskiest. However, a closer investigation of risk-return ratios often indicates that real estate can be a more advantageous investment option than shares.

In SA, REITs are obligated to apportion 75% of their taxable profits as dividends. This requirement presents a significant opportunity for short- to medium-term investors (Ntuli & Akinsomi, 2017). It is

essential to explore the connection between dividend policy and the financial success of REITs to determine whether there are distinct advantages to investing in them, considering these specific factors. Additionally, it is important to assess whether South African REIT firms align with established trends in dividend policy and if they offer any unique insights into the study of dividend policy, particularly at the backdrop of SA as an emerging economy. We therefore seek to answer the following research question: What is the relation between dividend policy and the financial success of REITs? And the sub research questions are as follows: What impact does dividend yield have on corporate financial success? How does the dividend pay-out ratio affect a firm's financial success? What kind of relation exists between leverage and company financial success? How does firm size contribute to financial success? We aim to explore the relationship between dividend policy and the financial success of REITs listed on the JSE in SA, which is classified as a developing market.

Hypothesis Formulation

Dividends Policy and Financial Success

This hypothesis is grounded in signaling theory, which posits that higher dividend yields convey financial stability to financers (Bhattacharya, 1979; Miller & Rock, 1985), and agency theory, which argues that dividend payout ratios constrain managerial free cash flow, thereby reducing agency conflicts (Jensen, 1986). Empirical evidence suggests that disciplined dividend policies enhance investor confidence and contribute to stronger financial outcomes for REITs (Chan et al., 1990; Ling & Naranjo, 2015).

Hypothesis (H_1): Dividend policy, operationalised through dividend yield (annual dividend/share divided by market price) and dividend payout ratio (proportion of distributable earnings paid as dividends), is positively associated with the financial success of top 20 JSE-listed REITs.

Null Hypothesis (H_0): Dividend policy, operationalised through dividend yield and dividend payout ratio, is not positively associated with the financial success of top 20 JSE-listed REITs.

Firm Structure, Leverage and financial success. We draw this hypothesis from the capital structure policy, This hypothesis draws on capital structure theory, which asserts that moderate leverage can enhance returns through tax shields and efficient asset financing (Myers, 2001), and the Resource-Based View (RBV), which suggests that larger firms possess superior resources, economies of scale, and market influence, thereby improving performance (Barney, 1991; Fama & French, 2001). Prior REIT studies indicate that both leverage and firm size significantly influence financial outcomes, particularly in regulated, capital-intensive sectors (Reddy & Moosa, 2018).

This research influences the literature in several forms, it seeks to adds to the ongoing discussion about dividend policy and its impact on a company's financial success, particularly in SA as an emerging market. It seeks to explore the kind of connection—if any—between dividend policy and financial success specifically among REITs, given the limited existing literature in this context. The findings are intended to assist both domestic and international investors, whether they are looking for short-term or long-term opportunities, in assessing whether investing in REITs (the property market) offers meaningful economic benefits compared to other sectors This study is motivated by the need to bridge the empirical gap in understanding how dividend policies impact financial outcomes in the South African REIT sector.

Literature Review

This section aims to study the theories in relation to dividend policy considering reforms in the property sector. Dividends are critical for REIT firms as they enable these entities to share a portion of their earnings with shareholders. In the REIT context, the theoretical perspectives considered in this study provide complementary lenses on payout behaviour and performance. Signalling theory frames how changes in distributions can credibly convey information about expected cash flows; agency theory explains how mandatory distributions mitigate free cash flow concerns; life-cycle theory predicts that mature REITs sustain higher payouts; and dividend irrelevance clarifies the assumptions under which payouts should not affect value. We emphasise recent empirical evidence, particularly post-2020 studies in emerging markets, to align the review with the study period and institutional context.

Theoretical Framework

Dividend Policy Theory

Although widely explored in financial literature, the core question of why companies opt to pay dividends and why financers favour them continues to be a major unanswered puzzle in the field (Baker, Singleton & Veit, 2011). Al-Najjar and Kilincarslan (2019) note that dividend policy has attracted considerable interest from finance scholars and practitioners, resulting in extensive theoretical modeling and sizable empirical research. Yusof and Ismail (2016) emphasise that decisions regarding dividend pay-out policy are vital in corporate finance because they directly influence investment and financing decisions. Wahjudi (2020) further explains that a company's dividend policy encompasses the management's decision-making process on how to allocate earnings—either distributing them to equity-holders as dividends or reinvesting them for future growth. The decision regarding dividend policy is a critical aspect of a firm's financing and investment strategy, and the pay-out ratio is essential for existing and potential investors when deciding whether to invest in a firm (Pinto et al., 2020). The concept of dividend irrelevance suggests that in a perfectly efficient market—without information asymmetry, taxes, or transaction costs—a company's dividend policy has no impact on its market value, as indicated by its share price. In this theoretical scenario, there would be no need for a specific dividend policy. In practice, investment remains an important aspect in determining an entity's financial performance or success (Miller & Modigliani, 1961). Their theory posits that a company's value is entirely based on the future cash flows produced by its investments (Baker & Powell, 2000).

Signalling Theory

According to signalling theory, companies pay dividends as a means of communicating favourable information to the financial markets. Due to the inherent information asymmetry, managers possess valuable insights that may not be readily available to the market. To bridge this information gap, managers employ financial decisions as a signalling tool to convey positive signals to potential investors about their company's prospects (Nguyeni & Buli, 2019) this notion is further reinforced by Bataha et al. (2023) who argues that signalling theory incentivises management to disclose information about the company's financial status to potential investors. This information, serving as a key indicator or signal is shared through the company's financial statement. For instance, a dividend payout is typically perceived as a positive signal, as investors tend to favour predictable returns on their investments, thereby mitigating risk of financial loss.

The Firm Life Cycle Theory

The firm life cycle theory of dividends suggests that as a company progresses through its growth stages and reaches maturity, it generates more cash than it can prudently invest in profitable ventures. It becomes beneficial for the company to distribute excess cash flow to shareholders in the form of dividends, optimising the utilisation of surplus funds while rewarding shareholders for their investments (Bulan & Subramanian, 2009). In contrast, a young company typically faces numerous investment opportunities but often lacks the necessary profitability to meet its financing requirements through internal cash generation alone.

As a company grows and matures, it inevitably reaches a point where investment opportunities become scarce. The company begins to distribute its earnings to shareholders in the form of dividend payments. Research by Grullon, Michaely and Swaminathan (2002) supports the maturity hypothesis, which suggests that a company tends to increase its dividend payments as it transitions from the growth phase to a more mature stage.

Empirical Evidence

Dividend Policy in the Context of Real Estate Investment Trusts

According to Mooradian and Yang (2001) a significant concern regarding REITs: their propensity to overinvest. This tendency arises from the obligation to disperse 95% of taxable income to shareholders to maintain favourable tax status. REITs tend to generate less free cash flow (FCF) than non-REIT firms, resulting in diminished internally generated equity financing and a greater dependence on external funding for acquisitions.

The organisational structure of REITs diverges from that of traditional corporations, which may help mitigate agency issues related to managerial control over free cash flow. In this context, capital markets can exert a regulatory influence on REIT managers, potentially curbing their inclination to overbuild or overpay for assets. As Feng et al. (2007) argue, the regulatory requirement for REITs to distribute 95% of taxable earnings limits managerial discretion in setting dividend policy. However, some authors challenge this notion, pointing out that REIT managers still retain substantial free cash flow due to significant depreciation deductions. Empirical evidence and anecdotal data support this perspective, as the average REIT dividend payout remains below 70% of funds from operations, indicating that managers have considerable discretionary cash flow at their disposal.

Real Estate Investment Trust in the Global Context

The concept of REITs has a rich history, dating back to the 1960s in the United States (US). According to the South African National Treasury (2007), REITs were first introduced to enable a broader range of investors, including both institutional and retail financiers, to tap into large-scale income-generating real estate opportunities. This pioneering move was soon followed by the Netherlands, which established a similar listed property framework in 1969. Belgium also jumped on the bandwagon, legalising REITs in 1995.

The REIT model gained further momentum in the late 1990s, with Turkey and Greece adopting the framework in 1999. The United Kingdom and Germany soon followed suit, implementing REIT structures in 2007. As noted by Grinis and Kaspar (2019), the concept of REITs has rapidly gained traction worldwide, with a total of 37 REIT markets now in operation, boasting a collective value of $1.7 trillion.

In recent years, the REIT landscape has continued to evolve, with seven new regimes established in countries such as Ireland.

Literature Gap

There is a clear absence of integrated, theory driven evidence on how dividend policy, capital structure, signalling dynamics and firm life cycle interact to shape the financial success of JSE listed REITs. Specifically, no study has addressed how the mandatory distribution regime modifies dividend policy's theoretical roles-as financing decision, a signal investor and stage specific strategy across the REIT life cycle. This study addresses this gap.

Research Design

This study employs a cross-sectional method combined with time series analysis to examine the relationship between dividend policies and the financial success of REITs. According to Cummings (2018), the defining characteristic of a cross-sectional design is that all observed data is collected at one specific moment, distinguishing it from longitudinal and experimental designs, which involve multiple observations over time. A pooled Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression model is utilised for hypothesis testing on the panel data collected.

Sampling and Data Collection Protocol

The financial data for this study is sourced from the Bloomberg terminal and IRESS database, focusing on 33 property entities that are listed on the JSE. A sample of 20 publicly listed REITs was selected based on the highest market capitalisation to analyse the association between dividend policy and financial success. The data collected includes relevant variables such as dividend yield and dividend payout ratio, which are central to this investigation. The study examines data from 2013 to 2023, starting from the official introduction of REITs in South Africa in 2013. To be included in this analysis, these REITs must have consistently paid dividends and reported positive earnings throughout the study period, allowing for accurate computation of dividend payout ratios and yields (Thanatawee, 2011).

Validity and Reliability

This study considers two types of validity: internal and external validity. Andrade (2018) states that internal validity evaluates whether the study's design, execution, and analysis provide reliable answers

to the study's questions. Bell et al. (2022) note that internal validity focuses on whether conclusions suggesting causal relationships between variables are well-supported, ensuring that no other underlying causal relationships exist to minimise potential biases. This study adopts established financial ratios and dividend policy indicators as benchmarks to evaluate financial success.

Results

Under this section of the research study, both the inferential and descriptive statistics are applied to gain in-depth and comprehensive insights into the data collected.

Models

The study utilised three models to analyse the empirical findings and results. The first part of the analysis consists of Multiple Linear Regression, which examines the influences of one or more independent variables affecting a dependent variable (Y), allowing for predictions based on the movements of multiple variables. The second model employed is the Panel Regression Model, which analyses the behaviour of statistical units over time. This model effectively combines time series and cross-sectional analysis. Finally, the Pearson Correlation Coefficient Model is employed to evaluate statistical significance of correlation coefficients based on a randomly selected sample.

Multiple Regression Equation

$Y=\beta_0+\beta_1 X\ldots+\sum\beta_n X_n+Ɛ$
Y= the forecasted value of the dependent variable, β_0= value of y when all other factors are set to 0, β_n= the representative regression coefficient , X_n= Independent variable and the Ɛ= Error term, extent to which there is variability in the estimation of Y (Bevans, 2022).

According to Uyanık and Güler (2013) regression analysis method is applied to establish if there is any causal link and predictive effective between one dependent variable and multiple independent variables. The study examines return on assets and returns on equity as indicators of financial success. Dividend yield and dividend pay-out ratios are utilised primarily as independent variables to gauge the cause-effect on the dependent variables. Moreover, leverage and market-to-book ratio are utilised as dummy independent variables. The statistical method of hypothesis testing at confidence interval of 99% (an equivalence of 0.01 significance level) was used to examine the proposed hypothesis.

Model Specification

$$ROE_{it}=\beta_0+\beta_1 DY_{it}+\beta_2 DPR_{it}+\beta_3 LEV_{it}+\beta_4 MBT_{it}+\varepsilon_{it}\ldots..(1)$$

$$ROA_{it}=\beta_0+\beta_1 DY_{it}+\beta_2 DPR_{it}+\beta_3 LEV_{it}+\beta_4 MBT_{it}+\varepsilon_{it}\ldots..(2)$$

ROE_{it}= Return on Equity of firm j in time t, ROA_{it}= Return on Assets of firm j in time t, DY_{it}= Dividend Yield of firm j in time t, DPR_{it}= Dividend Payout Ratio of firm j in time t LEV_{it}= Leverage of firm j in time t, MBT_{it}= Market to book value of firm j in time t, ε_{it}= Random error term, and $\beta_0\ to\ \beta_4$= Regression coefficients.

Pearson Correlation Co-efficients

Adler and Parmryd (2010) describe the Pearson correlation coefficient, often referred to as the product-moment correlation coefficient, as an indicator of the linear relationship between two variables. It is denoted by: r in a sample, ρ in the population from which the sample was drawn. The coefficient is measured on a scale without units and can take values ranging from -1 to +1, with the following interpretations: -1: A perfect negative linear relationship 0: No linear relationship +1: A perfect positive linear relationship. Values between -1 and +1 signal the strength and direction of the linear association, with values closer to -1 or +1 indicating a stronger link. These tests generate a test statistic that quantifies the likelihood of obtaining the sample correlation coefficient if there is no actual relationship in the population.

$$r_{xy} = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{n}(x_i - \bar{x})(y_i - \bar{y})}{\sqrt{\sum_{i=1}^{n}(x_i - \bar{x})^2}\sqrt{\sum_{i=1}^{n}(y_i - \bar{y})^2}}$$

n stands for sample size, xi and yi signify the individual sample points indexed with I, $\bar{x}$ and $\bar{y}$ represent the sample mean. In a statistical context, it is crucial to interpret the results generated by the Pearson correlation coefficient accurately and evaluate their significance concerning the specific problem being studied (Curwin et al., 2013).

Definition, Measurement and Interpretation of Variables

The primary objective of this research is to investigate the link between dividend pay-out policy and REITs listed on the JSE. The research focuses on two dependent variables: ROA and ROE, which are applied as proxies for assessing the financial success of firms. The other side of the equation uses dividend yield, dividend pay-out ratio which are the main independent variables accompanied by control variables, namely leverage and market to book value.

Return on Assets = $\frac{\text{Net Income}}{\text{Total Assets}}$

ROA is an important measure that assesses how efficiently a company uses its assets to generate profits. It reflects the firm's performance based on the resources it possesses (Purnamasari, 2015; Budagaga, 2020). Purnamasari (2015) further highlights that a higher ROA indicates that the company is effectively using its assets to earn money, while a lower ROA may signal inefficiencies or difficulties in managing those assets. By analysing ROA, stakeholders can obtain important insights into a company's operational efficiency and overall financial health. This metric is especially helpful for comparing firms within the same industry, as it enables investors and management to assess how efficiently a company is leveraging its assets to generate profits.

Return on Equity = $\frac{\text{Net Income}}{\text{Total Shareholder's Equity}}$

Puspitarini and Fitria (2023) state that ROE gauges the profit a company produces relative to the equity invested by its shareholders. For investors, analysing ROE is crucial as it helps assess the potential returns on their investments. For companies, a strong ROE can attract more investors, making it an essential factor for securing investment. Essentially, ROE indicates the earnings available to shareholders based on the capital they have invested in the business. Studies exploring the connection between ROE and other profitability ratios like ROA reveal that these metrics together offer crucial insights into a company's financial health and operational effectiveness (Al-Qudah, 2016).

Dividend Yield = $\frac{\text{Dividend Per Share}}{\text{Share Price}}$

Based on Henne, Ostrowski and Reichling (2007) dividend yield is calculated by dividing the annual dividend by the stock's closing price on the day prior to the dividend payment. This metric indicates the potential income an investor can receive from a stock's dividends.

Dividend Pay-out Ratio = $\frac{\text{Total Dividends}}{\text{Net Income}}$

The dividend pay-out ratio represents the portion of a company's earnings paid out to shareholders as dividends, expressed as a percentage (Sharif et al., 2015). Ilyas Sharif and Jan (2018) asserts that the formula for the dividend pay-out ratio shows that net earnings are reported on the company's income statement. Investors pay close attention to the dividend pay-out ratio when deciding whether to buy shares in a profitable company that pays dividends or in a profit-generating company with strong growth potential. The dividend pay-out ratio is an important measure for examining entity's financial condition and its approach to dividends. By examining this ratio, owners of equity can learn about how dedicated a company is to sharing profits with its shareholders, its plans for growth, and whether it can maintain its dividend payments over time.

$$\text{Leverage} = \frac{\text{Total Debt}}{\text{Total Shareholder's Equity}}$$

According to Heikal et al. (2014) the debt-to-equity ratio (DER) assesses a company's financial leverage that indicates the portion of equity capital used to fund its debt obligations. In simpler terms, this ratio shows what percentage of a company's equity is being used as collateral for its total debt or provides an estimate of how much debt the company is utilising to finance its operations. Susilawati et al. (2022) that having more debt, as shown by a higher debt-to-equity ratio, can greatly impact a company's profits. This emphasises the need by management to carefully manage debt levels to improve financial success.

$$\text{Market to book ratio} = \frac{\text{Market Capitalisation}}{\text{Total Book Value}}$$

The market-to-book (MTB) ratio is calculated by dividing the market price per share by the book value per share (Khan, 2009). The market price/ share translates into market capitalisation when calculated and book value relates to the total value of the company after deducting total assets from total liabilities. Alfraih (2018) argues that the MTB ratio and return on assets are two key metrics used to assess both market performance and overall financial health of a firm. The MTB ratio indicates the market's valuation of a company's common equity or net assets. It reflects how well managers are using the company's assets to drive growth and improve corporate financial success (Lee & Makhija, 2009; Ceccagnoli, 2009).

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics summarise the key characteristics of the dataset as shown in table 1.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	Variance	Skewness	Ex. Kurtosis	JB	ERS
DY	9.835***	615.970	2.572	12.040	8779.351***	0.000***
LEV	0.898***	56.857	2.318	8.836	8232.146***	0.000***
MTB	12.670***	401.991	5.360	39.314	60167.438***	0.000***
ROA	7.024***	0.221	0.728	2.464	273.019***	0.000***
ROE	5.256***	0.442	1.727	8.501	3142.646***	0.000***
DPR	0.664***	0.379	1.186	0.803	191.895***	0.000***

Ex.Kurtosis, JB and ERS represents the excess kurtosis, Jarque Bera test and Elliot, Rothernberg and Stock test for stationarity. ***show statistical significance at 1% level

Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics for the dependent variables, the two primary independent variables, and the control variables as outlined hypotheses. The table includes the mean, variance, skewness, kurtosis, and the Jarque-Bera test for the sample period. The average dividend yield for the top 20 REITs listed on the JSE is 9.835%. This means that for every R1 invested in shares, investors can expect to receive about 10 cents in annual dividend income on average. The variance of 615.97 measures how much the dividend yields differ from the average, signifying a significant level of variance. This implies that the dividend yields in the dataset are widely spread out. Most of the JSE-listed REITs in the sample have low yields, while a small number have very high yields. Skewness reflects the imbalance and asymmetry in a data distribution. A normal distribution is perfectly symmetrical, while a non-normal distribution can be positively or negatively skewed.

An average ROA of 7.024% indicates that, on average, the companies in the sample generate a profit of 7.024 cents for each rand of assets they possess. This figure is a useful indicator of how efficiently the REIT firms use their assets to maximise earnings. A variance of 25.215 for ROA shows how much the ROA values differ from the average in the dataset. This variance reflects a moderate spread in ROA values, indicating that certain companies exhibit ROA figures that are considerably above or below the average. A skewness value of -1.198 indicates that the distribution of ROA is leaning to the

left. This highlights that there are more JSE-listed REITs with higher ROA values, while fewer companies have significantly lower ROA values. In other words, the left side of the spread has a longer tail than the right side. Kurtosis measures the sharpness of the peak of a distribution and looks at the extreme values in either tail.

Pearson Correlation Co-efficient

Table 2 Pearson Correlation Matrix

	DY	LEV	MTB	ROA	ROE	DPR
DY	1.000***	-0.03***	-0.07***	0.04***	0.06***	0.36***
LEV	-0.03***	1.000***	0.02	-0.17***	-0.09***	-0.01
MTB	-0.07***	0.02	1.000***	0.03**	-0.01	-0.23***
ROA	0.04***	-0.17***	0.03**	1.000***	0.61***	0.13***
ROE	0.06***	-0.09***	-0.01	0.61***	1.000***	0.10***
DPR	0.36***	-0.01	-0.23***	0.13***	0.10***	1.000***

***represents statistical significance at level 1%.

Table 2 above reveals that dividend yield (DY) and dividend pay-out ratio (DPR) are inversely related to profitability. A higher dividend yield is associated with a higher payout which is intuitive since payouts drives yield. ROA and DPR, more profitable firms tend to pay slightly more dividends, but effects modest. MTB and DPR implies that high growth/ valuation firms tend to pay less. The LEV and ROE-0.09, ore leveraged firms tend to be less profitable or more profitable firms choose less debt: the magnitudes are small to moderate.

Regression Analysis

Table 3 Regression Results using ROA as Dependent Variable

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Constant	0.024***	0.024***	0.025***
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Dividend yield	-0.0261 **	-0.0262 **	-0.0269 **
	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.012)
Leverage	-2.6564	-2.6564	-2.6560
	(2.070)	(2.030)	(2.00)
Dividend payout ratio	0.0106 *	0.0106 *	0.0120 *
	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)
Market-to-book value	0.0002	0.0002	0.0002
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Observations	6,000	6,000	6,000
R-squared	0.300	0.300	0.300

Table 3 represents results of ROA as the primary independent variable, alongside two additional independent variables: DY and DPR. It also incorporates two control variables: LEV and MTB. The negative coefficient indicates that a unit increase in DY results in a decrease of 0.0261 in ROA. This implies that as companies pay out more dividends, they become less efficient and productive in generating profits, resulting in a lower ROA. This finding indicates that dividends may erode a company's profitability by diverting resources from potentially profitable investment opportunities to cash dividend payments. In this sense, dividends can be viewed as value-destructive, as they make companies less profitable. In summary, the regression analysis shows an inverse correlation between dividend yield and return on assets, suggesting that increased dividend pay-outs are linked to reduced profitability. In contrast to the results of Uwuigbe et al. (2012), who identified a positive and statistically significant link between profitability and dividend payout in the Nigerian financial market, our results suggest a different outcome. This may be attributed to the variations in market dynamics and regulatory conditions between the two countries, highlighting the need for context-specific studies on

dividend policies in diverse economic settings. For instance, factors such as inflation rates, interest rates, and cultural influences can significantly impact a company's dividend policy and payout decisions.

No statistically significant link between ROA and the DPR. This implies that as companies increase their leverage, their ability to improve profitability is negatively affected. Additionally, larger firms are perceived to be stable with growth prospects and profitability. However, these companies typically maintain lower cash reserves for dividend payments and are more inclined to allocate their funds toward debt compensation rather than issuing dividends, thereby mitigating financial risk. This focus on debt repayment can diminish their ability to invest in positive NPV projects that could enhance profitability.

Table 4 Regression Results using ROE as Dependent Variable

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Constant	0.120***	0.125***	0.118***
	(3.5000)	(3.6500)	(3.4200)
Dividend yield	-0.24922***	-0.25100***	-0.24700***
	(-2.8868)	(-2.9100)	(-2.8500)
Leverage	-3.2865***	-3.2500***	-3.3000***
	(-8.1077)	(-8.0500)	(-8.2000)
Dividend payout ratio	-0.7288	-0.7000	-0.7600
	(0.4623)	(0.4800)	(0.4400)
Market-to-book value	0.1342***	0.1320***	0.1360***
	(4.2078)	(4.1500)	(4.2600)
R-squared	0.3735	0.3650	0.3800

*** shows statistical significance at 1% level

This section presents a regression analysis as shown in Table 4 that investigates ROE as the primary independent variable, along with two additional independent variables: DY and DPR. The analysis also includes two control variables: LEV and MTB. Consistent with the ROA findings in table 3, there is a negative and statistically significant relationship between DY and firm financial success, with -0.24922. This means that dividends negatively affect a company's financial success. Specifically, as companies raise their dividend pay-outs, their efficiency in using equity capital to generate and maximise profits decreases. Paying dividends takes financial resources away from productive uses that could enhance the company's value by investing in projects that would further increase profitability.

Conclusion

The research examines REITs listed on the JSE and financial success. This investigation is particularly relevant given the formal establishment of REITs in SA in 2013 and the country's status as an emerging economy.

The study's results revealed a adverse and statistically significant link between ROA and DY. Additionally, a similar negative and statistically significant association was found between ROE and DY. Importantly, the regression analysis showed no significant link between financial success and DPR. Aligning with the study by Murage and Emba (2019), but contradicting Bataha et al. (2023), who argued that higher dividend yields enhance value. Consequently, these results support the dividend relevance theory, which posits that dividend policy influences a firm's financial success. Leverage shows a negative and statistically significant relationship indicating that higher debt levels adversely affect the profitability of REITs. Prior REIT studies indicate that both leverage and firm size significantly influence financial outcomes, particularly in regulated, capital-intensive sectors (Reddy & Moosa, 2018). In contrast, the market-to-book ratio is positively and statistically significant at both the 5% level for ROA and the 1% level for ROE. This aligns with the firm life cycle theory proposed by Bulan and Subramanian (2009), which suggests that as a company matures, its ability to make cash exceeds its capacity to find profitable investment opportunities. Consequently, it becomes beneficial for the company to distribute excess cash flow to shareholders in the form of dividends.

Future research could expand to include the entire population of 33 REITs to determine if the results change when REITs with lower market capitalisation are considered. Another financial success metric, such as Return on Capital Invested, could be included to determine if the results of this study align with this additional measure. Additionally, since some studies have examined share repurchases, it would be valuable to explore how share repurchases influence the results. Considering the inverse and statistically significant link between financial success and dividend yield, shareholders of JSE-listed REITs should prioritise capital gains to enhance their wealth portfolios instead of depending on dividend pay-outs. Additionally, JSE-listed REITs could focus on reducing debt to lessen the burden of high interest payments, thereby improving cash flow for investments in profitable opportunities that can enhance firm value.

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Collaboration for Resilient and Efficient Projects

SACQSP2025-26

The Critical Role of Stakeholder Engagement and Communication in Achieving Successful Project Delivery

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ABSTRACT

The increasing complexity of projects, coupled with the growing number of stakeholders involved, has stakeholder engagement, projects can face significant challenges, including scope creep, delays, and cost overruns. Despite the growing body of research on stakeholder engagement communication in project management, further studies are needed to explore the relationships among stakeholder engagement, communication, and successful project delivery. The objectives of this quantitative study were to examine stakeholder engagement strategies and communication tools that affect project success and suggesting best strategies for management of highly impacted primary stakeholders. Data was generated from online survey and analysed through descriptive statistics. This study found regular project updates stakeholder and face to face meetings as the most effective communication tool use for stakeholder engagement in achieving project success. Regular, proactive communication as the most important strategy for managing highly impacted stakeholder's expectations in large infrastructure projects. The findings of this study will facilitate and enhance project delivery, leading to increased productivity and optimal performance in terms of sustainability, quality, time, and cost. The study recommends further investigation into the role of stakeholder engagement and communication in achieving project success and delivering value to external stakeholders.

Keywords: Stakeholder Engagement, Communication, Successful Project Delivery, Highly Impacted Stakeholders.

Introduction

Stakeholder engagement and communication are the cornerstones of successful project management. "whatever you do, engage your beneficiary" (Bande et al., 2024). The Standish Group's CHAOS Report has consistently shown that stakeholder engagement and communication are key factors in determining project success. Communication is the lifeblood of any project (Project Management Institute). Recent high-profile project failures have highlighted the importance of stakeholder engagement and communication, demonstrating the need for project managers to prioritize these critical success factors. Identifying stakeholders at the beginning of projects, recognizing and managing their needs and expectations, contributes to creating a suitable environment and acts as a catalyst for success. This paper examines the crucial role of stakeholder engagement and communication in attaining project success

Background to the Study

Stakeholder engagement and communication remain a significant challenge for many project teams. Efficient stakeholder management is a critical success factor for construction projects (Nguyen & Mohamed, 2021). According to a report by PMI, 32% of project failures are attributed to bad stakeholder management. For this study, highly impacted stakeholders of infrastructural project are those who experience the greatest risk to their finances, operations and those who face disruption to their quality of life as result of the project. They include the project manager, client/employer, supervising ministry/department/ agency, contracting firms, sub-contracting firms/suppliers, project management members/ consultants, and financiers/sponsors, in line with Molwus, (2017). These

groups have the most gain financially from a successful project and the most lose from delays, cost overruns, and failure. Nguyen and Mohamed (2021) opined that, the increasing complication in the connections among stakeholders and their different personalities, power and interests as a reason that makes managing stakeholders difficult. Figueiredo Filho et al. (2021) identified inadequate stakeholder interactions and communication as possible hindrances. This according to the author can lead to misalignment and conflict in construction projects, complicating the amicable solution. Effective communication is a fundamental element of project management and serves as the foundation for project performance in any organization (Suleiman, 2022; Van Royen et al., 2022). Business Insider South Africa (2021) reported poor optimal stakeholder engagement by agencies, departments and ministries. Measure to improve stakeholders' management involves, ensuring stakeholders participate in decision-making and implement a governance system, effective communication mechanisms, building a good relationship with stakeholders, stakeholders' opinions in decision-making and detailed descriptions of project objectives (Figueiredo-Filho et al., 2021; Nguyen & Mohamed, 2021). Aghimien et al. (2019) presented preliminary findings from investigating stakeholder management practices in the South African construction industry. The authors suggested measures to improve stakeholder management, including knowing the stakeholders' needs, understanding stakeholders' interests, defining project missions and formulating required strategies. Managing stakeholder expectations is a continuous and crucial process that mosly determines the success of a project. Whether Nigeria's construction industry has engaged these feasible measures for possible implementation is indeterminate. If not, they are undoubtedly worth exploring so that integration, collaboration and teamwork can fully manifest in Nigeria's stakeholder engagement in construction infrastructural projects. Based on the measures mentioned above, examining the critical role of stakeholder engagement in developing countries' construction projects cannot be overemphasised. In Nigeria, analysing stakeholder engagement strategies and communication tools, as well as proposing methods to manage the expectations of highly impacted stakeholders, can enhance the construction of infrastructure projects. However, in-depth studies on how these engagement and communication strategies influence the success of large infrastructure projects remain limited. This is a knowledge gap because the desired study's results do not exist. It is one of the study's motivations. Few studies, including Ukoha (2022), have examined project management communication strategies designed at engaging stakeholders and enhancing project performance in oil and gas companies. But did not address core strategies for effective management of expectations of highly impacted stakeholders in large infrastructure projects. These gaps strengthened the study's motivation, and the results will form part of the theoretical contribution to the body of knowledge. Therefore, more research is needed to stakeholder engagement strategies and communication tools and suggesting strategies for managing highly impacted stakeholders' expectations in large infrastructure projects in Nigeria. This was be done by answering a few research questions:

1. What is the relationship between stakeholder engagement successful project delivery?
2. What role does communication play in stakeholder engagement, and successful project delivery?
3. Which stakeholder engagement and communication strategy effective for managing highly impacted stakeholders' expectations?

Knowledge Gap

Despite the growing body of research on stakeholder engagement and communication in project management, several gaps remain. Ukoha (2022) conducted a qualitative study on project management communication strategies to engage stakeholders and improve project performance in the oil and gas sector. The author recommended further studies with larger sample sizes, including experts from related multidisciplinary fields in project management across various geographical locations. This study aims to address these existing methodological and population gaps. Additionally, beyond contributing to the existing knowledge by emphasising the most effective stakeholder engagement strategies and communication tools that influence project success in large infrastructure projects in Nigeria, this research will fill the literature gap concerning stakeholder engagement and communication in Nigeria's construction projects. Stakeholder engagement has become a best practice globally in the construction sector. Furthermore, there is a lack of studies on the best strategies for managing the expectations of highly impacted stakeholders in large infrastructure projects within the Nigerian context. Therefore, this study investigates the critical role of stakeholder engagement and communication in Nigeria in achieving successful project delivery and recommends effective strategies for managing the expectations of highly impacted stakeholders in large infrastructure projects through the following objectives:

- To identify stakeholder engage strategies and communication tools used in large infrastructure projects.
- To determine the most effective stakeholder engagement strategy and communication tool that affect project success in large infrastructure projects.
- Suggest the most effective strategy for managing highly impacted stakeholder expectations in large infrastructure projects.

Content to Expect and Order of Presentation

This research study is divided into five sections. Section 1 is an introduction of the research, Section 2 describes the main research topics that encompass the issue of stakeholder engagement and communication in achieving successful project delivery. Section 3 explains the methodological approach. Section 4 presents the research findings. Finally, Section 5 provides a discussion, conclusions, and suggestions for further research.

Literature review

This section briefly addresses three themes related to stakeholder engagement and communication in infrastructure projects. The first topic, Stakeholders' engagement and communication in the construction sector. The second topic is successful project delivery. The third topic is managing expectation of stakeholders. The fourth topic is empirical evidence.

Stakeholders' Engagement and Communication in the Construction Sector

Stakeholders are individuals, groups, or organizations who may get affected by, or perceive themselves to be affected by a decision, activity, or outcome of a project (PMBOK Guide, 2013). Stakeholders contribute to the project process and activity, conceive the idea, develop project plans, execute the plans, make decisions, etc. So, the management of their requirements and expectations is critical to project success. Stakeholder engagement, as articulated in the PMBOK Guide, is a crucial and systematic process. It involves the identification, analysis, planning, and implementation of deliberate actions to effectively involve and communicate with individuals or groups who possess the ability to impact a project or who may be impacted by its outcomes. Mysore et al. (2021) found the clash of personalities, non-cooperation, malfunctions in governance, exclusion from decision-making and lack of reasoning, among others, from the 28 adverse situations, as the most significant variables that can influence stakeholders' engagement in the context of global-IT projects. Figueiredo-Filho et al. (2021) identified inadequate stakeholder interactions and communication as possible hindrances. This can lead to misalignment and conflict in construction projects, complicating the amicable solution. Mysore et al. (2021) found the clash of personalities, non-cooperation, malfunctions in governance, exclusion from decision-making and lack of reasoning, among others, from the 28 adverse situations, as the most significant variables that can influence stakeholders' engagement in the context of global-IT projects. According to the Project Management Institute (2017), high-performing companies engage in 30% more communication than the low-performing ones. It enables the management to be more adaptable to various stakeholders' preferences and demands when it comes to communication. The authors found face-to-face meetings and presentations as most effective mode of communication, followed by email and newsletters, use of project management software and collaboration tools, video and virtual meetings, social media and online group, distribution of physical forms including hard copy reports. Dainty et al. (2006) revealed that the face-to-face communication was more effective by 34% compared to the written form in dealing with the project's complicated problems. Research by Freeman (2010) emphasizes that open communication channels promote stakeholder trust and buy-in, leading to improved project outcomes such as on-time completions. Stakeholders are individuals, groups, or organisations who may be affected by, or perceive themselves to be affected by, a decision, activity, or outcome of a project (PMBOK Guide, 2013). Stakeholders contribute to the project process and activities by conceiving ideas, developing project plans, executing those plans, making decisions, and more. Therefore, managing their requirements and expectations is critical to successful project delivery. Stakeholder engagement, as outlined in the PMBOK Guide Seventh Edition, is a crucial and systematic process. It involves identifying, analyzing, planning, and implementing deliberate actions to effectively involve and communicate with individuals or groups who can impact a project or who may be impacted by its outcomes. Mysore et al. (2021) identified several significant variables influencing stakeholder engagement in global IT projects, including personality clashes, non-cooperation, governance malfunctions, exclusion from decision-making, and lack of reasoning, among 28 adverse

situations. Similarly, Figueiredo-Filho et al. (2021) highlighted inadequate stakeholder interactions and communication as potential obstacles, which can lead to misalignment and conflict in construction projects. Mysore et al. (2021) found the clash of personalities, non-cooperation, malfunctions in governance, exclusion from decision-making and lack of reasoning, among others, from the 28 adverse situations, as the most significant variables that can influence stakeholders' engagement in the context of global-IT projects. According to the Project Management Institute (2017), high-performing companies engage in 30% more communication than low-performing ones. This enhanced communication allows management to be more adaptable in their communication methods. The authors found face-to-face meetings and presentations to be the most effective modes of communication, followed by email and newsletters, the use of project management software and collaboration tools, video and virtual meetings, social media and online groups, and physical documents, including hard-copy reports. Dainty et al. (2006) demonstrated that face-to-face communication was 34% more effective than written communication when addressing complex project problems. Research by Freeman (2010) emphasises that open communication channels foster trust and buy-in, leading to increased engagement, which in turn results in project completion on time.

Successful Project Delivery

Successful project delivery has often been narrowly defined by the "Iron Triangle" of constraints: meeting cost, time (schedule), and quality or performance specifications. However, contemporary project management literature emphasises that merely achieving these traditional metrics is often insufficient for true overall project success. A project can be delivered on time and within budget yet still be considered a failure if the end-product performs poorly or if key stakeholders are dissatisfied (Project Management Institute, PMI). The modern understanding of successful project delivery includes a broader set of dimensions, recognizing it as fundamentally a matter of perception and a high level of satisfaction among key project team members, users, or client. According to Freeman (2010), stakeholder theory suggests that various groups and individuals should be considered as part of the project actors. These include project sponsors, project teams, project communities, project suppliers, relevant government agencies, project users, and others who can impact the progress and conclusion of the project.

Managing Expectations of Stakeholders

Ullah et al. (2020) assert that, the process of identifying stakeholders and addressing their needs and expectations may be accomplished by implementing effective and timely communication strategies that align with the needs and expectations of relevant stakeholders. This according to the authors involves the provision of necessary data to decision makers and the receipt of input to guarantee congruence between project objectives and stakeholder expectations. Another important component in the process of managing expectations mentioned by previous research is the necessity to develop and sustain good relations with the stakeholders. The authors identified misaligned expectations as one of the sources of conflict along with dissatisfaction in projects. These risks dictate that project managers should adopt various approaches to managing stakeholder expectations. These include identifying the project's duration, purpose, and constraints; communicating the project status and potential challenges; managing risks that may surface during the project; and engaging stakeholders in setting achievable targets and decision-making. Understanding project stakeholder expectations and maintaining successful connections with them are crucial for both independent researchers and project managers (Olkkonen, 2015) The management of stakeholder expectations serves the purpose of not only elucidating the diverse needs of stakeholders but also understanding the interconnections between them (Ismayilova & Silvius, 2021). By doing so, it significantly enhances the likelihood of project success (Boiral & Heras-Saizarbitoria, 2020). Failure to address the expectations of various stakeholders renders a project incapable of being deemed successful (Olkkonen, 2015).

Empirical evidence

The theoretical frameworks and practical models discussed previously are strongly supported by a growing body of empirical evidence, which consistently demonstrates a direct and significant correlation between effective stakeholder engagement, communication, and overall project success. Bande, Ika and Ouedraogo (2024) surveyed 154 projects to emphasise the importance of beneficiary engagement in international development initiatives. The authors focus on stakeholder involvement within these contexts. The results of their quantitative study suggest that beneficiary participation significantly and positively influences both short-term success (project management outcomes) and

long-term success (project impact). According to a KPMG global survey (2017), 70 per cent of organisations acknowledged that managing stakeholder expectations is a key challenge in project management.

Methodology

The target respondents were engineers, quantity surveyors, land surveyors, and estate surveyors who have recently participated in an infrastructural project (completed or ongoing). The sample size of 250 respondents was determined using (Cochran, 1977) formula. The study employed a mixed-methods design. The primary data collection tools were a literature review and a questionnaire. The questionnaire was used to solicit responses, and simple random sampling was employed to administer it. The survey instrument comprised four sections, containing a total of 23 questions—19 closed and 4 open-ended. The first section collected information about the respondents, while the second focused on the level and methods of stakeholder engagement. The third section gathered data on managing highly impacted stakeholders, and the fourth aimed to determine the impact of stakeholder engagement and communication on project success.Based on the feedback collected during the pre-testing of the instrument, an online version of the questionnaire was created using Google Forms, as this was considered more advantageous than attaching a soft copy of the questionnaire to the email. Additionally, error checking was incorporated into the submitted responses to ensure that all questions were properly answered. Furthermore, the software's functions for consolidating and tabulating results saved considerable time and reduced human error in manually collating the large volume of data. Information about the study was disseminated to potential respondents by sending an email containing the web address of the survey. The survey was conducted in May 2025, with a total of 199 construction professionals participating in the study. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the Likert scale data and gauge the general level of agreement with the statements. Frequency distributions were used for multiple choice questions to identify the most common practices. Content validity ratio was used to check validity of instruments.

Results and Discussion

Stakeholder Engagement Strategies and Communication Tools

This section presents the results derived from the literature review and questionnaires. The existing literature reveals a paucity of studies on stakeholder engagement and communication from the perspective of construction practitioners. The importance of stakeholder engagement and communication in public construction projects lies in addressing opposition and enhancing public involvement in decision-making. Without effective strategies and tools to engage stakeholders, the objectives of stakeholder engagement and communication may be significantly undermined.

The result of the literature reviewed as illustrated in Table 1, summarizes the questions in the questionnaire, namely: Regular project updates, Site visit for stakeholders, Dedicated website/social media page, Public information sessions, One on one meeting with highly impacted stake holders, Survey feedback, Collaborative workshops, Negotiation and conflict resolution process, and Community hotlines or dedicated email addresses were *strategies used for engaging stakeholders.* Face to face meetings, Email, Formal reports/presentations, Website/online portal, social media, print media, and Phone calls, were also identified as communication tools used for stakeholder engagement in the literature.

Table 1 Stakeholder Engagement Strategies and Communication Tools

S/N	**Stakeholder engagement strategies**
	Regular project updates
	Site visit for stakeholders
	Dedicated website/social media page
	Public information sessions
	Formal consultation committee
	One on one meeting with highly impacted stake holders
	Survey feedback

	Collaborative workshops
	Negotiation and conflict resolution process
	Community hotlines or dedicated email addresses
	Communication tools
	Face to face meetings
	Email
	Formal reports/presentations
	Website/online portal
	Social media
	Print media
	Phone calls

Descriptive Statistics

The results of the descriptive statistics summarise the raw data utilised in the analyses (see Table 2).

For stakeholders' engagement strategies the average ratios (mean) are: 3.714 for regular project updates (ranked1), 3.618 for site visit for stakeholders (ranked 2), 3.593 for dedicated website/social media page (ranked3), 2.5834 for provide general information (ranked 4), 2.824 for formal consultation committee (ranked 5), 2.397 for public meetings/town halls (ranked 6), 2.275 for suggestion boxes (ranked 7), 2.213 for collaborative workshops, 2.213 for negotiation and conflict resolution process (ranked 8) and 2.106 for community hotlines/liaison (ranked 9)

Standard deviations of the results are: 1.134 for regular project updates, 1.409 for site visit for stakeholders, 1.176 for dedicated website/social media page, 1.100 for provide general information, 1.365 for formal consultation committee, 1.490 for public meetings/town halls, 1.249 for suggestion boxes, 1.258 for collaborative workshops, 1.258 for negotiation and conflict resolution process and 1.178 for community hotlines/liaison

The minimum and maximum values for regular project updates, site visit for stakeholders, dedicated website/social media page, provide general information, formal consultation committee, public meetings/town halls, suggestion boxes, collaborative workshops, negotiation and conflict resolution process, and community hotlines/liaison are 1.00 and 5.00, respectively.

For communication tools the average ratios (mean) are: 3.010 for face to face meetings (ranked1), 2.915 for email (ranked 2), 2.673 for formal reports/presentations (ranked3), 2.477 for newsletters (ranked 4), 2.211 for social media (ranked 5), 2.106 for print media/press releases (ranked 6) and 1.859 for instant messaging and 1.859 for phone calls (ranked 7)

Standard deviations of the results are: 1.477 for face-to-face meetings, 1.403 for email, 1.247 for formal reports/presentations, 1.406 for newsletters, 1.237 for social media, 1.178 for print media/press releases and 1.150 for instant messaging and 1.150 for phone calls

The minimum and maximum are 1.00 and 5.00 for face-to-face meetings, email, formal reports/presentations, newsletters, social media, print media/press releases, instant messaging, and phone calls.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics on the Stakeholder Engagement Strategies and Communication Tools that Affect Successful Project Delivery

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Rank
Stakeholder engagement strategies						
Regular project updates	199	1.00	5.00	3.714	1.134	1
Site visit for stakeholders	199	1.00	5.00	3.618	1.409	2

Dedicated website/social media page	199	1.00	5.00	3.593	1.176	3
Provide general information	199	1.00	5.00	2.834	1.100	4
Formal consultation committee	199	1.00	5.00	2.824	1.365	5
Public meetings/Town halls	199	1.00	5.00	2.397	1.490	6
Suggestion boxes	199	1.00	5.00	2.275	1.249	7
Collaborative workshops	199	1.00	5.00	2.213	1.258	8
Negotiation and conflict resolution process	199	1.00	5.00	2.213	1.258	8
Community hotlines/liaison	199	1.00	5.00	2.106	1.178	9
communication tools						
Face to face meetings	199	1.00	5.00	3.010	1.477	1
Email	199	1.00	5.00	2.915	1.403	2
Formal reports/presentations	199	1.00	5.00	2.673	1.247	3
Newsletters	199	1.00	5.00	2.477	1.406	4
Social media	199	1.00	5.00	2.211	1.237	5
Print media/press releases	199	1.00	5.00	2.106	1.178	6
Instant messaging	199	1.00	5.00	1.859	1.150	7
Phone calls	199	1.00	5.00	1.859	1.150	7

Strategies for Managing Highly Impacted Stakeholder's Expectations in Large Infrastructure Projects

The results of the descriptive statistics summarise the raw data utilised in the analyses (see Table 3). For effective strategies for managing highly impacted stakeholder's expectations the average ratios (mean) are: 4.392 for regular, proactive communication (ranked1), 4.065 for establishing a dedicated point of contact (ranked 2), 3.804 for involving them in decision making process (ranked 3), 3.764 for providing fair and transparent compensation (ranked 4), 3.761 for demonstrating a genuine understanding of their concerns (ranked 5), 3.754 for using third party mediators for conflict resolution (ranked 6), 3.538 for offering alternative solutions or project modifications (ranked 7), 3.432 for holding private, one on one meetings (ranked 8), 2.769 for negotiation and conflict resolution process (ranked 8), 2.769 for empowering them with project information and updates (ranked 9) and 2.678 for develop workshop (ranked 10). Standard deviations of the result are: 0.914 for regular, proactive communication, 1.151 for establishing a dedicated point of contact, 1.274 for involving them in decision making process, 1.202 for providing fair and transparent compensation, 1.148 for demonstrating a genuine understanding of their concerns, 1.135 for using third party mediators for conflict resolution, 1.282 for offering alternative solutions or project modifications, 1.282 for holding private, one on one meetings, 1.361 for negotiation and conflict resolution process, 1.462 for empowering them with project information and updates and 1.278 for develop workshop. The minimum and maximum are 1.00 and 5.00 for regular, proactive communication, establishing a dedicated point of contact, involving them in decision making process, providing fair and transparent compensation, demonstrating a genuine understanding of their concerns, using third party mediators for conflict resolution, offering alternative solutions or project modifications, holding private, one on one meetings, negotiation and conflict resolution process, empowering them with project information and updates and develop workshop respectively.

Table 3 Descriptive Statistics of Effective Strategies for Managing Highly Impacted Stakeholder's Expectations

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Rank
Regular, proactive communication	199	1.00	5.00	4.392	0.914	1

Establishing a dedicated point of contact	199	1.00	5.00	4.065	1.151	2
Involving them in decision making process	199	1.00	6.00	3.804	1.274	3
Providing fair and transparent compensation	199	1.00	5.00	3.764	1.202	4
Demonstrating a genuine understanding of their concerns	199	1.00	5.00	3.761	1.148	5
Using third party mediators for conflict resolution	199	1.00	5.00	3.754	1.135	6
Offering alternative solutions or project modifications	199	1.00	5.00	3.538	1.282	7
Holding private, one on one meetings	199	1.00	5.00	3.432	1.361	8
Empowering them with project information and updates	199	1.00	5.00	2.769	1.462	9
Develop workshop	199	1.00	5.00	2.678	1.278	10

Discussions

This section discusses the minimum, maximum, mean, and standard deviation values for each variable analysed.

The respondents were asked to indicate the possible stakeholder engagement strategies and communication tools that, in their opinion, influence project success, using a scale from 1 to 5. Regular project updates were identified as the most effective strategy for engaging stakeholders in achieving project success and delivering value to both stakeholders and society at large (mean score: 3.714). Therefore, it is important to provide periodic updates on every development to those affected by the project (Rajeev & Pradeep, 2021). This assertion supports Lohrey's (2020) view that understanding the role of stakeholders at every phase of the project life cycle, as well as their concerns and expectations, can contribute to successful project delivery. Face to face meetings was the most effective communication tool (3.010). Face to face meetings was probably chosen because it has a greater effect on project success and achievement of project objectives directly relate to the traditional and more frequent modes of communication. This is assertion corroborated the view of Dainty et al. (2006) that, the face-to-face communication was more effective by 34% compared to the written form in dealing with the project's complicated problems. Similarly, respondents were asked to indicate, on a scale from 1 to 5, the strategies they considered most effective for managing the expectations of stakeholders most affected by large infrastructure projects. Regular, proactive communication is the most important Effective strategy for managing highly impacted stakeholder's expectations in large infrastructure projects (4.392). Effective management of expectation (those related to project delivery and those related to its impact on life and environment) requires a proactive, transparent and continuous engagement strategy. The importance of a regular, proactive communication strategy for managing individuals or groups affected by a project—such as homeowners, businesses, communities, and government regulators—lies in preventing the spread of misinformation, which can rapidly undermine a project. Regular, proactive communication not only clarifies the diverse needs of stakeholders but also fosters an understanding of the interconnections between them (Ismayilova & Silvius, 2021). In doing so, it significantly enhances the likelihood of project success (Boiral & Heras-Saizarbitoria, 2020).

Conclusion

These theoretical foundations are continuously supported by empirical evidence, which shows that the positive relationship between active engagement and strong communication with stakeholder management and the enhanced performance of the project can be measured. The review on the strategies, tools of communication and particularly the strategy of frequent project up-dates confirms that organisations need to engage stakeholders. Stakeholders need to be kept up-to-date regularly with every development so that they understand their role in each stage of the project life cycle, and are able to manage their concerns and expectations, or even contribute positively for successful projects. And conversely, face-to-face is reported to be more effective than written on handling these issues. In addition, the report emphasises that regular and proactive communication types of practices are key factors in expectation management and it is reported that tensions generated from unmet project expectations (dissatisfaction) have been evident in previous research.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The reviewed literature shows stakeholders' engagement and communication in large infrastructure projects cannot be overemphasised. It has been proved that stakeholder's engagement and communication are critical factors in construction projects, acting as the primary mechanisms for mitigating risk, controlling costs, and ensuring that the final structure meets the needs of its user and the community. Stakeholder engagement will ensure all parties are committed to the same objectives and enable swift informed decisions. Effective communication and early engagement minimize the likelihood and impact of common construction problems. Evidence from the reviewed literature shows that few studies conducted in the subject area did not address stakeholder's engagement strategies and communication tools that affect project success in large infrastructure projects including in Nigeria. Moreover, these previous studies did not explore the underlying issues from the source.

Theoretical Implication

Therefore, the study addressed the theoretical gap. The reviewed literature established a paucity of literature on stakeholders' engagement strategies and communication tools in Nigeria's construction projects. Filling this gap through the findings is a contribution to the existing literature. As revealed from the theoretical perspective, findings identify the most effective stakeholders' engagement strategies and communication tools and suggest best strategies for managing highly impacted stakeholders from the viewpoint of the key actors in the industry.

Practical Implication

Regarding the practical implication, the outcome of this research will stir up new frontiers of knowledge concerning stakeholders' engagement and communication in Nigeria's construction industry. The study's practical implications are in the form of contributions to successful construction project management by bringing overall awareness and clarity of the stakeholders' engagement strategies and communication tools that is tailored to the unique interest and influence of each category of stakeholders.

The practitioners suggested various strategies that could be used to manage highly impacted stakeholders. Findings from the study would stir up stakeholders in the built environment to promote stakeholder engagement and avoid issues that may affect the fruitfulness of the concept in Nigeria's construction projects at all levels of government. It may facilitate and strengthen project delivery, leading to productivity and optimal performance in terms of sustainability, quality, time and cost. The outcome will enhance collaboration among the stakeholders and form part of the practical implications for stakeholder engagement in Nigeria's construction projects. Other developing countries with similar stakeholder engagement challenges may modify the feasible strategies suggested in this study.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Research Limitation

The paper highlighted the stakeholder engagement strategies and communication tools that affect project success and suggested strategies for managing highly impacted stakeholders in large

infrastructure projects in Nigeria. Thus, it is limited to Nigera's stakeholders' engagement and communication in construction projects and has not investigated generalisability in other countries and sectors. Also, the study is limited to engineers, quantity surveyors, land surveyors, and estate surveyors. The limitations have been acknowledged but do not influence the quality of the findings and could be utilised in other developing countries with similar stakeholder engagement challenges.

Future Research Direction

Therefore, in order to effectively complete projects and provide value to external stakeholders, additional study is required to examine the function of stakeholder involvement and communications. Research with a wider scope and variables, like the impact on economic disruption, disruption of lifestyle, and the challenges of monitoring and compliance, might also be conducted.

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SACQSP2025-31

A Systematic Review of Drivers and Barriers to Biomimicry in Construction Solid Waste Management

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Abstract

The construction industry plays a vital role in national growth and development, contributing over 13% to the global economy. However, it also generates about 40% of the world's total waste, primarily from construction and demolition activities. As nations continue to expand and pursue innovative solutions, nature has increasingly become a source of inspiration for sustainable development. Biomimicry, which involves emulating nature's models, systems, and elements, has inspired innovations such as self-healing concrete, termite-inspired ventilation systems, and lotus-effect materials. The industry is gradually integrating sustainability principles by shifting from a traditional linear economy to a circular economy framework. This transition emphasises waste minimisation through the 3Rs (Reduce, Reuse, and Recover) rather than relying on conventional practices like landfilling and incineration. This study provides an in-depth examination of the key drivers and barriers influencing the adoption of biomimicry in managing construction solid waste. A systematic review was conducted, with the identified factors categorised under economic sustainability, regulatory, and knowledge and awareness dimensions, among others. To analyse publication trends, 94 peer-reviewed journal articles were reviewed, and scientometric analyses were performed using VOSviewer and Gephi to visualise keyword occurrences and research network trends. Based on the findings, the study proposes a strategic framework to strengthen biomimicry adoption in the construction sector. The recommendations include policy and regulatory reforms, professional education and awareness programmes, interdisciplinary collaboration, and economic incentives to promote innovation and large-scale implementation. Together, these strategies aim to accelerate the shift toward sustainable and circular practices in construction solid waste management.

Keywords: Construction Industry, Biomimicry, Circular Economy, Solid Waste Management, Sustainability.

Introduction

The construction industry is a major driver of economic growth and national development, closely linked to urbanisation through infrastructure such as railways, roads, bridges, buildings, and energy facilities. It also serves as a significant employment generator, especially in developing nations. However, the sector is heavily criticised for its environmental impact, being one of the largest

consumers of raw materials and energy. Solid waste generation is a growing concern worldwide, with global municipal solid waste (MSW) increasing from 2.01 billion tons in 2016 to 2.24 billion tons in 2020 (Kaza et al., 2018). Within this, construction solid waste (CSW) rose from 1.3 billion tons (64.7% of MSW) in 2016 to 1.6 billion tons (71.4%) in 2020 (Dong et al., 2025), making it the largest component of waste streams globally. Of the 100 billion tons of construction waste produced annually, more than 35% ends up in landfills, with developing countries such as China, India, and South Africa experiencing particularly high landfilling rates (Chen et al., 2022a).

Sustainability concerns have prompted interest in new models such as the circular economy, which promotes reduction, reuse, refurbishment, repair, and recycling to extend resource lifecycles (Zohoori & Ghani, 2017). Despite the attention solid waste receives, it remains less prioritised compared to issues such as wastewater and air pollution in developing nations. This has raised alarm among scholars, policymakers, and professionals about natural resource depletion and environmental degradation (Ruiz et al., 2020). In this context, biomimicry has emerged as a design paradigm that learns from nature's time-tested strategies to provide cost-effective, sustainable solutions (Biomimicry Institute, 2024). Examples include the kingfisher-inspired design of the Shinkansen bullet train and bone-growth-inspired structural optimisation (Hayes et al., 2020). However, existing research on the systematic application of biomimicry to construction solid waste management remains scarce. Most available studies focus on biomimetic materials or design frameworks, leaving a knowledge gap in understanding the key drivers and barriers that influence biomimicry adoption for sustainable waste management.

Therefore, the main aim of this study is to explore the drivers and barriers influencing biomimicry adoption in construction solid waste management through a comprehensive, systematic and scientometric analysis. The study applies VOSviewer and Gephi tools to identify publication trends, keyword occurrences, and research network patterns, while also reviewing existing techniques and proposing future recommendations for advancing biomimicry applications.

The objectives are to:

- To conduct an extensive bibliometric review of all necessary journals in the domain of biomimicry implementation in construction and the built environment.
- Perform a rigorous scientometric analysis to identify keyword co-occurrence and research network trends within the biomimicry research domain.
- To examine the techniques and methods developed for the barriers and drivers toward biomimicry implementation in construction.
- To propose future recommendations for the research domain.

Research Methodology and Method

This research employed a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative analyses. The quantitative component involved a scientometric analysis conducted using VOSviewer and Gephi. The process began with data collection from the Scopus database, followed by the analysis of publication trends, preferred publication outlets, leading organisations, frequently occurring keywords, and the most influential authors and countries in the biomimicry research domain.

The qualitative component entailed an in-depth thematic review focusing on the drivers and barriers influencing the adoption of biomimicry in the construction industry, particularly in relation to solid waste management. The systematic framework of the two key themes explored in this study, pertaining to biomimicry adoption for construction solid waste management, is illustrated in Figure 1, which outlines the entire research process from data collection to scientometric and thematic analysis

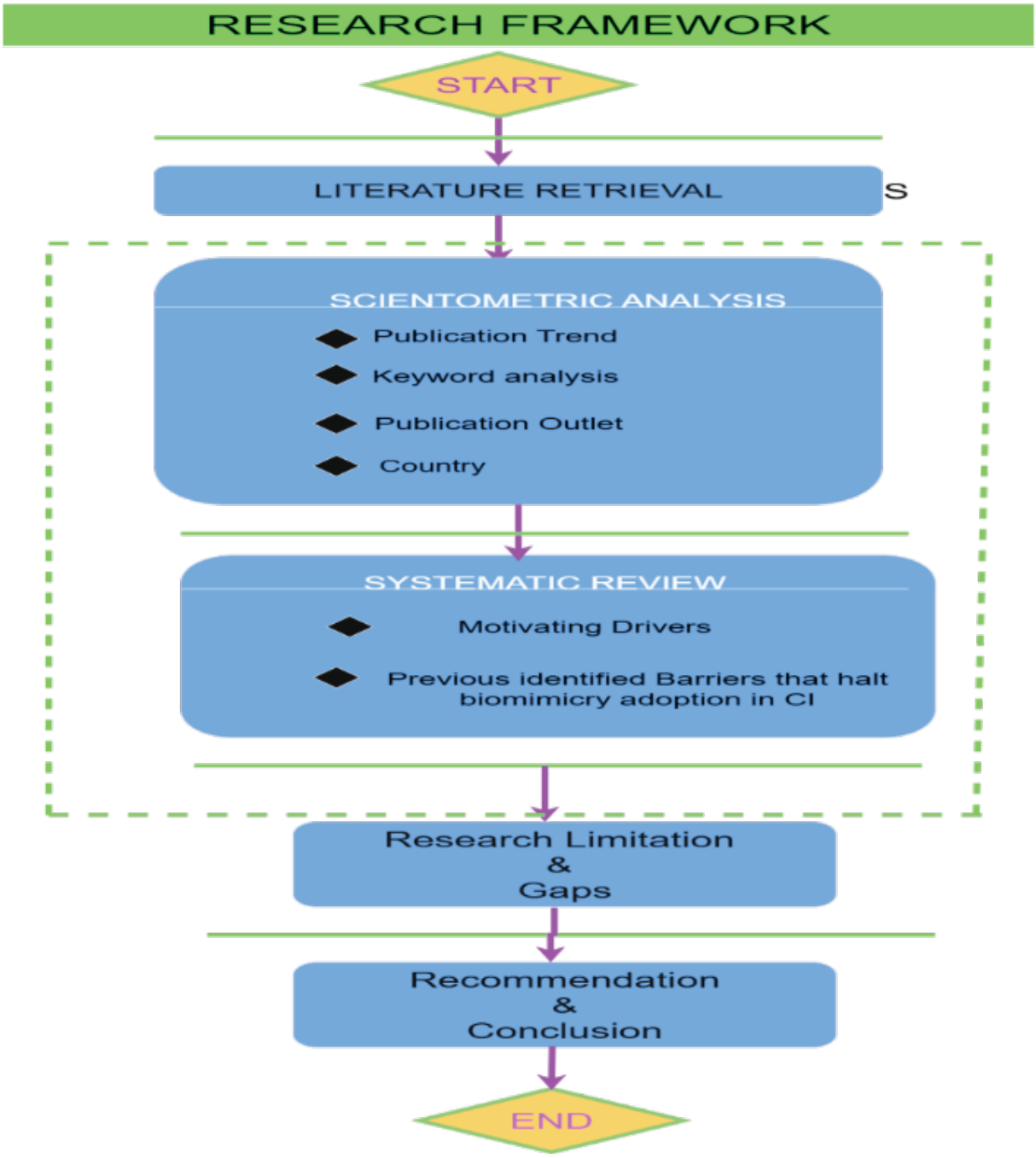

Figure 1 Research Frame from Literature Review to Recommendation

Literature Retrieval Procedure

Figure 2 illustrates the complete literature selection process. Data collection began with a pilot search using relevant search strings. The study primarily relied on the Scopus database due to its comprehensive coverage and rigorous indexing standards (Akindele et al., 2024). During the search for relevant journal articles, various keywords were tested alongside the main keyword biomimicry, and the number of search results varied depending on the keyword combinations used. The final search string was selected based on the combination that produced the highest number of relevant results. The retrieved publications were subjected to several filtering stages. First, titles and abstracts were screened to remove duplicates and irrelevant papers. Articles that passed this stage underwent full-text evaluation to confirm their eligibility based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, as emphasised by Tariq et al. (2022).

During this process, particular attention was given to studies addressing sustainability, sustainable development, the built environment, and the application of biomimicry in managing solid waste within the construction industry. The review was limited to articles published in English. After applying both forward and backward snowballing techniques to expand the initial selection, a total of 94 articles were included in the final analysis.

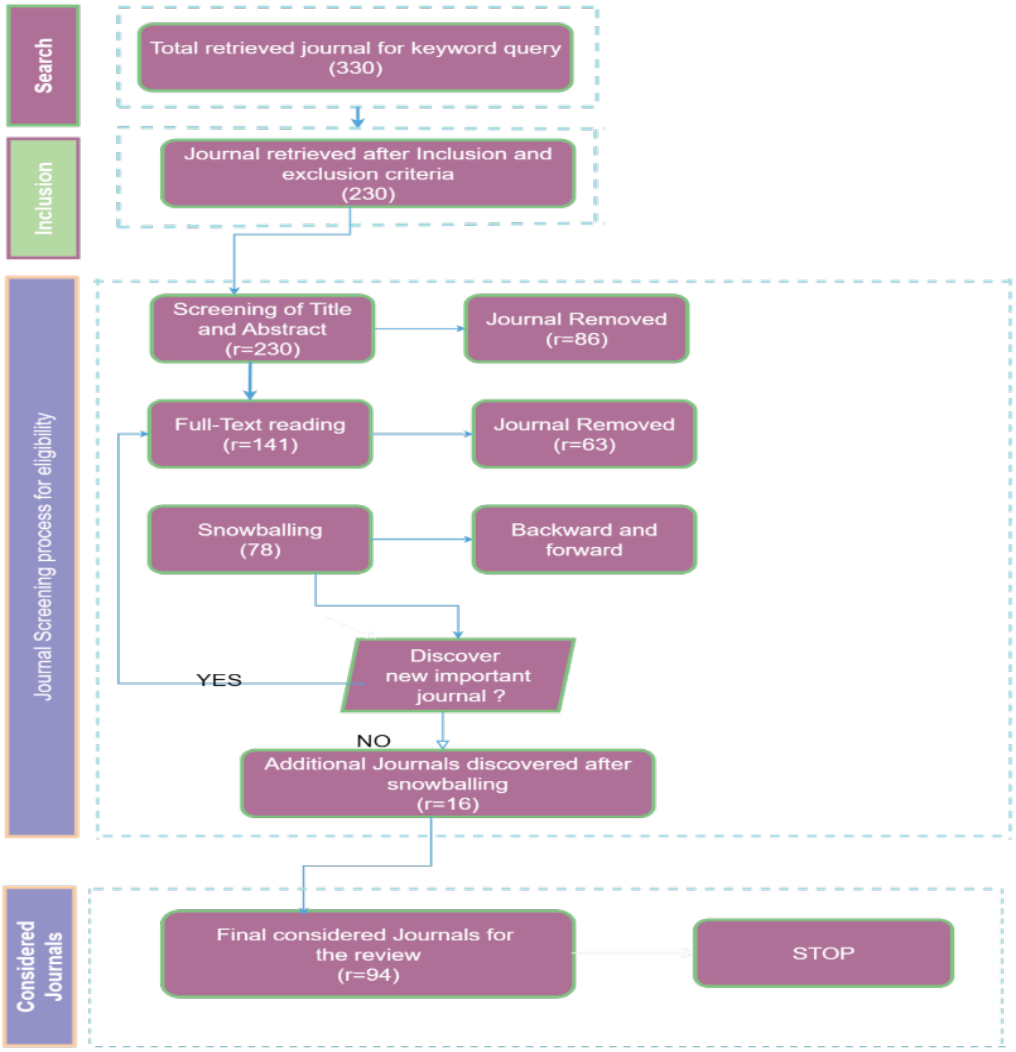

Figure 2 Procedure for Journal Retrieval

Research Results and Discussion

Scientometric Analysis

Publication trend

Figure 3 shows the publication trend of biomimicry adoption in the construction industry between 2006 and 2024. Before 2006, no scholarly work was recorded, and between 2006 and 2016, publications were limited, totalling only nine. A sharp rise occurred in 2017 with seven publications, nearly equal to the entire output of the previous decade, but this was followed by a decline to two in 2018. From 2019 to 2022, research activity stabilised at around 9 to 10 publications per year, before increasing to 14 in 2023 and peaking at 20 in 2024. This sharp growth highlights increasing global recognition of biomimicry's role in advancing circular economy principles and sustainable construction practices, demonstrating its rising importance as a driver of innovation in the sector.

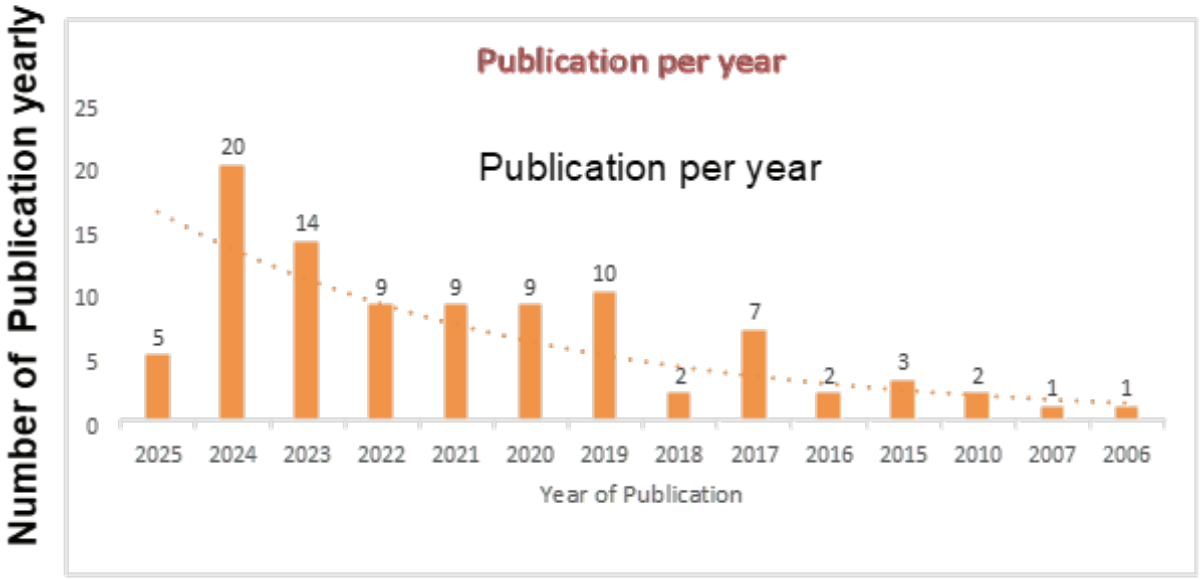

Figure 3 Yearly Publication Trend of the Biomimicry Research Domain

Keyword analysis

Keyword analysis is a vital approach for pinpointing the core research interests within a discipline. Examining the co-occurrence of keywords allows for a clearer visualisation of the knowledge landscape, providing insights into past research areas and revealing how they are conceptually connected and organised.

In this study, VOSviewer 1.60.2 and Gephi 0.10.1 were applied for keyword co-occurrence analysis. From a total of 93 carefully reviewed articles retrieved from Scopus and Google Scholar, 538 keywords were identified, of which only 87 met the VOSviewer threshold of appearing at least twice.

Figure 4 depicts the science mapping of the keyword co-occurrence network. The visualisation shows thematic clusters of keywords, each represented by a distinct colour. Node size reflects the frequency of keyword occurrence, while the thickness of connecting lines represents the strength of their relationships. The mapping highlights “Biomimicry” and “Sustainability” as central concepts, emphasising their prominence in the field.

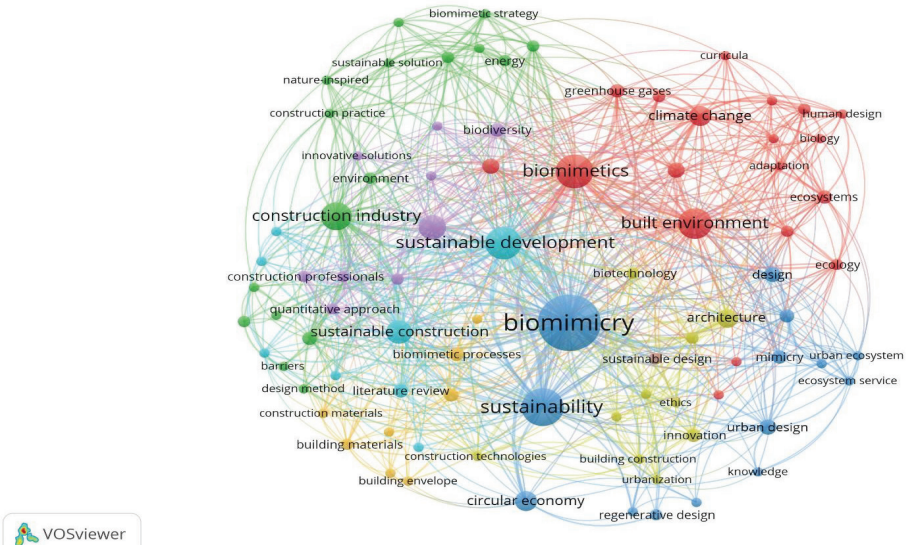

Figure 4 Keywords Occurrence for Biomimicry Adoption in Construction Industries

Publication Outlets

Academic journals play a crucial role in advancing scientific knowledge, and identifying leading outlets is valuable for researchers, authors, editors, and institutions engaged in biomimicry research within the construction industry. To determine the most influential journals, a citation analysis was conducted using VOSviewer with "sources" as the unit of analysis and inclusion criteria of at least one document and five citations per source. Out of 60 identified sources, 35 met the criteria, and 27 of these showed the highest interconnectivity, later visualised in Gephi, resulting in a citation network of 27 nodes and 48 edges. The analysis revealed the strongest citation link between Biomimetics and the World Construction Symposium, followed by a notable link with Energy Procedia. Table 1.0 ranks journals by average normalised citation scores, a measure reflecting the relative impact of research outputs, with the top five being Construction and Building Materials, Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics, Sustainable Development, Applied Sciences (Switzerland), and Environment and Planning B: Urban Analytics and City Science. By contrast, when considering productivity alone, Biomimetics, World Construction Symposium, and Sustainability (Switzerland) emerge as the most prolific outlets in this field.

Table 1 Publication Outlet for Biomimicry Adoption in Construction Industries

Sources	**TLS**	**Documents**	**Citations**	**Normalise Citations**	**Average Citations**	**Average Normalise Citations**
Construction and building materials	4	1	95	3.5561	95	3.5561
Journal of Agricultural and Environmental ethics	2	1	25	2.7778	25	2.7778
Sustainable development	3	1	8	2.6182	8	2.6182
Applied sciences (Switzerland)	6	1	60	2.6087	60	2.6087
Environment and planning: urban analytics and city science	5	1	47	2.2031	47	2.2031
Technology in society	3	1	5	1.6364	5	1.6364
Frontiers in the built environment	4	1	15	1.5652	15	1.5652
Biomimetics	20	14	222	17.2116	15.8571	1.2294
Buildings	2	1	25	1.1719	25	1.1719
International journal of Technology and design education	1	1	25	1.087	25	1.087

Leading Countries

Analysing country contributions provides insight into global expertise, investment, and collaboration in biomimicry research. Using VOSviewer with thresholds of three documents and five citations, 15 out of 33 countries represented across 95 reviewed articles met the criteria. Figure 5.0 highlights Australia as the central node, reflecting its strong research output and international collaborations. Further analysis. with Gephi ranked countries by Total Link Strength (TLS), showing Australia, South Africa, Sri Lanka, India, the UAE, and New Zealand as the top contributors, with the UK, France, and the Netherlands also playing key roles. Australia stands out for both the highest TLS and publication volume, while the strong performance of South Africa, India, and Sri Lanka demonstrates growing global engagement in advancing biomimicry applications within the construction industry.

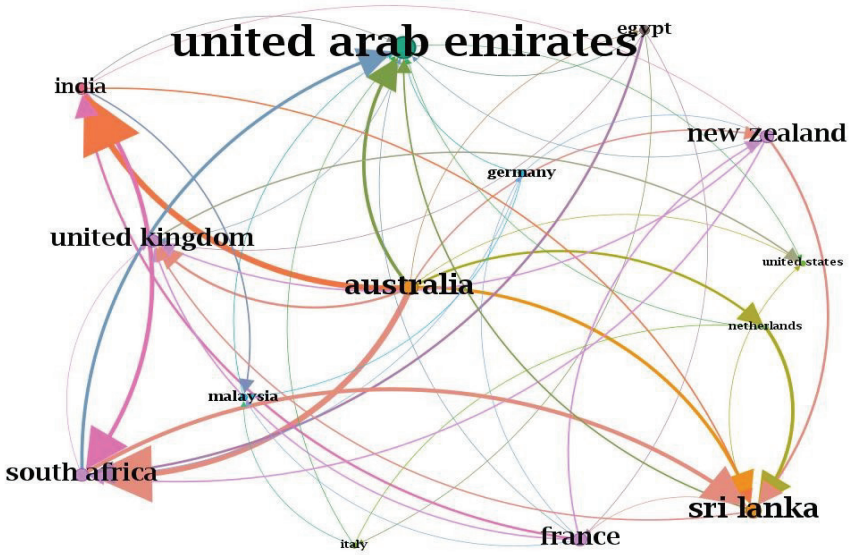

Figure 5 Top Countries with the Most Output from Biomimicry-related Research in the Construction Industry

Systematics analysis

The word 'biomimicry' gained widespread attention in 1997 from the book author Janine M Benyus titled Biomimicry: Innovation Inspired by Nature. coming from a combination of the Greek words bios (life) and mīmēsis (imitation), it literally means ‘life imitation’ or the ‘imitation of life’ (Verbrugghe et al., 2023). It is defined as the process of creating sustainable designs and solutions through the study and conscious emulation of natural forms, methods, and ecosystems. Biomimicry is described by Jamei and Vrcelj (2021) as a multidisciplinary field of science that encourages a robust collaboration between different stakeholders, including engineers and biologists, in creating sustainable solutions to human challenges. Based on a systematic analysis of over 94 journals considered for the study, two key areas were identified for a deeper understanding of biomimicry applications in the construction industry. This study reviewed the existing drivers and barriers toward embracing biomimicry in the construction industry.

Drivers and Barriers to Biomimicry Adoption in Construction (with Emphasis on Solid Waste Management)

A review of 94 journal articles identifies sustainability, innovation, and economic benefits as the main drivers for adopting biomimicry in construction, with direct applications in solid waste management (Oguntona & Aigbavboa, 2017; Pugalenthi et al., 2024).

Sustainability

Biomimicry supports biodiversity, resource efficiency, and eco-responsible solutions by replicating natural strategies. It encourages closed-loop recycling, renewable energy use, feedback loops, and the use of locally available resources (Oguntona & Aigbavboa, 2019a; Pugalenthi et al., 2024). Practical examples include the Shinkansen bullet train nose, inspired by the kingfisher’s beak, which reduces noise and energy, and bone structure models applied in structural optimisation (Hayes et al., 2020; Oguntona & Aigbavboa, 2019b).

Innovation and Materials

Green materials must be non-toxic, recyclable, renewable, and locally sourced (Pearce, 2017). Biomimicry helps reduce the environmental footprint of buildings while enhancing occupant well-being. For example, the Sinosteel International Plaza integrates lightweight structures and passive heat regulation (Mohammed, 2023; Chen et al., 2022b), while the Pearl River Tower mimics a sea sponge to achieve water and energy efficiency (Mirniazmandan & Rahimianzarif, 2018; Simsek, 2020). Biomimetic materials further provide lightweight strength, self-cleaning, recyclability, and self-healing

properties (Oguntona & Aigbavboa, 2019c). Techniques like biomimetic fibre path optimisation, inspired by tree branches, improve resource efficiency (Son et al., 2023).

Economic Sustainability

Adopting biomimicry provides financial benefits such as reduced maintenance and operational costs, higher returns for investors, and increased competitive advantage (Liu et al., 2020; Dicks et al., 2021). It also stimulates aesthetic appeal, new green markets, and job opportunities (Helmrich et al., 2020). For instance, bio-inspired cooling systems reduce air conditioning costs, enabling energy-efficient structures (Pugalenthi et al., 2024). Additionally, durable and wear-resistant biomimetic materials can extend component lifespan and minimise replacement costs (Jones et al., 2024).

Barriers to Biomimicry Adoption

Despite its promise, biomimicry adoption in construction, especially in developing economies, faces several barriers, grouped into six constructs: knowledge and awareness, technological and resources, methodological and process, industry and organisation, communication and collaboration, and financial and regulatory barriers (Oguntona & Aigbavboa, 2019c; Adekunye & Oke, 2023).

Knowledge and Awareness

Low awareness, limited biomimicry training, and weak communication among stakeholders hinder acceptance (Oguntona & Aigbavboa, 2019a; Adekunye & Oke, 2023). Additionally, the traditional mindset of the construction industry and fragmented communication make it difficult to push biomimicry concepts forward (Jones et al., 2024; Stevens et al., 2021).

Technological and Practical Barriers

Challenges include the difficulty of converting biological principles into designs, the lack of biomimicry curricula, inadequate databases, insufficient incentives, and the limited availability of advanced materials (Oguntona & Aigbavboa, 2019). Many practitioners remain reluctant to abandon traditional tools, preferring established methods. Moreover, the absence of standardised methods, outdated testing, and rigid standards limits scalability (Pugalenthi et al., 2024).

Regulatory Barriers

Regulatory challenges include poor conservation laws, rigid codes, low-skilled craftsmanship, and citizen/client literacy gaps (Adekunye & Oke, 2023). According to Jones et al. (2024), outdated frameworks make it difficult to approve innovative biomimetic solutions. For example, restrictions on timber structures in some jurisdictions illustrate how entrenched regulations can obstruct sustainable alternatives, with issues tied more to bureaucratic reluctance than safety risks.

Conclusion

This research concludes that biomimicry holds significant potential as a sustainable innovation pathway in the construction industry, particularly for addressing the challenge of construction solid waste. The bibliometric review of 94 peer-reviewed articles across 33 countries, with over 20 publications in 2024 and notable leadership from Australia and South Africa, confirms a growing and geographically diverse research interest. Scientometric mapping using VOSviewer and Gephi revealed strong research networks and recurring themes around circular economy, sustainable materials, innovation, and emerging digital applications. The systematic review further identified key drivers such as resource efficiency, reduced maintenance and operational costs, higher investment returns, and new green-market and employment opportunities, while highlighting major barriers including limited knowledge and awareness, technological and material constraints, and weak regulatory support. Together, these findings directly address the study objectives and emphasise that advancing biomimicry adoption in construction will require targeted education and training, supportive policies and regulations, interdisciplinary collaboration, research funding, and economic incentives to accelerate the transition toward circular, low-waste, and sustainable construction practices.

Recommendations

Policy and Regulatory Reform: Governments should review regulatory frameworks to accommodate biomimetic materials and design approaches, while incentivising sustainable alternatives.

Create Awareness: Universities, research institutions, and industry professionals should integrate biomimicry into curricula, training programs, and professional development initiatives to bridge the knowledge and skills gap.

Technological Advancement: Investment in research and Innovation development is needed to translate biological principles into practical construction solutions, supported by biomimicry databases, digital modelling tools, and testing standards.

Collaboration and Knowledge Sharing: Empowering collaboration among the industry professionals which includes engineers, material scientists, and biologists, can foster interdisciplinary solutions.

Economic Incentives: Financial mechanisms such as green subsidies, tax reliefs, or funding schemes should be introduced to encourage adoption. Businesses should also explore biomimicry as a source of competitive advantage through cost reduction, market differentiation, and eco-conscious branding.

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SACQSP2025-33

Exploring the Role Played by the South Africa's Public Private Partnership Unit in Mitigating Information Asymmetry in Unsolicited Proposals Selection

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Abstract

The endeavour to resolve public infrastructure gap in light of technical and financial constraint has seen most countries resort to adopting public-private partnerships (PPPs) as a procurement model. A PPP is a collaborative contract, which allows governments to leverage private sector resources and expertise in the delivery of public infrastructure and services. Allocating risks to a well capacitated party and obtaining value for money (vfm) through delivery of quality infrastructure at an affordable price are the key objectives enshrined in PPP frameworks and manuals by governments. To achieve these, the public sector is tasked with the responsibility of screening and approving the private sector submissions, contract management and monitoring during implementation. South Africa (SA) is the first country in sub-Saharan Africa to establish a PPP unit whose role has been capacitating public institutions in PPP model of contracting. Since establishment under national treasury (NT) in 2000, the SA's PPP unit has noticeably been able to oversee implementation of some noticeable projects such as the Chapmen Peak drive, Gautrain and the Inkosi Albert Lithuli hospital. There has been an increase in governments utilising PPPs conceptualised as unsolicited proposals (USPs) for innovative infrastructure projects. However, SA has never approved any USP through NT. The problem is that USPs present even greater information asymmetry to public institutions as they are required to screen and evaluate innovativeness of private proponents' proposals submitted without explicit request. This paper uses qualitative systematic literature review to explore the role played by the SA's PPP unit in mitigating information asymmetry in USP selection. It reviews the SA's PPP annual reports for the past 10 years and enacted framework. Results show that the PPP unit has not been fully capacitated to handle USPs. The paper recommends having in place a centralised but independent PPP unit with expertise in USPs.

Keywords: Public Private Partnerships, Unsolicited Proposals, Information Asymmetry, PPP units.

Introduction

South Africa (SA) has pinned its hope for economic recovery post COVID-19 on infrastructure development through public private partnerships (PPPs) (South African National Treasury, 2024). A PPP is a collaboration between the public and private sector towards achieving the same goal though with differing interests and capabilities. PPPs are commonly used in the development and operation of public infrastructure by private partners on behalf of a public institution. More recently, the South African National Treasury (2024) budget review focused on approaches the government could use in luring private sector investment in public infrastructure largely through PPPs. PPPs have been popularised by countries as a way of leveraging on the private sector's capabilities in infrastructure development and in some instances, operation. Khatleli (2020) observed that although still facing resistance, PPPs have a better public appeal compared to outright privatisation. Akintoye and Beck (2009) alluded that PPPs have become unavoidable among developing countries due to challenging economic environment, which has left most countries with financial and technical constraints.

Majority of PPPs procurement are initiated by the public institution solicitation of bids from the private sector. However, there has been a growing number of PPPs that are initiated as unsolicited proposals (USPs), were the private sector makes a submission to the public institution, without explicit request. Resultantly, over 30% of global infrastructure are initiated as USPs (Mallisetti, Dolla & Laishram, 2022). Further, approximately 85% of regions reviewed by the World Bank expressed interest in PPPs structured around USPs (World Bank, 2017; Thennakoon et al., 2025). The fundamental motivation for governments in unsolicited PPPs is the ability to tap into the unique creativity and innovation of the private sector (Osei-Kyei, Chan & Dansoh, 2020).

SA is the leading Sub-Saharan country with respect to PPPs (Fombad, 2019; ALSF, 2024) as shown in figure 1 below. It is also ranked among developed countries such as France, Portugal and Spain while only trailing behind countries such as the United Kingdom, Australia, Germany, Korea in fostering infrastructure development through PPPs (OECD, 2010).

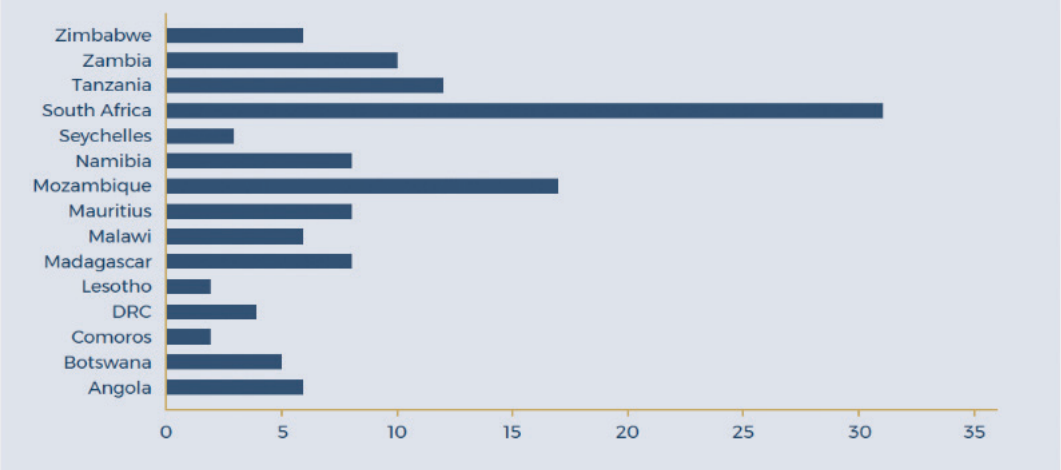

Figure 1 Total Number of PPP Projects in SADC, 1999 – 2019
Source: Khatleli 2020

The critical challenge facing public institutions is the failure to identify, package and evaluate PPPs (World Bank, 2017d; Osei-Kyei et al., 2018). Thus, while PPPs have been alluded as a great avenue for reciprocal reaping of benefits by both the public and private parties involved, research has widely shown that the private sector could use information asymmetry for self-interests by taking advantage of the capacity constraints in public institutions. Khatleli and Root (2008) added that the principal is never in a good position ex ante to know the true quality of the agent before the start of the formal relationship, because the skills the agent has are “hidden characteristics”. This is exacerbated under USPs as public institutions are seldom in position to depict the true innovativeness of the private proponent’s proposal submitted implicitly. The implicit USP procurement and limited competition has led to negative public perception and ideological resistance with some associating them with corrupt and nepotism practices (Turley, 2015). To counter the capacity challenge, the majority of countries in Sub-Saharan Africa have gone ahead to formulate PPP units following the enactment of frameworks and policies (Tshombe et al., 2020; Thennakoon et al., 2025).

SA is recognised among countries with well established PPP unit positioned within the NT’s Government technical advisory agency (GTAC). It lists provision of capacity, advisory and approval in PPPs as one of the key roles of the SA’s PPP unit. Since its establishment, the SA’s PPP unit has facilitated in assisting public institutions handling of PPPs and has seen the closeout of prominent PPP infrastructure projects such as th Gautrain, Inkosi Albert Luthuli hospital and the chapman’s peak road. In contrast, the SA NT (2024) informed that while USPs have been submitted in various sectors ranging from correctional services, toll roads, railway to health care, no PPP project has successfully implemented a PPP initiated as USP using the national treasury framework of 2009. A similar endeavour by South African National Roads Agency (SANRAL) has equally failed to record meaningful success with majority of projects unable to proceed beyond the negotiation stage. This raises the question as to whether the public sector is adequately capacited to handle USPs or if the institutional structure is well positioned for a procurement model that starts with the private proponent’s initiative without explicit request.

Many studies have been done on USPs, which mostly focused on regulatory frameworks or coming up with an evaluation checklist but has seldom looked at the role of the PPP units in minimising information asymmetry between the public and private parties. For example, Zin Zawawi, Kulatunga and Thayaparan (2016) came up with mechanisms of handing USPs in Malaysia through the introduction of competitive elements. Recently, Thennakoon et al. (2025) developed strategies to enhance the regulatory framework for managing USPs in infrastructure projects. Similarly, Van Den Hurk et al. (2016) came up with a comparative analysis of PPP-supporting units in 19 European countries but did not zoom into the role of PPP units at USP initiation phase. Aziz and Elmahdy (2015) undertook a study on USP perception but only focused on USA. Legacy, Gibson and Rogers (2024) looked at the assessment merits of USP projects in Australia. Although Canelas and Alves (2024) supported the recommendation for having policies in place as a way of building public capacity and market trust in PPPs, it is unlikely to yield positive results without actual implementation of regulatory frameworks and policies, which requires proactive and capable PPP units.

USPs presents even greater information assymetry to the public as they are required to screen and evaluate the private proponents' proposals submitted without explicit requests. Biygautane, Neesham and Al-Yahya (2019) established that having organisational support with dedicated structures was among the vital requirements for the successful implementation of PPPs. Thus, it is prepositioned that only a well resourced, capacitated and empowered PPP unit could be positioned to fulfil the outlined objectives of assisting public institutions in provision of expertise needed in evaluation of the soundness of USP concept submission. This paper seeks to explore the role played by the SA's PPP unit in mitigating information asymmetry in USP selection. It uses a qualitative systematic literature review. Thus, there is need of ascertaining the extent PPP units have gone in assisting public institutions in PPP projects procurement, especially in the absence of private transaction advisors (TAs) at the USP initiation phases. The paper starts by providing an overview of PPPs and USP model in infrastructure procurement. It then expounds on the information asymmetry that exists between the public and private partners and the mitigation role played by the PPP units to ensure that public institutions are adequately capacitated. The paper utilises the SA' s GTAC annual reports for the past 10 years to ascertain trends in reporting of PPPs procured through USPs and compares with solicited ones. It also reviews the SA's NT USP framework of 2009 to establish the stages at which the PPP unit is involved in USPs before drawing conclusions and making recommendations.

Literature Review

Weak technical and institutional capacity has been cited as highly contributing to the public sector's failure to plan, design, manage and monitor PPPs in infrastructure development in Sub-Saharan African countries (Nduhura et al., 2022). In countries with already high levels of corruption and low trust in public officials, USPs have been viewed as anticompetitive and mostly used to avoid following the procurement processes and regulations (Verma, 2010; Zin Zawawi, Kulatunga & Thayaparan, 2016; United Nations, 2021).The lack of transparency and limited competition subjects USPs' procurement to ideological resistance due to bad perception (Nwangwu, 2020; Ayat et al., 2025). Thus, USPs exposes the vulnerability of institutions especially at initiation up to procurement phases, which requires unique mechanisms and measures to be affected (Ayat et al., 2025).

Information Asymmetry in USPs

It has been reported that PPP contracts are increasingly being cancelled due to the adverse selection made at the procurement time as a result of limited information and lack of institutions responsible for monitoring private partners (Umar, Zawawi & Abdul-Aziz, 2019). On a study of PPPs in China, Liang et al. (2025) established that the development of PPPs is extremely unbalanced with the outcomes of China's PPPs falling short of expectations. This is similar to the experience in UK, which despite being a pioneer, announced the suspension of the application of its Private Finance Initiative (PFI) because of its enormous off-balance sheet debts and potential financial risks. Ruiz Diaz (2024) adds that Welfare superiority of USPs can only be observed in exceptional circumstances of asymmetric information on potential project solutions between the government and the project proponent. Resultantly, this exposes public institutions to severe capacity challenge compared to solicited procurements, which necessitates the enhancement of capacity through transitional advisors and PPP units (Liang et al., 2025). The purpose of PPP units is to enhance the government capacity by providing guidance in policy development and project implementation to public institutions embarking on PPPs (OECD, 2010; Van Den Hurk et al., 2016).

SA's PPP Regulatory Environment

In April 1997, the SA cabinet approved the appointment of an interdepartmental task team to develop policy, legislation and institutional reforms to enable the use of PPPs (Akintoye & Beck, 2009). RSA PPPs at national and provincial institutions level are regulated as set out in Treasury Regulation 16 (TR 16) in terms of the Public Finance Management Act, 1999 (PFMA). Municipal PPPs are regulated under the Municipal Finance Management Act, 2003 (MFMA). These were based on the PPP type where the public sector comes up with an initiative of infrastructure development upon establishing the need and solicits for the private partners through traditional procurement methods. A desire for increased private participation in public infrastructure saw SA enact a follow up framework for USPs in 2009. SA's NT defined a USP as a proposal/concept received by an institution outside its normal procurement process submitted by the private proponent without explicit request, which is innovative and unique. Strover (2009) outlined that SA's purpose for adopting USPs was to create an environment where advantage can be taken of the private sector's capacity to conceptualise, package and develop projects. However, the USP framework practice note of 2009 was not incorporated into the main PPP framework and manual, primarily because NT did not favour USPs when it was prepared (SA NT, 2024). Thus, although SA claims to consider USPs, the framework positions their acceptance at the mercy and sole discretion of the involved public institution (Hahm, 2019; Nwangwu, 2019).

Institutional Capacity for Evaluation of USP Concepts

For a USPs proposal to be accepted, most government frameworks demand that the private proponents' submission should be innovative, unique and not part of a project already in the implementation pipeline by the government institution. This places evaluation of the USP submissions as the key component of the procurement process (Strover, 2009). Thus, any adverse selection might lead to undue risks and an infrastructure that does not meet the expectations and highly likely to lead to moral hazard at implementation. For example, Umar, Zawawi and Abdul-Aziz (2019) research on skills requirement for PPP contract governance established that adverse selection and moral hazards resulted in cancellation of many PPP contracts. Similarly, lack of technical capacity could result in public institutions prematurely rejecting a USP submission without understanding the benefits, its innovative and uniqueness. Resultantly, the capacity to evaluate the USP private proponent submissions sets a foundation to their successful contribution to infrastructure development through PPPs.

In SA, USPs are submitted by the private proponents directly to the public institution implicitly for infrastructure development, in most cases as a PPP. The SA USP framework of 2009 mandates the accounting officer the role of reviewing and either rejecting or accepting the private proponent's submission (Strover, 2009). Even though it also permits the public institution's accounting officer to engage private expertise called transactional advisors (TA), this comes at the institution's own cost, which could be unaffordable at that stage of the proposal. Nyagormey, Baiden and Nani (2025) conceded that managing USPs is more complex and must be taken through a series of activities and tasks that consume resources at pre-construction stage. Thus, the deemed viable capacitation option for public institutions is through the PPP units. In SA, the NT houses GTAC whose primary role on infrastructure is divided in two wings of provision of TA services and PPP unit**.** Through these, GTAC assist government in the planning, procurement and implementation of large-scale transactions for infrastructure and related services. Thus, the preposition is that it is within the PPP unit mandate to provide technical assistance to public institutions on PPP procured as USPs. However, Fombad (2019) argued that there are no mechanisms and procedures, which leaves the accounting officer with little leverage over the private proponents. In addition, the other identified factors also directly effect the operations of the PPP unit, which is by establishment supposed to capacitate public institutions.

Dedicated PPP Units as a Way to Enhance Public Capacity

PPP units are becoming an important vehicle to implement PPPs. A unit can have one or more functions, which includes procurement management that assesses the project viability against set parameters (Aziz & Elmahdy, 2015). PPP units have been regarded as the embodiment of governance in that they are emblematic of governments' institutional underpinnings of PPP programs (Van Den Hurk et al., 2016). A PPP unit can either be attached to a public institution such as the ministry of finance or treasury, a standalone agency or dedicated unit. A dedicated PPP unit is any organisation set up with full or partial aid of the government to ensure that the necessary capacity to create, support and evaluate multiple PPP agreements is made available and reside in government and thus, a key

instrument to institutional support in PPPs implementation (Han & Guo, 2024). Opponents of dedicated PPP units have argued that in some cases, they may also function as policy veto players, thus inhibiting PPP uptake (Hodge & Greve, 2010; Van Den Hurk et al., 2016). However, Burger (2009) purported that a dedicated PPP unit would be able to, 1) Review the budgetary implication of PPPs, 2) Alleviate the danger of principal-agent challenges resulting from agency problems and, 3) Create a centre of knowledge and expertise to capacitate public institutions.

Positioning of PPP Units in Public Sector

Countries in Africa have different arrangements regarding the location of PPPs under their authority. Some countries establish a PPP unit as a focal point for PPPs. OECD (2010) study established that out of 29 countries reviewed, about 59% had dedicated PPP units at national level. similarly, Van Den Hurk et al. (2016) made a comparative analysis on PPP units, which reviewed that even if the unit is strong in formal terms, other factors can shape PPP policy and implementation, thereby marginalizing the role of the unit itself. However, both of these studies majorly focused on European countries. A 2024 world bank report indicated that while Africa has 42 out of 54 countries with enacted PPP legislation, 41 of the jurisdictions surveyed have one or more dedicated PPP Units (Vallee & Stucchi, 2024).

Utilisation of PPP Units for Institutional Capacity

Burger (2009) observed that although some dedicated PPP units have review and approval authority, the ultimate management and accountability regarding PPP agreements originates and rests with the individual public institutions' accounting officer. Aziz and Elmahdy (2015) contends that it is not effective to have a PPP unit that solely offers policy guidance without being involved in actual procurement management. This resonates with Khatleli (2020) guidelines for implementing PPPs, which encouraged SADC members to establish functioning and politically independent PPP units to deliver transparent procurement processes that will attract foreign players. British Colombia is among countries with exemplary PPP units, which independently procures as well as offers both management and technical support to PPP participants (Aziz & Elmahdy, 2015). Canelas and Alves (2024) observed that PPPs 'require strong institutional capabilities to be successful and can contribute to how much one investment can be deemed safe, liquid, and profitable.

Aziz and Elmahdy (2015) survey of PPP units in USA established that out of fourteen states that had established PPP units, only five of them have real PPP procurement management and technical support roles with others providing partial advisory service on PPPs. Out of the countries studied, OECD (2010) established that SA had a dedicated PPP unit that plays a direct role in the PPPs at pre-tender phases, which was similar to Korea, UK and Australia while the German PPP unit has an indirect role. This means that SA's PPP unit is mandated to be involved in the public institution's PPP initiation, feasibility to ascertain affordability, value for money and in the case of a USP, the uniqueness and innovativeness of the private proponent's concept submitted (ibid). Resultantly, there is a high reliance on external TAs by public institutions, which results in public officials reneging on their responsibilities and taking spectator role. This is exacerbated by the PPP unit's function only confined to advisory and approval of stages without enforcement. Additionally, external TAs input is seldom at USP initiation phase.

The above shows that there is need to revisit the role played by PPP units to ascertain if they were meeting the objectives they were set up for and identify gaps, which resulted in fragmentation and inefficiencies for PPP growth as a procurement model. Tackling of information asymmetry would result in public officials fulfilling the role they are expected to play in ensuring the success of the USPs under PPPs.

Institutional Theory

The institutional environment is composed of political and cultural norms, which shapes on how the society goes about doing business (Ahmad et al., 2022). Thus, both the institutional and political conditions have severe implication on how organs such as the PPP unit perform (Opara et al., *2017).* The institutional theory has been used to depict the capacity that PPP units possess in executing realistic and perceived roles in USPs and overall PPPs. Most studies on PPPs have usually focused on the principal and agency relation under the agency theory, which reveal adverse selection and moral hazard problems. However, there are underlaying issues to USPs such as trust in the institutional

environment and tolerance to the ideological nature of a private proponent making a submission implicitly without it being interpreted as corruption or nepotism. Thus, Ayat et al. (2025) study reviewed that the institutional role is more significant in unsolicited projects than on solicited PPPs. This because USPs have been found to have a higher vulnerability to institutional factors, which was attributed to lack of transparency and poor competition in the processes of unsolicited projects in many developing countries even in those with regulatory frameworks in place. There might be an increase in USP submissions in countries with weak institutions but misused the USP instrument to engage in corrupt and nepotistic practices (Hodges, 2003; Hodges & Dellacha, 2007; Osei-Kyei, Chan & Dansoh, 2020). Similarly, uncertainty in the institutional environment does not appeal to the private investors due to lack of trust in the processes.

Akintoye and Beck (2009) observed that SA government has always sought to move away from a government to governance-based approach, which seeks to accommodate private entities to take part in public assets through concessions, privatisation and PPPs. While it has achieved a lot of milestones on PPPs, its failure to utilise the USPs despite the enactment of the framework raises questions on where the actual problem could be laying. Fourie (2015) emphasised that lack of institutional capacity results in failure to maximise the potential of the partnership arrangement. Ayat et al. (2025) recommended that there was need of designing customized project management approaches that were unique to solicited and unsolicited PPPs.

Research Methodology and Method

SA's USP records are not readily available and accessible in the public domain due to the implicit nature and protection of intellectual properties (PI). Thus, the research used a qualitative systematic literature review of the following:

SA NT's GTAC Annual Reports

Annual reports from GTAC compilled for the past 10 years to establish the number of USPs, which has been handled by the NT's PPP unit. The review made comparison of the reporting done on USPs compared to the socilited PPPs in the annual reports using the following thematic criteria.

i. Transaction advisory projects registered (cumulative)
ii. Number of memos submitted to NT for Approval 1 consideration
iii. Active PPPs
iv. USPs reported or recorded

The Phases of the USP Implementation Process as per NT Framework of 2009

This is to ascertain the phases that the PPP unit provides input to the USP process in capacitating public institutions.

Research Results

Table 1 SA Record of PPP at NT

Transaction Advisory Services and PPP Unit										
Thematic focus area	**Year/ period**									
	2023/ 24	**2022/ 23**	**2021/ 22**	**2020/ 21**	**2019/ 20**	**2018/ 19**	**2017/ 18**	**2016/ 17**	**2015/ 16**	**2014/ 15**
Transaction advisory projects registered	*	*	*	*	18	26	19	*	14	11
Number of memos submitted to NT for Approval 1 consideration	8	3	4	0	*	*	*	*		?
Active PPPs	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	20	18
Completed PP	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	2	*
Unsolicited reported of recorded	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	1	1

*Implies that there were no records available in the reporting year (Source: GTAC annual reports)

GTAC's Annual Reports

From the systematic review of GTAC's annual reports for over a period of 10 years, it was established that USPs were only captured and reported in the 2014/15 and 2015/16 annual reports as indicated in table 1.

2014/15 GTAC annual report informs that the USP captured was a trigeneration project submitted to the free state department of health registered for the provision of energy services to its public hospitals in 2014. The department had previously issued a tender for such services for five public hospitals. During that period, it received an unsolicited bid to provide such services using trigeneration technology (combined cooling, heating and power generation) for the remaining public hospitals in the province. At that time, the terms of reference were still to be submitted to the PPP Unit's for review.

The 2015/16 GTAC annual report reported on two (2) USP projects. The first one was the Free State Department of Health's trigeneration project, which was also reported in the 2014/2015 financial. However, there was progress reported in the 2015/16 financial year as the free state department of health had secured a partial exemption from TR 16 to complete procurement of trigeneration services at five healthcare facilities through the unsolicited bid processes. The second USP was for the Mid Vaal Municipality for possible procurement of electricity distribution management services and procurement of project officer. However, it was reported that this USP stalled because of possible municipal demarcation change.

There was no follow up reporting of any USP from 2016/17 up to the most recent GTAC annual report of 2023/24. Thus, there are barely records in public domain to justify that the SA's PPP unit has been able to perform its role on USPs. The record on number of USP submissions to public institutions that the PPP unit has been involved in reviewing the viability, innovativeness and uniqueness of the private proponent submission is under reported and unknown.

The Phases of the USP Implementation Process as per NT Framework of 2009

The RSA NT provided guidelines on the steps to follow upon receipt of the USP bid or proposal (NT USP framework 11, 2008/09) extracted as per figure 2.

At phase 1, One of the requirements for USP concept submission is to submit a comprehensive and relevant feasibility study, which is packaged in a clear business case. At this phase, the public institution decides to either accept or reject the proposal. Even though the USP framework gives leverage to the accounting officer seek advice from independent consultants or experts, it is on condition that the accounting officer or authority holds the ultimate decision on whether to consider or not consider the USP private proponent's submission. However, the accounting officer and public institution are given enormous authority on deciding the fate of a USP despite capacity challenges compared to the PPP unit. The USP framework does not mention or mandate institutions to submit USPs proposals to the PPP unit unless it is a PPP in nature or a decision has been made to pursue the USP as a PPP. Thus, PPP unit only gets involved at phase 2 if it is established that the USP is of PPP complaint in nature. For the PPP conceptualised as USP (PPP compliant USP), it implies that all the feasibility studies and negotiations that takes place under the phases described above will be repeated once the USP is channelled into the PPP delivery framework and process, which severely prolongs an already linear and exhaustive PPP process.

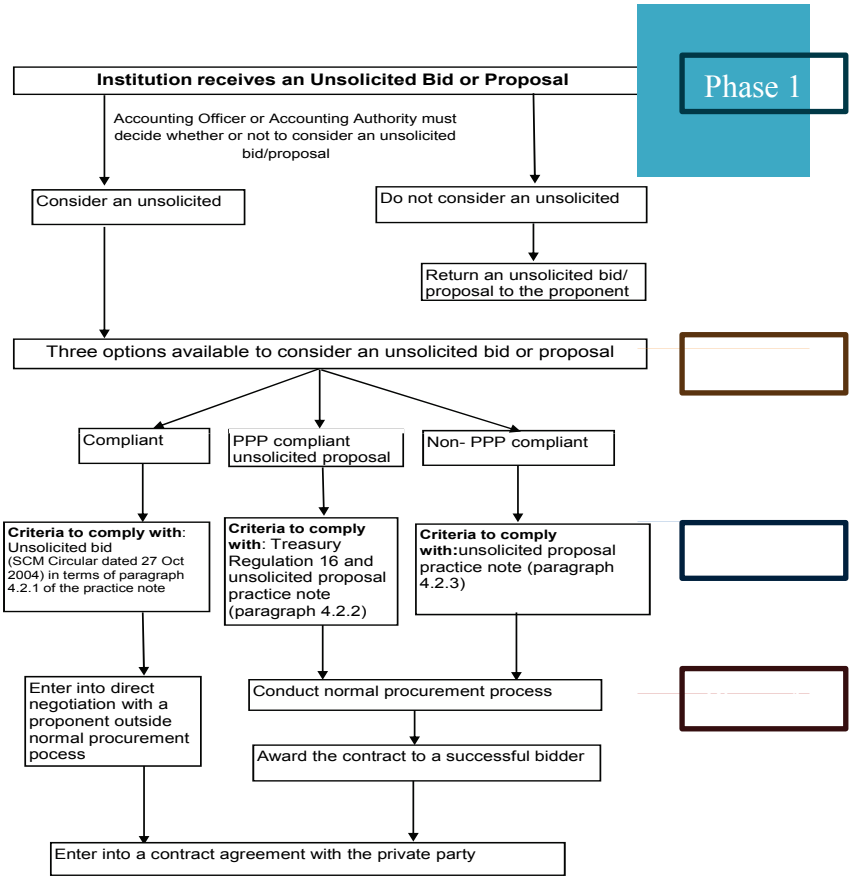

Figure 2 RSA NT USP Delivery Steps

Discussion

To capacitate public institutions and minimise information asymmetry, various countries have sought to utilise PPP units for initiation and management of PPPs (Aziz & Elmahdy, 2015). Burger (2009) added that the main function of the SA PPP unit is to ensure that all PPP agreements comply with the legal requirements of affordability, value for money and sufficient risk transfer with the following two broad tasks, 1) to provide technical assistance to government departments, provinces and municipalities who want to set up and manage PPPs, and 2) to provide National Treasury approvals during the pre-contract phases of a PPP agreement. However, from the study, the results have shown that the PPP unit established to capacity public institutions on PPPs is seldom involved at the initiation phases. Instead, the decision to reject or accept the USP proposal still lies with the public institution's accounting officer with little to no capacity. Thus, the establishment of the PPP unit has not assisted in resolving information asymmetry between the public and private parties under PPPs conceptualised as USPs.

It has been established that having a fully dedicated PPP unit is not sufficient without institutional support and limited authority. The GTAC's transaction advisory services and PPP Unit informed in the 2016/17 annual report that they only work with public institutions that makes a PPP submission to them. It was also informed that there were a lot that were out of PPP unit's control as some of the decisions were not theirs but public institutions, who were their clients. This aligns with previous research, which concluded that the spectator nature of PPP unit is limited to advisory and approval despite being poised as an expertise entity contributed to the lacklustre PPP record. Further, The NT may be considered as a bureaucratic government department and is likely to be mired in the business of power and politics (Fombad, 2019). OECD (2010) observed that the PPP unit located within the public sector and not independently constituted, signals conflict of interest and compromises the need for separation between its provision of technical support and advisory. Van Den Hurk et al. (2016) opined that there was need to establish if a third hand was involved in the PPPs performance and suggested that both formal and informal, tacit rules should be considered in assessing the role of PPP-supporting units.

Conclusion

While there has been considerable research done on PPPs, PPP units and information asymmetry, there has not been research that has endeavored to establish how information asymmetry in USPs could be resolved by enhancing the role of PPP units. Thus, this research's contribution to the academia discourse is to establish how PPP units aid in minimising information asymmetry in PPPs initiated as USPs. Information asymmetry is a common phenomenon in the PPP relationship between the public and private parties, which has been attributed to the expertise and technical know-how that the private sector possesses compared with their public counterparts. The paper recognises that countries that have opened doors to PPPs have also gone ahead to enact regulatory framework and formulated PPP units. While the framework focuses on the procedures, guidelines and regulating the PPP environment, it is not enough to empower the public institution with capabilities that come along with the PPP procurement models. The recognition of this limitation necessitated having PPP units, whose roles and custodianship differ based on the objective of each government.

SA is the most successful sub-Saharan country with a well-established PPP regulatory environment. However, the country has not recorded any success in the implementation of USPs since enactment of the NT framework in 2009 and has a PPP unit that is dedicated and housed in a separate agency, GTAC. Results from the research show that SA's NT has not been consistent in reporting on PPPs as it varies across the ten (10) annual reports reviewed. In addition, the reporting on USPs has not been fully captured in terms of submissions made, USPs reviewed, those rejected, and the approved ones. The paper is of the view that the aforesaid information is of basic nature and cannot compromise the private proponent's IP. Over the ten (10) years, it is only in 2014/15 and 2015/16 annual reports that USPs were covered. In the absence of USP coverage in the subsequent years, it was not possible to establish the performance of USPs at NT level. There were also no strategic approaches covered in the annual reports, which gave deliberate endeavors by NT to spearhead USPs. The paper has further reviewed that it is not enough to only have a dedicated PPP unit as its functions are impacted by several other factors. This includes limitations in its functions assigned, regulatory constraints, political will and interference as well as in-house expertise within the PPP unit. A centralised but independent PPP unit with independent expertise in USPs will serve as a centre of excellence, which serves both the public and private entities interested in pursuing PPP. Further, the role assigned to PPP units on PPPs initiated as USPs in the early phases is limited as most of the accountability is left to the accounting officers of the public institution to whom a USP proposal submission is made. In spite of not being well capacitated, the USP framework leaves the engagement of external consulting expertise and PPP unit at the sole discretion of the accounting officer.

Recommendations

The paper recognises that in order to have a PPP unit that operates at optimum, there is a need to enforce deliberate mechanisms that enhance it. There is also a need to clearly bring capacity to the PPP unit and review its mandate on the USPs. Further, there is a need to centralise the private proponents' submission of USP concept proposals from being at the institutional level to the PPP unit. To ensure that the user institution as a stakeholder is engaged, they should second a representative who forms part of the sitting at the PPP unit when reviewing the private proponent's USP submission.

This paper is only based on secondary data. Thus, it is recommended that future research that encompasses empirical data be done to ensure completeness. Secondly, there is a need for future research to be done that compares the USPs undertaken outside the framework with those done after framework enactment. A review of the USPs undertaken by SA's schedule 2 entities such as SANRAL, PRASA and DBSA will assist to come with the comparative analysis of whether the problem lays within the NT's PPP unit set up itself or it is a national problem as these fall within the confines of SA, hence operating in the same environment. Further, NT has been working on establishing PPP units across the country's nine (09) provinces in addition to the one centralised at NT's head office, within GTAC. However, there is need of reviewing the add value that this measure has contributed to the overall performance of PPPs and how the provincial offices' functions differ from the head office.

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SACQSP2025-44

Mapping the Evolution of Contracting Models: A Bibliometric Analysis of Pathways to Project Efficiency and Performance

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Abstract

This paper explores the evolution of contracting models and procurement methods over the past five years and their impact on project efficiency and performance in the construction industry. The purpose is to synthesise existing research and identify critical thematic clusters that inform current best practices and potential innovation in project delivery. A bibliometric review was conducted using the Elsevier Scopus database, utilising the keywords "contract models," "procurement method," "delivery system," "efficient," "project performance," and "construction." The search was limited to peer-reviewed articles, conference proceedings, and books published from 2020 to 2025 within the construction industry research focus. After filtering, 25 relevant publications were identified from the initial results. The VOS viewer software was used to achieve co-occurrence and keyword cluster analysis, resulting in the identification of four dominant thematic clusters. The analysis identified four research clusters: (1) Foundational strategies, (2) Transformative technologies, (3) Collaborative delivery approaches, and (4) Performance benchmarking analytics. The findings highlight a growing focus on integrated project delivery and technological innovation as drivers of performance and efficiency. Together, these clusters demonstrate a multidisciplinary approach based on digital innovation, collaborative delivery, and performance analytics to rethink traditional contracting and build more adaptive, efficient project ecosystems. For Quantity Surveyors and construction professionals, the study provides pathways into the evolving research landscape of contract models and highlights the potential of digital integration in optimising costs and performance. Limited to a single database and English-language documents within a five-year period, the study may exclude older foundational works that are not readily available in these sources. Nevertheless, the paper makes a timely and original contribution to understanding the connection between contracting models and construction performance.

Keywords: Contracting Models, Transformative Technologies, Project Efficiency, Procurement Methods, Project Delivery Systems.

Introduction

The construction industry has, over the years, experienced various shifts in how projects are procured, managed, and delivered. Amid these efforts are complex stakeholder expectations and sustainability demands; thus, efficiency and overall performance become major metrics in global construction activities. The judicious selection of a project delivery system, aligned with both project requirements and owner objectives, constitutes a critical determinant of construction project success, as it significantly enhances efficiency and overall performance. A foundational understanding of diverse project delivery systems and contract approaches, including their functional principles, distinguishing

characteristics, inherent advantages, and constraints, is therefore indispensable (Ibbs & Chih, 2011; Zhong, Tang & Chen, 2022). In construction, various contract models define the relationship between the owner and the contractor, outlining responsibilities, risks, and payment structures (Mostafavi & Karamouz, 2010). Therefore, the choice of method influences not only the ease and speed of decision-making but also the depth, accuracy, and capacity to incorporate decision-makers' preferences and uncertainties into the entire contracting process.

The traditional contract types, such as Construction Management at Risk (CMAR) and Design-Bid-Build (DBB), are widely used due to their simplicity and clearly defined division of responsibilities. However, these models tend to lead to adversarial relationships, delays, rework caused by the disconnect between design and construction phases, resulting in cost overruns. Currently, the industry is exploring newer alternative methods to reduce project inefficiencies and enhance value. Collaborative and partnership contract types, such as Design-Build (DB) and Integrated Project Delivery (IPD), are based on open communication, risk sharing, and mutual responsibility. These models have demonstrated the ability to improve project efficiency by reducing delays and conflicts (Aboseif & Hanna, 2024). Bapat, Sarkar and Gujar (2023) found that IPD results in better project performance through early collaboration among stakeholders, leading to improved cost control and innovation. Additionally, the use of key performance indicators (KPIs) related to IPD and Building Information Modelling (BIM) for large-scale projects enhances project performance (Ibrahim, Zayed & Lafhaj, 2024). Recent research highlights the growing adoption of alliancing-based contracts, which aim to align interests among project participants. The growing need for flexible, collaborative, and technology-driven procurement methods has led to the exploration of smart contracts, blockchain-based agreements, and performance-based delivery systems (Kim & Kim, 2024). These developments promise pathways to improve time, cost, and quality performance, but also present new complexities that require careful analysis and adaptation by construction professionals, particularly Quantity Surveyors, who are central to cost management and contract administration.

Despite significant shifts toward innovative contracting methods, a fragmented understanding of how contracting models influence project efficiency and performance outcomes remains. This study adopts a bibliometric review approach to map the research landscape over the past five years, identifying key themes, emerging trends, and research gaps. The study reviews the 5-year period to capture the most recent trends and developments in contract model research within the construction industry, ensuring relevance to current practices and emerging themes. By systematically analysing the research structure of this domain, the paper contributes to evidence-based decision-making and policy formulation, while also informing practitioners about evolving strategies that can enhance the success of construction project delivery.

The subsequent sections outline the method employed, followed by an analysis of the bibliometric findings, which include annual publication trends, global publication trends, keyword co-occurrence, and research hotspots.

Research Methodology and Method

This study employed a bibliometric analysis approach to map the intellectual structure and trends within the evolving landscape of contracting models and their influence on project efficiency and performance in the construction sector. Bibliometric analysis has been identified by Donthu et al. (2021) as a quantitative method that uses statistical and computational tools to evaluate patterns of publication, authorship, and keyword co-occurrence in scientific literature. This approach has been used in several applied sciences studies and the construction field (Aghimien et al., 2019; Ametepey et al., 2024). It helps to identify research clusters, influential works, and thematic developments within a defined body of literature.

The Scopus database was selected as the primary source for data collection due to its extensive coverage of peer-reviewed literature across engineering, business, and construction domains. The initial search was conducted using the advanced query function in Scopus, targeting the Title, Abstract, and Keywords fields. The search string used was: "contract models" OR "procurement method" OR "delivery system" AND efficient OR "project performance" AND construction. This initial search yielded 784 documents. To ensure the relevance and manageability of the dataset, the following filtering were applied: the publication period was limited to 2020–2025, reducing the dataset to 351 documents; only documents within the Engineering and Business Management subject areas were retained; the document types were refined to include journal articles, conference papers, book chapters, and review

articles, narrowing the set to 25 documents; Only publications written in English were considered, leading to a final dataset of 24 documents. This search was done in July 2025.

The final dataset of 24 documents was exported in CSV format from Scopus and imported into VOSviewer (version 1.6.19), a widely used tool for bibliometric visualisation and analysis. The following analytical procedures were conducted:

i. Trend Analysis: Identified the evolution of contracting models over the five-year period and also the global distribution of publications.
ii. Density Visualisation Mapping: To visualise the concentration and interlinkages of keywords, providing insights into dominant research areas and emerging topics.
iii. Cluster Analysis: Grouped keywords into thematic clusters using VOSviewer's natural language processing algorithms, analysing frequently occurring keywords across the dataset.

The bibliometric approach was selected for its ability to synthesise large volumes of scholarly output objectively. It enabled the identification of core topics, innovative pathways, and research gaps relevant to contracting models in construction, especially those contributing to project efficiency and performance. This methodology is particularly valuable for quantity surveyors, contract managers, and construction policy analysts seeking data-driven insights into procurement innovations and evolving delivery systems.

Research Results

Annual Publication Trend

The results reveal the annual distribution of literature on contracting and project procurement models in construction project delivery across the five-year review period, from 2020 to 2025. A total of 24 documents were retrieved: 16 articles, 4 conference papers, 3 review articles and 1 book chapter. Figure 1 shows the annual distribution of publications from 2020 to 2025.

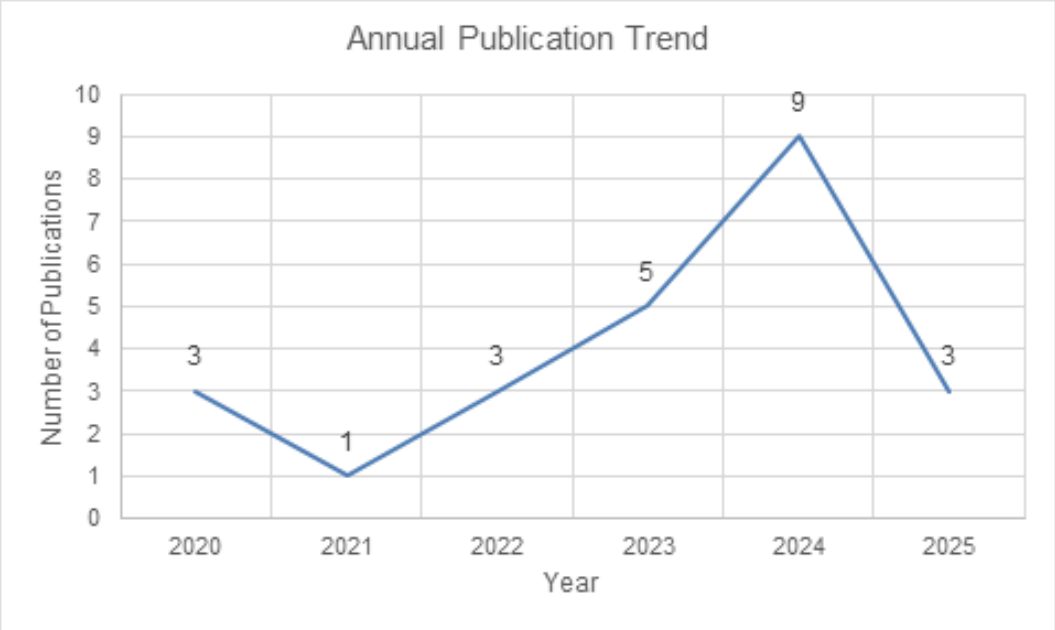

Figure 1 Annual Publication Trend

The results show a steady growth from 2020 to 2024. The publications between 2020 and 2021 are quite interesting, as in 2020, there were three publications, but this number reduced to one publication. Then, the number steadily increased from 1 in 2021 to a peak of 9 in 2024. The growth from 2022 (3) to 2024 (9) indicates rising academic interest in the topic, with studies focusing on emerging technologies and smart contracting models (Sherif, Abotaleb & Alqahtani, 2022; Yu et al., 2026). The tripling of output from earlier years (2020, 2022, 2025) may be related to policy changes and global trends in construction innovation and digital transformation. The decline in 2025 indicates that data for

2025 has not yet been fully recorded, and research work is still ongoing. The results suggest a growing but fluctuating research trend in this research area.

Global Distribution Publications

The global distribution of publications over the past five years, focusing on contracting models in construction, was also analysed, filtered to include a minimum of two publications and two citations per country. Out of 15 countries, 10 met the threshold, and the results are shown in Table 1 and pictorially shown in Figure 2.

Table 1 Global Distribution of Publications (Minimum of 2 Citations per Document) Source: Researchers' construct

Countries	Number of Publications	Citations
United States of America	9	84
Australia	2	39
China	2	30
Saudi Arabia	2	24
Indonesia	3	22
Egypt	2	21
Malaysia	2	16
New Zealand	2	15
Turkey	2	12
Nigeria	2	13

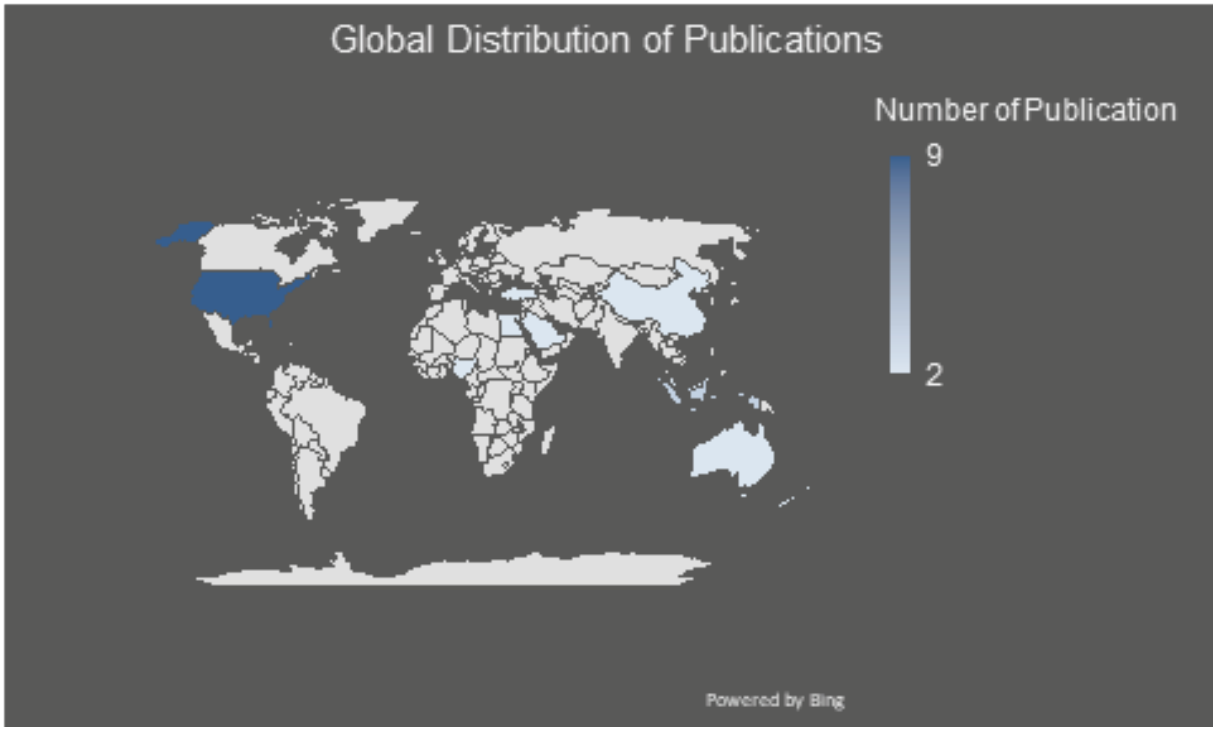

Figure 2 Global Distribution of Publications

The United States of America (USA) had the highest number of publications (9 documents), with 84 citations, indicating an average of approximately 9.3 citations per document. This shows that the USA is both the most active and most cited, indicating strong research productivity and influence in this field. Australia, China, and Saudi Arabia have fewer publications (2 publications each); however, they have garnered very high citation counts (39, 30, and 24 citations, respectively). These countries, despite having limited publication counts, reveal high citation-per-publication rates, indicating the presence of high-impact papers in this niche research area. Emerging countries, such as Egypt, Indonesia,

Malaysia, and Nigeria, show promise and may represent growing research hubs in construction contracting models. These findings demonstrate the need for increased global collaborations through co-authorship and funding to scale up impactful research. Research into innovative contracting models is an emerging area in construction research, and this area must be leveraged since it has been identified as a critical criterion for successful project delivery globally.

Discussion of Key-Word Cluster Themes

As established through literature, in construction, various contract models define the relationship between the owner and the contractor, outlining responsibilities, risks, and payment structures. A keyword co-occurrence analysis was conducted using bibliographic data retrieved from the reviewed articles. VOSviewer served as the text-mining tool for this analysis. Out of 216 initial keywords, 28 met the minimum threshold of two occurrences. After removing duplicates, a final set of 25 keywords was used to generate a network visualisation of co-occurring terms. Table 2 shows the clustered keywords that aid in understanding the connections between diverse concepts in the research area.

Table 2 Co-occurring Keywords Clusters

Clusters	Keywords
Red	Construction, Costs, Decision Making, Design-Build, Infrastructure Project, Optimization, Project Management, Surveys
Green	Block-chain, Current, Construction Industry, Contract Model, Cost Benefit Analysis, Smart Contract, Transaction Cost
Blue	Construction Manager, Integrated Project Deliveries, Lean Production, Performance, Project Delivery Systems, Project Performance
Yellow	Benchmarking, Construction Projects, Cost Performance, Logistic Regression

Figure 3 shows that the most prominent (bright yellow) nodes indicate high-frequency keywords, suggesting dominant focus areas across the reviewed literature: Project Management, Project Performance, Construction Industry and Construction.

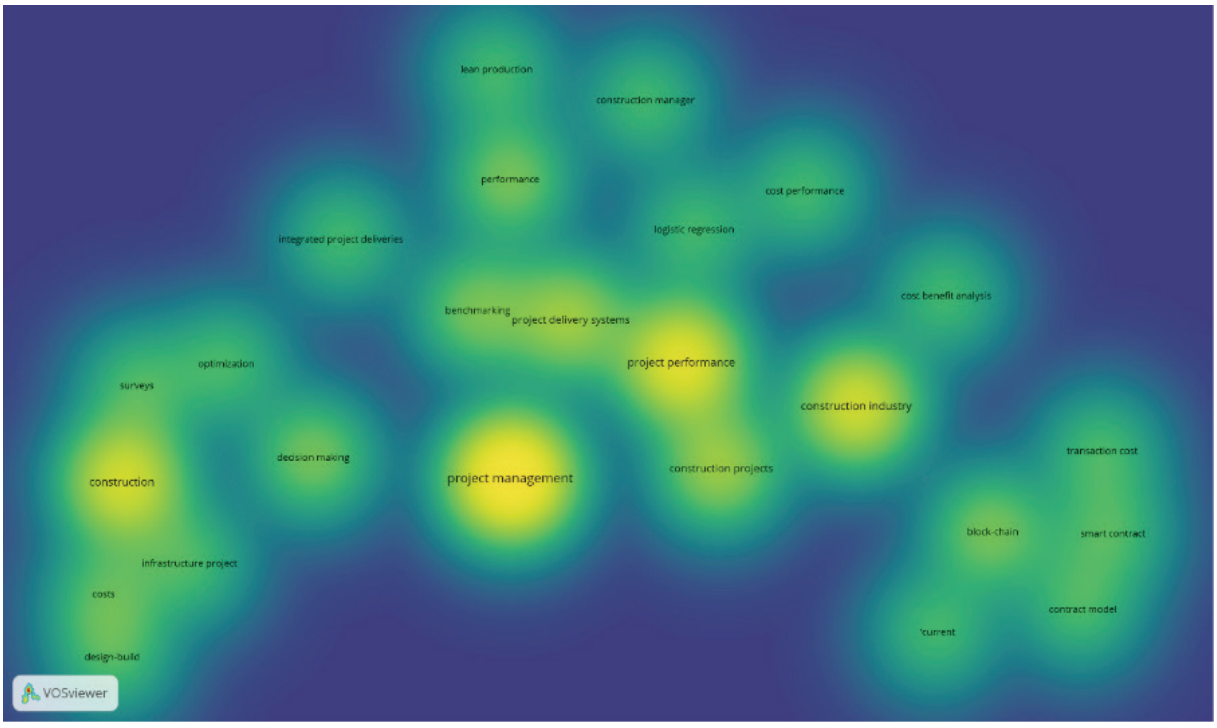

Figure 3 Keywords Density Visualisation Map

These four most occurring keywords are consistently central to the project performance and contract models' discourse. This indicates that most studies link contracting models directly to improving overall

project coordination, achieving performance benchmarks, and enhancing construction practices. This aligns with the study's objective to assess how procurement methods affect project outcomes. The map further reveals that the areas fading into the blue colour are low-density areas of research, highlighting niche or emerging topics to be explored. This highlights gaps for future study, particularly in the areas of quantitative assessment tools (e.g., logistic regression, design-build) and emerging procurement mechanisms (e.g., blockchain-based smart contracts). The map visually confirms that traditional methods of project delivery dominate the literature, while innovative models like smart contracts and blockchain are on the periphery, signifying an ongoing transition. This suggests a need for further empirical exploration of how these innovations impact project efficiency and cost control.

The cluster themes are subsequently discussed. Figure 4 presents the network of co-occurring keywords visualisation map.

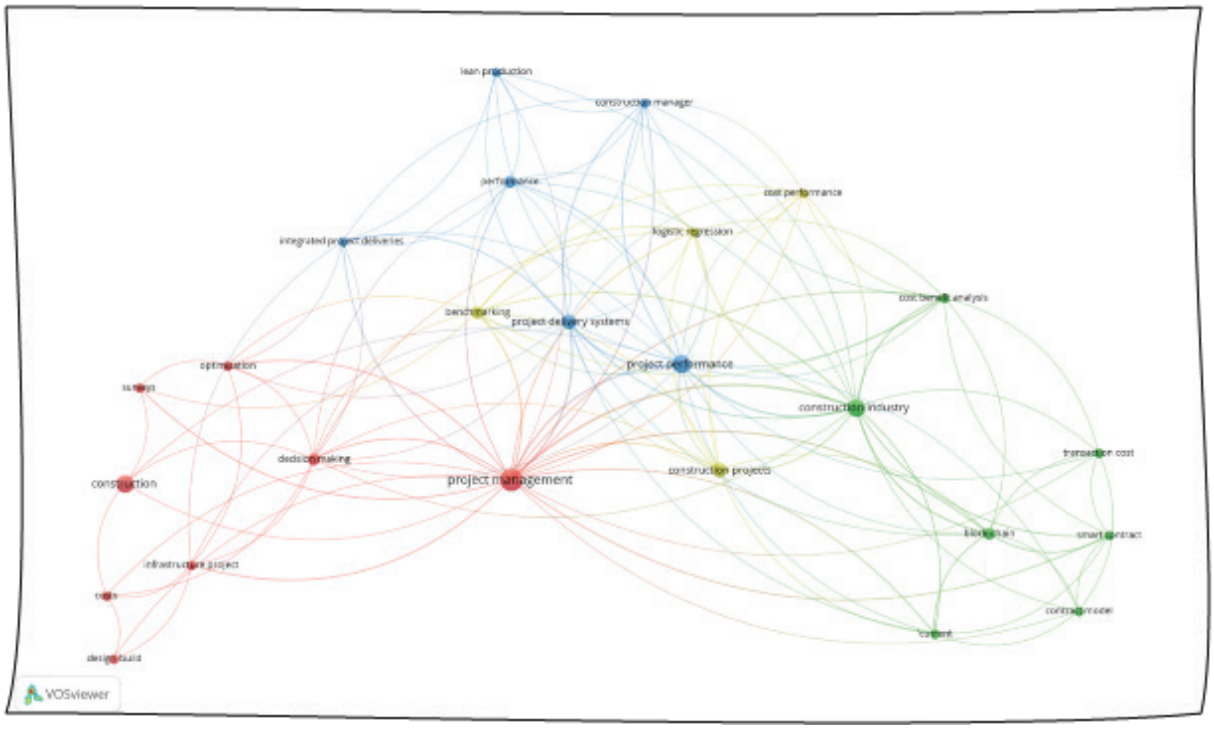

Figure 4 Network Visualisation Map

Foundational Strategies in Contract Models

This cluster represents the foundational elements of modern contracting models, particularly emphasising the operational and managerial components of infrastructure delivery. The presence of terms such as "construction", "costs", and "project management" highlights the centrality of cost control and managerial oversight in shaping project outcomes. The design-build (DB) approach, frequently cited in literature (Mosley & Bubshait, 2021; Aboseif & Hanna, 2024), signals a shift from traditional design-bid-build contracts towards more integrated models that ensure faster delivery, clearer accountability, and cost certainty which are key drivers of project efficiency, also indicated by (Fathi & Shrestha, 2020). Decision-making and optimisation connect to how project owners and stakeholders select contracting models based on project complexity, risk-sharing mechanisms, and life-cycle costs (Nouh, Elkasaby & Wageh, 2024). Studies have shown that improved decision frameworks using multi-criteria decision analysis (MCDA) and surveys to gather practitioner insights contribute to selecting models that align with performance goals (Zhong, Tang & Chen, 2022; Aboelyousr, El-Sayegh & Ahmed, 2025). These findings offer a pathway to enhancing project efficiency and predictability, while supporting performance-driven contracting models in the construction industry.

Transformative Technologies in Contracting

This cluster thematically reveals technological disruption and the emergence of decentralised contracting models in the construction industry. The identification of blockchain and smart contracts reflects growing scholarly interest in transforming traditional contract administration through immutable,

transparent, and automated processes (Rathnayake, Wedawatta & Tezel, 2022; Kim & Kim, 2024). As indicated in Wahab et al. (2023), these technologies have the potential to reduce transaction costs, mitigate disputes, and enhance trust among parties. They serve as critical contributors to project efficiency. The term contract model anchors the cluster within the broader literature on procurement and delivery frameworks. The use of cost-benefit analysis (CBA) is instrumental in evaluating the feasibility and performance implications of integrating blockchain solutions into existing contractual practices (Yu et al., 2026). Smart contracts, in particular, enable automated payments, milestone verification, and accountability, leading to streamlined workflows and improved performance metrics (Ahmadisheykhsarmast & Sonmez, 2020). These insights position this cluster as a critical pathway for redefining contract model efficiency in line with digital transformation.

Collaborative Delivery in Contracting

This cluster is anchored in the human and procedural dimensions of delivering construction projects efficiently. The presence of keywords like construction manager, project delivery systems, and performance signals a strong focus on implementation efficiency, with particular emphasis on how different delivery models impact project performance (Sari et al., 2023). Integrated Project Delivery (IPD) and Lean Production approaches are increasingly identified in studies and practice as transformative in enhancing collaboration, reducing waste, and achieving just-in-time construction (Viana et al., 2020; Hanna, Zhu & Morrison, 2023). These models address the long-standing inefficiencies associated with adversarial contracting and fragmented workflows highlighted in literature (Ibbs & Chih, 2011; Zhong, Tang & Chen, 2022). The construction manager's role, therefore, is not only administrative but should be strategic, driving integration, continuous improvement, and value generation across the project lifecycle. This cluster directly contributes to the efficiency-performance nexus by advocating delivery systems that promote: Early stakeholder involvement, Shared risk or reward mechanisms and Real-time decision-making (Garcés & Peña, 2023). This cluster thus captures the evolution of delivery-centric innovation, crucial for navigating Construction 5.0 goals of collaboration, digitisation, and sustainability.

Performance Benchmarking Analytics in Contract Models

This cluster emphasises the themes of quantitative evaluation of project performance, especially through cost performance metrics and predictive modelling techniques such as logistic regression in contracts literature. The recurring term benchmarking reflects the industry's growing reliance on comparative standards to assess the efficiency of various contracting models and delivery strategies (Aboseif & Hanna, 2024). Benchmarking facilitates performance-based feedback loops, helping stakeholders refine procurement strategies and contract types based on empirical outcomes (Kazar & Kucuk, 2024). The use of logistic regression models allows researchers and practitioners to identify critical predictors of cost overruns or efficiencies across different project types and contexts (Ogbu, Taigbenu & Asuquo, 2022). Studies (Nyamah et al., 2023; Kazar & Kucuk, 2024; Siregar, Larasati & Indraprastha, 2025) reveal these analytical approaches provide actionable insights into:

a. How specific contract models (e.g., Design-Build vs. Traditional) correlate with budget performance.
b. Risk probabilities under different delivery methods.
c. Performance forecasting for future projects.

This cluster reinforces the push toward evidence-based contracting in modern construction management.

A Synthesis of Cluster Analysis

The evolution of contracting models in the construction industry is increasingly shaped by the imperative to enhance project efficiency and performance. Cluster 1 discusses the foundational pillars, decision-making, optimisation, and design-build strategies that directly enable streamlined project delivery and infrastructure outcomes. Cluster 2 introduces transformative technologies such as blockchain and smart contracts, providing decentralised, transparent frameworks to reduce transaction costs and mitigate contract disputes, paving the way for agile, digitally empowered contract models. Cluster 3 focuses on integrated project delivery systems and lean production principles, which emphasise collaboration, waste reduction, and shared risk allocation to elevate overall project performance. Finally, Cluster 4 provides the analytical backbone through benchmarking and logistic

regression techniques, enabling data-driven comparisons and predictive assessments of contracting strategies. The conceptual diagram illustrates how contemporary research on contract models in the construction industry has evolved around these interrelated clusters of efficiency, digital transformation, and collaborative delivery. The diagram depicts an intellectual shift from traditional, transactional contracting toward adaptive, data-driven, and performance-oriented models to achieve sustainable project outcomes. All these significant findings have been conceptualised in Figure 4 below.

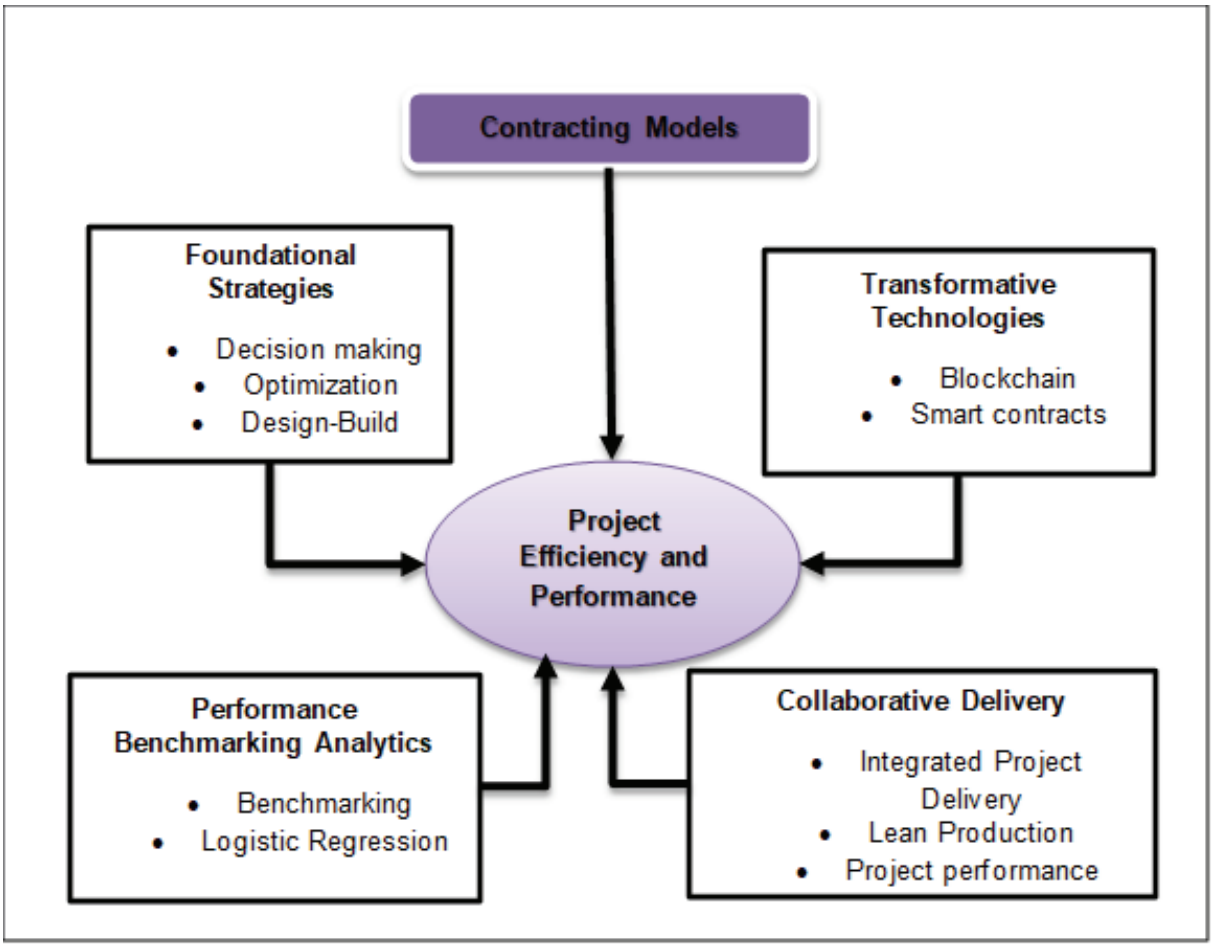

Figure 4 Clusters Conceptual Diagram

Conclusion

This bibliometric review mapped the intellectual and thematic evolution of contracting models in the construction industry over the last five years, with a particular focus on their function in ensuring project efficiency and performance. By analyzing 24 relevant documents from the Scopus database using VOSviewer, the study revealed four key clusters that reflect the everchanging emphasis of research and practice: traditional project optimization approaches, the integration of blockchain and smart contracts, the emergence of performance-oriented delivery systems like Integrated Project Delivery (IPD), and the growing application of data analytics tools such as benchmarking and logistic regression. The findings reinforce that the global construction industry is progressively embracing digital tools and innovative contract models to mitigate inefficiencies, manage costs, and enhance delivery performance. However, the synthesis also reveals a fragmented body of literature with limited cross-comparison of models across different contexts, especially in developing economies. While advancements like smart contracts and lean-based delivery methods show great promise, empirical evidence of their long-term impact on project outcomes remains scarce. The intersection of digital transformation (e.g., blockchain, BIM) with contract delivery models offers new frontiers for performance improvement. There is a growing need for comparative and contextualized research that links contract model selection to measurable project outcomes. Overall, this paper provides a foundational map of recent research and opens strategic pathways for both scholars and Quantity

Surveying practitioners committed to rethinking construction contracts as tools for transformation in the Construction 5.0 era.

Recommendations

Building on the conclusions drawn from this bibliometric review, it is evident that contract models are evolving into dynamic tools that influence project performance beyond traditional legal mechanisms. To enhance industry-wide adoption and effectiveness, stakeholders, including policymakers, quantity surveyors, and project managers should prioritize the integration of emerging delivery systems such as Integrated Project Delivery (IPD), smart contracts, and digital twin-enabled frameworks. Institutions responsible for capacity building (e.g Professional bodies) must develop targeted training programs to support practitioners in navigating this digital-contractual shift. Furthermore, to bridge the fragmented evidence base, future research should focus on comparative, context-specific evaluations of contract models across diverse regions and project types. Particular attention should be given to integrating artificial intelligence, machine learning, and blockchain in contract administration and monitoring systems. Researchers should also explore the institutional and policy environments necessary to scale up these innovations, especially in developing economies such as South Africa where regulatory and infrastructural challenges may hinder implementation. A multidisciplinary approach involving construction management, legal studies, and digital governance will be essential to shape contract models that are not only efficient but also adaptable to the realities of navigation through the era of digital disruptions in the Construction industry.

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SACQSP2025-58

Evaluating Effectiveness of Measurement Tools for the Upgrading of Informal Settlements Programme in Johannesburg, South Africa

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Abstract

The purpose of the study is to evaluate the effectiveness of the measurement tools used in the Upgrading of Informal Settlements Programme (UISP) in Johannesburg, South Africa. It aims to assess their relevance, accuracy, and capacity to support evidence-based policy enhancements and implementation. A quantitative approach was employed, utilising a descriptive survey design. A structured questionnaire was distributed to 150 key stakeholders, including policy makers, government officials from Human Settlements departments, agencies, and consultants involved in UISP. A total of 126 valid responses were received and analysed using descriptive statistics. The study identified five key tools for evaluating UISP in Johannesburg and highlighted limitations in current practices, such as validity and standardisation issues. While useful, existing tools face challenges like contextual misalignment, stakeholder exclusion, and technological constraints. Assessments focus on infrastructure and service access, including water, sanitation, and electricity. The research stresses the need for adaptable, participatory frameworks that incorporate local knowledge for better monitoring of informal settlement upgrades. It advocates community-generated data, assessing housing quality, safety, durability, and residents' well-being. MandE systems provide ongoing oversight to ensure objectives are met and challenges addressed. This study is limited to Johannesburg and may not reflect conditions in other regions with differing socio-economic or spatial contexts. The focus on human settlements practitioners involved in UISP excluded other key stakeholders—such as beneficiary communities and civic organisations—potentially limiting the diversity of perspectives. Additionally, the use of a structured questionnaire may have overlooked nuanced insights better captured through qualitative methods. The findings from the study can guide policymakers, consultants and practitioners in selecting the most effective measurement tools in UISP that enhance economic, health and social impact assessment; programme auditing and budgeting; political and policy stability; and baseline and end-line land survey.

Keywords: UISP, Informal Settlements, Measurement Tools, Johannesburg, Programme Effectiveness.

Introduction

Housing is a critical determinant of individuals' well-being across income levels (Charlton & Kihato, 2006). Developing countries experience rapid urbanisation, resulting in high demand for low-cost housing where access is increasingly constrained globally, especially for the urban poor (Laituri et al., 2021). Therefore, Governments struggle to provide (UN-Habitat, 2016), leading to a proliferation of informal settlements. Over 1 billion people live in informal settlements, projected to reach 3 billion by 2030 (WHO, 2023; United Nations Statistics Division, 2019). These settlements—often called slums, shantytowns, or favelas—lack tenure security, basic services, and regulatory compliance (Bolay et al., 2016; UN-Habitat, 2015), and are expected to grow as urbanisation accelerates (United Nations,

2019). Their expansion stems from social and political exclusion (Sinharoy et al., 2019), compounded by poor integration into urban planning (Baye et al., 2020). Policies focused on eradication rather than upgrading have proven inadequate (Sinharoy et al., 2019). Upgrading, which improves access to services and tenure security, is a humane alternative to evictions (Chen, 2007; Mitlin & Satterthwaite, 2013; Abbott, 2002). South Africa's UISP marks a policy shift requiring robust monitoring and evaluation (Tissington, 2010).

Therefore, public policies and property laws must support the well-being of informal settlements (Zhang et al., 2020). Evaluating the effectiveness of the measurement tools used for the Upgrading Informal Settlement Programme (UISP) is essential for developing sustainable urban policies. Since UISP's launch in 2004, considerable resources have been invested in it yet living conditions in informal settlements have not improved over the last decade, highlighting the importance of programme evaluation (Khalifa, 2015; Taing et al., 2013).

Literature Review

The global demand for affordable housing continues to rise, yet access remains increasingly constrained—particularly for urban poor populations—due to escalating demand and inefficient land management practices (Laituri et al., 2021), leading to inequality and rapid urbanisation (Oksiutycz & Azionya, 2022; Cohen, 2009). In Asia and Africa, factors like migration, land dispossession, and unplanned housing drive their growth (Awad, Bartlett & Conaldi, 2021). Habitat for Humanity (2023) advocates balancing immediate upgrades with sustainable design for resilience. In-situ upgrading is especially effective (Goytia & Dorna, 2016), and integration with broader urban systems is essential (Van Oostrum & Shafique, 2023).

Overview of Informal Settlement Programmes in Developed and Developing Countries

Informal settlements, or slums, arise from rapid urbanisation, population growth, and social inequality. (Oksiutycz & Azionya, 2022). In Asia, causes include high population density and lack of tenure rights, while in Africa, factors such as housing shortages, forced evictions, and unregulated urbanisation contribute to their growth (Awad, Bartlett & Conaldi, 2021). Rural-urban migration exacerbates these conditions, leading to poor access to basic services like clean water and sanitation (Oksiutycz & Azionya, 2022). Habitat for Humanity (2023) advocates for a balance between immediate interventions and sustainable urban design to support vulnerable communities. Data-driven approaches support governance tailored to local socio-economic contexts. In-situ upgrading—improving settlements without relocation—is preferred for preserving social networks (Goytia & Dorna, 2016). Brazil's Favela-Bairro programme and India's Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) exemplify successful infrastructure-focused initiatives (Achmani et al., 2020; Habitat for Humanity, 2023).

In Africa and Asia, redevelopment strategies include inclusive policy reforms, community-based organisations, and NGO partnerships (Awad, Bartlett & Conaldi, 2021), whilst Nuhu et al. (2023), emphasise legal recognition and infrastructure development as foundational pillars. Comparative studies underscore the significance of inclusive reforms and collaborative partnerships in achieving sustainable outcomes (Awad et al., 2021). For instance, Zimbabwe has aligned its upgrading strategies with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), demonstrating a commitment to global development frameworks (Matamanda et al., 2020). Nuhu et al. (2023) further note that developed countries often integrate informal settlements into existing urban frameworks without increasing inequality. Over the past two decades, countries like South Korea, the UK, India, Kenya, Uganda, Ghana, and Nigeria have advanced their informal settlement upgrading programmes (Awad et al., 2021).

Measuring Tools for Evaluating the Upgrading of Informal Settlement Programmes in Japan

Achmani et al. (2020) identify key metrics for assessing informal settlement upgrades in Japan, emphasising sustainability, durability, energy efficiency, resident satisfaction, and robust monitoring systems. Samper et al. (2020) highlight the use of geolocation and spatial analysis tools to evaluate neighbourhood-level impacts and intervention outcomes.

Nuhu et al. (2023), advocate for quality-of-life indicators—such as public health, economic stability, access to clean water, housing quality, and employment opportunities—as essential measures of

programme effectiveness. Habitat for Humanity (2021) underscores the importance of climate resilience and adaptation in response to environmental hazards affecting informal settlements.

Further, Samper et al. (2020) stress the need for comprehensive monitoring and evaluation frameworks, stakeholder engagement, and environmental risk assessments. The UNHCR (2024) supports strategic tracking and continuous evaluation to assess infrastructure and shelter initiatives, policy development, and intergovernmental coordination.

Measuring Tools for Evaluating the Upgrading of Informal Settlements Programmes in Nigeria

The effectiveness of the measurement tools for the upgrading of informal settlements in Nigeria is evaluated through a range of measurement tools identified by various scholars. Sulyman and Christianah (2021) observe a rising trend in informal settlements, particularly in Lagos, Port Harcourt, and the North-Central region, and emphasise the importance of monitoring and evaluation to assess the long-term viability of settlement growth, land use changes, and environmental impacts. Satterthwaite (2012) describes upgrading informal settlements as a means of improving housing conditions and accessibility for low- and middle-income urban dwellers. Samper et al. (2020) propose standardised measurements using remote sensing and direct mapping tools to monitor urban growth.

Julyan (2011) highlights community health education as a vital measure that has enhanced access to clean water, sanitation, and medical services. They identify key measuring tools such as beneficiary consultation, intergovernmental relations, personnel education, monitoring and evaluation, and community-generated data. Ezebilo and Savadogo (2021) argue that infrastructure preferences and availability are essential in determining the success of upgrading initiatives. Their study outlines measuring tools, including intergovernmental relations, residents' readiness to support, access to public services and sanitation, and good location.

Informal Settlements Overview in South Africa

Informal settlements in South Africa are complex and defined by legal, socio-economic, and physical characteristics (Housing Development Agency, 2013; 2015a). Roy (2011) and Huchzermeyer (2011) describe them as self-organised spaces offering immediate housing and livelihood solutions. Historically, these settlements faced evictions and demolitions, especially under apartheid, which enforced racial segregation through mass relocations and the Prevention of Illegal Squatting Act 52 of 1951 (PISA). In the 1980s, civil resistance led to amendments allowing “designated zones” to be exempt from urban planning laws (Muller, 2013), and the introduction of site-and-service schemes influenced by the World Bank and Urban Foundation (Forster & Gardner, 2014). The Independent Development Trust (IDT) piloted these schemes in the early 1990s, followed by the National Housing Forum (NHF) in 1992, which negotiated housing futures ahead of the democratic transition (Huchzermeyer, 2004). Post-1994, the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) focused on new housing projects but perpetuated apartheid spatial patterns (Basset et al., 2003). In response, the Breaking New Ground (BNG) policy was introduced in 2004 to broaden housing approaches, giving rise to the Upgrading of Informal Settlements Programme (UISP). UISP promotes in-situ upgrading—improving settlements without evictions or relocations—supported by community participation and backed by the World Bank (Del Mistro & Hensher, 2009; Huchzermeyer, 2006; Devas, 2001; D’Cruz et al., 2009). The RDP and BNG policies, along with instruments like the housing capital subsidy scheme, aimed to formalise informal settlements and deliver adequate housing, with the new government pledging one million houses within five years (Khalifa, 2015).

Research Methodology

Research Approach and Design

A research design acts as a master plan detailing the methods for collecting and analysing information (Kothari, 2004; Ogunbayo et al., 2023). It structures the investigation of research questions and controls variance. The quantitative approach was chosen, allowing respondents to answer the researcher's questions (Polit & Hungler, 1995; Ogunbayo et al., 2023). This standard design ensures reproducibility (Calnan, 2019: 41) and delivers stable results regarding behaviours, beliefs, and knowledge, thus enriching the academic field.

Sample Selection and Research Area

The study focuses on Human Settlement practitioners in Gauteng province, sourced from the Gauteng Department of Human Settlements (GDHuS) and relevant professional bodies. This area was selected due to its high number of informal settlements. The objective population includes all respondents meeting the criteria outlined by Coughlan, Cronin, and Ryan (2007: 34), providing deeper insights into the research area.

Sampling Size

Probability sampling techniques were employed, specifically random sampling, giving all participants an equal selection chance (Teddlie & Yu, 2007:79; Ogunbayo et al., 2023). Data was gathered via an e-questionnaire aimed at key UISP stakeholders in Gauteng. Although the target was 150, only 126 responses were received. This aligns with Masoetsa et al. (2022) and Pallant (2016), indicating that larger samples reduce error likelihood. According to Kothari (2004), the sample size of 126 is adequate.

Data Collection

A quantitative technique was used for data collection, including both primary and secondary data. Primary data came from in-depth questionnaires, while secondary data was sourced from Google Books, Google Scholar, Scopus, and ResearchGate. Participants completed the questionnaire in about fifteen minutes, and data collection spanned two months, with 150 questionnaires distributed.

Instrument for Data Collection

The questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree.' The data was quantified and analysed for frequency through a descriptive survey. An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using SPSS version 21, with oblimin rotation, assessed correlation, validity, and reliability, aiming to identify distribution and anomalies in the data (Masoetsa et al., 2022).

Validity and Reliability

To ensure reliability, the instrument must yield consistent results across similar respondents (Cohen et al., 2000: 117; Ogunbayo et al., 2023). Reliability tests were conducted post-validation, using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, with a threshold of 0.7 deemed acceptable. Scales below this threshold were assessed for mean inter-item correlation, which was reported at a minimum of 0.3.

Ethical Considerations

Confidentiality for respondents was maintained, with responses used solely for academic purposes. Anonymity was ensured, preventing any link between respondents and their answers (Burns and Grove, 1993:762). A cover letter requesting permission to conduct the research was included with questionnaires from the Department of Construction Management and Quantity Surveying at Doornfontein Campus, University of Johannesburg.

Findings

Demographic Data of Respondents

This section provides a concise analysis of the respondents' demographics, covering their education level, work experience, professional designation, type of organisation, and departmental divisions within the South African construction industry, involved in UISP. Additionally, the 126 respondents are primarily from the Gauteng Department of Human Settlements, policymakers, parastatals, and consultants. Their extensive experience enriches this study.

Respondents' Level of Education

Figure 1 presents the respondents' level of education, which comprises 13% (3) without qualification, 8% (23) with a post-matric (grade 12), 33% (42) had a bachelor's degree, 25% (32) had an honour's degree, 19% (24) had a master's degree, and 2% (2) with a doctoral degree.

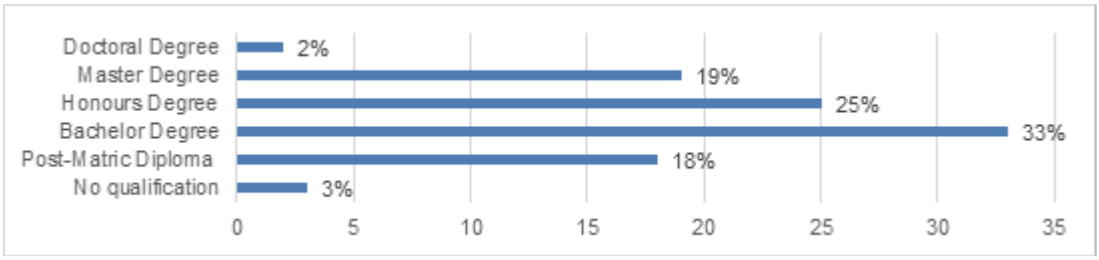

Figure 1 Respondents' Level of Education

Respondents' Years of Experience

Figure 2 presents respondents' working experience in informal settlement upgrading programmes in South Africa. The respondents comprise 10% (12) who had 0-5 years of working experience, 25% (32) who had 6-10 years of working experience, 28% (35) who had 11-15 years of working experience, 21% (27) who had 16-20 years of working experience, 13% (16) who had 21-25 years of working experience, and 3% (4) who had more 25 years of working experience.

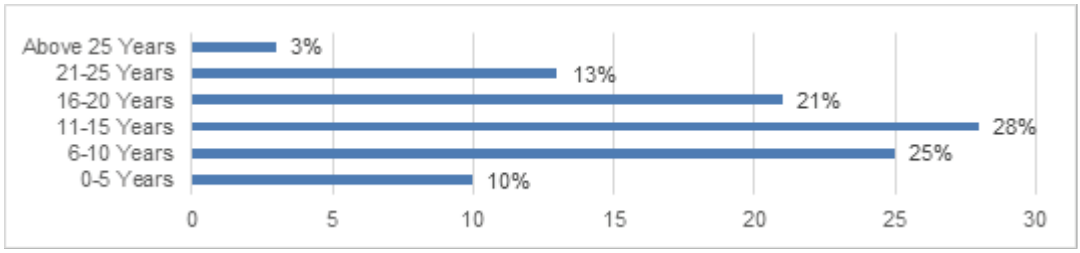

Figure 2 Respondents' Years of Working Experience

Sphere of Government or Parastatal in which Respondents are Employed

Figure 3 presents responses to the sphere of government or parastatal where respondents are employed and contribute to the informal settlement upgrading programmes in South Africa. The respondents comprise 4% (5) Gauteng Partnership Fund (GPF), 9% (11) Development Bank of South Africa (DBSA), 10% (12) Housing Development Agency (HDA), 13% (17) Local Municipality 16% (19) Gauteng Department of Human Settlements, and 17% (22) National Department of Human Settlements.

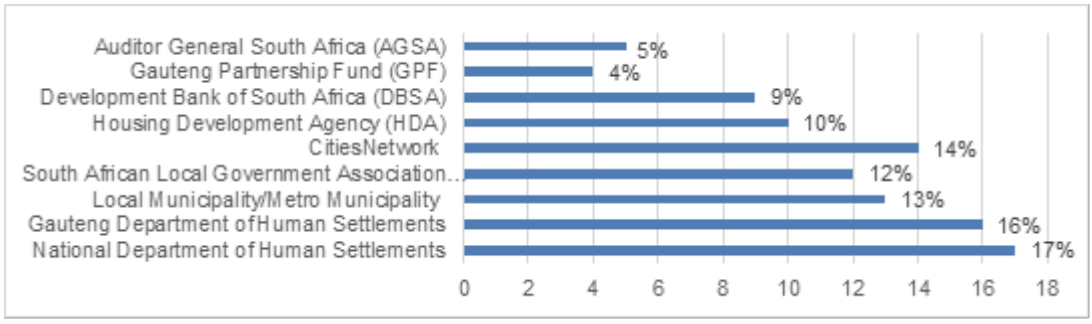

Figure 3 Sphere of Government or Parastatal where Respondents are Employed

Respondents' Role in the Department that Manages the USIP

Figure 4 presents the respondents' role in the department that manages the UISP. These comprise 7% (9) head of department/CEO, 14% (17) director of department/executive, 6% (8) director of department/executive, 16% (20) assistant director in the department/middle manager, 26% (32) project manager (construction/engineer/junior manager), 21% (27) assistant project manager/clerk of works and 10% (13) others. This implies that the respondents fairly represent stakeholders involved in UISP in South Africa.

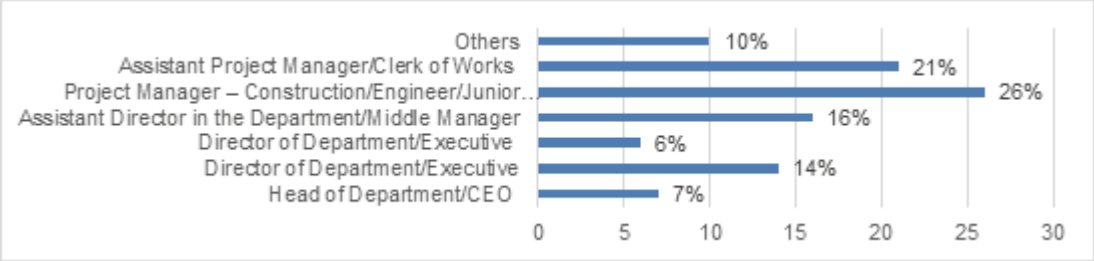

Figure 4 Respondents' Professional Designations

Division within the Department of Respondents' Works

Figure 5 presents the division within the Department where respondents work in the USIP. The respondents comprise 5% (6) who work in monitoring and evaluation or audit, 5% (6) who work as town planners, 5% (6) who work in beneficiary administration, 6% (7) who work as communications and stakeholder relations, 6% (7) who work as finance,9% (11%) work as land and asset management, 10% (13) who work as strategic management support,10% (13) who work as national upgrading support programme (NUSP), 14% (17) who work in policy and research and 23% (29) who work as project management/implementation.

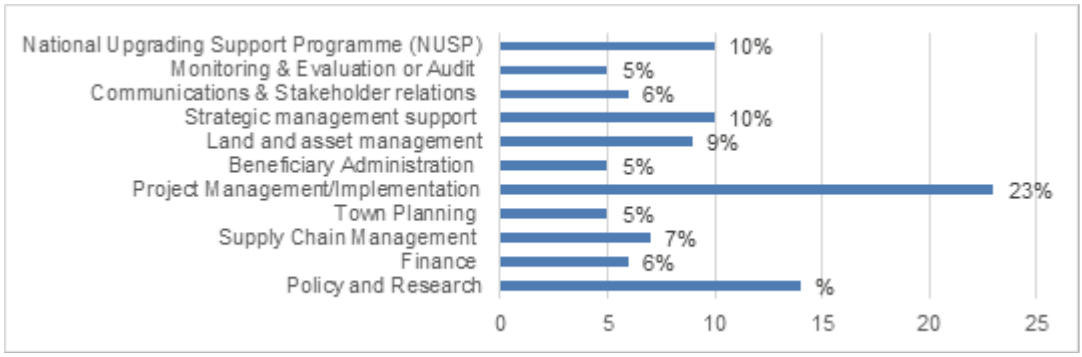

Figure 5 The Division within the Department where Respondents work in the USIP

Measuring Tools for the Effectiveness of UISP in Johannesburg, South Africa

Table 1 presents the results of descriptive statistics of the twenty-one identified measuring tools for the effectiveness of UISP in Johannesburg, South Africa, using a five-point Likert scale: 1 = Strongly disagree (SD); 2 = Disagree (D); 3 = Neutral (N); 4 = Agree (A); 5 = Strongly agree (SA). To begin with, the study established the following assumptions in ranking the descriptive analysis of the identified measuring tools for the effectiveness of UISP in Johannesburg, South Africa. Opawole and Jagboro (2016) affirmed that ranking variables with mean score (MS) values ≥ 3.50 in descriptive analysis indicates a high significance value. Likewise, Field (2009) and Oke et al. (2024) maintained that when variables have the same mean score (MS) value, the variable with the lowest standard deviation must be ranked highest. Hence, Table 6.1 establishes the significance of the identified measuring tools for the effectiveness of UISP in Johannesburg, South Africa, by ranking Mean Score (MS) and Standard Deviation (Std. Dev.).

The monitoring tools with a highly significant impact on the effectiveness of UISP in Johannesburg, South Africa, are as follows: infrastructure and service delivery assessment ranked first with a 4.10 MS and 0.898 Std. Dev.; community data generated ranked second with a 4.06 MS and 0.861 Std. Dev.; housing and building quality assessment ranked third with a 4.06 MS and 0.879 Std. Dev.; health and social impact assessment ranked fourth with a 4.02 MS and 0.867 Std. Dev.; monitoring and evaluation ranked fifth with a 4.01 MS and 0.853 Std. Dev.; participatory evaluation methods ranked sixth with a 3.99 MS and 0.959 Std. Dev.; financial availability ranked seventh with a 3.95 MS and 0.893 Std. Dev.; government and institutional effectiveness ranked eighth with a 3.94 MS and 0.773 Std. Dev.; economic impact evaluation ranked ninth with a 3.94 MS and 0.888 Std. Dev.; and intergovernmental relations ranked tenth with a 3.90 MS and 0.884 Std. Dev.

Similarly, programme budgeting ranked eleventh with a 3.89 MS and 0.896 Std. Dev.; policy formulation ranked twelfth with a 3.89 MS and 0.940 Std. Dev.; continuous policy review ranked thirteenth with a 3.88 MS and 1.093 Std. Dev.; beneficiaries' consultation ranked fourteenth with a 3.87 MS and 0.885 Std. Dev.; stakeholder management ranked fifteenth with a 3.81 MS and 1.093 Std. Dev.; occupant audits ranked sixteenth with a 3.74 MS and 0.997 Std. Dev.; and baseline and end-line survey ranked seventeenth with a 3.71 MS and 1.081 Std. Dev., recording high-significance factors accordingly. However, personnel education is the only variable with a medium impact of 3.49 MS and a 1.00 Std. Dev. Value.

Table 1 Measuring Tools for the Effectiveness of UISP in Johannesburg, South Africa

MEU Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation	Ranking
Infrastructure and service delivery assessment	4.10	0.898	1
Community data generated	4.06	0.861	2
Housing and building quality assessment	4.06	0.879	3
Health and social impact assessment	4.02	0.867	4
Monitoring and Evaluation	4.01	0.853	5
Participatory evaluation methods	3.99	0.959	6
Financial availability	3.95	0.893	7
Government and institutional effectiveness	3.94	0.773	8
Economic impact evaluation	3.94	0.888	9
Intergovernmental relation	3.90	0.884	10
Programme Budgeting	3.89	0.896	11
Policy formulation	3.89	0.940	12
Continuous policy review	3.88	1.093	13
Beneficiaries' consultation	3.87	0.885	14
Stakeholder management	3.81	1.093	15
Occupant audits	3.74	0.997	16
Baseline and end-line survey	3.71	1.081	17
Smart technology	3.67	1.057	18
Political support	3.60	1.052	19
Good location	3.57	1.039	20
Personnel education	3.49	1.010	21

Exploratory Factor Analysis of Measuring Tools for the Effectiveness of UISP in Johannesburg, South Africa

The twenty-one identified measuring tools for the effectiveness of UISP in Johannesburg, South Africa, were tested using IBM SPSS Statistics version 28 for exploratory factor analysis (EFA). The principal component analysis established the data's suitability for the EFA. A KMO value of 0.831 was obtained in Table 2, exceeding the minimum recommended value of 0.6 by Lloret et al. (2017) and Watkins (2018), indicating sample adequacy for the EFA. According to George and Mallery's (2003) recommendations, Bartlett's test of sphericity for multivariate normality in the dataset distributions returned a significant value of 0.000, which is less than the recommended threshold of 0.05, suggesting that the data is suitable for EFA. The KMO and Bartlett test values indicate that the data does not generate an identity matrix, and the correlation coefficient greater than 0.3 supports the factorability of the datasets.

Table 2 KMO and Bartlett's Test on Measuring Tools for the Effectiveness of UISP

KMO and Bartlett's Test		
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		0.831
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	1391.600
	Df	210
	Sig.	0.000

Baseline and End-line Land Survey

The fourth component explained baseline and end-line survey (81%) and good location (78%) as the two variables with 6.052% of the total variance.

Table 3 Pattern Matrix(a) for the Measuring Tools for the Effectiveness of UISP

MEU Variables	Component			
	1	2	3	4
Government and institutional effectiveness	0.843			
Economic impact evaluation	0.822			
Community data generated	0.772			
Intergovernmental relations	0.761			
Monitoring and evaluation	0.744			
Housing and building quality assessment	0.717			
Infrastructure and service delivery assessment	0.667			
Health and social impact assessment	0.646			
Participatory evaluation methods	0.615			
Education of personnel		0.888		
Occupant audits		0.870		
Programme budgeting		0.866		
Stakeholder management		0.855		
Financial availability		0.640		
Continuous policy review			0.819	
Political support			0.808	
Smart technology			0.703	
Beneficiaries' consultation			0.649	
Policy formulation			0.572	
Baseline and end-line survey				0.809
Good location				0.782

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Oblimin with Kaiser Normalisation. a. Rotation converged in 5 iterations.

Component Correlation Matrix

Table 4 presents a positive relationship between the clustered variables in the component correlation matrix, with more than 0.30 values for the variables of each component.

Table 4 Component Correlation Matrix

Component Correlation Matrix				
Component	1	2	3	4
1. Economic, health and social impact assessment	1.000	0.249	0.482	0.235
2. Programme auditing and budgeting	0.249	1.000	0.049	0.140
3. Political and policy stability	0.482	0.049	1.000	0.131
4. Baseline and end-line land survey	0.235	0.140	0.131	1.000

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Oblimin with Kaiser Normalisation.

Reliability of Cluster Factors

Furthermore, the reliability test of the variables clustered in each component in Table 5 validates the variables measured in each component. The Cronbach's alpha test value for each component for the twenty-one identified measuring tools for the effectiveness of UISP in Johannesburg, South Africa, ranges from 0.659 to 0.903.

Table 5 Reliability of Cluster Components

Component	Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient
1. Economic, health and social impact assessment	0.903
2. Programme auditing and budgeting	0.702
3. Political and policy stability	0.785
4. Baseline and end-line land survey	0.659

Discussion of Findings

This section discusses the findings from the previous data analysis and validates these results with existing literature.

Theme 1: Component One: Economic, Health and Social Impact Assessment.

This component accounts for 33.163% of total variance with the highest factor loadings among the nine variables: government and institutional effectiveness, economic impact evaluation, community data generation, intergovernmental relations, monitoring and evaluation, housing quality assessment, infrastructure and service delivery assessment, health and social impact assessment, and participatory evaluation methods. These variables are essential for assessing the effectiveness of the measuring tools for UISP in Johannesburg. The findings align with the World Bank (2014), which noted that economic assessments of informal settlement upgrading programmes reveal impacts on local businesses and employment, resulting in improved income levels and new opportunities. Similarly, Marais et al. (2014) emphasised that health and social impact assessments in UISP should consider public health aspects, such as reductions in waterborne diseases, and evaluate social cohesion and community dynamics. Enhancing the impact of informal settlement upgrading programmes in South Africa requires a focus on these assessments to address communicable diseases and ensure inclusive urban planning for low-income residents. Oberholster et al. (2022) highlighted the importance of community stakeholders, participatory processes, and support from public and private sectors in government health and social impact assessment initiatives for informal settlements.

Theme 2: Component Two: Programme Auditing and Budgeting

The second component accounted for 15.745% of the total variance, highlighting personnel education, occupant audits, programme budgeting, stakeholder management, and financial availability. It discusses programme budgeting and auditing as effective tools for assessing UISP in Johannesburg. Findings corroborate Venter et al. (2019), who linked occupancy audits, budgeting, beneficiary needs, and smart technology to informal settlement upgrades. Visagie et al. (2020) also emphasise programme budgeting and government subsidies as essential for upgrading informal settlements. A notable issue is the lack of stakeholder collaboration, which complicates development interventions. This aligns with Rautenbach et al. (2015) and Stewart (2018), who concluded that education and stakeholder management are crucial for upgrading initiatives.

Theme 3: Component Three: Political and Policy Stability

The third component explained 7.313% of the variance through five variables: continuous policy review, political support, smart technology, beneficiaries' consultation, and policy formulation. These are critical tools for the effective upgrading of informal settlements. The study supports Cirolia (2017), who identified continuous policy formulation, political support, and land allocation as key tools. Stewart (2018) also highlights intergovernmental relations and inclusive training as vital for successful upgrades.

Theme 4: Component Four: Baseline and End-line Land Survey

The fourth component identified baseline and end-line surveys and good location as significant variables, explaining 6.052% of the variance. These surveys are essential for collecting data before and after upgrading programmes. Samper et al. (2020) noted the value of standardised measurements, while Huchzermeyer (2006) and Fox (2014) highlighted the role of baseline surveys in understanding pre-intervention conditions and end-line surveys in evaluating improvements. This approach offers a comprehensive view of the changes resulting from the upgrading programme.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study identified twenty-one tools for measuring the effectiveness of the UISP in Johannesburg, South Africa. Key significant factors include infrastructure, service delivery, community data, housing quality, health and social impact, evaluation methods, financial availability, government effectiveness, economic evaluation, and intergovernmental relations. The findings confirmed that the objective of the study was met, establishing four components for measuring UISP effectiveness: economic, health and social impact assessment; programme auditing and budgeting; political and policy stability; and baseline and end-line land surveys. The evaluation of the upgrading of the informal settlement programme will establish effectiveness measurement tools for UISP. This study, therefore, guides stakeholders, policymakers, consultants, municipalities, and agencies by recommending a deeper understanding of the impact of assessment tools on enhancing the UISP. Moreover, focusing on promoting inclusive urban planning and prioritising the success factors of upgrading while supporting in-situ upgrading and city-wide policies. Furthermore, the Government must adopt long-term strategies to gradually transform UISP and enable inclusive community participation.

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SACQSP2025-78

Strategies for Optimising Transaction Costs in PPP Infrastructure Projects in South Africa

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Abstract

Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) offer a significant role in addressing the infrastructure deficits in South Africa through the leverage of private sector capital and expertise. However, the high transaction costs of delivering infrastructure projects using this procurement model pose significant barriers. This study assessed the strategies for optimising transaction costs in PPP infrastructure projects in the South African construction industry. Data were collected using a quantitative methodology using a closed-ended questionnaire from construction professionals, using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. The retrieved data were analysed using exploratory factor analysis. The study's findings outline four components that can potentially aid in an effective transaction cost for PPP infrastructure projects. These are Procurement and Contracting Efficiency, Unambiguous Legal and Regulatory Framework, Optimal Stakeholder Engagement and Risk Management, and Institutional Capacity. The findings offer practical insights for policymakers, infrastructure planners, and PPP practitioners seeking to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of infrastructure delivery in South Africa.

Keywords: Infrastructure, PPP, Transaction Costs, Strategies, South Africa.

Introduction

Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) serve as a key mechanism for actualising infrastructural projects in developing economies, usually necessitated due to fiscal constraints and growing infrastructure deficit (Zhang et al., 2020). In South Africa, the PPP model has been embraced as an avenue for leveraging private sector capital and expertise to deliver projects spanning transportation, healthcare facilities, water and energy systems. According to Dithebe et al. (2023), this has helped in shoring up the backlog of infrastructure delivery, mostly experienced due to low gross domestic savings on the part of the government. Despite the potential benefits of PPP as a model for delivering infrastructure, it is associated with some bottlenecks. One such challenge is the high transaction costs incurred in project delivery.

In any production activity, such as construction, costs are typically incurred beyond production expenses. These are transaction costs (Ikuabe et al., 2020). According to transaction cost economics theory (TCE), a transaction occurs when a service or product is exchanged through a distinct technological interface (Williamson, 2010). The expenses associated with converting inputs into outputs are known as production costs, while the costs related to economic exchanges are referred to as transaction costs. In construction projects, transaction costs encompass, but are not limited to, the preparation of bidding documentation, the establishment of contracts, contract management, addressing deviations from contractual conditions, legal expenses, and the costs of gathering and processing information, among others (Li et al., 2014). Given that construction costs are a crucial factor in evaluating project performance (Oke, 2022), it is essential to initiate strategies on how they can be optimally expended.

The concept of transaction costs from the perspective of PPP for infrastructure delivery highlights the parameters such as the cost of planning, adaptation, and monitoring of exchanges associated with complex contractual setups (Carbonara et al., 2016). Ping et al. (2015) opined that for construction project delivery through PPPs, high transaction costs is an indication of a shift from value for money and enhanced project delivery. De Schepper et al. (2015) state that in a PPP project framework, these associated costs are shaped by an array of market, regulatory, and institutional factors spanning from inefficiencies in risk allocation, capacity constraints from the public-sector partner, and elongated procurement scheduling, etc. Moreover, the fragmented nature of stakeholders' engagement in a PPP project delivery model often leads to coordination failure, leading to inflated transaction costs. From a developing economy perspective, no study has focused on the impacts on transaction costs on the delivery of PPP infrastructure projects. This study is therefore situated at the intersection of infrastructure economics, public procurement policy, and institutional reform. On this basis, this study is geared towards assessing the strategies for optimising transaction costs in PPP projects in South Africa. This is with a view to proffering insights that can help optimise transaction costs in a PPP project delivery model for the South African construction industry.

Review of Related Studies

According to Ikuabe and Oke (2019), transaction costs refer to the financial expenses of an economic transaction, separate from the product being exchanged and the market price. Additionally, transaction costs can be viewed as expenses related to market exchanges, enforcing agreements, and negotiating contracts (Nirvikar, 2008). For PPPs in construction project delivery, the need for optimised transaction costs situates the recognition of the vital role cost plays in determining value for money outcomes and project efficiency. From a South African construction industry perspective, transaction cost deliberations have emerged as crucial as they underscore critical concerns regarding an uneven share of project resources, emphasising the pre-construction phase. Drawing from transaction cost economics theory, PPP projects' inherently relational, long-term and complex nature makes them susceptible to transaction-related inefficiencies (Carbonara et al., 2016). Therefore, strategies that can drive the efficiency of transaction costs in PPP projects would help attain expected project outcomes. Boyer and Newcomer (2015) noted that a key strategy for reinforcing public sector expertise is the development of technically efficient government agencies with requisite professional skills in contract administration and project appraisal. Also, continuous training and capacity building for stakeholders in public organisations are essential for effectively managing complex processes associated with PPP projects (Olojede et al., 2020).

Moreover, the presence of a coherent and clear legal framework for PPP enables predictability and reduces legal uncertainties, typically leading to delays in project delivery (Osei-Kyei & Chan, 2018). The framing of robust mechanisms for dispute resolution can assist in driving optimised transaction costs. Interventions such as mediation and arbitration can help in achieving this goal. Also, the streamlining of regulatory approvals, such as land-use and environmental permissions, aids the eradication of bureaucratic delays and related costs (Fernando et al., 2025). Kwofie et al. (2019) note that effective communication among project stakeholders breeds trust, minimises resistance, and mitigates delays from conflict, which is usually costly. Hence, the transparent disclosure of project information tends to reduce the diligence burden on the part of the private partner. Moreover, framing a solid risk management framework, which stipulates the likely risks and strategies for mitigating them, would help abate, consequently leading to reduced transaction costs (Jiang et al., 2023). Also, early market engagement enables the public sector to gauge private sector appetite and tailor project specifications, accordingly, reducing costly rework (Whiteside et al., 2020). Cong and Ma (2018) stated that an efficient bid assessment process that is time-bound and free from ambiguity reduces associated costs for both public and private partners. Adopting a flexible procurement process in complex projects permits better alignment of private partner capabilities and project needs. Hence, this results in optimised transaction costs for actualising project goals and other ancillaries. Additionally, the coupling of similar projects into larger packages tends to reduce duplication in transaction efforts, resulting in economies of scale (Wang et al., 2022).

Research Methodology and Method

The research seeks to assess the strategies for optimising transaction costs in PPP infrastructure projects in South Africa. A quantitative methodology was employed for the research, necessitating a questionnaire to collect data from the selected participants. The study focused on the Gauteng

province in South Africa, which is driven by the large number of construction professionals based in the region and the diverse array of PPP construction projects being carried out there. The population for the study comprised of construction professionals namely Quantity Surveyors, Architects, Construction Managers, Engineers, and Construction Project Managers. Additionally, purposive and snowball sampling techniques were applied in the study. This process initially included finding professionals who were knowledgeable and experienced in PPP projects. These participants subsequently helped to identify respondents with similar characteristics further. A pilot study was carried out before data collection, which provided insight into the necessary elements of the data collection instrument. The participants chosen for the initial study were selected due to their participation in PPP projects. The questionnaire was administered through electronic means using Google forms. After gathering all completed questionnaires, one hundred and twelve were deemed accurately filled and suitable for analysis. A Cronbach's alpha test was performed to ascertain the validity and reliability of the questionnaire. The resulting alpha value of 0.907 affirms the good validity and reliability of the research instrument, as it surpasses the recommended threshold of 0.70 and approaches 1.00 (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011; Adekunle et al., 2024). The data analysis was conducted using exploratory factor analysis, employing principal component analysis as the extraction method outlined by Akinradewo et al. (2022). Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 27 was utilized to conduct Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) for evaluating the factor-analysis readiness and unidimensionality of the identified variables. This approach aims to offer insights into organized patterns that clarify the reasoning underlying the relationships.

Research Results

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) is used to identify variables with similar characteristics and underlying factors (Ibrahim et al., 2024). The application of this method in the current study helped to articulate components characterised by variables with standard features, thereby streamlining the measurement variables. This approach led to the development of a more transparent framework that highlights the strategies for optimising transaction costs in PPP infrastructure projects in South Africa. The suitability of the collected data was examined to confirm its effectiveness for EFA. The inter-item correlation from the output resulted in values ranging from 0.3 to 0.60, which aligns with the suggestions by Phelan and Wren (2007); this affirms the validity of the dataset for EFA. Furthermore, the data's factorability was evaluated using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy in conjunction with Bartlett's test of sphericity. As asserted by Pallant (2005), Bartlett's test must yield statistically significant results ($p < 0.05$) for EFA to be deemed suitable. The findings, summarised in Table 1, indicate a KMO value of 0.887 and a significant outcome for Bartlett's test, with a p-value of 0.000. This surpasses the recommended minimum of 0.6, as Ikuabe and Oke (2019) and Maphongwane et al. (2024) noted.

Table 1 KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy		0.887
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	1006.214
	Df	116
	Sig.	0.000

The results of the rotated component matrix are shown in Table 2. The communalities extracted for the measurement variables and the percentages of variance for the derived variables are also provided. The extracted communalities are observed to surpass the 0.50 benchmark, as indicated by earlier studies (Oyediran et al., 2025; Ibrahim et al., 2024). Furthermore, principal component analysis was employed as the method for data extraction, with the measurement variables converging after five iterations using varimax rotation. Four components with eigenvalues exceeding 1.00 were identified, yielding a cumulative variance of 71.81%. The first component includes four measurement variables with factor loadings between 0.601 and 0.874, representing 41.03% of the variance, and is designated as procurement and contracting efficiency. The second component comprises four measurement variables with factor loadings from 0.572 to 0.793, accounting for 18.95% of the variance, and is referred to as the legal and regulatory framework. The third component is named optimal stakeholder engagement and risk management, with factor loadings ranging from 0.559 to 0.726, representing 8.72% of the variance. The final component is called institutional capacity, with factor loadings between 0.516 and 0.648, accounting for 3.11% of the variance.

Table 2 Rotated Component Matrix

Strategies	Component				Extracted Communalities	% of Variance
	1	2	3	4		
Procurement and Contracting Efficiency						
Efficient Bid Evaluation Processes	0.874				0.692	41.03
Early Market Engagement	0.727				0.531	
Bundling of Projects	0.638				0.825	
Use of Negotiated Procedures	0.601				0.777	
Unambiguous Legal and Regulatory Framework						
Efficient Dispute Resolution Mechanisms		0.793			0.595	18.95
Clarity in Risk Allocation		0.681			0.618	
Clear Legal Framework for PPPs		0.616			0.543	
Streamlined Regulatory Approvals		0.572			0.822	
Optimal Stakeholder Engagement and Risk Management						
Effective Stakeholder Communication			0.726		0.745	8.72
Robust Risk Management Framework			0.655		0.663	
Transparent Information Disclosure			0.559		0.581	
Institutional Capacity						
Strengthening Public Sector Expertise				0.648	0.504	3.11
Capacity Building and Training				0.557	0.643	
Standardisation of PPP Processes				0.516	0.729	

a. Converged in five iterations

Discussion

The quantitative analysis results portray the strategies for optimising transaction costs in PPP projects in South Africa. The first component is labelled as procurement and contracting efficiency. This finding is in consonance with Whiteside et al. (2020), who noted that early market engagement enables the public sector to gauge private sector appetite and tailor project specifications, reducing costly rework. Also, Cong and Ma (2018) stated that an efficient bid assessment process that is time-bound and free from ambiguity reduces associated costs for both public and private partners. Adopting a flexible procurement process in complex projects permits better alignment of private partner capabilities and project needs. Furthermore, the study's findings showed that an unambiguous legal and regulatory framework is a key strategy to help optimise transaction costs. Osei-Kyei and Chan (2018) affirmed that a coherent and transparent legal framework for PPP enables predictability and reduces legal uncertainties, typically leading to delays in project delivery. Also, the framing of robust mechanisms for dispute resolution can assist in driving optimised transaction costs. Interventions such as mediation and arbitration can help in achieving this goal. Moreover, effective communication among stakeholders in a PPP project would help minimise the likelihood of conflicts, which then helps reduce transaction costs. The study identifies that strengthening expertise in the public sector can aid in navigating the

turbulent management of the public and private stakeholders' engagement mix. To corroborate this, Boyer and Newcomer (2015) noted that a key strategy for reinforcing public sector expertise is the development of technically efficient government agencies with requisite professional skills in contract administration and project appraisal.

The study advances the theoretical understanding of transaction cost optimisation within Public-Private Partnership (PPP) frameworks by integrating procurement efficiency, regulatory clarity, and institutional capacity as interrelated constructs. It reinforces Transaction Cost Economics (TCE) theory by demonstrating that reducing uncertainty, improving contractual governance, and strengthening public sector capability collectively minimise opportunism and information asymmetry. The findings extend the theory's applicability to emerging economies like South Africa, where institutional frameworks are still evolving. Practically, the study provides actionable insights for policymakers and practitioners seeking to optimise PPP transaction costs. It suggests the adoption of flexible and transparent procurement processes supported by early market engagement to enhance competition and efficiency. Strengthening legal and regulatory frameworks can reduce disputes and procedural delays, while embedding alternative dispute resolution mechanisms ensures smoother project delivery.

Conclusion

While PPP seeks to address a financing hurdle plaguing the delivery of construction projects, it might incur unprecedented transaction costs when not adequately managed. This study evaluated the strategies for optimising transaction costs for PPP projects in South Africa. Primary data were elicited from the target respondents who were experts in PPP projects using a questionnaire survey. The retrieved data was analysed using exploratory factor analysis, deploying principal component analysis as the extraction method. The results derived four components as strategies that can aid in optimising transaction costs for PPP projects in South Africa. These are procurement and contracting efficiency, an unambiguous legal and regulatory framework, optimal stakeholder engagement and risk management, and institutional capacity. These elements collectively reduce uncertainty, enhance collaboration, and improve project value-for-money. The findings affirm that transparent legal frameworks and adaptive procurement strategies are central to cost-efficient PPP implementation.

Recommendations

Using the findings from the study as a basis, it is recommended that PPP infrastructure projects be streamlined by streamlining procurement and contracting processes to minimise delays and administrative burdens, supported by a clear and consistent legal and regulatory framework. By embarking on these processes, adopting standardised bidding documents, model contracts, and transparent evaluation criteria can substantially reduce negotiation time and minimise procedural duplication. On a conclusive basis, it is worth stating that this study solely used a mono-method (quantitative) methodological choice. Future studies can explore either a qualitative approach or a mixed-methodological choice. This can help give a comparative and broader assessment of the current study's findings.

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SACQSP2025-84

Beyond Numbers: Exploring Emotional Intelligence Among Quantity Surveyors in the South African Construction Industry

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Abstract

Emotional intelligence (EI) is increasingly recognised as a critical competence for quantity surveyors, given the construction industry's collaborative, multi-stakeholder, and high-pressure nature. The profession requires not only technical expertise but also the ability to manage interpersonal relationships, resolve conflicts, and communicate effectively. This study aimed to investigate the perceptions and levels of emotional intelligence among quantity surveyors in South Africa, focusing on practitioners based in Durban. The purpose was to explore how EI contributes to professional effectiveness and why it is becoming indispensable in the evolving built environment sector. Adopting a positivist, quantitative approach, the research employed a structured, closed-ended questionnaire to capture participants' views. Purposive sampling was utilised, with fifty-one questionnaires distributed and thirty-two completed, resulting in a 63% response rate. Data were coded and analysed using SPSS v29, with descriptive statistical techniques applied to examine the different dimensions of emotional intelligence. The findings revealed that quantity surveyors with higher levels of EI demonstrated stronger awareness of both their own emotions and those of others, enabling them to engage constructively with colleagues and clients. The results further highlight that EI contributes to enhanced productivity, improved conflict management, and greater job satisfaction, factors that directly influence project success and organisational outcomes. Notably, respondents indicated that EI competencies are increasingly important for navigating the complexities of modern construction practice, where collaboration and adaptability are essential. The study concludes that emotional intelligence should be considered a core professional competency for quantity surveyors. The results suggest the need for integrating EI development into both formal education curricula and professional training programmes, thereby equipping practitioners with the interpersonal skills required to thrive in an industry undergoing significant transformation.

Keywords: Construction Industry, Emotional Intelligence, Job Satisfaction, Quantity Surveyors.

Introduction

"*Construction is not only about bricks and mortar; it is about people*" (Nkado & Meyer, 2001:481). This statement underscores the reality that, despite the highly technical nature of the construction industry, human factors remain central to its success. Quantity surveyors, as cost managers and contractual advisors, occupy pivotal roles that demand technical accuracy and the capacity to navigate interpersonal dynamics. The complexity of modern construction projects, characterised by multiple stakeholders, tight deadlines, and frequent conflict, places increasing emphasis on emotional intelligence (EI) as an essential competency (Clarke, 2010; Opoku et al., 2015).

The importance of EI in construction has been well established. Defined as the ability to perceive, understand, and regulate emotions in oneself and others (Salovey & Mayer, 1990), EI has been linked to effective leadership, enhanced collaboration, and improved project outcomes (Goleman, 1998; Jordan & Troth, 2011). Studies in construction management highlight that professionals with higher EI are better equipped to manage conflict, communicate effectively, and foster trust (Sunindijo & Zou, 2013). For quantity surveyors, EI translates into greater effectiveness in negotiations, stakeholder engagement, and dispute resolution (van Heerden et al., 2023). Despite these findings, much of the research is international, with limited empirical studies contextualised within South Africa's construction industry.

On the other hand, South African scholarship on construction competencies has historically prioritised technical and managerial skills, often overlooking the emotional and interpersonal dimensions of

practice (Nkado & Meyer, 2001). While international evidence suggests EI's impact on professional effectiveness, little is known about how local quantity surveyors perceive and rate their emotional competencies. This omission is significant, given the South African construction sector's diverse cultural and socio-economic context, where communication, empathy, and adaptability are critical (Opoku et al., 2015). Without a deeper understanding, opportunities for improving workplace productivity, job satisfaction, and project success may be lost.

This study addresses this gap by examining how quantity surveyors in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, perceive and rate their emotional intelligence using an established measurement scale. Specifically, the study seeks to explore the extent to which EI competencies support interpersonal effectiveness and professional performance in this group.

Emotional Intelligence (EI)

The construction industry, both globally and locally, is widely recognised as a complex and demanding environment characterised by tight deadlines, financial constraints, and the involvement of multiple stakeholders. These dynamics emphasise the human factor, as interpersonal relationships, collaboration, and conflict management are integral to successful project delivery (Müller & Turner, 2010). Within this context, quantity surveyors, who often serve as cost managers and contract administrators, must navigate both technical and interpersonal challenges. Consequently, emotional intelligence (EI) has emerged as a crucial competency for professionals in the built environment (Opoku et al., 2015).

Emotional intelligence is defined by Salovey and Mayer (1990:3) as "the subset of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions". According to Harish et al. (2019:11), emotional intelligence refers to "the ability to recognise, understand, manage, and effectively use one's own emotions and the emotions of others". Scholars argue that EI contributes to developing soft skills such as empathy, communication, and adaptability, which complement the technical skills typically associated with quantity surveying (Boyatzis, 2018). In high-pressure environments such as construction projects, integrating EI with technical expertise enables practitioners to balance rational decision-making with interpersonal sensitivity (Clarke, 2010).

Research in construction management has increasingly highlighted the role of EI in shaping project outcomes. For example, studies show that emotionally intelligent professionals are more effective in managing conflicts, fostering teamwork, and reducing stress (Jordan & Troth, 2011). In South Africa, Opoku et al. (2015) noted that EI competencies are particularly important in overcoming challenges related to diversity, cultural differences, and communication barriers. These skills not only improve workplace relationships but also contribute to job satisfaction and productivity.

Measuring Emotional Intelligence

Various instruments have been developed to measure EI, reflecting different theoretical perspectives. The Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT) (Mayer, Salovey & Caruso, 2002) is ability-based, while Goleman's Emotional Competence Inventory (ECI) adopts a mixed-model approach (Goleman, 1998). The Wong Emotional Intelligence Scale (WEIS), developed by Wong and Law (2002), was utilised for this study. The WEIS is a self-report measure widely employed in organisational and cross-cultural research due to its reliability, brevity, and applicability in workplace settings (Law et al., 2004). The scale measures four dimensions of EI:

1. Self-emotion appraisal (SEA) – the ability to understand and express one's emotions.
2. Others' emotion appraisal (OEA) – the ability to perceive and understand the emotions of others.
3. Use of emotion (UOE) – the ability to harness emotions to facilitate performance.
4. Regulation of emotion (ROE) – the ability to regulate one's emotions effectively.

The WEIS is particularly appropriate in the construction industry context, as it emphasises both self-awareness and interpersonal awareness, skills critical for quantity surveyors in managing diverse stakeholders and negotiating effectively. Previous studies applying the WEIS have shown its predictive validity for job satisfaction, leadership, and workplace performance (Law et al., 2004; Jordan & Troth, 2011).

Emotional Intelligence in the Context of the Construction Industry

The underlying goal of any construction project is its successful implementation. However, construction projects often require complex and in-depth procedures in terms of their design and management processes, which pose a challenge to project success (Lawani & Moore, 2021). Moreover, human behaviour and emotional intelligence tend to factor into construction-related aspects be it from managerial, stakeholder, or worker perspectives, further complicating the process (Acheampong et al., 2021; Harish et al., 2019; Sunindijo & Maghrebi, 2020) Therefore, effective synergy across all levels of the construction workforce is required for project success; however, emotional intelligence in the construction industry is a mostly unexplored subject (Acheampong et al., 2021; Kukah et al., 2021; Lawani & Moore, 2021; Zhang et al., 2013). According to Kukah et al. (2022), the top countries involved in EI and construction research are the UK, Australia, and the USA, all of which are first-world countries. EI levels of construction professionals are also lacking (Harish et al., 2019) while being significantly affected by factors like experience, family background, knowledge and training, personality, and maturity, adding further layers of intricacy.

However, studies involving EI have generally outlined it as advantageous. The benefits of EI in the construction industry include professional success and performance, the interaction of participants to achieve common project goals, interpersonal skill development, employee satisfaction, the effective management of resources, and increases in individual and team performance (Oke et al., 2017). Leicht et al. (2009) showed EI as a primary trait for success since it is linked to improved individual and team performances. Linking EI to job performance and project leadership (in terms of workplace success drivers, positive workplace outcomes affecting variables like leadership, stress resistance, work attitude/ethic, job satisfaction, performance, employee creativity, and career achievements) has also been one of the benefits of EI in the construction setting, as discussed by Acheampong et al. (2021). However, interpersonal skills and empathy were identified as key factors for improving EI (Harish et al., 2019), especially among construction executives. Therefore, EI is vital to the overall improvement in the sector since it also improves communication and relationships between clients and team members (Oke et al., 2017).

Relevance to Quantity Surveyors

Quantity surveyors have an important role to play in the construction industry. As one of the many stakeholders on a construction project, their significance lies in their adept comprehension and high emotional intelligence. This proficiency is crucial for effectively interpreting and responding to signals emanating from the diverse stakeholders with whom they engage. Quantity Surveyors work closely with various stakeholders in the construction industry, including architects, engineers, contractors, clients, and regulatory authorities. Their expertise is essential for maintaining construction projects' financial health and ensuring they are delivered on time, within budget, and to the desired quality standards (Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, 2023). Due to their critical role, quantity surveyors require strong analytical skills, attention to detail, communication abilities, and a good understanding of construction technology and processes (South African Council for the Quantity Surveying Profession (SACQSP, 2025).

Emotional intelligence (EI) is crucial for quantity surveyors due to the nature of their work and the demands of the construction industry. In an industry that demands collaboration, effective communication, and managing multiple stakeholders, emotional intelligence empowers quantity surveyors to navigate challenges with resilience, empathy, and professionalism (Acheampong et al., 2021; Kukah et al., 2021). For quantity surveyors, who are required to engage with multidisciplinary teams, EI is linked to improved negotiation, leadership, and stakeholder management (van Heerden et al., 2023). Research further indicates that quantity surveyors with higher EI are more capable of interpreting the needs of others and responding appropriately, thus reducing potential disputes and enhancing collaboration (Sunindijo & Zou, 2013). In a South African context, the increasing complexity of construction projects underscores the need for professionals who can combine technical acumen with emotional and social competencies (Nkado & Meyer, 2001).

EI also plays a significant role in various professional and personal life aspects, including job satisfaction. For quantity surveyors in South Africa, emotional intelligence can substantially enhance job satisfaction by improving interpersonal relationships. Quantity surveyors work a lot in teams, and having high emotional intelligence allows them to communicate effectively, understand others' perspectives, and build positive relationships (Oke et al., 2017). Emotional intelligence helps

employees express their ideas clearly and empathetically, which fosters better understanding and cooperation among team members. Emotional intelligence can also assist employees in terms of stress management, conflict resolution, leadership skills, remaining flexible, open-minded, and willingness to embrace change (Kukah et al., 2021; Oke et al., 2017; Zhang & Fan, 2013).

Despite growing recognition of EI in the construction sector, limited empirical research has focused on South African quantity surveyors. While international studies suggest a positive link between EI and professional effectiveness, there remains a need to assess how local practitioners perceive their emotional competencies using validated scales such as the WEIS. This study addresses this gap by quantitatively examining how quantity surveyors in Durban rate their levels of EI, thereby providing evidence to inform education, training, and professional development.

Research Methodology

This study adopted a positivist research philosophy, which prioritises objectivity and the use of scientific methods to produce data that is free from researcher bias (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019). Positivism was deemed appropriate as the study sought to quantify emotional intelligence (EI) levels among quantity surveyors in a measurable, replicable way. A quantitative research method was employed, as this approach allows for the systematic collection and statistical analysis of numerical data, enabling comparison between variables and identifying patterns (Creswell, 2014).

A structured, closed-ended questionnaire was designed as the primary instrument for data collection. Questionnaires were selected due to their unobtrusive nature, cost-effectiveness, and ability to reach a larger pool of respondents within a relatively short timeframe. They also allow participants the flexibility to respond at their convenience (Saunders et al., 2019). The questionnaire was divided into two sections:

- Section A: Demographic information (e.g., age, gender, years of professional experience).
- Section B: Emotional intelligence measured using the Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS), a well-validated instrument in organisational research (Wong & Law, 2002; Law, Wong & Song, 2004). The WLEIS measures four dimensions of EI: self-emotion appraisal (SEA), others' emotion appraisal (OEA), use of emotion (UOE), and regulation of emotion (ROE).

Purposive sampling, a non-probability technique, was employed to ensure the inclusion of participants who met the criteria of being registered and practising quantity surveyors in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal (Saunders et al., 2019). The target population was identified through the Association of South African Quantity Surveyors (ASAQS) website, which lists 68 firms in KwaZulu-Natal, 54 of which are based in Durban. Using an online sample size calculator, with a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error, the required sample size was determined to be 51. Of the distributed questionnaires, 32 were returned, yielding a 63% response rate.

The questionnaire was distributed via email and hand to increase accessibility and response rates. Completed questionnaires were coded, and responses were numerically assigned to facilitate analysis. The coded data were captured into IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 29. To minimise errors, the data entry process included cross-checking responses against the original questionnaires, following the error-checking protocols suggested by Pallant (2016).

Descriptive statistics (including mean and standard deviation) were used to summarise the data and provide insights into the respondents' levels of EI. Inferential statistics were also applied to test associations between variables where relevant. Reliability of the WLEIS was tested using Cronbach's alpha, which measures internal consistency across scale items. A coefficient of 0.70 or above was deemed acceptable for reliability (Pallant, 2016). In this study, the Cronbach's alpha values across the EI dimensions fell within acceptable ranges, indicating strong reliability.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University's Research Ethics Committee prior to data collection. Participants were provided with informed consent forms that explained the purpose of the study, assured confidentiality, and emphasised voluntary participation. Respondents were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences. These measures were implemented in line with standard ethical practices in social research (Creswell, 2014).

Research Results

Fifty-one surveys were distributed among quantity surveyors in Durban, resulting in the return of 32 completed questionnaires, reflecting a 63% response rate. The demographic details are presented in Table 1. Among the respondents, 53% were male, and 50% fell within the age range of 18 to 29. Additionally, 44% of participants were between 30 and 49 years old. Regarding work experience, 44% of quantity surveyors had been in their current positions for less than 5 years, while 34% reported employment durations between 16 and 20 years. Fifty-six per cent of the respondents were in junior-level positions, 22% in senior management, and 16% were in executive management. Regarding educational qualifications, 50% of respondents held a BSc degree, 20% possessed a Diploma, 19% had a BTech, and 6% held a PhD.

Table 1 Demographic Information

		Frequency	**Percent**
Gender	Male	17	53,1
	Female	15	46,9
	Total	32	100
Age	18-29	16	50,0
	30-39	7	21,9
	40-49	7	21,9
	50-59	2	6,3
	Total	32	100
Employment Duration	>5 years	14	43,8
	6-10 years	2	6,3
	11-15 years	3	9,4
	16-20 years	11	34,4
	> 26 years	2	6,3
	Total	32	100
Job grading	Junior level	18	56,3
	Middle management	2	6,3
	Senior management	7	21,9
	Executive management	5	15,6
	Total	32	100
Qualification	Diploma	7	21,9
	BTech	6	18,8
	BSc	16	50,0
	MSc	1	3,1
	PhD	2	6,3
	Total	32	100

The study sought to examine the levels of emotional intelligence (EI) among quantity surveyors in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, using the Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS) (Wong and Law, 2002). A total of 32 responses were analysed. Cronbach's alpha was used to measure the

reliability of this scale. Cronbach's alpha ranges from 0 to 1, with 0.7 regarded as the acceptable internal consistency (Pallant, 2016). Table 2 shows the reliability measures for emotional intelligence, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.850, exceeding the threshold of 0.70 recommended for reliability (Pallant, 2016). Subscale reliability coefficients also indicated satisfactory internal consistency.

Self-Emotional Appraisal (SEA)

This dimension measured the respondents' awareness and understanding of their own emotions. The mean scores ranged from 5.56 to 6.06, with relatively low variability (SD = 0.672–1.268). The highest rated item was "I always know whether I am happy or not" (M = 6.06, SD = 0.878), followed by "I have a good understanding of my own emotions" (M = 6.00, SD = 0.672). These findings suggest that quantity surveyors in the sample generally demonstrated strong self-awareness. The Cronbach's alpha for this subscale was 0.536, which, while lower than the conventional benchmark, still provides indicative reliability given the small sample size.

Emotional Appraisal of Others (OEA)

This dimension assessed the respondents' ability to perceive and interpret the emotions of others. The mean scores varied more widely (M = 4.78–6.03). Respondents rated themselves highest on "I am sensitive to the feelings and emotions of others" (M = 6.03, SD = 0.695) and lowest on "I am a good observer of others' emotions" (M = 4.78, SD = 1.184). The Cronbach's alpha of 0.651 indicated moderate internal consistency for this dimension.

Use of Emotion (UOE)

The use of the emotion subscale, which measured respondents' ability to harness emotions to motivate themselves, reflected consistently high mean scores (M = 5.63–5.94). The strongest agreement was with "I would always encourage myself to try my best" (M = 5.94, SD = 0.948). The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.792 indicated good internal consistency. These findings suggest that quantity surveyors in the sample are generally confident in their ability to self-motivate and utilise emotions constructively.

Regulation of Emotion (ROE)

This dimension examined the respondents' ability to regulate their emotional states. Scores for this subscale were the lowest across the EI dimensions (M = 4.38–4.72). The lowest rated item was "I can always calm down quickly when I am very angry" (M = 4.38, SD = 1.519), highlighting challenges with emotional regulation in stressful situations. The Cronbach's alpha for this subscale was 0.902, indicating excellent reliability.

Table 2 EI Scale and Cronbach's Alpha

Emotional Intelligence Scale		N = 32, Cronbach's alpha = 0,850		
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Cronbach's alpha
Self-emotional appraisal				
EI1.	I have a good sense of why I feel certain feelings most of the time.	5,56	1,268	0,536
EI2.	I have a good understanding of my own emotions.	6,00	0,672	
EI3.	I understand what I feel.	5,88	0,751	
EI4.	I always know whether I am happy or not.	6,06	0,878	
Emotional appraisal of others				
EI5.	I always know my friends' emotions from their behaviour.	4,81	0,931	0,651
EI6.	I am a good observer of others' emotions.	4,78	1,184	

EI7.	I am sensitive to the feelings and emotions of others.	6,03	0,695	
EI8.	I have a good understanding of the emotions of people around me.	5,03	0,967	
Use of emotion				
EI9.	I always set goals for myself and then try my best to achieve them.	5,78	0,751	0,792
EI10.	I always tell myself I am a competent person.	5,75	0,984	
EI11.	I am a self-motivating person.	5,63	0,751	
EI12.	I would always encourage myself to try my best.	5,94	0,948	
Regulation of emotion				
EI13.	I am able to control my temper so that I can handle difficulties rationally.	4,63	1,540	0,902
EI14.	I am quite capable of controlling my own emotions.	4,72	1,464	
EI15.	I can always calm down quickly when I am very angry.	4,38	1,519	
EI16.	I have good control of my emotions.	4,69	1,120	

Overall, the findings suggest that quantity surveyors in Durban demonstrated relatively strong competencies in self-emotional appraisal and use of emotion, moderate ability in emotional appraisal of others, but weaker competencies in regulation of emotion. These results indicate that while quantity surveyors are generally self-aware and able to motivate themselves, they may face challenges in regulating emotions under stress, an important consideration given the high-pressure environment of the construction industry.

Figure 1 indicates quantity surveyors' mean emotional intelligence (EI) scores across the four dimensions. Self-Emotional Appraisal (SEA) and Use of Emotion (UOE) are the strongest areas. Emotional Appraisal of Others (OEA) is moderate. Regulation of Emotion (ROE) is the weakest area, highlighting potential targets for professional development and training.

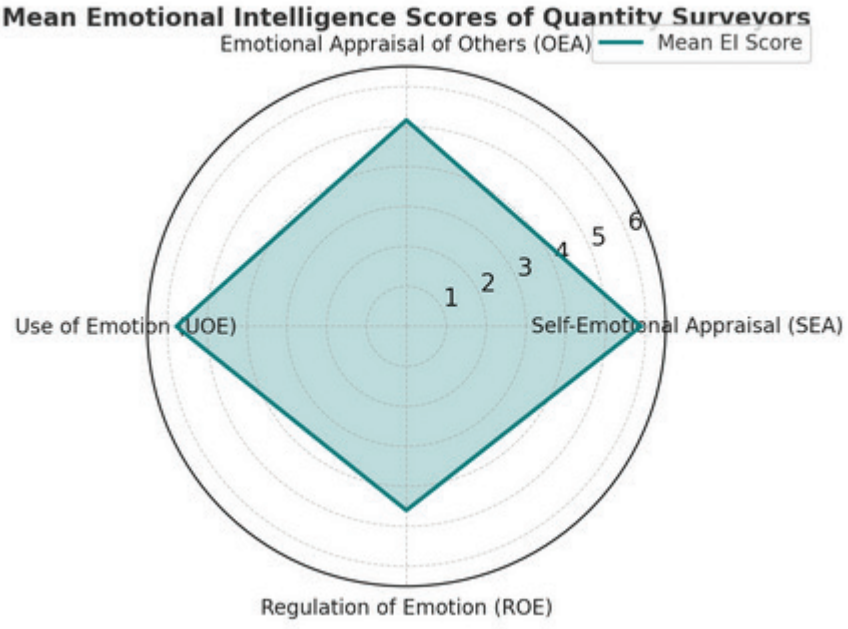

Figure 1 Mean Emotional Scores of Quantity Surveyors

Discussion

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the emotional intelligence (EI) of quantity surveyors in Durban, and when compared with existing literature, reveal both areas of alignment and divergence.

Self-Emotional Appraisal (SEA)

The results indicated that respondents demonstrated strong self-awareness, with high mean scores for understanding and recognising their own emotions. These findings are consistent with the literature, which positions self-awareness as the cornerstone of EI and an essential skill for professionals working in complex, people-oriented environments such as construction (Salovey & Mayer, 1990; Goleman, 1998). Previous studies have emphasised that professionals with higher self-awareness are better equipped to manage stress and maintain professional relationships (Clarke & Visser, 2019). The current results, therefore, reinforce the importance of this competency among quantity surveyors.

Emotional Appraisal of Others (OEA)

The findings showed moderate ability to perceive and interpret the emotions of others, with variability between items. While participants rated themselves highly in sensitivity to emotions, they reported lower ability to observe subtle emotional cues. This partly aligns with prior studies by Sunindijo and Zou (2013), which found that construction professionals often overestimate their empathy while underestimating their observational accuracy. Such findings suggest that although quantity surveyors believe themselves to be attuned to colleagues' emotions, gaps may exist in their practical application of this skill. This discrepancy signals the need for targeted training interventions in emotional perception.

Use of Emotion (UOE)

Respondents scored consistently high on their ability to use emotions to motivate themselves. This outcome aligns with studies by Wong and Law (2002), who emphasised the link between motivational aspects of EI and workplace performance. Self-motivation has been cited as a critical attribute in high-pressure industries (Jordan & Troth, 2020). Thus, these results reaffirm that quantity surveyors draw significantly on emotional resources to achieve goals and sustain productivity, echoing global findings on EI in project-based contexts.

Regulation of Emotion (ROE)

Contrary to the above strengths, the regulation of emotion emerged as the weakest area. Participants reported difficulty in calming themselves when angry or controlling emotions under stress. This result is consistent with Clarke (2010), who found that construction professionals often face challenges in emotional regulation due to the adversarial and deadline-driven nature of the industry. However, the current findings extend this understanding by highlighting that even self-aware and motivated professionals may lack emotional regulation skills. This indicates a possible gap in formal education and workplace training, as EI is often not explicitly developed within technical programmes (van Heerden et al., 2023).

Implications for Literature and Practice

Overall, the results align in part with previous studies but also offer fresh perspectives. The strong self-awareness and motivation observed correspond with global EI literature, while the weaker emotional regulation underscores the contextual pressures of the South African construction sector. These findings do not render prior research questionable but rather highlight that EI may manifest differently across cultural and professional contexts. Furthermore, the moderate reliability in some subscales (e.g., SEA, OEA) may reflect the relatively small sample size and use of self-report questionnaires, which are prone to social desirability bias. This suggests the need for mixed-method approaches in future research, incorporating qualitative interviews or 360-degree assessments.

Conclusion

This study evaluated the emotional intelligence (EI) of quantity surveyors in Durban using the Wong Emotional Intelligence Scale (WEIS). The findings revealed that quantity surveyors generally demonstrated strong self-awareness and motivation, moderately strong skills in recognising the emotions of others, and comparatively weaker abilities in regulating their own emotions under stress. These results echo existing literature highlighting the centrality of self-awareness and motivation in professional performance (Goleman, 1998; Wong & Law, 2002), underscoring a persistent gap in emotional regulation within the construction sector (Clarke, 2010).

The study contributes to the broader body of knowledge by contextualising EI within the South African construction environment. It highlights that while quantity surveyors are competent in understanding and using emotions to drive performance, they remain vulnerable in high-pressure interpersonal contexts where emotional regulation is critical. Leaving this condition unresolved may perpetuate workplace conflict, reduce job satisfaction, and undermine project outcomes.

Recommendations

Drawing on the findings, it is evident that emotional intelligence (EI) should be treated as a critical professional competency for quantity surveyors. In terms of education, university curricula and professional development programmes should incorporate structured EI training, with particular emphasis on emotional regulation strategies. Simulation-based learning and role-play exercises could be implemented to help students and early-career professionals build resilience in managing stress and conflict, skills that are crucial in the high-pressure construction environment.

Professional development initiatives by bodies such as the Association of South African Quantity Surveyors (ASAQS) could further support EI competency. Short courses and workshops focusing on practical skills, including empathy, communication, and emotional control, would enhance professional effectiveness. Linking these programmes to Continuing Professional Development (CPD) accreditation could incentivise participation and encourage ongoing engagement with EI development.

At the organisational level, construction firms should embed EI assessment and training within workplace development strategies, recognising the role of emotional competencies in enhancing teamwork, leadership, and job satisfaction. Mentorship programmes pairing experienced professionals with early-career quantity surveyors could provide practical modelling of emotional regulation, facilitating learning in real-world contexts.

This study is not without limitations. The small, Durban-based sample restricts the generalisability of the findings across South Africa. Additionally, reliance on self-report questionnaires may have introduced bias, as participants may overestimate their competencies. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into EI among quantity surveyors and underscores the importance of integrating emotional intelligence into education, professional development, and workplace practice. Future research addressing these limitations will strengthen the evidence base and guide interventions that improve both individual and organisational outcomes in the construction industry.

By highlighting both strengths and weaknesses in the EI profile of quantity surveyors, this study emphasises the need to treat emotional intelligence as a professional competency, not a peripheral attribute. Addressing the gap in emotional regulation has the potential to improve not only individual well-being and job satisfaction but also the efficiency and harmony of project teams within the South African construction industry.

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SACQSP2025-88

Benefits of Digital Procurement in Public Sector Construction: Evidence from Gauteng, South Africa

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Abstract

Although digital procurement is increasingly adopted worldwide, little is known about its actual benefits in the South African public construction sector. Existing research is largely theoretical or focused on private-sector projects, leaving a gap in evidence from government projects. This study investigates the benefits of implementing digital procurement systems in public sector construction projects within Gauteng province. The research is motivated by the need for more transparent, efficient, and accountable procurement processes in contexts often challenged by bureaucratic inefficiencies and corruption. A quantitative research design was employed, using a structured questionnaire administered to seventy-six construction professionals purposively sampled based on their involvement in public sector projects. Descriptive and inferential statistical techniques were applied to analyse the data. The findings show that the highest-ranked benefits of digital procurement include reduced project costs, improved information management, elimination of time and distance constraints, enhanced project monitoring and control, and proactive problem-solving. Additional benefits include improved collaboration, increased productivity, and better financial control. These results highlight the transformative potential of digital procurement in enhancing efficiency and performance in public infrastructure delivery. The study recommends promoting digital literacy through targeted professional training and integrating digital procurement into higher education curricula. It also advocates a phased and inclusive implementation strategy, supported by dedicated funding, to ensure sustainable adoption and capacity-building. By aligning investment with digital adoption, public sector organisations can fully realise the operational, governance, and cost-related benefits of digital procurement. This research contributes to knowledge on digital construction transformation and provides insights for policymakers, procurement managers, and construction stakeholders seeking to improve public sector procurement outcomes through digital means.

Keywords: Digital Procurement, Public Construction Projects, Technology Adoption, South Africa, Gauteng Province.

Introduction

Delayed infrastructure projects can be linked to inefficiencies in procurement phases (Orya & Calahorra-Jimenez, 2024). As the construction sector navigates the global wave of digital transformation, digital procurement systems (e-procurement) have emerged as promising tools to address chronic issues such as cost overruns, delays, and corruption (Kelechi et al., 2024). These systems automate workflows, improve transparency, and streamline data handling processes (Hassan, 2024). The South African construction industry, particularly within the public sector, lags behind global peers in adopting digital procurement. While Gauteng Province remains a key driver of socio-economic growth and urbanisation, many government departments continue to rely on outdated, paper-based procurement practices (Khoza, 2023). Myneni (2025) stress that current procurement processes across consultancy, demolition, and supply contracts remain manual, inefficient, and vulnerable to

manipulation. Although some studies have explored the theoretical benefits of digital procurement (Radell & Schannon, 2019, Moutang & Sifsolo, 2023), evidence of realised benefits, especially within the South African public construction context is scarce. These prior studies either focus on other sector applications and generalised perspectives, with little attention paid to the specific challenges and opportunities present in Gauteng's public infrastructure delivery systems.

This omission represents a critical knowledge gap. Despite increasing pressure for digital transformation in public procurement, little research has examined the actual benefits experienced by construction professionals in government-led projects. Without such evidence, it becomes difficult for policymakers to justify widespread adoption or to design targeted implementation strategies. Leaving this gap unaddressed may further entrench inefficiencies and limit the country's ability to meet its infrastructure development goals. The findings contribute towards informed decision-making by government agencies and policymakers, supporting South Africa's broader digital transformation and sustainable infrastructure development agenda. This paper aims to fill that gap by exploring the benefits perceived by construction professionals regarding the use of digital procurement systems in public sector construction projects in Gauteng Province. Specifically, the study investigates which benefits are most valued and how they align or diverge from previous literature. The research uses a quantitative approach to collect and analyse primary data from practitioners engaged in government projects. The remainder of this paper is organised as follows: Section 2 provides a review of relevant literature, Section 3 details the research methodology, Section 4 presents the findings, and Section 5 offers a discussion, conclusions, and practical recommendations.

The Benefits of Digital Procurement in the Construction Industry

Despite widespread recognition of their transformative potential, the adoption of digital procurement systems in construction remains uneven. The promise of these systems is clear: increased transparency, enhanced operational efficiency, stronger accountability, and reduced procurement cycle times, benefits particularly vital for public infrastructure projects. Existing studies highlight several thematic benefits. Operational efficiency and productivity are frequently emphasised: Osunsanmi et al. (2018) note that digital tools shorten project timelines and promote effective working methods, while Oke et al. (2023) and Ejidike et al. (2024) report improved lifecycle management, reduced costs, and safer worksites. Design precision and decision-making also benefit from digitalisation: Akeiber (2025) and Jiao et al. (2021) show faster, more accurate design options, and Rane (2023) and Harris (2025) link automation to better scheduling and site safety.

Collaboration and communication are enhanced through cloud-based systems, wearables, and sensors, which improve stakeholder coordination and site compliance (Chukwurah et al., 2024; Katrakazas & Papastergiou, 2024; Awolusi et al., 2019; Rane et al., 2023). Sustainability and environmental performance are also cited, with Ma and Lin (2019) and Olawumi et al. (2023) noting reduced energy consumption, less waste, and greater design freedom, although such applications remain limited in Africa. Finally, studies caution that benefits are contingent on strategic implementation and user competence; Andreoni et al. (2021) emphasise that inadequate upskilling can marginalise workers lacking technological proficiency, highlighting the human element in digital adoption. Overall, these studies provide strong evidence of digital procurement's benefits globally and in South Africa. However, most research focuses on private-sector projects or developed economies, leaving limited empirical evidence on how these benefits manifest in South African public sector construction projects. This gap underlines the need for the present study, which investigates Gauteng's public sector to provide context-specific insights.

Table 1 The Benefits of Digital Procurement in the Construction Industry

Benefit	Source
Enhanced productivity and operational efficiency across project phases	Ortiz et al. (2023)
Improved value delivery to clients and key stakeholders	Martínez-Peláez et al. (2023)
Reduced overall project costs through streamlined processes and automation	Martini & Giudici (2024)
Strengthened compliance with health and safety regulations	Kakolu & Faheem (2023); Omar et al. (2024)

Improved communication and stakeholder engagement throughout the project lifecycle	Prebanić & Vukomanović (2021); Tumpa & Naen (2025)
Facilitation of remote working and real-time collaboration via digital platforms	Vuori, Helander et al. (2019); Orzeł & Wolniak (2022)
More effective tracking, monitoring, and control of construction activities	Duarte-Vidal, Herrera et al. (2021)
Higher quality outcomes in both design and construction delivery	Musarat et al. (2022)
Reduced material waste and minimised environmental impact	Ringenson et al. (2018); Alsanie (2025)
Real-time tracking and management of plant, tools, and equipment	Samir et al. (2019); Menon et al. (2022)
Greater flexibility and freedom in the design and planning process	Orzeł & Wolniak (2022)
Accelerated and more informed decision-making capabilities	Barkokebas et al. (2023)
Enhanced ability to anticipate and proactively solve project challenges	Liu & Wang (2025)
Improved data storage, retrieval, and knowledge-sharing systems	Blindheim & Karlsen (2018)
Expanded opportunities for cross-functional team collaboration	Ahmad et al. (2023)

The reviewed studies highlight a wide range of benefits of digital procurement, including cost savings, efficiency, and collaboration. However, most of these insights are drawn from developed economies or private sector contexts. Very few studies provide empirical evidence of how such benefits are realised in South Africa's public construction projects, where procurement inefficiencies remain a major challenge. This creates a clear gap which this study seeks to address by focusing on the Gauteng public sector.

Research Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative research approach to explore the benefits of implementing digital procurement systems in public sector construction projects. Guided by the positivist research paradigm, which supports the collection and analysis of measurable data to produce objective findings, the study employed a structured questionnaire as the primary data collection instrument (Rahi, 2017). The questionnaire, developed from established literature, consisted of two sections: demographic profiling and benefit-related items, measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree." The research was conducted in Gauteng Province, South Africa, chosen for its concentration of public infrastructure projects and diverse pool of construction professionals. The province's economic centrality and role as a hub for government projects make it an appropriate context for studying digital procurement in the public sector (Gauteng Provincial Treasury, 2024). A combination of purposive and convenience sampling was used to target professionals with direct experience in public sector construction. A total of 76 valid responses were obtained, ensuring sufficient representation of relevant stakeholders. Data Analysis: The collected data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 29. Descriptive statistics, including mean item scores and standard deviations, were used to rank the perceived benefits. Internal consistency was verified using Cronbach's alpha, yielding a coefficient of 0.953, which indicates high reliability. The Shapiro-Wilk test assessed normality, and results showed significant deviation from a normal distribution (all p-values < 0.05), justifying the use of non-parametric methods for further analysis. The Kruskal-Wallis H test was employed to determine whether statistically significant differences existed in perceived benefits across experience levels. This methodology ensured that the research was rigorous, reliable, and repeatable in similar contexts. By combining a carefully targeted sample with robust statistical analysis, the study provides empirical evidence on the benefits of digital procurement systems and insights to inform decision-making and policy in South Africa's public construction sector.

Research Results

The study examined the benefits of digital procurement systems through data collected from 76 construction professionals in Gauteng Province. Respondents held varied educational qualifications, with the majority (71%) possessing a Bachelor's degree. Quantity Surveyors formed the largest professional group (55%), followed by Project Managers, Engineers, and Architects. In terms of experience, 57% had three years or fewer in the industry, indicating a relatively young workforce. The data revealed that 36% of participants had no prior exposure to digital procurement systems, and 42% had used such tools in only one or two projects. These findings depict the limited adoption of digital procurement systems in public sector construction projects.

The results indicate that the most significant benefits of digital procurement include reduced overall project costs, improved information management, elimination of time and distance barriers, enhanced monitoring and control, and proactive problem-solving. Other frequently identified advantages were improved collaboration, increased productivity, better financial oversight, and greater design flexibility. These benefits point to the transformative potential of digital procurement in improving efficiency, transparency, and decision-making across public construction delivery. Statistical analysis confirmed variations in perceived benefits across different experience levels, supporting the need for tailored training and change management strategies.

Normality Test

Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, following Adamson (2013), and yielded a strong coefficient of 0.953, indicating high internal consistency. The Shapiro–Wilk test, suitable for small samples (Ahmad & Khan, 2015), was applied to assess data normality. Results showed that all p-values were below 0.05, indicating a significant deviation from normal distribution and justifying the use of non-parametric statistical techniques for further analysis (Table 2).

Table 2 Normality Test for the Benefits of Digital Technologies in the Construction Industry

Benefits	Statistic	Df.	Sig.
Reduced overall costs	.732	76	0.001
Improved information storage and retrieval	.796	76	0.001
Eliminates time and distance barriers	.733	76	0.001
Effective project monitoring and control	.797	76	0.001
Proactive problem solving	.812	76	0.001
Better opportunities for collaboration	.821	76	0.001
Productivity and efficiency in the construction industry	.748	76	0.001
Better financial control and monitoring	.794	76	0.001
Quicker project delivery	.781	76	0.001
Plant and equipment tracking via the internet	.805	76	0.001
Improved quality	.831	76	0.001
Reduced human effort	.838	76	0.001
Reduced waste	.765	76	0.001
Enhanced communication and interaction	.753	76	0.001

Analysis of the Benefits of Digital Technologies in the Construction Industry

The Kruskal-Wallis H test was conducted to examine whether participants' years of experience influenced their perceptions of the benefits associated with digital technologies in construction. As a non-parametric alternative to one-way ANOVA, the test was appropriate given the ordinal nature of the Likert-scale data and the independent grouping of respondents by experience levels. Table 3 presents the test results, highlighting the H values, significance levels (p-values), mean scores, standard deviations, and ranks for each benefit.

Overall, the analysis revealed no statistically significant differences across experience groups for most benefits, suggesting broad consensus among professionals about the advantages of digital technologies. Notably, reduced human effort was the only benefit with a statistically significant variation in responses ($p = 0.022$), indicating differing views based on experience levels regarding its importance. This suggests that younger professionals may see automation differently from those with more years in practice. In terms of perceived impact, the highest-rated benefit was reduced overall project costs, followed closely by improved information storage and retrieval and elimination of time and distance barriers. These findings affirm digital procurement's perceived role in enhancing cost-efficiency and access to timely information, both critical for public sector project delivery.

Other notable benefits include: Effective project monitoring and control, Proactive problem solving, Improved collaboration, and Enhanced productivity and efficiency. These results reflect the industry's recognition of how digital systems can support streamlined decision-making and team coordination. Interestingly, benefits such as reduced human effort, reduced waste, and enhanced communication received slightly lower scores, though still above 4.0, see table 3 below. This may suggest that while these outcomes are acknowledged, they are considered secondary to cost, time, and data-related gains. Collectively, these findings demonstrate a positive reception of digital technologies among construction professionals, with minimal resistance across experience groups. They highlight areas where digital systems are already proving valuable and areas where further awareness or practical demonstration may be needed. Table 3 presents the Kruskal–Wallis H test results.

Table 3 Kruskal-Wallis H Test for Benefits of the Use of Digital Procurement Systems

Benefits	K-W value (H)	Std. Deviation (σX)	Mean item score	Standard deviation	Rank
Reduced overall costs	3.982	0.828	4.36	0.828	1
Improved information storage and retrieval	2.445	0.804	4.32	0.804	2
Eliminates time and distance barriers	6.118	0.941	4.32	0.941	2
Effective project monitoring and control	4.225	0.895	4.30	0.895	4
Proactive problem solving	1.774	0.789	4.26	0.789	5
Better opportunities for collaboration	3.095	0.835	4.25	0.835	6
Productivity and efficiency in the construction industry	5.547	0.964	4.24	0.964	7
Better financial control and monitoring	2.188	0.980	4.20	0.980	8
Quicker project delivery	4.662	0.976	4.18	0.976	9
Plant and equipment tracking via the internet	1.329	0.885	4.17	0.885	10
Improved quality	2.904	0.929	4.17	0.929	10
Reduced human effort	6.731	0.985	4.17	0.985	10
Reduced waste	3.662	0.999	4.17	0.999	10
Enhanced communication and interaction	2.556	0.900	4.13	0.900	14

Discussion

The study identified several highly ranked benefits associated with the use of digital procurement systems in public sector construction projects within Gauteng. Among these were reduced overall costs improved information storage and retrieval and the elimination of time and distance barriers.

These results affirm the role of digital procurement technologies in enhancing productivity, minimising overheads, and enabling seamless access to project data and platforms, particularly relevant for geographically dispersed teams. The findings are consistent with the work of Ramadan et al. (2023) and Campaz-Landazábal et al. (2024), who emphasise the efficiency gains from digitised data coordination and cloud-based collaboration. Similarly, Chowdhury et al. (2019) and Leung et al. (2008) report notable cost savings and improved transparency facilitated by digital platforms.

Other benefits with strong agreement include effective project monitoring and control, proactive problem solving, and better opportunities for collaboration. While these results highlight recognition of digital tools' value, their modest impact in some areas may reflect the limited local deployment of advanced systems such as IoT, BIM-integrated sensors, and AI-enhanced monitoring. As noted by Leong, Manickam et al. (2024), raising awareness of digital capabilities is essential for full-sector transformation. Without training in advanced digital applications, the construction workforce may miss opportunities to improve safety, reduce physical strain, and boost productivity. This underscores the need for targeted digital literacy programmes focused on emerging technologies that go beyond basic information management, enabling more strategic and transformative use of digital procurement in South African public construction projects. Although the benefits identified broadly align with global literature, they highlight the context-dependent nature of digital transformation. The South African public sector may not fully realise high-level benefits due to institutional limitations, fragmented digital strategies, and limited investment in emerging technologies. Digital tools are mainly used for administrative and communication tasks, while advanced capabilities such as IoT integration, automation, and real-time monitoring remain underexplored. These findings reinforce the need for a contextualised approach that emphasises capacity-building, technology access, and practical implementation frameworks.

Conclusion

This study examined the benefits of digital procurement systems in public sector construction projects in Gauteng, South Africa. The findings indicate that the adoption of these systems significantly enhances project transparency, reduces procurement-related corruption, improves efficiency in tendering processes, and supports timely project monitoring and control. Respondents also highlighted improved collaboration among stakeholders, better documentation management, and greater accountability as key outcomes of digital procurement implementation. The results depict the practical implications for public sector organisations seeking to modernise procurement practices. Digital procurement not only streamlines administrative processes but also strengthens governance mechanisms, thereby fostering trust among contractors, clients, and regulatory bodies. The study highlights that strategic investment in digital platforms can yield measurable operational benefits and enhance project delivery outcomes.

From a policy perspective, the study provides actionable insights for government agencies and professional bodies. Integrating digital procurement within competency frameworks, providing targeted training, and piloting digital platforms for large-scale infrastructure projects can accelerate adoption and maximise benefits. This aligns with broader national objectives of digital transformation and sustainable public sector management in South Africa. Overall, the research contributes to both theory and practice by offering empirical evidence of the tangible benefits of digital procurement in the South African context. It provides a foundation for further studies on technology adoption in construction and supports decision-makers in designing policies and strategies that promote effective, transparent, and efficient procurement practices.

Recommendations

To fully unlock the benefits of digital procurement in South Africa's public construction sector, several measures are essential. Construction professionals should receive ongoing training and awareness programmes, particularly on advanced tools that enhance safety, efficiency, and sustainability. Public sector organisations must embed digital procurement into policy and procurement frameworks, supported by investment in ICT infrastructure, dedicated funding, and change management strategies that enable long-term adoption. Industry leaders and training bodies should develop digital competency frameworks tailored to the local context while reflecting global best practices, with a strong focus on data-driven decision-making, digital communication, and remote collaboration. At the policy level, a national digital construction roadmap is needed to coordinate sector-wide efforts and incentivise

adoption, especially for publicly funded projects. Finally, further research should evaluate the long-term outcomes of digital procurement on cost, quality, and delivery, while examining barriers such as technological limitations, cultural resistance, and regulatory constraints to ensure inclusive and sustainable transformation.

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SACQSP2025-98

Traditional Procurement Adaptations to Improve Economic Sustainability in Construction Projects

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Abstract

The construction sector plays a significant role in global economic development, encompassing a wide range of activities from infrastructure provision to residential and commercial building projects. Despite its importance, traditional procurement methods in the sector have increasingly been criticised for their limited capacity to support sustainable development objectives. Given this reality, this study investigates the constraints inherent in traditional procurement processes and identifies strategies to improve them for achievement of economic sustainability. A qualitative research design was adopted, involving semi-structured interviews with five construction firms. Within these organisations, one to two professionals per organisation; primarily project managers, procurement managers and quantity surveyors experienced in traditional procurement and project delivery were interviewed. The findings reveal several challenges within traditional procurement that impede long-term economic sustainability in construction project delivery. One predominant issue is the prioritisation of short-term cost reductions, often driven by client budget pressures, which overshadows considerations of long-term value. The study also found that clients frequently lack sufficient awareness of the long-term economic advantages associated with sustainable construction solutions. Moreover, key practices such as value engineering and life cycle costing, which are critical to achieving cost efficiency and sustainable outcomes, are often insufficiently applied within traditional procurement methods. This limited application restricts opportunities for informed decision-making and cost optimisation across the project lifecycle. The study contributes to both industry practice and academic discourse by providing nuanced insights into the limitations of traditional procurement and highlighting the need for systemic adaptations. It further proposes practical strategies to enhance procurement approaches through stronger integration of value for money principles and economic sustainability considerations. These recommendations support the advancement of more effective, resilient, and sustainable construction procurement practices.

Keywords: Economic Sustainability, Life-cycle Costing, Sustainability, Traditional Procurement, Value For Money.

Introduction

The construction industry is widely recognised as a major driver of global economic growth (Ruparathna & Hewage, 2015). It encompasses a diverse range of activities aimed at the successful delivery of infrastructure and building projects, and it must continually evolve in response to changing socio-economic conditions, technological advancements, and environmental and governance demands. However, traditional procurement methods have increasingly been criticised for their inability to adapt to these emerging challenges and for their limited capacity to support sustainable development (Ahmed & El-Sayegh, 2023). These methods are typically centred on achieving the lowest initial cost and accelerating delivery, often at the expense of long-term economic efficiency, environmental performance, and social benefits. When viewed against current sustainability

imperatives, the traditional procurement approach, anchored in price competition and speed reveals significant limitations. This cost-driven focus may lead to the selection of inferior materials or subcontractors, contributing to increased maintenance and operational costs over the life of the asset.

Existing research highlights the consequences of these shortcomings. Ruparathna and Hewage (2015) argue that traditional procurement models inadequately integrate sustainability principles, thus contributing to both environmental degradation and increased lifecycle expenditure. The prioritisation of immediate cost reductions without considering long-term implications often leads to escalating costs and diminished resource efficiency. As a result, the economic, environmental, and social dimensions of sustainability are frequently undermined, reinforcing the need for procurement strategies grounded in holistic value rather than lowest cost only.

Traditional procurement models, particularly design-bid-build, tend to follow a sequential and fragmented process in which designers, contractors, and suppliers operate independently. This separation limits opportunities for early collaboration and shared problem-solving, contributing to inefficiencies, rework, and lost opportunities for cost optimisation (Laryea & Watermeyer, 2016). Furthermore, the rigidity of traditional processes constrains the introduction of innovative solutions or adaptive practices during construction, thereby restricting the effective use of value engineering and other cost-optimisation techniques (Walker & Cuomo, 2019). Such limitations often result in higher lifecycle costs, design challenges identified only during construction, and disputes between project stakeholders all of which reduce the capacity to achieve durable and cost-effective outcomes.

In contrast, contemporary procurement approaches such as Integrated Project Delivery (IPD) offer more collaborative frameworks aligned with sustainability objectives (Kelly & Ilozor, 2022). These models emphasise transparency, shared responsibility, and long-term value creation. Empirical evidence indicates that sustainable procurement strategies can yield substantial financial benefits over a project's lifecycle. For example, Hossain et al. (2020) demonstrate that such approaches lead to lower operational costs, reduced energy consumption, and improved asset performance, thereby promoting both economic resilience and environmental stewardship.

Despite the growing body of research on sustainable procurement, much of the existing work has concentrated on public sector projects or has predominantly prioritised environmental aspects of sustainability. As a result, the economic and social dimensions remain comparatively under-examined (Sarpong et al., 2023; Hald, Wiik & Larssen, 2020; Meehan & Bryde, 2011). To address this gap, the present study applies a qualitative research approach to examine how traditional procurement methods in the construction industry may be reformed or adapted to strengthen economic sustainability outcomes.

The structure of this study is organised as follows: a review of literature on traditional procurement and economic sustainability, followed by a discussion of the research methodology; presentation and analysis of empirical findings; discussion of results; and finally, the conclusion and recommendations for future research.

Literature Review

A comprehensive literature review was undertaken to investigate how existing traditional procurement practices may be adapted to enhance economic sustainability in the delivery of construction projects. Relevant publications were sourced from major academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, using search keywords such as "traditional procurement," "economic sustainability," "sustainable procurement," "whole life costing," "life cycle costs," and "value for money." Studies were selected based on their focus on economic sustainability within construction procurement contexts, while literature unrelated to construction or procurement, as well as studies addressing only environmental or social sustainability, were excluded to maintain the scope of inquiry.

The literature review is structured in four key parts. First, it examines traditional procurement methods within the construction industry, outlining their defining characteristics and associated limitations to establish why adaptations may be warranted. Second, the review explores the concept of economic sustainability in construction, with attention to how it is conceptualised and measured. Third, the principle of value for money in project delivery is discussed, highlighting its relevance to economically sustainable outcomes. Finally, the review considers the application of life cycle costing, assessing how

accounting for the full life span of built assets influences procurement decisions and supports improved economic performance.

Generally, the purpose of the review is to provide a foundational understanding of the constraints inherent in traditional procurement and to identify potential opportunities for enhancing economic sustainability. In doing so, the review also highlights the existing gaps in the literature that this study seeks to address.

Traditional Procurement Method

Safeena, Athambawa and Musajith (2020) indicated that procurement methods in the construction industry are commonly classified into two broad categories: traditional and non-traditional (or alternative) methods. In the traditional method, the design and construction processes are contractually and operationally separated, and tendering is usually conducted through open tendering, selective tendering, or negotiated tendering. In contrast, non-traditional procurement approaches integrate a wider range of functions, including design, construction, financing, and facility management. As construction projects become increasingly complex and sustainability considerations gain prominence, clients are increasingly adopting alternative procurement methods to meet evolving project requirements. Selecting an appropriate procurement approach early in a project's development is therefore critical to achieving optimal outcomes and client satisfaction.

The traditional procurement method is characterised by several defining features. These include the leveraging of competitive tendering processes, either through open or selective contractor appointment; the clear division between design and construction responsibilities; and the capacity to accommodate unforeseen construction-related challenges, such as variable ground conditions (Kong & Gray, 2006). Additionally, traditional procurement requires adequate time for the preparation of procurement documentation to minimise cost-related risks and errors, and it maintains a sequential project structure whereby each phase is separate, with a clear transition from the design phase to the construction phase.

Constraints of Existing Traditional Procurement Methods

Ineffective project performance remains a persistent concern within the construction sector, with many projects failing to meet their intended outcomes due, in part, to the procurement method selected. The traditional procurement approach, which remains widely adopted internationally, is characterised by a linear and sequential workflow that significantly influences key project performance criteria namely time, cost, and quality. These three criteria have long served as the main indicators of project success, shaping stakeholder satisfaction and overall project outcomes. However, contemporary construction clients increasingly assess success using broader measures, including value for money, risk minimisation, stakeholder engagement, and early certainty of design and cost parameters (Okereke, Ihekweme & Adegboyega, 2022).

The literature reviewed suggests that the traditional procurement method frequently contributes to project delays due to its fragmented structure, where design and construction responsibilities are distinctly separated. Although this separation enhances accountability and allows clients to fully finalise the design before construction begins, it limits the contractor's involvement during the design stage. Consequently, challenges and redesigns often emerge later during construction, leading to extended schedules and increased costs. While traditional procurement provides initial cost transparency through mechanisms such as the Bill of Quantities, its rigid procedural framework, extensive documentation requirements, and communication gaps among project participants tend to undermine flexibility and efficiency. As a result, the method is commonly associated with poor performance outcomes, particularly in contexts where project management capacity is constrained specifically in developing countries (Okereke et al., 2022).

Moreover, the traditional procurement method tends to marginalise the role of contractors and subcontractors in the early stages of project planning and design. This limits their ability to contribute practical construction knowledge, thereby reducing opportunities for innovation, improved cost efficiency, and enhanced technical decision-making (Ozoh et al., 2021).

Economic Sustainability

Yılmaz and Bakış (2015) assert that sustainability within the construction sector entails planning, designing, and delivering projects in a way that addresses the needs of the present population while safeguarding the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. This requires adherence to ethical decision-making and the application of principles that jointly promote environmental protection, economic development, and social well-being. Rooted in the well-known definition of sustainable development as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own" (Mavi et al., 2021), the concept has continued to evolve, with emerging approaches influencing how construction practices are reshaped to support long-term responsibility and resilience.

Economic sustainability, as a component of sustainable construction, focuses on delivering high-quality buildings and services at the lowest feasible cost while accounting for operational and maintenance expenditures (Zhong & Wu, 2015). For this reason, economically sustainable considerations should be integrated early in the procurement phase, where the ability to influence project cost and value outcomes is greatest. Key elements of economic sustainability include achieving value for money and promoting collaboration among stakeholders. According to Sarpong et al. (2023), the economic principles underlying sustainable construction involve maximising output value relative to input expenditure, balancing short-term returns with long-term performance, and strengthening cooperative relationships throughout the project lifecycle.

Lifecycle costing plays a central role in assessing the economic sustainability of procurement decisions (Boardman et al., 2019). Economic sustainability in construction reflects the distribution of financial benefits across all relevant parties, including clients, contractors, public users, and government agencies. To achieve this, project alternatives must be evaluated comprehensively to identify solutions that offer both cost efficiency and long-term sustainability. Such evaluations may be supported by structured decision-making tools that enable clearer comparisons across life cycle stages (Zhong & Wu, 2015).

Several economic assessment techniques assist in determining the financial viability of construction projects, including present value analysis, cost-benefit analysis (CBA), and life cycle cost analysis. CBA, in particular, provides a widely accepted framework for comparing the economic implications of procurement choices by quantifying their respective costs and benefits (Ribas & Cachim, 2019). For construction projects to be considered economically sustainable, they should be assessed on criteria such as profitability strategies, functional performance and adaptability, resource efficiency, supplier relationships, innovation capacity, energy use and construction methods, and competitive pricing (Sarpong et al., 2023).

Value for Money

Within the construction sector, value for money (VFM) refers to the extent to which a project or service meets the client's objectives in proportion to the cost incurred. VFM is realised when the client perceives that the final output corresponds with the financial investment made. It involves balancing expenditure on materials, labour, and technical expertise with the quality and benefits derived from the completed asset. Conceptually, VFM can be regarded as the ratio between the benefits achieved and the resources expended, where resources may include time, money, or materials, all of which ultimately translate into cost (Olatunji, Olawumi & Awodele, 2017). In relation to economic sustainability, VFM extends beyond initial capital outlay to consider the full life cycle of a project. It focuses on optimising the long-term balance between total costs and the functionality, quality, and performance needed to meet end-user requirements (Sarpong et al., 2023).

Project benefits may be tangible, such as cost savings, adherence to schedule, and technical performance, or intangible, such as stakeholder satisfaction and perceived social value, which are more subjective and difficult to measure. A project can therefore be considered to provide value when it achieves comparable outcomes at a lower cost or delivers superior outcomes for the same cost (Olatunji et al., 2017). The concept of Best Value (BV) enhances the VFM principle by integrating cost, quality, and sustainability considerations. BV involves assessing total life cycle cost, fitness for purpose, and economic, social, and environmental impacts, thereby prioritising the achievement of optimal overall outcomes rather than the lowest initial price (Olatunji et al., 2017).

Engaging contractors at the early planning stage can significantly improve the ability to achieve VFM, as their technical expertise can help identify cost-effective materials and construction methods without compromising quality. Early contractor involvement encourages informed decision-making that considers long-term performance rather than short-term savings, aligning closely with the objectives of economic sustainability (Andrade & Vieira, 2018). Since the early phases of a project offer the greatest potential to influence costs and outcomes, adopting collaborative procurement models such as design-and-build or turnkey approaches can enhance integration among project participants. These approaches promote joint decision-making and facilitate value optimisation across the entire project lifecycle, thereby improving overall economic sustainability (Laryea & Watermeyer, 2016).

Lifecycle Costing

Life cycle costing (LCC) is a critical analytical tool used within procurement to assess the total cost of asset ownership and to support decision-making that aligns with principles of long-term economic sustainability and value for money. The process involves identifying the distinct phases of an asset's life cycle namely, acquisition, operation, maintenance, and end-of-life disposal and collecting relevant cost data associated with each phase (Zhong & Wu, 2015). Such data typically includes initial purchase and installation costs, operational expenditures (e.g., labour and energy usage), maintenance and repair requirements, as well as decommissioning or disposal costs. These cost components are subsequently used to derive comprehensive cost estimates throughout the asset's life cycle (Tomlinson, 2020). The ISO 15686-5:2017 standard provides structured guidance for implementing LCC in the context of buildings and constructed assets, offering detailed methodologies for evaluating the long-term financial implications of design and construction choices (International Organization for Standardization, 2017). Accordingly, LCC facilitates a shift away from short-term expenditure considerations toward a holistic evaluation of economic performance over the asset's full operational lifespan.

Overall, the literature reveals clear distinctions between traditional procurement practices and those that are oriented toward economic sustainability. Traditional procurement frameworks predominantly prioritize short-term cost minimisation and retain rigid contractual divisions among project participants. In contrast, economically sustainable procurement emphasises long-term value creation, enhanced stakeholder collaboration, and the integration of full life cycle cost considerations into decision-making processes. Furthermore, while existing literature has increasingly focused on environmental sustainability within procurement and construction, economic and social sustainability dimensions are comparatively underexamined, despite being equally vital to the realisation of sustainable project outcomes. This imbalance highlights the necessity of re-evaluating traditional procurement processes. Consequently, this study seeks to address this gap by examining the constraints inherent in traditional procurement and proposing strategies to better support the achievement of economic sustainability in construction project delivery.

Research Methodology and Method

Research Method

The study utilised a qualitative method to gain deeper understanding of how the existing traditional procurement method can be improved to promote economic sustainability. This was done to explore the knowledge, experiences and perspectives of professionals within the construction industry. Semi-structured interviews were used for data collection which were conducted in person and online depending on the availability of the participants. The interviews were structured with questions in alignment with the research question and the aim, to ensure that the data collection process was focused and also allowing flexibility for the participants to provide further information on the perspectives, knowledge and experiences. Procurement managers, project managers and quantity surveyors with experience and knowledge in traditional procurement methods were targeted for the interviews. Their extensive experience also contributed to the quality of the data collected. Participants were carefully purposively selected to ensure that their level of expertise and experience are better aligned with the purpose of the study.

Population and Sampling

Purposive sampling was used for targeting and accessing the participants. Five constriction firms were identified and selected in order to interview 1-2 procurement managers, project managers and quantity

surveyors with adequate experience in project delivery using traditional procurement methods. Only participants with the relevant experience and knowledge in alignment with the objectives of the study were selected and included in the study. The unit of analysis was the actual participants and not the construction companies. The selection ensured that the study focused on participants whose insights were directly applicable to understanding traditional procurement practices and economic sustainability. Adopting and utilising a qualitative approach, conducting semi-structured interviews and applying thematic analysis led to the study being effectively captured and analysed from the data collected from the participants. This methodology provided a basis for proper comprehension of traditional procurement methods and procedures, economic sustainability in addressing the aim of the study and providing significant insights to the field.

Data Analysis

Thematic data analysis was used for the study to identify recurring patterns and themes for the data collected. Several key steps of the analytical process were undertaken which includes but not limited to data review for extraction of significant concepts in relation to the research topic; detailed examination of collected primary data; categorisation of similar data points for better data organisation; and findings compilation into a systematic well-structured report. The interviews transcribed were analysed and systematically coded for identification of key patterns, themes and repeated ideas were categorised into well-define themes determined from the similarities in the responses of the participants. The categorisation contributed to a structure interpretation and analysis of the collected data which also revealed the professional perceptions on traditional procurement methods and economic sustainability (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019; Isang & Ebiloma, 2023).

Research Results and Analysis

Following a thematic analysis of the collected data, the results are presented under two principal themes:

1. The limitations of traditional procurement
2. The challenges associated with achieving economic sustainability within traditional procurement processes.

Limitations of Traditional Procurement

Short-term Cost-saving Objectives and Client Budget

Fixed client budgets and the pressure to minimise immediate costs were identified as significant barriers to adopting sustainable solutions, even when such solutions could generate long-term financial benefits. Participant 1 noted that “traditional procurement has no impact; costs are typically determined by the client's budget,” indicating that, in their experience, project costs are driven more by client financial capacity than by the procurement method itself. Similarly, Participant 2 remarked, “It does not have an influence; it is all about what the client can afford,” reinforcing the view that short-term cost management is largely dictated by client-imposed budget constraints rather than the procurement approach. Participant 5 further highlighted the limited flexibility resulting from strict budget limits, noting that clients often establish fixed spending ceilings and express strong preferences for specific materials. This rigidity reduces opportunities to propose more sustainable alternatives, as client priorities are focused on immediate cost reduction. Overall, the findings suggest that client budget constraints and the emphasis on short-term cost savings significantly restrict the adoption of sustainable solutions, even when such options could offer substantial long-term economic benefits.

Challenges of Stakeholder Collaboration in Traditional Procurement

The findings indicate that, although traditional procurement establishes clearly defined roles for stakeholders, project cost overruns and efficiency are more strongly influenced by the quality of project management and the professionalism of the project team. The data showed that traditional procurement provides explicit definitions of each party’s responsibilities, which facilitates clearer communication and a better understanding of roles. Contractors are often allowed to review drawings before construction begins, allowing them to raise concerns or highlight discrepancies that could have cost implications. Despite these structural advantages, most participants suggested that the traditional procurement framework itself does not directly determine costs. Instead, project efficiency and cost

control are largely dependent on effective project management and stakeholder competence. Participants 1 and 2 noted that cost overruns often arise from issues such as contractors seeking to maximise profit through claims for minor delays or from deficiencies in project management practices. For example, underpriced bids or incomplete and erroneous drawings can create challenges during construction, but these are attributed to individual practices rather than the procurement method itself. The findings further emphasise that proactive project management, including timely communication with contractors and clear guidance during the construction phase, is critical to mitigating cost issues and enhancing overall project efficiency.

Mechanisms in Traditional Procurement that Ensures that Tenders aren't Awarded to the Lowest Bidders and the Commitment to Economic Sustainability

The findings indicate that, although price is a significant factor in procurement decisions, additional considerations are critical for ensuring the economic sustainability of construction projects. Key factors include the financial stability and capacity of contractors, which determine their ability to manage costs effectively and avoid project delays. The Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB) grading system is commonly used to assess a contractor's financial capability. Contractors are also evaluated based on their adherence to economic sustainability practices, such as employing local labour, as well as their technical competency and past performance. By taking into account financial stability, professional skills, and track record, procurement processes can mitigate risks, enhance quality, and promote long-term cost-effectiveness, thereby contributing to overall project success.

Challenges Associated with Achieving Economic Sustainability

This theme examined the challenges associated with achieving economic sustainability and implementing value-for-money principles within the context of traditional procurement methods. The analysis focused on how lifecycle costing and value engineering are applied and considered whether best practices or innovative approaches could be adopted to enhance the economic sustainability of traditional procurement processes.

Challenges for Achieving Value for Money in Traditional Procurement

Project success is primarily evaluated through the careful balance of time, cost, and quality constraints, which participants identified as essential for achieving value for money. A key finding from the interviews was the strong emphasis on adhering to predetermined budgets and complying with the specifications and drawings provided by the architect on behalf of the client. This underscores the central role of budget management within traditional procurement, where financial constraints largely define the project's scope and execution. All respondents agreed that value for money is primarily determined by the effective management of time, cost, and quality. Participants highlighted that staying within the client's fixed budget while meeting specified quality standards is fundamental to ensuring value for money. Additionally, effective coordination and resource management, as well as careful handling of variation orders to address unforeseen costs or design changes, were consistently noted as critical components for achieving project success.

Challenges in Integrating Value Engineering in Traditional Procurement

The findings indicate that traditional procurement frameworks significantly constrain the effectiveness of value engineering by limiting its application to specific stages rather than integrating it throughout the project lifecycle. In practice, value engineering is often applied reactively, typically during the issuance of variation orders, which restricts opportunities for proactive cost optimisation and the implementation of sustainable solutions. This limitation, compounded by the delayed involvement of contractors, reduces the potential benefits that early expertise could contribute to project planning and execution.

Participant 1 observed that value engineering is primarily conducted by quantity surveyors during the initial stages of procurement to reduce project costs, rather than being maintained as a continuous, integrated practice throughout the project. Similarly, Participant 2 noted that value engineering is generally introduced only when a variation order arises, prompting the project team including contractors to propose cost-efficient solutions. Three participants highlighted that contractors, despite possessing valuable insights, are often not engaged early enough, illustrating how traditional procurement methods restrict the full potential of value engineering. The findings suggest that more

flexible and integrated procurement approaches, which involve contractors from the outset, can better leverage their expertise and enhance cost optimisation and sustainable project outcomes.

Challenges with Incorporating Lifecycle Costing in Traditional Procurement

The findings indicate that lifecycle costing (LCC) within traditional procurement is constrained by a tension between long-term value and immediate budget limitations. While project teams typically consider LCC during the early design phases evaluating factors such as material durability, maintenance requirements, and overall operational costs these considerations are frequently overridden by client budget constraints. Tools such as the Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB) method for incorporating lifecycle costing into tender evaluations remain underutilised in practice. Participants highlighted that although LCC is discussed during the design phase, the final decisions are often dictated by the client's budget. When proposed materials or construction methods exceed the client's financial limits, project teams are compelled to select cheaper, and often less sustainable, alternatives. This suggests that while LCC is conceptually integrated from the outset, its practical influence is limited by financial considerations and client preferences, reducing opportunities to optimise long-term savings. Moreover, the CIDB's LCC evaluation method, though available, is rarely applied. Even when LCC analyses are performed, clients seldom prioritise them in decision-making, regardless of the cost-effectiveness demonstrated. These findings indicate that while LCC has the potential to enhance economic sustainability and long-term value, its actual implementation in traditional procurement is significantly constrained by budget pressures, limited client willingness to accept higher upfront costs, and adherence to client preferences.

Best Practices and Innovative Approaches to Enhance Economic Sustainability in Traditional Procurement Methods

To explore strategies for enhancing the economic sustainability of traditional procurement methods, participants were asked about best practices and innovative approaches that could be applied in construction projects. The objective was to identify practical solutions that could be integrated into traditional procurement while maintaining project quality and success. Two key factors emerged as critical: educating clients and involving contractors early in the project. Participants noted that informed clients are more likely to make decisions that account for long-term impacts rather than focusing solely on immediate costs, while early contractor involvement enhances opportunities to identify cost-effective and sustainable solutions.

Participant 4 highlighted that explaining to clients how their decisions influence long-term costs helps them appreciate the broader implications of their choices, encouraging more informed and sustainable decision-making. Educating clients about sustainability enables them to consider both initial costs and long-term benefits. Participants also emphasised the importance of involving contractors in value engineering efforts. By leveraging their practical expertise at the early stages, project teams can identify cost-saving measures that also contribute to sustainable outcomes.

In conclusion, the findings suggest that improving the economic sustainability of traditional procurement requires both client education and early contractor engagement. Clients who understand the long-term consequences of their decisions are more likely to balance initial expenditures with future sustainability, while early contractor involvement in value engineering enhances the identification of cost-efficient solutions aligned with sustainable objectives. Implementing these practices can optimise financial efficiency while maintaining project quality and long-term value

Discussion

Budgetary Constraints

Existing literature indicates that traditional procurement methods prioritise short-term cost savings while often neglecting long-term financial implications (Ruparathna & Hewage, 2015). The findings of this study, however, suggest that client budget constraints are the primary factor shaping project costs. Participants highlighted that procurement decisions tend to be reactive, responding to the financial limits imposed by clients rather than proactively identifying opportunities for cost optimisation. Consequently, the emphasis on immediate cost reduction can restrict the adoption of sustainable solutions, even when such alternatives may offer greater economic benefits over the long term. In conclusion, although traditional procurement is commonly associated with short-term cost

minimisation, this study underscores that client-imposed budget limitations are a critical driver of project costs, constraining flexibility and limiting the potential for implementing economically sustainable solutions. These findings emphasise the ongoing challenge of reconciling short-term financial pressures with long-term sustainability objectives.

Stakeholder Collaboration

Traditional procurement provides clearly defined stakeholder roles and accountability structures; however, this rigid framework can sometimes foster adversarial relationships among project participants. The sequential nature of traditional methods, particularly the delayed involvement of contractors, often results in design issues being identified late in the construction phase. Such late discovery typically leads to costly modifications, schedule delays, and budget overruns (Akintan & Morledge, 2013). While these findings correspond with existing literature, they also offer a more nuanced understanding of stakeholder collaboration within traditional procurement.

Several participants noted that the explicit definition of roles and responsibilities facilitates clearer communication and mutual understanding among stakeholders. Despite these advantages, most responses indicated that traditional procurement does not inherently ensure improved cost control or project efficiency. Factors such as the quality of project management and the professionalism of the project team were reported to have a greater influence on project outcomes. Consequently, while traditional procurement provides structure and accountability, its effectiveness in delivering efficient and cost-controlled projects depends heavily on stakeholder competence and collaboration. Poor communication, inadequate contractor pre-qualification, and design errors were identified as common contributors to cost overruns, highlighting that successful implementation of traditional procurement requires proactive risk management and effective stakeholder engagement throughout the project lifecycle (Ozoh et al., 2021).

Integration of Value Engineering

A prominent theme emerging from the findings is that value engineering is often insufficiently integrated into traditional procurement processes. Rather than being applied proactively throughout the project lifecycle, value engineering is typically implemented reactively, in response to budget overruns or the need for variation orders. This reactive approach significantly limits its effectiveness. A major contributing factor is the delayed involvement of contractors, who are usually engaged only after the design phase has been completed. Consequently, contractors are unable to influence design decisions or identify potential cost-saving and efficiency-enhancing measures from the outset (Ozoh et al., 2021).

Contractors possess practical experience and technical knowledge that can provide critical insights into optimising design for cost efficiency, sustainability, and constructability. The exclusion of contractors in the early project stages prevents the full utilisation of this expertise, resulting in missed opportunities for effective value engineering. The combination of delayed contractor involvement and the reactive application of value engineering thus constrain the potential for creating long-term value in traditional procurement projects. To address this limitation, the literature recommends considering alternative procurement approaches, such as design-and-build or turnkey systems, which facilitate early contractor engagement and enable more integrated and proactive value engineering practices (Laryea & Watermeyer, 2016).

Value for Money

Value for money (VFM) in construction projects involves the use of formal tools and techniques designed to optimise both costs and project outcomes. Among these, value engineering (VE) is frequently highlighted in the literature as a systematic approach to achieving VFM. VE aims to enhance the functionality of a project while minimising costs, typically through the analysis of design, materials, and construction processes to identify cost-saving alternatives without compromising quality or performance. To support economic sustainability, VE is often applied in conjunction with lifecycle costing, which considers long-term operational, maintenance, and disposal costs to ensure that projects deliver optimal value throughout their lifespan (Sarpong et al., 2023).

During the interviews, the Project Management Triangle, comprising time, cost, and quality emerged as a dominant theme. Respondents emphasised that achieving VFM primarily involved delivering projects on schedule, within budget, and to the required quality standards. While balancing these constraints is

important, the interviews indicated that advanced techniques such as lifecycle costing or cost-benefit analysis were not widely applied. Value engineering was not explicitly mentioned, despite its recognition in academic literature, and respondents did not describe systematic evaluation of project functions or alternatives for cost reduction. Instead, the focus remained on meeting budgetary and timeline requirements, with less attention given to optimising project functions for long-term cost-effectiveness through VE (Olatunji et al., 2017).

Challenges of Implementing Lifecycle Costing in Traditional Procurement

The implementation of lifecycle costing (LCC) in construction projects is often constrained by several factors, including client budget limitations, limited awareness of long-term economic benefits, and the underutilisation of available LCC tools. LCC is a critical tool for assessing and promoting economic sustainability in construction, as it enables the evaluation of costs associated with materials, maintenance, and asset durability over the entire project lifecycle (Ribas & Cachim, 2019). In traditional procurement, LCC is most relevant during the early stages of a project, particularly in the design phase, when architects, engineers, and quantity surveyors can assess long-term cost implications. However, the practical integration of LCC into procurement decisions is frequently limited by clients' short-term budget priorities and material preferences (Tomlinson, 2020).

Although LCC is recognised in theory, it is often not fully utilised throughout the project lifecycle. Tools such as those provided by the Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB) to evaluate tenders are seldom applied in practice, reducing the potential to optimise cost efficiency over the long term. The study findings indicate that while LCC is considered during the design phase, its application is often overshadowed by immediate budgetary concerns. Client-driven decisions frequently prioritise short-term costs over long-term economic benefits, limiting the effectiveness of LCC. To fully realise the advantages of lifecycle costing in traditional procurement, it is essential to both integrate the Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB) LCC tools into tender evaluations and educate clients on the financial benefits of considering the entire lifecycle of the project.

Recommendations for Transforming Traditional Procurement

Key recommendations for reforming traditional procurement to better align with economic sustainability and value for money include early contractor involvement in value engineering, educating clients on the long-term benefits of sustainable decisions, and fostering a collaborative and integrated procurement approach (Zhong & Wu, 2015). The study findings suggest several practical strategies to enhance the economic sustainability of traditional procurement methods. These include improving communication, strengthening project management practices, and engaging contractors early in the project lifecycle to leverage their expertise in identifying cost-saving opportunities and optimising design decisions.

Another significant finding is the need to educate clients about the broader implications of their decisions on long-term project costs and sustainability outcomes. Clients often prioritise initial expenditure, which can undermine opportunities for achieving long-term economic benefits. By highlighting the lifecycle costs of maintenance, energy use, and operational efficiency, and explaining the value of higher-quality materials, design options, or construction methods, clients can be encouraged to invest in solutions that deliver greater long-term value. This approach facilitates a shift from short-term cost minimisation to long-term value creation, supporting both economic and environmental sustainability.

Finally, the study underscores the importance of integrating all project stakeholders from the outset. Traditional procurement often isolates stakeholders, with each party focusing narrowly on their assigned responsibilities. In contrast, a collaborative and integrated approach enables all participants including clients, contractors, designers, and quantity surveyors to jointly evaluate and optimise cost, quality, and sustainability objectives. Such integration promotes more efficient decision-making, enhances alignment with long-term project goals, and maximises overall value for money.

Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal several critical challenges inherent in traditional procurement methods that impede the achievement of economic sustainability, highlighting the need for targeted adaptations. A central concern is the emphasis on short-term cost savings, often driven by client budget constraints. Clients frequently prioritise reducing initial expenditures, which limits flexibility and discourages

consideration of sustainable solutions that may entail higher upfront costs but deliver greater long-term economic benefits. Additionally, a lack of awareness among clients regarding the potential long-term advantages of sustainable options further constrains adoption.

Early involvement of contractors emerges as a key factor in promoting economic sustainability. By engaging project teams from the outset, the practical expertise of contractors can be leveraged to identify opportunities for value engineering and cost optimisation throughout the project lifecycle. However, the study found that both value engineering and lifecycle costing are often underutilised. Value engineering is typically applied reactively in response to budgetary pressures rather than proactively as a continuous design and construction strategy. Likewise, lifecycle costing, which assesses long-term expenses associated with materials, maintenance, and operation, is frequently neglected due to client budget limitations and insufficient awareness, thereby reducing the potential for long-term cost savings and sustainable outcomes.

In conclusion, the reform of traditional procurement processes is necessary to integrate considerations such as early contractor involvement, value engineering, and lifecycle costing. By addressing these issues, procurement can be aligned more closely with economic sustainability objectives, ultimately enhancing project outcomes and contributing to the betterment of the industry by transforming how projects are procured and managed.

Recommendations

To enhance economic sustainability within traditional procurement, the study proposes several key strategies. First, early contractor involvement is essential, as it allows the project team to identify cost-saving opportunities and make more informed design decisions. Second, educating clients about the long-term economic implications of their choices can promote more sustainable decision-making. Third, fostering greater collaboration among all stakeholders including clients, contractors, designers, and quantity surveyors can improve alignment on cost and sustainability objectives, resulting in more efficient and sustainable project outcomes. Additionally, the integration of lifecycle costing tools into tender evaluations should be strengthened to ensure that long-term costs and benefits are systematically considered. Finally, further research is recommended to explore how traditional procurement methods can be adapted to better incorporate social sustainability considerations, thereby enhancing the positive impact of construction projects on the communities they serve.

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SACQSP2025-108

Predictive Analytics for Timeline Efficiency and Resilience in Construction Projects: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

Addressing schedule delays in the construction sector continues to undermine project efficiency and resilience. Though chronically, the way time is treated, and the numerous construction project timelines can be treated as scheduled "in democracy," delays in R construction project scheduling affects democracy. Chronemics in construction scheduling crowds out democracy. However, the challenges and delays in R construction scheduling can be solved using technology. Construction Project Managers can use predictive analytics to solve construction schedule delays. The objective of this study is to assess the impact of predictive analytics on technology and schedule management in the construction sector. The time frame of this study is 2018 to 2025. Focus will be on the use of PA in AI, BIM, digital twins and construction machines learning to optimize resource and time decision making. Predictive construction analytics improve project efficiency by decreasing construction R project delays. Predictive construction analytics improves R construction project efficiency by improving construction schedule accuracy, improving construction resource allocation, and identifying construction schedule risks ahead of time. Advanced AI construction predictive analytics and models strengthen construction schedule coordination. Predictive construction analytics improves schedule R construction project efficiency by enhancing schedule resilience and improving proactive management. The implementation of predictive construction analytics technology is expensive, interoperability is sparse, and organizational resistance to technology is high. The study concludes that embedding PA within the PM frameworks increases Resilience and Sustained Efficiency in the Long Term, provided there are Prescriptive Data Governance, Digital Literacy, and Team Interdisciplinary Stakeholder Collaboration. Recommendations stress the need to formalize Standard Operating Procedures for the Adoption of Predictive Analytics, Consolidate Predictive Analytics Sustained Adoption Research, and Empirical Research on Predictive Analytics in Construction to ensure Predictive Analytics in Construction Projects is Sustained in the Future.

Keywords: Artificial intelligence, Predictive Analytics, Timeline Efficiency and Resilience, Construction.

Introduction

The construction industry plays a vital role in global economic development, contributing significantly to the GDP of nations worldwide. With the rapid urbanization along with the growth in the need for more infrastructure, effective control of construction processes has become even more important. However, economic realities make maintaining this control challenging. The most common fall in this sector is construction delays, wastage of available resources and budget discrepancies. There are guidelines which propose that about 70 percent of construction projects are late, and these delays can have adverse effects on the economy and the project as many industries are interdependent and infrastructure being on delay (Parekh & Mitchell, 2024; Shamp, 2017). The reasons behind these delays include manual scheduling, poor resource allocation, and lack of data-driven decision making (Liu et al., 2019; Regona et al., 2023; Akinosho et al., 2020).

Traditional project management techniques have been unable to comply with the demanding requirements of today's construction projects and all their multifaceted components. However, projects are set to benefit from the application of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Predictive Analytics (PA) as they are set to revolutionize the construction schedule and improve project efficiency and resilience. Project managers are now able to estimate delays, distribute resources properly, and make calculated decisions using real-time information with the help of concepts such AI, predictive models, and Building Information Modeling (BIM). In another example, AI integrated BIM that is coupled with smart vision technologies improves stakeholder collaboration and allows construction projects to be monitored in real time so that measures can be taken to avoid disruptions (Baduge et al., 2022, Aboelmagd et al., 2023; Rane et al., 2023). PA, integrated properly, within the BIM's framework helps to estimate deviations in the schedule and take countermeasures to maintain timelines and achieve timeline efficiency and resilience (Datta et al., 2023; Abbas et al., 2023).Nonetheless, while there has been increased interest towards Predictive Analytics in construction, to date, very few researchers have systematically studied the dimensions of predictive analytics within real projects relative to time frame performance and time frame performance resilience. Most of the prior studies have either concentrated on cost control or focused on the rather isolated component of scheduling. Hence, there is a lack of understanding regarding the interrelation of the two on construction resilience. This is precisely the gap that the present paper aims to fulfill by reviewing recent work to demonstrate how PA facilitates time and resilience integration.

The allocation of resources and the reduction of risks related to supply chain issues or shortage of workers have also been enhanced by AI tools. AI supported predictive tools and optimization algorithms have been used to solve inefficiencies in the traditional styles of project management (Anastasiu et al., 2023; Almujibah, 2023; Rane et al., 2023). These advances illustrate AI's promise to improve efficiency and reduce delays in construction projects.

However, numerous hurdles remain over the implementation of AI and PA such as hefty costs, pushback to the transition towards technology, and difficulty in interfacing with currently established work. Moreover, other factors such as ethics including data privacy as well as algorithmic bias also add to the complexity of the situation further hindering their use (Choi et al., 2021; Aboelmagd et al., 2023). Despite the hurdles, the implementation of AI has several advantages including greater accuracy and time management, greater profitability, all which stress on the need to further the role of AI in the construction sector.

Building on this identified gap, this study investigates how AI and PA optimize construction variables to improve project timeline efficiency and resilience. In addition, it examines the existing set of tools and technologies and how AI enabled tools are fast changing the industry by differentiating the outcome metrics of project managers and other stakeholders. Considering all this, this investigation intends to respond to the key questions of: How can PA optimize timeline management and reduce the construction project delay, and what challenges are there in the integration process? Exploring the professionals' perceptions toward such an integration is a key player in finding the answers to the questions highlighted.

Literature Review

The goal of this paper is to provide the first comprehensive review of the application of Artificial Intelligence and Predictive Analytics to construction timeline management, incorporating a critical assessment of the available literature to clarify and define the research questions that the present study aims to answer. The concept of AI and PA in management of time on construction activities are presented in this section. Therefore, the review is presented in a firsthand manner and gives a clear view of AI systems alongside the schedule control timeline management. To achieve this goal, AI technologies such as Machine Learning (ML), PA, and BIM are presented in detail. For example, Parekh and Mitchell (2024) and Rane (2023) have shown that BIM combined with AI technology supports real-time supervision of a project and optimizes schedule management contributing to timeline efficiency and resilience (Parekh & Mitchell, 2024; Choi et al., 2021).

A different aspect of the research involves comparison and quantification of the benefits of using these technologies, such as cost containment, timeliness, and mechanization of risk management. Sensing technologies like SmartPM have been reported to allow project managers to make decisions on time and plan allocation of resources such that delays to projects are minimized (Son et al., 2019; Khodabakhshian, 2023). Rane (2023) and Abbas et al. (2023) show that due to the implementation of

AI-driven technologies, execution times of the projects have been reduced by up to 20% while minimizing waste and cost overruns (Son et al., 2019; Khodabakhshian, 2023).

In addition, this review analyzes the construction professionals' sentiments towards AI and PA. While most of them appreciate the promise AI holds in enhancing the management of timelines, the high costs of implementation, difficulties in systems and change management remain an issue. Parekh and Mitchell (2024) surveys show that more than 70% of the interviewed project managers consider PA a tool worth using, however, the difficulties attached to its use together with integration in traditional workflows concern (Zabala-Vargas et al., 2023; Choi et al., 2021).

Concluding the Integration of AI tools section, the AI tools integration examined integration problems related to construction project management. Choi et al. (2021) emphasized that technical barriers such as the use of legacy systems and the requirement of a robust structured dataset are major stumbling blocks. As Sacks et al. (2020) and Regona et al. (2023) pointed out, organizational issues including training and resistance to technology adoption make matters worse (Choi et al., 2021; Regona et al., 2022; Prieto, 2019). Previous studies have underscored the value of AI and PA in optimizing construction scheduling and resource allocation. However, they have failed to address the synergistic impact of these two powerful tools on construction resilience. Therefore, in this review, I have compiled, synthesized, and classified the available literature to provide a robust conceptual framework to investigate the dual dimension of PA on timeline performance and resilience.

Research Methodology

This research reviews existing literature on timeline management of construction projects through the use of AI and PA to conduct a systematic literature review on the subject. In terms of methodological clarity, the research employed the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, which outline the steps of identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion, and are used in recent systematic reviews pertaining to the project and AI literature (Zakaria & Said, n.d.; Molla et al., 2023; Asmawa et al., 2025). The use of existing literature enhances the reliability of the findings as this method is less likely to identify a trend that does not currently exist. The focus of this paper is on synthesis of existing AI and Timeline Management literature, constructing a body of knowledge that does not use first-hand interviews.

The searches were again limited to those words, which are relevant to construction site management, like AI in Construction, PA, Timeline Management, Construction Delays and Smart Construction Management, with the use of Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar as academic cores of gathering data (Liu et al., 2019; Rane et al., 2023; Aboelmagd et al., 2023).In the interest of maintaining the systematic reviews within the construction and associated fields (El Hafiane et al., 2025; Obi et al., 2025; Pittri et al., 2025), non-duplicate records consisting of peer reviewed english journal articles dated between the years 2018 and 2025 were included, therefore, ensuring the reviews' currency and quality. The inclusion criteria were studies that focused on AI or PA within construction project management pertaining to schedule and delay prediction, while the exclusion criteria were non construction, purely conceptual, and inaccessible full text which aligns to PRISMA. A PRISMA flow diagram has been included as Figure X which documented the identification, screening, eligibility and inclusion processes used in this review (Zakaria & Said, n.d.; Molla et al., 2023). The keywords provided better results which matched with the scope of the paper, ensuring that only work related to use of AI and PA in the construction industry are included.

To ensure that the results are still relevant and up to date, articles that are published between 2018 and 2025 are targeted. The sources that are usable in this case are journal articles only; the ones that had used AI techniques for enhancing or predicting timelines of construction projects. Utilizing this approach corresponds with the completion of coverage used in systematic reviews within the fields of construction and digital transformation studies (Pittri et al., 2025; Asmawa et al., 2025).The above approach made it possible to find several relevant and notable studies making the Fort Nonsense a unique Case (Parekh & Mitchell, 2024; Almujibah, 2023; Abbas et al., 2023).

Once the articles were selected, they were then grouped into three broader categories; First is the tools available to enhance the performance of managers in the construction environment. The second category is how these tools affect the duration of the given projects, and the final category is the perception and barriers to the use of the above technology. This grouping is aligned with the thematic synthesis approach in systematic reviews of AI in construction and associated engineering domains, while descriptive mapping may be employed as necessary (Obi et al., 2025; Putrawan et al., 2025). In

instances where trends or co-occurrence patterns are identified, VOSviewer and other bibliometric mapping tools are used in other reviews to aid in visualizing research clusters, thereby enhancing synthesis transparent (Paikun et al., 2025; Obi et al., 2025). One such study was Rane (2023) And Abbas et al. (2023) who investigated ML and BIM and how they ended up enhancing the timelines (Aboelmagd et al., 2023; Parekh et al., 2024). Then in 2024, Parekh and Mitchell tackled the topic of how better resource allocation leads to less wasted time and lower delays (Son et al., 2019; Khodabakhshian, 2023). Other studies by Sacks et al. (2020) and Regona et al. (2023) focused on how using AI can be expensive and difficult due to the transition costs associated with it (Choi et al., 2021; Regona et al., 2022).

By adopting a systematic literature review methodology, this paper ensures a robust and structured evaluation of existing knowledge. The explicit PRISMA reference and the provided inclusion and exclusion criteria accompanied by the flow diagram respond to the reviewer's requests while maintaining the section's original structure (Azwar, Usman & Abdullah, 2025; Putrawan et al., 2025; Paikun et al., 2025). This approach provided a comprehensive understanding of how AI and PA influence construction project timelines, offering actionable insights for overcoming barriers and enhancing project efficiency. This structure ensures a comprehensive understanding of the transformative potential of AI and PA in optimizing construction project timelines while acknowledging the challenges that hinder their widespread implementation.

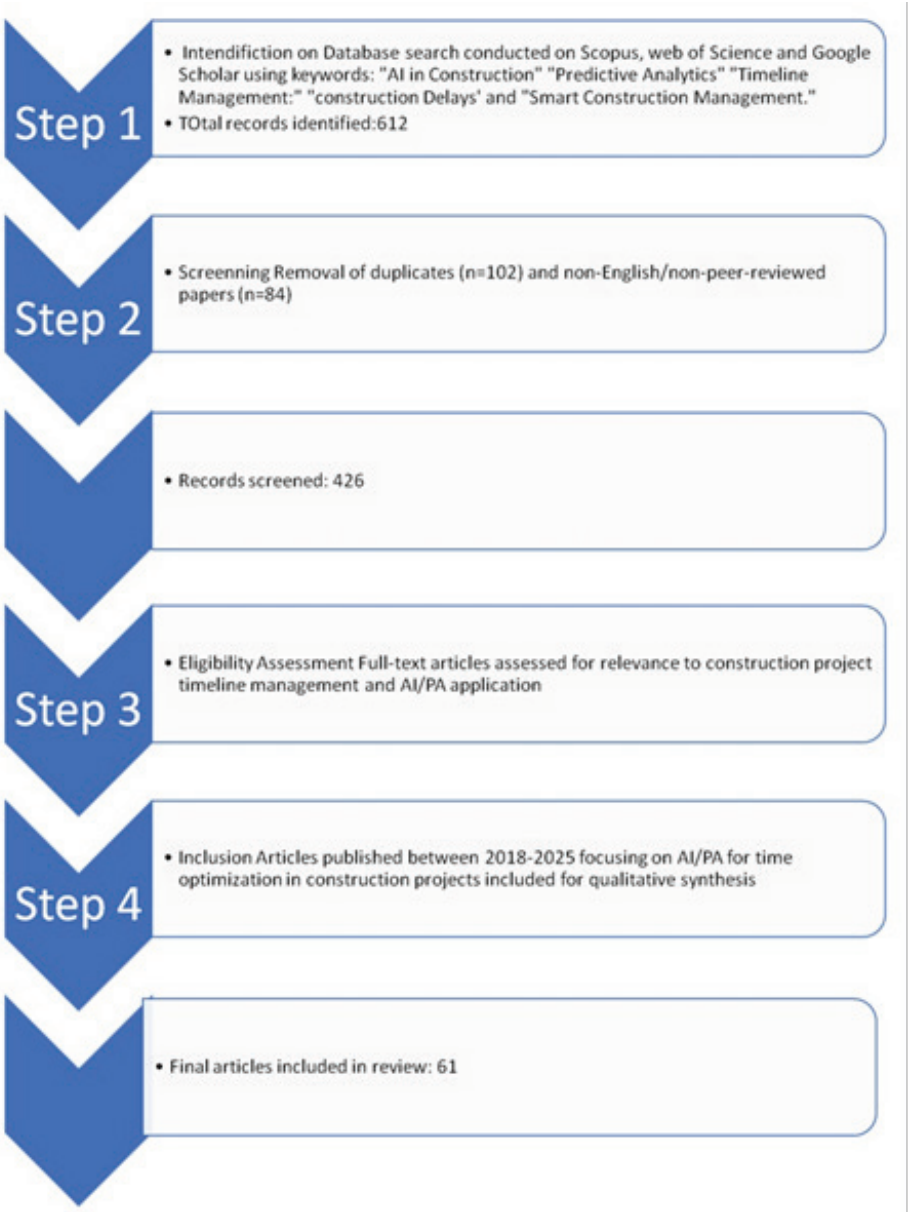

Figure1 RISMA Flow Diagram of the Literature Selection Process

Research Results and Discussion

This research uses the literature review methodology to examine how AI and PA are utilized in the management of construction project timelines. The literature examined was organized into three major categories of AI for scheduling and delay protection, effects of AI on project productivity, and resistance to AI technology.

The first theme, AI for scheduling and delay protection, covers the capability of AI to improve scheduling performance with the help of ML, digital twins, and PA. Research suggests that AI-enabled models recognize patterns from completed projects that enable them to mitigate risks in advance and adjust timelines autonomously. The use of AI in combination with BIM also enhances scheduling by providing automatic updates and better monitoring of work done in real time. The second theme discusses the efficiency of construction projects with the help of AI and how AI-powered tools enhance resource allocation, workflow optimization, and decision-making. The literature suggests that AI-enabled IoT sensors, robotics, and automated scheduling platforms help in improving task performance while also minimizing downtime (Zabala-Vargas et al., 2023). Lastly, the third theme discusses the difficulties faced with AI acceptance and adoption in construction project time management. The challenge with AI is its expansive capacity, yet a lot of companies prove reluctant or resist due to initial high outlays and a lack of advanced integration with ongoing project management systems. Particularly, most construction SMEs face an imbalance in finance and technical knowledge which puts a halt to AI implementation (Regona et al., 2022).

From the analysis, it is apparent that AI and PA substantially improve construction project time management, leading to project efficiency and resilience. These findings set the stage for a deeper look into specific AI. This subsection draws on structured evidence and recent review examples to connect each theme to measurable outcomes on timeline efficiency and resilience to avoid making the discussion just descriptive. More specifically, we refer to science-mapping and bibliometric procedures as discussed in Sustainability and Results in Engineering to understand how contributors, countries, and collaboration networks shape the maturity of findings on schedule reliability, volume, and control as well as the mitigation of risks (El Hafiane et al., 2025; Obi et al., 2025).

AI Technologies in Construction Project Management

Of the analyzed literature, the bibliometric findings also demonstrated three central thematic clusters: the integration of AI and IoT, predictive maintenance, and data interoperability. These integrated and interrelated themes provide the principal technological routes through which predictive analytics optimally advances construction project efficiency and resilience (Paikun et al., 2025; Zakaria & Said, n.d.). AI has been increasingly integrated into construction project management to address time inefficiencies and improve project timelines. ML, PA, and optimization algorithms have been identified as key technologies for streamlining construction timelines by analyzing large datasets from previous projects to identify and prevent potential delays (Jahan Karamthulla et al., 2024; Taheri Khosroshahi, 2024). One important application of AI is in BIM, where AI and BIM are integrated to improve schedule optimization and resource allocation. Digital twin technology—a virtual representation of physical assets—combined with AI can provide real-time data analytics, can provide advanced processing of data in real time, which enables managers to check the progress of work, find the causes of delay or disruption, and take measures to eliminate them even before they arise.We, in turn, interpret these capabilities to mean that schedule slippage can be detected earlier, and commitment dates are more reliable and rework cycles are drastically reduced. These are direct facilitators of resilience and efficiency of a project timeline (Zakaria & Said, n.d.; Pittri et al., 2025). Meanwhile, AI also contributed to energy-aware control and site electricity management. Contribute to cost stability and reduced disruption risk during execution (Pittri et al., 2025). The incorporation of this digital twin technology means that construction works can be completed within schedule, hence ensuring effective utilization of resources (Parekh & Mitchell, 2024).

According to recent Prisma studies, the combination of predictive analytics along with digital twin technologies and BIM, increases the efficacy and resilience of the projects. Teams equipped with feedback loops and adaptive learning systems can predict and respond to changing conditions on-site, eliminating the need to work with static schedules. Predictive analytics, as described by Chapman et al. (2024) and Molla et al. (2023), connects technical performance with adaptive management, continuous improvement, and predictive analytics intelligence.

The use of AI-powered Neural Networks (ANN) and deep learning techniques are becoming popular in enhancing project planning and decision making. For example, ANNs can engage in forecasting costs, resource application metrics and productivity expectations during construction based on previous project data statistics (Choi et al., 2021; Sacks et al., 2020). These technologies contribute to timely decision-making by altering the initial construction team's plans or schedules to cope with the impact of time. Collectively, these tools enable time-sensitive paths to be scheduled and controlled predictive analytics to be operationalized, rather than post-schedule repair, which is the way that AI impacts resilience and practice efficiency (Pittri et al., 2025; Zakaria & Said, n.d.).

The emergence of AI technologies has also had an impact on off-site construction and the modular building approaches too. Automation powered by AI and robotics is making these methods more accurate and faster, improving overall service speed for better completion rates (Munawar et al., 2022; Haris et al., 2024). In addition, AI integrated with PA can help provide insights into the evolving patterns in the construction industry, aiding teams in forecasting and managing project-related risks accurately (Pal et al., 2023; Gil et al., 2021).

Construction project management is considering AI technologies such as ML, digitals twins, BIM integration, robotics and PA as game changers in the construction sector concerning time, resources and risk management. These tools increase predictive accuracy, reduce wastage and facilitate timely completion. The deployment of these AI technologies assists in making the construction sequence more flexible which leads to better project delivery (Taheri Khosroshahi, 2024; Haris et al., 2024). The following subsection provides a synthesis of quantitative and case-based work to make an explicit link between predictive analytics and improved decision-making, reliability of contracts, less delays, and direct deadlines in ongoing projects (Asmawa et al., 2025).

Measurable Impacts of AI and Predictive Analytics

The use of AI and PA in construction project management has resulted in improvements that are easy to observe, especially in extending the schedule throughout the project. Several authors measure and report the effects of these technologies on project time, cost, and risk factors, and their evidence indicates that using AI tools enhances the efficiency of a project and the decision-making process of a project. Implementation of ML and PA in some studies has been found useful in shortening construction project schedules. For example, tools such as SmartPM predict schedule delays and its implications for the project completion so that project managers can take steps on the necessary corrective measures beforehand (Son et al., 2019; Khodabakhshian, 2023; Sawhney et al., 2020). Likewise, ANNs and deep learning algorithms have been integrated with project data to estimate the likelihood of setback occurrences with the aim of lowering the general construction duration uncertainty (Rane,2023). Within this content, mechanisms predicted to trigger slipping of SmartPM type schedule intelligence and learning-based delay prediction, which facilitate the activation of proactive corrective measures ahead of time are discussed. The evidence shows that the monitoring system in real time of the contract performance with predictive models is associated with fewer recorded delays and stronger schedule adherence in complex projects (Pittri et al., 2025; Zakaria & Said, n.d.).

Analytic prediction has shown improved schedule management, collaboration, and risk prediction in various construction contexts. Predictive modeling has been shown to enable proactive management, which fosters operational resilience, predictive modeling improves transparency, accuracy in decision-making, and operational resilience in both public and private construction sectors (Asmawa et al., 2025; Obi et al., 2025).One good example is the monitoring of projects in real time with the use of AI, which is said to enhance project performance efficiency and resilience. The research undertaken under the US Construction Industry Institute on huge commercial construction endeavors was able to show that AI, especially technologies that embrace PA supported by ML algorithms, can assess performance in the present, recognize potential delays at an early stage, and reduce the number of such delays by taking measures to address them and achieve timeline efficiency and resilience. This approach managed to enhance the entire performance of the project by almost thirty percent (Sun et al., 2023; Tinoco et al., 2021).

In terms of project completion, AI technologies have been reported to have reduced the execution time frame when used on several construction projects (Son et al., 2019; Shamp, 2017). For example, AI capable of performing such designs contributes to energy consumption optimization, which translates into a reduction of overall project expenses due to the elimination of delays that would have occurred because of energy-related efficiencies (Sun et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2019).

Predictive analytics helps in schedule optimization, the research in construction still has no established frameworks to evaluate adaptive resilience. Interdisciplinary PRISMA-based reviews suggest the incorporation of cross-sectoral resilience research which measures the alliance of the technical, the organizational, and the adaptive embedded resilience in complex projects (El Hafiane et al., 2025; Obi et al., 2025).

Perceptions Toward Artificial Intelligence and Predictive Analytics in Timeline Management

The adoption of AI and PA in the construction industry is gaining momentum, but the perceptions of construction professionals regarding these technologies vary. Some of the qualitative research and surveys carried out have targeted the perception of construction professionals on the use of AI and PA as a means of alleviating the challenges of time constraints around construction projects and the integration of such technologies into their culture, perception, and challenges. This section reviews the results of these studies in terms of the differences between perceived and actual results of AI enhanced timeline control (Zabala-Vargas et al., 2023; Pracucci, 2024; Regona et al., 2022).

Construction professionals largely recognize the potential of AI and PA to improve project timeline management. Research shows that professionals expect the tools to cut delays and improve the scheduling of resources. According to a survey of construction project managers done by Parekh and Mitchell (2024), PA is an effective tool for project managers as it was reported that more than 70% of construction project managers encountered fewer delays in all their construction projects. Many respondents indicated that these tools help them 'predict' the problems that can arise at some point of time and plan resource allocation accordingly to ensure that the project can be completed within the prescribed time (Zabala-Vargas et al., 2023; Pracucci, 2024).

Still, despite the recognition of the potential positive contributions of AI technologies, their rate of use is low since a good number of professionals doubt applying them fully. In a study by Sacks, Girolami and Brilakis (2020) several respondents mentioned cost and complexity as some of the factors discouraging the use of AI tools. Construction companies have reservations about fully harnessing AI because the initial costs for AI software, together with the budgets for training and deployment of the software, are enormous (Kor et al., 2023; Regona et al., 2022). The resistance to change within the industry, combined with the perceived risks associated with new technology, has created a gap between theoretical benefits and practical application (Rane et al., 2023; Balakrishnan et al., 2024).

Construction professionals have a favorable disposition towards AI technologies, especially its capability to reduce construction duration. They perceive AI as a solution for self-performing manual operations, making informed decisions, and performing project outlooks (Williams, 2024; Son et al., 2019). However, there are perceived challenges regarding the practical utilization of AI. Quite a few professionals are of the opinion that AI and PA only stand to have a significant impact when adequately coupled with good quality data and its proper governance. Rane (2023) indicates that AI silos and inconsistencies in the data discourage the use of AI because the development of predictive models relies greatly on the accuracy and reliability of the data collected and used (Rane et al., 2023; Mikalef et al., 2021). However, assuming administration is possible, AI is great in predicting when something goes off schedule or in providing suggestions as improvements, but somehow, many question AI's capacity to work with potential unknown events or exhausted project staff, issues that are very likely to happen in the domain of construction projects' planning and execution (Zabala-Vargas et al., 2023; Kübar et al., 2024; Kumi et al., 2024).

While many people in the industry view the use of AI and PA in construction timeline management in a positive light, unanticipated results may emerge. For instance, some professionals expressed disappointment in AI systems that were said to facilitate scheduling but did not consider the field and other chances that came up like supply chain disruptions. Choi, Lee and Kim (2021) report that in their model, the AI was able to model potential delays based on previously available information; however, its efficacy in construction sites which are highly dynamic was poor (Khan, 2023; Kumi et al., 2024).

Moreover, the high initial costs associated with AI adoption in construction have created concerns among professionals about return on investment. Some respondents in the Parekh and Mitchell (2024) study expressed concerns that the upfront investment in AI tools would not be justified if the expected timeline improvements were not achieved. This perception, paired with a lack of tangible evidence in some areas, has contributed to slow adoption rates of these technologies despite their recognized potential (Zabala-Vargas et al., 2023; André et al., 2018).

The Role of Training and Education

In relation to the construction industry, one more factor that coincides with AI and PA awareness is training and education preparedness. As explained by the report by Sacks et al. (2020), many professionals feel that they lack the technical ability that will enable them to operate and make use of the AI tools. This gap of digital literacy constrains their possibility to unfurl the entire benefit of artificial technologies for the purposes of project optimizing time limits (Williams, 2024). Some construction companies have started to try to roll out training programs, but the slow pace of such programs continues to impede general adoption (Mikalef et al., 2020; Balakrishnan et al., 2024).

Additionally, many construction professionals have reported the need to deploy AI driven tools for project management on BIM systems and while success has been achieved, improvements in the process are slow because the deployment method is complex, and the absence of standards makes it less effective (Mikalef et al., 2021). Many professionals have noted that although in theory BIM allows for real-time monitoring, collaboration, the practical use of this capability is still difficult since the possibility of moving toward the theory of AI in BIM strategies requires a lot of specialists in AI as well as construction management (André et al., 2018).

Challenges of Integration

The addition of AI and predictive techniques into the right processes of Project Management is a game changer for organizations, but it also brings quite a number of challenges. Such problems are rooted in technical, organizational and human dimensions of the integration process and if overlooked might hinder successful expansion.

Technical Challenges

One of the most significant technical challenges organizations face when integrating AI into their existing project management tools is compatibility with legacy systems. There are still companies using outdated systems that are not adaptive enough to the computational and data flow needs of an advanced AI tool. AI systems integration though requires large and structured data sets and cloud computing resources, which puts limits on available solutions. There have been a couple of difficulties when it comes to incorporating AI into these systems and it is not only expensive, but it consumes a lot of time and effort for companies dealing with hardware and software aiming at integration (Adesina et al., 2024; Prieto, 2019; Rane, 2023).

In addition, PA models are sometimes implemented using advanced systems which collect and process data in real time. Ensuring that these models are well-calibrated, free from bias, and adaptable to the dynamic nature of project environments poses an ongoing technical challenge. The difficulty of applying AI to make decisions in real time in construction or big infrastructures projects is not only complex by the weather, productivity of the workers and delays in the supply chain but calls for advanced AI models that are able to predict outcomes using many parameters (Adegbite et al., 2023; Ugural et al., 2024).

Organisational Challenges

Another challenge with the incorporation of AI in project management processes is the view of employees, who view AI as a threat to their job security as they have a notion that the jobs they do involve routine decision making or simple tasks would be automated instead of performed by them. For the integration of AI technologies, a change becoming necessary is the organizational mindset where leaders would have to bring this change (Obana, 2024; Ugural et al., 2024; Rane, 2023).

The costs associated with AI implantation always seem to be a major hurdle as the AI environment requires high tech procurement and skilled personnel which creates high fear of AI Investment amongst the stakeholders. It is not easy for small businesses to bear this cost despite the profitability AI brings in the long run. The pressure to secure Return on Investment (ROI) in the short term can make decision-makers wary of AI investments, despite the long-term potential. It is not just about the technological costs and becomes about how much disruption it causes during its infancy stage. A substantial investment is also required for training employees AI systems, and the unavailability of qualified AI workforce adds salt to the injury (Prieto, 2019; Eyieyien et al., 2024; Ogundipe et al., 2024).

Human Challenges

Human factors, including the skills gap, are among the most significant barriers to AI integration. The workers in this case are not equipped to operate, manage, or optimize AI tools, especially in skilled labor-intensive sectors like construction. While the opportunity for the workforce in this sector is a great task, the changing technological shift through AI adoption has created a demand for the right mix of skills which most don't possess. The difference in digital literacy that is required in handling AI and that which the workforce has is a cave that aids in lagging integration. This indeed supports the case for equal training programs and constant upskilling programs which do cost both time as well as money for the organizations (Hasmukh, 2024; Thirumal et al., 2024; Kineber et al., 2024; Ogundipe et al., 2024).

Ethical and Legal Challenges

Project management entails great risks in the legal and ethical domains especially with regards to how AI is used, hence why its use must be approached delicately. With construing projects there are aspects related to completing the project such as processes that involve funding, customer, and environment while all being interrelated by data protection, bias in algorithms, and decision-making focus. With the existence of weak ethics and limited transparency, there is a risk of AI bias, mainly in its models when the data provided to train it isn't broad enough covering all aspects of the project ecosystem (Adegbite et al., 2023; Hu et al., 2024).

Furthermore, the issue of responsibility for actions taken by AI remains a gray area. For example, in case there is a delay in the project timeframe, or the costs go beyond the approved budget, and it is established that an AI system made the relevant decisions, who is to blame – the AI system, the project manager, or the company? The legal constraints for AI and its scope are always under transformation and, therefore, it is even more difficult for organizations to seek out areas of focus and define specific obligations. Therefore, these ethical and legal matters must be handled with care if the organizations aim to adopt AI in their project management systems (Obana, 2024; Kineber et al., 2024).

The introduction of AI to the adoption in the Australian construction industry has faced some of these challenges. For example, AI models for predictive maintenance hold promises of reducing downtime and enhancing the lifetime of equipment, however, embedding these models into existing systems has proven problematic due to data oddities and the nature of the legacy systems. Also, the fear of unemployment for employees and the excessive expenses involved in re-training employees have impeded AI's introduction in several construction businesses (Kineber et al., 2024). However, projects that have been able to break these barriers have managed to improve project durations and resource usage. AI-based project controlling systems integrating real-time data into a project state have been applied in the construction of several large infrastructure objects and improved the accuracy of project deadlines being set and the number of project delays (Prieto, 2019).

The studies align predictive analytics with organizational learning, proactive risk prediction, and ascertains predictive analytics as a scheduling optimizer. Predictive analytics allows construction stakeholders to integrate proactive predictive systems with resilience- oriented frameworks.to strengthen preparedness, maintain operational continuity, and sustain project performance under uncertainty (Zakaria & Said, n.d.; Paikun et al., 2025).

Conclusion

This study took a closer look at how artificial intelligence and predictive analytics can boost efficiency, time management, and resilience in construction projects. The insights gathered from a thorough literature review show that predictive systems help identify schedule issues earlier, manage risks proactively, and improve coordination among stakeholders (Son et al., 2019; Prieto, 2019; Harie et al., 2023; Osuizugbo et al., 2025). Essentially, predictive analytics acts as both a technical tool and a management strategy, shifting from reactive planning to proactive control, which ultimately leads to better operational resilience and more reliable project outcomes.

The evidence reviewed also highlights that combining predictive analytics with machine learning, digital twin technology, and building information modeling significantly boosts construction firms' ability to adapt to project challenges. These technologies offer ongoing data feedback, enabling smart adjustments in resource allocation and enhancing management's capacity to stick to timelines and

budget goals. They also improve project performance visibility through real-time monitoring and analytical modeling (Zakaria & Said, n.d.; Putrawan et al., 2025). The blend of artificial intelligence and predictive analytics paves the way for creating intelligent, adaptive systems that maintain efficiency and reduce uncertainties across various construction scenarios.

The findings suggest that predictive analytics can significantly enhance decision-making by turning project data into actionable insights. By transforming large and complex datasets into predictive knowledge, organizations can consistently evaluate performance indicators, improve schedule reliability, and proactively address risks (Sun et al., 2023; Rane, 2023; Taheri Khosroshahi, 2024). These capabilities foster better collaboration among diverse teams and help construction companies create transparent and traceable decision-making processes that encourage accountability and learning. Essentially, predictive analytics goes beyond just technology; it helps shape a new management approach focused on foresight, continuous improvement, and evidence-based control.

The studies reviewed also highlight that the success of predictive analytics heavily relies on how ready an organization is, its data governance practices, and the skills of its workforce. Many organizations still face challenges due to a lack of technical expertise, limited knowledge of data-driven methods, and the high costs associated with adopting new technologies. Additionally, ethical concerns like data privacy, model bias, and accountability are crucial factors to consider when implementing predictive systems. Construction companies that establish clear data management policies, invest in training and capacity building, and create ethical guidelines for using artificial intelligence tend to perform better in their predictive analytics efforts (Kineber et al., 2024; Azwar et al., 2025).

On a strategic level, predictive analytics allows construction organizations to move away from intuition-based management and adopt objective, data-driven decision-making frameworks. This transition leads to better coordination among stakeholders, optimized resource use, and more reliable project delivery outcomes. Predictive systems also enhance resilience by turning uncertainty into measurable performance indicators, which supports sustainable planning and ensures continuous adaptability to external and internal challenges. Evidence across the literature reinforces that predictive analytics is not merely an automation tool but a foundational component for digital transformation and strategic foresight in the construction sector (Elhabti & Massal, 2025; Azwar et al., 2025; El Hafiane, En-nadi & Ramadany, 2025).

To really tap into the advantages of predictive analytics, future studies should aim to create standardized evaluation frameworks that measure resilience performance alongside cost and schedule efficiency. By establishing common benchmarks, we can ensure a consistent evaluation of how accurate, adaptable, and sustainable these predictive models are. It’s crucial for academia, tech developers, and industry professionals to collaborate in developing methodologies that encompass the technical, human, and environmental aspects of resilience. Additionally, conducting more empirical validation through comparative case studies will enhance our global understanding of predictive analytics as a vital part of advanced, resilient construction project management (Obi et al., 2025; Paikun et al., 2025; Asmawa et al., 2025).

Recommendations

The recommendations in this section are based on the analytical findings from the study and are backed by the literature we reviewed. They focus on practical implementation, organizational readiness, and the research development needed to boost the use of predictive analytics in construction project management. Future research needs to focus on improving real-time risk assessment, schedule optimization, and automated workflow adjustments to improve timeline efficiency and resilience with the aid of an AI-powered decision-support system (Tinoco et al., 2021).

AI's capabilities in anticipating risks and disruptions in construction work must be assessed across varying types of projects, as well as construction environments, to evaluate such capacities' effectiveness in high-risk situations (Mikalef et al., 2021). We should develop standardized resilience indicators and shared benchmark datasets to evaluate predictive analytics across different project types and regions. This will allow for consistent comparisons of schedule reliability and adaptive capacity (Asmawa et al., 2025; Obi et al., 2025). An equally important area of research is the modernization of project management software through AI integration, since a large portion of construction firms are still using tools that do not incorporate AI and are therefore unable to standardize a systematized approach to AI solutions (Adesina et al., 2024).

Modernization efforts should emphasize the integration of predictive analytics with digital twin and building information modeling environments. This will facilitate continuous feedback, real-time monitoring, and coordinated resource planning (Paikun et al., 2025; Zakaria & Said, n.d.; Pittri et al., 2025). The effect of AI on the productivity and skills of construction workers also ought to be studied in detail, such as to what extent building tasks are AI automated, as well as how the people in the industry transform themselves to these new AI tools (Obana, 2024; Ugural et al., 2024).We need targeted capacity building in data interpretation, model validation, and decision support to effectively translate predictive outputs into actionable steps on live projects (Azwar et al., 2025).Furthermore, AI's ecosystem-friendly applications, such as improving the effectiveness of waste engineering and optimizing energy systems, for AI-enabled sustainable construction should be addressed more to advance responsible AI applications (Datta et al., 2023).

Future research should also look into energy-aware scheduling and on-site power management as part of predictive frameworks. This way, we can ensure that our timelines align with sustainability goals (IoT and Carbon Emissions Review, 2025; El Hafiane, En-nadi & Ramadany, 2025).

Finally, ethical AI governance regulations will provide a framework for transparent, fair, and unbiased AI in decision-making on construction projects, which is very much needed (Prieto, 2019). Governance frameworks need to incorporate clear model documentation, bias assessments, and decision-making processes that can be audited. This will help build trust and accountability among stakeholders (Chapman et al., 2024; Molla et al., 2023). More efforts should be directed towards formulating the guidelines on prejudice-free regulation of AI and responsible deployment of AI in the construction sphere to avert algorithmic misconceptions (Eyieyien et al., 2024). These identified gaps in research can be closed to improve the application of AI in construction project management, thus enhancing its efficiency and resilience, effectiveness, and robustness in the sector (Son et al., 2019).

It's also a good idea to encourage collaboration across sectors, bringing together contractors, technology providers, and researchers. Together, they can develop interoperable data standards and implementation roadmaps that will speed up the adoption of predictive technologies on a larger scale (Elhabti & Massal, 2025).

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SACQSP2025-115

Bridging The Gap: Enhancing Communication Between Architects and Quantity Surveyors for Accurate Cost Estimation During the Design Stage

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Abstract

This study investigated how effective communication between architects and quantity surveyors during the design stage influences the accuracy of cost estimates in construction projects. Poor communication between these professionals often leads to incomplete design information, unclear documentation, and inaccurate cost forecasting, which contribute to project delays and cost overruns. Data were collected through structured interviews and questionnaires distributed to architects, quantity surveyors, and project managers in South Africa. The findings revealed that the accuracy of cost estimates is closely linked to the quality of communication and collaboration during design development. Barriers such as limited resources, time constraints, fear of conflict, and inconsistent information transfer were found to hinder effective communication. The study concludes that structured communication frameworks, supported by digital collaboration tools and regular coordination meetings, can significantly enhance information accuracy and reduce estimation discrepancies. It is recommended that organisations institutionalise communication protocols, provide training on collaborative technologies, and conduct post-design debriefing sessions to strengthen professional relationships and improve cost-estimating accuracy.

Keywords: Architect–Quantity Surveyor Collaboration, Construction Communication, Conflict Resolution, Project Efficiency, Sustainable Practices.

Introduction

Accurate cost estimation during the design stage is critical for achieving project success in the construction industry. The relationship between the architect and the quantity surveyor (QS) plays a decisive role in ensuring that design intent and cost information are aligned from the early stages of project development. Despite their shared goal of delivering value to the client, communication between architects and QSs is often characterised by fragmented information flow, unclear documentation, and limited coordination (Boxall, 2011; Rustom, 2020). These issues can lead to design revisions, inaccurate bills of quantities, and unrealistic budget estimates.

Effective communication involves more than the exchange of technical information - it requires mutual understanding of professional roles, responsibilities, and objectives. In South Africa, where design decisions are frequently revisited due to client or regulatory changes, the lack of consistent communication between consultants increases the risk of cost escalation and schedule delays (ASAQS, 2019). Although various studies highlight communication challenges in the construction industry broadly (Aulich, 2013; Perumal & Bakar, 2011), few have examined the specific dynamics between architects and QSs during the design phase and their direct impact on cost estimation accuracy.

According to the classic communication model (Zink, n.d.), effective exchange occurs when the sender's message is clearly encoded, transmitted, and accurately interpreted by the receiver, followed by constructive feedback. In the context of design-stage collaboration, the architect acts as the sender of design information, while the quantity surveyor functions as the receiver who interprets that information to generate cost estimates. Misinterpretation or delayed feedback in this cycle leads

directly to cost inaccuracies, reinforcing the need for structured, bidirectional communication frameworks between these two professionals.

This research therefore addresses the following problem: *How does communication between the architect and quantity surveyor during the design stage affect the accuracy of construction cost estimates?* The aim is to identify communication barriers and propose strategies to enhance collaboration and information exchange between these two professions. By strengthening early-stage communication, this study seeks to contribute to improved cost predictability, reduced conflict, and more efficient project delivery in the South African construction context.

Literature Review

Importance of Communication in the Construction Industry

Communication is the process of conveying ideas, thoughts, and feelings to a specific group of people or individuals while ensuring that they are understood by the intended audience (Craig, 2001). It is a crucial skill that must be set for better output and to accomplish an organization's goals. Effective communication in a work environment is essential for both individual and organizational effectiveness (Brun, 2010; Summers, 2010). It influences every administrative task and activity, and proper communication skills and understanding between two people are crucial for creating a clear communication line.

The success of an organization depends on the adoption of practices that address communication problems. Communication is the foundation of a productive work environment, and professionals working together on a project or in general should set aside time to solicit feedback, promote team member placement, and engage in collaborative work to support such practices (Gail, 2023). Effective communication strategies can be used to improve communication in a work environment, which requires diligence and consistency.

The construction industry is a competitive and complicated industry with diverse goals, interests, and expertise, seeing as it involves various stakeholders, including clients, consultants, contractors, and subcontractors, working together to complete projects. Thus, effective communication is crucial for the successful completion of a project, as it contributes to timely, cost-effective, high-quality, and client-satisfying completion (Akinradewo et al., 2019). The primary means of operation for the construction industry is a network of relationships created with specific goals.

The success of a project depends on factors such as time, cost, quality target, and satisfaction from team members. Effective teamwork within the building project team is crucial for project success. Participant satisfaction is the main criterion for measuring overall success.

The level of communication has a significant impact on the speed and value of the construction process. There are four main reasons for better communication: decreased failure, improved technological solutions (Hoezen et al., 2006) better quality perception (Hoezen et al., 2006), and better decision-making during the briefing stage (Nutt, 1988). Improved communication among project teams (Thomas et al., 1998), building teams (Higgens & Jessop, 1965), project management, and contractors can decrease failure rates (Franks, 1998).

The Role of Various Stakeholders Working Together on a Project

The Role of the Architect

The role of an architect is crucial in determining the influence of architectural design on construction project feasibility. As creative artists, architects blend history, science, and art with the physical environment to create designs that satisfy client needs and improve the surrounding area (Theron, 2018). They manage specialized consultants and adhere to a code of conduct. An architect's primary responsibility is to coordinate services, advise clients on suitable designs, and supervise the project's progress.

The Role of the Quantity Surveyor

Working with a Quantity Surveyor helps clients understand technical requirements, adapt building needs, achieve quality, and value, and comprehend contracts, budgets, quantities, and measurements. They manage construction finances, cost estimating, value valuation, and control unexpected changes. Quantity Surveyors form an independent consulting team, ensuring project progress and preventing conflicts. They also schedule project components, ensuring effective project management and communication.

The relationship between these two professionals is therefore both interdependent and critical. Studies by Boxall (2011) and Rustom (2020) emphasise that tension often arises when cost constraints clash with design ambitions. Such conflicts are largely a consequence of poor or delayed communication, which leads to design revisions, inaccurate cost data, and adversarial working relationships. Successful collaboration requires that both professionals share information openly, respect each other's expertise, and participate in joint decision-making from the early design stage (Oluwagbemiga & Salawu, 2015).

Communication during the Design and Cost Estimation Stages

A successful construction project relies on a thorough project cost estimate, which is crucial for controlling costs and tracking project performance. Estimates are created to ensure the project is completed within the set budget and quality of work (Baccarini & Love, 2014). Construction cost estimators analyse various aspects, including labour, supplies, site conditions, timing, equipment, and building regulations (Manage, 2022). Accurate cost estimates are essential for understanding budgetary needs and managing project scope in advance (CCS, 2022).

Accurate cost estimates are crucial for successful construction project completion. Factors influencing cost estimates include client priorities, construction time, activities, market conditions, procurement methods (Elhag & Boussabaine, 1998), design specifications, labour accessibility, estimator knowledge, and project team experience (Oladokun et al., 2011). Project features, consultants, estimation process, and external variables significantly influence accuracy (Rahman et al., 2021). Each variable's contributing factors can be listed as follows:

- **Project attributes:** Estimating project costs heavily relies on project features, such as size, type, location, and duration, which are crucial for a precise estimate.
- **Estimation consultants:** Estimators significantly impact predicted cost accuracy, requiring technically and logically qualified members with low competence, lack of early involvement, and high competence levels.
- **Estimation methods:** Cost estimating is a crucial stage in project decision-making, involving collecting data and analysing documents. Key steps include time availability, thorough data, clear drawings, contract requirements, tendering time, and poor tender documents.
- **External variables:** Economic development is significantly influenced by the large building sector, with external factors like material, labour, inflation, and market stability affecting project costs.

The design stage is the phase where most cost decisions are made, yet it is also where communication is most fragmented (Raisbeck & Aibinu, 2010). The accuracy of cost estimates depends heavily on the clarity and completeness of design information (Cunningham, 2015). If architects provide insufficient or ambiguous details, quantity surveyors are forced to make assumptions, resulting in inaccurate cost forecasts (Serpell, 2005).

Effective communication mechanisms - such as real-time digital collaboration platforms, regular design-cost review meetings, and shared documentation - can greatly improve cost estimation accuracy (Rustom, 2020). Early and continuous involvement of the QS during conceptual and schematic design enhances cost predictability and reduces the need for rework (Ling & Boo, 2010).

Barriers to Effective Communication

Despite its importance, communication between architects and QSs is often hindered by organisational, behavioural, and technical barriers. These include time pressures, unclear lines of responsibility, inadequate ICT systems, and fear of professional conflict (Jaffar, Tharim and Shuib,

2011). Differences in professional language, hierarchical structures, and role perceptions can also cause misinterpretation of information (Hoezen et al., 2006).

Furthermore, cultural and behavioural issues - such as the reluctance to question authority or to admit errors - exacerbate communication breakdowns (Kelvin-Iloafu, 2017). Within the South African context, limited adoption of digital communication tools and insufficient interdisciplinary training continue to undermine collaboration between architects and QSs (ASAQS, 2019). While extensive research discusses communication in construction generally, there is a lack of focused investigation into how communication between architects and quantity surveyors specifically influences cost estimation accuracy during the design stage. This study addresses this gap by examining communication barriers, evaluating their effects on cost predictability, and proposing strategies to strengthen collaboration between these two professions.

Research Methodology and Method

The study population comprised registered architects (South African Council for the Architectural Profession - SACAP) and quantity surveyors (Association of South African Quantity Surveyors - ASAQS) actively engaged in design-stage project work. A purposive non-probability sampling technique was applied to select participants with relevant experience and insight into interdisciplinary communication. A total of 36 professionals participated in the study, including 18 architects, 14 quantity surveyors, and 4 project managers who routinely coordinate design - cost integration. Data obtained by structured interviews would be compiled as the primary method. Supplementary data will be obtained from interviews with other various consultants such as the project managers on a project to address the questions from the proposed study.

The questionnaire was created using Google Forms for maximum convenience, effect, and accuracy in data analysis, and responses were automatically recorded in a Microsoft Excel document created and linked to the questionnaire. Microsoft Excel provides simple analysis with its already coded formulae to prevent errors while coding and developing relevant formulas to analyse obtained data. The software enables the use of descriptive statistics to examine the data by showing percentages and mean scores of the data.

All research participants were fully informed of the ethical procedures and standards established by the University of the Free State and the Ethics Committee before participation in the study to comply with ethical principles and rules. According to the established regulations and standards, the study's leader was permitted to gather data. Participants were made aware of the anonymity of their participation and that no identifying information would be required of them to ensure conformance.

Research Results

Demographic Information

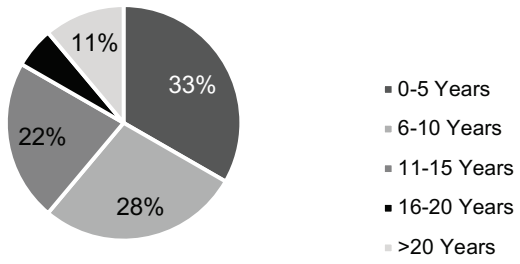


Figure 1 Demographic Summary of Respondents based on Years of Experience

The study found that 50% of the respondents were architects, whereas only 5.6% registered as professionals. 38.9% were Quantity Surveyors, whereas 22.2% were registered as professional Quantity Surveyors. The remaining percentage are other stakeholders forming part of a project team. Only 11.1% worked in the construction industry for more than 20 years, and 33.3% worked between 0 to 5 years.

The experience of professionals enhances their communication methods and skills for project success. Thus, these results offer a solid foundation for adequate industry knowledge of practical methods for communication in completing projects successfully.

Analysis of Core Findings

Information Communication Methods Implementation in Construction Projects

When asked whether their organisations had increased investment in structured communication methods (such as digital collaboration platforms, coordination meetings, or standardised reporting), 67% of respondents confirmed improvement, 22% were uncertain, and 11% indicated no change.

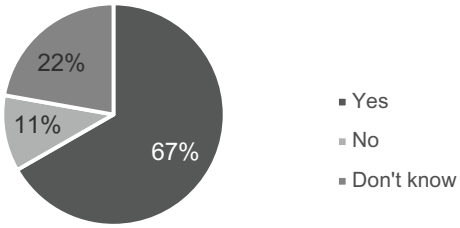


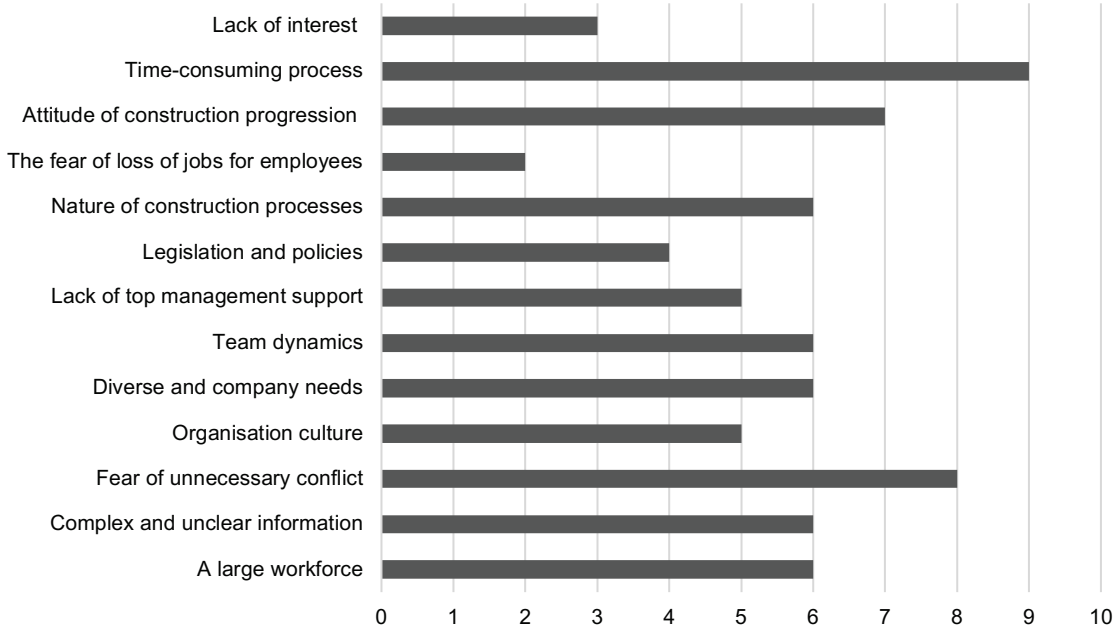
Figure 2 The Increase of Investing in Proper Communication Methods

These results suggest growing awareness among construction professionals of the importance of formal communication strategies. However, qualitative feedback indicated that while communication tools were available, their consistent use between architects and QSs remained limited, often due to time constraints and the perception that such methods were “administratively heavy.” This aligns with Boxall (2011), who found that communication breakdowns between architects and QSs often arise not from lack of intent, but from the absence of formalised communication structures that encourage early and continuous interaction during design development.

Barriers to the Implementation of Proper Communication Methods

Respondents identified several barriers that hinder communication effectiveness.

Table 1 [*sic*] Barriers to Investing in Proper Communication Methods



As illustrated in Table 1, the most prominent constraints were time-consuming communication processes (45%), limited resources (38%), and fear of conflict (33%). Additional obstacles included unclear information, complex team dynamics, and organisational culture that discouraged open dialogue. These findings confirm that behavioural and organisational factors, rather than technical limitations, remain the primary barriers to effective communication (Jaffar et al., 2011). The fear of conflict prevents QSs from questioning design feasibility or architects from addressing cost discrepancies early in the process - ultimately reducing cost estimation accuracy.

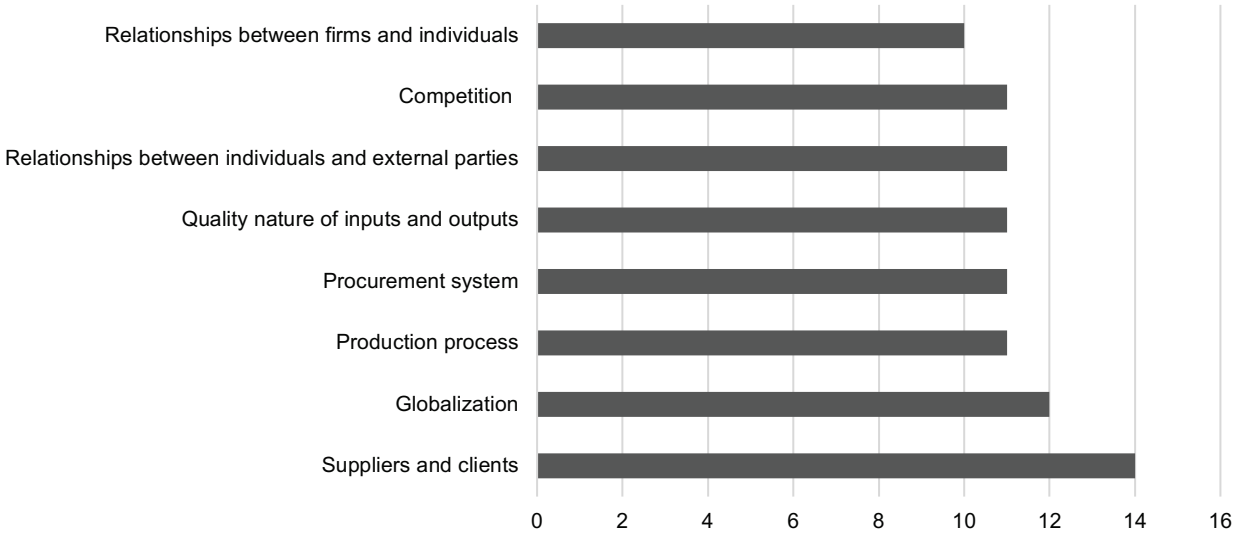
Causes for the Poor Adoption of Proper ICT Systems in an Organisation

The questionnaire aimed to identify the reasons for the poor adoption of ICT systems in an organisation. Although 78% of participants acknowledged that digital tools (such as Building Information Modelling -BIM - or online document management platforms) could enhance communication, only 41% reported using such systems regularly. The main causes for underutilisation were limited training, software costs, and resistance to change. Therefore, effective communication methods in the workplace can enhance a firm's competitive advantage by increasing staff output, establishing a positive brand image, and fostering employee trust. However, respondents preferred using their methods due to their organizational effectiveness. This suggests that while the industry recognises the potential of technology to bridge information gaps between architects and QSs, its integration remains inconsistent. Successful implementation of ICT-based collaboration requires not only access to technology but also organisational commitment to training and process alignment (Maqbool, 2018; Rustom, 2020).

Drivers of Innovation in Construction

As identified and illustrated in Table 2, respondents rated innovation drivers in the construction industry, with suppliers and clients being the most influential. Client organizations foster ideal conditions for innovation. Effective communication systems are crucial for these drivers, ensuring all parties understand information. Therefore, organisations must implement proper communication with their clients to foster innovation and ensure all parties are aware of the ideal conditions for innovation.

Table 2 [*sic*] Drivers of Innovation in Construction



Discussion

The aim stated that implementing proper communication methods between the various consultants forming part of a construction project will reduce the gap regarding the cost estimation for a project enabling construction companies and contractors to work in unison for future developments. This study found that implementing proper communication methods takes up time that could have been spent on completing a project successfully and introduces unnecessary conflict between parties to a However, [*sic*]

However, participants noted that innovation in professional collaboration - specifically between architects and QSs - remains limited due to traditional role boundaries. When communication is strengthened through early design workshops or integrated project delivery models, professionals are better able to coordinate design alternatives with cost constraints, leading to more realistic budgets and smoother project execution.

Table 3 Barriers/Constraints in the Implementation of Proper Communication Methods

Barriers/constraints	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Limited knowledge of proper communication methods	8%	8%	23%	38%	23%
The nature of construction work hinders the adoption	17%	17%	33%	33%	0%
Current communication methods available in SA are not practical	25%	42%	8%	17%	8%
Implementing proper ICT systems has both positive and negative effect	17%	17%	25%	33%	8%
Increases a firm's competitiveness	15%	8%	8%	31%	38%
Improve product quality	8%	8%	8%	38%	38%
Improve relationships among stakeholders	10%	0%	0%	30%	60%
This leads to higher productivity	9%	9%	0%	36%	45%
Prefers to carry on with familiar methods of operation	17%	8%	33%	25%	17%
Can reduce the time for completing projects	9%	0%	9%	36%	45%

Finding 1: The Implementation of Proper Communication Methods to ensure Information Flow

The results of the study indicated the awareness of respondents on whether their respective organisations have increased their investment in proper communication methods. More than 60% of respondents indicated that they are aware of the communication methods implemented by their organisations and that it has improved recently, compared to other respondents who have yet to know if their communication methods have improved or not. Thus, increasing an organisation's investment in proper communication methods does influence the information accuracy between stakeholders, based on Table 3.

Finding 2: Communication Barriers and Constraints

As a result of the study, investing in proper communication methods does increase an organization to complete their construction projects. However, the study also found that implementing proper communication methods and ensuring that these methods are effective, is a time-consuming process and can result in a loss of time, which could have been spent on completing the project. A fear of conflict between stakeholders also influences the implementation of proper communication methods as various stakeholders work together on a project, with differences in opinion. A study conducted by (Jaffar, Tharim & Shuib, 2011), found that conflict arises between stakeholders due to three main factors, such as behavioural problems, contractual problems, and technical problems. Thus, conflict arises due to behavioural problems such as poor communication among project team members and contractual conflict arises due to contractual factors such as improper project schedules and estimates. The current study, however, proved this according to Table 3, 60% of the respondents strongly agreed that implementing proper communication methods within an organisation does lead to better relationships between stakeholders. The study, however, failed to indicate that implementing proper communication methods is a time-consuming process, as Table 3 indicates that 45% of the respondents strongly agreed that implementing proper communication does reduce the time for completing projects.

Finding 3: Drivers of Innovation in the Construction Industry

The study found that suppliers and clients are the main drivers of innovation in the construction industry, as communication enables an organisation to closely collaborate with their suppliers and understand the needs of their clients to improve innovation. Thus, the feedback from clients and the ability to source innovative components from suppliers are vital for the development of the construction industry as well as for an organisation within the industry.

Overall, the results highlight that communication quality between architects and quantity surveyors directly influences the accuracy of cost estimates during the design stage. While both professions recognise the importance of collaboration, the absence of structured communication frameworks, reluctance to use digital tools, and behavioural barriers such as fear of conflict remain persistent challenges.

Improved communication - achieved through early joint design sessions, shared document systems, and continuous feedback - can minimise design ambiguities, prevent estimation errors, and build trust between professionals. These findings align with international literature (Serpell, 2005; Rustom, 2020) and contribute to the growing recognition that effective interdisciplinary communication is as critical to project success as technical competence.

Recommendations

From the study's findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. A proper communication method must be available and implemented during every stage of a project to guarantee the project stakeholders are properly informed and communicating project information.
2. Industry Professionals and organisations must make larger investments in cutting-edge communication technologies by offering training and information on the various tools that can be used to achieve optimal effectiveness.
3. After each stage of a project, conduct a debriefing session to identify what went well and what could be improved in terms of communication. Use this feedback to refine the communication processes for future projects.
4. Seeing as conflict is a lead barrier to communication effectiveness, establish a process for addressing conflicts or disagreements that may arise during the design stage. Encourage team members to resolve issues professionally and promptly.

Conclusion

This study explored the relationship between architects and quantity surveyors during the design stage, focusing on how communication quality affects the accuracy of cost estimates. The findings demonstrated that ineffective communication - caused by unclear documentation, limited use of collaborative technologies, and reluctance to engage in open feedback - contributes to inaccurate cost forecasting and potential disputes. Conversely, regular interaction, structured feedback loops, and transparent information sharing significantly improve cost reliability and professional collaboration.

The study achieved its primary objective of highlighting the critical link between communication practices and cost estimation accuracy. It confirmed that implementing formal communication frameworks and investing in digital collaboration platforms can minimise information loss and enhance decision-making efficiency. Furthermore, barriers such as fear of conflict, limited time, and insufficient communication training were identified as key obstacles to effective teamwork. By adopting the recommended strategies, construction professionals can strengthen interdisciplinary collaboration, reduce cost variance, and enhance overall project performance - contributing to a more resilient and efficient South African construction industry.

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SACQSP2025-119

Developing a Collaborative Cost Management Framework for Public Sector Projects

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Abstract

Cost overruns persist in South African public sector projects despite multiple interventions. While the widespread use of traditional cost management techniques has been blamed for the challenge's persistence, there have been few studies attempting to show how effective collaborative cost management techniques can be in resolving this issue in the South African context. In order to improve the cost performance of public sector projects, this study aims to demonstrate the value of a collaborative cost management framework. In accordance with the case study research design, information was gathered using a combination of interviews and project-related documentation drawn from five current and completed public sector initiatives that served as cases. Purposive selection was used to choose the study's projects and participants. Thematic analysis was used to examine the data. The study's findings demonstrated how beneficial the collaborative cost management framework was for raising the overall performance and cost of public sector projects. The framework clarified how it may serve as a guide for all project participants to participate in cooperative cost management efforts with the goal of adding value for the client. Additionally, the framework's capacity to alleviate long-standing cost management issues was articulated. Given the importance of collaborative cultures for supporting effective cost management performance, it is anticipated that the study's findings will encourage the creation of such cultures both within and across supply chains. This study is a useful resource for cost management experts since it emphasises the importance of collaborative cost management approaches in producing optimal construction project cost performance.

Keywords: Collaboration, Construction, Cost Management, Public Projects.

Introduction

South African public sector projects continue to experience poor cost performance, frequently exceeding approved budgets. This perennial issue has made it more difficult for government to supply infrastructure-related services at an affordable cost. Although numerous studies have explored why there is poor cost performance and even proposed solutions (Abdul Nabi & El-adaway, 2021), recent findings indicate a persistence of the problem (Parsamehr et al., 2023). However, limited studies have investigated the contribution of the traditional cost management approaches towards addressing or perpetuating such a problem (Farouk & Rahman, 2023). Traditional cost management approaches face several shortcomings in the current fast-paced business environment. From conventional budgeting processes to reactive measures and limited stakeholder engagement, such processes fail to keep up with evolving needs of modern-day infrastructure projects. Scholars such as Monyane et al. (2020) advocate for the employment of agile, integrated, and proactive cost management practices to eliminate such weaknesses. Such practices center on the deployment of technology, proactive stakeholder engagement, and flexible methodologies to foster improved project cost performance.

Teamwork is fundamental to bring together varied opinions, capacities, and competencies for maximum cost-effectiveness (Monyane et al., 2020). Team-oriented cost management involves collaborative effort by various stakeholders, be it internal functions, suppliers, or external partners, to drive cost-reduction activities, streamline processes, and enhance value creation (Klassen et al., 2019). With knowledge exchange and cross-functional collaboration between teams, significant cost-savings can be achieved. In the first place, collaboration allows different project stakeholders to identify

and rank cost-saving activities through collective problem-solving and brainstorming (Fayard et al., 2022). Secondly, by prioritizing information sharing concerning expenses, budgets, and performance indicators, collaborative cost management engenders transparency, responsibility, and trust within the project. Lastly, collaboration enables cost-reduction efforts to be implemented through stakeholder commitment and acceptance (Voss et al., 2020). In addition to cost reduction, collaboration enhances goal alignment, optimises resource utilisation, and improves strategic decision-making (Papadopoulos et al., 2021). Supplier partnerships facilitate economies of scale, enhance favourable conditions, and foster innovative distribution and product design methods, ultimately leading to improved value creation and customer satisfaction. Therefore, cooperation is critical for engendering resource maximization, productivity enhancement, and improved sustainability performance. Adopting collaborative models and good stakeholder engagement practices not only enhances decision-making and innovation but also legitimacy, trust, and resilience. However, in order to optimally achieve these benefits, projects must intentionally design an environment of inclusiveness, transparency, and mutual benefit in venturing through inherent problems.

Keeping the above in mind, particularly within the South African context, embracing a collaborative approach towards cost management in public sector projects can offer an appropriate solution for recurring cost overruns. In spite of this, a paucity of studies seeking to assess the effectiveness of such approaches in enhancing cost performance in these projects has been observed. Existing research detailing the significance of collaborative frameworks has predominantly focused on developed countries (Johnson et al., 2020; Tan et al., 2022). Interestingly, collaborative cultures are shaped by context. Therefore, it is crucial to analyze the relevance and utility of these models to a developing nation context, using a South African exemplar.

This study strives to bridge these gaps by exploring the ability of collaborative techniques to improve cost management performance in South African public sector projects. Specifically, the research seeks to:

- Identify the cause of cost overruns in chosen public sector projects in South Africa.
- Evaluate the current knowledge and practice of collaborative methods among the stakeholders.
- Propose a conceptual collaborative cost management model that is tailored to the South African public sector context.

It is anticipated that the results of this investigation will help to contribute to the growing body of academically oriented contributions in partnership cost management on public sector projects.

Understanding Cost Management Frameworks

Cost management frameworks provide the structured processes, tools, and principles that guide the planning, estimation, budgeting, and control of project costs. They are essential for ensuring financial discipline and delivering value for money. While traditional frameworks have long been the norm, their limitations in contemporary project environments have prompted a shift towards more dynamic and inclusive approaches.

Limitations of Traditional Cost Management Methods

Cost control is a crucial component of project management which ensures that projects are completed within budgetary constraints and value delivered to stakeholders. Many sectors have long relied on traditional cost management techniques for planning, estimating, and controlling costs. However, despite their widespread use, these approaches have notable limitations. One major limitation is their reliance on rigid budgeting procedures, which can hinder flexibility and responsiveness. Budgeting techniques, such as static budgeting frequently overlook unanticipated changes in project requirements and scope, as well as external variables like changes in the market or regulatory actions (Smith, 2017).

Furthermore, traditional cost management techniques are typically more reactive than proactive. Often times, this reactive approach has resulted in lost opportunities to optimize value and save costs. According to Lalic et al. (2022), conventional cost management frameworks often lack the necessary tools to identify cost variances early or to take proactive measures in response to emerging cost trends, resulting in suboptimal project outcomes.

The conventional cost management approaches' scant attention to stakeholder cooperation and participation is another drawback. Traditional methods often overlook the importance of stakeholder engagement in cost-related decision-making, treating cost management as a solely technical activity. The need of stakeholder engagement in cost management is emphasized by Liu and Walker (2022), who stress the necessity of transparent communication, group decision-making, and interest alignment among project participants. The inability of traditional cost management techniques to address stakeholder issues or obtain insightful information without the active participation of stakeholders could result in resistance or discontent. Furthermore, traditional cost management techniques frequently lack adaptability and suppleness to changing project specifications or external conditions. For instance, project teams may be unable to adapt to changing market conditions or needs if they are subject to strict spending caps or set resource allocations as a result of traditional budgeting techniques. Zhang et al. (2018) contend that by imposing bureaucratic procedures or hierarchical structures that discourage initiative and autonomy within project teams, standard cost management frameworks may impede creativity and innovation.

Transition to Stakeholder Engagement and Collaboration in Cost Management

Over the past few decades, there has been a fundamental change in cost management approaches due to the realization of the significance of stakeholder engagement and collaboration. Smith (2017) posits that conventional cost management frameworks frequently ignore stakeholder interests and the larger project environment in favor of cost control strategies. On the other hand, to attain cost effectiveness and project success, modern frameworks place a strong emphasis on cooperation between project participants, including contractors, Governmental organisations and community members (Garcia et al., 2022). The advent of collaborative technologies like the . Building Information Modeling (BIM) has been significant in enabling stakeholder participation in the cost-management process. BIM helps stakeholders to see project expenses in real-time, across the project lifecycle and spot possible areas for cost savings (Zhang et al., 2018). It also improves accountability and transparency in cost management procedures by encouraging information exchange among project teams. According to Zhang et al. (2018), BIM has the ability to enhance cost management procedures by giving stakeholders the ability to find possibilities for cost savings, allocate resources optimally, and manage project risks. Similar to this, different digital tools and platforms like the cloud-based data sharing platforms and collaborative project management software have enabled stakeholders, regardless of location or organizational function, to participate more actively in cost management processes.

In addition, the public sector's cost management procedures have undergone a radical transformation with the advent of the agile project management methodology. This methodology emphasizes iterative growth and ongoing involvement of stakeholders hence enabling project teams to quickly adjust to changing requirements and reduce risks associated with costs (Lalic et al., 2022). Additionally, this methodology encourages cross-functional teamwork, making it possible for stakeholders to work closely together on value engineering, forecasting, and cost estimating tasks. Scholars have underscored the significance of stakeholder participation and partnership in cost management strategies, in addition to technology developments. According to Liu and Walker (2022), effective stakeholder involvement is crucial for building consensus and trust among project participants, thereby enhancing the likelihood of successful cost management.Public-private partnerships (PPPs) and joint ventures exemplify collaborative governance frameworks that facilitate shared decision-making and risk distribution, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of cost management outcomes (Smith et al., 2023).

Case studies of Singapore’s public housing development program (Tan et al., 2022) and the London Crossrail project (Johnson et al., 2020) demonstrate that effective collaborative cost management can significantly reduce expenditures and enhance project outcomes in the public sector. These projects highlight how proactive risk management, performance measurement, and stakeholder participation may result in successful cost optimization programs. Notwithstanding the advantages of cooperation and stakeholder involvement in cost management, there are still a number of obstacles preventing its application in the South African construction industry and beyond. Adopting collaborative approaches is frequently hampered by competing agendas, siloed working, and cultural opposition to change. Moreover, challenges related to data interoperability, along with concerns about privacy and security, can hinder effective stakeholder engagement. Overcoming these barriers requires strong leadership, transparent communication, and a willingness to adopt innovative technologies and approaches

Research Methodology

This study is grounded in an interpretivist philosophy, which is well-suited for exploring complex social phenomena like collaborative cost management (Fellows & Liu, 2015). Accordingly, a qualitative, multi-case study research strategy was selected because it allows for the use of a variety of methods for data elicitation and analysis and facilitates an in-depth exploration into phenomena within its natural contexts (Awuzie & McDermott, 2017; Yin, 2018). Case studies contribute to the development of new theoretical views on collaborative cost management in the public sector, as well as the improvement of current ideas through meticulous data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Baxter & Jack, 2020; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2019). The Free State Department of Public Works (FSDPW) project management system was used to choose the projects that served as case studies for this study. The initiatives were anonymously coded and uniquely identified using project numbers. Before moving forward with a project, the FSDPW conducts a feasibility analysis of all viable choices and compares the needs against properties owned by the state. A public sector official was asked to select instances using a set of case selection criteria from a list of projects carried out under the FSDPW in Bloemfontein, South Africa, in order to eliminate bias. These requirements included school buildings that were given to contractors in grades 7 and 8, located in the province of the Free State, awarded between 2020 and 2024, and that were either recently finished, under construction, or terminated and re-awarded, but with a cost overrun of between 5% and 30%.

Document analysis, and semi-structured interviews, were used to gather data for this investigation. A total of twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted. The principle of data saturation was employed to determine the sufficiency of the sample size (Fusch & Ness, 2015). After a preliminary analysis, five cases were selected for this study. Furthermore, records were reviewed in order to understand data that represented preliminary cost projections from the beginning to the conclusion. Project timelines were recorded by looking through the contract documentation. Minutes from site meetings, contract paperwork, final financial statements, and instruction booklets were also examined. The primary cost management performance issues were identified by an analysis of the data gathered from the cases.

Contractors must register on the Construction Industry Development Board's (CIDB) grading system before they are eligible to bid on a project. A grading system is used to evaluate contractors' performance based on the maximum turnover attained and the successful completion of projects in order to promote them to a higher grade. The CIDB grading system (System 1) establishes the criteria for grading contractors according to the calibre of work they can complete.

The CIDB grading table and rules for assigning contractors a grade based on the quality of work they can perform are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1 Rating Values for CIDB Grading

Designation	Contract value limit	Best Annual Turnover (R) (2 year) % of Tender value	Largest contract(R) (5 year) % of Tender value
Grade 1	R500 000	0	0
Grade 2	R1 million	0	20%
Grade 3	R3 million	50%	22,5%
Grade 4	R6 million	50%	22,5%
Grade 5	R10 million	50%	22,5%
Grade 6	R20 million	50%	22,5%
Grade 7	R60 million	50%	22,5%
Grade 8	R200 million	50%	22,5%
Grade 9	N/A	50%	22,5%

Table 2 presents a profile of all selected case studies derived from the public sector project management system. It offers a concise summary of the chosen cases, designated as 'Case 1', 'Case

2', 'Case 3', 'Case 4', and 'Case 5'. The South African Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB) classifies project types into four categories: General Building (GB), Civil Engineering (CE), Electrical Engineering (EE), and Mechanical Engineering (ME). This study includes general construction projects from the FSDPW, encompassing structures like school hostels and new educational facilities. The initial tender amounts ranged from R33,000.00 to R77,000,000.00, with durations established at 18 months, excluding any time extensions.

Table 2 Level of CIDB Grading for Selected Cases

Case	Contract value	CIDB grading	Status of the project	Project type	Procurement method
Case 1 (C_1)	R74 811 000	8GB	Completed	New school	Develop and construct
Case 2 (C_2)	R74 322 000	8GB	Under construction	New School	Develop and construct
Case 3 (C_3)	R81 545 000	8GB	Under construction	New school	Develop and construct
Case 4 (C_4)	R44 876 000	7GB	Under construction	New school hostel	Develop and construct
Case 5 (C_5)	R77 745 000	7GB	Terminated and re-appointment	New school	Develop and construct

The study carried out twenty semi-structured interviews with individuals from the chosen cases. The participants consisted of one construction project manager, one quantity surveyor, one architect, and one engineer from each case study project. Semi-structured interviews were conducted at various intervals from March to September 2023 in the offices of different organisations. Appropriate gatekeeper approvals were secured from each cooperating firm before the initiation of data collection. Moreover, consent for voluntary participation was secured from respondents before the commencement of each session. The interviewees received a form bearing the University letterhead to complete prior to participating in the study. All interviewees were provided with an explanation of the form's contents. The primary author conducted the interviews for the documented cases, whereas both authors independently analysed the data, indicative of multi-investigator triangulation (Awuzie & McDermott, 2017). The interview sessions, lasting between forty-five minutes and one hour each, were recorded and transcribed verbatim with the interviewees' consent.

Thematic analysis was applied to make sense of the data (Kulatunga et al., 2007). The analysis followed the six-phase process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. This rigorous process ensured that the findings were deeply rooted in the data. The resulting themes are presented and discussed in the following section, supported by illustrative figures and charts.The researchers made considerable efforts to ensure reliability and validity of the data collected by using different types of informants on various sites as well as by providing background data to establish the context of the study and details of the phenomenon in question to make it possible for comparisons to be made (Shenton, 2004). One limitation of this research is its focus exclusively on public sector projects within South Africa, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other contexts or regions. Moreover, different procurement methods, other than those applicable to this study might provide different results.

Research Findings

Empirical results about project cost performance and its underlying causes are provided in this section. An assessment of the stakeholders' perceptions regarding the utility of collaborative costing within the South African construction industry is presented. The concept was examined in greater depth by means of multiple scenarios for evaluating its real-world application. Data for projects C1 through C5 are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 Cost Performance of C_1, C_2, C_3, C_4 and C_5

PROJECT DATA	**C_1**	**C_2**	**C_3**	**C_4**	**C_5**
Date contractor appointed	24 Feb 2020	17 April 2020	08 Jan 2020	27 Aug 2020	08 November 2020
Site hand-over date	23 March 2020	9 May 2020	17 Jan 2020	22 October 2020	25 November 2020
Practical completion date	23 September 2021	9 November 2021	17 July 2021	22 April 2022	25 May 2022
Actual completion date	3 March 2023	Under Construction	Under Construction	Under Construction	Under construction
Contract amount	R74 000 000	R75 300 000	R74 264 000	R44 300 000	R33 300 000
Estimated Final amount	R81 000 000	R79 200 000	R78 400 000	R81 600 000	R77 700 000
Overrun amount Procurement method	R7 000 000 Develop and construct	R4 400 000 Develop and construct	R4 000 000 Develop and construct	R42 400 000 Develop and construct	R6 000 000 at the time of termination of contract Develop and construct

Tables 3 and 4 display the findings of the cost performance of public projects. The project data from the cases reveal that temporal performance was likewise inadequate. The data reveal that cost overruns ranged from 5% to 133% of the original contract amount.

The examined projects disclosed multiple variables leading to their underperformance, such as client-requested additional tasks, time extensions, re-measurements, and modifications that required cooperative cost management. Notwithstanding these issues, no corrective actions were undertaken. The selected cases employed a collaborative procurement process known as the develop and construct system. Nonetheless, the initiatives did not fulfil the clients' expectations about budget and timeline.

Document analysis highlighted inefficient stakeholder interaction, persistent variation orders, inadequate planning, and poor project management as significant contributors to project failure. A closer look at the procurement methods revealed a clear disconnect between the planning and construction phases. Notably, the contractor was not engaged at an early stage, which further exacerbated coordination and execution issues.

A quantity surveyor was appointed to manage the cost of the projects independently, while the design team of architects and engineers developed the initial and detailed designs separately prior to the introduction of a contractor in the planning stages. The design team conducted the costing and design of the project independently, without the presence of any constructors. At this stage, a report on each design update was submitted to the quantity surveyor to revise the cost of the detailed design and offer financial guidance to the design team. This information was essential for determining whether to proceed with or modify the design based on budget constraints before proceeding to tender. Cost reports reflecting variation orders were utilized in post-contract cost management to inform the client of progress.

Questions were posed to interviewees to elicit their views on the effectiveness of collaborative cost management practices in addressing the challenges faced. The quantity surveyors and project managers observed that designers frequently did not communicate essential information to other consultants, providing such information to the cost managers only after the designs had been finalized with the clients. The focus was primarily on client approval rather than on the collaborative decisions of the team.

Collaboration management methods were established on lean methodologies. Interviewees participated in conversations about lean tools to evaluate their understanding of the idea and its

application. The tools utilised encompassed set-based design, team formation, a risk and reward system, target cost establishment predicated on design and value with a cross-functional team, the employment of an integrated form of agreement, the application of Building Information Modelling (BIM), and the execution of choosing by advantage (CBA) methodologies for decision-making. Nevertheless, of the technologies enumerated, BIM was exploited minimally, and the big room facility was utilised exclusively for site meetings, proving inadequate as a collaborative platform for all team members. The involvement of additional parties in the site meetings was not regularly guaranteed. Furthermore, interviewers utilised the phrase 'collaboration' interchangeably with 'partnering.' All interviewees agreed that collaboration signifies a transaction between organisations intended to leverage resources for a common goal. Architect 1 equated a joint venture with collaboration, while Project Manager 2 asserted that cooperation is synonymous with collaboration. The thematic analysis of interview transcripts and project papers identified four primary themes that clarify the fundamental obstacles and opportunities for collaborative cost management in the examined projects. These themes transcend conventional textbook ideas to offer context-specific insights gained directly from empirical evidence.

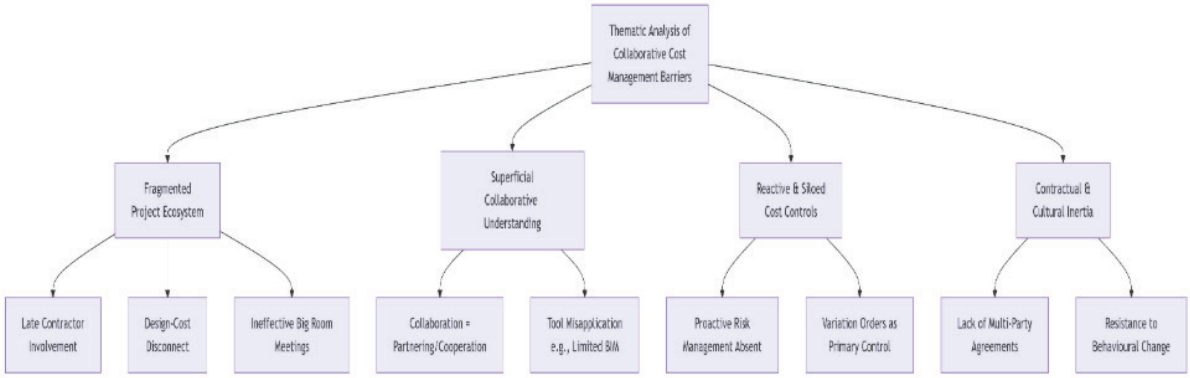

Figure 1 Map of Themes depicting the Four Main Themes and their Sub-themes

Theme 1: A Fragmented Project Ecosystem

A dominant theme was the systemic fragmentation in project delivery. Despite the use of the 'Develop and Construct' method, which implies collaboration, the process remained sequential and siloed. As one Quantity Surveyor noted: "The designs were completed in isolation. We received drawings for costing, but the constructor's practical input was missing, leading to unforeseen costs during construction." This was visually evident in the project timelines, where a significant gap existed between the design phase and contractor appointment (see Table 3). The 'Big Room' concept was physically present but functionally ineffective, used for traditional progress meetings rather than integrated, concurrent problem-solving.

Theme 2: A Superficial Understanding of Collaboration

The data revealed a conceptual ambiguity around the term "collaboration." It was often conflated with basic cooperation or contractual partnering arrangements like joint ventures. There was no shared mental model of collaboration as a deep, integrated process involving shared risk and reward, open-book accounting, and early stakeholder involvement. An Architect stated, "For us, collaboration means working with the client to get design approval and then cooperating with the QS on costs," highlighting a client-centric rather than a team-centric view. This superficial understanding underpinned the limited and often tokenistic application of collaborative tools like BIM.

Theme 3: Reactive and Siloed Cost Controls

Cost management was consistently described and observed as a reactive, gatekeeping function rather than a proactive, value-engineering one. The primary mechanism for cost control was the processing of variation orders after changes had occurred. A Project Manager lamented, "We are always chasing variations. By the time a cost report is issued, the financial decision is often a fait accompli." The absence of proactive risk management and joint contingency planning was a critical sub-theme,

directly linked to the high-cost overruns. Cost data was not integrated dynamically with project progress, preventing real-time financial decision-making.

Theme 4: Contractual and Cultural Inertia

The analysis identified a significant barrier in the form of entrenched contractual and cultural norms. The standard forms of contract used did not incentivise or mandate the deep collaboration found in frameworks like Integrated Project Delivery (IPD). Furthermore, there was a recognised resistance to the behavioural changes required. As one Engineer put it, "The system here is adversarial by habit. Moving to a truly collaborative model would require not just a new contract, but a complete mindset shift for everyone, from the client down." The lack of multi-party agreements that align objectives and share risks/rewards was a key missing enabler.

Discussion

Collaborative cost management in the construction sector has received considerable focus recently as organisations aim to enhance cost efficiency and project results. Collaborative cost management in the construction sector is a complex process necessitating efficient stakeholder collaboration, technological utilisation, proactive risk management, and careful draughting of contractual agreements. By incorporating these essential insights into their cost management strategies, construction firms may optimise project results, realise cost efficiencies, and elevate overall project performance. Cost management in conventional projects sometimes relies on historical data, which may include wasteful (non-value-adding) activities from prior projects. Project estimations are conducted in isolation, excluding suppliers from the team (Ahmed et al., 2019). Suppliers are granted unrestricted authority to determine their quotations and select their desired profit margins. The data from interviews indicated that participants did not utilise any collaborative principles developed from lean management approaches. It was apparent that collaboration remained poorly comprehended by participants in project delivery within the South African construction sector. The selection of team members is a crucial determinant in the success of a high-performing project team. Furthermore, large collaborative sessions would facilitate cooperation among all stakeholders during the design phase, allowing designers, contractors, subcontractors, and owners to debate design specifics without the need for cumbersome requests for information (RFIs) (Ballard, 2009). Implementing set-based design and Target Value Design (TVD) would have enhanced adherence to the design in the case-study projects, hence minimising alterations during construction.

Using target costing would have averted all of the projects' cost overruns (Ballard, 2008). The implementation of the last planner system (LPS) could have helped to decrease construction and design delays, eliminate waste, and foresee forthcoming issues (Hamazeh et al., 2016). In addition, fresh concepts would have resulted from early stakeholder consultation and participation in the design process. Moreover, consulting all stakeholders early and involving them in the design phase would have produced innovative ideas. The involvement of different stakeholders in the design phase not only guarantees enhanced communication and better understanding, but also ensures quality, cost and time efficiencies. The collaboration of various parties and the alignment of shareholders' interests is the basis of lean construction. However, collaborative behavioural changes are required in addition to contract changes to effect such a system in construction. The findings of this study, however, demonstrate a significant gap between the theoretical potential of collaboration and its practical application in the South African public sector context. The identified themes of fragmentation, conceptual ambiguity, reactive controls, and inertia provide a granular understanding of why cost overruns persist even when collaborative procurement methods are nominally employed. The thematic findings resonate with but critically extend the existing literature. The observed fragmentation confirms the limitations of traditional, sequential approaches noted by Smith (2017).

However, this study reveals that simply labelling a procurement method as "collaborative" (e.g., Develop and Construct) is insufficient without the supporting processes and culture, a nuance often overlooked. The conceptual confusion around "collaboration" echoes the literature on partnering (Garcia et al., 2022) but highlights a critical implementation barrier: if stakeholders do not share a deep, common understanding of what collaboration entails, their efforts will be misaligned and ineffective. The reactive nature of cost control aligns with the criticisms of traditional methods by Ammar et al. (2020). This study provides empirical evidence that this reactivity is a direct consequence of the fragmented ecosystem and late involvement of key stakeholders like contractors. The proposed framework (Figure 2) directly addresses this by integrating cost management from the outset. Finally,

the theme of contractual and cultural inertia underscores the point made by Liu and Walker (2022) that stakeholder engagement is crucial but adds that such engagement must be structurally incentivised through contracts and actively managed to overcome deep-seated cultural resistance.

The proposed collaborative cost management framework (Figure 2) is therefore not merely a theoretical model but a direct response to the thematic findings. It is designed to replace the identified barriers with enablers: replacing fragmentation with integration, ambiguity with clarity, reactivity with proactivity, and inertia with a structured, continuous improvement cycle. The collaborative cost management framework's efficacy will be seen when integrated with the procurement system that facilitates collaboration, as mandated by the Public Finance Management Amendment Act for public sector projects in South Africa. This framework's development integrates the methodologies of Ballard (2009) and Seed (2015). Ballard and Seed's contributions, notably via the Last Planner System (LPS) and lean construction concepts, underscore collaboration, iterative enhancement, and waste minimisation in project management. Their approaches focus on improving project efficiency and achieving reliable workflow by integrating planning and performance measurement into project execution. In the context of a collaborative cost management framework, Ballard and Seed's principles can be integrated to enhance the feedback loop system by introducing structured, iterative steps that improve cost control and project outcomes.

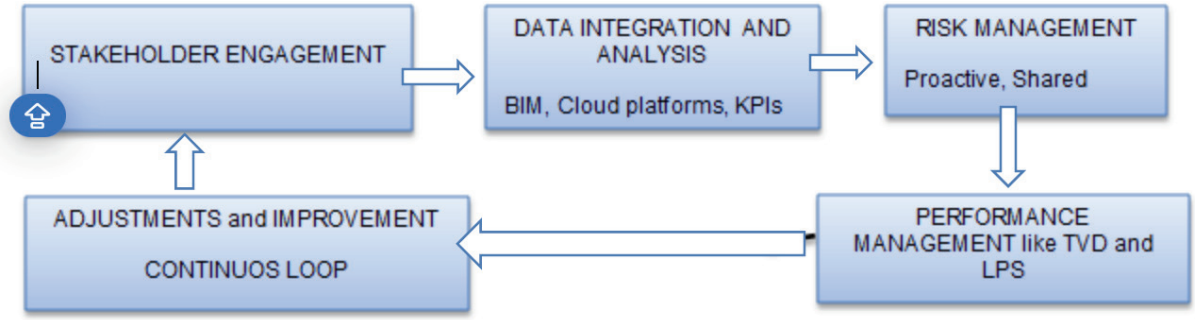

Figure 2 Proposed Collaborative Cost Management Model

The proposed framework functions as a dynamic, iterative cycle designed to institutionalize collaboration. It commences with Stakeholder Engagement, fostering early and continuous involvement based on a shared understanding of collaboration, which is cultivated through dedicated boot camps and solidified via multi-party agreements. This fundamental participation facilitates Data Integration and Analysis, employing technologies like Building Information Modelling (BIM) and cloud platforms to grant all stakeholders transparent, real-time access to pricing and project data. This transparency, in turn, fuels a proactive approach to Risk Management, transforming it into a shared process for the early identification and mitigation of risks, thereby moving beyond the traditional reactive cycle of variation orders. Concurrently, Performance Management is conducted using Lean tools like Target Value Design and the Last Planner System to rigorously measure progress against predefined collaborative goals. Finally, the cycle is closed through Continuous Improvement and Adjustments, where performance data is systematically analyzed to make informed adjustments, thereby embedding a culture of learning and adaptive management directly into the project delivery process.

Conclusion

This study examined the effectiveness of the collaborative cost management framework as a solution to the problems obstructing the successful implementation of standard cost management frameworks in public building projects. The study conclusively demonstrates that the chronic cost overruns in the South African public sector projects studied are not merely technical failures but are symptomatic of a fragmented project ecosystem, a superficial understanding of collaboration, reactive cost controls, and deep-seated contractual and cultural inertia. The proposed collaborative cost management framework was developed in direct response to these identified, context-specific challenges. It provides a structured yet flexible model to transition from the current dysfunctional state to one of integrated, proactive, and value-driven cost management. The implications of this research are both practical and theoretical. For practitioners, the framework offers an actionable roadmap. It underscores the non-negotiable requirement for genuine collaboration, which must be actively fostered by cost managers and project leaders through early stakeholder involvement, the use of target costing, and the

distribution of risks and benefits via multi-party agreements. It also highlights the critical importance of prioritising team formation and cultivating a collaborative culture from the project's inception.

Recommendations

For policymakers and researchers, this study highlights that simply adopting collaborative-sounding procurement methods is futile without simultaneously addressing the foundational elements of culture, contract, and competency. The findings call for a concerted effort to develop standard contractual frameworks that incentivise collaboration for the South African public sector and to invest in training that builds a shared understanding of collaborative principles. whilst challenges related to data interoperability, cultural resistance, and institutional impediments remain, this study posits that they can be overcome through the deliberate and structured application of the proposed framework. By fostering ongoing collaboration, knowledge exchange, and a commitment to continuous improvement, the South African public sector can build a robust and economical infrastructure that satisfies the requirements of current and future generations.

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SACQSP2025-129

An Analysis of Professional Fee Determination Practices in the South African Construction Industry: Towards a Sustainable Conceptual Framework for Equitable Allocation

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Abstract

Commercial professional fee competition in South Africa has intensified beyond international norms, primarily due to prolonged economic stagnation and structural market pressures. Construction professionals (CPs) face growing financial strain as professional fees continue to decline amid macroeconomic instability, slow sectoral growth, and market oversupply. The absence of effective service differentiation within the Identification of Work (IDoW) framework further amplifies price-based competition, encouraging fee undercutting among the Construction Professional Councils (CPCs). Within the commercial development sector, professional remuneration is typically conceptualised as a collective "fee basket", a fixed proportion of total construction costs, distributed among CPs. However, this model is increasingly constrained by diminishing project profitability, declining returns on investment, and the proliferation of specialist consultants, all of which intensify intra-professional competition and undermine the financial sustainability of professional practice in the built environment.

Fee Allocation Challenges: Fee guides allocate fees with uniform discounts to meet budget constraints. Ideally, fee adjustments should reflect coordinated changes in CP roles and agreed scope expansions. However, analysis shows CPC fee increases are often uncoordinated and reactive, leading to inflated, inequitable, and non-market-related fee guides.

Systemic Risks: Inconsistent, subjective fee adjustments in a competitive market risk destabilizing the fee distribution system. This could undermine fairness, erode trust and collaboration, and foster short-term individual gains over long-term collective and industry sustainability.

Study employed a literature review to examine the economic environment's effect on professional fee determination practices, analysing historic fee increases across the CPC to identify trends and shifts in approach. Qualitative research methods were applied through interviews with senior industry professionals to obtain primary data and industry insights on fee determination and allocation methodologies, while quantitative methods utilised secondary data in a theoretical case study of a 10 000 m² office building to evaluate professional fee escalation and market relevance.

To evaluate the validity of the criteria CPCs use to determine and distribute professional fees post-abolishment of statutory fees, when the commercial fee basket is applied, assessing whether practices are, aligned with the Council for the Built Environment (CBE) policy guideline on Professional fees (2008,6), reflect free market realities, equitable, and supportive of CPs' long-term sustainability.

Key Words: Price Theory, Inter-Dependable Remuneration, Perception And Culture On Value Contribution, Equitable Fee Determination, Free Market Fee Determination.

Introduction

Since the late 1980s, many societies have moved away from prescribed professional fees in favour of market-based pricing, driven by competition and free-market principles (Fourie, 2012; Prinsloo & Andersen, 2015; Okonkwo & Wium, 2018; Laryea, Watermeyer & Govender, 2020). In South Africa (SA), this shift culminated in the Competition Commission's 2016 decision to abolish prescribed tariffs, citing conflict with the Competition Act no 89 of 1998 (Government Gazette, 1998:89).

Prescribed fees were replaced by recommended fee guidelines, issued by Construction Professional Councils (CPCs) under oversight of the Council for the Built Environment (CBE), (Okonkwo Wuim, 2019; Laryea Watermeyer & Govender, 2020). These guidelines aim to normalize fees while allowing competition—often via discounts. Since then, CPCs have had to revise their fee determination methods, aligning with the CBE's 2008 Policy on Guideline Professional Fees, and adapting to a volatile market shaped by changing supply-demand dynamics (Dutta et al., 2003; Beale, 2018).

Although market-driven pricing may democratize fees and stimulate innovation, it also risks undermining quality and exploiting clients unfamiliar with service benchmarks (Akampurira & Windapo, 2018; Okonkwo & Wium, 2018). The shift may weaken trust and reduce professional service standards. Even prior to 2016, SA's construction environment was challenging, with consistent fee reductions. For instance, fees dropped 16.9% in 2010 relative to inflation (Adendorff et al., 2012; Claasen & Cumberlege, 2014).

The weak economy, political uncertainty, and oversupply of professionals further decreased demand, forcing construction professionals (CPs) into extreme price-based competition. The IDoW framework, which lacks differentiation in services, exacerbates this, making price the main competitive lever. Studies (Table 1) confirm extraordinary fee discounts and riskier business practices:

- CESA: Discounts rose from 16.25% (2008) to 28% (2016), with a slight drop to 23.5% (2022).
- Prinsloo and Andersen (2015): 81.2% of quantity surveyors offer discounts on 60%+ of projects; 60.4% do so on 81–100% of their work.
- SACAP (2022): Discounts on guideline fees reached 44% (hotels) and over 75% (industrial buildings).

These findings suggest that replacing authoritative tariffs with fee guidelines may have inadvertently intensified competition and reduced financial sustainability for CPs.

Table 1 Literature Studies Indicating Unachievable Fee Guidelines in Market

No	Discipline	Reference
1	Engineers (ECSA)	CESA, 2013; CESA, 2022; Laryea, Watermeyer & Govender, 2020; Okonkwo & Wuim, 2018; Coetzee et al., 2015; Campbell, 2018; Siqiti, 2020.
2	QS	Claasen & Cumberlege, 2014; Prinsloo & Andersen, 2015.
3	Architects	Peerutin, 2018; SACAP, 2019; SAIA, 2017; SACAP, 2022; Efficiency, 2000; SACAP Fee Survey, 2022.

Low professional fees pose a significant risk to construction project success and threaten the long-term sustainability of construction professionals (CPs) in the industry (Okonkwo & Wuim, 2019; Ramabodu, 2023). This study posits that revitalizing a country's economy depends on a healthy, sustainable construction sector, which in turn requires fair and sustainable CP remuneration as a foundation for achieving sustainable national economic growth.

However, South Africa's professional fee environment is notably more extreme than most international markets, primarily due to prolonged weak economic growth fostering excessive competition (Ramabodu, 2023). Key contributing factors include:

- Extreme fee discounts and declining fees
- Absence of authoritative tariffs
- Non-market related fee guidelines

In a low-growth economy with rising overheads, these inconsistencies risk inequitable fee distribution, undermining CP sustainability. Research highlights that current fee guidelines may lack accuracy, validity, and fairness, raising ethical concerns about fair compensation, which is essential for CP survival (Ramabodu, 2023). The study argues for a mechanism to mitigate the adverse effects of price-based competition in the industry.

Thus, there is a need to evaluate the post-abolishment criteria for professional fee determination and distribution practices employed by CPCs in commercial office developments, within a competitive free-market economic environment without authoritative prescribed fee tariffs. The paper proposes the need to assess whether these fee determination practices are equitable, aligned with free-market principles, and consistent with CBE fee guideline policies, while supporting the long-term sustainability of CPs.

Literature Review

Market Demand and Supply Effect on Fees

Literature confirms that market demand in the construction sector is driven by political and economic stability, negative economic conditions—such as political instability, poor infrastructure (e.g., unreliable electricity), unfavourable policies, high inflation, and weak investor confidence—reduce demand, create market oversupply, lower equilibrium prices and fees, and trigger employment cuts and retrenchments (Hillebrandt, 1984; Briscoe, 1988; Goh, 2012).

In SA, prolonged stagnant growth, ideological political policies (e.g., land expropriation without compensation), BEE requirements, energy shortages, and deteriorating infrastructure have significantly reduced investor confidence and construction demand. Further challenges—such as regulatory inefficiencies, overregulation, and rising compliance and operational costs—continue to erode commercial viability and return on investment in the sector.

The research identified three distinct downward economic business cycles in South Africa (Figure 1), occurring from the end of 2007 to the fourth quarter of 2009, from the end of 2013 to the first quarter of 2017, and from mid-2019 to the first quarter of 2020.

Research by Ofori et al. (1996) and Lam and Oshodi (2016) confirms that downward economic business cycles create instability and inefficiencies in the construction industry's supply-demand dynamics—often resulting in retrenchments and business liquidations during periods of low demand and oversupply (Table 2). These economic business cycles directly impact economic supply and demand forces which impacts the fees and pricing structures for CP (Table 2).

Table 2 Economic Demand and Supply Shifts Effect on Quantity and Price/Fee of Service. Source: Case *et al.* (2014) (Adapted)

Demand	Supply	Price/Fee	Economic situation
	Unchanged		Shortage
	Unchained		Surplus
Unchanged			Surplus
Unchanged			Shortage

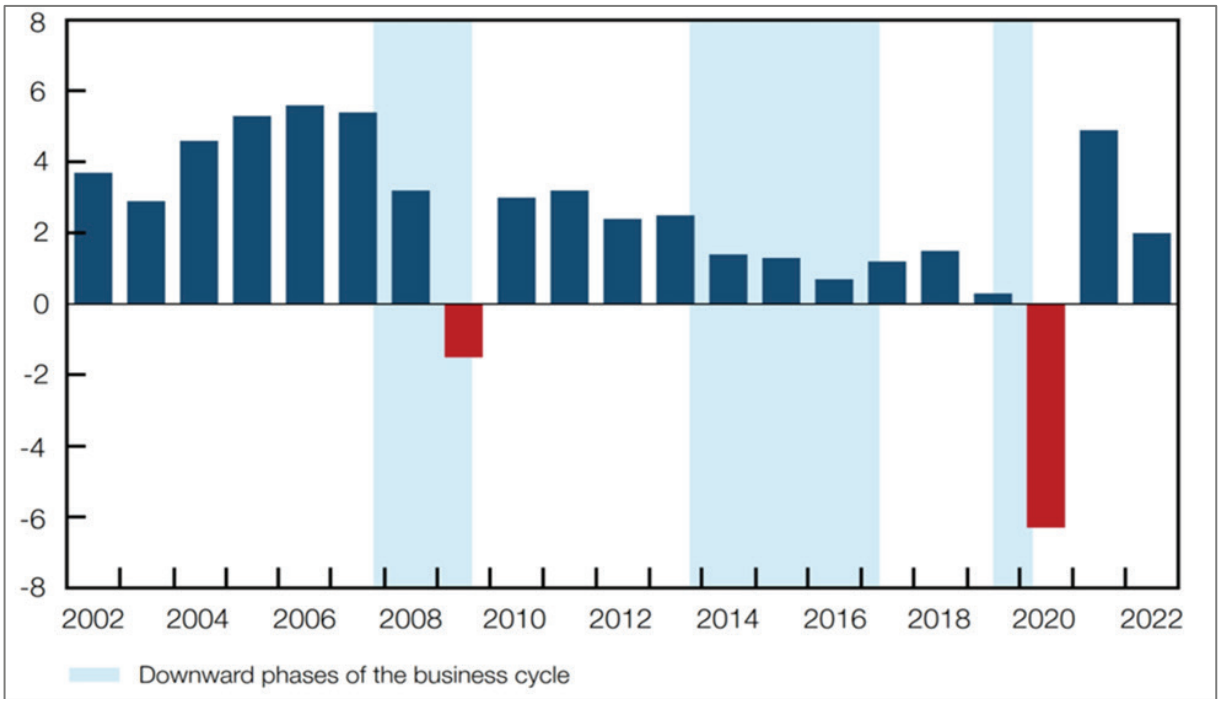

Figure 1 SA Real GDP Percentage Change Over One Year, Indicating Downward Business Cycles
Source: South African Reserve Bank (SARB) (2023)

Economic principles, as outlined in Figure 1 and Table 2, emphasize that professional fees (as a price mechanism) should respond to market dynamics—particularly supply and demand fluctuations driven by economic business cycles. The CBE's policy on fee guideline determination (Table 3) also mandates that fee structures must reflect economic principles, market conditions, cost realities, and supply-demand imbalances.

Table 3 CBE Guideline Principles on Free Market Fee Guideline Determination. Source: Council for the Built Environment (CBE) (2008)

No	CBE guideline on criteria to be taken into consideration on fee guideline determination
1	Fee guidelines to be based on economic principles
2	Reflect market related costs
3	Reflect the current economic environment in which it operates
4	Identify market forces that will influence or reduce professional payments
5	Provide a reliable baseline based on qualitative and quantitative market changes and market needs

Explore Considerations and Criteria to Determine Fee Guidelines Validity

Literature study indicate that fee guidelines are based on the following statistics (Layrea et al., 2020; Okonkwo & Wium, 2019):

- Historic fee data as basis for guides
- Salary surveys as basis for guides
- Overhead cost factors; Consumer Price Index (CPI)

Despite the fact that literature indicates that professional fees should reflect economic principles and market dynamics such as demand and supply forces, it seems the criteria identified above are predominantly focussed solely on the supply-side effects on professional services, without incorporating any market demand indicators or data. In a free market system, prices and professional fees are determined through the interaction of both demand and supply forces, where equilibrium is reached when the market value of a service reflects not only its cost of provision but also its perceived value and demand in the marketplace. The absence of demand-side considerations, such as client affordability, market capacity, or economic appetite for professional services, means that the

methodologies applied by the professional Councils are inherently one-sided, and does not incorporate the CBE policy guideline on Professional fees (2008,6), (Table 3), and is not in line with the CBE Act 43 of 2000, section 4 (K) (v)

No additional literature or empirical data could be identified to substantiate the existence of clear or standardised CPC fee determination criteria that account for changes in professional scope of work.

Laryea et al. (2020), and Okonkwo and Wium (2019) confirm that no benchmarking or data could be determined for the individual fee scales and further questioned the rationale for the adoption of these scales in the absence of data or scientific evidence.

Historic Fee Amendments and Adjustments

Despite the fact that professional fees should respond to economic principles and market dynamics, analysis of Figure 2 and Table 4, which indicate CPC fee guideline increases from 2006 to 2022 alongside economic cycles (Figure 1), reveals a major disconnect between theory and practice. Despite clear economic downturns (Figure 1), 69.23% of fee increases were implemented during these negative cycles (Table 4).

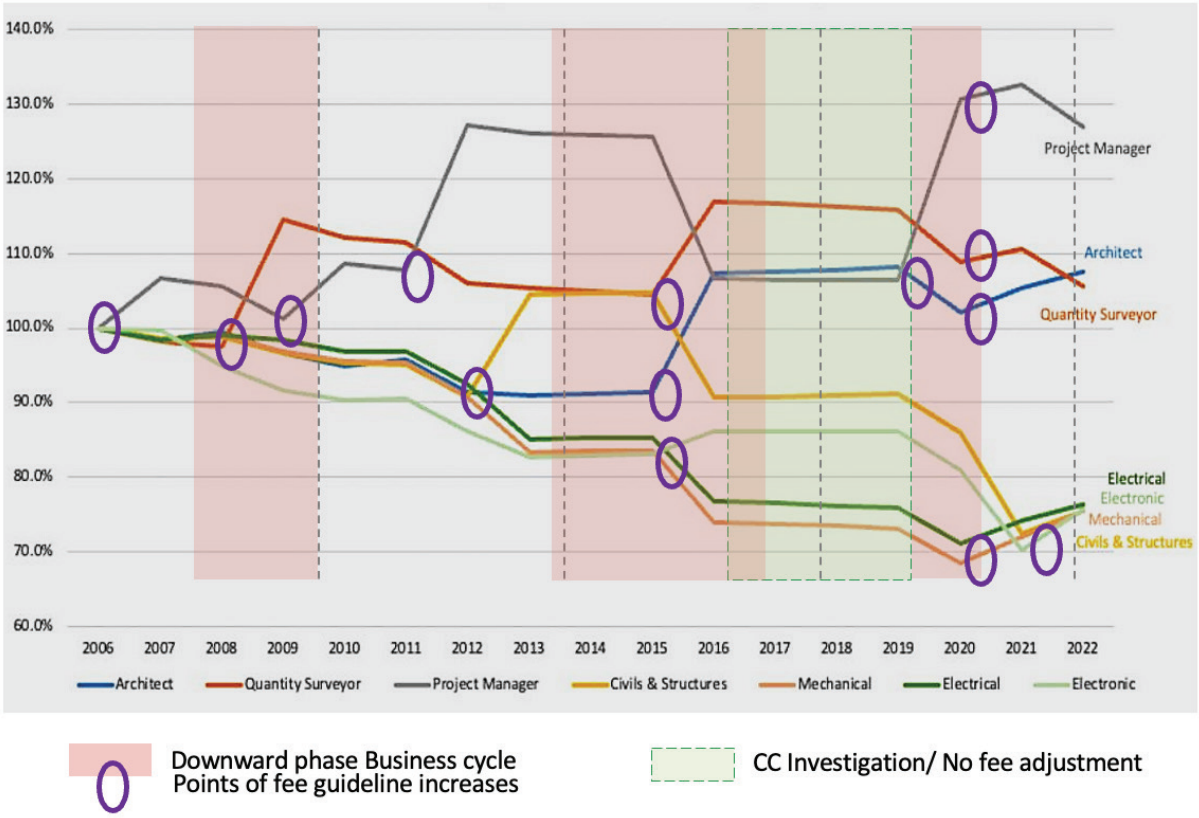

Figure 2 Fee Guide Increases by CPC Indicated as a Share of Fee Basket for Commercial Offices
Source: FreshProjects, Berry, (2020)

Figure 2 indicate no fee adjustments from 2016 to 2019 due to Competitions Commission ruling and incorporates business downward phases from Figure 1. This suggests that CPCs have not incorporated economic and business cycles into fee guideline determinations, contradicting CBE's prescribed criteria (Table 3). Notably, after the Competition Commission's (CC) 2016–2019 investigation, CPCs were required to shift toward market-driven fee strategies. Yet post CC fee increases in 2019 and 2020 occurred during a broader economic downturn. This timing underscores a clear disconnect between the prescribed fee guidelines and actual market realities, indicating that fee amendments disregarded prevailing macroeconomic conditions and economic price theory. These increases highlight a misalignment between the Construction Professional Councils' (CPC) industry-focused objectives, centred on sustaining or elevating professional remuneration, and the Council for the Built Environment's (CBE) national policy goals of affordability, accessibility, and economic stability.

Table 4 Analysis of Amount of Fee Guideline Increases During Economic Cycles. Source: FreshProjects, Berry, (2020). Adapted from Figure 1 and Figure 2

Construction professional council	Fee increases date	Downward economic cycle	Normal economic cycle	Number of increases over 16yrs
SACPCMP	2006		X	4
	2009	X		
	2011		X	
	2019	X		
SACQSP	2008	X		3
	2015	X		
	2020	X		
SACAP	2015	X		2
	2020	X		
ECSA	2012 civils and structure		X	4
	2015 Electronic engineering	X		
	2020 Electrical and Mechanical	X		
	2021 Electronic and Mechanical		X	
% increases by economic cycles		69,23%	30, 77%	13

Fee Basket Practice (Market Demand Price) and Industry Implications

Interview results revealed that commercial property developers in South Africa have increasingly treated commercial professional fees as a collective expense, leading to the creation of a "fee basket"—a fixed percentage of construction costs allocated to the entire professional team. This percentage is based on the developer's profit goals and project viability. The fee basket, once around 12% to 15%, has since declined to 9–10%, due to reduced market demand, ROI constraints, and the rising number of specialized consultants (e.g., environmental, wet services, fire), which has diluted fees across more professionals for commercial projects.

This fee basket model, largely unique to SA, relies on professional fee guidelines as a distribution mechanism, allocating the total commercial professional fee among disciplines. A general discount is then applied across the board to fit the project's budget. Deductive reasoning would assume that such an interdependent system should require alignment among CPCs on fee adjustments, scope definitions, and value contributions, ensuring that any increase for one CPC (discipline) fee is justified by agreed scope changes and with an approved offset by corresponding reductions in other CPCs (disciplines) fees within the fee basket. Such coordination is essential for maintaining fairness, balance, and sustainability.

It therefore appears that the abolishment of prescribed professional fee tariffs, combined with the fee basket remuneration practice, has significantly changed the original intent of commercial fee guides. Originally intended to serve as a framework for fair professional compensation for specialized work, protect the public, and prevent anti-competitive behaviour in the industry (Laryea, Watermeyer & Govender, 2020) these guidelines now function as little more than a tool for the allocation of fee basket funds among CP consultants in commercial developments as no other fee allocation mechanism currently exists in SA.

A comparison by FreshProjects (2020), indicate the different professional Council's fee guidelines, in SA, from 2006 to 2021, reveal drastic and erratic alterations in the allocation and share of the fee basket during the past 16 years (Figure 2; Table 4, Table 5, Table 6).

Table 5 summarises Figure 2, comparing the professional fee basket allocation for various construction professionals (CPs) in 2009, 2013, 2017, and 2021, relative to the base year 2006—before major fee adjustments began.

To determine fee adjustment trends, historic fee increases were analysed which revealed that the first substantial fee increase occurred in 2009, when the QS Council increased its fee by 13.79%, resulting in reduced fee percentage allocations of all other CPs within the fixed fee basket (Table 5).

In response, Project Managers (PM) and Structural/Civil Engineers increased their fees in 2012–2013 by +26.32% and +7.69%, respectively. This shift caused fee share reductions for Architects (-6.35%), QS (-9.09%), Mechanical Engineers (-11.11%), and Electrical Engineers (-6.67%), (Table 5).

In 2016, Architects (+18.64%) and QS (+13.33%) reacted with fee increases, reducing the shares for PM (-14.58%), Structural/Civil (-10.71%), Mechanical (-12.50%), and Electrical (-14.29%), (Table 5).

In 2020, PMs again increased their share by +21.95%, resulting in further reductions for Architects (-2.86%), QS (-5.88%), and Structural/Civil Engineers (-20.00%), (Table 5).

Table 5 indicate that by 2021, compared to the base year 2006, the cumulative effect of these cyclical fee increases indicates increased fees as a percentage of the fee basket for architects, quantity surveyors and project managers. In contrast, fees have decreased for the engineering professions. This reflects a competitive “cannibalisation” within the professional fee basket, where gains by some professions have come at the expense of others.

Data from Figure 2, and table 5 appear to be supported by table 6, which reveal a similar pattern of professional fee reduction and increases of respective CP disciplines if the 2021 fee guideline is compared to CP fees based on construction cost escalation of 12,95% as determined by Table 7.

Table 7 presents a theoretical comparison of professional fees for a 10,000m² commercial office development based on the 2006, 2009, 2013, 2017, and 2021 fee guidelines, measured against a market-related fee basket of 12%. Though the 12% benchmark is used for consistency, interviews revealed that real market budgets have dropped further to 9–10%, exacerbating fee pressure on construction professionals (CPs).

- 2006: CP fees totalled 15% of construction cost; a 19.3% discount was needed to fit within a 12% fee basket (Table 7).
- 2009: Fees rose to 16%, requiring a 25% discount (Table 7).
- 2013: Fees increased to 18%, needing a 31.5% discount (Table 7).
- 2017: Fees escalated to 23%, demanding a 46.9% discount (Table 7).
- 2021: Fees remained at 23%, now requiring a 48.5% discount to align with the 12% basket (Table 7).

Table 7 indicate that construction costs (for a 10 000m2 commercial office development) rose by 12.95% from R137,220,386 in 2006 to R155,000,000 in 2021. However, total professional fees increased by 53.3%, from 15% to 23% of construction cost, significantly outpacing construction cost growth and inflation. This discrepancy suggests that current CP fee guidelines do not reflect free market dynamics and are misaligned with economic growth and real market conditions. And confirms literature findings that fees are unachievable in the current market.

Table 5 Relative Construction Professional Change in Share of Fee Basket (Based on Figure 2). Source: FreshProjects, Berry, (2020). Adapted from Figure 2

Fee scale/ guide year		Relative construction professional percentage share of fee basket											
		Arch		**PM**		**QS**		**Struc/ Civil Eng**		**Mech Eng**		**Elec Eng**	
1	**2006** (Base year)	32,5	Change year on year	19	Change year on year	14,5	Change year on year	14	Change year on year	9,5	Change year on year	8	Change year on year
2	**2009**	31,5	-3,08	19	0	16,5	+13,79	13	-7,14	9	-5,26	7,5	-6,25
3	**2013**	29,5	-6,35	24	+26,32	15	-9,09	14	+7,69	8	-11,11	7	-6,67
4	**2017**	35	+18,64	20,5	-14,58	17	+13,33	12,5	-10,71	7	-12,50	6	-14,29
5	**2021**	34	-2,86	25	+21,95	16	-5,88	10	-20,00	7	0	6	0
Percentage fee change from base year (2006)		+1,5% increase		+ 6% increase		+1,5% increase		- 4% decrease		-2,5% decrease		-2% decrease	
Percentage fee increase/decrease from base year (2006)		**+4,62% increase**		**+31,58% increase**		**+10,34% Increase**		**-28,57% decrease**		**-26,32% decrease**		**-25% decrease**	

Explanations: 2006 regarded as base year to compare subsequent fee adjustments

Table 6 Professional Fee Comparison: 2021 Professional Fee Guideline Compared to 2021 Professional Fees Based on Construction Cost Escalation of 12,95% (Based on table 9). Source: Matla Quantity Surveyors (Adapted from Table 7)

Professional fee calculation on 10 000 m2 office development	**Arch**	**QS**	**PM**	**Str Eng**	**Civil Eng**	**Elect Eng**	**Mech Eng**
2021 Fees based on 12,95% construction cost escalation from 2006	R 7 634 742	R 4 379 523	R 3 990 636	R 657 369	R 673 859	R 601 910	R 623 258
2021 Fees based on Prof fee guides	R 7 512 600	R 4 219 700	R 4 797 500	R 512 600	R 531 800	R 512 600	R 512 600
Prof fee comparison: **2021 fee guides and 2021 escalated construction cost fee**	**-1,6% fees compared to 12,95% escalation**	**-3,65% fees compared to 12,95% escalation**	**+20,22% fees compared to 12,95% escalation**	**-20,02% fees compared to 12,95% escalation**	**-21,08% fees compared to 12,95% escalation**	**-14,84% fees compared to 12,95% escalation**	**-17,75% fees compared to 12,95% escalation**

Explanations: 2006 regarded as base year to compare subsequent fee adjustments

Table 7 Fee Guide and Fee Basket Comparison for a 10 000m² Office Development. Source: Matla Quantity Surveyors.

No	Year	Office 10 000m2 P Grade	Fee Scale	Fee % of construction value	Fee calculation	Discount	Total fee value without discount	Construction Professionals						
								ARCH fee %	QS fee %	PM fee %	STR ENG fee %	CIVIL ENG fee %	ELEC ENG fee %	MECH ENG fee %
1	2006	Construction value 2006	**2006 fee scale**	**15%**	R 20 490 300	0,0%	R 20 490 300	R 8 428 200	R 4 834 700	R 4 405 300	R 725 700	R 743 900	R 664 500	R 688 000
		R 137 220 386	Fee basket @	12%	R 16 466 446	**-19,8%**	R 16 433 200	R 6 759 400	R 3 877 400	R 3 533 100	R 582 000	R 596 600	R 532 900	R 551 800
2	2009	Construction value 2009	**2009 fee scale**	**16%**	R 22 610 000	0,0%	R 22 610 000	R 8 860 500	R 5 785 400	R 4 948 000	R 745 200	R 769 900	R 750 500	R 750 500
		R 141 464 315	Fee basket @	12%	R 16 975 718	**-25,0%**	R 16 957 600	R 6 645 400	R 4 339 100	R 3 711 000	R 558 900	R 577 400	R 562 900	R 562 900
3	2013	Construction value 2013	**2013 fee scale**	**18%**	R 25 537 000	0,0%	R 25 537 000	R 9 173 400	R 5 921 100	R 6 776 700	R 908 600	R 940 000	R 908 600	R 908 600
		R 145 839 500	Fee basket @	12%	R 17 500 740	**-31,5%**	R 17 493 000	R 6 283 800	R 4 056 000	R 4 642 100	R 622 400	R 643 900	R 622 400	R 622 400
4	2017	Construction value 2017	**2017 fee scale**	**23%**	R 33 965 000	0,0%	R 33 965 000	R 13 105 200	R 8 002 800	R 9 087 600	R 934 300	R 966 500	R 934 300	R 934 300
		R 150 350 000	Fee basket @	12%	R 18 042 000	**-46,9%**	R 18 035 400	R 6 958 900	R 4 249 500	R 4 825 500	R 496 100	R 513 200	R 496 100	R 496 100
5	2021	Construction value 2021	**2021 fee scale**	**23%**	R 36 115 000	0,0%	R 36 115 000	R 14 587 400	R 8 193 400	R 9 315 400	R 995 400	R 1 032 600	R 995 400	R 995 400
		R 155 000 000	Fee basket @	12%	R 18 600 000	**-48,5%**	R 18 599 400	R 7 512 600	R 4 219 700	R 4 797 500	R 512 600	R 531 800	R 512 600	R 512 600

Findings from Literature and Publicly Available Data

Analysis of the application of professional fee guidelines for commercial projects reveals historic irregularities amongst CPCs, suggesting a lack of coordinated, holistic approach to fee determination (Figures 2, Tables 4,5, and 6). Key findings include:

- Literature study confirmed a disconnect between CPC published fee guidelines and fees earned in practice by CP, as indicated by documented extreme discounts on professional work (Table 1, Table 7).
- Professional fee guidelines are directly influenced by price theory based on economic free market principles, such as market demand and supply dynamics, and should therefore respond to market realities and be aligned with the CBE guideline of professional fees (Table 2, Table 3).
- The fee determination criteria identified do not align with the CBE professional fee guidelines, and seems to be one-sided, reflecting only supply-side dynamics and omitting critical demand-side considerations (Layrea et al., 2020; Okonkwo & Wium, 2019). This would result in distorted fee guidelines, since they are based solely on cost structures and internal valuations from the providers' perspective, without accommodating market response to guides or the perceived market value of these services. This imbalance risks producing fees guides that are misaligned with market realities, failing to represent the true economic equilibrium between professional value creation and the price clients are willing to pay.
- Study revealed an absence of documented frameworks or evidence-based methodologies that would justify proportional fee adjustments in response to expanded or revised CP service scope and requirements. This gap highlights a critical weakness in the current fee-setting system, where fee increases often lack a transparent, rational, or defensible basis linked to actual changes in professional input or project complexity.
- Historical fee guideline data reveal a pattern of increases during periods of economic contraction, contrary to both economic theory and CBE policy (Figure 2, Table 4). This practice underscores a disconnect between fee-setting processes and actual free market conditions, indicating that fee adjustments disregarded prevailing macroeconomic conditions and economic price theory.
- Historic fee increases analysis revealed fee adjustments not aligned with the CBE policy guideline on Professional fees (2008,6), which highlight a misalignment between the CPCs industry-focused objectives, centred on sustaining or elevating professional remuneration, and the CBE national policy goals of promoting affordability, accessibility, and economic stability. This divergence

exposes a structural inconsistency between regulatory intent and market responsiveness, ultimately undermining the credibility and practical relevance of the existing fee determination frameworks.

- Historical fee amendments reveal that professional fee guidelines were largely calculated and determined independently by the various autonomous CPCs, with minimal coordination, interrelation, or consensus amongst the Councils. Evidence suggests that fee increases initiated by certain Councils often triggered reactive adjustments by others seeking to rebalance the overall fee basket allocation in favour of their respective members (Figure 2, Table 5).
- The historic fee increases data further indicate that certain CPCs may be engaged in self-serving rent-seeking behaviour, to manipulate or favour the interests of their own members, prompting reactive fee adjustments by other Councils seeking to protect their members from potential exploitation. This competitive dynamic appears to have fostered a cycle of continuous fee increases which has led to inflated, non-market-based, and unrealistic fee guidelines, which failed to seek group agreement, or consider each profession's actual value, cost, or risk contribution to construction projects.
- Figure 2, Table 5, and Table 7 suggest that internal competition among CPCs for a larger share of the overall fee basket has resulted in significant oscillations in professional fee percentages. This dynamic has contributed to persistent fee inconsistency and uncertainty for CP, while also producing inflated, unattainable, and non–market-aligned fee guidelines that exceed both prevailing market demand and inflationary parameters.

Conclusion

The study concludes that the CPCs have not effectively adapted to free-market dynamics, continuing to rely on outdated, supply-side, post-industrial models (Diaz, 2006) that disregard demand-driven economic forces and market realities Consequently, current fee guidelines fail to meet the CBE policy guideline on Professional fees (2008,6), (Table 3), and lack a reliable, data-driven baseline for determining commercial value contribution amongst CPCs.

Findings indicate that professional fees are adjusted primarily according to subjective perceptions of value, scope, and risk, rather than through objective market mechanisms governed by supply and demand. In some cases, CPCs appear to engage in rent seeking practices, strategically apply fee adjustments to secure a larger portion of the commercial fee basket, reinforcing competitive imbalances within the sector. Deductive reasoning suggests that the resulting environment has evolved into a co-dependent and imbalanced system resembling a "master–slave" dynamic, where dominant councils manipulate fee structures and others react defensively to maintain relevance (Rollins, 2007). Such a system may perpetuate a dysfunctional status quo characterised by inflated, non–market-aligned fees (Table 7), which in turn can erode institutional trust, undermine professional credibility, and weaken cross-disciplinary collaboration within the built environment sector.

Literature evidence reveals fee guidelines determined in isolation, and without meaningful coordination (Figures 2; Tables 4, 5, and 6), illustrate decision-making processes driven more by institutional self-interest than by collective industry or national imperatives. This behaviour highlights a fundamental and structural misalignment between the CBE and the autonomous CPCs with respect to their objectives, policy goals, values, and strategic approaches to professional fee determination. Rather than advancing a shared national vision, CPCs continue to operate in isolation, guided largely by self-preservation and entrenched institutional philosophies. As a result, fee determination processes remain fragmented and lack a coherent theoretical, ethical, or policy framework. This institutional fragmentation has produced a self-reinforcing social dilemma, wherein each Council's pursuit of short-term advantage perpetuates broader systemic dysfunction. Within this competitive and fragmented environment, professional fee determination has evolved into an unsustainable model marked by subjectivity and inequitable remuneration, eroding the legitimacy of fee guidelines and threatening the long-term viability of professional practice within the built environment.

Addressing this professional fee dilemma will require both motivational and structural reforms. Motivational solutions include fostering trust, communication, and shared professional identity, while structural reforms should establish transparent governance mechanisms and objective allocation models that reward proportional value contribution. Without such reform, entrenched patterns of self-interest and intergroup exploitation will continue to threaten the sustainability, credibility, and developmental role of the construction professions within South Africa's economy.

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SACQSP2025-140

From Linear to Circular: Overcoming Barriers in South Africa's Construction Industry

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Abstract

The purpose of the study is to identify and analyse the key barriers hindering the adoption of circular economy principles in the construction industry. The study adopted a qualitative research methodology and utilised semi-structured interviews as the research design and utilised snowballing sampling. A total of 18 construction professionals participated in the interviews. The data gathered from the interviews were thematically analysed.

The findings of the study reveal several significant barriers hindering the integration of circular economy principles in the construction industry. Firstly, there is a notable lack of awareness and understanding among industry stakeholders regarding circular practices and their long-term benefits. Secondly, existing regulatory and policy frameworks are often rigid and do not support innovative circular approaches such as material reuse and recycling. Thirdly, the availability of recyclable and reusable materials remains limited, with underdeveloped supply chains and a lack of standardisation. Additionally, the study found that high initial costs and perceived financial risks discourage stakeholders from adopting circular methods. Lastly, the industry's fragmented structure and poor collaboration among stakeholders further impede the implementation of circular economy strategies.

The study provides practical insights that can guide policymakers, industry stakeholders, and educators in developing targeted strategies to overcome identified barriers and promote the effective adoption of circular economy principles in the construction industry.

The originality of the study lies in its focused examination of the specific barriers to adopting circular economy principles within the construction industry, offering context-specific insights that are often overlooked in broader sustainability research.

Keywords: Circular Economy, Construction Industry, Sustainability, Barriers.

Introduction

The construction industry (CI) accounts for more than 30% of the global resource consumption and over 37% of carbon dioxide emissions ((UNEP), 2025). Even though there have been significant improvements, progress towards a net zero climate resilient future by 2050 remains slow and fragmented (Fam & Fam, 2024). In fact, emissions from the industry have since risen by 5% since 2015, moving further away from the 28% reduction aimed by 2030 to stay on track with the Paris Agreement (UNEP, 2025).

Traditionally the CI is largely governed by a linear economic model based on a "take, make, dispose" system (Purchase et al., 2022). While this model was historically effective in driving the economic growth, it has proven to be unsustainable (Gasparri et al., 2023). According to Sarmah and Akhtar (2018), rapid urbanisation, high house demand and a backlog of infrastructure development continue to put a strain on the already stretched environmental systems and natural resource reserve.

In response to these environmental challenges the Circular Economy (CE) model has emerged as a viable and sustainable alternative Gasparri et al., 2023). CE is a regenerative economic system that revolves around the concept of a "closed loop" supply chain that aims to be as efficient as possible with

resources, this means rethinking design process, adopting modular construction and encouraging the reuse of building materials (Bocken et al., 2016; Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2024).

Adopting CE principles in CI has been associated with many benefits, including waste reduction, enhanced material efficiency, cost savings, over the lifespan of the building and greater resilience to supply chain disruptions (Mhlanga et al., 2024). Developed countries in Europe and parts of Asia have made significant strides in institutionalising CE within their CI through the formulation of policy frameworks, understanding green procurement and industry partnerships and collaboration (Tátrai & Diófási-Kovács, 2021).

However, in developing countries like South Africa, the integration of CE into the CI is still at its early stage. Even though academic interest and some isolated best practices are progressively on the rise, the systematic adoption of CE is still restricted by contextual and structural challenges. According to Prieto-Sandoval et al. (2018), these include underdeveloped recycling markets, regulatory and policy misalignment, limited technical skills, and a fragmented construction ecosystem. This presents a critical knowledge gap, particularly given the socio-economic setting of South Africa which further complicates the transition from linear to circular models due to the high unemployment rate, informal labour practise and increasing budget cuts.

Several studies have addressed barriers to CE adoption in construction globally Adams et al. (2017) and Durdyev et al. (2023) citing issues such as cultural resistance, limited supply chains, and financial constraints. However, these findings cannot be fully generalised to the South African context. There is limited empirical insight into how local construction professionals perceive CE, and how contextual challenge affect its implementation.

The aim of this paper is to explore the barriers hindering the adoption of CE principles in South Africa's CI. It seeks to:

- Explore stakeholder awareness and understanding of CE.
- Identify institutional, economic, and behavioural barriers.
- Propose practical interventions for CE integration.

Literature review

Global and Regional Barriers to CE Implementation

The Circular Economy (CE) is a new trend for sustainable development focused on the principles of reduction, reuse, and recycling resources with reduced environmental impact (Gasparri et al., 2023. The implementation of CE practice is generally regarded as an essential response to resource limitation, climate change, and economic inefficiencies. However, the adoption of CE is negatively influenced by different barriers that operate at both global and regional levels. It is vital that policymakers, businesses, and researchers understand these barriers to develop effective strategies for pushing circular practices (Kirchherr et al., 2018).

Despite this progress, several barriers persist even in developed markets. Studies by Adams et al. (2017) and Durdyev et al. (2023), have highlighted common challenges such as:

Lack of stakeholder awareness and understanding of CE principles
Inadequate policies and regulatory frameworks
Fragmented construction supply chain with hinder collaboration
Financial constraints, including high upfront costs and uncertain return of investmen
Insufficient data and tools to measure circularity or assess lifecycle impacts

Limited Stakeholder Knowledge and Awareness of CE Principles

A root barrier to the transition to circular economy (CE) principles is the general ignorance and lack of familiarity with CE on the part of stakeholders in the CI, from clients and contractors to the professional team and suppliers (Eberhardt et al., 2019; Mhlanga et al., 2023). CE is either confused with traditional ideas of sustainability, or narrowly identified with waste recycling, rather than seen as system-wide transformational change that encompasses design thinking, life-cycle optimisation, and closed material loops (Potting et al., 2017).

The many CI stakeholders are unfamiliar with practices such as design for disassembly, material passports, or cradle-to-cradle certification. They therefore lack skills to integrate circular approaches into project planning, procurement, and execution (Eberhardt et al., 2019). Furthermore, South African education curricula in architecture, engineering, and construction management rarely cover CE, hence a knowledge and skills gap translate to practice. Lacking awareness and understanding of the long-term environmental and economic advantages of CE, stakeholders will not give priority to or push for its adoption (Otasowie et al., 2024).

Lack of Regulatory Support and Regulatory Frameworks

Policy and regulatory frameworks are key drivers of the transition towards a circular built environment. However, in the majority of developing countries, like South Africa, building codes and construction regulations are outdated and designed to support linear models of construction (Adams et al., 2017). They do not substantially encourage or in some cases, even provide for material reuse, modular construction, or the inclusion of recycled content in building materials (Mhlanga et al., 2023).

According Gamage et al. (2024) public sector procurement systems especially favour lowest initial cost over lifecycle functionality, discouraging the adoption of innovative circular solutions that require higher upfront investment. Moreover, the absence of facilitating policies such as tax incentives, subsidies, or recycling requirements reduces the attractiveness for businesses to invest in CE strategies (Clark et al., 2018). The lack of formal guidelines and standardisation further makes it ambiguous or administratively challenging to follow circular approaches (Ghisellini et al., 2016).

Fragmentation of the Construction Supply Chain

The construction supply chain is inherently fragmented, and there are a number of independent stakeholders, clients, designers, consultants, contractors, subcontractors, and material suppliers who have a tendency to operate in silos (Kirchherr et al., 2018). The fragmented structure hinders effective communication, integration, and coordination among stages of a project that are critical for CE adoption (Hosseini et al., 2023).

The absence of collaborative digital platforms and integrated project delivery models (e.g., BIM-enabled workflows) also limits visibility and accountability throughout the supply chain (Kirchherr et al., 2018). According to Hosseini et al. (2023) circular strategy requires long-term thinking and whole system coordination, which is difficult to achieve in the prevailing transactional and risk-adverse culture of the construction industry.

Financial Barriers - High Upfront Costs and Uncertain Investment Returns

Economic viability is another significant barrier to the implementation of CE practices. Circular solutions often entail higher initial expenses due to special materials, new technology, or innovative design (Ritzen & Sandström, 2017). For instance, modular systems or pre-fabricated modules, though more efficient in the long term, may require substantial initial investment in production equipment and skilled labour (Prieto-Sandoval et al., 2018).

In addition, the economic benefits of circular construction i.e., reduced lifecycle costs, asset durability, and lower waste disposal costs are typically long-term and intangible. This creates a mismatch between short-term project funding structures and client expectation of short-term cost savings. SMEs, which dominate South Africa's construction industry, typically lack the risk appetite or financial buffers to experiment with CE initiatives (John et al., 2023). Moreover, the absence of economic incentives, green finance vehicles, or demonstrable business cases reinforces perceptions of circular strategies being financially risky or unviable (Hosseini et al., 2023).

Limited Data and Tools to Evaluate Circularity or Quantify Lifecycle Impacts

Robust data and analytical abilities are necessary to evaluate CE intervention efficacy. However, widespread general unavailability of information on material flows, embodied carbon, recyclability, and lifecycle performance within the South African construction sector persists (Charef & Lu, 2021). Life Cycle Assessments (LCAs) are not conducted for the majority of projects, and building materials are rarely labelled or tracked with material passports or electronic records (Gamage et al., 2024).

Without accurate data, it is difficult to set benchmarks, monitor progress, or quantify the value of circular approaches. Decision-makers are unable to compare circular and conventional options on a level playing field. Furthermore, construction practitioners do not have the technical tools and software expertise to undertake circularity appraisals or scenario model material reuse (Charef et al., 2021). This information gap undermines both strategic planning and policy enforcement and prevents scaling up best practice CE initiatives.

CE in South Africa's Construct Context

The South African Construction Industry is a primary driver of the economy's development, infrastructure delivery and job creation, contributing to the 3% to 4% of the country's GDP (CIDB, 2022). Rapid urbanisation, increasing housing shortage and demand for infrastructure development under the National Housing Development Plan (NDP) have increased construction activities and continue to put a strain on the already stretched environmental systems and natural resource reserve (NDP, 2012).

CE principles present a transformational opportunity to reduce these problems by shifting the industry away from the traditional linear "take, make, dispose" approach to a regenerative approach centred around material efficiency, reuse, recycling, and closed loops (Purchase et al., 2022.

In the context of South Africa's Construction industry CE could involve:

- Material Recovery and reuse - A closed loop could be achieved by salvaging wood, bricks, steel from demolition sites to be use in new construction projects. Thus turning waste streams in valuable raw materials and reducing waste in landfills.
- Modular construction - Design construction elements to be easily assembled thus, allowing for a quicker and less wasteful construction processes.
- Design for adaptability and deconstruction - Design structures that are flexible ensure to enable components to be reused at the end of their lifecycle.
- Localised material loops – establishing regional supply chains for recycled and reclaimed materials to minimise transport costs and emissions.

Despite these opportunities, CE adoption in South African construction industry is still an emerging concept. While notions of sustainability and green building are gradually gaining traction, driven in part by initiatives such as the Green Building Council South Africa (GBCSA), clear CE frameworks have yet to be consolidated into mainstream construction policy, procurement systems, or industry practice (Kirchherr et al., 2018).

Policy and Regulatory Climate

South Africa has introduced various environmental and waste management policies, including the National Environmental Management: Waste Act 59 of 2008 (NMWS) and the National Waste Management Strategy, which set waste reduction and recycling targets ref [*sic*] (Department of Environment, 2020). However, these frameworks are typically generic and do not provide CE-specific guidelines for the construction sector. Procurement models and building codes remain predominantly linear, focusing on lowest initial cost rather than lifecycle value (Tátrai & Diófási-Kovács, 2021). The public sector, being the biggest client in the market, follows the practice of awarding contracts on the basis of cost-competitive bidding, which typically dissuades innovative circular solutions that need increased up-front investment (Boons & Lüdeke-Freund, 2013).

Industry Practice and Awareness

Awareness of CE principles among industry stakeholders remains limited. Many stakeholders equate CE solely with energy efficient measures or green certification, overlooking its broader systemic nature of circularity, as a resulting waste reduction efforts are often superficial, with material sorting and recovery treated as an afterthought rather than an integral component of planning and execution (Tátrai & Diófási-Kovács, 2021). Where recycling is occurring, it is typically driven by individual contractors or niche recycling companies and not ingrained in an organised industry-wide system.

Economic and Market Factors

The economics of CE in South Africa are shaped by various constraints: a lack of large-scale markets for recycled construction materials, low integration in supply chains, and a lack of standardisation of materials (Adams et al., 2017; Durdyev et al., 2023). The majority of clients, private and government, are wary of using reclaimed materials due to perceived quality and safety concerns (Ritzen & Sandström, 2017). Moreover, SMMEs, which are the overwhelming majority in the construction industry, lack the capital, expertise, and collaborations to experiment with CE approaches (John et al., 2023).

Theoretical Perspectives and Models

There have been several proposed implementation frameworks for the construction industry. Bocken et al. (2016) described CEBMs into categories such as product life extension, resource recovery, and product-as-a-service. These models provide a strategic approach that companies can integrate CE into project design, operational, and delivery processes. In terms of policy and governance, Hosseini et al. (2023), suggest that regulations, incentives, and industry norms have to align for CE to be implemented effectively. However, these frameworks are largely focused on developed countries with minimal accommodation for developing countries like South Africa. A significant body of literature employs the Barrier-Drivers-Outcomes (BDO) approach, which allows identification of systemic forces that influence CE implementation (Kirchherr et al., 2017; Durdyev et al., 2023). This approach is particularly useful to developing countries, where the interplay between political, economic, and socio-cultural factors shapes the implementation outcomes of CE principles.

Obiuto et al. (2024) assert that the circular economy is founded on the principles that aim to minimise waste, maximise resource efficiency, and create sustainable systems of production and utilisation. One of the key principles of the circular economy is designing out of waste and pollution, which advocates for constructing with products tha prevent waste generation while also utilising resource-efficient processes (Rahla, Mateus & Bragança, 2021). Furthermore, materials should be kept in use through reuse, repair, remanufacturing, and recycling and regeneration of natural systems, which aims to restore and enhance ecosystems rather than depleting them (Van Ewijk, 2018). As opposed to the traditional way of doing things, which consists of “take, make, dispose”, CE promotes a closed-loop system that encourages innovation, reduces dependency on raw materials, and enhances long-term economic, environmental, and social resilience (Rahman et al., 2024).

Research Methodology and Method

The study adopted a qualitative mono-method research approach, selected for its ability to provide a rich understanding of the barriers to adopting CE principles in South Africa’s construction industry. A qualitative research approach was more suitable for capturing the rich experiences, perspectives, and contextual realities of professionals, which are not easily measurable using a quantitative approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Semi-structured interviews were used as a primary instrument of data collection. This method provided scope for the utilisation of a set of standardised core questions while maintaining flexibility in asking for greater depth of questions (Kallio et al., 2016). Interview questions were designed to explore three key areas: Knowledge and awareness of CE principles; Enablers and barriers to implementation perceived by CE implementation and Examples of existing or potential CE practices within the South African construction industry. The interviews were conducted virtually through Microsoft Teams, and in-person sessions were held depending on participant availability and location.

A The snowballing sampling technique was employed to identify participants with relevant industry experience and knowledge of CE-related practices (Etikan et al., 2016). The sample consisted of professionals involved in design, planning, and management across various types of projects. Participants were selected from Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, Free State, and Northwest provinces to ensure diversity of geographical and organisational contexts. The sample consisted of architects, civil and structural engineers, construction/project managers, and policy and regulatory officials. The aim was to get a holistic overview from the professionals involved in the construction industry. 18 professionals were interviewed, and they were deemed sufficient according to Creswell and Poth (2018) Data from the respondents was thematically analysed.

Research Results

This section presents the results from the of semi-structured interviews conducted with professionals in the construction industry across four provinces in South Africa: Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, Free State, and Northwest. The data collection aimed to establish barriers to the adoption of CE principles in the South African construction industry. 18 interviews were conducted, representing architects, engineers, project managers, and policymakers.

Awareness and Understanding of CE Principles

The first research question sought to determine the level of understanding and awareness of stakeholders regarding CE principles. The findings indicate that while most participants had a general awareness of sustainability, specific knowledge of CE was limited.

Table 1 CE Principle Awareness of Respondents

Awareness Level	Frequency (n=18)	Percentage (%)
Comprehensive knowledge	3	16.7
Basic awareness	9	50.0
No prior knowledge	6	33.3

Figure 1 illustrates the percentage of respondents in each professional group who reported having awareness of CE principles. Architects recorded the highest awareness, while policymakers had the lowest awareness.

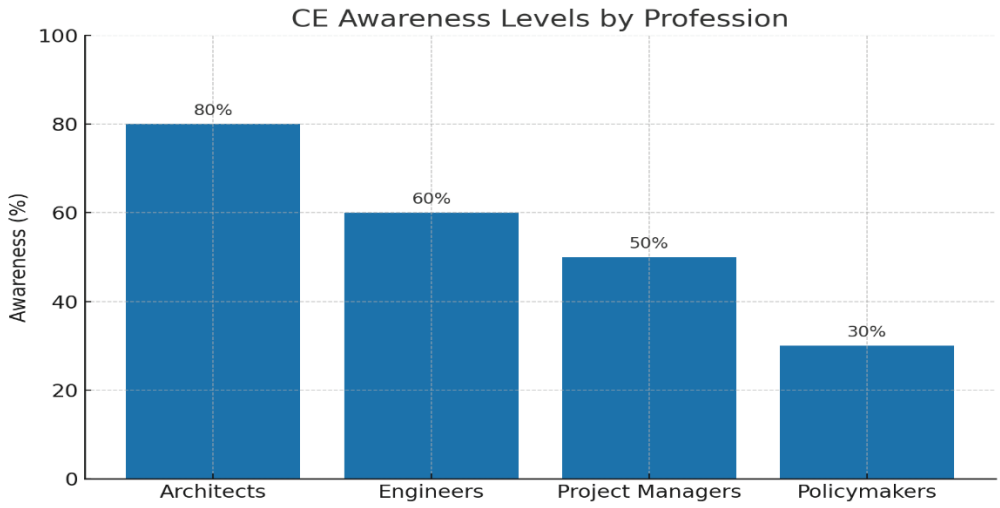

Figure 1 CE Awareness Levels per Profession

Identified Barriers to CE Adoption

The second research question examined barriers hindering CE adoption. Thematic coding produced five main categories:

Table 2 Barriers to CE Adoption in the South African Construction Industry

Barrier Category	Frequency of Mentions (n=18)	% of Respondents Reporting
Lack of regulatory frameworks	15	83.3
High implementation costs	12	66.7
Limited technical expertise	11	61.1
Cultural resistance to change	9	50.0
Fragmented supply chains	8	44.4

Geographic Trends in Barrier Perceptions

The barriers were varied in relative significance across provinces. Gauteng respondents cited more policy gaps, while KwaZulu-Natal respondents cited infrastructure constraints. The findings in figure 2 reveal that policy gaps are the most significant barrier overall, particularly in Gauteng, where 85% of respondents identified this as a challenge, followed by KwaZulu-Natal (70%), Free State (75%), and North West (65%). This suggests that regulatory inconsistencies and the lack of clear policy direction are more acutely felt in urbanized and industrialized regions such as Gauteng. High costs are also widely reported, with Gauteng (70%) and KwaZulu-Natal (65%) again leading, reflecting higher operational and infrastructural expenses in these provinces. In terms of technical expertise, challenges are more prominent in Gauteng (60%) and KwaZulu-Natal (55%), possibly due to the higher demand for specialized skills in implementing innovative or sustainable projects. Cultural resistance appears more evenly distributed, but still higher in Gauteng (50%) compared to North West (35%), implying that attitudes toward change may be more entrenched in less urbanized areas. Finally, fragmented supply chains were most reported in Gauteng (45%) and least in North West (30%), highlighting disparities in infrastructure integration and logistical coordination across provinces.

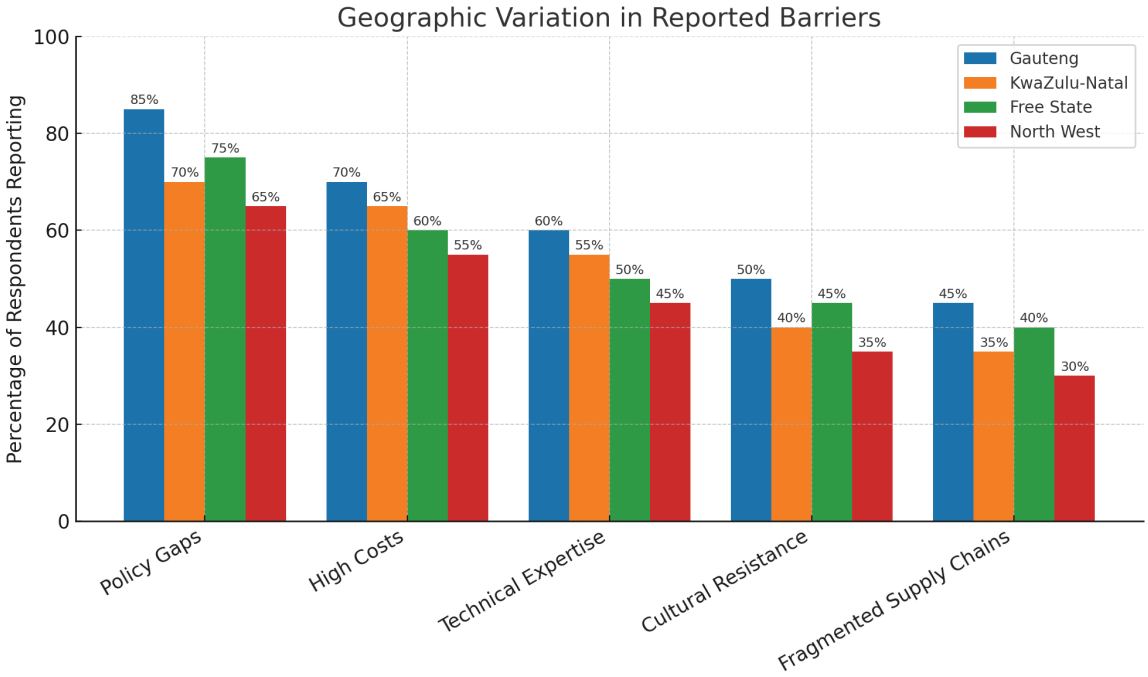

Figure 2 Geographic Variation in Reported Barriers

Existing CE Practices

Although adoption is limited, some of the respondents identified individual CE practices in their projects. These included material reuse, on-site waste sorting, and use of recycled aggregates.

Table 3 Examples of CE practices Reported by Respondents

CE Practice	No. of Mentions	% of Respondents
Material reuse	7	38.9
Waste sorting and recycling	6	33.3
Design for disassembly	3	16.7
Modular/prefabricated methods	2	11.1

Summary of Findings

Generally, the findings are as follows:

- CE consciousness is generally low, with only 16.7% of the interviewees demonstrating total awareness.
- Limited budget and lack of gap in the regulation are the most commonly seen barriers.
- Technical capacity constraints and fragmented supply chains also hinder the adoption of CE.
- Spreading CE practices exist but are small in scale and not systematically included in project work procedures.

Discussion

The objective of this study was to explore the barriers to adopting CE in South Africa's construction industry, focusing on stakeholder awareness, current practices, and regional challenges. The findings are compared to existing studies, highlighting areas of agreement, divergence, and potential areas for future research.

Awareness and Understanding of CE

The research reveals that only 16.7% of the respondents demonstrated overall knowledge of CE principles, while a third of them indicated no prior knowledge. This is in line with Mhlanga et al. (2023), who observed limited CE awareness in South Africa's construction industry, where sustainability is often equated to energy efficiency or green building certification rather than systematic resource circularity.

On the other hand, studies in more developed countries like the UK and the EU show higher baseline awareness due to better policy integration and training of industry Kirchherr et al. (2018) and Adams et al. (2017), this suggests that lack of awareness in South Africa is not a is not a universal CE challenge but is amplified by local capacity constraints and poor policy development (Mhlanga et al., 2023).

Barriers to CE Adoption

Five types of barriers emerged from the study: lack of regulatory frameworks, excessive implementation costs, a shortage of technical skills, cultural resistance to change, and a fragmented supply chains.

These typically align with the global barrier established as provided by Durdyev et al. (2023), who also noted gaps in policy, cost limitations, and industry fragmentation as recurring themes in CE adoption. However, the high ranking of policy-related barriers in Gauteng and infrastructure limitations in KwaZulu-Natal reveals provincial-specific realities, which point to diversified preparedness across provinces.

Although previous research by Jayakodi et al. (2024) argues that market incentives may assist in overcoming cost barriers partially, existing evidence indicates that is the present findings suggest that without clear regulatory direction in South Africa, such incentives will unlikely make a difference.

Existing CE Practices

Although adoption remains low, some isolated practices such as material reuse, waste sorting on site, and the use of recycled aggregate have been described by respondents. Similar trends of partial adoption are also noted in emerging economies like Kazakhstan and Malaysia (Hosseini et al., 2023), where practice will generally deal with waste management but have not yet integrated design-for-disassembly or closed-loop supply chains.

The low frequency of design for disassembly and prefabrication is partially in contrast to technological-innovation school of thought on CE implementation, which see these practices as core to CE implementation (Bocken et al., 2016). This suggests that without market or policy pressure, such practices will remain niche in the South African context.

Convergence and Divergence with Literature

The findings are in strong agreement with literature in identifying regulatory, finance, and culture as being central to CE adoption challenges. However, there’s a variance in the degree in which these as undefeatable. In the case of developed countries, government incentives have [*sic*]

Conclusion

The study sought to investigate the barriers to the adoption of CE principles in South Africa's CI. Through qualitative interviews of construction stakeholders, the following five dominant barriers were identified: lack of regulatory frameworks, excessive implementation costs, a shortage of technical skills, cultural resistance to change, and a fragmented supply chains.

The findings of the study indicated that the awareness of CE remains limited, with sustainability commonly limited to energy efficiency rather than a holistic resource circularity. While there are isolated examples of CE practices such as material reuse and waste sorting of construction sites, these are fragmented and lacking integration into project design and supply chain processes.

These findings are consistent with international studies describing regulatory and financial barriers (Durdyev et al., 2023; Kirchherr et al., 2018) but are distinct in the manner that South Africa's issues are compounded by inefficient policy implementation, uneven provincial readiness, and limited capacity development programs.

Overall, the study concludes that the implementation of CE in South Africa's CI remains nascent and inconsistent, requiring systemic policy, financial, and cultural interventions to be become impactful.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

- The government must have the proper regulatory frameworks and guidelines for CE implementation, supported by regulatory measures, especially in Gauteng province
- Public procurement needs to be used to mandate CE principles for tendering and project delivery, driving a demand-led shift.
- Professional bodies and Institutions of higher learning should initiate training programmes and curriculum development, thereby integrating CE principles into construction education.
- Industry-wide campaigns are needed to alter cultural attitudes and establish CE practices as the "norm" in the South African construction space.
- The offering of tax breaks, subsidies, or grants to CE-integrated projects can reduce perceived economic cost in South African construction sector
- Green financing channels to support CE innovation in construction projects.
- Pilot CE projects must be piloted by government and industry stakeholders to demonstrate technical feasibility and commercial benefit.
- A national knowledge platform must be created to capture learnings and replicate best practices among provinces.

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SACQSP2025-143

The Influence of Construction Management Skills and Planning Processes on Housing Quality Delivered by SMMEs in Pretoria Townships

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of inadequate construction management skills and non-compliance with established processes on the quality of construction projects undertaken by Small, Medium, and Micro Enterprises (SMMEs) in Pretoria, South Africa. Through a comprehensive literature review, the research aims to identify the challenges and obstacles contributing to poor quality construction projects, assess the construction management processes employed during project execution, and examine the influence of planning applications, firm characteristics, and construction skills on SMMEs' performance. By exploring these factors, the study seeks to provide potential solutions to improve the quality of construction projects delivered by SMMEs. This study employed a quantitative approach, utilising a questionnaire to collect data from a sample of 241 respondents. The data was analysed using the SPSS program. The findings revealed that several factors significantly impact the quality of low-income housebuilding projects. Key factors contributing to poor quality include the use of low-quality materials and equipment, inadequate site worker skills, inappropriate financing models, poor contract administration, and challenges in project control. These findings offer valuable insights for contractors and housing officials, shedding light on the primary determinants of poor-quality low-income housing within a local government in South Africa

Keywords: SMMEs, Construction Management Skills, Construction Quality, Housing.

Introduction

The prevalence of poor-quality housing developments in Pretoria townships, particularly those undertaken by small, medium, and micro enterprises (SMMEs), highlights a pressing concern at the link of urban development, socio-economic transformation, and housing policy in South Africa (Charlton and Kihato, 2006). Since the dawn of democracy in 1994, government-led housing initiatives, guided by the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) and later the Breaking New Ground (BNG) policy, have sought to address spatial inequalities and provide affordable housing to historically disadvantaged communities. Within this context, SMMEs have played a vital role in both construction and housing provision, leveraging their ability to generate local employment, stimulate township economies, and contribute to inclusive growth.

In South Africa, poor quality housing is a pressing concern that compromises the safety and well-being of its inhabitants. According to the Housing Act 107 of 1997 and the Housing Act 50 of 1999, all citizens have the right to adequate living environments. To meet this standard, housing must ensure security, health, accessibility, and access to services (SAHRC, 2023). However, when housing fails to meet these basic requirements, it becomes poor quality. Unfortunately, poor quality housing in South Africa often perpetuates historical inequalities, disproportionately affecting low-income communities who are forced to live in unsafe or informal structures (Dullah Omar Institute, 2020).

The quality of housing produced has often been called into question, with numerous studies highlighting persistent shortcomings. A significant challenge faced by Small, Medium, and Micro Enterprises (SMMEs) is a shortage of skilled workers. As most semi-skilled and skilled workers are employed by the government and large private sector firms, SMMEs struggle to access the expertise and manpower they need. According to Vuba (2019), the demand for certain skills far exceeds the

available supply. This is reflective of a broader issue in the country - a lack of skilled workers, which contributes to high unemployment rates despite numerous job openings. As a result, SMMEs often find themselves under pressure to secure the necessary construction and project expertise, a task that is frequently made more difficult by the inaccessibility and/or scarcity of these skills. The prevalence of poor-quality housing in Pretoria's townships reflect deeper systematic issues: fragmented regulatory oversight, capacity limitations among emerging contractors, and the pressures of delivering low-cost units within constrained financial and temporal frameworks (Sibanda, 2020). Communities are left without housing stock that not only fails to provide adequate shelter but also perpetuates cycles of disinvestment, vulnerability and dissatisfaction.

From a theoretical perspective, the issue of the poor-quality housing by SMMEs can be understood through the lens of institutional theory and capacity building frameworks. The gap between formal policy objectives and actual delivery outcomes highlights a disjuncture between institutional aspirations and operational realities of small contractors. The study seeks to interrogate the poor-quality quality of housing developments undertaken by SMMEs in Pretoria's townships, examining the relationship between regulatory framework, contractor capacity and township socio spatial realities.

Despite the South African government concerted effort to address the housing backlog and improve living standards in historically disadvantaged areas, the delivery of quality housing in Pretoria's townships remains a persistent challenge. SMMEs have been positioned as vital actors in the housing delivery value chain tasked with stimulating township economies, creating employment opportunities and supporting inclusive growth. However, evidence suggests that many housing developments undertaken by SMMEs are characterised by poor quality quality, manifesting in structural defects, noncompliance with building codes, poor finishes and inadequate service integration (Herrington, 2018). These deficiencies compromise not only the physical durability of housing units but also the dignity and long-term wellbeing of beneficiaries.

Most township homeowners have suffered since most of their property is built by incompetent contractors or is completed late owing to performance difficulties. The desire for good quality micro developments undertaken by SMMEs has grown, and one of the issues is that not enough skilled workers are available to comprehend and carry out developments in line with viable aims. We therefore have the following research questions: firstly, what is the relationship with construction management skills and the quality of construction projects deliverance by SMMEs? The sub questions include what are What are essential construction management processes to be followed for a construction project to be a success? What construction skills are needed by SMMEs to make sure the development is of good quality? What is the importance of the planning application, firm characteristics, and construction skills and how they can affect SMMEs' performance? What are the challenges experienced by the homeowner's developers?

The main aim of the research is to understand the challenges faced by Pretoria-based SMMEs in delivering quality projects for developing affordable housing in congested areas. The study aims to contribute to policy and practise by identifying strategies that can strengthen the role of SMMEs in delivering sustainable, high-quality housing while simultaneously fostering inclusive urban development. This research endeavors to investigate the pervasiveness of poor-quality housing projects in Pretoria townships, with a specific focus on identifying the underlying impediments to the development of high-quality housing initiatives. The study seeks to achieve the following objectives: firstly, by examining the primary challenges and obstacles that hinder the realisation of high-quality housing projects in Pretoria townships, thereby shedding light on the complexities inherent in this context. Secondly, by examining the construction management methodologies employed by SMMEs during the construction phase, with a view to highlighting areas that necessitate improvement and optimisation. Thirdly, by assessing the influence of planning and firm characteristics on the quality of housing delivered by SMMEs, with a view to providing actionable insights that can inform future development initiatives and policy interventions. By exploring these objectives, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the factors that contribute to the prevalence of low-quality housing projects in Pretoria townships, and to identify potential strategies for mitigating theset.

Hypothesis Formulation

SMMEs lack the capacity to deliver good quality houses, as the construction of good quality houses is dependent on formal construction management skills and professionalised oversight. The underlying assumption is that without structured project planning, cost control, quality assurance mechanisms,

and adherence to professional construction standards. Housing delivery in low-income communities tends to suffer from defects such as structural instability, poor finishes, and non-compliance with building codes. In SA, several government audit reports and academic studies have highlighted that housing provided by emerging contractors is often plagued by poor workmanship and inadequate technical standards, largely due to limited construction management expertise (CIDB, 2012; Laryea, 2010). Hence, the null hypothesis suggests that SMMEs in Pretoria townships cannot independently guarantee high-quality housing delivery in the absence of formal construction management processes. The application of structured construction management processes—such as project planning, scheduling, cost management, quality control, risk management, and stakeholder coordination—significantly enhances the ability of SMMEs to deliver good quality houses in Pretoria townships. Construction management provides a systematic approach to coordinating resources, enforcing building standards, and ensuring compliance with the National Building Regulations and Housing Code. Empirical evidence shows that projects that integrate construction management principles tend to experience fewer defects, better cost efficiency, and improved customer satisfaction (Ofori, 2015). In township housing contexts, where SMMEs often serve as the primary contractors for government-subsidized or affordable housing projects, applying construction management methodologies not only improves quality outcomes but also contributes to skills transfer, enterprise growth, and sustainable human settlements (Department of Human Settlements, 2019; Thwala & Phaladi, 2009). Thus, the alternative hypothesis argues that construction management processes are a crucial determinant in achieving housing quality through SMMEs in Pretoria townships.

Literature review

The literature disclosed considerable information discovered and developed by academics, scholars, media, experts, etc. in the production of state construction projects in general.

Theoretical Framework

Several theoretical lenses help illuminate the persistence of poor-quality housing. Institutional theory underscores the role of formal and informal rules in shaping housing outcomes, highlighting the gap between policy frameworks and actual practises on the ground (Scott, 2017). According to Morgan (2006) capacity building theory emphasises the need for strengthening the skills, resources and institutional support systems available to SMMEs to improve delivery. Urban political economy perspectives further situate hosing quality within the broader dynamics of inequality, governance, and market forces arguing that poor quality housing reflects systematic failures in planning and socio spatial justice (Harvey, 2009). Together these frameworks demonstrate that poor quality housing in Pretoria's townships is not merely a technical problem but a multi weakness, capacity, deficits and structural inequalities.

Housing Provision in Post-apartheid South Africa and SMMEs

Housing remains one of the most pressing socio-economic challenges in South Africa, where apartheid spatial planning entrenched inequalities be relegating Black communities to peripheral, under services townships (Parnell & Pieterse, 2010). Since 1994, the state has embarked on large scale housing delivery programmes, initially under reconstruction development programme (RDP) and later breaking new ground (BNG) frameworks. These policies were designed to meet quantitative targets, reduce backlog, and provide affordable shelter. While more than four million houses have been delivered nationally the quality of these units has been a consistent source of critique (Charlton and Kihato, 2006). In Pretoria townships, as elsewhere, many houses fail to meet minimum structural, functional and spatial adequacy standards. This suggests that achievement of numerical delivery has often come at the expense of quality, resilience and sustainability.

SMMEs have been central to township housing delivery, both contractors and subcontractors. According to Charlton and Kihato (2006) globally SMMEs are recognised as engines of economic growth and local job creation. Financial constraints restrict SMMEs ability to procure high quality materials or invest in skilled labour (Morgan, 2006). Furthermore Ofori (2012) emphasise that managerial weakness manifest in poor planning, inadequate monitoring an ability to adhere to struct timelines. Technical skills shortages further exacerbate quality concerns, particularly where informal construction practises dominate. In Pretoria townships, these limitations interact with local socio-economic realities, including limited access to finance, lack of training opportunities, dependencies on

subcontracting arrangements (Nkado & Meyer, 2020). As a results, housing delivery by SMMEs often reflects systematic weaknesses rather than isolated failures of individual contractors.

Housing quality in SA is governed by the national Building Regulations and Building Standards Act No. 103 of 1977) and the home building manual (National Home Builders Registration Council, NHBRC). In theory, these frameworks, ensure safety durability and habitability. In practise, weak regulatory enforcement, fragmented oversight, and capacity shortages within local government often undermine compliance (Rust, 2011). Research shows that SMMEs, struggle to navigate these regulatory environments either due to lack of awareness or high costs of compliance (Windapo and Cattel 2014). As a result, oversight often enables the proliferation of poor-quality construction, particularly in township contexts where urgent demand pressures contractors to prioritise speed over quality. This highlights the importance of possessing effective construction management skills.

Construction Management Skills

Effective construction management is crucial in guaranteeing housing quality, cost efficiency, and adherence to safety standards. However, a lack of competent management during the construction process can lead to a deterioration in housing quality. This is often evident when there is inadequate oversight from design coordination and materials procurement to supervision and quality control (Ofori, 2015). Conversely, skilled construction managers play a vital role in ensuring that projects meet building codes, utilize suitable materials, and follow standardized methodologies, ultimately enhancing durability and habitability

Empirical research highlights that inadequate technical capacity among contractors is a significant contributor to substandard housing outcomes in developing countries (Windapo, 2014; Olanrewaju & Abdul-Aziz, 2015). This inadequacy is characterized by poor workmanship, cost overruns, and non-compliance with building regulations. Moreover, the absence of continuous professional development and accreditation systems for small-scale builders aggravates the issue, particularly in informal and low-income housing markets, where the need for quality housing is most acute (CIDB, 2022). Additionally, the planning application process requires greater emphasis.

Planning Application Process

The planning application process plays a crucial role in determining the legal, environmental, and spatial conditions that govern the approval and execution of housing projects. However, if this process is weak or inefficient, it can lead to the proliferation of low-quality housing, particularly in areas where informal settlements expand beyond regulatory frameworks (Turok & Borel-Saladin, 2016; Li et al., 2021). In South Africa, the Spatial Planning and Land Use Management Act (SPLUMA) of 2013 provides the guiding framework for the planning system, aiming to promote equitable spatial development and ensure compliance with zoning and building regulations (Republic of South Africa, 2013). This Act aims to strike a delicate balance between fostering development and safeguarding the interests of residents and the environment. Consequently, the importance of robust characteristics that underpin the production of high-quality developments cannot be overstated.

Firm Characteristics

Despite the existence of policies aimed at promoting affordable housing, research has shown that bureaucratic inefficiencies, inconsistent enforcement, and corruption can hinder their effectiveness (Pieterse, 2018). The lengthy approval process often prompts developers to circumvent formal procedures, resulting in unregulated and potentially hazardous construction practices (Huchzermeyer, 2011). Moreover, the disconnect between urban planning and housing delivery systems poses a significant challenge to integrating essential infrastructure, transportation, and environmental considerations seamlessly (Napier, 2018)

The quality of housing outcomes is significantly influenced by firm-level characteristics, including ownership structure, size, capital base, experience, and governance. Notably, larger and more experienced construction firms tend to have a greater advantage in terms of accessing skilled labor, quality materials, and advanced technology, which ultimately leads to better compliance with housing standards (Cheah et al., 2011). In contrast, smaller and informal firms often struggle with financial and regulatory constraints, hindering their ability to maintain construction quality (Windapo, 2016).

The performance and accountability of construction firms are significantly influenced by their corporate governance practices. As agency theory suggests, weak governance can lead to cost-cutting measures and non-compliance with building codes, as firms prioritize short-term profits over long-term sustainability (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). Moreover, construction firms with a poor safety and environmental culture are more likely to compromise on health and safety standards, resulting in subpar housing (Osei-Tutu et al., 2020). Therefore, the need for robust housing quality metrics becomes increasingly important.

Housing Quality Metrics

Housing quality metrics offer a comprehensive framework for evaluating the safety, comfort, and sustainability of dwellings. According to the United Nations, adequate housing is characterized by security of tenure, availability of services, habitability, accessibility, and cultural adequacy (UN-Habitat, 2020). In the South African context, housing quality assessments take a multifaceted approach, incorporating both objective and subjective measures. Objective metrics include the structural soundness of homes, access to essential services, and materials used, while subjective indicators consider resident satisfaction and perceived safety (SAHRC, 2023). Furthermore, quantitative housing quality indices typically assess the physical condition of structures, access to utilities, and environmental quality, providing a detailed picture of housing quality (Boamah, 2014)

Assessing housing quality in Pretoria townships requires a multifaceted approach. Traditional quantitative indices focus on the physical condition of structures, access to essential utilities, and environmental quality (Boamah, 2014). However, more comprehensive frameworks also incorporate social and environmental factors, such as energy efficiency, ventilation, and resilience to climate risks (Lu & Wang, 2019). Unfortunately, in low-income areas, the lack of reliable metrics and monitoring systems hinders municipalities' ability to identify and address substandard housing (Napier, 2018).

Fortunately, recent advancements in GIS-based spatial analytics and remote sensing tools have significantly enhanced the accuracy of housing quality assessments. These innovative tools enable governments and researchers to create detailed maps of housing deficits and structural vulnerabilities (Adebayo & Ibem, 2021). By integrating these tools into policy implementation, policymakers can develop evidence-based interventions to reduce substandard housing and improve urban resilience, ultimately creating a better living environment for township residents

Quality Concerns in Low-income Housing Developments

The literature consistently highlights significant deficiencies in the housing stock of Pretoria townships. Research by Sibanda (2020) reveals a range of structural issues, including cracked walls, leaking roofs, poor plastering, and inadequate foundations. Furthermore, these structural inadequacies are often compounded by a lack of ventilation, insufficient insulation, and poor integration with essential services such as water, electricity, and sanitation.

Moreover, the construction industry in these townships faces additional challenges. Many Small, Medium, and Micro Enterprises (SMMEs) lack access to proper construction management technologies, making it difficult for them to compete with more established companies. These technologies include business planning software, scheduling software, and progress management software. According to Herrington et al. (2017), one of the primary barriers to the adoption of effective construction management practices among SMMEs is the difficulty in securing financing from financial institutions. This is largely due to the fact that SMMEs often lack a strong financial history and struggle to develop a viable business strategy.

Literature Gaps

Most studies on construction management and quality focus on large and international contractors, with very little evidence on how township based SMMEs in SA specifically apply construction management processes (Ofori, 2015). Windapo and Cattell (2014) while literature identifies general project management processes (planning, scheduling, cost control, quality assurance) the critical subset of processes that small contractors must prioritise to succeed in resource constrained environments remains underexplored. Research acknowledges a skills shortage in South African construction sector (CIDB, 2018) but there is limited clarity on which specific skills-technical, managerial, or financial-are more vital for SMMEs to deliver quality housing in townships. Firm size,

ownership, financial capacity, and workforce composition are often mentioned but not systematically linked to project outcomes for SMMEs in the township housing sector. Literature on urban planning and housing policy emphasises formal procedures (e.g building approvals, NHBRC regulation) but the degree to which influence, or hinder SMMEs housing delivery remains unclear. Studies largely overlook the end user perspective, including issues such as poor workmanship, delays, cost overruns and lack of accountability in SMMEs delivered projects (Laryea, 2010).

Research Methodology

This section delves into the study's primary data sources, examining their validity and reliability, while also addressing potential ethical concerns. The chapter culminates in an overview of the data analysis methodology employed in this research, providing a comprehensive understanding of the study's underlying framework

Research Approach

This research follows a deductive approach, which is defined by Silverman and Marvasti (2008) as an approach that is used when a theory developed through a literature review will be tested through observation and by using. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, also known as (SPSS). Therefore, this study follows a deductive approach because it makes use of questionnaires and structured interviews to create an empathetic observation which will allow the researchers to compare the different understandings of the people through empirical data.

Research Strategy

This research adopts a deductive approach, as defined by Silverman and Marvasti (2008), which involves testing a theory developed through a comprehensive literature review using observational methods and statistical analysis via the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). In line with this approach, this study employs a combination of questionnaires and structured interviews to gather empirical data, enabling the researchers to make an informed comparison of the diverse perspectives of the participants and gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation

Population and Sampling

The real estate development projects have various stakeholders who are formally connected to it, including property owners, customers, and employees. However, there are also external stakeholders who may have an indirect impact on the project (Gibson, 2000). According to Brink (2002), sampling is the process of selecting a representative subset of a population to gather data relevant to the study's objectives. Sampling is a useful method for collecting valuable insights about a specific population (Lim & Ting, 2012).

The target population comprised SMME construction professionals operating predominantly in Pretoria townships, including owners, project managers, site supervisors, and foremen. A total of 241 respondents participated in the survey.

Development of the Research Instrument(s)

To gather comprehensive feedback, two distinct questionnaires were designed and sent to respondents: one tailored for SMMEs and another for material suppliers, professional property developers, construction professionals, property forums, policy developers, and low-cost housing homeowners. By asking identical questions to each respondent, the questionnaires facilitated a streamlined data collection process. During the interviews, the researcher maintained a consistent attitude and demeanor to ensure uniformity, as recommended by Yin (2011).

Data Collection Protocol

The methodological approach taken has a significant impact on the data collection process (Bryman, 2012). To gain a comprehensive understanding of SMMEs, researchers obtained permission to collect data on-site or at offices. A two-pronged approach was utilised, consisting of online survey distribution and on-site data collection. Each questionnaire included an information sheet that clearly outlined the study's purpose, ensured informed consent, and allowed participants to specify their trade or job

experience. To maintain participant anonymity, the consent form was separated from the responses. Completed questionnaires were placed in a sealed box, and site responses were then combined to further ensure confidentiality (Silverman & Marvasti, 2000).

Validity and Reliability

To ensure the questionnaires yield relevant data, the researcher will submit them to the group supervisor for review and feedback. This involved rephrasing certain sections for clarity and adding more suitable alternative response options to open-ended questions. According to Burns et al. (1998), external validity is a crucial consideration when evaluating the extent to which study results can be generalized to the broader population. With this in mind, the researcher will directly contact participants via telephone prior to distributing the survey questionnaire to ensure they understand the research objectives and what is expected of them in the survey.

Reliability

The respondents represented a diverse range of professionals, including contractors, quantity surveyors, owners, engineers, and related Small, Medium, and Micro Enterprises (SMME) roles. To test for reliability, we used Cronbach alpha as presented in Table 1. Our analysis revealed several key themes that contribute to substandard housing in Pretoria townships. Firstly, the lack of structured planning and supervision is a significant driver of rework and poor finishes. Interestingly, respondents with higher firm grades and greater resources reported better planning discipline, suggesting a positive correlation between firm capabilities and project outcomes. The perceived influence of structured planning, firm capabilities, and core construction management (CM) skills on project outcomes was widely reported. Many respondents indicated that these factors improved outcomes, highlighting their importance in delivering quality projects. However, the experience of poor-quality outcomes was also a common theme. Many respondents reported encountering poor quality work sometimes or often in their projects, underscoring the need for improvement in this area.

Table 1 Reliability (Cronbach's alpha)

Construct	Items	Cronbach Alpha	Interpretation
Construction Management Skills	4	0.944	Good
Planning Process Application	3	0.937	Good
Quality Score	5	0.981	Good

Skills and planning are significant, improving quality and reducing schedule variance and defects; model fit is acceptable across outcomes.

Data

After the collection of data, a computer programme (SPPS) is used to categorise, code, and analyse data with the main aim of quantifying newly appearing traits and ideas. This programme was used to develop and design tables, diagrams, pies, and bar charts. The research employs qualitative descriptive analysis as its analysis method. This method of data analysis decodes interprets and describes systematically and systematically acquired data. Although statistical methods may be used in this qualitative research's data analysis, most of the time the analysis is an ongoing iterative process that involves continuous data collecting and analysis that occurs virtually instantly (Agresti and Tarantola, 2018).

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 presents the descriptive results, showing with planning process showing the highest variability among the soft-process indices, the planning process is likely a leverage point. Enhancing planning rigor could mitigate both Schedule Variance and Defect Rate.Construction Management Skills, this soft metric stands out as particularly strong. While it may positively impact Quality Score, it is not sufficient to offset inconsistencies in planning. The moderate Quality Score, coupled with a relatively high Defect Rate, suggests that quality outcomes are not yet aligning with capability levels. This disparity may be

attributed to gaps in execution discipline and controls. Performance Variance shows a significant variance in Schedule and Defect Rate indicates that some firms or projects excel, while others struggle. This supports the need for standardization, training, and baseline controls to address these disparities.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics

Variable	N	Mean	SD
Quality_Score	241.0	0.482	0.175
CM_Skills	241.0	0.596	0.186
Planning_Process	241.0	0.556	0.236
Firm_Grade	241.0	4.43	1.005
Experience_Years	241.0	7.592	3.723
Firm_Size	241.0	26.267	11.829
Schedule_Variance	241.0	0.232	0.134
Defect_Rate	241.0	0.207	0.141

Table 3 shows the pairwise correlation matrix, quality score is mot positively associated with Construction management skills (CM_Skills (0.40) and planning process at (0.384), better skills and planning link to higher quality. On the other hand, quality score is negatively associated with schedule variance at (-0.268), being off schedule relates to lower quality and defect rate at (-0.191) with more defects relate to lower quality.

Table 3 Pairwise Correlation Matrix

Variable	Quality Score	CM Skills	Planning Process	Firm Grade	Experience Years	Firm Size	Schedule Variance	Defect Rate
Quality_Score	1.0	0.4	0.384	0.039	-0.007	-0.026	-0.268	-0.191
CM_Skills	0.4	1.0	0.107	-0.049	-0.104	0.01	-0.385	-0.237
Planning_Process	0.384	0.107	1.0	-0.024	-0.028	-0.077	-0.317	-0.292
Firm_Grade	0.039	-0.049	-0.024	1.0	-0.094	-0.069	-0.061	-0.207
Experience_Years	-0.007	-0.104	-0.028	-0.094	1.0	0.123	0.037	0.033
Firm_Size	-0.026	0.01	-0.077	-0.069	0.123	1.0	-0.066	0.007
Schedule_Variance	-0.268	-0.385	-0.317	-0.061	0.037	-0.066	1.0	0.212
Defect_Rate	-0.191	-0.237	-0.292	-0.207	0.033	0.007	0.212	1.0

Further tests were conducted as shown in Table 4 conducted for our variables and the rule of thumb is met, all our variables are within the threshold for VIF.

Table 4 Variance Inflation Factors (VIF)

Variable	VIF
CM_Skills	8.969
Planning_Process	5.977
Firm_Grade	10.523
Experience_Years	4.646
Firm_Size	5.431

Table 5 presents a comprehensive examination of substandard housing in Pretoria townships through three distinct models. Each model offers a unique perspective on the issue, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the complexities involved. The three models are as follows: the first model assess the overall quality of hosung in Pretoria townships; the second model focuses on the construction timeline, this model investigates the extent to which the projects deviate from scheduled completion dateshighlighng potential inefficiencies; and lastly the third model examines the prevalence of defects

in housing units, this model sheds light on the frequency and severity of construction flaws, ultimately impacting the quality of life residents

Table 5 Results Hypothesis Testing Results

Variable	Quality Score	Schedule Variance	Defect Rate
Intercept	0.482 (0.01)***	0.232 (0.008)***	0.207 (0.008)***
CM Skills (std)	0.065 (0.01)***	-0.048 (0.008)***	-0.031 (0.008)***
Planning Process (std)	0.061 (0.01)***	-0.039 (0.008)***	-0.039 (0.008)***
Firm Grade (std)	0.012 (0.01)	-0.012 (0.008)	-0.032 (0.008)***
Experience Years (std)	0.009 (0.01)	-0.001 (0.008)	-0.002 (0.008)
Firm Size (std)	-0.001 (0.01)	-0.012 (0.008)	-0.004 (0.008)
N	241	241	241
R-squared	0.284	0.241	0.179
Adj R-squared	0.269	0.225	0.162
F-statistic	18.65***	14.9***	10.25***

Table 5 presents a comprehensive examination of substandard housing in Pretoria townships through three distinct models. Each model offers a unique perspective on the issue, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the complexities involved. The three models are as follows: the first model assess the overall quality of hosung in Pretoria townships; the second model focuses on the construction timeline, this model investigates the extent to which the projects deviate from scheduled completion dateshighlighng potential inefficiencies; and lastly the third model examines the prevalence of defects in housing units, this model sheds light on the frequency and severity of construction flaws, ultimately impacting the quality of life residents.

The results of Model 1 reveal that construction management skills have a significantly positive impact on quality scores, leading to an increase of 0.065 points. Similarly, the planning process also substantially enhances quality, resulting in a 0.061-point increase. This finding is consistent with previous research by Thwala and Phaladi (2009), which emphasised the importance of integrating construction skills and planning processes to achieve better project outcomes. Furthermore, the data from this study suggests that effective implementation of construction management skills and planning processes can lead to improved project outcomes, such as increased quality scores, reduced schedule variance, and ultimately, enhanced user satisfaction with the housing units. The implications of these findings are significant, as they highlight the need for targeted interventions in the construction industry to address the substandard housing issue in Pretoria Townships. Therefor the results support the (H_0). Additionally, other variables, such as firm grade and experience, also play a role in determining quality outcomes.

Model 2 reveals a significant link between construction skills and schedule variance, resulting in a reduction of 0.048 points. Additionally, the planning process also significantly decreases schedule variance, with a notable reduction of 0.030 points. These findings are consistent with those of Ofori (2015), who also found a positive relationship between effective construction management and reduced project delays. Furthermore, the analysis suggests that construction skills and planning processes are critical factors in determining the success of a construction project, and their impact on quality scores and schedule variance cannot be overstated.

The third model's results reveal that possessing construction skills can reduce defects by 0.031, while a thorough planning process also leads to a significant reduction in defects by 0.039. Furthermore, a higher firm grade is associated with a significant decrease in defects by 0.032 points. These findings align with the research conducted by Windapo and Cattell (2014) and the Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB, 2018), which found that effective construction management practices, including skilled labor and thorough planning, can significantly improve the quality and timeliness of construction projects. This further supports the null hypothesis.

The construction skills and planning process consistently demonstrate the ability to enhance quality, reduce schedule variance, and lower defects across all three models. Notably, firm grade only plays a

significant role in defect reduction, with no discernible impact on quality or schedule. Conversely, experience and firm size appear to have little to no effect on these outcomes.

Findings indicate that structured construction management processes are associated with improved housing quality among SMMEs in Pretoria townships.

Conclusion

The analysis of construction management processes and their influence on housing quality in township developments reveals a critical tension between the capacity of SMMEs and the demands of professionalized construction management. The null hypothesis (H_0) assumed that SMMEs, due to limited formal skills and resources, are unable to deliver good quality houses, and that construction quality is inherently dependent on professional construction management expertise. While this view is supported by evidence of poor workmanship, cost overruns, and safety risks in projects lacking structured management practices, it oversimplifies the realities of township-based SMMEs. Furthermore, evidence suggests that with appropriate training, mentorship, and access to resources, SMMEs can integrate these processes into their operations and successfully deliver durable, safe, and cost-effective housing in Pretoria townships.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that the challenge is not the incapacity of SMMEs, but the absence of structured construction management integration in their operations. If policymakers, industry bodies, and training institutions can bridge this skills gap, SMMEs have the potential to emerge as reliable agents of housing delivery. This positions construction management not merely as a technical requirement, but as a transformational driver for enhancing housing quality, reducing urban inequalities, and empowering township-based enterprises.

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SACQSP2025-146

Influence of Operating Environment on Project Control: Empirical Evidence from South Africa's Construction Industry

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Abstract

Project controls are fundamental to the success of construction project delivery because they provide the mechanisms through which time, cost, quality, and scope are systematically managed. In construction, projects are often complex, resource-intensive, and highly sensitive to undesirable outcomes such as cost overruns, schedule delays, safety concerns, and regulatory non-compliance. This study examines the influence of the operating environment on the effectiveness of project controls in the South African construction industry. A quantitative research design was employed using a questionnaire survey, while construction professionals who were purposively sampled formed the population of the study. The method of data analysis used was confirmatory factor analysis. The findings reveal that the operating environment significantly influences the success of project control mechanisms by shaping organizational capacity to monitor, evaluate, and regulate project performance. Weaknesses in compliance, safety culture, technology uptake, and risk awareness undermine control systems, while strong integration of these factors enhances efficiency and accountability. The study highlights the interdependence between organizational environment and project controls and recommends that firms institutionalize integrated frameworks embedding compliance, safety, technology, and risk management to improve project delivery outcomes.

Keywords: Project Controls, Operating Environment, Project Delivery, South Africa.

Introduction

The construction industry is one of the key economic activities driving sectors in South Africa (Wentzel et al., 2022). There is a positive correlation between the performance of the construction industry and the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Economic performance trends have for decades reflected a bi-directional relationship between these two variables (Olarewaju & Ibrahim, 2020). Construction works and related activities amounted to R430.2 billion in 2018, or six percent of GDP, signaling the strategic importance of the South African construction sector (Zhang et al., 2020). Successful construction projects must be initiated with careful planning, including applying project controls for efficient construction processes (de Rezende et al., 2022). Project controls ensure the delivery of projects according to the allocated budget, time and quality (Endut et al., 2009). Rajabi et al. (2024) assert that it is expected to control deviations from the project plan and emphasize the collection and analysis of information that will facilitate decision making and better management of project risks that may negatively affect the completion of the project. The environment in which project controls operate is crucial as it affects how much project controls can be executed. Various factors, such as industry norms, rules and regulations, economic climate, and culture, affect project controls. In highly regulated industries, such as construction, the project control environment can be influenced by compliance requirements and other parameters (Kivilä et al., 2017). Furthermore, for construction projects to meet expected outcomes, high safety and environmental policies must be implemented to enhance project control. While these add layers of complexity, they can also improve how teams organise and monitor the projects. Moreover, there is paucity of studies on how the operating environment can drive project control in the South African construction industry. On this basis, this study aims to evaluate the influence of operating environment on the effectiveness of project controls in the South African construction industry. The other sections of the paper are literature review, research methodology, results, discussion of findings, conclusion and recommendations.

Literature Review

Project controls refer to the coordinated efforts to handle, control, and oversee a project's workings within the expected outcome (Rozenes et al., 2006). In construction management, project controls are necessary for handling the project's scope, budget, timeframe, and quality to avoid risks and achieve the project objectives. Some of them include planning and scheduling, cost management, risk management, and performance measurement that provide up-to-minute information necessary for proper project management (Kivilä et al., 2017). The conceptual abstraction of project management controls is interrelated to some management theories and framework-originated tools of project management integration. Acebes et al. (2014) noted that project controls are theoretically anchored on specific concepts, such as management paradigms in operations research, systems theories, and decision-making models.

According to Hwang and Ng (2013), the successful use of modernised project controls can only be achieved with effective leadership and governance frameworks. Organisational leaders make decisions concerning accountability, transparency of intention and adherence to set objectives while undertaking projects. Governance structures, including steering committees and project control mechanisms, are responsible for such supervision and control and assist in integrating the level of project controls and the level of the organisation. The control of the project that has been put in place can also be consistent with the most reliable of processes and procedures that are standard (Arefazar et al., 2022). Stubbs and Higgins (2014) stated that organisations whose processes define the specifics of project planning, monitoring, and reporting tend to have a higher likelihood of optimising control of the project or its progress. These processes create a system for making decisions and lessen the range of variability of project results.

Completing construction projects is complicated by environmental risks such as natural disasters, extreme weather, and environmental degradation (McNeil et al., 2015). The optimised project controls must have risk management frameworks where the risks are identified, their effects are measured, and strategies to reduce the risks are affected. For example, comprehensive scheduling controls may be necessary for contracting delays and undertaking projects in hurricane-prone areas. Also, local communities and environmental factors influence project controls through expectations for sustainability, noise control, and social responsibility (Qian & Lin, 2016). Therefore, project controls must be optimally designed to include environmental assessments, stakeholder engagement, and community benefits. Furthermore, advanced analytics tools provide insights into project performance and environmental trends, thus enabling effective decision-making (Todorović et al., 2015). An example of such techniques is predictive analytics, which can help anticipate risk and recommend mitigations. Badewi (2016) stated that one factor influencing project control optimisation is the different amounts of available financial, human, and material resources. The limitation on resources calls for hierarchy or order of control and cutback measures. For instance, budget limitations may mean a more stringent control on expenditures, while insufficient personnel resources may imply focused training and recruitment.

The South African operating environment exerts concentrated and multifaceted pressures on project controls, with studies highlighting energy insecurity, institutional and procurement dynamics, political economy influences, and human-capital constraints as primary determinants of control system effectiveness (Manu & Pretorius, 2009). Beyond utilities, public-sector procurement regimes and the governance practices of state-owned enterprises influence the design and enforceability of controls: constrained procurement flexibility, compliance burdens, and politicised award processes reduce the capacity of project controls to correct course in real time and amplify risks of late delivery and cost escalation (Manyathi & Jarbandhan, 2024).

The optimisation of the project controls presents a complex task comprising the structural factors of the control systems adopted and the environment in which these systems operate. Systems of project control, which are balanced, flexible and data-driven while operating in a conducive external environment, are of great importance in attaining maximum project performance. Ultimately, the objectives of successful optimisation rely upon the capacity to combine such elements in a manner that improves factoring for decision-making and resource management while keeping in view the dynamic nature of projects or even environmental circumstances.

Research Methodology and Method

The research focused on evaluating the influence of operating environment on the effectiveness of project controls in the South African construction industry. A deductive methodology was utilized, rooted in a post-positivist philosophical framework. This choice is due to its ability to capture the intricate realities of both social and natural phenomena. Quantitative data was gathered from construction industry professionals via a questionnaire survey employing a purposive sampling strategy. The research was conducted in Gauteng Province, South Africa, renowned for having a significant number of construction professionals and projects. A total of three hundred forty-five responses were collected from the targeted respondents, and all the received responses were considered suitable for analysis. The questionnaire was designed to gather respondents' perspectives on how the operating environment impacts project controls in South Africa, using a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Additionally, ethics approval for the research was granted by the Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa.

The study implemented a Confirmatory Factor Analysis to assess the measurement equivalence of the operating environment regarding the effectiveness of project controls within the South African construction sector. This analysis was conducted utilizing EQS Version 6.4 software. An extensive approach was taken for the analysis, which included various indices such as the Bentler comparative fit index (CFI), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), goodness-of-fit index (GFI), Satorra-Bentler scaled chi-square (S - Bχ2), root mean square error of approximation with 95% or 90% confidence interval (RMSEA @ 95% or 90% CI), andstandardized root mean square residual (SRMR). As noted by Byrne (2006) and Kaplan (2009), these indices function as descriptions of incremental or comparative fit indices and the provision of an absolute fit index.

Kline (2010) pointed out that the comparative or incremental fit indices comprise χ2, S - Bχ2, CFI, and GFI, while the absolute fit indices are represented by SRMR and RMSEA. Both SRMR and RMSEA are essential metrics for evaluating the alignment of a priori models with the sample data and for identifying the optimal fit of a conceptual model. In summary, the present research employed six index assessment techniques with the intention of performing a comprehensive model evaluation. The six indices applied included SRMR, RMSEA, GFI, CFI, Normed Fit Index (NFI), and Non-Normed Fit Index (NNFI), demonstrating a combination of four incremental fit indices and two absolute fit indices used in the research.

Results

The model was initially defined by ten observed variables. However, after the first analysis, four variables were identified as having acceptable values, making them suitable for inclusion in the following analysis, as shown in Table 1. When evaluating a model's fitness for the data, it is essential to examine and interpret the estimates of individual parameters, paying attention to their statistical significance, validity, and reliability (Hair et al., 2013).

Table 1 Measurement Variables for Operating Environment

Latent Construct	Measurement Variable	Label
Operating Environment (OPE)	The organization enforces compliance to standards and regulations	OPE1
	Health and safety measures are considered in my organization	OPE2
	The entity encourages the use of technology	OPE3
	There is a good awareness of risk management in the organization	OPE4

It is recommended that multiple criteria entail both 'absolute' and 'incremental' fit indices, and the chi-square test is carried out in the assessment of model fit (Hair et al., 2013). In furtherance to those mentioned earlier, this study adopted the use of index: goodness-of-fit index (GFI), comparative fit index (CFI), residual mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), standardised root mean square

(SRMS), normed fit index (NFI) and non-normed fit index (NNFI). According to Bentler (2005), CFI can reflect the fit assessment of all sample sizes and its ability to measure a non-centrality comparative reduction. Also, the chi-square test proves to be good at measuring measures of it. However, it is attributed to its inability to accurately assess probability values impacted by the sample size (Iacobucci, 2010). Hence, using the Satorra-Bentler scaled chi-square (S-Bχ2) for dealing with sample size sensitivity (Kline, 2010).

Table 2 presents the fit indexes established for the analysis alongside the output estimates generated from the analysis. The values for CFI and GFI were found to be 0.960 and 0.957, respectively. As recommended by Iacobucci (2010), a CFI and GFI value of 0.95 or higher indicates a good fit, while values equal to or above 0.90 can be deemed satisfactory. Therefore, the results obtained from the analysis satisfy the criteria for a good fit. Additionally, the SRMR and RMSEA exhibited values of 0.038 and 0.206, respectively. Bentler (2005) remarked that SRMR and RMSEA values of 0.05 or below are indicative of a good fit, while those under 0.08 are considered satisfactory. Thus, it can be concluded that the SRMR and RMSEA values also met the good standards. Moreover, the sample data for the operating environment measurement model yielded an S-Bχ2 of 740.908 with 28 degrees of freedom, accompanied by a p-value of 0.00. According to Zhong and Yuan (2011), the chi-square is highly sensitive to both sample size and data normality, making it a less reliable and inadequate measure. Consequently, it is advisable to use a normed chi-square (Kline, 2005), which is calculated by dividing the chi-square statistic by its degrees of freedom. Thus, the normed chi-square determined was 4.078. Byrne (2006) suggested that a normed chi-square value between 3.00 and 5.00 reflects a good fit. This supports the adequacy of the proposed model.

Table 2 Robust Fit Indexes for Operating Environment

Parameters	Threshold	Approximation	Outcome
S - Bχ2		740.908	
Df	value > 0.00	6	Good fit
Comparative Fit Index	value ≥ 0.90 (satisfactory) value ≥ 0.95 (good)	0.960	Good fit
Goodness of Fit Index	value ≥ 0.90 (satisfactory) value ≥ 0.95 (good)	0.957	Good fit
Root Mean Square Error of Approximation	value ≤ 0.08 (satisfactory) value ≤ 0.05 (good)	0.206	Good fit
Standardized Root Mean Square Residual	value ≤ 0.08 (satisfactory) value ≤ 0.05 (good)	0.038	Good fit
Normed Fit Index	value ≥ 0.90 (satisfactory) value ≥ 0.95 (good)	0.958	Good fit
Non-Normed Fit Index	value ≥ 0.90 (satisfactory) value ≥ 0.95 (good)	0.948	Satisfactory
Root Mean Square Error of Approximation 90% CI		0.146:0.272	satisfactory range
p-value	value > 0.05	0	satisfactory range

The coefficient values and test statistics of the analysis are presented in Table 3. Bentler (2005) observed that Z-values and the coefficient of determination (R2) are insightful for understanding the impacts and importance of parameters within a specific model. It was found that the correlation values fell below 1.00, whereas the Z-statistics surpassed 1.96, indicating their suitability. Statistically, Z-

statistics determine the significance level of the path coefficients in the inner model. A two-tailed Z-test with a 5% significance level with Z-statistics larger than 1.96 is significant (Hair et al., 2013). Hence, it can be adjudged that all the indicator variables are significant in the model since the Z-test values are greater than 1.96. Also, the model's predictive accuracy was ascertained with the given R2. The measurement scale for R2 ranges from 0 to 1. Kline (2010) affirmed that values closer to 1 connote high predictive accuracy. As revealed in the table, the R2 values are above 0.5, thus indicating that the factors explained a large proportion of the variance in the measurement variables. Hence, it can be deduced that the indicator variables significantly define and predict the latent construct.

Table 3 Factor Loading and Z-Statistics

Observed Variable	Unstandardised Value (λ)	Standardised Value (λ)	Z-Statistics	R2	Indication of Significance at 5% level
OPE1	1.0278	0.8378	9.035	0.702	Yes
OPE2	1.5376	0.8837	7.123	0.781	Yes
OPE3	0.4117	0.6654	11.838	0.543	Yes
OPE4	0.7422	0.7930	10.278	0.629	Yes

Discussion

The insight that organisations which prioritize adherence to the established standards and regulations in a construction setting attain greater effectiveness in control aligns with the established knowledge in construction management. The specified standards, such as ISO 9001 concerning Quality Management Systems and ISO 45001 addressing Occupational Health and Safety (Marhavilas et al., 2021), serve as tools aimed at achieving consistency, accountability, and continuous improvement. A lower level of deviation in processes establishes a more stable baseline for evaluating and monitoring performance on construction projects. This supports Bello et al. (2024) assertion that regulatory enforcement in construction contexts aids in mitigating disputes and delays by integrating accountability. In situations where project costs and timelines are uncertain, adherence to regulations establishes a framework for controlling deviations and identifying deficiencies in regulatory and compliance standards.

The components related to health and safety were shown to positively influence the effectiveness of project controls. Given that construction activities are highly susceptible to accidents, incidents related to safety can trigger a cascading effect on costs, schedules, and quality (Shao et al., 2019). Organizations that incorporate health and safety into their control frameworks can create an operational buffer that enhances predictability and resilience. This is consistent with the research findings of Manu et al. (2014), which indicated that safety compliance would be improved during the project planning phase and would minimize disruptions. Enhanced safety on projects also leads to lower employee turnover and improved morale, thereby indirectly boosting overall productivity. The implications here suggest that health and safety issues are more than mere compliance requirements; they are fundamental components of project control.

The increasing adoption of technology in construction underscores the importance of encouraging technology use for optimizing controls. Innovations such as Building Information Modelling (BIM), drones for site surveys, and project management software deliver real-time data that improve the speed and accuracy of decision-making (Vacanas et al., 2015). When organizations embrace digital tools, it enhances transparency for stakeholders, boosts predictive accuracy regarding project results, and removes inefficiencies caused by fragmented information access. Dagou et al. (2025) contends that construction technologies foster new types of collaboration, enhance innovation, and allow for real-time monitoring, all crucial for effective project control. These findings indicate that technology promotes precision within control systems and enhances adaptability in dynamic project environments.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings expand the current project control literature by extending the conventional performance constraints of cost, schedule, and quality to also encompass situational, reflective, and technological factors. The acknowledged importance of project control levers indicates that sustainable governance structures are essential, and the existing institutional environment illustrates that control systems hold significance only within the broader context of organizational and

regulatory frameworks. From a practical perspective, significant are the insights related to the operating environment, which reveal that compliance with regulatory standards, proactive incorporation of health and safety practices, openness to technological advancements, and a widespread consciousness of risk form the foundational basis for effective control systems. In practical terms, construction organisations are compelled to expand their focus beyond internal project control processes and actively develop environments that encourage adherence to regulations, organizational resilience, and adaptability.

Conclusion

This study investigated the influence of the operating environment on the effectiveness of project controls within the South African construction industry, employing a quantitative approach through a questionnaire survey. The application of confirmatory factor analysis validated four critical variables as essential components shaping project control effectiveness. The findings demonstrate that a favorable operating environment, characterized by these variables, significantly enhances the robustness of project control mechanisms, thereby improving efficiency, accountability, and project outcomes. Conversely, a deficient environment, where compliance is weak, safety standards are undermined, technological integration is resisted, and risk management practices are poorly understood, compromises the capacity of project controls to deliver their intended benefits. These insights reaffirm that project control frameworks cannot operate effectively in isolation but are intricately dependent on contextual organizational and environmental enablers. The implications are far-reaching for both industry and policy. For practitioners, the results highlight the need to institutionalize strict compliance regimes, embed health and safety culture, leverage digital technologies for monitoring and reporting, and mainstream risk management education at all levels of project delivery. For policymakers and regulatory bodies, the findings underscore the importance of creating supportive frameworks that incentivize technological adoption, strengthen regulatory enforcement, and improve the monitoring of occupational health and safety compliance.

Recommendations

It is therefore recommended that construction firms in South Africa adopt a holistic project control strategy that explicitly integrates compliance, safety, technology, and risk management as interdependent pillars of effective practice. Organisations should prioritize ongoing professional training to enhance their internal skills in these domains while also adopting digital solutions like project management information systems and risk assessment tools. On an industry-wide level, collaborative networks should be created to share best practices, track compliance developments, and assist small- and medium-sized enterprises in addressing implementation challenges.

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Sustainability and the Role of the Quantity Surveyor in Climate Action

SACQSP2025-1

Costing Green: Closing the Competency Gap Among South African Quantity Surveyors for a Sustainable Future

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Abstract

The aim is to evaluate the cost factors impacting green building costing for quantity surveyors in South Africa. This study followed an interpretivist research philosophy with an inductive approach to theory development. Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured/ interviews with professionally registered quantity surveyors who are members of the Association of South African Quantity Surveyors (ASAQS) and/or the Green Building Council of South Africa (GBCSA). Data was analysed using deductive thematic analysis. The key green building costing factors can be categorised into project team characteristics, project-specific characteristics, and external factors. Various strategies were considered instrumental in enhancing competency in green building costing. These include targeted education and training programs that equip quantity surveyors with the latest sustainability-focused skills, integrating green building costing into formal academic curricula, and fostering collaboration within the industry to encourage knowledge sharing and best practices. Additionally, the implementation and effective use of comprehensive cost databases tailored to green projects provide professionals with essential cost benchmarks, while ongoing professional development opportunities allow quantity surveyors to stay current with evolving green building methodologies and standards. The small participant pool, typical of qualitative research, suggests that the findings may not be widely applicable. This research paper provides preliminary directions for South African quantity surveyors through the identification of the specific cost factors associated with green buildings, enabling more accurate and effective cost estimation. This paper aims to potentially identify the relevant green building cost factors pertaining to the South African construction sector and to propose strategies for enhancing quantity surveyors' competency in these factors.

Keywords: Quantity Surveyor, Sustainable Construction, Cost Factors, Green Building Costing.

Introduction

Buildings globally contribute over 40% of greenhouse gas emissions (Chan et al., 2017), highlighting an urgent need for sustainable solutions within the construction sector. Green buildings have emerged as essential to reducing emissions (Marotta et al., 2023), making it crucial to curb greenhouse gases in construction to mitigate climate change (Li et al., 2019). As client demand for green buildings rises worldwide (Khan et al., 2019), South Africa has seen incremental growth in green building adoption since introducing standards in 2007, presenting significant expansion opportunities (Simpeh & Smallwood, 2023). However, while green buildings are well established in countries like the USA, Australia, and parts of Europe, South Africa's green building sector has not yet gained comparable traction (Simpeh & Smallwood, 2020). Yet, green construction is viewed as a long-term business prospect, impacting both developed and emerging markets (Owoha et al., 2021). In this complex industry, understanding green building project costs is critical for informed investment and procurement decisions (Mushi et al., 2021). Throughout construction, quantity surveyors monitor costs, provide cash flow data, enable clients to manage finances at each project stage (Ramdav & Harinarain, 2019). Quantity surveyors play a central role by estimating costs associated with sustainable construction, leveraging expertise in areas like green building costing, carbon footprint analysis, life cycle costing, property performance assessment, green building rating systems, and building information modeling (BIM) (Omotayo et al., 2022). Green building costing, as defined by Salleh (2020), entails

comprehending the financial aspects unique to sustainable construction. However, misconceptions about the high costs of green building design and construction persist, slowing industry advancements (Omotayo et al., 2022). Quantity surveyors are therefore positioned to advise clients on the value of sustainable construction versus traditional methods (Omotayo et al., 2022), though many in South Africa lack sufficient training in green building costing (Jacobs, 2015). As sustainable practices grow, quantity surveyors must be well-prepared to handle green building costs, making it essential to assess the current state of expertise in this field (Jacobs, 2015). As property developers increasingly recognize the benefits of green buildings, enhancing quantity surveyors' proficiency in green costing becomes critical for maintaining a competitive edge (Masia et al., 2019). The aim of the paper is to evaluate green cost factors among South African quantity surveyors. Therefore, the objectives of the paper are to identify the key cost factors influencing green building projects for quantity surveyors in South Africa and to propose strategies for strengthening their competencies in these areas. In doing so, the paper aspires to advance both national and global sustainability goals by fostering a skilled, future-ready quantity surveying profession capable of leading South Africa's move toward a more sustainable built environment.

Literature Review

Green construction advocates promote green buildings as key to a sustainable future. However, many developers hesitate due to higher upfront costs and additional risks. Since cost is the main barrier, it must be clearly outlined and understood to encourage market entry (Zahirah et al., 2013). The study found that sustainable residential buildings cost only 1.58% more than traditional ones, suggesting they are not significantly more expensive. The slight increase is likely due to the higher cost of green products (Sana, 2018) and the decision to pursue green certification (Abidin et al., 2021). Several terms are used to describe cost units, including tangible cost, invisible cost, direct cost, indirect cost, capital cost, and investment cost. Indirect costs, or overheads, refer to expenses not directly tied to specific construction activities. Direct costs include materials, labor, and equipment, while overheads encompass project-specific expenses, such as a superintendent's salary and crane rental, as well as general overhead and transactional costs. Even smaller items, such as nails and wires, fall under project overhead (Hu, 2024). Invisible and tangible costs are interrelated, and accurately assessing the total project cost requires considering both (Abidin & Azizi, 2021). The decision to pursue green building practices is believed to influence tangible and invisible costs (Azizi & Raofuddin, 2014). Invisible costs refer to "off-site" expenses not directly linked to labor or materials, including planning, design, and administrative services related to green building projects (Abidin & Azizi, 2021). In contrast, tangible costs involve expenditures on architectural features, mechanical and electrical systems, civil and structural elements, and other tangible construction aspects specific to green buildings (Azizi & Raofuddin, 2014).

Factors Influencing Green Building Costing

A range of factors have been examined regarding the construction costs of green buildings. Understanding the factors that influence these costs is essential for quantity surveyors to gain a competitive advantage in delivering accurate cost estimates to clients (Omotayo et al., 2022). Green building construction cost-influencing factors fall into three categories: project-specific characteristics (technological complexity, supply chain condition and building-specific characteristics), project team characteristics (procurement and delivery method, skills and experience, collaboration and communication, and innovation), and external characteristics (Climate, market conditions, regulatory requirements, and economic trends) (Hu, 2024).

Project Specific Characteristics

Project specific characteristics entail building-specific characteristics, technological complexity and supply chain condition. The category of building-specific characteristics encompasses various factors that influence construction costs, including the building's function, location, architectural design, complexity, size, construction methods, site limitations, and more (Hu, 2024). These characteristics account for a substantial portion of overall construction costs (Elmohr et al., 2022). The construction of sustainable buildings can be highly complex due to the involvement of advanced technologies and intricate building procedures (Ayarkwa et al., 2022). A study by Jherson and Guillermo (2019) found that projects with high complexity typically experience average cost overruns of 25.6%, while low complexity projects have an average cost overrun of 8.0%, and medium complexity projects have an

average of 9.0%. The construction supply chain involves all organisations that contribute to delivering a built asset (contractors, manufacturers, suppliers, transporters, and intermediaries), affecting costs through the flow of products, services, and information (Badi & Murtagh, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the significant impact of supply chain disruptions on construction expenses (Hu, 2024).

Project Team Characteristics

Project-specific characteristics include the chosen procurement and delivery method, skills and experience, collaboration and communication, and innovation. The chosen procurement method is crucial as it dictates how a project will be delivered and financed, affects trust among stakeholders, and shapes openness and communication among team members (Hu, 2024). Choosing an appropriate procurement strategy is crucial because it can significantly affect the project's cost, timeline, and quality outcomes (Bako, 2015). Effective skills, communication, and collaboration are vital in addressing challenges such as complexity, resource limitations, and high costs, enabling teams to share valuable knowledge (Cheng et al., 2023). Collaboration in construction involves a long-term partnership between multiple stakeholders working together to achieve common business objectives (Larsson & Larsson, 2020). Green innovation involves developing sustainable technologies and processes that can initially raise costs but contribute to long-term environmental benefits (Ahmad, 2023). Incorporating green innovations, such as triple-glazed windows, building monitoring systems, and carbon-free insulation, tends to increase both material and labor costs. Additionally, the use of advanced technologies like photovoltaic roof panels and energy-efficient windows often necessitates modifications to the building's infrastructure, which can further escalate overall expenses (Nguyen, 2023).

External Factors

External factors like climate conditions, policy support, economic benefits, and certification programs also play a critical role in shaping the costs associated with green building development (Zhang et al., 2019). External factors, which are largely beyond human control, such as adverse weather or market conditions, have the greatest influence on cost overruns (Mirhosseini et al., 2022).

Strategies to Develop Competence in Green Building Costing among Quantity Surveyors

The need for sustainability literacy in construction, especially among quantity surveyors, is paramount as it supports the industry's transition toward sustainable practices. The global shift toward green construction requires quantity surveyors to stay informed and skilled in green building costing to remain relevant and competitive in the field (Salleh et al., 2020). According to the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS, 2018), competence encompasses the essential skills and knowledge necessary for performing specific tasks. With that in mind, several strategies to develop competence in green building costing for quantity surveyors include education and training programs, integration of green building costing in curriculum, industry collaboration and knowledge sharing, establishment and use of cost databases for green products, professional development and competence assessment, and government policy and legislative support.

Researchers worldwide have identified several barriers to implementing green building practices in construction, such as a lack of awareness (Azeem et al., 2017). Continuing professional development (CPD) activities such as seminars and workshops help professionals stay current with technologies, improve their skills, and stay informed about field advancements (Halabi, 2014). Continuing professional development includes both formal and informal learning opportunities that help quantity surveyors enhance their skills and improve their professional practice. It also bridges the gap between formal education and professional practice needs (Namaganda, 2019). Higher education institutions play a crucial role by incorporating green building costs in construction-related curricula. This integration ensures that future professionals are well-equipped to meet industry requirements and advise clients accurately on green building costs (Xia et al., 2016). Academic institutions can offer quantity surveying programs that equip graduates with the essential competencies needed to contribute effectively to green building projects (Yogeshwaran et al., 2018).

Partnerships enable knowledge sharing and provide exposure to successful green construction implementations, reinforcing the global commitment to sustainability (Darko et al., 2016). Collaborative relationships are widely used across various industries and have proven to be highly effective in the

construction sector (Lung & Shaurette, 2018). Collaborative efforts among industry stakeholders can promote the adoption of sustainable practices (Darko et al., 2016). Each professional's competence is essential to achieving the overall skills required to drive sustainable development and construction (Donzing et al., 2023). Cost databases centralise data on green products, materials, and market trends, enabling accurate green cost estimations. Regular updates from production sectors make these databases valuable resources for quantity surveyors (Borja et al., 2019; Omotayo et al., 2021). The accuracy of detailed construction estimates largely depends on the quality and reliability of cost data, particularly regarding materials and labor (El-Mohr et al., 2022).

Professional bodies worldwide emphasise skills development through structured assessments like the Assessment of Professional Competence (APC). This process focuses on training, feedback, mentorship, and targeted skills development, guiding quantity surveyors to meet professional standards (Noor et al., 2020; Parsons et al., 2020). Professional quantity surveyor candidates must complete a final assessment involving a 20-minute presentation, a critical analysis, and responses to practice problems. This is followed by an interview covering their analysis, practical experience, ethics, and current industry issues (Jayalath, 2019). Many researchers argue that government financial incentives, such as tax exemptions for green buildings, can effectively encourage developers and homeowners to adopt sustainable building practices (Akcay, 2023). Governments worldwide have implemented regulations and policies that provide incentives to promote green technologies and enhance energy efficiency (Oguntona et al., 2019).

Research Methodology and Method

This study adopted an interpretivist approach, aiming to understand cost factors impacting green building costing for quantity surveyors and propose strategies to enhance their competency. A mono-method qualitative approach was used, gathering insights from a limited, knowledgeable sample through open-ended questions in semi-structured interviews (Ratten, 2023). The target participants included two groups in South Africa: five ASAQS quantity surveyors and four with dual ASAQS and GBCSA membership. This sample size aligns with qualitative research standards for reaching data saturation of 4-12 interviewees (Saunders et al., 2016).

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, divided into sections covering participant background, cost factors, development strategies, and open comments on green building. Initial briefings addressed participant questions and consent, with 30-minute interviews conducted via a secure video platform. Participants reviewed transcripts to ensure accuracy. Ethics approval (no. 1028) was obtained to uphold standards in data usage, consent, integrity, and confidentiality (Louis et al., 2017). Deductive thematic analysis was conducted using ATLAS. ti, coding transcripts to identify and analyse themes extracted from literature from participant responses (Cassel et al., 2018). After initial coding, transcripts were re-coded for comprehensive data analysis, resulting in a clearer narrative around cost factors and strategies in green building costing.

Research Results and Discussion

Responses

Nine participants agreed to take part and were successfully enrolled in the study, following Saunders et al. (2016), who recommend a sample size of 4 to 12 participants. Data collection proceeded until thematic saturation was achieved.

Profile of Participants

To ensure relevant and reliable findings, data were collected from professional quantity surveyors registered with both ASAQS and GBCSA, as well as those registered only with ASAQS, as shown in Table 1, allowing for a comparison of perspectives. These professionals are well-versed in project requirements and play a key role in implementing sustainability strategies (Omotayo, 2022).

Table 1 Profile of participants

PARTICIPANTS	YEARS OF EXPERIENCE	INVOLVED IN GREEN BUILDING PROJECTS	PROFESSIONAL QUANTITY SURVEYORS(PRQS)	ASAQS OR ASAQS &GBCSA REGISTERED
P1	20	NO	YES	ASAQS
P2	9	NO	YES	ASAQS
P3	15	NO	YES	ASAQS
P4	22	NO	YES	ASAQS
P5	11	NO	YES	ASAQS
P6	33	YES	YES	ASAQS&GBCSA
P7	25	YES	YES	ASAQS&GBCSA
P8	30	YES	YES	ASAQS&GBCSA
P9	13	YES	YES	ASAQS&GBCSA

Analysis of Data

This section presents and examines the participants' responses for the two objectives of identifying cost factors and strategies, and the themes identified through deductive thematic analysis, which involved systematically coding and categorising keywords and phrases, ultimately leading to the identification of three and two themes, respectively, as outlined in Figure 1.

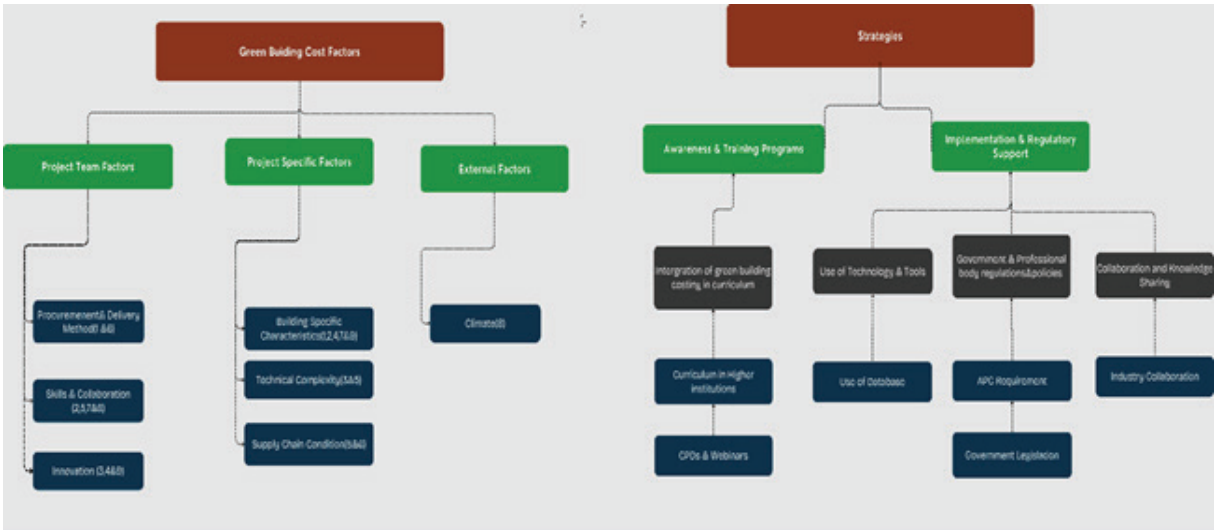

Figure 1 Themes, Categories, and Codes

Cost Factors Influencing Green Building Costing for South African Quantity Surveyors

Theme 1: Project Team Factors

Procurement and Delivery Method: The choice of a project delivery method—the approach and process for completing a project significantly impacts its success (Hu, 2024). As Bako (2015) points out, selecting the right procurement strategy is essential, as it can influence project cost, delivery time, and quality. Participants 1 and 6 underscore this, noting that procurement and delivery methods substantially affect the cost of green building projects.

Skills and Collaboration: According to Larsson and Larsson (2020), collaboration in construction is a long-term commitment among various stakeholders to meet shared business goals. This aligns with the growing, though gradual, demand for sustainable construction, which is hampered by a shortage of skilled professionals able to address sustainability requirements effectively (Oke et al., 2018). Participants 5, 2, 7, and 8 collectively reinforce that skills and collaboration within a team are essential to successfully implement green building projects. Participant 5 stresses the need for a team that not

only possesses sustainable design, costing, and management skills but also shares a commitment to embrace new technologies and learn collaboratively:

"*Are we all willing to come together and try to find a solution? This is a change management process and not everyone is receptive to change... if the whole team can say we are moving in this direction... it's going to be easier.*" - P5

Participant 5 underscores how skills and openness to collaboration can smooth the path toward green building initiatives, allowing the team to support one another even if some lack direct experience with sustainability practices. This sentiment is echoed succinctly by other participants.

Innovation: While green buildings are a relatively new trend in real estate, they have already proven to influence construction costs (Chegut et al., 2019). The integration of green innovations— such as triple-glazed windows, building monitoring systems, and carbon-free insulation—often increases material and labour costs. Advanced technologies like photovoltaic roof panels or energy-efficient windowpanes may also require building infrastructure modifications, further driving up expenses (Nguyen, 2023). Participant 3 highlights that technological advancements, though beneficial for sustainability, can unpredictably increase the costs of other building components.

Theme 2: Project-Specific Factors

Building-Specific Factors: Research by Elmohr et al. (2022) indicates that these characteristics account for a substantial portion of overall construction costs. Hu and Skibniewski (2022) further identify specific factors that influence green building costs, including the project's sustainability level (such as its green star rating), building and construction type, location, project size, and material availability. Participants 1, 2, and 4 agreed that building-specific factors are essential in determining costs.

Technical Complexity: Ayarkwa et al. (2022) emphasise that sustainable buildings often involve complex technical processes, while Cristóbal et al. (2018) note that complexity arises in design features or techniques that are unfamiliar or untested. Participant 5 underscores that the success of technically complex designs depends heavily on the designers' expertise. Designers must assess whether a project is feasible and ensure that their plans can be constructed effectively. Additionally, Participant 5 highlights that a shortage of experienced contractors adds difficulty, as contractors need time to understand, practice, and adapt to new methods, which is crucial for implementing technically complex projects successfully:

"*Technical complexity will depend on the knowledge of the designers... contractors, they need time to understand this. They need time to practice this. They need to experiment. They need to know what works and what does not work*." – P5

Participants 3, 4, and 8 also agreed on the importance of technical complexity.

Supply Chain Condition: The construction supply chain includes contractors, manufacturers, suppliers, transporters, and intermediaries, all contributing to the successful delivery of construction projects (Cataldo et al., 2022). In green construction, supply chain conditions are particularly impactful, as they directly influence the availability of skilled contractors, material supply, and alignment with project specifications (Gu et al., 2023). Participant 5 highlights the shortage of skilled contractors, noting that many lack the specialised skills needed for sustainable construction projects. This skills deficit raises questions about the market's capacity to supply contractors capable of executing complex green projects effectively. Participant 5 also points to the importance of drafting comprehensive specifications and attracting qualified contractors through a competitive bidding process:

"*I'm now leaning more towards supply chain conditions... there are a lot of general skill deficits amongst our contractors... So, are there enough contractors out there to be able to implement this*?" – P5

Participants 6 and 9 agree that supply chain factors are essential in managing costs, especially for green buildings.

Theme 3: External Factors

Climate: External factors, while unrelated to project activities, can still impact the achievement of project goals. According to Hwang and Leong (2013), these factors vary in their impact across different projects, while Mubarak, Husin and Oktaviati (2017) found that most external factors tend to have a low-intensity impact on project costs. Participant 8 specifically highlights climate as a significant external factor, noting that construction costs would vary drastically depending on location, such as between the Sahara and Iceland.

Strategies to Develop Competence in Green Building Costing among Quantity Surveyors

This section sought effective strategies to enhance South African quantity surveyors' competence in green building costing, focusing on education, professional development, and industry initiatives for sustainable practices. Two themes awareness and training programs and implementation and regulatory support revealed four categories: curriculum integration, professional development, technology use, and collaboration. These categories led to six specific codes.

Theme 1: Awareness and Training Programs

Category 1: Integration of Green Building Costing in Curriculum

Curriculum in Higher Institutions: Educating undergraduates in green building costing is crucial for advancing greener practices in the construction industry, as these students will eventually lead efforts in sustainable construction (Xia et al., 2016). Participant 1 specifically suggests incorporating green building costing into South African higher education curricula to better prepare quantity surveyors for sustainability:

"*Introduce it into schools or universities for future quantity surveyors*." – P1

Without these competencies, future quantity surveyors may encounter increased costs, delays, inefficiencies, and missed opportunities in green building projects. Yogeshwaran et al. (2018) emphasise the need for close collaboration between industry and educational institutions to ensure that degree programs are frequently updated to align with the evolving skills required in the field.

CPDs and Webinars: Raising awareness of green buildings among professionals and stakeholders is crucial for advancing sustainable practices, as highlighted by Azeem et al. (2017). Continuous professional development (CPD) activities, such as discussions, seminars, and workshops, help professionals adapt to evolving technologies and maintain their expertise (Halabi, 2014). Namaganda (2019) notes that CPDs and webinars address the limitations of initial qualifications. Participants emphasise the effectiveness of CPDs and webinars in enhancing expertise in green building costing among South African quantity surveyors:

"Effective workshops and webinars or courses teaching about green buildings costing such as CPD." – P1
"Probably to have it in continuous professional development can help a lot." – P3

Category 2: Professional Development

APC Requirements: The Assessment of Professional Competence (APC) evaluates candidates' abilities through interviews, critical analyses, presentations, and problem-solving exercises, culminating in a viva voce (Jayalath, 2019). Participant 3 emphasises that incorporating green building costing into the APC process is essential for ensuring that quantity surveyors possess the necessary competencies in this area:

"*Probably to have it as a requirement within the APC development can help a lot*." – P3

Theme 2: Implementation and Regulatory Support

Category 1: Use of Technology and Tools

Use of Cost Database: Access to reliable cost data is essential for producing accurate estimates in green building projects, enabling quantity surveyors to manage costs effectively throughout the project lifecycle (El-Mohr et al., 2022). However, limited access to current cost data remains a challenge, as highlighted by Participant 5. Establishing a continuously updated, accessible cost database can enhance the accuracy of green building cost estimates. Participants expressed strong support for the creation of such a database:

"I think cost databases can assist quantity surveyors with the cost of green buildings." – P1
"A database from the Green Building Council to say, look, we built this building... the cost per square meter for this building is, let's say, 40,000 per square meter." – P2
"If we have them in place, they will actually guide us to come up with the sort of estimate." – P3
"It will be very difficult for anyone to start giving an accurate estimate without having such information." – P4

Participants emphasised that the database should be managed by the Green Building Council of South Africa to meet industry standards. Furthermore, Participants 8 and 9 noted that the database should include effective approaches and experiences from all team members, ensuring it supports accurate cost estimation and best practices for successful project execution.

Category 2: Collaboration and Knowledge Sharing

Industry Collaboration: Collaborative work among various stakeholders is vital for the successful completion of construction projects, particularly in green building initiatives (Lung & Shaurette, 2018). The construction industry relies on teamwork, and achieving shared goals requires coordination among diverse experts from multiple disciplines. This collaboration enhances both project execution and green building knowledge (Donzing et al., 2023). Assembling a multidisciplinary team fosters knowledge exchange, benefiting less experienced quantity surveyors by improving their competence in green building practices. Participants emphasised the importance of shared knowledge in these collaborative settings:

"Collaboration between construction professionals and green building experts to share knowledge about green buildings." – P1
"If you can get maybe 2 or 3 cases to work under another team, it would assist in educating people about green building." – P4
"The more that knowledge is shared between us and all consultants, the better." – P8

This collective knowledge-sharing is crucial for enhancing the expertise of quantity surveyors in green building projects.

Government Policies and Legislation: The government plays a crucial role in encouraging construction owners to adopt green building projects through effective policies, regulations, and incentives. Mandatory regulations compel compliance, while supportive frameworks ensure adherence to sustainability standards (Akcay, 2023). Many countries have enacted legislation to promote sustainable construction practices (Oguntona et al., 2019). In South Africa, the effective implementation of such policies is essential to foster green building initiatives and enhance the proficiency of quantity surveyors in green costing. Participants highlighted the importance of government involvement:

"Government policies that mandate the adoption of green building practices will encourage green building costing among quantity surveyors." – P1
"There needs to be legislation." – P8

By providing clear incentives and enforcing sustainability guidelines, governments can drive the widespread adoption of green building practices.

Conclusion

The findings highlight the key cost factors that influence green building costs for quantity surveyors in South Africa, as well as practical strategies to enhance their expertise. Factors such as project team

factors, specific project characteristics, and external conditions significantly shape the costs associated with green buildings. Effective procurement methods, skilled and collaborative teams, and innovative practices are essential for striking a balance between sustainability goals and cost efficiency. However, challenges like building complexity, limited supply chain expertise, and climate-related constraints continue to affect project feasibility and overall costs.

To improve green building costing proficiency, a multi-dimensional approach is necessary—one that combines education, professional development, technological integration, and regulatory support. Incorporating green building costing into higher education curricula and Assessment of Professional Competence (APC) requirements will equip future quantity surveyors with the necessary skills. Ongoing professional development through Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programs and webinars will help practitioners stay current with evolving sustainable construction practices. Additionally, establishing a centralised cost database, managed by the Green Building Council of South Africa, can improve cost accuracy and benchmarking.

Beyond professional and institutional measures, a broader societal and market shift is also needed. Increasing awareness and demand for sustainable buildings among clients, developers, and the public will naturally promote greater adoption of green building practices and, in turn, the need for skilled green-costing expertise. As the demand for sustainability grows, industry practices will evolve accordingly. Ultimately, this study emphasises that both building professional capacity and fostering societal commitment are crucial for advancing South Africa's transition toward a sustainable, low-carbon built environment.

Recommendations

To enhance the competence of South African quantity surveyors in green building costing, it is essential to revise higher education curricula by implementing comprehensive programs in universities and technical colleges that focus on green building costing, equipping future quantity surveyors with the necessary skills to manage sustainable projects effectively. Additionally, establishing an accessible centralised cost database managed by the Green Building Council of South Africa will provide current and comprehensive cost data for green building materials and technologies, ensuring regular updates to reflect market trends.

Limitations

This study faced certain limitations that may affect the interpretation of its findings. One significant limitation is the small participant pool, a common feature of qualitative research. This small sample size indicates that the findings may not be widely applicable to the broader population of quantity surveyors in South Africa.

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SACQSP2025-2

The Role of Carbon Accounting in Enhancing Sustainability in Construction Projects: A Quantity Surveying Perspective

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Abstract

The construction industry contributes significantly to global carbon emissions; therefore, effective sustainability practices are indispensable. However, existing research has overlooked the perspectives of quantity surveyors. This paper explores how carbon accounting can enhance sustainability in construction projects from a quantity surveying perspective. This study employs semi-structured interviews to gather the viewpoints of professionals. Twelve experts in sustainability, construction management, and quantity surveying have been specifically selected. One-on-one and online interviews were conducted to collect data, which was subsequently analysed thematically to identify key insights and perspectives relevant to the study's objective. The study indicates that quantity surveyors can play a pivotal role by incorporating carbon accounting into project cost control, enabling informed decision-making, and fostering environmentally friendly practices. Key themes emerging from the interviews include integrating carbon costs into decision-making, challenges associated with implementing carbon accounting, opportunities for innovation in sustainable construction, the importance of collaboration and communication, and quantity surveyors as sustainability champions. This study emphasises the significance of carbon accounting in enhancing the sustainability of construction projects. It redefines the role of quantity surveyors as central to achieving carbon-efficient, financially viable construction projects, thereby aligning the industry with global sustainability goals. Consequently, quantity surveyors' procurement expertise and cost control skills should advocate for and implement carbon accounting to support sustainable practices within the industry. The findings will contribute to the development of environmentally conscious construction practices, guiding industry initiatives and policy formulation. This study offers unique insights into quantity surveyors' perspectives on the role of carbon accounting in enhancing sustainability in construction projects.

Keywords: Carbon accounting, Sustainability, Quantity surveying, Construction projects, and Greenhouse gas emissions

Introduction

Alongside intensifying global concern about climate change, construction companies face a clear mandate to reduce their environmental impact. Increasingly, the industry understands that retrofitting sustainable practices is no longer optional; it has become a baseline expectation. Carbon accounting, which systematically quantifies and reviews greenhouse-gas emissions associated with every stage of a build, has emerged as an indispensable resource for any stakeholder seeking a credible sustainability benchmark (Lun Xiong et al., 2024). As the sector shifts towards its sustainability objectives, quantity surveyors are being called to weave carbon metrics into their customary disciplines

of cost, contract, and value oversight (Omotayo et al., 2023). This paper presents a quantity surveyor-centric appraisal of carbon accounting, affirming the profession's pivotal role in guiding project-wide budget control while ensuring value-for-money throughout the project.

Through the lens of quantity surveying, carbon accounting offers tangible advantages that extend beyond spreadsheets. It empowers surveying teams to weave sustainability into their cost forecasts and fiscal assessments. While cost control and financial oversight have defined quantity surveying for decades (Adjei et al., 2018), the field is now recognising that financial figures alone fall short. Environmental performance indicators, particularly carbon metrics, are becoming essential parallel measures (Hwang & Ng, 2013). By embedding carbon data into cost models, surveyors can deliver a holistic appraisal of project health that harmonises financial, social, and ecological returns. Another key merit lies in the sharper risk-management insights that carbon accounting offers. The construction sector, characterised by shifting cost, time, and quality uncertainties, must now also contend with emissions-related risk. By quantifying carbon output, quantity surveyors can detect exposure to evolving compliance for suppliers, volatile carbon credit markets, and reputational fallout from failure to decarbonise (Wang et al., 2024). This anticipatory risk posture strengthens project teams and cultivates an imbued culture of sustainability. Moreover, embedding carbon accounting into quantity surveying routines fosters stronger alliances among project players. Sustainable building success hinges on the collaboration of architects, engineers, contractors, and clients (Kibert, 2016).

By offering a single, openly shared structure for carbon-emission evaluation, quantity surveyors assume a broker role, guiding discussions so that stakeholders can collectively pursue common sustainability targets. Nonetheless, carbon accounting holds real promise; a host of hurdles remain. The foremost is the absence of uniformity in carbon-calculation techniques. Conflicting frameworks, most notably the Greenhouse Gas Protocol and ISO 14064, outline carbon-accounting pathways yet differ on definitions, project scope, and disclosure rules, sowing confusion and variability (Bohne et al., 2021). Quantity surveyors, therefore, must develop a rounded grasp of these competing protocols, mastering the distinctive elements of each and deploying the most appropriate one in real-world projects.

Furthermore, embedding effective carbon accounting in the construction sector demands an enduring cultural adjustment. Traditionally, companies have been more concerned with immediate profit margins, sidelining the implications for enduring ecological stewardship. Achieving change requires a robust education programme that equips quantity surveyors with the technical knowledge and analytical skills to seamlessly integrate carbon calculations into project budgets and forecasts (Waniko, 2023). If the industry collectively nurtures a mindset that values ecological balance as highly as financial yield, the path toward construction that leaves a lighter ecological footprint becomes both clearer and more attainable.

Throughout the sector, the utility of carbon accounting as a lever of sustainability in construction continues to receive wider recognition, particularly in the context of quantity surveying practice. Facing the realities of a warming planet, the discipline requires a systematic mechanism for quantifying, monitoring, and reconciling carbon flows, which in turn equips quantity surveyors to champion low-carbon procurement and delivery. Embedding carbon metrics within the traditional role of cost control, therefore, realigns the surveyor's value proposition with Net Zero outcomes, sharpening the relevance of bill preparation, value engineering, and lifecycle appraisal. Nevertheless, the existing body of empirical and theoretical work addressing this intersection is predominantly Eurocentric and North American, leaving a conspicuous evidential vacuum in the countries and regions of the Global South. This paper, therefore, interrogates the deployment of carbon accounting lenses defined by quantity surveying paradigms. The exposition is organised as a sequenced argument comprising seven sections: an introductory statement, a survey of the current literature, and, thirdly, the methodology adopted. Section four itemises the quantitative and qualitative results obtained, and the analysis and critique of those findings are canvassed in Section five. The final substantive section reviews the implications for legislative frameworks, practical procedures, and the agendas for ongoing scholarship and data enhancement.

Overview of Carbon Accounting

Tailoring carbon accountability to the construction sector entails tracking emissions across both direct and indirect pathways, commonly labelled as "embodied" and "operational" carbon. Embodied carbon captures the emissions linked to the extraction, processing, transport, and onsite assembly of

materials, whereas operational carbon accounts for the emissions incurred during the life of the building, including heating, cooling, and upkeep. When energy-efficient designs curtail operational energy use, the proportion of embodied carbon—traditionally estimated at 10 to 20 per cent of total lifecycle emissions- grows proportionately larger, rendering precise measurement indispensable for credible sustainability certifications. Supporting this, recent studies emphasise the importance of rigorous, reproducible assessment methodologies and recommend adopting internationally accepted protocols, such as the Greenhouse Gas Protocol and relevant ISO standards, to ensure consistent, transparent data reporting. Ongoing research calls for the construction sector to embed life cycle assessment (LCA) within carbon accounting to capture the full environmental impact, while industry guidelines, peer-reviewed studies, and sector-wide initiatives collectively advocate for protocols that reconcile economic feasibility with planetary boundaries.

In addition to the intrinsic technical requirements, construction projects are inherently characterised by intricate supply chains, fragmented project teams, and fluctuating market conditions, all of which impose latent carbon risks that basic measurement regimes can easily overlook. Fundamental visibility across the supply chain —from raw material extraction to waste management—coupled with continuous reporting practices, creates the foundation for credible, comparative assessments. Quantity surveyors, whose expertise centres on forecasting, allocating, and monitoring project costs, are therefore presumed to act as carbon stewards throughout project cycles, embedding emission targets into tendering, procurement, and valuation processes. Empirical studies and expert panels increasingly advocate for empowering quantity surveyors with tailored carbon datasets, streamlined software, and harmonised carbon factors to expand their analytical scope and translate carbon performance data into actionable financial and programmatic revenue, addressing the severe shortfalls quantity surveyors can expect. Industry-wide workshops, academic roundtables, and regulatory initiatives are being mobilised to attain consensus on common emission factors, common boundaries, and reporting frequency that would confer the profession and the projects they oversee the rigour and credibility traditionally afforded to cost estimates. The challenge of benchmarking carbon performance is compounded by the fact that the methodologies adopted vary widely by country and project type, making it difficult to draw reliable comparisons across different studies and to establish clear, internationally accepted performance baselines.

Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) remains the primary framework for quantifying the carbon emissions of building projects. By tracing the carbon costs from extraction, through processing, transport, erection, in-use performance, and eventual end-of-life scenarios, it offers a comprehensive view of each building's emissions profile (Li et al., 2022). When integrated into cost management workflows and quantity take-off processes, LCA enables quantity surveyors to directly correlate material specifications and construction techniques with carbon metrics, thereby steering project teams toward lower-carbon choices at the earliest stages of design (Li et al., 2022). The availability of digital LCA calculators and centralised data repositories—like the Inventory of Carbon and Energy (ICE), the EU Environmental Product Database (EU-EFDB), and the IPCC Environmental Product Database (IPCC-EFDB)—means that carbon accounting can now be seamlessly tied to the bill of quantities, enhancing both precision and cross-project comparability (Li et al., 2022). However, the ongoing divergence in data inventories, emission factors, and boundary definitions, region by region and project by project, continues to lead to significant discrepancies, eroding trust in the numbers ultimately presented (Bowen & Wittneben, 2011). The broad spectrum of methodologies underscores an urgent requirement for a globally harmonised protocol that quantity surveyors can adopt to ensure that projects can be confidently compared and effectively benchmarked (Bowen & Wittneben, 2011; Lun Xiong et al., 2024; Babatunde et al., 2019). Given that the construction sector now accounts for an estimated 39% of worldwide greenhouse gas emissions, taken together across both operational and embodied metrics, closing the gap in standardised accounting practices is both imperative and, from a project oversight perspective, feasible.

Carbon accounting turns measurement into insight: by routinely quantifying emissions, it sharpens decision-making, flags compliance risks, and homes in on the project phases where cuts matter most. A smart policy translates numbers into directives, steering teams toward lighter materials, low-carbon suppliers, and construction methods that use less energy. Studies confirm that teams that conduct a carbon footprint review at the schematic design stage are better positioned to incorporate efficient materials and low-impact techniques into their construction plans, resulting in lower carbon emissions, lower costs, and reduced future risk.

The Role of Quantity Surveyors in Carbon Accounting

Surveyors are adopting carbon management frameworks, seamlessly embedding them within cost planning, life-cycle costing, and value engineering in sustainable construction. There is, however, insufficient information available on carbon accounting standards, which calls for more robust professional training and inclusion in the scope of the certification. At the same time, surveyors serve as economic intermediaries between the design, the client, and the contractors. They motivate clients to adopt more carbon-efficient designs and make lower-carbon choices. From an operational perspective, surveyors facilitate the integration of carbon accounting into processes, making construction work more systematic and enhancing the transparency of decision-making, as noted by Li et al. (2022). Surveyors incorporate cost data and bills of quantities to track resource flows, emissions, and decisions (Marrero et al., 2020). Surveyors can grade and benchmark the carbon performance of construction work by assessing the construction's carbon footprint. Information Technology tools (BIM) that compute carbon quantities.

Furthermore, Zuo and Zhao (2014) stated that surveyors could advocate for sustainable suppliers and low-carbon materials, which could negatively influence low-carbon procurement. Thus, surveyors could undermine low-carbon construction approaches and damage their reputation as environmental stewards (Venturelli & Mio, 2025). Sustainability and environmental construction advocacy work earn them a reputation. Additionally, quantity surveyors can utilise life-cycle costing to inform investment decisions that consider both carbon and economic costs, thereby enabling value engineering (Priyan et al., 2025). This method ensures that the initial construction, as well as the operation and decommissioning activities, are managed sustainably, and all impacts are captured through the defined sustainability assessments. Furthermore, in the context of carbon, quantity surveyors provide carbon information alongside cost data, enabling stakeholders to make informed decisions about low-carbon materials and construction methods that impact a building's climate throughout its lifecycle (Qian et al., 2025). Additionally, quantity surveyors assist in carbon performance benchmarking, evaluating supplier environmental claims, and helping to set and monitor project-level carbon targets.

The ongoing transition to digital technologies, such as BIM and blockchain, is fostering innovations in carbon accounting. BIM supports the integration of design, measurement, and sustainability by enabling real-time carbon estimation across all design phases, facilitating seamless integration of design and measurement (Marrero et al., 2020). EcoConstruct and similar platforms offer transparency, data integrity, and traceability in carbon recording and trading, thereby enhancing regulatory compliance and stakeholder confidence, ultimately improving carbon governance (Rathnayake et al., 2025).

Challenges in Carbon Accounting and Future Directions

The implementation of carbon accounting in construction projects promises significant environmental advantages but is hindered by several persistent challenges. A primary concern is the intricate task of consistently quantifying and documenting emissions over multiple project phases and extended supply chains (Chicca et al., 2022). Data variability, arising from differences in quality, completeness, and reporting protocols, often compromises the integrity of accounting routines, leading to persistent discrepancies in delivered carbon figures (Häkkinen & Belloni, 2011).

Equally pressing is the absence of coherent, universally accepted carbon accounting protocols, which generates unnecessary ambiguity among project stakeholders. Varying techniques employed by different organisations inhibit the clear comparison of carbon outcomes across otherwise similar projects (Stechemesser & Guenther, 2012). Such disjointed reporting erodes the credibility of carbon claims, consequently restricting the mechanisms intended to drive continual sustainability gains. Recent investigations have identified several persistent impediments: unreliable input quality, the absence of agreed-upon benchmarks, and, perhaps crucially, the lack of contractual or commissioning pressure to quantify carbon (Lun Xiong et al., 2024). Setting carbon metrics within quantity surveying practices involves resising established workflows and refreshing skill sets (Priyan et al., 2025). Lacking a cohesive global standard, the workforce confronts pronounced skill gaps, while exact, project-specific carbon data —especially for novel materials and innovative construction techniques —remains elusive.

Improving the precision and influence of carbon accounting depends on tightened cross-disciplinary collaboration, standardised methods, seamless digital tools, and ongoing training across generations of professionals. Synchronising carbon and financial targets is imperative, and consistent dialogue with all

relevant stakeholders remains the best means to address remaining practical loopholes. The integration of carbon accounting into the education and everyday work of quantity surveying remains partial. Even as the sector increasingly acknowledges the imperative of sustainability, many surveyors lack the proficiency to execute carbon accounting with confidence and precision (Waniko, 2022). That skill deficiency calls for revised training modules and for several forms of continuous professional education that centre on carbon management in the quantity surveying discipline.

Table 1 Mapping Consensus and Disagreement on Carbon Accounting in Quantity Surveying. Source: Authors Construct, 2025.

Theme/Issue	Consensus Viewpoints	Divergent or Critical Perspectives
Standardisation of Methods	LCA and standards like PAS 2080 are widely upheld as central pathways to robust carbon accounting. Many supports international harmonisation for cross-border comparability (Lei, 2024)	LCAs are context-sensitive, often resource-intensive, and lack consistency across regions. Some challenge feasibility of global harmonisation and recommend more region-specific benchmarks (Xu & MacAskill, 2024; Bostan & Aboud, 2025)
Role of Quantity Surveyors	Most agree QSs are well-placed to drive carbon management due to their influence over costs, procurement, and planning. There's broad support for integrating carbon metrics into QS education (Victoria, 2025)	Others claim current QS professional training inadequately covers carbon literacy. Some suggest sustainability consultants or LCA specialists may be better suited to lead these analyses (Dong et al., 2018; Babalola & Onososen, 2022)
Impact on Sustainability Outcomes	Carbon accounting is seen as crucial for making emissions visible, influencing lower-carbon choices, and meeting climate targets. Early integration in project planning, particularly with interdisciplinary teams, often yields significant reductions (Afionis et al., 2017; Kesidou & Sovacool, 2019)	Some research finds carbon data collection is sometimes superficial, driven by compliance rather than deep-seated change (Solomon et al., 2011). Others warn that over-emphasis on carbon may crowd out other sustainability dimensions like biodiversity (Vijge, 2016).
Tools and Digital Integration	The use of digital tools and BIM for carbon analysis is largely backed as the future, promising improved accuracy and easier integration with QS workflows (Liu et al., 2023).	Critics highlight inadequate tool interoperability, regional misalignment, and the danger of uncritical reliance on digital outputs without transparency of assumptions (Chehrehgosha Kenari, 2024).
Barriers to Adoption	Lack of client demand, unclear regulation, and limited carbon benchmarks are mainstream concerns that slow widespread take-up (Bergman & Foxon 2020). Advocates call for regulatory mandates and improved training.	Some authors warn that until carbon management aligns strongly with client value and risk frameworks; it will remain marginalised (Hellmich & Kiesel, 2021). There's also concern that some QSs resist extra workload without clear incentives (Kibwami, 2016).
Professional Scope and Incentives	Many support financial or contractual incentives for carbon reduction as a way to bring QS motivations in line with low-carbon priorities (Liu & Yin, 2024).	Skeptics caution these incentives may conflict with cost savings or could lead to unintended behaviours like data manipulation or box-ticking (Glavas et al., 2023). Some suggest clearer role demarcation between QS and sustainability consultants is preferable (Ratnatunga, 2013).

While there is widespread agreement that carbon accounting should be a key part of sustainable construction, especially given the expertise and influence of QS professionals, the literature reveals real tension about how — and how effectively — this transition can occur. On one side, many support an empowering (Victoria, 2025), upskilling path for QSs (Vijge, 2016), promoting the integration of digital tools and education (Liu et al., 2023) to improve both cost and carbon outcomes. On the other hand, practical barriers such as inconsistent data (Bergman & Foxon, 2020), increased workload, weak client demand (Hellmich & Kiesel, 2021), and a professional culture cautious of change dampen the

optimism. Furthermore, a crucial cautionary note warns against relying solely on carbon counting: true sustainability must extend beyond emissions, encompassing social, ecological, and lifecycle complexities (Liu & Yin, 2024). Without institutional reforms, aligned incentives, and strong interdisciplinary practices, carbon accounting may become merely a compliance formality rather than a driver for real impact.

Research Methodology

This qualitative inquiry examines how carbon accounting promotes sustainability in construction projects from a quantity surveying perspective. A qualitative design was deliberately adopted to surface the nuanced perceptions, lived experiences, and actual routines of quantity surveyors regarding carbon accounting and its influence on sustainability. Such an approach is particularly defensible, as it yields context-rich, narrative data that can clarify the intertwined dimensions of the problem (Creswell, 2009). The inquiry is grounded in a constructivist framework, which posits that knowledge is co-produced through social encounters and professional routines. This stance is well-suited, as it foregrounds the individual and collective lenses through which quantity surveyors make sense of and operationalise carbon accounting protocols. Semi-structured interviews have been identified as the primary technique for gathering empirical data, as the format allows for adaptive probing while systematically foregrounding the central themes prescribed by the research agenda (Bryman, 2016).

A purposive sampling strategy was adopted, discerning respondents from quantity surveyors actively engaged in construction undertakings across the Ashanti and Greater Accra regions of Ghana. Considerations of their experience level guided the selection of participants, the type of projects they had worked on, and their familiarity with carbon accounting protocols, consistent with the recommendations of Palinkas et al. (2015). The intended composition consisted of 15 respondents, chosen to reflect a broad spectrum of experience and to ensure multiple viewpoints on the practical adoption of carbon accounting in the construction sector. Recruitment was conducted through established professional channels, including industry associations, career networks, and the Ghana Institution of Surveyors (GhIS) social media presence. The initial contact consisted of a succinct introductory message that described the study's objectives, explained the anticipated contributions of participants, and assured the confidentiality and anonymisation of all contributions, in line with ethical guidelines (Guest et al., 2006).

Data Collection

The research team conducted semi-structured interviews from January to March 2025, aiming to examine the integration of carbon accounting into the delivery of construction projects. To accommodate the wide-ranging geographic and logistical circumstances, conversations took place either in person, when convenient, or via secure video conferencing applications, primarily Zoom and Microsoft Teams, according to each participant's predetermined preferences, schedules, and locations. Each session adhered to a structured interview guide comprising open-ended prompts that encouraged in-depth elaboration. Among the main topics were the linkage between carbon accounting and overarching sustainability goals, present practices and analytical tools, implementation barriers, empirical benefits to project performance and sustainability (see Kibert, 2016; Ofori, 2023), and recommendations for methodological enhancement. Recordings were made digitally after securing informed consent from each interviewee, and subsequent verbatim transcriptions were produced for meticulous verification and analytical fidelity.

Data Analysis Strategy

A thematic analysis guided the exploration of how carbon accounting fosters sustainability outcomes in construction projects. The analysis unfolded in six stages: immersion in the corpus, generation of preliminary codes, tentative theme construction, theme refinement, formal definition, and the synthesis of the report. Each transcript was repeatedly read to unearth recurring patterns and prospective themes. The corpus was then annotated in NVivo, with text segments differentiated by their relevance to the specific research questions. This proportional analysis led to the clustering of similar codes within emergent themes, and a thematic map thereafter illustrated the hierarchical and relational architecture of the codes across the major themes.

Subsequent stages ensured that proposed themes remained faithful to the data set and responsive to the research prompts; themes that failed to meet these criteria were either strengthened through

recoding or removed. Each theme received a succinct, descriptive title, and the final thematic framework positioned them to foreground the research's principal interpretive contributions. Ethical scrutiny underpinned each procedural step: the university research ethics committee adjudicated and ratified the study protocol, and informed consent was secured from every research participant, safeguarding their autonomy and the confidentiality of sensitive data. Data were stored securely and accessible only to the research team. The study aims to capture the nuanced experiences and insights of quantity surveyors, contributing to a deeper understanding of the link between carbon accounting and sustainability in the construction industry.

Research Results and Discussion

A qualitative research study on the role of carbon accounting in promoting sustainability in construction projects, involving interviews with 15 surveyors and a literature review, identified key themes related to understanding, implementation, and the impact of carbon accounting practices in the construction sector.

Descriptive Analysis of Data

According to Table 2, the sample is relatively balanced, comprising eight males (53%) and seven females (47%), reflecting an increase in female participation in QS roles (Jans, 2023). Sixty per cent of respondents are under 40, indicating greater engagement among younger QS professionals with sustainability. The majority are mid-career (6–15 years; 53%), with the remaining participants either senior/late-career or early-career, offering diverse perspectives. In terms of their roles, participants' career positions range from Assistant QS to Director, including specialists such as BIM Analyst and Sustainability QS, and they cover both operational and strategic viewpoints. Respondents work across various sectors, including building, infrastructure, housing, education, industrial, and roads, with the highest representation in the commercial/building sectors. Furthermore, most work with public sector/public-private bodies (53%), followed by contractors (33%) and private consultancies (13%). The sample covers only two regions of Ghana, which may limit its national relevance. Nine respondents (60%) have completed sustainability training, demonstrated proactive engagement, but also highlighted a significant training gap (Roper, 2025). With a balanced sample across gender, career stage, sector, and region, the study captures a broad spectrum of QS engagement with carbon accounting. The prominence of mid-career professionals and the training gap highlight the need for broader upskilling and standardisation across the profession.

Table 2 Biographical Data of Respondents (n = 15) Source: Field data, 2025

Respondent ID	Gender	Age Range	Years of Experience	Current Role	Sector	Organisation Type	Region	Sustainability /Carbon Training Completed
QS1	Male	30–39	8	Senior QS	Building	Public Authority	Greater Accra	Yes
QS2	Female	40–49	17	Director of works Dept	Civil/Infra	Private Consultancy	Ashanti region	No
QS3	Male	25–29	4	Assistant QS	Housing	Contractor	Greater Accra	Yes
QS4	Male	35–44	12	Project QS	Commercial	Public Authority	Greater Accra	Yes
QS5	Female	50–59	30	Head of Cost Planning	Mixed-use Dev.	Public Authority	Greater Accra	Yes
QS6	Male	30–39	10	Senior QS	Healthcare	Public Authority	Ashanti region	No
QS7	Female	25–29	5	BIM/Carbon Analyst QS	Education	Contractor	Greater Accra	Yes
QS8	Male	40–49	20	Commercial Manager	Industrial	Contractor	Ashanti region	No
QS9	Female	35–44	13	Sustainability QS	Roads	Public Authority	Greater Accra	Yes
QS10	Male	25–29	6	Quantity Surveyor	Residential	Developer	Greater Accra	Yes
QS11	Female	30–39	11	Senior QS	Infrastructure	Private Consultancy	Greater Accra	Yes
QS12	Male	45–54	22	Principal QS	Roads	Contractor	Ashanti region	No
QS13	Female	35–44	14	Cost Manager	Commercial	Public Authority	Ashanti region	No

QS14	Male	50–59	28	Senior Commercial Mgr	Housing	Contractor	Ashanti region	No
QS15	Female	30–39	9	Quantity Surveyor	Education	Public Authority	Greater Accra	Yes

Thematic Analysis of Interview Findings

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 practising QS professionals to explore their perceptions, experiences, and practical challenges in applying carbon accounting within construction projects. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach, involving familiarisation, coding, theme development, review, and interpretation. The findings reveal six major themes that collectively illustrate the evolving role of QS in embedding sustainability into industry practice.

Theme 1: Understanding Carbon Accounting and Integrating Carbon and Cost Data

Across the interviews, practitioners displayed a mixed yet broad appreciation for carbon accounting. Several interviewees stressed that the metric serves a wider purpose than simply submitting a performance figure. QS3 expresses it well: "*Carbon accounting is not just a measuring exercise; it's an effort to map the entire lifecycle of a project and its chain of environmental repercussions.*" QS7 adds that, beyond a philosophical stance, this mapping is "*crucial to the cost-estimating and project-planning formulas that we, as QSs, routinely hand to clients.*" Moreover, a growing number of surveyors emphasised the need to report both carbon and cost metrics simultaneously. QS4 remarks, *"Embodied carbon figures now travel with the cost schedules we attach to tender submissions—it is simply what the market wishes to see."* Omotayo (2023) corroborates this, insisting that carbon figures stitched into cost plans hand decision-making authority the advantage of foresight from the earliest design contest. Interviewees downstream of QS4's view confirm that the presence of carbon cost as a visible figure steers optioneering, sharpens value engineering, and sharpens supplier short-listing. Similarly, clients expressed increased confidence when QS recommendations state both monetary and environmental dividends; as a result, budgetarians and sustainability champions are no longer different project stakeholders requesting divergent priorities. Despite this progress, the interviews revealed uneven familiarity with the technical standards and frameworks that any sensible surveyor should be aware of. While many attendees demonstrated proficiency with key standards, such as the Greenhouse Gas Protocol and ISO 14064, several voiced hesitations about applying this theoretical knowledge in day-to-day practice. QS10 summarised the mood: "*We've got the standards, but the training lag is the hurdle. More practical guidelines and training are essential if we want to weave carbon bookkeeping into our standard procedures.*"

Theme 2: Influence over Procurement, Materials, and Construction Methods

Twelve quantity surveyors reported that their sway over environmentally conscious procurement and material selection is now more pronounced. QS11 noted, "*Pitching a lower-carbon choice, say recycled aggregate or sustainably sourced timber, only works if we can show, side-by-side, the original price and the carbon cost over the asset's full life.*" This aligns with the recent Auerbach (2024) thesis that purchasing choices remain the most potent lever for cutting embodied carbon. Rather than merely crunching numbers, QSs are rebranding themselves as sustainability guides, persuading clients, suppliers, and contractors to choose greener specifications early in the project life cycle.

Theme 3: Digital Tools and Data-Driven Practice

Eleven participants mentioned the use of digital carbon calculators, BIM integration, and specialised carbon databases. QS7 stated: "*Carbon calculators and BIM integration have made it much easier to quantify emissions at every design revision so that we can make carbon-aware decisions from day one.*" This observation reflects Roper (2025), who emphasises the importance of reliable, standardised digital data to achieve net-zero targets. Technology enables QSs to monitor and update carbon assessments in real-time, thereby strengthening their role in iterative design and ensuring compliance with sustainability requirements.

Theme 4: Skills Development, Training, and Professional Education

Fourteen respondents identified upskilling as a prerequisite for maintaining professional currency. QS10 noted, "*Some of us had to self-learn carbon assessment. Continuous professional development on embodied carbon is now a must to remain effective.*" This observation aligns with Jans (2023), who asserts that ongoing education in carbon quantification and whole-life carbon assessment is crucial. Accreditation routes and higher education syllabi should weave carbon literacy and climate-related competencies into quantity surveyor qualifications. Training and pedagogical development emerged as strategic levers for embedding carbon accounting within the quantity surveying profession. Throughout the interviews, a consistent misalignment emerged: practitioners were keen on bespoke continuing professional education on carbon management protocols and sustainability. QS14 reiterated, "*We need more training initiatives that equip surveyors with the latest embodied carbon measurement and applied practices.*" Echoing that sentiment, respondents urged universities to integrate carbon accounting into core quantity surveying modules. "*To equip the next cohort with sustainability literacy, carbon measurement must feature from the very first semester,*" QS15 concluded, framing curriculum design as a moral imperative.

Theme 5: Barriers – Data Quality, Lack of Standardisation, and Client Awareness

A persistent barrier that emerged was that carbon information remains fragmented among the multiple platforms and repositories that professionals routinely consult. QS6 illustrated this clearly: "*Duplicated figures left and right, one database estimates three hundred, another says five, standard carbon numbers shouldn't spark debate, let alone colour the advice we pass to clients.*" QS14 added insight: "*Beyond tools, won't deny the client who says ambitiously, 'But we've left that carbon stuff optional, right? These figures aren't binding yet.' Address it head-on, and it's rip-and-repair the entire rom.*" These observations align directly with the synthesis by Jackson and Kaesehage (2019), who urged that an effective carbon regime waits for the twin engines of robust governance frameworks and client prioritisation to turn. Absent systematic uniformity and coherent public-sphere muscle, any QS who skews within tomorrow's roadmap will remain, painfully, hostage to present-day indeterminacy.

Another primary obstacle mentioned by participants was the perceived complexity of carbon accounting methodologies. QS9 remarked, "*For many quantity surveyors, the technical aspects of carbon accounting can be daunting. Simplifying these processes could encourage more professionals to engage with them.*" Additionally, the lack of regulatory frameworks and incentives for carbon accounting was highlighted as a significant barrier. QS11 stated, "*Without regulations pushing for carbon transparency, many firms see no immediate incentive to adopt carbon accounting practices. There needs to be a shift in policy to drive this change.*"

Furthermore, the financial implications of implementing carbon accounting practices were a concern for many interviewees. QS2 noted, "*There's often a perception that adopting carbon accounting will increase project costs. We need to demonstrate that the long-term savings and benefits outweigh the initial investment.*"

Theme 6: Whole Life-Cycle Carbon Accounting and Policy Drivers

Thirteen QSs discussed the rising demand for whole-life-cycle assessments (LCA), driven by policy and reputational factors. QS5 noted: "*With regulations tightening, we're being asked to track carbon across the whole building life cycle, not just the build phase.*" This aligns with PAS 2080 standards and the UK Net Zero Carbon Building Standard, both of which require LCA compliance. QSs are becoming compliance specialists capable of delivering low-carbon strategies throughout the entire asset life cycle, affecting both capital expenditure (CapEx) and operational expenditure (OpEx).

Theme 7: The influence of carbon accounting practices on project decision-making and delivery

The research identified various approaches to implementing carbon accounting within construction projects. Participants highlighted the importance of integrating carbon accounting into the early stages of project planning and design. QS5 noted, "*The earlier we incorporate carbon accounting, the better we can manage emissions and costs. It becomes a part of our decision-making process rather than an afterthought.*" However, implementing carbon accounting practices was not without challenges. Many pointed out the lack of standardisation in carbon accounting practices across the industry. QS12

remarked, "*Different companies use different methods, which makes it difficult to compare results and establish benchmarks. We need a unified approach to ensure consistency.*"

Furthermore, integrating carbon accounting into existing project management frameworks was highlighted as a critical factor for success. QS1 stated, "*It's essential to align carbon accounting with our standard project management processes. This alignment ensures that carbon considerations are not siloed but integrated into every aspect of project delivery.*" The findings also suggest that carbon accounting significantly influences decision-making in construction projects. Participants reported that the ability to quantify carbon emissions enabled more informed choices about materials, construction methods, and project design. QS8 explained, "*When we have clear data on carbon emissions, we can weigh the environmental impact of our choices against cost and performance, leading to more sustainable outcomes.*" Moreover, the study revealed that carbon accounting could enhance stakeholder engagement. QS4 noted, "*Clients are becoming increasingly aware of sustainability issues. By providing them with carbon data, we can facilitate discussions about sustainable practices and make a stronger case for environmentally friendly options."* However, several participants acknowledged that the impact of carbon accounting on decision-making is often contingent on the organisational culture and leadership commitment to sustainability. QS6 stated, "*If the leadership doesn't prioritise sustainability, it's challenging for us to advocate for carbon accounting in our projects. It requires a top-down approach to truly embed these practices.*"

Table 3 Summary Table of Themes Source: Field Data, 2025

Theme	No. of QS Reporting	Example Quote	Supporting Literature
Integrating Carbon and Cost	15	*"Embodied carbon alongside costs is now expected."* (QS4)	Omotayo (2023)
Procurement and Materials	12	*"Quantifying both cost and lifetime carbon impact."* (QS11)	WGBC (2023)
Digital Tools and Data	11	*"BIM integration enables carbon-aware decisions."* (QS7)	Roper (2025)
Skills and CPD	14	"*CPD on embodied carbon is essential*." (QS10)	Jans (2023)
Barriers	13	*"Standardised carbon data is our biggest frustration."* (QS6)	Jackson & Kaesehage (2019)
Whole Lifecycle and Policy	13	*"Track carbon across the whole life cycle."* (QS5)	Navaei (2024)
Carbon accounting practices	6	*"Leadership doesn't prioritise sustainability."* (QS6)	

Study Implications for Policy, Practice, and Research

The findings of this study have significant implications for policymaking, industry practice, and future research in quantity surveying and sustainable construction. The study emphasises the need for standardised carbon accounting frameworks and robust regulatory drivers to improve comparability and stakeholder confidence. It suggests that policymakers and professional bodies should develop nationally recognised carbon data standards (Themes 1, 5, 7), introduce policy incentives, and require full-life-cycle carbon assessment compliance for major projects, aligning with PAS 2080 and net-zero targets, to make carbon accounting an integral part of project delivery.

The quantity surveying profession should shift from a cost-focused approach to one centred on value and carbon. This includes integrating carbon metrics into cost plans and tender documents, leading low-carbon procurement strategies (Themes 1 and 7), utilising BIM-linked carbon calculators for real-time assessments (Theme 2), upskilling through CPD and targeted training programs, and engaging stakeholders (Theme 4). This shift can improve client understanding and foster sustainability-embracing organisational cultures (Theme 7). Incorporating carbon accounting into standard project management frameworks will ensure it is a fundamental part of decision-making, not just an add-on.

Conclusion

A study highlights the importance of carbon accounting for promoting sustainability in construction projects, particularly in quantity surveying. Quantity surveyors play a vital role in balancing costs and emissions, supporting the industry's transition to a low-carbon future, and are key in turning sustainability goals into measurable results. Quantity surveying professionals are transforming from cost management to integrating financial and environmental stewardship. The study highlights the need for standardised frameworks, regulatory support, and digital tools. However, challenges such as knowledge gaps, standardisation issues, and organisational commitment still exist. To effectively incorporate carbon accounting, standardised frameworks, regulatory support, and targeted training are essential. Although the profession is demonstrating leadership in sustainability by advocating for low-carbon materials and guiding clients toward environmentally responsible choices, future studies should focus on developing standardised frameworks, advocating for regulatory policies that promote carbon transparency, and enhancing training and education for construction professionals. These measures will foster a culture of sustainability and embed carbon accounting as a core element of project delivery.

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SACQSP2025-6

Counting the Cost of Carbon: Reimagining the Quantity Surveyor's Role in a Carbon-Conscious Construction Economy

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Abstract

This study explored how the quantity surveyor (QS) role can be redefined to support carbon accountability in the construction industry, moving beyond traditional cost-centric functions to address the urgent demands of sustainable development. The issue is critical, as the built environment contributes significantly to global carbon emissions. Yet QSs, despite their influence on cost planning, procurement, and material specification, are rarely positioned as key actors in carbon reduction strategies. The study employed a combined scientometric analysis and narrative synthesis methodology to investigate this gap. Using Scopus and Web of Science databases, relevant literature was analysed through keyword clustering and thematic mapping to identify four major research domains: Sustainable Planning, Low-Carbon Housing, Sustainable Materials, and Sustainable Modelling. The findings reveal that although sustainability tools and frameworks such as life cycle assessment (LCA), circular economy models, and BIM-based modelling are well developed, they remain underutilised within QS practice due to role limitations, lack of training, and institutional silos. The study offers new theoretical insights by proposing a dual-function model where QSs operate as both cost managers and carbon evaluators, capable of influencing low-carbon outcomes at the design, procurement, and planning stages. The practical implications suggest a need for reforms in QS education, professional standards, and procurement policies to integrate carbon metrics into project workflows better. The study concludes that empowering QSs with carbon literacy and embedding sustainability responsibilities into their role is essential for achieving measurable progress in low-carbon construction. This research contributes to the evolving discourse on sustainable construction by identifying the QS as a pivotal, yet underused, professional in the carbon transition. It offers a foundation for future studies and policy development to align cost management with climate action.

Keywords: Carbon Accounting, Cost Planning, Embodied Carbon, Low-Carbon Design, Sustainable Construction.

Introduction

"Climate change is the defining issue of our time, and we are at a defining moment," said António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations (United Nations, 2018). Yet, within the built

environment, a sector responsible for nearly 39% of global carbon emissions, many professionals continue to focus almost exclusively on financial metrics (Giesekam, Barrett & Taylor, 2016:424). Among them, Quantity Surveyors (QSs) have traditionally been viewed as financial custodians, with roles rooted in cost estimation, budgeting, and value engineering (Nnadi, Obiechefu & Egwuagu, 2024:2). However, as the construction industry confronts the urgent need to decarbonise, the limitations of this financial-only approach become more apparent. The growing emphasis on environmental, social, and governance (ESG) metrics calls for a broader scope of professional responsibility, challenging QSs to count more than just the monetary cost of a project.

Several studies have highlighted the construction sector's slow adaptation to carbon accountability, despite its significant contribution to global greenhouse gas emissions. While tools such as Life Cycle Assessment (LCA), embodied carbon estimators, and Building Information Modelling (BIM)-integrated sustainability plugins are available, they are often sidelined due to a lack of awareness, perceived complexity, or absence of regulatory pressure (Jayathilaka, Thurairajah & Rathnasinghe, 2024:2; Alves, Palha & de Almeida Filho, 2025:3). Victar et al. (2024:1016) illustrated that quantity surveyors, in particular, have historically operated within a narrowly defined scope that prioritises capital cost efficiency over environmental performance. As a result, carbon assessment is frequently treated as an optional or secondary consideration in procurement and cost planning stages. Morrison, Callaghan, Tong & Thomson (2022:691) added that although institutions like the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) have introduced frameworks such as the Whole Life Carbon Assessment (WLCA) for the built environment to align cost and carbon thinking, actual industry adoption has been inconsistent and largely voluntary. In educational contexts, carbon literacy remains underrepresented in QS curricula, which limits professionals' preparedness to engage meaningfully with decarbonisation strategies (Molthan-Hill et al., 2024:2; James, Moyo & Moyo, 2025:86). Furthermore, construction contracts and project delivery models rarely mandate environmental accountability as part of the QS's remit, reinforcing a professional culture where emissions are externalised rather than costed. This ongoing disjunction between available tools, institutional guidance, and daily practice highlights a systemic barrier that continues to separate cost management from environmental responsibility.

This paper addresses that gap by exploring how the quantity surveyor's role can evolve to include carbon cost considerations alongside traditional financial metrics. On the one hand, previous research has acknowledged the environmental impacts of construction; on the other, it often overlooks the practical mechanisms for integrating carbon accounting into QS practice. Why has carbon not yet become a key performance metric in quantity surveying? What knowledge, tools, or institutional changes are required to make that shift? This study will argue that failing to empower QSs this way risks prolonging unsustainable practices across the industry. Therefore, the study aims to examine how carbon-related concepts intersect with the evolving role of quantity surveyors in sustainable construction, with objectives to identify key research themes and trends, analyse how carbon literacy is reflected in professional practice, and explore opportunities for integrating cost management with environmental accountability.

Rethinking Quantity Surveying in a Carbon-Conscious Era

Traditionally, Quantity Surveyors (QSs) have operated as key financial advisors in construction projects, responsible for cost estimation, tender documentation, value engineering, and financial reporting from concept design to completion (Nnadi, Obiechefu & Egwuagu, 2024:3). This financially focused role has effectively ensured budget control and financial transparency, particularly in complex and capital-intensive projects. However, the role's foundational principles were developed when environmental concerns were peripheral to construction economics. As sustainability has moved to the centre of global discourse, especially with the built environment contributing to global carbon emissions, it has become evident that financial efficiency alone is no longer an adequate performance measure (Francis et al., 2023:2). International research, from both developed and developing countries reveal that QSs are rarely involved in key sustainability decisions and are often excluded from discussions that affect a project's environmental footprint (Chamikara, Perera & Rodrigo, 2020:239; Khan, Tong & Phung, 2024:2). These studied illustrated that their traditional workflow does not position them to assess or advise on embodied or operational carbon in materials or processes. Their contributions to carbon mitigation are underdeveloped, even though they often have early and ongoing involvement in construction projects where impactful decisions are made.

This disconnection presents a structural problem. At a stage when carbon-conscious decision-making is most impactful, such as during material selection, procurement strategy, or design evaluation, QSs

are usually focused on budget management, leaving sustainability-related assessments to environmental consultants or designers (Mbachu, 2015:4; Khan, Tong & Phung, 2024:3). As a result, opportunities to influence design for low carbon outcomes are often lost or delayed. For instance, carbon-intensive materials may be selected purely on cost or availability without life cycle carbon considerations, and procurement methods may favour short-term financial gains over long-term sustainability. The professional and educational frameworks guiding QSs have also slowly evolved. In many regions, including Sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Southeast Asia, QS education focuses on cost planning and contractual knowledge, with sustainability modules often elective or absent (Ebekozien & Aigbavboa, 2024:1525; Ginigaddara, Gajendran & Beard, 2025:1059). This has led to a generation of professionals who are technically competent in traditional QS tasks but underprepared for the environmental demands of modern construction. Without intentional reform, this skill gap limits the profession's ability to effectively respond to the climate crisis.

Carbon Metrics and the Case for the Role of Expansion

Despite the existence of robust carbon assessment tools, their uptake by QSs has been limited and inconsistent. Frameworks such as Life Cycle Assessment (LCA), Environmental Product Declarations (EPDs), and Building Information Modelling (BIM) integrations for carbon calculation are well-documented in countries like Germany, the Netherlands, and the UK (Anyanya et al., 2025:2). These tools can quantify embodied and operational carbon throughout the life cycle of a building. However, their practical adoption within the QS workflow remains rare. Additionally, even when LCA data is available, it is often overlooked in favour of cost-led value engineering processes. This is not due to a lack of relevance, but rather a lack of familiarity, training, and institutional emphasis. Furthermore, Morrison, Callaghan, Tong, and Thomson (2022:691) added that the RICS guidance on Whole Life Carbon Assessment provides a methodology for integrating carbon data with financial appraisals. Yet, in practice, this has primarily been applied to high-profile or government-funded projects, with limited uptake in mainstream commercial developments. Without mandatory regulations or client demand, carbon remains a "nice-to-have" metric rather than a core responsibility (Kadefors et al., 2021:612).

Some countries have begun to demonstrate what effective integration looks like. In Sweden and Norway, carbon accounting is now required in public procurement processes, with government projects mandating carbon assessments at key design stages (Nurhayati et al., 2024:54; Paris, Hechelmann & Buchenau, 2024:1659). This regulatory environment has elevated carbon metrics to the same importance as cost and time. In China and some developing nations, integrated project delivery models encourage collaboration between designers, QSs, and sustainability experts, enabling QSs to contribute to sustainability targets without abandoning their core financial duties (Wang et al., 2016:2; Victar et al., 2024:1017). However, the literature also cautions that such success depends heavily on systemic support, including updated education, revised professional standards, and institutional mandates. Without these, even advanced tools and policies may fail to change everyday practice (Singun, 2025:40). Across much of the international landscape, QSs remain underutilised in sustainability planning because their traditional competencies have not been formally expanded to include carbon literacy. This signals a fundamental need for better tools and a redefinition of the profession's purpose and capabilities in a carbon-conscious construction economy.

Summary of Literature and Research Gap

The reviewed literature clearly shows that carbon tools and sustainability frameworks already exist and have been tested internationally, with varying levels of success. It also confirms that quantity surveyors are strategically positioned to influence project outcomes from early design to post-construction, yet they are rarely tasked with carbon-related responsibilities. Despite successful examples in Scandinavia, the UK, and parts of Asia, the broader QS profession has yet to evolve its core practices to include carbon as a measurable and reportable cost. Most academic studies focus on tool development or policy recommendations, but do not adequately explore how QSs can incorporate carbon metrics into their daily tasks or decision-making models. Few papers propose concrete pathways for integrating environmental data into cost planning, procurement, or value engineering, where QSs typically have significant influence. This study seeks to address that gap by investigating how the traditional role of the quantity surveyor can be expanded to include carbon accountability. Doing so contributes to the global discourse on sustainable construction while offering a practical framework that enables QSs to operate as financial stewards and environmental advocates within the project team.

Research Methodology and Method

This study adopted a combined methodology of scientometric analysis and narrative synthesis to explore how carbon-related concepts are linked to the evolving role of quantity surveyors in sustainable construction. Scientometric analysis was selected for its ability to identify key themes, influential publications, co-authorship networks, and emerging trends across a wide body of academic work (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017:960). It offers a structured, data-driven way to examine how topics such as "embodied carbon," "cost planning," and "low carbon design" intersect with the professional identity and skills transition of quantity surveyors. To support this, a narrative approach was also used to contextualise and interpret practical insights, focusing on current challenges and opportunities in aligning cost consultancy with environmental goals. This combination helped provide a broad mapping of the field and a deeper understanding of the qualitative developments shaping professional practice.

Data were sourced from two leading bibliographic databases: Scopus and Web of Science (WoS), both recognised for their extensive coverage of peer-reviewed literature in the built environment and construction domains (Stephen & Aigbavboa, 2025:8). In Scopus, a Boolean search string was applied across all fields using the following terms: embodied carbon OR carbon footprint AND cost consultant OR quantity surveyor AND construction OR low carbon design AND cost planning AND built environment OR infrastructure AND professional role OR skills transition. This search produced an initial set of 15 documents, which was refined to 12 after removing duplicates and irrelevant items. A similar query structure was used in WoS, adjusted to match the platform's syntax, yielding a broader final dataset of 49 peer-reviewed articles. No year restrictions were applied to provide a comprehensive view of research development over time. Scientometric mapping was conducted using VOSviewer (analytical software) to visualise keyword co-occurrence and thematic clustering. In contrast, Biblioshiny in R (analytical software) was used for performance analysis by country and source (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017:961). This dual-tool approach ensured a reliable and repeatable procedure, providing a clear overview of how carbon literacy is, or is not, being integrated into the QS profession and highlighting key areas for further investigation.

Research Results

Table 1 presents four distinct thematic clusters derived from keyword co-occurrence analysis, each capturing a core research area in the intersection of carbon accountability and quantity surveying within the built environment. Cluster 1 (Sustainable Planning) includes broad systems-level terms such as adaptive management, planning, and sustainability, reflecting research focused on high-level strategies in both developed and developing contexts. This suggests that a significant body of literature addresses macro-level frameworks but may lack technical specificity related to quantity surveying. Cluster 2 (Low-carbon Housing) narrows the focus to the housing sector, highlighting variables like carbon emission, embodied carbon, and housing conditions. This indicates an emerging interest in quantifying carbon within residential development, which is highly relevant to quantity surveyors' cost planning and material selection roles.

Table 1 Thematic clusters of keyword occurrences (authors')

Cluster	Variables	Summary
1	adaptive management, built environment, construction industry, construction projects, developed economies, developing countries, developing economies, developing world, development strategy, environmental sustainability, face-to-face, planning, sustainability, sustainable development	Sustainable Planning
2	carbon emission, economic analysis, embodied carbon emission, housing conditions, housing sector, low-carbon emissions, modernisation, residential location, SDG localisation, sustainable development	Low-carbon housing
3	building materials, carbon, circular economy, concrete, steel, sustainable housing, timber, waste	Sustainable materials
4	building information modelling, decision-making, life cycle assessment (ICA), probability theory, sensitivity analysis, sustainable construction, uncertainty analysis	Sustainable modelling

Cluster 3 (Sustainable Materials) concentrates on material-related concerns, linking carbon, waste, and key building components such as concrete, steel, and timber, suggesting that much of the current discourse ties carbon accounting to material choices, an area QSs can influence directly through procurement and specification. Cluster 4 (Sustainable Modelling) points to methodological sophistication in the field, with keywords like life cycle assessment, sensitivity analysis, and BIM, reflecting the integration of digital tools in sustainability analysis. These findings imply that while sustainability is broadly studied across planning, housing, materials, and modelling, the quantity surveyor's role is more implicitly situated within Clusters 2 and 3. This highlights an opportunity for the present study to bridge the gap between QS practice and technical carbon tools, especially in material selection and residential cost planning. This reinforces the argument that QSs should move beyond traditional cost metrics to support sustainable development goals.

The VOSviewer network visualisation reveals four distinct thematic clusters that reflect the current research structure linking sustainability and quantity surveying, see Figure 1. The red cluster focuses on high-level strategic themes such as adaptive management, developed economies, and the built environment, highlighting mature discourse around sustainable planning and governance. The green cluster centres on carbon emissions, embodied carbon, and housing conditions, pointing to an emerging body of work on low-carbon housing and economic analysis, directly relevant to QS roles in cost planning. The blue cluster emphasises building materials and carbon waste, aligning with QS tasks in material procurement and circular economy practices. The yellow cluster, located more centrally, involves methodological tools like life cycle assessment (LCA), building information modelling (BIM), and uncertainty analysis, which serve as technical bridges across the other themes. The relative distance and limited overlap between clusters suggest a fragmented research landscape where carbon accounting, modelling tools, and QS practice are not yet fully integrated. This visual insight supports the study's aim to connect these domains by redefining the QS role to include carbon and sustainability metrics in standard cost planning and decision-making.

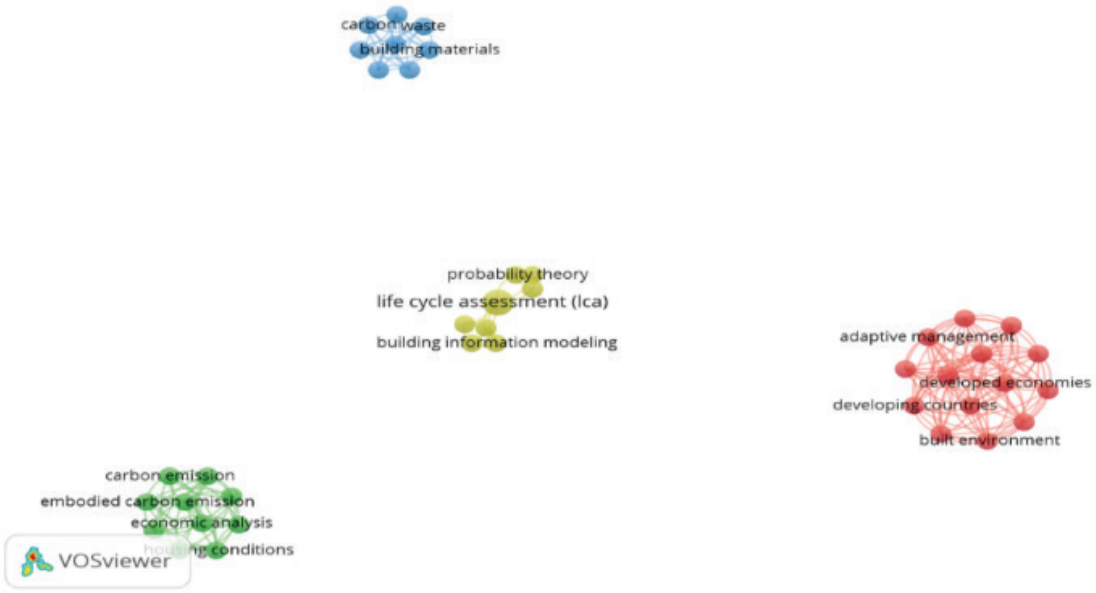

Figure 1 Keyword occurrence visualisation

Discussion (Narrative Review)

Cluster 1 (Sustainable Planning) reinforces the study's aim by providing a strategic backdrop where the evolving role of the quantity surveyor (QS) can be situated. The cluster includes variables such as adaptive management, construction projects, developed and developing economies, and sustainable development, which reflect the global push for integrated, long-term planning in the built environment (Hariram et al., 2023:2, Adanma & Ogunbiyi, 2024:970). These themes align with international policy frameworks like the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 11 (sustainable cities) and SDG 13 (climate action), which call for measurable environmental responsibility in infrastructure and construction planning. However, unlike previous literature that treats sustainability as a high-level policy issue managed by urban planners or policymakers, this study positions QSs as

active participants in sustainable planning, professionals who can translate these broad goals into practical, costed decisions. For example, in a large-scale infrastructure project in a developing country, a QS could work with project managers to apply adaptive planning techniques that account for both upfront costs and long-term carbon impacts, using tools such as life cycle costing or early-stage material assessment to favour low-emission alternatives like rammed earth or sustainably sourced timber (Jayamaha et al., 2024:1273). While some earlier studies acknowledge the need for integrated planning, they rarely identify QSs as critical enablers of this transition (Majumder, Majumder & Biswas, 2022:2254; Sheikhkhoshkar et al., 2023:2), which limits the profession's visibility in the sustainability conversation. Therefore, this study agrees with the strategic direction proposed by the literature and expands it by offering a more grounded, practice-oriented perspective. It reveals that previous research may have unintentionally reinforced role silos by not exploring how QSs can operationalise sustainability goals within real project contexts, especially where governance structures are weak or fragmented. By doing so, this study fills a key gap, showing how QSs can bridge the policy-to-practice divide, and calls for further work that integrates QS competencies into adaptive planning and national climate strategies.

Cluster 2 (Low-Carbon Housing) significantly advances the study's aim by framing the housing sector as a critical focus area where the quantity surveyor (QS) can directly contribute to reducing carbon emissions through informed cost planning and procurement strategies. This cluster includes terms such as carbon emission, embodied carbon emission, economic analysis, housing conditions, housing sector, low-carbon emissions, and SDG localisation, highlighting the intersection of carbon accountability and residential development (Anderson et al., 2022:2; Marsh et al., 2024:2). These terms reflect a growing international concern with decarbonising housing to meet climate goals, especially under the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (e.g. SDG 11 and 13). Yet, while the literature has increasingly acknowledged the importance of embodied carbon in housing construction, it often positions sustainability consultants or environmental engineers, not QSs, as the primary agents of carbon assessment. This study challenges the oversight by arguing that QSs are uniquely equipped to bridge cost and carbon objectives, particularly through tools like life cycle costing and early-stage material evaluations (Matipa, Kelliher & Keane, 2008:170; Wong et al., 2025:2). For example, in a public housing project in a developing country, a QS could compare the long-term economic and environmental implications of using compressed earth blocks versus concrete masonry, supporting informed choices that meet budget and carbon targets. Unlike earlier studies that focus narrowly on design or performance outcomes, this study repositions QSs as essential contributors to carbon-informed decision-making within housing, particularly at the procurement, tendering, and cost estimation stages (Victar et al., 2024:1030; Zhou & Cheng, 2024:133). Moreover, the cluster reveals a key gap: while low-carbon housing is well-discussed, few studies examine how QSs can integrate carbon metrics into their standard workflows, such as bills of quantities or contractor evaluations. This study fills that gap by offering a practical perspective on how QSs can use their existing tools and influence to promote low-carbon residential development. It calls for further research into standardising carbon data within QS processes and rethinking training curricula to support this expanded role.

Cluster 3 (Sustainable Materials) directly supports the study's objective by highlighting a practical and immediate area where quantity surveyors (QSs) can integrate carbon awareness into their existing responsibilities through material selection, cost evaluation, and procurement advice. This cluster includes focused terms such as building materials, carbon, circular economy, concrete, steel, timber, sustainable housing, and waste, all of which point to growing research interest in the environmental impact of construction inputs and the potential for resource-efficient alternatives (Rahla, Mateus & Bragança, 2021:2, Hidalgo & Verdugo, 2025:2). Unlike the broader themes found in strategic planning or housing policy, this cluster centres on quantifiable, project-specific decisions where QSs already have technical control, making it highly relevant for redefining their role in sustainable construction. For example, a QS preparing a cost plan for a commercial development could assess the embodied carbon of steel-framed versus timber-framed structural systems, using carbon data to influence cost and the environmental implications of material choices. The cluster's emphasis on circular economy and waste also reinforces the QS's potential to evaluate the reuse of salvaged materials, the financial viability of recycled components, and the lifecycle costs associated with sustainable alternatives, all of which are traditionally within the QS's scope but underexplored in carbon terms (Nemakhavhani, Dzansi & Khafiso; 2024:227). However, the literature tends to silo material sustainability within architectural or engineering discourse, often bypassing the QS's role in these decisions. This reveals a key research gap: while material sustainability is well-documented, few studies critically examine how QSs can incorporate carbon metrics into core outputs such as bills of quantities, tender reports, or contractor evaluations. This study addresses that gap by showing how QSs, supported by carbon data

and circular economy frameworks, can act as pivotal decision-makers who ensure that material choices are cost-effective and environmentally responsible, effectively linking financial and sustainability outcomes within the procurement process.

Cluster 4 (Sustainable Modelling) strengthens the study's core argument by focusing on digital tools and analytical methods enabling quantity surveyors (QSs) to incorporate carbon considerations into cost planning with greater accuracy and transparency. This cluster includes terms such as building information modelling (BIM), life cycle assessment (LCA), decision-making, probability theory, sensitivity analysis, uncertainty analysis, and sustainable construction, which reflect a methodological shift toward data-driven project evaluation and predictive modelling in the built environment (Rehman, 2025:199; McNeil-Ayuk & Jrade, 2025:23). These tools and techniques allow QSs to analyse initial capital costs and long-term carbon impacts, risk variability, and the environmental consequences of alternative design options. For instance, by integrating BIM with LCA tools, a QS can simulate different material choices and construction methods to visualise their embodied carbon profiles alongside their cost implications, allowing clients to make informed decisions early in the design stage. Despite these capabilities, the literature indicates that QSs remain underrepresented in research and practice related to carbon modelling, with these tasks often assigned to sustainability consultants or designers. This oversight suggests that previous work underestimates the QS's potential to use such tools for carbon-informed cost planning, a gap this study aims to address. While sustainable modelling has advanced in architecture, engineering, and environmental science, its integration into cost consultancy workflows remains fragmented and inconsistent.

Earlier studies rarely examine how QSs can apply sensitivity analysis or uncertainty modelling to assess how carbon costs fluctuate with design changes or market conditions. These insights could significantly improve risk management and long-term value assessments, as demonstrated by the limited literature across this study. This limits the ability of QSs to engage with carbon metrics beyond fixed cost figures, even though their role involves advising on trade-offs, contingencies, and whole-life costing. Moreover, although BIM adoption is growing globally, cost consultants often overlook or underutilise its sustainability features due to training and tool integration gaps. This study highlights this disconnect by proposing that when combined with traditional QS methods, sustainable modelling techniques can empower QSs to take a more proactive role in carbon management. By embedding digital modelling and carbon analytics into cost planning, QSs can help transition the construction industry from reactive cost control to proactive, low-carbon decision-making. This fills a critical gap in existing literature and supports the study's broader aim of rethinking the QS's central role in achieving financial and environmental project outcomes.

Conclusion

This study offers a timely and necessary rethinking of the quantity surveyor's (QS) role in the face of global sustainability demands, particularly concerning carbon accountability in the built environment. By combining scientometric mapping with narrative analysis, the research uncovered four key thematic clusters, Sustainable Planning, Low-Carbon Housing, Sustainable Materials, and Sustainable Modelling, that collectively define the current research landscape. These clusters reveal a growing international focus on decarbonising construction and a recurring omission: the QS is seldom positioned as a central actor in sustainability transitions. The study challenges this limited framing and introduces a dual-function model of the QS, as both cost manager and carbon evaluator, capable of bridging financial discipline with environmental stewardship. This theoretical shift builds on emerging perspectives in sustainable construction management and aligns with broader interdisciplinary goals of integrating carbon metrics into mainstream project workflows. Furthermore, the findings show how carbon literacy, procurement strategies, and material selection, typically within the QS's control, can be leveraged to align construction economics with long-term environmental performance goals, especially when informed by tools such as life cycle assessment and BIM.

In practical terms, the study offers clear implications for QS education, institutional policies, and professional practice. It highlights the need to rethink how QSs are trained, deployed, and recognised in sustainability-driven projects. The research also shows that sustainability tools and frameworks are increasingly available but are not yet systematically embedded in QS workflows, limiting their influence on carbon outcomes. Consolidating knowledge from across planning, housing, materials, and modelling helps illuminate the structural and cultural barriers that prevent the full integration of environmental accountability in quantity surveying. A key insight is that while rich in technical and policy analysis, previous literature has generally underappreciated the practical levers available to QSs

in shaping low-carbon construction outcomes. This study contributes to closing that gap by offering a more inclusive view of QS practice, recognising their potential to influence not only cost but carbon, making them indispensable to delivering environmentally responsible built environments. Finally, the study's limitation lies in its reliance on a limited, literature-based dataset, which might constrain empirical validation. It may overlook practical, context-specific aspects of quantity surveyors' evolving carbon-focused roles.

Recommendations

The findings show that quantity surveyors (QSs) often lack carbon literacy, sustainability tools such as life cycle assessment (LCA), BIM, and circular economy frameworks are underused, and that evidence of their practical application remains limited. Therefore, this paper recommends that professional bodies such as The South African Council for the Quantity Surveying Profession (SACQSP), The South African Council for the Project and Construction Management Professions (SACPCMP), and other related bodies together with academic institutions, embed carbon literacy, LCA, and digital modelling as core competencies in QS education and practice; that policymakers and clients revise procurement and tendering guidelines to make carbon metrics mandatory in cost planning and evaluation; and that further research use case studies and interviews to capture how QSs apply carbon tools across different contexts. These actions would help transition the profession from passive cost reporting to proactive carbon management, aligning QS practice with global sustainability goals.

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SACQSP2025-11

Domestic Photovoltaic Installations vs National Electrical Grid Supply in South Africa – An Assessment of Trends and Costs

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Abstract

South Africa's electricity supply is predominantly generated from fossil fuels, resulting in rising electricity costs and frequent power outages. In response, many households are exploring solar photovoltaic (PV) systems, yet there remains limited empirical evidence on their long-term financial feasibility in the South African residential context. This study asks: To what extent are residential solar PV systems financially viable compared to continued reliance on grid electricity in South Africa? A quantitative approach was employed, with data collected from 30 homeowners with PV installations. While the small sample size limits the generalisability of findings, the study provides valuable early insights into adoption and cost–benefit dynamics. Descriptive statistical analysis and financial mathematics were applied to evaluate life cycle costs, payback periods, and opportunity costs. Results show that the most common system size is 8kW, with a payback period of approximately 10 years. Over a 12-year period, homeowners could achieve savings of R86,977, with a present value of R24,861, while also gaining resilience against load shedding. The findings contribute practically by informing sustainability policy (through evidence of household-level cost–benefit trade-offs) and QS practice (by strengthening financial evaluation tools for renewable energy investments). Under these conditions, investing in a domestic solar PV system in South Africa can prove financially viable, supporting the transition to sustainable energy solutions.

Keywords: Cost Benefit Analysis, Eskom, Off Grid, Solar, Opportunity Costs.

Introduction

Electricity is one of the largest contributors to carbon emissions and pollution worldwide (Kartal et al., 2024). Energy efficient usage and renewable electricity generation contributes to the reduction of the carbon footprint as well as meeting the climate change objectives set out in COP26 (Rao et al., 2024). The focus on renewable energy and energy efficiency is to use less power to produce the same outcome (Jamshidi & Meybodi, 2024).

South Africa predominantly uses fossil fuel and generates approximately 83% of the country's electricity by using coal (Eskom, 2023). This has serious environmental pollution implications in conjunction with the challenges of maintaining these power plants (Ajmi et al., 2022). Furthermore, the consumption of electricity is fundamentally linked with economic growth and development (Peprah et al., 2023).

Due to aging coal fleets, lack of maintenance of critical infrastructure and the crippling corruption within the industry, South Africa has had the burden of power outages for the past 17 years (Jahns, 2023), which is locally referred to as loadshedding (Wiese & Van Der Merwe, 2024). Walsh et al. (2021) have estimated that the South African economy has lost 35 billion rand between 2007 and 2019 due to loadshedding. Putting that into perspective, it is the same impact that the 2008 financial crises had on the GDP growth for South Africa (Mohamed, 2012).

Although slow, the adoption of solar photovoltaics (PV) in South Africa is underway, with nearly 10% of households that have installed solar PV for everyday use (Mutumbi et al., 2024). Fortunately, solar PV

costs have been reducing steadily over the last few years and have become one of the cheapest forms of electricity generation around the globe (Semelane et al., 2021). The use of residential solar PV can play a role in offsetting fossil fuel-based generation and assist in a reduction of greenhouse gas emissions by providing renewable energy (Chapman et al., 2016). Semelane et al. (2021), states that the South African solar resource is the third largest in the world, with an average of over 2,500 hours of sunshine annually. The average solar radiation level is between 4.5 kWh/m² and 6.5 kWh/m² in a day. This translates into a substantial untapped sustainable energy resource (Semelane et al., 2021). This is a potential opportunity, which if implemented in every household and business, loadshedding could be eliminated. However, despite this opportunity, the literature on South African PV adoption has focused largely on technical feasibility or national-scale energy policy, with relatively little attention to the household-level financial case for investment.

Furthermore, South Africans have experienced annual electricity tariff increases (direct clients of Eskom) of 15.6% in 2021/2022, with an increase of 18.65% (Mutumbi et al., 2024) for 2023/2024 and 12.7% in 2024/2025. The financial decision to invest in solar PV to offset the increasing cost of Eskom generated electricity is a possible solution to addressing unpredictable electricity supply.

Solar PV is a process by which solar radiation is directly converted into electricity (Khan & Salek, 2019). By placing solar PV panels on the roof of a house, the solar panels can absorb sunlight, which releases electrons to generate the electric current. This current is captured into batteries as a direct current (DC) and then converted by an inverter to alternating current (AC) which can be used in homes. This process is completely independent of any electrical grid and can be used to take households completely off the electrical grid or supplement their electrical demands during loadshedding hours (Mannan et al., 2023).

Life cycle costing analysis (LCCA) is conducted to determine the financial feasibility of installing a solar PV system. LCCA looks at the initial cost of implementing the installation, and the operating, maintenance, replacement, and eventually disposal costs (Czarnezki & Van Garsse, 2019). The cost to produce solar PV units is reducing, however, the costs associated with installing a solar PV system other than for its convenience, are more variable. To assess the financial sustainability of solar PV installation, one would need to look at the ways in which the installation is funded. This includes the monthly repayments, capitalisation of the borrowed money along with the opportunity costs associated with the funding.

The studies done on life cycle costing of PV systems in SA (Marais et al., 2020; Numbi & Malinga, 2017; Ziuku & Meyer, 2012), do not take opportunity costs into account, nor is it based on the market trends in terms of system size or funding methods. This highlights a critical knowledge gap: while technical and policy analyses exist, empirical evidence on household-level financial feasibility, particularly when factoring in opportunity cost and real-world adoption patterns, remains scarce.

This study addresses this gap by asking: To what extent are residential solar PV systems financially viable compared to grid electricity in South Africa? By applying life cycle cost analysis and opportunity cost evaluation to actual household adoption trends, the research offers a more realistic appraisal of financial feasibility than prior models. This study has three objectives: (i) Evaluate financial feasibility including opportunity costs; (ii) Test long-term viability using Life Cycle Costing (LCCA); (iii) Explore wealth creation through reinvested electricity savings. The paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 reviews the relevant literature; Section 3 explains the methodology and analytical framework; Section 4 presents the results and discussion; and Section 5 concludes with implications for sustainability policy and QS practice.

Literature Review

The Types of Solar PV Systems

There are two primary types of solar systems commonly utilised in residential areas across South Africa: off-grid and grid-connected systems. Off-grid systems, integrated with Battery Energy Storage Systems (BESS), operate independently of the grid and provide electricity to remote or unreliable areas (Adebanji et al., 2021). Grid-connected systems, in contrast, supply local loads and feed excess energy into the grid, supporting broader distribution (Adebanji et al., 2021). While these system types are technically well established, debates remain around their relative economic and policy value in South Africa, where grid instability and high tariffs complicate household investment decisions.

Battery Technologies and Their Relevance

Various battery types (lead-acid: flooded, gel, AGM; and lithium-ion) offer different performance characteristics. Lead-acid options are cheaper but limited by lower depth of discharge (DoD) and higher maintenance (Moseley & Crocker, 2020; Rakhimov et al., 2024). Lithium-ion batteries, by contrast, offer higher DoD (80–90%) and longer lifespans but carry safety risks such as thermal runaway (Rakhimov et al., 2024). For household decision-making, the critical issue is not the technical chemistry but the trade-off between upfront costs, maintenance expectations, and long-term value. Over-emphasising technical differences risks obscuring the financial and behavioural considerations that determine adoption. For this reason, the present study condenses battery-level detail and instead highlights opportunity cost and financing as decisive factors in adoption.

Shortcomings of Solar PV

A persistent challenge is the limited storage capacity of PV systems and the resulting dependence on costly batteries (Abdullahi et al., 2017). End-of-life waste adds further sustainability concerns, with global PV waste expected to reach millions of tons by mid-century (Daniela-Abigail et al., 2022). Scholarly debates emphasise that these shortcomings are not purely technical but embedded in policy and social frameworks, where recycling incentives, training programmes, and financial support mechanisms can mitigate negative outcomes. For this reason, financial feasibility must be analysed in relation to broader socio-economic systems, not only technology performance.

Government Solar Panel Tax Incentive Program

To promote investment in renewable electricity generation, the South African government has introduced a solar panel tax incentive program (Godongwana, 2023). The initiative aims to accelerate the adoption of clean energy by offering financial benefits to qualifying individuals. Taxpayers are eligible for a rebate of up to 25% of the cost of new and unused solar photovoltaic panels, with a maximum rebate capped at R15,000 per person. To qualify, the panels must have a minimum capacity of 275W each and must be installed in residential properties. This incentive applies to panels operational between March 1, 2023, and February 29, 2024. By fostering the adoption of solar energy, this program contributes to advancing sustainability and mitigating environmental impacts. While helpful, such incentives are capped and time-limited, raising questions about their sufficiency in driving long-term adoption. This aligns with international debates over whether short-term fiscal measures or structural reforms to electricity pricing are more effective in enabling household-scale renewables.

Challenges of Solar PV Systems

Dike et al. (2017) identified five critical factors responsible for the failure of solar PV systems in Nigeria, namely poor system design, substandard products, inadequate planning, insufficient maintenance, and the excessive cost of quality equipment coupled with a lack of professionalism. These factors not only undermine system performance but also serve as potential indicators of challenges encountered by solar PV system owners.

Poor system design represents a significant challenge in ensuring that solar PV systems are customised to meet specific needs and environmental conditions. Inefficiencies arise from incorrect component sizing, improper layout, and insufficient consideration of site-specific factors such as shading. Karandikar et al. (2020) observed that the emphasis on cost reduction and the absence of rigorous quality standards often lead to the use of inferior products, resulting in poorly designed systems. Furthermore, Karandikar et al. (2020) highlighted the widespread use of substandard solar products, particularly in India, where solar PV systems frequently underperform, degrade prematurely, or exhibit shorter operational lifespans.

The prevalence of inferior products underscores the difficulty of accessing high-quality solar panels, inverters, and other essential components. Solar PV system owners often face reliability issues and premature failures owing to the substandard quality of available products. According to Dike et al. (2017) and Karandikar et al. (2020), this issue is compounded by the excessive costs of premium products. Additionally, consumers with limited knowledge of solar PV technology encounter challenges in distinguishing between high-quality and low-quality products. The demand for low-cost installations further incentivises installers to use subpar components to maintain profitability, thereby perpetuating the reliance on inferior materials.

The lack of proper maintenance presents a significant challenge to ensuring the optimal performance and longevity of solar PV systems. Many system owners lack access to regular and effective maintenance services, leading to the gradual deterioration of system components. Orosz et al. (2024) argue that faults within solar PV systems reduce both their efficiency and reliability. Their study categorises solar panel failures into three main types: optical degradation, electrical inadequacy, and unclassified faults. Addressing these maintenance challenges is crucial for sustaining the long-term viability of solar PV systems. Common problems of a dedicated solar PV power plant depend on the climate of the installation area. For instance, panels in arid regions often suffer from dust accumulation, while those in coastal areas are more prone to corrosion due to salt exposure. Additionally, regions with high humidity might experience higher rates of Mold and mildew growth on panels, whereas areas with extreme temperatures could see more frequent issues related to thermal stress.

Grass cutting is a prevalent maintenance challenge for solar panels installed at ground level. Solar panels, including those mounted on rooftops, are vulnerable to shading, particularly from large trees. In extreme cases, neglected vegetation can promote the growth of tall grass, shrubs, or trees, which may cast shadows on the panels or compromise the integrity of cable systems and inverters, thereby reducing the overall power output.

Panels exhibiting cracks are likely caused by collisions with birds and bats flying at high altitudes. This phenomenon is explained by the "lake effect" theory, which posits that birds mistake the reflective surfaces of solar panels for water bodies when viewed from above, resulting in accidental collisions. Such cracks not only create shading on the panels but also disrupt internal circuitry, leading to diminished performance.

Damage sustained by solar PV panels due to hail can cause an average performance loss of 30%. The typical size of hail-induced damage on panels measures approximately 3cm; however, larger hailstones exceeding 4cm in diameter can inflict even more severe damage. For instance, a hailstorm in Johannesburg in November 2023 caused widespread destruction, damaging solar PV panels, vehicles, and rooftop solar geysers.

The accumulation of dust, bird droppings, and snow on solar PV panels is another problem. Each of these factors contributes to shading, significantly impairing panel performance by obstructing sunlight and impeding energy absorption. Dust and bird droppings are particularly problematic in South Africa, where they are prevalent and pose substantial challenges to the efficiency and maintenance of solar installations. Similarly, snow accumulation, although more common in colder climates, presents an analogous issue by covering the panels and preventing optimal functionality.

Thermal challenges are a prevalent concern in solar PV systems incorporating solar batteries. The charging and discharging cycles of these batteries involve dynamic processes that inherently generate heat. Solar batteries are susceptible to thermal degradation, necessitating the maintenance of optimal operating temperature ranges to enhance energy conversion efficiency within battery cells. Extreme temperatures can disrupt chemical reactions, impair overall performance, and reduce energy storage capacity. Additionally, excessive heat can expedite the degradation of battery components, significantly shortening their lifespan. Prolonged exposure to elevated temperatures adversely affects battery efficiency, longevity, and, most critically, safety (Ertugrul & Haines, 2019).

The lack of professional expertise within the industry presents significant barriers to accessing reliable solar PV system installations and services. The substantial initial investment required for high-quality components and skilled labor often compels users to opt for cheaper, less reliable alternatives. Installations performed by inadequately trained personnel are prone to failures and reduced performance, as highlighted by Ajayi and Temidayo (2018). Moreover, a shortage of adequately trained professionals, results in installations and maintenance performed by individuals lacking the requisite technical expertise. These factors compromise the long-term reliability and effectiveness of solar PV systems (Chapara & Terblanche, 2024). These technical challenges are significant, but critically, they point to a knowledge gap: while reliability has been well documented, fewer studies quantify how such risks are reflected in long-term financial feasibility, particularly in South African households.

LCCA

Mohamed et al. (2017), define the characteristic of a viable project as one that is dependent on technical analysis, financial analysis, economic analysis, management experience, safety, and quality.

However, they concluded that a proper financial analysis is the key determinant in determining viability. The reliability of solar PV systems, defined as the probability of producing energy at rated capacity under specified environmental conditions throughout their lifespan, is a crucial metric for ensuring long-term performance and economic viability (Fara & Craciunescu, 2020). There are various methods of assessing profitability, such as Net Present Value (NPV), Internal Rate of Return (IRR), Accounting Rate of Return (ARR) and Return on Investment (ROI). The concept of Time Value of Money (TVM) is the foundation of NPV and IRR. LCCA takes TVM into consideration when determining discounted payback period.

Due to this, this study opted to implement the LCCA (Baldoni et al., 2019). As explained by Czarnezki and Van Garsse (2019), a life cycle costing looks at the initial cost of implementing the installation, as well as the operating, maintenance, replacement, and eventually disposal costs. They also look at the environmental and social aspects that affect the installations' life from cradle to grave. Mohamed et al. (2017), agrees with this definition as they go on to state that lifecycle cost assessments include the following: (i) initial capital cost; (ii) repairs and maintenance costs; (iii) operating costs; (iv) management cost flows; (v) disposal costs; and (vi) revenue.

Therefore, to properly understand whether installing a solar PV system would be beneficial, LCCA would need to be conducted as it would encompass the complete installation as well as the cost to dispose of components. In terms of cost, Semelane et al. (2021), found that solar photovoltaics (PV) costs have been reducing steadily over the last few years. The literature stress that while LCCA is a robust tool, its value depends on integrating context-specific variables such as financing models and opportunity cost, which are often overlooked.

Studies on the Feasibility of Solar PV systems

Many studies focused on the technical design of residential solar PV systems (Molotsi et al., 2019; Rossi et al., 2020). However, Marais et al. (2020), did a life cycle costing on a residential solar PV system over 20 years, while presenting the system installation costs at the time and potential electrical savings. They found that the payback period is 11.5 years with a saving of R270 022.83. Numbi and Malinga (2017), found that the payback period for a 3kWh system is less than 14 years and the higher the grid electricity price, the higher the profitability of the system. Another study found that the payback period was 8 years based on a 5kWh system (Ziuku & Meyer, 2012). However, these studies typically assume simplified financing models and exclude opportunity cost, creating a gap in capturing the true financial implications for households. As energy tariffs continue to escalate (Mutumbi et al., 2024), opportunity cost becomes increasingly central to understanding real-world feasibility.

Funding a solar PV system for installation has an impact on how to account for the opportunity costs. Banks in South Africa, such as Nedbank, are already offering various packages for customers who wish to install solar systems (Nedbank, 2024). Various financing routes can be followed including loans, savings, extension of home bond or private loan.

Synthesis and Knowledge Gap

In summary, while prior research has contributed important technical, policy, and cost analyses, the literature remains fragmented. Technical studies emphasise system design and reliability, while policy papers highlight incentives and infrastructure weaknesses. Yet few studies synthesise these dimensions to assess how financial feasibility is shaped by both household-level decision-making and broader energy market dynamics. The critical gap lies in empirically evaluating residential PV feasibility in South Africa using LCCA that integrates opportunity costs and reflects actual adoption trends. This study addresses that gap, thereby contributing both to scholarly debates on renewable energy transitions and to the practical work of quantity surveyors tasked with assessing the viability of sustainable investments.

Research Methodology and Method

The overarching research method comprised three stages: (i) surveys of residential property owners who had installed solar PV, (ii) financial data analysis of these installations in the form of opportunity cost analysis and Life Cycle Costing Analysis (LCCA), and (iii) investment analyses of electricity savings.

This study followed the strict ethical requirements of the University of Cape Town, and an ethical clearance certificate was obtained from the UCT ethics committee prior to data collection. Participants were purposively sampled from residential property owners who had installed solar PV in South Africa, since no formal database of this population exists. The final sample comprised 30 respondents (50% response rate). The majority of respondents resided in middle- to upper-income suburbs of Cape Town and Johannesburg, with household incomes ranging from R25,000–R85,000 per month. They were homeowners and had installed PV systems. This socio-economic profile indicates that current adoption is concentrated among relatively affluent households. That, along with the small sample size, limits generalisability but provides valuable insight into early adoption trends. Small-sample studies can provide critical early insights into adoption trends, challenges, and policy implications (Lakens, 2022).

A pragmatist paradigm guided the study, which is appropriate for applied research focusing on both practical outcomes and contextual realities. The mixed descriptive–financial approach was selected to align with the research aim of assessing real-world feasibility while capturing subjective adoption experiences.

The financial analysis of the solar PV installations was conducted via descriptive statistics as the main method of analysis. Descriptive statistics allow for a compact summary of the data for analysis (Fisher & Marshall, 2009). Furthermore, descriptive statistics allow for the identification of patterns and relationships post data analysis (Walz et al., 2023). The data included monthly electricity savings resulting from the solar PV installation.

A financial model was developed, which included several market related financial indicators; (1) the return on capital not invested in solar PV (i.e., the opportunity cost), (2) the annual increase in on-grid electricity prices, (3) the discount rate (minimum accepted rate of return) for net present value (NPV) and internal rate of return (IRR) analysis, (4) maintenance costs of the solar PV and the corresponding annual escalation, and (5) the realistic life span (n = 12 years) of the solar PV installation. The NPV and IRR were calculated to determine the financial feasibility of the most common (inverter and battery size) solar PV installation. For the solar PV installation to be deemed feasible, the NPV and IRR would need to be greater than zero, and greater than the discount rate, respectively.

In addition, a wealth creation exercise was undertaken to calculate the present value of monthly electricity savings if invested in both liquidity (cash) and South African equity markets (Nurick et al., 2024), over the same 12-year lifespan. This triangulation of financial feasibility measures strengthens the methodological robustness. Overall, while the small sample size and socio-economic concentration limit the robustness and generalisability of findings, the staged design, explicit paradigm, and transparent financial modelling provide a replicable framework for future studies.

Research Results and Discussion

Survey Results

The surveys (n = 30) collected data on inverter and battery sizes. Table 1 provides the breakdown of the sample across inverter and battery sizes, respectively. 8kVA (n = 13) and 20kWh (n = 10) were the most popular choices across the sample. The market price for an 8kVA/20kWh solar PV system is approximately 153,200 South African Rand (R). Most respondents (n = 18) funded the solar PV with savings, while the balance funded the solar via extending their home loan (n = 8) or a private loan (n = 4). This pattern suggests a reliance on personal liquidity and debt finance, which aligns with broader trends in South Africa where household renewable adoption is often self-financed due to limited subsidy access (Mutumbi et al., 2024).

Table 1: Inverter and Battery Size

Inverter Size	**n**	**Battery Size**	**n**
3kVA	7	2kWh	1
5kVA	3	7kWh	1
8kVA	**13**	10kWh	8
10kVA	3	15kWh	3
15kVA	4	**20kWh**	**10**

		25kWh	3
		40kWh	4
Total	**30**	**Total**	**30**

Opportunity Cost Analysis

The opportunity cost of investing the initial capital outlay of the solar PV installation is calculated by determining the future value (FV) by applying the return (8.75% p.a. compounded monthly) of a typical South African interest-bearing deposit account over the lifespan of the solar PV installation (equation 1). A market discount rate (11% p.a.) is applied to the FV to calculate the present value (PrVa) of the opportunity cost (equation 2). This analysis explicitly addresses objective (i) by evaluating financial feasibility beyond installation costs, showing that opportunity cost considerations meaningfully alter the assessment of PV as an investment option.

$$FV = PrVa \times (1 + \frac{i}{m})^{n \times m}$$

Equation 1: Future Value Compounded Monthly

Where:
FV = Future Value
PrVa = Present Value, i.e., Initial capital outlay of the solar PV installation
i = Annualised return of interest-bearing account (8.75% p.a.)
n = Lifespan of the solar PV installation (n = 12 years)
m = Compounded monthly (m = 12)

FV = 153,259 x (1 + 0.0875/12)12x12
FV = 436,295

$$PrVa = \frac{FV}{(1+r)^n}$$

Equation 2: Present Value Formula

Where:
PrVa = Present Value
FV = Future Value
r = Discount Rate (11% p.a., compounded annually)
n = Lifespan of the solar PV installation (n = 12 years)

$$PrVa = \frac{436{,}295}{(1 + 0.11)^{12}}$$

PrVa = 124,711

Life Cycle Costing Analysis (LCCA)

A comprehensive LCCA was conducted, which was underpinned by the monthly savings (R1,350) in year 1. According to the national power provider annual increase in on-grid electricity prices were predicted to be: 21.80% (year 2), 11.25% (year 3), and 16.53% (years 4-12). Market-related maintenance costs are 8% of the initial capital outlay of the solar PV installation, escalating at 6% p.a. It is predicted that major maintenance will occur in years 3, 6, 9 and 11. Furthermore, it is assumed that the solar PV installation will not have a residual value at the end of the lifespan (n = 12 years)

The LCCA yielded a NPV = R43,606 (equation 3) and an IRR = 15.12%, which are both feasible (NPV > 0, and IRR > r). The NPV and IRR remain feasible up to a maintenance cost premium of less than 10%, i.e., once maintenance costs are assumed to be 18% (8% + 10%) of the initial capital outlay of the solar PV installation. This directly supports objective (ii), confirming the viability of solar PV when framed within realistic market and maintenance conditions.

$$NPV = -y + \frac{FV1}{(1+r)^1} + \frac{FV2}{(1+r)^2} + \ldots + \frac{FVn}{(1+r)^n}$$

Equation 3: Net Present Value (NPV)

Where:
y = Initial Capital Outlay
FV = Future Value
r = Discount Rate (11% p.a., compounded annually)
n = The holding period/lifespan

The discounted payback period determines the amount of time it takes to recoup the initial capital outlay for the solar PV installation. The savings (net of predicted maintenance costs) are discounted at 11% p.a. Based on the assumptions in the LCCA the discounted payback period is 9 years and 11 months. Table 2 shows the LCCA for the solar PV installation, where the outstanding balance on the initial capital outlay in year 9 (R20,110) would be settled in year 10.

Table 2 LCCA for solar PV installation with 8kVA inverter/20kWh battery

Year	Savings/month	Savings/year	Maintenance	Net Saving	PrVa of Savings	Disc Payback
0		-R153,259		-R153,259		**Balance**
1	R1,350	R16,200		R16,200	R14,595	R138,664
2	R1,644	R19,732		R19,732	R16,015	R122,650
3	R1,829	R21,951	R14,603	R7,349	R5,373	R117,276
4	R2,132	R25,580		R25,580	R16,850	R100,426
5	R2,484	R29,808		R29,808	R17,690	R82,736
6	R2,895	R34,736	R17,392	R17,344	R9,273	R73,464
7	R3,373	R40,477		R40,477	R19,496	R53,967
8	R3,931	R47,168		R47,168	R20,468	R33,500
9	R4,580	R54,965	R20,714	R34,251	R13,390	R20,110
10	R5,338	R64,051		R64,051	R22,558	-R2,448
11	R6,220	R74,639	R23,275	R51,364	R16,297	
12	R7,248	R86,977		R86,977	R24,861	

Wealth Creation Through Electricity Savings

It is assumed that the monthly electricity savings are invested in either an interest-bearing (low risk) account (8.75% p.a., compounded monthly) or the South African equity market (moderate to high risk), which comprises investing in the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE) All Share Index. The JSE All Share Index yielded an average annualised return of 10.68% for the last twelve years. Both investments take the form of an ordinary annuity (less the maintenance costs), as shown in equation 4.

$$FV = PMT \times \frac{(1+i)^n - 1}{i}$$

Equation 4: Future Value of an Ordinary Annuity

Where:
FV = Future Value
PMT = Monthly savings
i = Annualised return (8.75% p.a. or 10.68%)
n = Lifespan of the solar PV installation (n = 12 years)

The investing of the savings follows the same logic as a retirement annuity, where monthly savings are invested consistently over the lifespan (n = 12 years) of the solar PV installation. This resulted in a future value (FV) of R665,018, which is greater than the FV of investing the initial capital outlay into an interest-bearing account (i = 8.75%, FV = R436,295). The present value (PrVa) of the FV of the ordinary annuity discounted at 11% p.a. is R190,089, which is greater than the PrVa of the opportunity cost of investing the initial capital outlay (R124,711). If the monthly electricity savings net of scheduled maintenance costs were invested in the JSE All Share Index (i = 10.68%), then the homeowner would accrue a cumulative FV of R739,599, which when discounted at 11% p.a. would result in a PrVa of R210,550, which exceeds both the opportunity cost and investing in an interest-bearing account.

These results illustrate that savings reinvestment substantially enhances household wealth creation, addressing objective (iii) and reinforcing the opportunity cost trade-off.

The findings demonstrate that residential solar PV is financially feasible in South Africa when opportunity costs, market-based maintenance, and realistic financing trends are considered. This contrasts with earlier studies such as Marais et al. (2020) and Ziuku and Meyer (2012), which found payback periods of 8-14 years but did not integrate opportunity cost or financing dynamics. By explicitly incorporating these elements, this study advances the literature by situating PV adoption within household investment decision-making frameworks.

Implications for the Built Environment

The findings have important implications for the built environment. Hao and Michaud (2024), drawing on Marin (2019), note that rooftop solar PV is the only renewable energy source consistently associated with positive property value effects. For the residential sector, PV uptake contributes not only to household energy resilience but also to perceptions of long-term asset value, with potential knock-on effects for affordability and investment behaviour. More broadly, linking property value dynamics to renewable energy adoption underscores the role of solar PV in advancing urban sustainability goals, shaping neighbourhood desirability, and informing future housing policy and planning frameworks.

Conclusion

This study assessed the financial viability of residential solar PV installations in South Africa through a two-stage approach: a survey of homeowners who installed solar PV systems and a financial analysis utilising opportunity cost analysis and life cycle costing analysis (LCCA). Despite the small sample size (n = 30), the findings provide valuable insights into adoption trends, financing methods, and financial feasibility, contributing to the growing body of knowledge on renewable energy investments in the residential sector.

Several shortcomings associated with solar PV systems were identified, including limited energy storage potential, end-of-life waste management concerns, and vulnerability to environmental factors such as hail damage, dust accumulation, and temperature fluctuations. Maintenance challenges, the prevalence of substandard components, and the lack of professional expertise further complicate the successful deployment and long-term reliability of solar PV installations. Addressing these barriers requires improved regulatory standards, greater investment in high-quality components, and enhanced training programs for installers and system owners.

The survey results indicated that the most common solar PV system installed was an 8kVA inverter paired with a 20kWh battery, with most homeowners funding the installation using personal savings. The financial analysis demonstrated that investing in solar PV had a corresponding opportunity cost (FV = R436,295, PrVa = R124,711). The net present value (NPV = R43,606) and internal rate of return (IRR = 15.12%) exceeded the minimum required return (11%), confirming the financial feasibility of solar PV installations under the given assumptions. Furthermore, the discounted payback period of approximately 9 years and 11 months suggests a reasonable investment recovery period within the system's projected lifespan of 12 years. Both the cash (interest bearing) (FV = R665,018, PrVa = R190,089) and equity (JSE All Share Index) (FV = R736,599, PrVa = R210,550) investments provide an indication of potential long-term wealth creation for homeowners that have installed solar PV systems, which further strengthens the argument for solar PV installations in residential units in South Africa.

In addressing the three research objectives, this study (i) evaluated the financial feasibility of residential solar PV systems, including opportunity costs, (ii) tested their long-term viability using Life Cycle Costing (LCCA), and (iii) explored the potential for wealth creation through reinvested electricity savings. Importantly, beyond these financial and economic outcomes, the findings resonate with international literature showing that rooftop solar PV is the only renewable energy source consistently associated with positive property value effects (Hao & Michaud, 2024; Marin, 2019).

While these findings highlight the economic benefits of solar PV adoption, the study acknowledges certain limitations. The small sample size limits broader generalisability, and the financial analysis is

subject to assumptions about electricity price increases, maintenance costs, interest rates, and future returns in the publicly listed equity market.

Theoretically, the research contributes by integrating opportunity cost analysis, LCCA, and reinvestment potential with the property value dimension, thus expanding the understanding of renewable energy's role in built environment economics. Practically, the study provides evidence for homeowners, policymakers, and built environment professionals: homeowners gain confidence in both financial returns and enhanced asset values, policymakers can justify incentives to accelerate adoption, and professionals such as quantity surveyors can leverage these insights to advise clients on sustainable investment strategies.

Overall, this study underscores the financial viability of solar PV installations for residential property owners in South Africa. Given the increasing electricity tariffs, unstable state of the national grid and the declining costs of solar technology, these findings provide a compelling case for wider adoption and further policy incentives to promote renewable energy solutions at the household level. However, homeowners must take care in appointing experienced contractors to install the solar PV system to optimise the benefits. Furthermore, out of all the African countries, South Africa is the leading green country, and if successful in South Africa, there is a good chance to be successful in other Africa countries. Ultimately, solar PV enhances both household energy resilience and property values, positioning it as a cornerstone of sustainable housing and urban development.

Recommendations

Future research could expand the sample size to improve representativeness, while incorporating real-world energy consumption data to validate financial modelling assumptions. Comparative analyses of different system sizes, battery capacities, and financing options would also provide insight into sensitivity and scalability. From a built environment perspective, studies should also explore implications for housing affordability, urban sustainability, and policy incentives, while recognising the advisory role of built environment professionals in guiding investment decisions.

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SACQSP2025-20

Bridging the Sustainability Gap: A Qualitative Inquiry on Competency Development for Quantity Surveyors in Namibia

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Abstract

Despite their pivotal role in shaping cost and procurement decisions, quantity surveyors in Namibia continue to lack the sustainable construction competencies (SCCs) required to meet contemporary environmental and economic demands. This paper aimed to explore practical strategies for enhancing SCCs among Namibian quantity surveyors and to investigate the anticipated benefits of such improvements for the construction industry. Anchored in an interpretivist philosophy, this qualitative study employed semi-structured interviews with a total of five experienced quantity surveyors, academics, and members of the Institute of Namibian Quantity Surveyors (INQS) education committee. Data were thematically analysed using Atlas.ti to extract insight-driven strategies and perceived industry benefits. The study found that continuous professional development, integration of sustainability into academic curricula, and government-backed incentives are vital to improving SCCs. Participants also emphasised the importance of knowledge-sharing platforms and regulatory alignment. The anticipated benefits include improved project life cycle value, enhanced environmental performance, better client satisfaction, and increased industry competitiveness both locally and regionally. The study's qualitative scope limits generalisability, but its depth provides critical insight into context-specific interventions and value propositions for sustainable construction practices in Namibia. The findings support the formulation of industry-driven training programs, CPD policies, and educational reforms aligned with sustainability priorities. These can guide professional bodies, regulators, and academic institutions in fostering a skilled and future-ready quantity surveying workforce. This paper provides Namibia-specific interventions in both the strategies and value outcomes associated with enhancing sustainable construction competencies among quantity surveyors. It offers a foundation for systemic change through targeted, evidence-based professional development initiatives.

Keywords: Sustainable Construction, Competency, Quantity Surveyor, Sustainability, Namibia.

Introduction

In the global pursuit of environmentally responsible development, the construction industry has emerged as both a contributor to and a potential mitigator of environmental degradation. Buildings account for nearly 40% of global energy consumption and carbon emissions, highlighting the urgent need for sustainable construction practices (Kamath et al., 2019; Isaksson & Rosvall, 2020). Sustainable construction has evolved into more than a trend, it is a professional and ethical obligation that calls for rethinking traditional construction approaches to include environmental, social and economic considerations throughout a project's life cycle (Kibert, 2016). In Namibia, the need for sustainability is underscored by context-specific challenges, such as extreme water scarcity, climate vulnerability and limited natural resources (Maio et al., 2016). The country receives an average annual rainfall of only about 270mm, making it one of the most arid nations in sub-Saharan Africa (Namibia Statistic Agency, 2023). Yet despite a growing awareness of these challenges, implementation remains limited, largely due to a shortage of sustainable construction competencies (SCC's) among key industry professionals. Among them, quantity surveyors (QS's) hold a critical role, tasked with cost planning, procurement and life cycle analysis, they are uniquely positioned to influence decisions that

affect the sustainability of construction projects (Omotayo, Tan & Ekundayo, 2023). However, studies suggest that many QSs lack the requisite knowledge, skills and attitudes to effectively champion and embed sustainability into practice (Chamikara, Perera & Rodrigo, 2020; Victar et al., 2023). While existing literature has explored competency frameworks and sustainability barriers in general (Ali et al., 2015; Hwang, Shan & Lye, 2018; Toriola-Coker et al., 2021; Akindele et al., 2023; Dalirazar & Sabzi, 2023; Zulu et al., 2023), there is a lack of in-depth research on how sustainable construction competencies can be improved among QS's in developing contexts like Namibia, and what benefits such improvement would yield. Much of the current literature focuses on barriers and skill gaps, with limited qualitative insight into the lived experience of professionals actively engaged in or overseeing sustainability efforts.

Therefore, this paper addresses these gaps by exploring practical strategies to improve SCC's among Namibian QS's, as well as identifying the anticipated benefits for the construction industry. Through qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with experienced QSs, educators and committee members of the Institute of Namibian Quantity Surveyors (INQS), the study presents targeted insights that can inform training, policy and curriculum development.

The objectives of this paper are therefore twofold:

1. To assess the best ways to improve sustainable construction competencies among Namibian quantity surveyors
2. To identify the benefits that the Namibian construction industry will accrue from quantity surveyors who are competent in sustainable construction

To achieve this, the remainder of the paper is structured as follows: first, a literature review summarises prior work on improving SCCs and the benefits of sustainability-focused QS practice. The next section outlines the research methodology. This is followed by a presentation of the qualitative findings, a discussion comparing these with literature, and a conclusion with practical recommendations.

Literature Review

Sustainable Construction and the Quantity Surveying Profession

Sustainable construction (SC) is a complex and multifaceted system encompassing the extraction of materials, manufacturing of products, assembly into buildings, ongoing maintenance, and eventual deconstruction or demolition (Murray, 2019). It considers energy and water use throughout the project and building life cycles, alongside the impacts of each stage on environmental and human health. Planning decisions influence the physical distribution and relationships of buildings and infrastructure, shaping long-term energy consumption profiles (Kibert, 2016). Implementing Sustainable Construction demands the coordinated involvement of public policy (regulations, incentives, and disincentives), the real estate, finance, and insurance sectors, educational institutions, consulting firms, and construction companies to train and employ stakeholders in sustainable methods (Det Udomsap & Hallinger, 2020). Globally, frameworks such as the European Union's energy performance directives (Alotaibi, Edum-Fotwe & Price, 2019) and the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification in the United States (Kibert, 2016) have driven adoption of green building practices. However, in developing countries, adoption remains constrained by limited financial resources, inadequate training, and weak regulatory enforcement (Mahamud, 2019; Moyo et al., 2023). Challenges such as resource scarcity, energy insecurity, and climate change impacts intensify these constraints. While sustainable construction offers both environmental and economic benefits, its uptake in developing contexts often lags due to shortages of skilled professionals, including quantity surveyors (QSs), who are pivotal in ensuring projects are both cost-effective and environmentally responsible (Ebekozien & Aigbavboa, 2023). A critical tool in SC is life cycle costing (LCC), which evaluates total ownership costs, including environmental and operational costs, over the lifespan of a building (Kibert, 2016). Although LCC is common in developed markets, its use in developing countries is limited, where short-term cost constraints often overshadow long-term value considerations (Ohiomah, Aigbavboa & Thwala, 2019). Similarly, while waste minimisation through material reuse and recycling is mainstream in many developed nations, inadequate infrastructure and incentives hinder such practices in much of the Global South (Ogunmakinde et al., 2017).

Quantity surveyors occupy a unique role in advancing Sustainable Construction, acting as cost consultants and contract managers with influence across all project phases (Olawumi & Chan, 2020. Their expanding scope now includes embedding sustainability into financial, procurement, and project planning decisions (Omotayo et al., 2023). Through LCC, QSs can encourage long-term thinking, supporting energy-efficient and resource-saving solutions that may have higher initial costs but deliver operational savings and reduced environmental impact over time (Cartlidge, 2017). In procurement, QSs can prioritise sustainable materials, such as recycled or renewable products, ensuring they align with both cost and sustainability targets (Ebekozien & Aigbavboa, 2023). The integration of Building Information Modelling (BIM) into QS practice further enhances their ability to optimise material use, minimise waste, and assess energy efficiency (Ali et al., 2015). BIM's data-driven insights enable QSs to evaluate sustainability trade-offs with precision (Ali et al., 2015).

To effectively champion SC, QSs require competencies in sustainable cost management, environmental impact assessment, green building standards, and sustainability risk management (Olawumi & Chan, 2020). These skills remain underdeveloped in many developing contexts, reinforcing the need for targeted training, updated curricula, and supportive policy frameworks. In Namibia's context, characterised by scarce resources, climate vulnerability, and infrastructure growth, enhancing quantity surveyors' sustainable construction competencies is not only a professional imperative but also a national development priority.

Strategies for Enhancing Sustainable Construction Competencies

Improving the sustainable construction competencies (SCCs) of quantity surveyors (QSs) requires a multipronged approach that includes education, training, policy interventions and industry collaboration. Several studies have advocated for government-led financial incentives, such as subsidies, tax relief, and preferential project awards, as a way to stimulate sustainability uptake (Akindele et al., 2023; Dalirazar & Sabzi, 2023). These incentives are especially important in developing countries where the cost of sustainable technologies is often a barrier. Curriculum development at tertiary institutions is also seen as crucial. According to Ebekozien and Aigbavboa (2023), embedding sustainability into QS education at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels is essential for developing a future-ready workforce. This includes introducing modules on life cycle costing, building information modelling (BIM), carbon accounting, and green procurement (Oke et al., 2019). More strategies to improve sustainable construction competencies among quantity surveyors are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Strategies to improve quantity surveyors' sustainable construction competencies

Strategies	References
Financial incentives from the government	Nguyen (2018); Olawumi & Chan (2020); Akindele et al. (2023); Fitriani & Ajayi (2023)
Building awareness of sustainable construction practices/principles among stakeholders	Oke et al. (2019); Akindele et al. (2023); Fitriani & Ajayi (2023)
Developing regulatory mechanisms	Oke et al. (2019); Zulu et al. (2023)
Knowledge sharing among construction professionals	Chan et al. (2019); A. Oke et al. (2019); Olawumi & Chan (2020)
Regular and improved training programs and education	Akindele et al. (2023); Ebekozien & Aigbavboa (2023); Fitriani & Ajayi (2023)
Cooperation & partnerships between experienced and inexperienced professionals	Oke, Ogunsemi & Adeyelu (2019); Dalirazar & Sabzi (2023)
Integrating sustainable regulation	Oke et al. (2019); Ajayi et al. (2023)
Compulsory Continuing Professional Development (CPD) by professional bodies	Toriola-Coker et al. (2021); Fitriani & Ajayi (2023)
Increasing professional involvement in sustainable construction	Chamikara et al. (2020); Akindele et al. (2023)
Improving client education to increase client demand	Dalirazar & Sabzi (2023)
Government/External support for more research and development in sustainable building practices	Hwang et al. (2018); Akindele et al. (2023)

Using Building Information Modelling (BIM) programs for cost estimation and management	Gao, Koch & Wu (2019); Olawumi & Chan (2020)
Creating a sustainable building practice framework for quantity surveyors to follow	Hwang et al. (2018); Dalirazar & Sabzi, (2023)
Using past successful projects as a reference to develop competencies	Hwang et al. (2018); Dalirazar & Sabzi, (2023)
Using BIM to enhance communication and collaboration between professionals	Gao et al. (2019); Olawumi & Chan (2020); Dalirazar & Sabzi (2023)

Beyond formal education, continuing professional development (CPD) has been widely promoted as a vehicle for knowledge renewal. Fitriani and Ajayi (2023) recommend compulsory CPD programs focused on green building standards and practical case studies to ensure that practicing professionals remain aligned with evolving sustainability benchmarks. Knowledge sharing platforms, such as seminars, peer learning groups, and technical forums, offer low-cost and high-impact mechanisms for spreading sustainability best practices (Chan, Olawumi & Ho, 2019). Moreover, improved collaboration among stakeholders, including clients, engineers, architects, and QSs, can enhance mutual understanding and drive holistic project outcomes (Olawumi & Chan, 2020).

Finally, technological integration, particularly through BIM and sustainability performance simulation tools, can serve as both a teaching aid and a practice enhancer. Olawumi and Chan (2020) found that the application of BIM in sustainable design improved interprofessional coordination and real-time sustainability tracking.

Benefits of Sustainable Construction Competent Quantity Surveyors

Developing SCCs among QSs offers a wide range of benefits to the Namibian construction industry, spanning environmental, economic, and social factors.

Environmentally, these competencies empower QSs to promote low-carbon materials, energy-efficient design, and waste minimisation strategies, thereby reducing the overall environmental footprint of projects (Gu et al., 2023). By advising on sustainable procurement practices, QSs can ensure that materials are sourced responsibly, favouring recycled or renewable products that reduce pressure on finite natural resources. Competent QSs are also able to integrate water efficiency measures and renewable energy solutions into project planning, directly contributing to national climate change mitigation goals and global sustainability targets (Olawumi & Chan, 2020).

Economically, skilled QSs can perform life cycle costing (LCC) and cost-benefit analyses to identify options that balance higher upfront investments with long-term operational savings (Yap et al., 2022). This approach enhances client confidence and improves project value by lowering running and maintenance costs over the building's lifespan. Moreover, sustainable buildings often qualify for tax incentives, favourable financing, and achieve higher resale or rental values, providing better returns for developers and investors (Zuo & Zhao, 2014). The ability to quantify these benefits enables QSs to position sustainability as not only environmentally responsible but also financially advantageous.

Socially, sustainable construction practices lead to healthier, safer, and more comfortable built environments. Competent QSs are instrumental in specifying materials and designs that improve indoor air quality, acoustic comfort, thermal performance, and lighting quality, all of which positively affect occupant well-being and productivity (Zuo & Zhao, 2014). By fostering inclusive design and sourcing materials through ethical supply chains, QSs also contribute to social equity. Additionally, the growth of green building projects stimulates job creation in emerging sectors such as renewable energy installation, energy auditing, and sustainable materials production (Kibert, 2016). This multiplier effect strengthens local economies while advancing social development objectives.

The literature demonstrates that sustainable construction offers significant environmental, economic, and social benefits, and that quantity surveyors are uniquely positioned to drive its adoption through their influence over cost planning, procurement, and life cycle decision-making. However, in Namibia, the integration of sustainable construction competencies into QS practice is constrained by limited formal training, inadequate CPD opportunities, weak regulatory enforcement, and low client demand. Evidence from global best practices highlights that improving SCCs requires a coordinated strategy

encompassing education reform, targeted CPD, government incentives, technological adoption, and stronger professional body leadership. Addressing these gaps will not only enhance the capacity of QSs to deliver sustainable outcomes but will also position the Namibian construction industry to align with global sustainability standards, strengthen market competitiveness, and contribute meaningfully to national development priorities. Collectively, these benefits as shown in Table 2 position sustainability-competent Quantity Surveyors as key agents in achieving both industry competitiveness and broader national development goals.

Table 2 Benefits of Sustainable Construction Competent Quantity Surveyors in Namibia

Category	Benefits	References
Environmental	Promotion of low-carbon and eco-friendly materials Integration of energy-efficient design strategies Waste minimisation and recycling practices Incorporation of water efficiency and renewable energy solutions	Olawumi & Chan (2020); Gu et al. (2023)
Economic	Application of life cycle costing (LCC) to optimise long-term value Cost-benefit analysis for sustainable solutions Reduced operational and maintenance costs Access to tax incentives, green financing, and higher resale value	Zuo & Zhao (2014); Yap et al. (2022)
Social	Creation of healthier and safer indoor environments Enhanced occupant comfort and productivity Ethical procurement and inclusive design considerations Job creation in emerging green sectors	Kibert (2016)

Research Methodology and Method

This study adopted an interpretivist research philosophy, underpinned by the belief that reality is socially constructed and best understood through the subjective experiences and perspectives of individuals (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019. This approach was deemed appropriate as the aim was to explore strategies for improving sustainable construction competencies (SCCs) among quantity surveyors in Namibia, as well as the perceived benefits of developing these competencies, rather than to measure them quantitatively. A qualitative research design was employed, utilising semi-structured interviews to collect rich, in-depth data from participants. This method was selected for its flexibility in probing beyond surface-level responses, allowing participants to elaborate on their experiences and insights (Denscombe, 2021). The interview guide was informed by the literature review and aligned with the study's objectives, focusing on two key areas: Strategies to enhance SCCs among quantity surveyors, and Benefits to the Namibian construction industry from sustainability-competent QSs.

The study population consisted of registered quantity surveyors in Namibia, including those practising as consultants, contractors, and in academic or professional body roles. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who were well-positioned to provide informed perspectives on SCCs. This included senior professionals, members of the Institute of Namibian Quantity Surveyors (INQS) education committee, and QSs with substantial industry experience. A total of five participants were interviewed, representing a range of professional backgrounds, organisational types, and years of experience. Semi-structured interviews were conducted between March 2025 and May 2025, either face-to-face or via online conferencing platforms, depending on participant availability. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participant's consent to ensure accuracy during transcription. Ethical clearance for the study was granted by the Nelson Mandela

University Research Ethics Committee (REC-H) (Ref: 1008). The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically following Nowell et al. (2017) six-phase framework. This involved familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. The analysis was facilitated using Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis software, to organise codes, link related concepts, and ensure a transparent audit trail of analytical decisions. Thematic analysis was chosen for its suitability in identifying patterns within qualitative data while accommodating both inductive (data-driven) and deductive (theory-informed) coding approaches. Data saturation was reached after the fourth interview, as no new themes or significant insights emerged from subsequent coding iterations, suggesting that the data collected sufficiently captured the range of perspectives relevant to the research objectives.

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, member checking was undertaken by sharing preliminary interpretations with selected participants for validation (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016). Triangulation was achieved by comparing findings across participants with diverse roles and organisational contexts. In qualitative research, validity is addressed through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019). Credibility was ensured through prolonged engagement with the topic, participant validation, and the use of direct quotes to support interpretations. Transferability was promoted by providing detailed descriptions of the research context and participant profiles, enabling others to judge the applicability of findings to similar contexts. Dependability and confirmability were enhanced through maintaining a clear audit trail of methodological decisions and coding processes.

Research Results

To protect anonymity, participants are identified by codes R1 to R5. Table 3 summarises their demographics and will be used to attribute quotes in the Results and Discussion.

Table 3 Demographic Profile of Respondents

Code	Gender	Sector	Highest qualification	Years of experience
R1	Male	Private Consultancy	BSc Quantity Surveying	20+
R2	Male	Private Consultancy	BSc (Hons) Quantity Surveying	15
R3	Female	Public sector	BSc Quantity Surveying	18
R4	Male	Private	BSc (Hons) Project Management	18
R5	Male	Public sector	BSc Quantity Surveying; BSc (Hons) Project Management	16

The diversity in gender, professional roles, and sectoral representation (consultancy, public sector, multidisciplinary practice) ensured that the study captured insights reflecting both private and public perspectives in Namibia's construction industry. The participants' 15–20 years of experience also ensured that the responses drew on extensive industry practice.

Strategies for Enhancing Sustainable Construction Competencies

To address how quantity surveyors' sustainable construction competencies (SCCs) can be improved in the Namibian construction industry, a thematic analysis of interview responses was conducted. Three main themes emerged: Education and Training, Policy and Institutional Support, and Collaboration and Technology. These themes were further categorised into sub-categories, as shown in Figure 1.

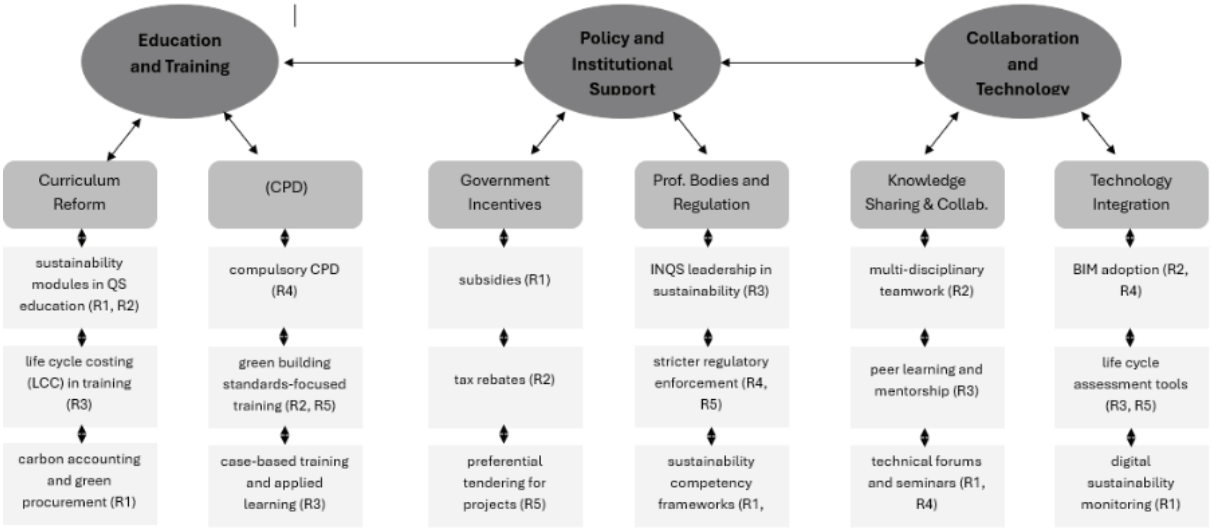

Figure 1 Themes on Strategies to Improve SCC"s among Quantity Surveyors

Theme 1: Education and Training

Curriculum Reform

Participants consistently emphasised the need to embed sustainability in QS curricula at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. R1 argued: "If sustainability is not taught from the start, we are producing professionals who are already behind the times." R2 and R3 echoed this, noting that QS graduates often lack exposure to life cycle costing (LCC), carbon accounting, and green procurement. R3 stated: "We still graduate with a traditional skillset, but the industry expects us to know about things like LCC and environmental assessments." These findings align with Ebekozien and Aigbavboa (2023), who stressed that curriculum reform is essential for developing a sustainability-ready workforce. Similarly, Pacis and VanWynsberghe (2020) found that without embedding sustainability into professional education, graduates enter practice ill-equipped to respond to global sustainability challenges.

Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

Beyond formal education, CPD was seen as critical for bridging competency gaps. R4 argued for compulsory CPD linked to professional registration: "Unless CPD in sustainability is mandatory, most QSs will not prioritise it." R2 and R5 supported this, noting the need for training on emerging tools and standards. R5 explained: "Workshops on new sustainability regulations and standards should be compulsory if we are serious about raising competencies." This echoes Toriola-Coker et al. (2021), who found that CPD programmes are among the most effective mechanisms for updating sustainability knowledge in practice. Fitriani and Ajayi (2023) further highlight that case-based training is particularly impactful, as it connects theory with real project applications. The findings confirm that education and CPD are foundational to improving SCCs. Formal curriculum reform would ensure new entrants graduate with baseline sustainability skills, while CPD would enable practising QSs to remain current with evolving tools, standards, and policies. Together, these approaches reflect a dual strategy also advocated by (Chamikara et al., 2020), who observed that sustainable construction competencies can only be mainstreamed when reinforced across both higher education and professional development structures.

Theme 2: Policy and Institutional Support

Government Incentives

Respondents emphasised that government leadership is essential to accelerate the adoption of sustainable construction. R1 argued: "If there are no subsidies or financial support, clients will always go for the cheaper, unsustainable option." R2 reinforced this, calling for fiscal measures such as tax rebates, while R5 added that preferential tendering for green projects could motivate contractors: "If sustainability gives you an advantage in winning tenders, the whole industry will start taking it

seriously." These insights mirror findings by Oke et al. (2019) and Dalirazar and Sabzi (2023), who highlight the importance of incentives in overcoming cost barriers that hinder sustainability in developing countries. Without these measures, as Mahamud (2019) observed, sustainable construction often remains aspirational rather than practical in resource-constrained contexts.

Professional Bodies and Regulation

Participants also stressed the role of professional institutions and stronger regulatory frameworks. R3 noted: "The INQS must take the lead. If they don't make sustainability part of our competencies, it won't be prioritised." R4 and R5 emphasised stricter enforcement of sustainability regulations: "Regulations are the real game changer. If sustainability is enforced, everyone has to take it seriously" (R4). "The rules are too soft right now, which is why many firms ignore sustainability" (R5). This aligns with Olawumi and Chan (2020), who found that professional bodies are pivotal in setting standards and ensuring compliance. Similarly, Akindele et al. (2023) argue that integrating sustainability into regulatory frameworks ensures consistency across the industry. The findings highlight that policy and institutional support are indispensable enablers of SCC adoption. Government incentives reduce financial barriers for clients and contractors, while professional bodies and regulators institutionalise sustainability within professional practice. These results echo Chamikara et al. (2020), who argue that without systemic reforms driven by policy and regulation, sustainability remains dependent on individual champions rather than becoming an industry norm.

Theme 3: Collaboration and Technology

Knowledge Sharing and Collaboration

Participants stressed that improving SCCs requires breaking down silos within the construction industry. R2 highlighted the value of interdisciplinary teamwork: "Sustainability is not a QS-only issue. We need to work closely with engineers and architects to make it part of every decision." R3 echoed this, noting the importance of mentorship and peer learning: "Younger QSs can learn a lot from those who have handled green projects before, but there are very few platforms for that kind of exchange." R1 and R4 added that technical forums and seminars would provide cost-effective ways to spread best practice: "We should have regular forums where professionals share lessons on sustainable projects" (R1). "Even case studies presented at workshops can go a long way in showing what works" (R4). These findings align with Chan et al. (2019) and Olawumi and Chan (2020), who argue that collaboration across disciplines enhances project outcomes and fosters the integration of sustainability principles. Similar studies in developing contexts (Oke et al., 2019) confirm that knowledge-sharing platforms are particularly important where structured training opportunities are limited.

Technology Integration

The role of technology, particularly Building Information Modelling (BIM) and digital assessment tools, was highlighted by several respondents. R2 and R4 stressed BIM's potential for improving decision-making: "BIM makes it easier to visualise the cost and environmental impact of different options" (R2). "We are already using BIM in project management; it can be expanded to sustainability tracking" (R4). R3 and R5 pointed to life cycle assessment (LCA) tools as vital for evaluating long-term sustainability impacts: "LCC and LCA should be part of every project feasibility study, but right now they are not" (R3). "Digital tools can show the hidden costs, like energy use and maintenance, that are ignored in traditional costing" (R5). R1 added that digital monitoring tools can provide real-time data to support sustainable procurement decisions: "With digital monitoring, you can track how sustainable your project is as it progresses, not only at the end." These insights support Gao et al. (2019), who found that BIM enhances sustainability performance by integrating cost and energy data. They also align with Olawumi and Chan (2020), who emphasise digitalisation as a key driver for sustainable construction practices.

Benefits of Sustainable Construction Competent Quantity Surveyors

To explore the benefits that sustainable construction competent quantity surveyors (SCC-competent QSs) can bring to the Namibian construction industry, a thematic analysis of interview responses was undertaken. Three overarching themes emerged from the data: Environmental Benefits, Economic Benefits, and Social Benefits. These themes were further categorised into sub-categories, as illustrated in Figure 2.

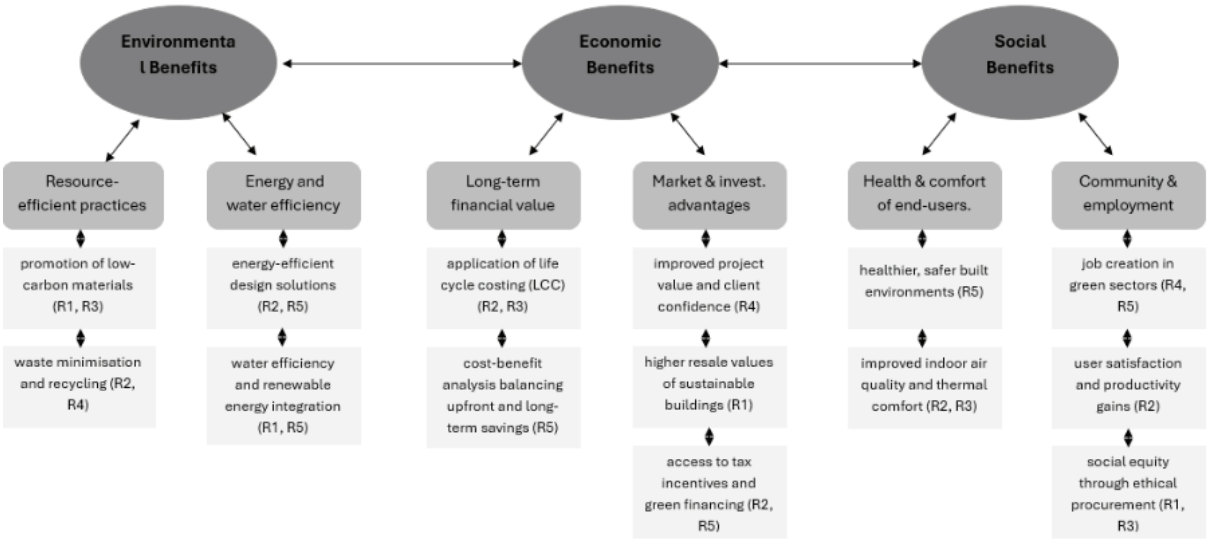

Figure 2 Themes on Benefits of SCC-Competent Quantity Surveyors

Theme 1: Environmental Benefits

Low-carbon and resource-efficient practices

Respondents described how SCC-competent QSs can steer projects toward lower-carbon specifications and material efficiency through informed cost planning and procurement advice. R1 noted, “Clients listen when the cost plan shows how low-carbon options fit the budget. If we present the numbers clearly, they choose greener materials.” R3 added, “We can cut waste at tender and during valuation by tightening allowances and insisting on recycled or certified materials.” R2 and R4 linked this to site waste controls and specification discipline: “Standardising details and enforcing take-off accuracy reduces off-cuts and rework” (R2), and “Direct procurement of certified products helps us track the embodied impacts better” (R4). These accounts align with studies emphasising QS influence over material selection, waste minimisation and embodied-carbon reduction through procurement and measurement control (Olawumi & Chan, 2018; Gu et al., 2023). Taken together, the evidence supports the view that QS-led controls across cost planning, bills, and contract clauses are practical levers for reducing project footprints.

Energy and water efficiency

Participants also highlighted the role of QSs in integrating energy and water efficiency early in design economics. R2 observed, “If life cycle costing is tabled at concept, efficient envelopes and services compete fairly with the baseline.” R5 stressed Namibia’s resource context: “Water-saving fixtures and on-site reuse need to be costed as standard options, not extras.” R1 added, “When we cost renewable energy and storage with whole-life numbers, clients see the payback and resilience.” These insights echo literature that positions QSs as enablers of energy and water efficiency through options appraisal, life cycle costing, and performance-based specifications (Kibert, 2016; Kamath et al., 2019). They are also consistent with Namibian studies underscoring water scarcity and the need for efficiency strategies in the built environment (Maio et al., 2016). Across both categories, the findings indicate that environmental gains are most likely when QSs embed sustainability into the economic language of projects: clear cost-quality-carbon trade-offs, robust waste and specification controls, and early LCC of energy and water options. This directly supports prior work that frames QSs as pivotal translators between sustainability intent and commercial decision-making (Olawumi & Chan, 2018; Gu et al., 2023).

Theme 2: Economic Benefits

Long-term financial value

Respondents highlighted that one of the strongest benefits of SCC-competent QSs is their ability to translate sustainability into financial terms through life cycle costing (LCC) and cost–benefit analyses. R2 explained: “When we cost green options using life cycle costing, it shows that what looks expensive

upfront actually saves money over time." R3 reinforced this by stressing that sustainability is easier to sell to clients when quantified in long-term savings: "If you demonstrate the payback periods clearly, even conservative clients begin to support energy-efficient solutions." R5 added that proper cost–benefit analyses allow sustainable options to compete fairly with conventional alternatives: "The numbers matter. Once you put the operating and maintenance savings on paper, sustainability becomes a viable choice." These views are consistent with Yap et al. (2022), who identified LCC as a core competency for modern QSs to align short-term cost planning with long-term sustainability outcomes. Similarly, Cartlidge (2017) and Kibert (2016) argue that QSs act as translators between sustainability and finance, enabling clients to see sustainability as an investment rather than an additional cost.

Market and investment advantages

Beyond operational savings, respondents noted that sustainable buildings bring competitive and financial advantages in the market. R4 emphasised the trust built with clients: "Clients are more confident when they know their buildings will cost less to run and maintain." R1 noted that sustainable buildings often achieve higher valuations: "Properties with green certifications or energy efficiency ratings fetch more in the market, and QSs can help achieve that." R2 and R5 further stressed the importance of incentives and financing: "Tax rebates and green financing make sustainable projects more attractive, but only if QSs highlight these options to clients" (R2). "Developers want to know what financial benefits they can access, and it's our job to bring that knowledge" (R5). These insights align with Zuo and Zhao (2014), who demonstrated that sustainable buildings often yield higher resale and rental values, supported by incentives and financing. They also reflect findings by Opoku and Fortune (2019), who highlighted the role of QSs in improving investor confidence in green projects.

The findings confirm that economic benefits are a major lever for sustainability adoption. SCC-competent QSs not only reduce long-term operational costs through LCC and cost–benefit analyses but also enhance the financial attractiveness of projects via improved valuations, client confidence, and access to incentives. This dual role, both as cost analysts and market advisors, positions QSs as critical enablers of financial sustainability in the built environment.

Theme 3: Social Benefits

Health and comfort of end-users

Participants underscored that SCC-competent QSs contribute to healthier, safer, and more comfortable built environments by influencing material choices and project design economics. R2 explained: "When we advise on finishes and layouts, we can push for materials that improve air quality and designs that give better light and ventilation." R3 added that sustainability extends beyond efficiency: "It's also about ensuring buildings are safe, comfortable, and long-lasting, not just cheap." R5 stressed that sustainable specifications improve occupant well-being: "If we cost for things like insulation or better ventilation systems, the people using the building live and work in much healthier conditions." These findings support Kibert (2016), who identifies indoor environmental quality, thermal comfort, and safety as core principles of sustainable construction. They also resonate with Olawumi and Chan (2020), who argue that QSs influence well-being by integrating these considerations into procurement and specification decisions.

Community and employment outcomes

Respondents also noted the broader social value of SCC-competent QSs in creating jobs and supporting communities. R4 remarked: "Green projects open up opportunities in areas like renewable energy installation and energy auditing, those are new jobs for Namibians." R5 added that sustainable construction stimulates local skills development: "When sustainability is prioritised, we invest in training people in new technologies, and that creates employment pathways." R1 and R3 further pointed to ethical procurement: "We can source responsibly, making sure materials are not only sustainable but also ethically produced" (R1). "Government projects, in particular, should use procurement to support local suppliers and fair practices" (R3). These perspectives echo Kibert (2016), who emphasise that sustainability encompasses social equity, fair supply chains, and opportunities for communities. They are also consistent with (Oke et al., 2019), who observed that sustainable construction in developing contexts can stimulate green job creation and improve livelihoods.

Conclusion

The Namibian construction industry continues to face challenges in embedding sustainability, largely due to a shortage of professionals with the competencies required to translate sustainability goals into practice. Quantity surveyors, despite being strategically placed to influence cost planning, procurement, and life cycle decision-making, remain constrained by gaps in education, inadequate access to structured CPD, weak regulatory enforcement, and limited government incentives. This study set out to explore strategies for enhancing sustainable construction competencies among Namibian QSs and to identify the benefits that would accrue from their development. The qualitative findings revealed three central strategies: embedding sustainability into higher education curricula and CPD programmes, strengthening government incentives and policy support, and fostering collaboration and technology adoption, particularly through Building Information Modelling (BIM). While these align with international literature, the study highlights the need for interventions tailored to Namibia's specific policy, resource, and institutional context. The study further confirmed that developing SCCs offers multi-dimensional benefits. Environmentally, SCC-competent QSs promote low-carbon development, energy efficiency, and climate resilience. Economically, they enhance project value through life cycle costing and cost–benefit analysis, improving client confidence and market competitiveness. Socially, their input contributes to healthier, safer, and more inclusive built environments while creating new employment opportunities in emerging green sectors. In conclusion, improving QS competencies in sustainability is not only a professional imperative but also a national development priority. Equipping Namibian QSs with these competencies will position the profession as a driver of sustainable transformation in the built environment, aligning local practice with global sustainability goals and supporting the country's broader socio-economic development agenda.

Recommendations

Curriculum reform (Theme 1) should integrate sustainability, life cycle costing (LCC), and life cycle assessment (LCA) into QS programmes, supported by compulsory CPD focused on applied sustainability skills. The INQS should update its competency standards and, together with government, introduce incentives and enforceable green procurement policies (Theme 2) to institutionalise sustainability practice. Finally, collaboration and technology adoption (Theme 3), including multidisciplinary training and the use of BIM and digital sustainability tools, should be prioritised to enhance informed, data-driven decision-making across the Namibian construction industry.

Limitation

This study was limited to its small qualitative sample, which restricts the generalisability of the findings to the wider population of Namibian quantity surveyors.

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SACQSP2025-25

Investigating the Influence of Subjective Norms on Electricity Saving Behaviour among University Students in Residential Settings: A Quantitative Analysis

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Abstract

Electricity consumption in residential buildings remains a concern in the global push toward sustainability, particularly where users are not financially accountable for usage. The objective of this study is to analyse the influence of subjective norms on university students living in university-managed accommodations. To achieve this, the researchers used a survey questionnaire to collect quantitative data. A close ended survey questionnaires was administered to 115 participants, of which 98 valid responses were retained. The findings showed that Perceived Social Approval (M = 3.33) and Influence of Friends and Family (M = 3.13) exerted the greatest influence on electricity-saving intentions, while Media Influence (M = 2.65) and Motivation to Comply (M = 2.68) were found to be weaker. These results indicated that positive social reinforcement and peer approval were stronger motivators for conservation than external campaigns or punitive pressures. The study enhances the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) by illustrating the influence of normative pressures in non-cost-bearing residential contexts. It recommends that universities leverage peer-led initiatives and community engagement to promote sustainable energy behaviors among students. Despite the positive findings, the study is limited by its reliance on survey questionnaires, which may not fully capture actual behaviors or nuanced forms of social pressure. Future research should address these limitations by employing mixed methods, such as observational studies or interviews, to uncover hidden social pressures, including informal disapproval. Additionally, expanding the study to encompass multiple regions would strengthen its generalisability.

Keywords: Electricity consumption, Subjective norms, Theory of Planned Behaviour, Student residences, Social influence.

Introduction

Electricity conservation has become one of the most urgent sustainability priorities in the face of global climate change (International Energy Agency [IEA], 2023; Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC] 2022). Overconsumption of electricity places pressure on national energy systems and significantly contributes to greenhouse gas emissions, accelerating global warming and threatening the stability of ecological systems (Liu et al., 2022) Residential buildings are major contributors to this challenge, where electricity is often consumed inefficiently through wasteful practices such as leaving lights and appliances switched on unnecessarily, overuse of heating and cooling systems, and ignoring energy-saving alternatives (Wang et al., 2024) In South Africa, these problems are compounded by recurring electricity shortages, rising demand, and heavy reliance on coal-powered generation, which make conservation not only an environmental necessity but also an economic and social imperative (Himeur et al., 2021; Fang et al., 2022).

While governments, universities, and private institutions worldwide have introduced initiatives such as renewable energy investments, advanced metering, and smart-grid systems to encourage electricity conservation, these interventions often overlook the human factor the psychological and social influences that shape everyday energy-use behaviours (Li et al., 2021; Ajzen, 2020; Park & Lee, 2023).

Technical solutions alone cannot achieve meaningful reductions if residents' behaviour remains unchanged. In university student residences, this issue becomes particularly pronounced, students do not pay their own electricity bills, which removes a key financial incentive for conservation. Instead, their behaviours are shaped by peer influence and the prevailing social culture of the residence environment (Nomura et al., 2020). For example, if wasteful practices such as leaving lights or heaters running are widely accepted, these behaviours can quickly become normalised. Conversely, when energy-saving actions are promoted and valued by peers, they are more likely to spread through the same social networks (Fang et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2022).

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) is a widely recognised social-psychological framework for explaining and predicting human behaviour in diverse contexts (Ajzen, 2020). While the theory does not specifically address electricity consumption, it identifies three core determinants of behavioural intention: attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. These constructs can be applied to examine decision-making in specific domains, including energy use. This study applies TPB to the context of electricity consumption in communal living spaces, focusing exclusively on subjective norms the perceived social pressure to engage in or avoid a particular behaviour. In university student residences where students do not pay their own electricity bills, these social pressures can be especially influential (Nomura et al., 2020). Without the financial feedback of a monthly bill, students often take behavioural cues from their peers, roommates, and the wider residence culture. If wasteful behaviours are widely practised, they can quickly become normalised. Conversely, when conservation is socially valued and modelled, it can spread through the same social channels (Fang et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2022).

Although TPB has been applied in many energy behaviour studies, the focus is often on attitudes and perceived behavioural control, especially in settings where occupants bear the cost of their energy use (Li et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2024). Far less attention has been given to the role of subjective norms in non-cost-bearing contexts, such as university residences. This represents a critical gap in both theory application and practical intervention design. Without understanding how social expectations operate when economic incentives are absent, conservation campaigns risk overlooking a powerful behavioural driver one that could either undermine or significantly enhance their success. The cost of leaving this gap unaddressed is twofold: continued wasteful consumption in student housing and the missed opportunity to leverage peer influence for sustainability gains.

This paper aimed to investigate the influence of subjective norms on university students living in university-managed accommodations. The study's objective was to examine the influence of subjective norms on electricity consumption among university students residing in campus housing where they are not responsible for paying their own electricity bills. The study Cantered the analysis solely on subjective norms, it tested whether the TPB's propositions hold true in a specific, non-cost bearing energy use context and generates practical insights for designing norm-based interventions in student residences.

The paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 reviews the relevant literature on electricity consumption, behavioural drivers, and the role of subjective norms within TPB. Section 3 outlines the research methodology, Section 4 presents the results, Section 5 discusses the findings, and Section 6 concludes with recommendations for policy and practice.

Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) is one of the most widely used psychological frameworks for explaining human behaviour across different domains (Ajzen, 2020). According to TPB, behavioural intention is determined by three constructs: attitudes (the degree to which a person has a favourable or unfavourable evaluation of the behaviour), subjective norms (the perceived social pressure to perform or not perform the behaviour), and perceived behavioural control (the extent to which a person feels capable of carrying out the behaviour) (Ajzen, 2020). Together, these constructs provide a structured way of examining how individuals make decisions and how external and social factors shape those choices. In the context of energy use, TPB has been applied to understand why people adopt or resist energy-saving behaviours, and it highlights the importance of considering not only personal motivations but also the wider social environment (Li et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2024).

Subjective Norms in the Theory of Planned Behaviour

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) offers a widely applied framework for explaining human action. It identifies three core determinants of intention: attitudes toward the behaviour, perceived behavioural control, and subjective norms (Ajzen, 1991; Ajzen, 2020). While TPB is not specifically about energy use, its flexibility makes it applicable to understanding electricity consumption in communal living environments. Subjective norms refer to the perceived social pressure to engage in or avoid a behaviour, shaped by the expectations of significant others such as friends, family, peers, or institutional figures (Arli et al., 2020). Two components underpin subjective norms: normative beliefs about what important others expect, and motivation to comply, which is the degree to which an individual is willing to meet those expectations (Ajzen et al., 2018). For instance, a student may believe that saving electricity is important (normative belief), but if they have little desire to follow their peers' views (low motivation to comply), they may reduce their efforts. Conversely, if peers strongly endorse conservation and the student values their opinions (high motivation to comply), their intention to act is likely to be amplified (Fang et al., 2022).

Subjective norms are a central construct of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), representing the perceived social pressure to engage in or refrain from a particular behaviour (Ajzen, 2020). They are shaped by individuals' beliefs about what important others expect of them and the degree to which they are willing to comply. In residential electricity use, subjective norms become particularly influential in communal contexts, such as student residences, where behaviours are easily modelled, reinforced, or discouraged through peer influence and shared cultural practices (Nomura et al., 2020; Fang et al., 2022). Table 1 summarises the key dimensions of subjective norms identified in the literature, along with the sources that have explored these components.

Table 1 Summary of Subjective Norms and the Sources

Subjective Norms	Sources
Perceived Social Approval	Eugena et al. (2013), Chastener et al. (2013), Johnson (2017)
Perceived Social Disapproval	Castanier et al. (2013), Johnson (2017)
Normative Beliefs	Ajzen et al. (2018), Ahmmadi et al. (2021), Schultz (2019)
Motivation to Comply	Andrighetto et al. (2015), Johnson (2017), Bihari et al. (2017), Hoi-Wing et al. (2022)
Influence of Friends and Family	Al Halbusina et al. (2023), Novianti & Uswati (2017), Ajzen (2020)
Influence of Community and Society	Ajzen et al. (2018), Harwood (2013), Fishbein & Ajzen (2019)
Media Influence on Social Norms	Ajzen et al. (2018), Conner (2020), Hasheem et al. (2022)

Evidence of Subjective Norm Influence on Electricity Use

A growing body of research confirms that subjective norms can shape energy-saving behaviours. Park and Lee (2023) found that in shared accommodation, peer influence had a significant effect on residents' willingness to adopt conservation habits. Fang et al. (2022) reported that among university students, perceived peer approval predicted electricity saving behaviours more strongly than personal environmental concern. Nomura et al. (2020) demonstrated that in households where residents did not pay for electricity, providing social comparison feedback led to sustained reductions in consumption. Yet, most of these studies were conducted in contexts where occupants bore the cost of their energy use. This leaves a gap in understanding how norms function in environments without financial incentives. Methodologically, many studies rely on self-reported data, which can be affected by social desirability bias (Li et al., 2021). Few have examined institutional residences, where group identity, shared facilities, and visible behaviours can intensify normative influence.

Research Gap and Theoretical Application

While TPB has been widely applied, the role of subjective norms in non-cost-bearing contexts remains underexplored. This limits the potential to design conservation campaigns that effectively leverage peer influence. The study focuses exclusively on subjective norms and examines how peer, roommate, and institutional expectations influence electricity-use decisions in South African student residences. The results aim to inform norm-based conservation strategies including peer-led campaigns, social comparison tools, and group commitments that can complement technical measures and embed conservation within residence culture.

Research Methodology and Method

The study adopted quantitative research approach to investigate the influence of subjective norms on university students living in university-managed accommodations. A quantitative approach was appropriate because it allows for the systematic measurement of relationships between variables, the collection of numerical data, and the application of statistical techniques to examine the research objective, which is as follows:

- This paper examined the influence of subjective norms on electricity consumption among university students residing in campus housing where they are not responsible for paying their own electricity bills.

The study focused on residential tenants at a university residence, as they represent a population with shared living environments and potential peer influences that shape electricity consumption. Participants will be selected to ensure diversity in year of study, room type, and lifestyle habits, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of social influences on energy behaviour. By concentrating on this group, the study provided targeted recommendations for energy-saving interventions within university residences.

In addition, the target population comprised students living in university-managed residences in Bloemfontein, South Africa. Using simple random sampling from official residence rosters, 115 students were invited to participate. Of these, completed the survey (response rate 85%). After data cleaning, 98 responses were retained; 12 were excluded due to incomplete sections or inconsistent answers, ensuring validity.

A closed-ended questionnaire was designed from established TPB subjective norm constructs identified in the literature. It comprised two sections: Demographic details (age, gender, year of study, and length of residence stay). Subjective norms items such as Influence of Friends and Family (e.g., “My friends think I should save electricity”), measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). The instrument was piloted with 15 students, leading to minor wording adjustments for clarity.

Table 2 Research Demographic Details

Year of Study	Gender (M/F %)	Residence Period (≤2 yrs / >2 yrs)	Total (n, %)
First Year	M: 48%, F: 52%	≤2 yrs: 100% / >2 yrs: 0%	24 (24.5%)
Second Year	M: 53%, F: 47%	≤2 yrs: 70% / >2 yrs: 30%	28 (29.3%
Third Year	M: 54%, F: 46%	≤2 yrs: 35% / >2 yrs: 65%	26 (24.1%)
Fourth Year	M: 48%, F: 52%	≤2 yrs: 20% / >2 yrs: 80%	20 (21.6%)
Total	M: 51%, F: 49%	≤2 yrs: 46% / >2 yrs: 54%	98 (100%)

Internal consistency was confirmed with Cronbach’s alpha ($\alpha = 0.989$), indicating excellent reliability. Content validity was assured through expert review and alignment with established TPB measures. Data were collected over 2 months’ period in early 2025. Surveys were distributed physically in residences, with informed consent obtained before participation. Participation was voluntary, and no incentives were offered.

Data were analysed using SPSS for descriptive statistics (Mean Score and Standard Deviation) and reliability analysis. Missing data were handled through listwise deletion for major gaps and mean substitution for minor omissions. Ethics clearance was granted by the Central University of Technology's Faculty Research Ethics Committee (Ref: CUT/FBET/2025/02). Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, assured of anonymity, and given the right to withdraw at any stage without consequence.

Research Findings

The descriptive analysis explored seven constructs of subjective norms measured on a 5-point Likert scale. Mean scores ranged from 2.65 to 3.33, with standard deviations between 1.06 and 1.28, reflecting moderate variation in responses. Table 3 presents the mean, standard deviation, ranking, and acceptance status of each construct, showing how students perceive different sources of social pressure to conserve electricity.

The results show that Perceived Social Approval (M = 3.33) ranked highest, indicating that students felt moderate encouragement from peers when engaging in conservation behaviours. This was followed by the Influence of Friends and Family (M = 3.13) and Normative Beliefs (M = 3.09), suggesting that close relationships and personal values play a strong role. In contrast, Perceived Social Disapproval (M = 2.71), Motivation to Comply (M = 2.68), and Media Influence (M = 2.65) scored lowest, showing that punishment, compliance pressure, and media messaging were not viewed as strong drivers of behaviour. Overall, the data suggest that positive reinforcement and peer/family influence are stronger motivators for electricity conservation in student residences than negative pressures or external campaigns. Table 3 below shows the descriptive Statistics.

Table 3 Summary of Subjective Norm Descriptive Statistics

Item Code	Construct	Mean	SD	Ranking	Status
SBE1	Perceived Social Approval	3.33	1.28	1st	Accepted
SBE5	Influence of Friends and Family	3.13	1.21	2nd	Accepted
SBE3	Normative Beliefs	3.09	1.18	3rd	Accepted
SBE7	Influence of Community & Society	3.07	1.18	4th	Accepted
SBE4	Perceived Social Disapproval	2.71	1.06	5th	Rejected
SBE2	Motivation to Comply	2.68	1.24	6th	Rejected
SBE6	Media Influence on Social Norms	2.65	1.14	7th	Rejected

Discussion

The findings of this study confirmed that subjective norms play a significant role in shaping electricity saving behaviour among university students residing in campus-managed residences. The highest ranked constructs perceived social approval and Influence of friends and family suggested that students were more likely to engage in electricity saving behaviour when they observed similar actions among peers or received approval from people whose opinions they valued. This aligns with the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), which identifies normative pressure as a key predictor of behavioural intention (Ajzen, 2020)

These results align with existing studies. Fang et al. (2022) and Park and Lee (2023) found that peer approval and family influence strongly shape conservation practices, which is consistent with the accepted constructs in this study. Similarly, Nomura et al. (2020) emphasised the role of communal living environments, where group behaviour often dictates individual choices, resonating with the

influence of community and society observed here. However, the weak role of motivation to comply contrasts with Ajzen et al. (2018), who identified it as a central pathway linking norms to behavioural intention. A possible explanation is that in student residences where occupants do not bear financial responsibility for electricity use, the pressure to comply with expectations is diluted.

The limited effect of media influence also diverges from findings such as Hasheem et al. (2022), who noted that campaigns and media interventions can reinforce normative behaviour. In this context, however, it appears that visible peer behaviour outweighs external messaging, highlighting the strength of immediate social networks over broader campaigns. Moreover, the weak effect of perceived disapproval suggests that negative sanctions may be less effective than positive reinforcement in shaping behaviour in communal residences. The findings confirm the validity of TPB in explaining electricity saving behaviour but also show that certain pathways within subjective norms require contextual adaptation. While normative beliefs and approval function as expected, compliance and media based influences may be less relevant in environments where cost responsibility is absent. This study therefore advances understanding by showing that positive reinforcement and close social ties matter more than sanctions or media campaigns in driving electricity conservation among students in residences.

Figure 1 illustrates the influence of constructs, showing that perceived social approval was the strongest influence, followed by friends and family, normative beliefs, and community expectations, while disapproval, compliance motivation, and media influence scored lowest.

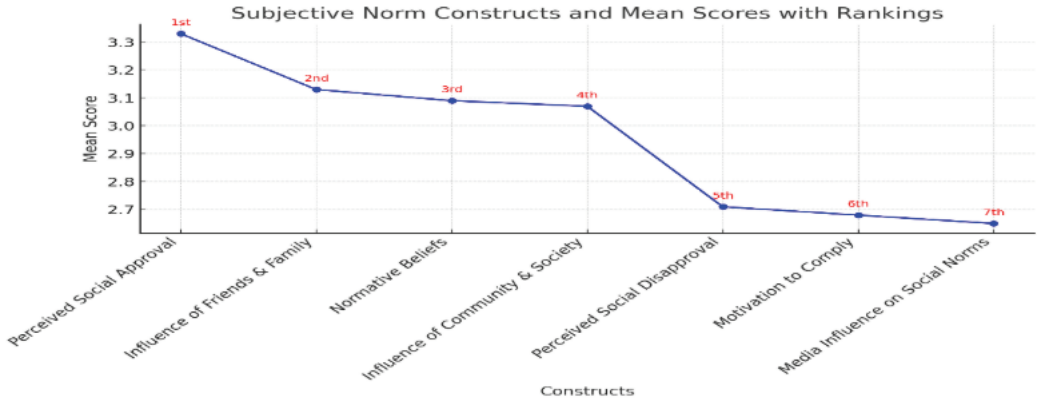

Figure 1 Influence of Constructs

Conclusions

This study explored how subjective norms shape electricity use among students in university managed setting. The findings demonstrate that electricity-saving behaviour is strongly influenced by peer approval, family influence, and community expectations, while factors such as media messaging, compliance pressure, and disapproval were less persuasive. These results suggest that social approval and close social networks are more effective in encouraging conservation than external campaigns or punitive measures. By focusing exclusively on subjective norms, this study confirms their central role in shaping intentions and behaviours in contexts where occupants do not directly bear the cost of electricity.

A key contribution of this study is its demonstration that, in communal living environments, positive reinforcement and peer influence are powerful levers for behavioural change. This insight has practical value for universities and policymakers: initiatives to reduce electricity consumption in student housing should prioritise peer-led campaigns, visible cultures of conservation, and community-driven programmes, rather than relying solely on rules or mass media messaging. Despite these contributions, the study has limitations. First, it relied on self-reported survey data, which may not fully capture actual behaviours or subtle forms of social pressure. Second, the focus on one province limits the generalisation of the findings to other regions or housing contexts. Third, only subjective norms were examined, while other TPB constructs such as attitudes and perceived behavioural control were not included.

Future research should address these limitations by using mixed methods (e.g., observational studies or interviews) to capture hidden social pressures such as informal disapproval. Expanding the study

across multiple regions would also strengthen generalisability. Furthermore, integrating all TPB constructs could provide a more holistic understanding of electricity-use behaviour in residential settings. In conclusion, this study confirms that subjective norms significantly shape electricity consumption in student residences. Harnessing peer approval and social identity within residential communities offers a promising pathway for promoting sustainable energy use in higher education environments.

Recommendations

This study highlighted that electricity-saving behaviour among students in university residences is strongly shaped by social approval, family influence, and collective residence culture. It is therefore recommended that universities promote peer-led initiatives, student role models, and recognition systems that reinforce positive energy saving practices. Sustainability messages should extend beyond the campus by involving families and community networks to strengthen pro-environmental norms. Residence management should also cultivate a shared sense of responsibility by embedding sustainability themes into student orientations and residence life activities. Media campaigns should be student-centred, using relatable and localised content to enhance credibility. For future research, longitudinal and multi-university studies are recommended to capture behavioural changes over time and compare contexts across institutions. Employing mixed methods would provide deeper insights into how subjective norms evolve and interact with other TPB constructs, offering a more comprehensive understanding of electricity-saving behaviour in university residences.

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SACQSP2025-30

Technical Role of Quantity Surveyors in Carbon Accounting for Environmental, Social and Governance Construction

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Abstract

The Quantity Surveyor's (QS) roles, both technical and operational, in carbon accounting within the construction industry are very significant, especially in supporting Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) objectives. This paper aims to provide a comprehensive global overview of carbon accounting practices in the construction industry by systematically reviewing the literature over the past decade. A comprehensive systematic literature review was conducted using Scopus and Web of Science to identify peer-reviewed journal articles on the roles of QS in carbon measurement, reporting, and carbon cost estimation. Key themes were extracted and analysed. The review period was limited to the past decade, 134 relevant documents were used with keywords such as "carbon accounting," OR "carbon cost planning", AND "construction industry." The study identifies six key themes showcasing quantity surveyors' emerging role in carbon accountability: LCA and circularity, urban carbon intensity, digital tools, carbon-conscious material choices, low-carbon construction targets, and the broader carbon-construction nexus. While opportunities exist, the review reveals limitations in technical capacity, regulation, and data access that require targeted training, digital adoption, and policy support to enhance QS contributions. For practitioners, the findings provide insight into new services the QS can provide, such as carbon footprint estimation, carbon cost planning, and sustainable procurement advice, which enhance project ESG performance. The literature on QS involvement in carbon accounting is still emerging; empirical studies are few and primarily focused on developed countries, limiting their generalisability across regions.

Keywords: Carbon Accounting, Quantity Surveyors, Social and Governance, Life Cycle Assessment, Sustainability.

Introduction

Globally, the built environment faces increasing sustainability challenges, with the construction industry playing a significant role in climate change. As a result, the industry is under growing pressure to reduce its environmental impact while meeting the rising demands of sustainable development (Wang, 2023). The integration of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) principles into construction practices has emerged as a global imperative, driven both by the urgency of climate change and stakeholder expectations for accountability and transparency. Within this context, carbon accounting has become an essential tool for measuring, managing, and reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Accurate carbon accounting underpins the "Environmental" component of ESG, enabling the measurement of environmental impacts, the setting of reduction targets, and the demonstration of regulatory compliance. ESG criteria, particularly the environmental dimension, have gained prominence as investors and regulators demand greater transparency and sustainability in both strategy and operations. These metrics influence not only investment decisions but also internal management practices, supporting risk mitigation, operational efficiency, and long-term value creation (Li et al., 2022).

Despite the growing emphasis on ESG in the construction industry, certain aspects, particularly governance, remain insufficiently explored (Li et al., 2022). In this context, carbon accounting plays a key role in increasing project transparency and strengthening both the environmental and governance pillars of ESG within the construction sector. Although there is an expanding body of literature on ESG integration and carbon management in construction, research specifically focused on the technical role of Quantity Surveyors (QSs) in carbon accounting remains relatively nascent. While existing studies acknowledge the evolving contribution of QS professionals to sustainability (Pomponi & Moncaster, 2017; Chamikara, Perera & Rodrigo, 2020; Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, 2024; Victar et al., 2024) and examine broader carbon accounting methodologies a gap remains in understanding the specific tools, functions, and processes QSs utilise or could utilise to quantify, cost, manage, and report embodied and operational carbon, especially for ESG reporting and value creation.

Simultaneously, ESG standards are increasingly shaping project sustainability benchmarks, influencing investor behaviour, and guiding policy decisions. This article examines the technical role of quantity surveyors in carbon accounting for ESG-focused construction projects. Through their expertise in measurement, reporting, cost estimation, and lifecycle analysis, QSs act as an essential link between sustainable design and financial viability. Their responsibilities may include monitoring the carbon footprint of materials, carrying out lifecycle assessments, and ensuring compliance with evolving ESG standards. This discussion draws on recent studies and case analyses to emphasise the urgent need for enhanced carbon accounting capabilities in the construction industry (Luo et al., 2021; Li et al., 2022). Life Cycle Assessment (LCA), a systematic environmental evaluation tool, plays a crucial role in quantifying carbon emissions across different phases of a construction project (Zhao et al., 2024). Research has shown that materials like concrete and steel contribute significantly to carbon emissions, while materials such as soil and gravel, although less carbon-intensive, can have a substantial impact on project costs (Li & Zheng, 2020; Luo et al., 2021). Current investigations into carbon accounting mainly focus on LCA-based emissions calculations across various building types and project stages, from material production and on-site construction to operation and demolition (Kamali, Hewage & Sadiq, 2019; Warrier, Palaniappan & Habert, 2024; Liu et al., 2025).

Traditionally, quantity surveyors have been responsible for cost planning and financial control in construction projects. However, their role is increasingly expanding to include environmental and carbon management. Sturgis (2019) considers carbon cost as the second key metric, alongside financial cost, in project evaluations (Emmanuel & Baker, 2012; Sturgis, 2019). Clients now demand insight into how a design performs not only in economic terms but also in terms of its environmental and social impact (Kim & Chang, 2022). QSs are uniquely positioned to provide this insight through a range of responsibilities, including material quantification, emission factor analysis, and cost-based carbon assessments. Furthermore, the reporting duties of QSs now extend beyond conventional cost tracking. They include environmental reporting, audit and verification, and the use of advanced technologies such as Digital Twins and Building Information Modelling (BIM) to enable real-time monitoring and visualisation of carbon outputs. These digital tools facilitate dynamic carbon reporting while supporting the accuracy of cost estimation, which remains a core QS function (Tumpa et al., 2025). Despite these advancements, existing carbon accounting approaches often fall short in fully capturing the impact of critical construction elements, such as machinery use, material transport, and labour, on total emissions (Luo et al., 2021; Wu et al., 2025). This limitation highlights the need for improved LCA methods that incorporate these factors more comprehensively. Quantity surveyors are well-positioned to address this gap. Their expanding responsibilities could include integrating potential future costs, such as carbon taxes or emission-related penalties, into project budgets.

In this evolving landscape, QS professionals act as critical intermediaries between technical teams, management, and external stakeholders. Their contributions through detailed carbon accounting reports support ESG disclosure requirements and ensure compliance with environmental and governance standards. They also provide cost-benefit analyses of sustainability interventions, enabling project managers to make informed decisions that enhance long-term value (Waniko, 2022; Tumpa et al., 2025). Moreover, their empirical data and reporting facilitate collaboration among architects, engineers, investors, and regulators, a crucial component in implementing a coordinated ESG strategy across complex construction projects. The growing emphasis on carbon management in the built environment thus presents a unique opportunity for the quantity surveying profession to redefine its value proposition in the era of sustainable developmentThis research, therefore, aims to define carbon accounting in the construction industry, and systematically identify the specific technical roles and competencies required of Quantity Surveyors to effectively contribute to strong carbon accounting processes that support credible ESG performance in construction projects and portfolios.

The following research questions guide the achievement of this objective:

1. What is the current understanding of the definition of carbon accounting within the construction industry?
2. What research themes have been explored over the past decade in the construction industry?
3. How must quantity surveyors' traditional competencies evolve technically to support carbon accounting in ESG-driven construction?

The following section outlines the research methodology used to achieve the study's aim.

Research Methodology and Methods

This research adopts a post-positivist philosophical perspective and employs an inductive methodology, emphasising objective observation, measurement, and the search for causal relationships between variables. It utilises text mining techniques to analyse and interpret patterns within the scholarly literature, aiming to derive insights into research productivity and map the evolving technical role of Quantity Surveyors (QSs) in carbon accounting for Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) compliance within the construction industry.

To achieve a comprehensive and rigorous analysis of existing literature, the study integrates bibliometric and systematic review techniques. This combined approach facilitates a more thorough examination than traditional manual reviews, as exemplified by Ametepey et al. (2024). The specific aim is to systematically identify, define, and evaluate the technical roles and competencies that QSs require to contribute effectively to robust carbon accounting processes, which underpin credible ESG performance in the construction industry. qualitative insights into the evolution of research on contract models in the construction industry. The bibliometric component enabled mapping publication patterns, co-authorship networks, and keyword co-occurrences, providing an objective overview of research performance and thematic trends. The SLR component, on the other hand, allowed for an in-depth interpretive synthesis of the identified clusters and thematic areas, linking quantitative outputs to conceptual and theoretical developments in the field. Combining these two techniques enhances the rigour and depth of analysis, bibliometric methods provide empirical evidence of research structure and dynamics, while systematic review ensures transparency, reproducibility, and critical interpretation of findings (Snyder, 2019).

Following established guidelines, the review process involved defining the research scope and keywords, selecting databases, applying inclusion and exclusion criteria, and conducting bibliometric and thematic analyses. This approach enhances methodological rigour by minimising bias and ensuring that the findings are grounded in comprehensive and reproducible evidence (Kitchenham & Charters, 2007). This integrated approach has been increasingly adopted in construction management and built environment studies to uncover both the intellectual structure and content of research fields (Donthu et al., 2021). The review process followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework for systematic reporting (Page et al., 2021) and the bibliometric workflow suggested by Zupic and Čater (2015), encompassing database selection, keyword refinement, screening, data cleaning, and thematic clustering.

This dual-method strategy was therefore chosen to capture not only the quantitative evolution of research but also the qualitative interpretation of emerging discourses and gaps that inform the development of the proposed conceptual framework. By applying this systematic procedure, the study captures the intellectual evolution, key research streams, and thematic gaps that inform the conceptual framework and future research directions.

Literature Search and Screening Process:

Scholarly articles were systematically retrieved from two major databases: Elsevier Scopus and Web of Science (WoS). The core search string employed was: ("carbon accounting" OR "carbon cost planning") AND "construction industry".

Table 1 Literature Search and Screening. Source: Authors' compilation, 2025

Literature Search/Screening Process	**Output**
Scopus Search (Initial)	The initial search on Scopus yielded 37 documents.
Scopus Filtering	i. Publication Year: Limited to the last 10 years (2015-2025, inclusive), resulting in 27 documents; ii. Document Type: Restricted to Articles, Conference Papers, and Review Articles, yielding 24 documents; iii. Subject Area: Filtered to Engineering, Energy, Accounting, and Environmental Science, resulting in 24 documents; iv. Language: Limited to English, yielding a final Scopus set of 23 documents; and v. Output: Results were exported in CSV format for subsequent analysis.
Web of Science Search (Initial)	The initial search on WoS yielded 1,550 documents.
Web of Science Filtering	i. Publication Year: Limited to a 10-year period (2015-2025, inclusive), resulting in 1,153 documents ii. Document Type: Restricted to Articles, Conference Proceedings Papers, and Review Articles, yielding 1,084 documents. iii. Language: Limited to English, resulting in 1,076 documents; iv. Research Area/WoS Categories: Filtered to Engineering, Energy Fuels, Construction and Building Technology, and Environmental Sciences, yielding a final WoS set of 307 documents; v. Output: Results were exported in Excel format for subsequent analysis.
Database Merging and Deduplication	The results from Scopus (23) and WoS (307) were merged, resulting in a combined corpus of 330 unique records. Six duplicate records were identified and removed, resulting in 324 unique documents for initial screening.

Inclusion/Exclusion criteria

The 324 documents underwent further screening based on the following criteria, applied to titles, abstracts, and full texts as necessary. Articles explicitly discussing carbon accounting within the construction industry, with findings directly relevant to methodologies for measuring, reporting, or managing carbon emissions that apply to the Quantity Surveying (QS) role and support ESG compliance, were included. Articles not addressing the specific role or potential role of Quantity Surveyors in carbon accounting. Opinion pieces, editorials, letters, or non-empirical studies lacking methodological rigour were excluded. Duplicate publications (already addressed in deduplication); articles focused solely on carbon accounting outside the construction context or without clear implications for QS practice and ESG.

This multi-stage selection process, involving database searching, filtering, merging, deduplication, and the rigorous application of inclusion and exclusion criteria, resulted in a final corpus of 134 relevant documents that form the basis for the systematic analysis and discussion in this review. The methodological design employed is depicted in Figure 1.

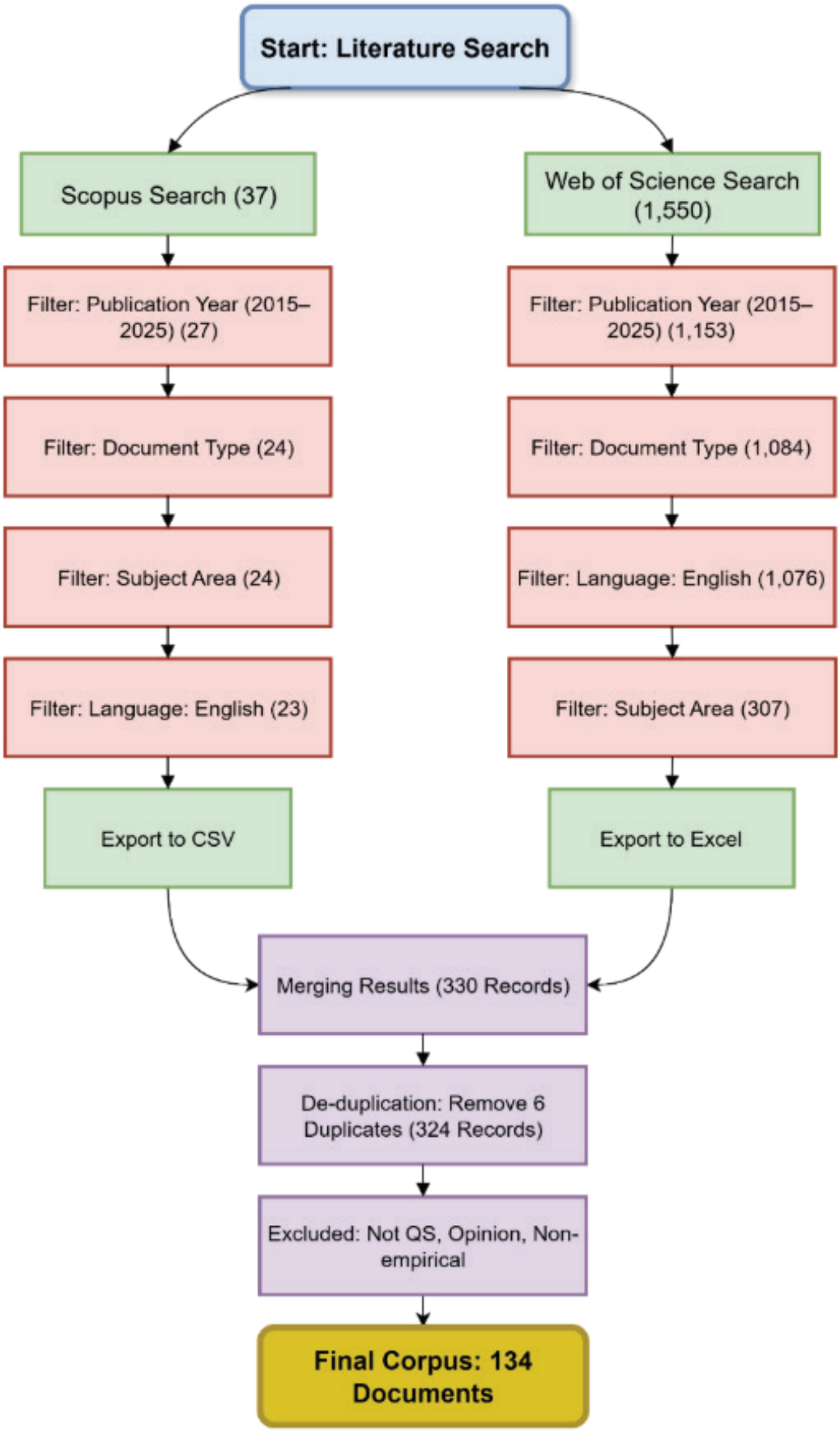

Figure 1 Research Design

Furthermore, the most frequently occurring keywords were used to identify thematic research areas over the past 10 years, using the VOSviewer version 1.6.19 text mining tool. A ten-year period was intentionally adopted to capture the most recent and relevant developments in carbon accounting and ESG-related construction research, reflecting the growing policy and industry focus on decarbonisation since 2015. Restricting the search to English-language publications ensured consistency in interpretation and data processing, as translation of technical terms from different languages could compromise accuracy and comparability. Additionally, limiting the document type to only journal articles, conference papers, and review articles was based on their higher level of scholarly rigour and peer-review standards, which align with the study's objective of synthesising validated scientific knowledge. The concepts of carbon accounting and the ways in which the quantity surveyors' role can be advanced in the construction industry were examined. Based on the examination, several insights were identified; a content review analysis was conducted using research theme analysis and keyword co-occurrence clusters from the VOSviewer output. Also, data cleaning was performed prior to analysis to enhance accuracy and coherence. Repeated or synonymous terms were merged, including variations such as *"life cycle assessment"* and *"LCA"*, *"carbon emission"* and *"CO_2"*, as well as *"life cycle analysis"* and *"climate change"*. Common stop-words and non-conceptual terms were also excluded.

Research Results

Publication per Year

The number of publications remained relatively low and stable between 2015-2020, fluctuating between 4 and 7 publications per year. Then, for 2021-2024, there was a sharp increase in publications. Shifts in interest or external drivers (e.g. policy change, global events like COVID-19). This likely reflects increased research output, possibly due to an increase in publications (2024-2025), due to more research works in China (Liu et al., 2025; Wu et al., 2025). The line chart titled "Publications per year" (Figure 2) shows the annual number of publications from 2015 to 2025.

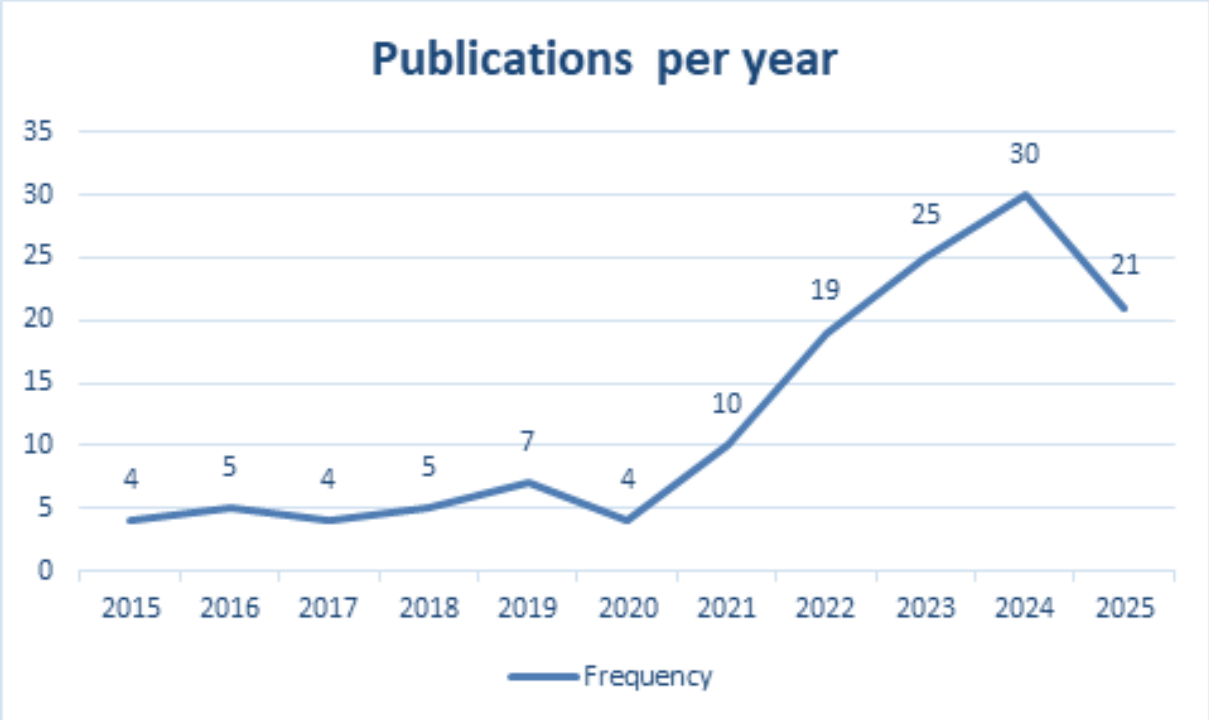

Figure 2 Annual Distribution of Publications

Publication by Country

China leads research output in carbon accounting within the construction industry, as indicated, demonstrating both the highest number of publications and citation impact, followed by contributions from the UK and Australia. Table 2 presents the distribution of documents from the VOSviewer

analysis, with a minimum of three documents per country; eighteen countries emerged. However, the top 6 countries with high citations are presented.

Table 2 Top Contributing Countries in Carbon Accounting Research
Source: Authors' compilation (2025)

Country	Documents	Citations	Indicative Share (%)
China	40	945	54%
United Kingdom	9	384	22%
Australia	6	301	17%
France	3	186	4%
United States	3	99	2%
Canada	4	46	1%

This distribution underscores China's leadership in advancing carbon-accounting frameworks for construction, supported by robust institutional and policy-driven research.

Discussion

Several authors have offered definitions of construction-related carbon emissions. Mathur, Farouq and Labaran (2021:107) categorise these emissions into direct and indirect types. Direct, or operational, CO2 emissions are typically generated from on-site energy consumption and other construction activities. In contrast, indirect emissions stem from upstream and downstream processes, including the extraction of raw materials, manufacturing, transportation, demolition, and other non-building-related activities. Similarly, Zainordin and Zahra (2020:178) define carbon emissions as the release of carbon into the atmosphere resulting from human activities in the construction industry, particularly the combustion of fossil fuels and cement production, which contribute to the accumulation of greenhouse gases. Their definition, like that of Mathur, Farouq and Labaran (2021), underscores both the sources and the environmental impact of these emissions. Taken together, these definitions highlight the comprehensive nature of emissions across the construction lifecycle. Mathur et al. (2021) provide an explicit distinction between direct (operational) and indirect emissions, encompassing stages such as material extraction, production, transportation, on-site activities, and eventual demolition. Zainordin and Zahra (2020) further emphasise that these emissions are not only emitted but also persist in the atmosphere, contributing to climate change by increasing greenhouse gas concentrations. Mukwarami, Nkwaira and Van Der Poll (2023:6) defines carbon accounting in the supply chains sector, specifically within the context of carbon management accounting (CMA), as "the process of measuring and analysing a company's carbon emissions to develop strategies for reducing greenhouse gases (GHG)". Also, Ong et al. (2021:6) defines carbon accounting as "a process that facilitates the measurement and monitoring of carbon emissions within organisations, primarily focusing on carbon dioxide (CO_2) emissions". It involves systematically quantifying carbon outward flows to inform managerial decisions, develop mitigation strategies, and enhance organisational carbon performance From this perspective, carbon accounting in construction can be synthesised as the systematic process of quantifying, reporting and managing carbon dioxide (CO_2) and other greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions resulting from human activities throughout a building's lifecycle for decision-making and mitigation strategies in the construction industry. It includes both direct emissions, those generated by on-site energy use and construction operations, and indirect emissions, which result from off-site activities such as raw material extraction, manufacturing, material transport, and demolition. Additionally, carbon accounting involves the structured measurement, tracking, and reporting of GHG emissions at various stages of the construction process. This includes identifying major emission sources, analysing cost drivers, monitoring energy consumption patterns, and evaluating resource utilisation across the project lifecycle (Wu et al., 2025).

Thematic Review

This section presents the cluster analysis discussion of the keyword clusters. The evolution of research in carbon accounting within the construction industry reflects a growing emphasis on sustainability, digital integration, and technical accountability. This systematic review identifies six thematic clusters

that outline emerging pathways through which Quantity Surveyors (QSs) can contribute to ESG-compliant project delivery. Table 3 presents a summary of the keywords and thematic focus to be discussed below.

Table 3 Summary of Cluster of Keywords, Themes and Relevance

Cluster	Core Keywords	Thematic Focus	QS Relevance
Cluster 1	biogenic carbon, buildings, circular economy, construction, dioxide emissions, life-cycle assessment, management, sustainability	Sustainable construction and lifecycle carbon analysis through LCA and circular economy principles	LCA integration, sustainable procurement, circularity-focused budgeting
Cluster 2	China, cities, CO2 emissions, consumption, energy consumption, footprint, greenhouse gas emissions, input-output	Urban-scale emissions, national contexts, and consumption-based carbon profiling	Urban-scale carbon tracking, footprint analysis, data-driven QS interventions
Cluster 3	carbon accounting, carbon footprint, carbon management, emissions, generation, model, sustainable development	Technical tools and frameworks for carbon measurement, management, and accounting	Carbon-cost modelling, use of digital tools (LCA/BIM), carbon budgeting
Cluster 4	biomass, climate change, impacts, sequestration, storage, trade	Natural carbon storage, bio-based materials, and emissions associated with trade and sequestration	Material choice evaluation, trade emission assessment, bio-based accounting
Cluster 5	carbon neutrality, energy, impact, life cycle assessment	Carbon neutrality targets, energy impact assessment, and lifecycle optimisation	Carbon neutrality planning, energy-cost integration, ESG-target modelling
Cluster 6	carbon, carbon emissions, construction industry	Core link between carbon emissions and the construction industry's operational domain	Baseline emission assessments, regulatory compliance, carbon reporting in cost plans

The network visualisation map derived from VOSviewer shows the evolution of keyword clusters over the review period. For the keyword co-occurrence, the Vos viewer version 1.6.19 was used. 904 author keywords were initially identified, of which 42 met the threshold of a minimum of five occurrences using the full counting method in VOS viewer. From the cluster visualisation, the most frequently occurring keywords are: carbon accounting (54 occurrences), carbon emissions (19 occurrences), carbon footprint (10 occurrences), life-cycle assessment (13 occurrences), and greenhouse gas emissions (15 occurrences). These form the conceptual core of the field, indicating a strong research focus on quantifying and managing carbon across construction processes. Their prominence reflects an increasing integration of lifecycle-based carbon evaluation, emission tracking, and sustainability management as essential components of environmental performance and ESG-aligned construction practices. Figure 3 presents the network visualisation.

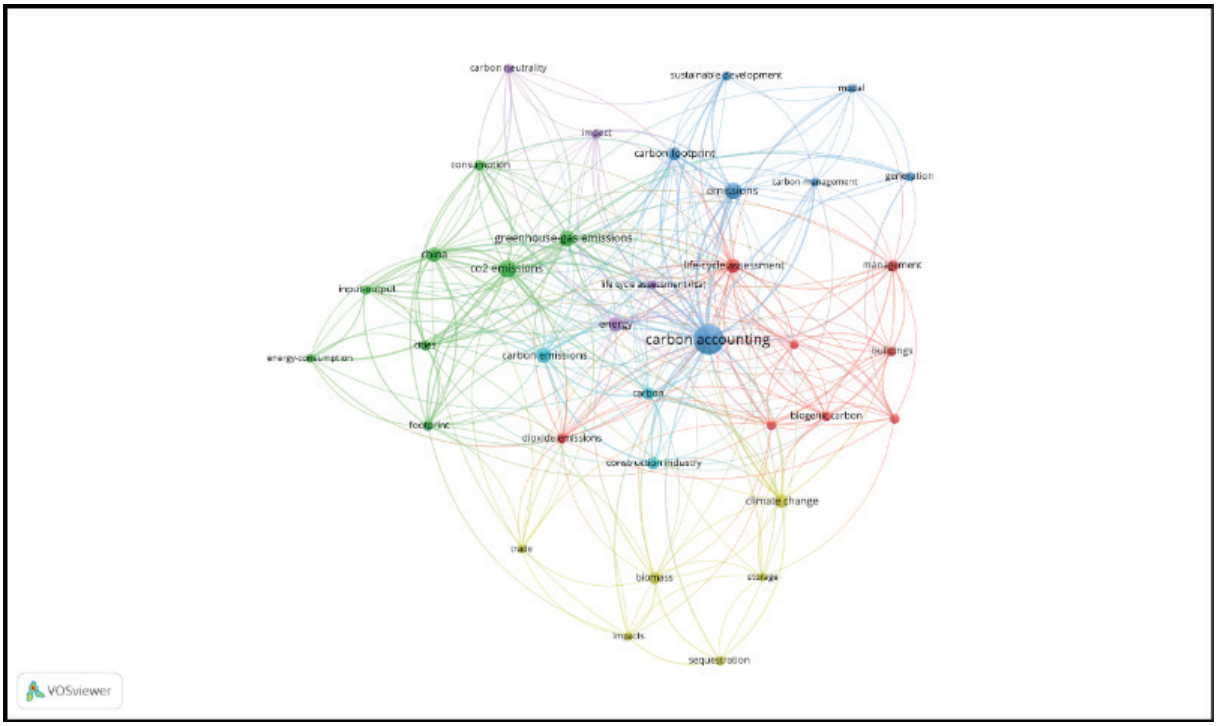

Figure 3 Network Visualisation Map

Sustainable Construction through LCA and Circularity: This cluster reflects a macro-level focus in research on sustainability in the built environment, with particular emphasis on carbon emissions accounting, environmental lifecycle thinking, and circular construction practices (Xiao et al., 2025). These themes are highly relevant to Quantity Surveyors (QSs) as emerging sustainability mandates reshape their traditional cost management roles. This theme represents core sustainability concepts and tools that are directly applicable to the technical role of Quantity Surveyors in carbon accounting. These keywords from various studies reinforce the shift of QSs from cost gatekeepers to carbon-conscious construction managers who are pivotal in delivering ESG-aligned, low-carbon buildings using LCA and circular economy principles (Andersen et al., 2024; Victar et al., 2024)

Urban Carbon Accountability and Emission Intensity in Construction: This cluster theme reflects studies on macro-environmental and geographic dimensions of carbon emissions, focusing on urban centres (particularly China) as major hubs of construction-related energy consumption and emissions. As the world's largest construction market and emitter, China serves as a case study for developing global best practices in carbon regulation and measurement, with transferable lessons for QSs in any context (Qi & Xia, 2022; Zhu et al., 2023). It connects to the broader ESG discourse around urban sustainability, emissions disclosure, and consumption footprints, providing a contextual backdrop for where QSs can act as key agents in reducing construction-related GHGs (Hu et al., 2023). Cluster 2 expands the carbon accounting discourse to urban systems and national contexts, reinforcing the need for QSs to operate not only at the project level but also as contributors to city-wide carbon strategies. Their role in tracking GHG emissions and consumption patterns positions them as crucial players in scaling ESG compliance from the building to the urban level.

Technical Tools and Frameworks for Carbon Control in Construction: This cluster theme centres on the core technical competencies and methodologies required for carbon control in construction, particularly relevant for Quantity Surveyors (QSs) involved in carbon estimation, modelling, and strategic ESG alignment. It encapsulates the tools QSs need to transition from traditional cost-based roles to carbon-conscious construction professionals (Gu et al., 2025). The theme represents the technical core of carbon accounting, merging theory with practice. It affirms that Quantity Surveyors are not merely passive estimators but active managers of carbon, using models, measurement techniques, and strategic frameworks to advance ESG-compliant, sustainable development in the construction industry (Liao, Pan & Zhang, 2023).

Carbon Sequestration, Material Choices, and Global Impacts: This cluster focuses on studies in natural climate solutions, carbon storage mechanisms, and the economic/environmental trade

implications of materials and emissions, all increasingly relevant in modern construction and ESG discourse (Head et al., 2021). While traditionally outside the core QS scope, these areas are becoming critical as QSs evolve into sustainability advisors who must understand material carbon impacts, offsets, and climate-aligned procurement. Cluster 4's theme contributes to the climate science and carbon storage dimension of ESG-compliant construction. It emphasises that Quantity Surveyors must evolve into sustainability strategists, incorporating carbon sequestration, trade emissions, and bio-material performance, such as nature-based solutions, into cost and carbon models (Keith et al., 2021). This enhances the integrity and impact of carbon accounting frameworks in achieving climate-aligned project delivery.

Tools and Targets for Low-Carbon Construction: This theme encapsulates the end-goals and performance metrics of ESG-aligned construction practices, notably carbon neutrality, energy optimisation, and impact minimisation (Lei & Dong, 2023). These are inherently quantitative targets, and Quantity Surveyors are increasingly expected to engage with the methodologies and indicators that support these outcomes, particularly through Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) and energy modelling. This cluster represents the quantitative framework for ESG compliance, as studies by Andersen et al. (2024) focused on carbon neutrality, energy performance, and life cycle thinking (Blumberg & Sibilla, 2023). These areas are rapidly becoming core to Quantity Surveyors' technical roles, enabling them to bridge cost, carbon, and compliance in the delivery of sustainable construction projects.

Core Nexus of Carbon and Construction Practice: Cluster 6 represents a theme on the core problem, the emissions-intensive nature of the construction industry, and the urgent need for carbon accounting within QS practices. These keywords anchor the review and justify the need for technical roles (like that of Quantity Surveyors). The QS play a critical role in supporting low-carbon transitions in the built environment. This reinforces the fundamental problem: there is a need for solutions alignment at the core of the construction industry's carbon intensity and the essential technical contribution of Quantity Surveyors in addressing it through measurement, reporting, and carbon-conscious decision-making. This cluster underpins the necessity of QSs as vital to ESG-compliant construction futures through baseline emission assessments, regulatory compliance, and carbon reporting in cost plans.

These six clusters demonstrate a paradigm shift from traditional cost-centric roles to carbon-conscious quantity surveying, grounded in technical expertise and supported by digital transformation. The clusters also highlight knowledge gaps around AR/big data, human-machine collaboration, and cybersecurity-energy trade-offs in carbon-sensitive construction environments, areas QSs must explore to stay relevant in a future governed by ESG imperatives.

The Evolving Role of Quantity Surveyors Towards Carbon Accounting in ESG

Quantity Surveyors (QSs) must develop a fundamental understanding of the distinction between biogenic carbon (carbon sequestered and released through natural biological processes) and anthropogenic carbon (emissions resulting directly from human activities). This differentiation critically influences both sustainable material selection and the establishment of accurate reporting thresholds for carbon emissions (Pomponi & Moncaster, 2017). Furthermore, the profession necessitates a paradigm shift from traditional cost estimation towards integrated whole-life carbon-cost modelling. This holistic approach, particularly vital during the early design stages, enables the concurrent evaluation of financial expenditure and carbon impact throughout a building's lifecycle (Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, 2024).

QSs are uniquely positioned to quantify the carbon savings achievable through the specification of reused and recycled materials. This capability is central to effective Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) strategies and green procurement policies. Proficiency in this area demonstrates the profession's increasing carbon literacy and its integration of Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) principles. Furthermore, QSs are advancing material circularity appraisal, providing critical data for strategic decision-making. These evolving carbon metrics are now feeding directly into QS-led value engineering and risk assessment processes, underpinning sustainable project delivery (Robati et al., 2021; Wu et al., 2025). To ensure credibility and comparability, QSs must quantify emissions rigorously in alignment with established ESG reporting frameworks, such as the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), Sustainability Accounting Standards Board (SASB), and Carbon Disclosure Project (CDP) (Li et al., 2022).

The justification of sustainable procurement decisions relies heavily on robust data. Consequently, QSs must leverage specialised carbon databases and LCA software (Wu et al., 2025). The adoption of Building Information Modelling (BIM), alongside dedicated LCA and carbon calculation tools, is essential. This technological integration supports sophisticated scenario modelling and facilitates low-carbon procurement strategies (Yan et al., 2022; Gu et al., 2025). As sustainability factors increasingly translate into tangible financial risks, QSs are evolving into technical ESG advisors. QSs can now contribute directly to achieving project-level Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). A core function involves developing cost plans that explicitly integrate carbon neutrality objectives. This integration manifests through strategies such as specifying renewable energy systems, selecting energy-efficient materials, or evaluating the feasibility and integrity of carbon offsets (United Nations Environment Programme, 2020).

Given that the construction industry is a major global emitter, QSs must actively contribute to emission reduction efforts across multiple scales: project delivery, organisational strategy, and policy advocacy (Skea et al., 2023). Additionally, the analysis highlights variations in how studies define system boundaries, assess data quality in Environmental Product Declarations (EPDs), and distinguish between operational and embodied carbon, revealing differing methodological priorities across the literature (Farouq & Labaran, 2021; Mukwarami et al., 2023). These distinctions have direct implications for quantity surveyors, underscoring the need for standardised carbon data protocols and clearer scope definitions to enhance accuracy in cost–carbon modelling and ESG reporting.

This multi-level engagement is crucial for driving the systemic change required to meet global climate targets. Figure 3 presents the concept diagram from the thematic analysis of the clusters.

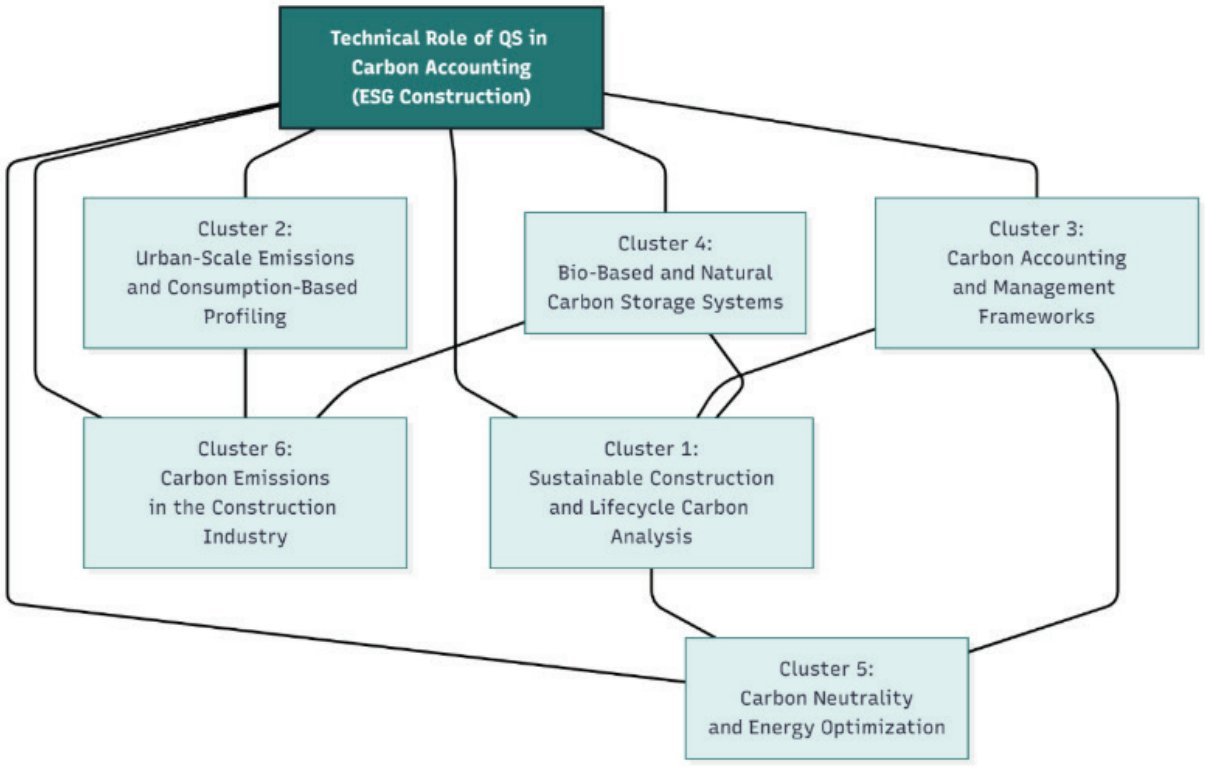

Figure 4 Conceptual Diagram of Clusters

This study contributes to both scholarship and practice by establishing a structured conceptual understanding of the quantity surveyor's technical role in carbon accounting within ESG-oriented construction. Through the integration of bibliometric and systematic analyses, six thematic clusters were identified, illustrating how research has evolved from general sustainability concerns toward specialised domains such as lifecycle carbon analysis, carbon neutrality, and data-driven emissions management. The conceptual framework derived from these clusters clarifies the QS's contribution to carbon measurement, cost modelling, and ESG reporting, and links professional competencies to environmental performance goals. Practically, the framework provides a foundation for redefining QS education, professional training, and policy alignment to embed carbon literacy into cost management

systems. The study thus positions quantity surveyors as central actors in advancing low-carbon, transparent construction practices throughout the project life cycle.

Conclusion

This systematic review critically examined the emerging technical roles of quantity surveyors (QSs) in advancing carbon accounting within ESG-aligned construction practices. The review, spanning a 10-year period (2015-2025), revealed limited studies linking the core roles of the QS in carbon accounting, underscoring the need for further research. Additionally, China is leading research on carbon accounting in construction; publications on this topic increased in 2024 and 2025. The synthesis of current literature revealed that quantity surveyors are no longer limited to traditional cost management functions; they are becoming integral to sustainability-focused initiatives. Their expertise in cost planning, lifecycle costing, procurement strategies, and data analysis positions them uniquely to contribute to embodied carbon assessments and emissions reporting. The study also showed that QSs are increasingly expected to operate within interdisciplinary teams, applying digital tools such as BIM-integrated carbon calculators, lifecycle assessment (LCA) software, and ESG-compliance platforms. However, the findings underline a knowledge-practice gap; while frameworks and technologies exist, practical application remains uneven due to a lack of training, fragmented policy guidance, and limited stakeholder awareness. As construction pivots towards ESG performance and carbon neutrality, quantity surveyors must evolve their competencies to meet these new demands. QSs have a vital technical role in carbon accounting for ESG construction, and their contributions are indispensable to achieving measurable, reportable, and verifiable sustainability outcomes. To conclude, the study demonstrates that quantity surveyors' evolving deliverables now encompass carbon measurement, lifecycle assessment integration, and data-driven cost–carbon modelling aligned with ESG objectives. However, as the bibliometric corpus was limited to English-language publications indexed in Scopus and Web of Science, the findings may not fully capture regional research dynamics or non-indexed industry practices, suggesting scope for broader comparative inquiry.

Recommendations

To enhance the contribution of quantity surveyors (QSs) in the South African Construction Industry to carbon accounting within ESG-driven construction, several strategic actions are necessary. Firstly, there is an urgent need to revise QS education and professional training to include carbon analysis methodologies, ESG compliance, and the use of digital tools such as lifecycle assessment (LCA) software and environmental product declarations (EPDs). Upskilling through CPD programs and formal certification in carbon reporting tools will ensure QSs are technically equipped for evolving project demands. Secondly, the development and integration of interoperable digital platforms (e.g., BIM, digital twins, and LCA software) that combine carbon data with cost estimation and procurement systems are critical. These platforms should be supported by standardised data protocols, particularly in material emissions coefficients and process carbon factors, to ensure consistency across projects. Thirdly, supportive regulatory frameworks must mandate carbon reporting as a core project requirement, empowering QSs to deliver certified carbon cost reports. Government incentives could further drive early adoption, especially in the private sector. Additionally, construction firms should embed QSs into interdisciplinary sustainability teams from the early design stages, leveraging their expertise to optimise the alignment between cost efficiency and carbon reduction. Finally, future research should investigate the measurable impact of QS-led carbon accounting on project outcomes, while exploring innovations such as artificial intelligence and predictive analytics to support carbon forecasting in cost planning processes. These interventions, if implemented holistically, can elevate the QS profession and significantly contribute to decarbonising the South African built environment.

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SACQSP2025-32

Driving Sustainable Construction in Developing Economies: A Review of Circular Economy Adoption

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Abstract

The construction industry waste has been recognised as one of the major contributors to global waste generation, creating significant environmental challenges through its conventional linear 'take–make–use–dispose' approach. The Circular Economy (CE) concept has become increasingly popular among scholars and practitioners as a promising approach to addressing the economic and environmental sustainability challenges posed by the traditional linear economy, while also providing a viable pathway for achieving sustainable development across various industries, including construction. Despite the global acknowledgement of the benefits of CE, its adoption in developing economies remains limited, often due to various challenges. In light of this, this study seeks to deepen understanding in this area by: (1) conducting a scientometric analysis of scopus index articles published between 2015 and 2025 on Circular Economy in the construction sector using VOSviewer and Gephi, aimed at offering an in-depth understanding of current research trends and practical application; and (2) conducting a systematic content analysis of the selected literature to identify and categorise the key barriers and enablers influencing CE implementation in developing economies. The scientometric results reveal a steady rise in CE publications since 2017, with developed countries dominating collaborations while developing economies remain underrepresented. The systematic content review further identifies six major barrier categories and five key enablers affecting CE implementation, highlighting financial and economic related barriers as the most critical barriers, while regulatory and policy related enablers act as essential drivers. This study therefore contributes to the growing body of CE literature by highlighting how contextual and institutional conditions influence CE diffusion in construction particularly in developing economies. It also offers valuable insights for policymakers and industry practitioners seeking to facilitate effective CE transitions in the construction industry.

Keywords: Circular Economy, Barriers, Enablers, Construction Industry, Developing Economies.

Introduction

The construction industry is central to global economic development, contributing between 5% and 13% of total output in many countries while driving modernisation, infrastructure expansion, and job creation (Awodele et al., 2025). Yet, alongside these socio-economic benefits, the sector exerts severe environmental pressures. It consumes over 40% of global raw materials, uses 12% of freshwater resources, and generates more than one-third of total waste and CO_2 emissions (Nureni et al., 2025). Construction and demolition waste (CDW) alone amounts to 2.5–3.5 billion tonnes annually, representing 36% of global waste, of which up to 93% in developing countries is poorly managed (Nureni et al., 2025). This unsustainable performance reflects the dominance of the linear "take–make–use–dispose" model, compounded by rapid urbanisation and population growth in emerging economies where infrastructure often outpaces sustainable planning (Ding et al., 2023; Bao & Lu, 2020).

To address these challenges, the circular economy (CE) has been advanced as an alternative paradigm. In the built environment, CE approach optimise resource use, minimises waste and promote the continuous reuse of matrials within closed closed loop systems to maintain their highest value (Metinal & Gumusburun Ayalp, 2025). Its principles extend beyond the traditional 3Rs to include refurbish, regenerate, and rethink strategies. It involves shifting construction from a "cradle-to-grave" to a "cradle-to-cradle" system (Chen et al., 2022). While developed nations such as the UK, Netherlands, and Germany have made progress through CE strategies and near-zero landfill policies (Bao & Lu, 2020; Giorgi et al., 2022), adoption in many developing regions remains limited due to weak infrastructure, poor regulation, low market demand for recycled materials, and limited stakeholder awareness (Nureni et al., 2025).

Previous review studies on the circular economy (CE) in the construction sector show that research in this field remains fragmented. Some studies focus mainly on barriers (Metinal & Gumusburun Ayalp, 2025; Ghisellini et al., 2018; Ferriz-Papi et al., 2024) while others examine enablers or strategies (Chen et al., 2022; Alhawamdeh et al., 2024; Wuni, 2023; Shahid & Ali, 2023). Broader analyses, such as the review by (Rao et al., 2025) attempted to integrate barriers, enablers, and strategies but did not focus specifically on developing contexts. Similarly, Oluleye et al. (2022) emphasised organisational barriers but gave little attention to policy or practical challenges. Overall, most studies treat barriers and enablers separately, offering limited understanding of how they interact particularly in developing countries, where the conditions for CE implementation differ.

This paper argues that examining barriers and enablers together, rather than separately, is key to advancing CE adoption in construction, especially in developing economies. To achieve this, the study applies scientometric mapping and systematic content analysis to explore major themes, research linkages, and context-specific factors influencing CE adoption.

The subsequent sections cover the research methodology, the results and discussion of the scientometric analysis, the findings from the systematic content analysis, and the concluding remarks with recommendations.

Aim and Objectives

This study aims to bridge the fragmentation in existing literature by providing an integrated, context-sensitive analysis of CE adoption in construction. The objectives are to:

- Conduct a scientometric analysis of the existing CE research in the construction industry
- Identify and categorise the barriers affecting CE adoption in construction industry
- Identify and categorise the enablers of CE adoption in construction industry.

Research Methodology

This study adopted a structured, two-stage approach to achieve its research objectives. The first stage involved a scientometric analysis aimed at quantitatively mapping research trends, patterns, and collaborations in Circular Economy (CE) studies within the construction sector. Scientometric analysis, as applied in related research (Olawumi & Chan, 2018; Rashidi et al., 2024), is widely recognised for its effectiveness in revealing the intellectual structure and thematic evolution of a research domain. The analysis was conducted using VOSviewer to visualise keyword co-occurrence and thematic clusters,

and Gephi to generate advanced network representations of article interconnections and research collaborations (Hussein & Zayed, 2021; Akindele et al., 2024).

The second stage comprised a systematic and content-based review of full-text articles to identify, categorise, and discuss the major barriers and enablers influencing CE implementation in the construction sector. This approach aligns with previous studies that adopted similar analytical procedures to extract and synthesise thematic insights from reviewed literature (Thirumal et al., 2024; AlJaber et al., 2023). The review process was guided by the principles of the PRISMA framework to maintain transparency and rigor in the identification, screening, and inclusion of relevant studies. Ethical standards were maintained through proper citation, transparent data selection, and exclusion of any confidential or identifiable information. The overall methodological framework is illustrated in Figure 1.

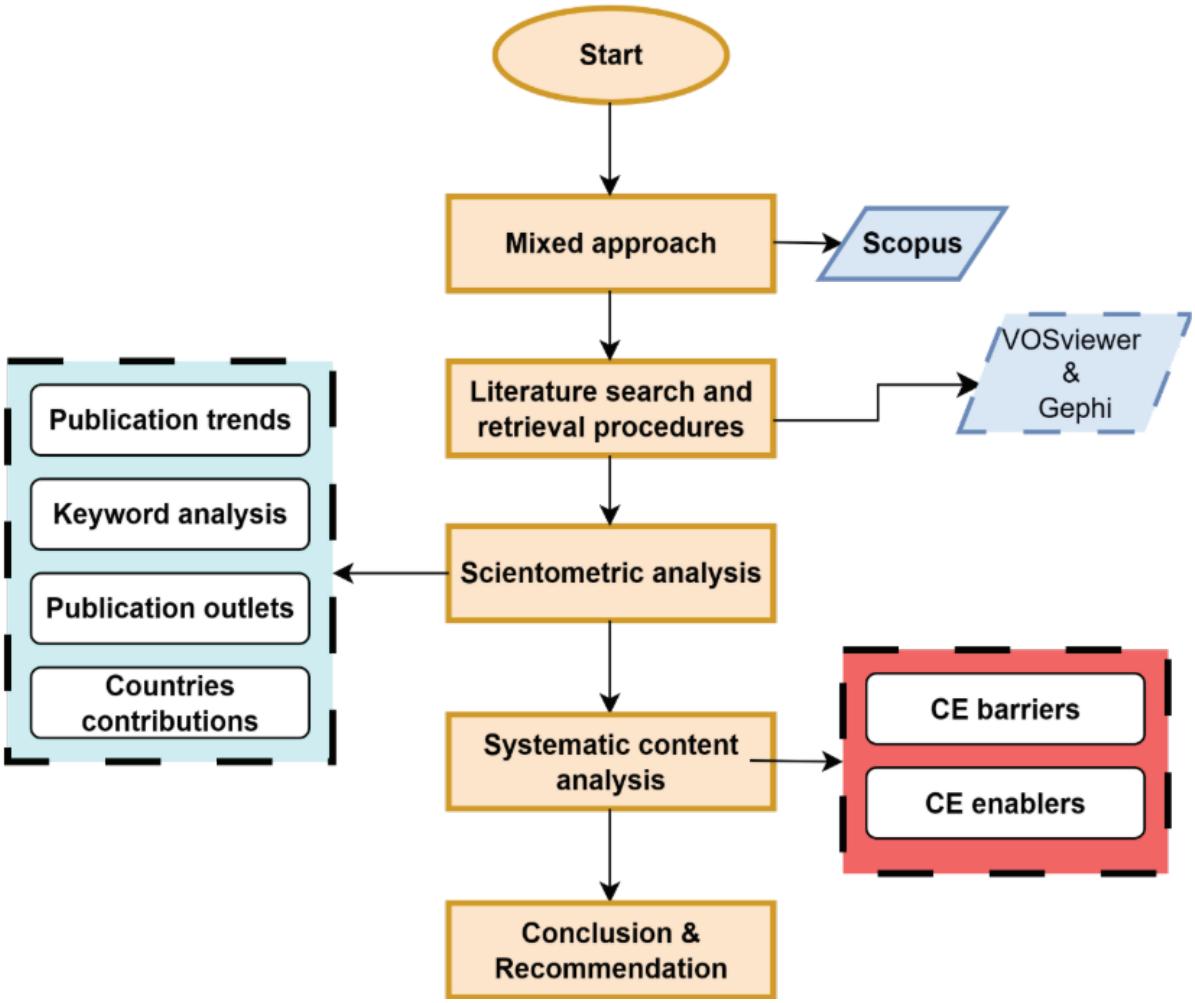

Figure 1 Methodology framework.

Literature Search Strategy and Retrieval Procedures

A systematic bibliometric literature search was conducted using Scopus (2015–2025), chosen for its extensive coverage and suitability for scientometric analysis. The selection process followed four stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. During identification, Boolean search strings (TITLE-ABS-KEY) with well-established keywords as shown in Table 1 retrieved 927 records, which were refined to 798 after applying filters for language (English), document type (article, review, conference paper), and relevant subject areas. In the screening stage, titles and abstracts were reviewed to remove irrelevant studies, reducing the dataset to 164 articles. The eligibility stage involved assessing the full texts against predefined inclusion criteria, and finally, 112 articles were retained in the inclusion stage as the core dataset for subsequent scientometric and content analyses.

Table 1 Keywords Search String

Search Scope	Search String
Barriers OR Enablers related to CE in Construction	(("barriers" OR "inhibitors" OR "hindrances" OR "challenges") OR ("drivers" OR "determinants" OR "driving forces" OR "enablers" OR "critical success factors") AND ("circular economy" OR "circular building" OR "circular construction" OR "circularity" OR "cradle to cradle") AND ("construction industry" OR "building industry" OR "construction sector" OR "construction" OR "built environment") AND ("construction waste" OR "demolition waste" OR "waste management" OR "waste reduction")

Results and Discussion of Scientometric Analysis

In this section, the results of the scientometric analysis, including the annual publication trends, analysis of keywords, and other science mapping analyses of top countries and Publication outlets, are discussed.

Annual Publication Trend

Figure 2 presents the publication trend on Circular Economy in the construction industry between 2015 and 2024. No articles were recorded in 2015–2016, indicating limited attention to the topic. The first appeared in 2017, with gradual growth until 2019. A sharper increase was seen from 2020 (11 publications), with some fluctuations, and the trend peaked at 32 in 2024. Data for 2025 was excluded since it was collected early and may not fully represent the year. Overall, the upward trend, especially from 2022 onward, reflects rising academic interest and recognition of CE in construction.

Figure 2 Annual Publication Trends

Keyword Occurrence Analysis

Keyword co-occurrence analysis helps reveal dominant themes and conceptual relationships in a research field. In this study, VOSviewer was used to analyse author keywords from Scopus publications on Circular Economy in construction. Initially, 216 keywords with at least two occurrences were extracted. A thesaurus file was created to harmonise variations (e.g., modelling vs. modeling, CE vs. circular economy), after which a threshold of five was applied, reducing the set to 51 keywords. The resulting co-occurrence network (Figure 3) shows node size proportional to frequency and colors representing thematic clusters. High-frequency terms such as circular economy, waste management, construction sector, and construction waste management emerged as central nodes, indicating their core relevance in the literature. These central terms reflect key areas of focus and act as conceptual bridges between clusters, guiding future research directions within the field.

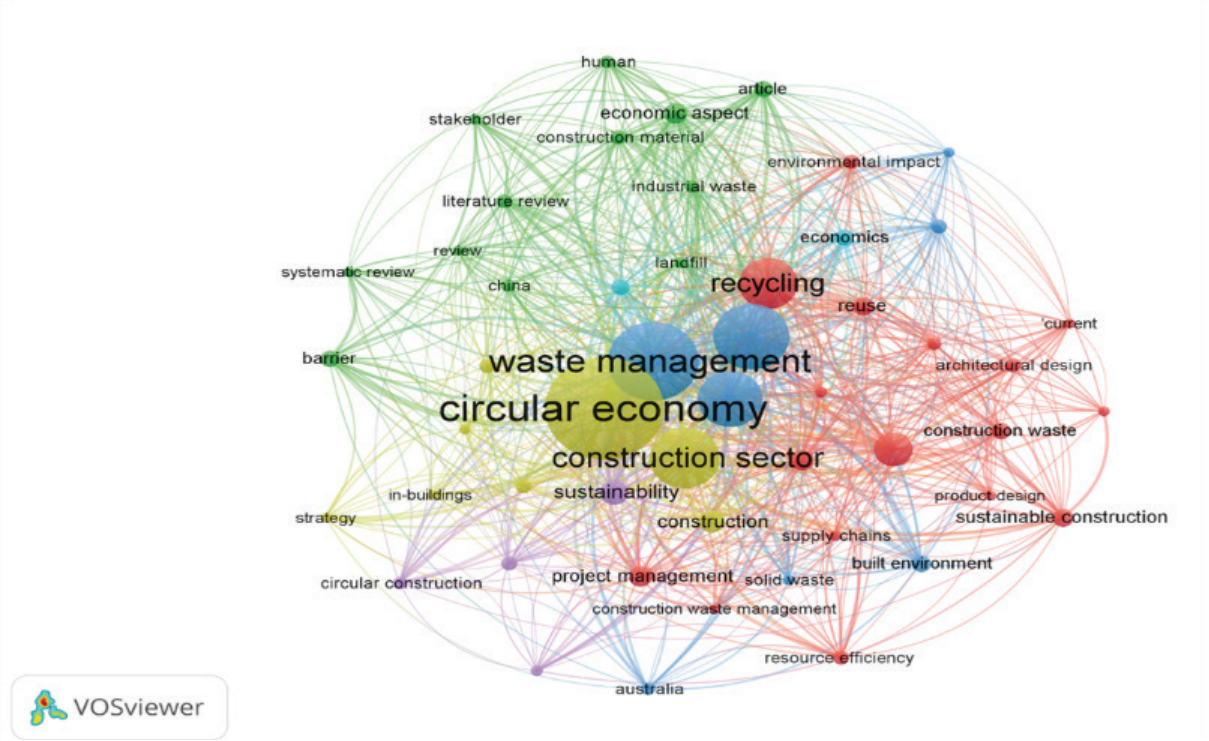

Figure 3 Science Mapping of the Keyword

Publication Outlets

To examine how Circular Economy research in construction is disseminated, a source-level citation analysis was performed using VOSviewer with thresholds of ≥2 publications and ≥3 citations per source. From 62 identified sources, 18 met the criteria, indicating a concentrated distribution of impactful outlets. The filtered data were further analysed in Gephi, producing the citation network shown in Figure 4. Node size reflects citation counts, edge thickness represents link strength, and clusters indicate journals with shared focus. As summarised in Table 2, Journal of Cleaner Production, Smart and Sustainable Built Environment, Building and Environment, Sustainability, and Construction Innovation ranked as the top five outlets. Strong linkages were also observed for Resources, Conservation and Recycling (TLS = 54), Journal of Cleaner Production (49), and Sustainability (Switzerland) (42), highlighting their central role in connecting and advancing research in this field.

Table 2 Top 5 Publication Outlets in CE-CI Research Domain

Publication Outlets	TLS	Documents	Citations	Normalised Citations	Average Normalised Citations	Modularity
Journal of Cleaner Production	49	10	1736	17.8571	1.7857	0
Smart and Sustainable Built Environment	14	2	68	8.8455	4.4228	2
Building and Environment	17	4	174	8.8187	2.2047	1
Sustainability (Switzerland)	42	9	354	8.2802	0.92	0
Construction Innovation	3	2	12	6.75	3.375	2

Influential Countries

A co-authorship analysis was conducted in VOSviewer with countries as the unit of analysis and fractional counting. After cleaning inconsistencies (e.g., merging Hong Kong with China, correcting misspellings, and removing non-country entries), a refined threshold of ≥3 documents and ≥1 citation reduced the dataset to 17 active countries from 47. The collaboration network generated in Gephi (Figure 4) shows the UK, China, and Australia as central players, with strong bilateral ties such as UK–China and China–Australia. Figure 4 further reveal China, the UK, and Australia leading in both publications and citations, while countries like Turkey and the UAE, despite lower output, occupied strategic positions in the network. Notably, developing countries remain underrepresented, with only a few (e.g., Ghana, Kazakhstan, Sri Lanka) emerging, pointing to limited Global South collaboration and a key research gap.

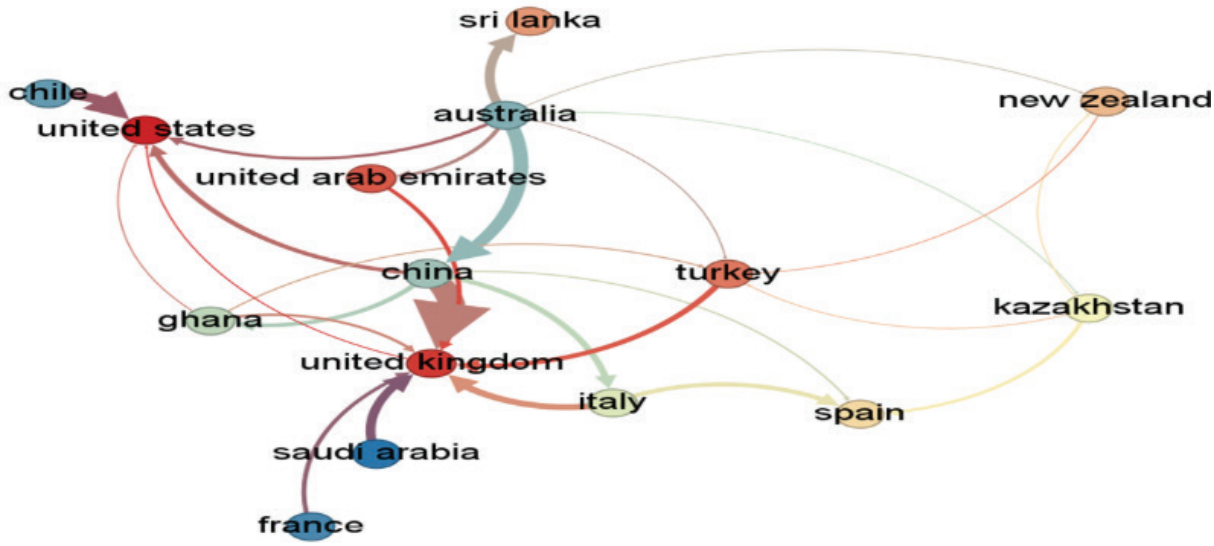

Figure 4 Network Mapping of Influential Countries in CE-CI Research Domain

Result and Discussion of Systematic Analysis

Barriers to Adoption Circular Economy in Construction Industry

Based on the content analysis of the reviewed literature, several barriers to Circular Economy (CE) implementation in construction were identified and classified into six major categories, as summarised in Table 3.

Financial and economic barriers emerged as the most frequently cited, reported in 68 studies. High upfront investment costs, uncertain returns, and limited financial incentives were consistently emphasised, as opined by Abdulai et al. (2024) and confirmed in the study conducted by Hasibuan et al. (2025). These findings align with the broader understanding that financial constraints remain a primary deterrent to CE transition, particularly in developing construction markets.

Regulatory and policy barriers followed closely, cited in 56 studies. The absence of CE-specific legislation, fragmented policy frameworks, and inconsistent enforcement mechanisms were noted as major impediments, as revealed by Srećković et al. (2024) and further emphasised in line with the study by Rao et al. (2025). Collectively, these studies highlight that the lack of cohesive policy direction weakens institutional coordination and hinders CE mainstreaming across the construction industry.

Knowledge and awareness barriers were identified in 50 sources, where limited understanding of CE principles, insufficient training, and weak stakeholder engagement were recurrent themes. As emphasised by Metinal and Gumusburun Ayalp (2025) and Véliz et al. (2025) the deficiency in technical know-how and awareness significantly undermines industry readiness to adopt CE-oriented innovations and practices.

Technological and infrastructural barriers were also prominent, reported in 49 studies. Inadequate recycling facilities, poor digital integration, and the absence of lifecycle data systems were repeatedly highlighted, as noted by Shooshtarian et al. (2025) and in line with the findings of Lau et al. (2025). These technological deficiencies constrain resource recovery efficiency and material traceability throughout project lifecycles.

Market and business barriers, documented in 43 studies, were characterised by underdeveloped secondary material markets, unstable pricing mechanisms, and negative perceptions of recycled products. As revealed by Luciano et al. (2022) and Buhaljoti (2024), the limited profitability and uncertain demand within circular business models discourage private sector participation and investment.

Social and cultural barriers, though less frequently reported (31 sources), exert a notable influence on CE adoption. Resistance to change, weak collaboration among stakeholders, and low trust in recycled materials persist as key challenges, as emphasised by Ding et al. (2023) and Lau et al. (2025).

Overall, these findings indicate that while financial and policy-related challenges dominate the reviewed literature, technological, knowledge-based, market, and socio-cultural constraints are equally instrumental in shaping the slow diffusion of CE practices within the global construction industry.

Table 3 Categories of Barriers to CE Adoption in Construction

Category	Total Sources
Financial and Economical Related Barriers	68
Regulatory and Policy Related Barriers	56
Knowledge and Awareness Related Barriers	50
Technological and Infrastructural Related Barriers	49
Market and Business-Related Barriers	43
Social and Cultural Related Barriers	31

Enablers or Drivers Towards Adopting CE in the Construction Industry

Drawing from the reviewed literature, various key enablers facilitating Circular Economy (CE) adoption in the construction sector were systematically grouped into five major categories, as outlined in Table 4.

Regulatory and policy enablers emerged as the most frequently cited, highlighting the role of supportive legislation, coherent policy frameworks, and green public procurement standards in facilitating CE practices. As revealed by Rao et al. (2025) and Alotaibi et al. (2024), such institutional support establishes accountability and creates a conducive environment for CE-oriented initiatives.

Knowledge and awareness enablers were reported as essential for enhancing stakeholder understanding and reducing resistance to change. Education, training, and awareness campaigns strengthen technical competence and foster innovation, as emphasised by Adabre et al. (2024) and Hendrianto et al. (2024).

Financial enablers also play a crucial role. Subsidies, grants, and low-interest loans reduce the burden of high upfront investment costs and encourage private sector participation. These findings, as opined by Lau et al. (2025) and confirmed by Véliz et al. (2025), underscore the decisive influence of accessible financial support on CE adoption.

Technological and infrastructural enablers focus on innovations such as recycling facilities, digital tools, and lifecycle data systems. As highlighted by Shooshtarian et al. (2025) and Lau et al. (2025), solutions like digital material passports and improved waste-sorting technologies enhance resource recovery efficiency and traceability throughout construction processes.

Social and cultural enablers, though less frequently discussed, were identified as equally important. Collaboration, stakeholder engagement, and trust-building were repeatedly emphasised as critical for collective CE adoption, as reported by Rao et al. (2025) and Shooshtarian et al. (2025).

These findings indicate that regulatory, financial, technological, knowledge-based, and social factors collectively facilitate CE adoption in construction, underscoring the need for a coordinated approach that aligns policy, investment, technology, and stakeholder engagement.

Table 4 Categories of Enablers to CE Adoption in Construction

Category	Total Sources
Regulatory and Policy Related Enablers	43
Knowledge and Awareness Related Enablers	38
Financial and Economic Enablers	37
Technological and Infrastructural Related Enablers	37
Social and Cultural Enablers	32

Conclusion

This study examined Circular Economy (CE) adoption in the construction sector by integrating scientometric and systematic review approaches across 112 peer-reviewed articles published between 2015 and 2025. The scientometric analysis revealed a growing global interest in CE research, particularly since 2020, but highlighted limited participation from developing economies in international collaboration networks. Keyword mapping showed that while waste management and construction waste dominate the literature, technological and digital dimensions remain underexplored.

The systematic content analysis identified key barriers and enablers shaping CE adoption. Financial and regulatory constraints were the most critical barriers, alongside gaps in knowledge, technology, infrastructure, markets, and socio-cultural factors. Conversely, supportive policy frameworks, financial incentives, knowledge development, technological infrastructure, and stakeholder collaboration emerged as pivotal enablers. By combining scientometric and systematic analyses, this study offers a novel integrative perspective, linking global research trends with practical challenges and drivers. These findings underscore that advancing circular construction practices requires a coordinated approach across regulatory, financial, technological, and social domains, providing a solid foundation for targeted recommendations.

Recommendations

Building on these insights, the following recommendations are proposed to advance Circular Economy (CE) adoption in construction.

To accelerate CE implementation, coordinated actions are required across institutional, technological, and socio-technical systems. Governments should strengthen regulatory frameworks and enforcement mechanisms while providing financial incentives to reduce entry barriers and stimulate innovation. Investments in digital and infrastructural capacity such as IoT, blockchain, digital twins, and advanced recycling systems are crucial for improving material traceability and system-level resource efficiency.

Education and training initiatives should be expanded to enhance professional competence, foster behavioural change, and integrate CE principles into construction curricula. Multi-stakeholder collaboration among policymakers, industry, and academia is equally vital to build innovation networks and strengthen secondary material markets.

Future research should advance empirical and context-specific studies, particularly in developing economies, to validate theoretical models and inform policy adaptation. Collectively, these measures form a theoretically informed and practically grounded framework for accelerating CE adoption and driving sustainable transformation in the construction sector.

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SACQSP2025-36

A Review of Barriers and Drivers of Modular Integrated Construction for Sustainable Housing in Developing Countries: A Systematic Approach

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Abstract

Global affordable sustainable housing challenges stem from rural-urban migration, population growth, and climate change impacts. While developed nations like the US, UK, and Hong Kong have successfully adopted Modular Integrated Construction (MiC) over conventional in-situ methods due to benefits such as reduced construction time, lower costs, and minimised waste but developing countries face significant adoption barriers. This research investigates these implementation obstacles and identifies drivers that could accelerate MiC adoption for improved housing outcomes. The study employs a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative analysis (keyword occurrence, co-citation analysis, and bibliometric assessment of literature from Scopus using Gephi and VOSviewer), with qualitative methods involving systematic review of barriers. Key barriers identified were categorised into 7 including attitudes and perception barriers, knowledge barriers, financial barriers, design and technical barriers, quality and supply chain barriers, logistics and onsite barriers, and regulatory and policy barriers. Also, drivers into economic drivers, technical drivers, quality drivers, policy drivers, sustainability drivers, market and social drivers, and knowledge and skills drivers. This research proposes strategic interventions to overcome these obstacles, including: implementing supportive governmental regulations, expanding financial institution funding, creating supplier and transportation partnerships, and developing industry practitioner training programs. These findings provide actionable insights for stakeholders navigating MiC implementation complexities, ultimately contributing to sustainable housing development goals in developing regions. By addressing these specific barriers and leveraging identified drivers, countries can accelerate MiC adoption to meet growing housing demands sustainably.

Keywords: Affordable Sustainable Housing, Sustainable Construction, Modular Integrated Construction, Construction Industry, Barriers**.**

Introduction

For decades, developing nations have encountered significant challenges in financing and constructing projects that meet established engineering standards due to the high costs of building materials, labor, transportation, and site preparation. Idris and Adamu (2023) identified inherent complications within conventional construction practices, including hazardous working conditions, height-related risks, and

insufficient site accessibility. Research by (Wuni et al., 2022; Akinradewo et al., 2023; Ali et al., 2023) supports the view that adopting prefabricated components could enhance safety, efficiency, and sustainability outcomes. Oyelola et al. (2025) emphasised that providing affordable sustainable housing is critical in developing countries experiencing rapid urbanisation.

According to the United Nations, approximately 1.6 billion people worldwide currently lack access to safe and adequate housing, with projections indicating this number could reach nearly 3 billion by 2030 if current trends persist. Additionally, the IPCC (2022) report indicates that conventional building methods require extensive on-site activities that create substantial waste, consume large quantities of raw materials, and generate high carbon emissions. The provision of sustainable affordable housing is urgently needed to reduce housing demand and provide adequate shelter for communal harnessing innovative method of construction which are environment friendly. Moghayedi et al. (2021) emphasise that despite increasing recognition of the need to integrate sustainability principles into affordable housing development, practical implementation continues to pose substantial difficulties. Recent research demonstrates growing efforts to embed sustainability into affordable housing initiatives through the adoption of innovative construction approaches, particularly innovative prefabricated construction methods (IPCMs) (Moghayedi & Awuzie, 2023).

Modular Integrated Construction (MiC), as a prefabrication construction method, demonstrates significant potential as an alternative to conventional building approaches, particularly for addressing large-scale housing deficits through its time-saving capabilities (Sherif et al., 2020). MiC represents a sustainable construction approach that involves fabricating completely finished 3D volumetric modules at manufacturing facilities and transporting these modules to assembly sites (Abdelmageed & Zayed, 2020). In developed countries including the USA, UK, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Australia, MiC is experiencing rapid growth due to its effectiveness in delivering benefits such as reduced construction costs, accelerated construction processes, decreased hazards to workers and the environment, and enhanced construction quality control (Li et al., 2018; Wuni et al., 2019; Pan et al., 2020; Arowoiya et al., 2023).

Despite its benefits and potential to transform the construction sector, modular integrated construction implementation remains limited in most regions, particularly in developing countries. Ali et al. (2023) identified that the lack of widespread MiC adoption is influenced by challenges encompassing technological limitations, regulatory constraints, limited market awareness, and cultural resistance harnessing Eygpt construction section. Also, in Nigeria, Akinradewo et al. (2023) demonstrated that the value derived from using MiC and project financing costs present challenges that construction practitioners face in its adoption, which were further categorised into construction industry practices, client concerns, and site characteristics.

Similarly, insufficient collaboration and industry fragmentation have intensified challenges in utilising MiC among stakeholders, including architects, manufacturers, engineers, and builders (Khan et al., 2024). Moghayedi et al. (2021), emphasise that the provision of sustainable affordable housing has been significantly constrained by insufficient investor engagement across various contexts, primarily because such housing is predominantly perceived as a social good with minimal profit potential. Consequently, the responsibility for developing sustainable affordable housing has fallen predominantly on public sector agencies, non-governmental organisations, and low-profit entities, while private sector participation remains notably limited.

Zhou et al. (2024) explored the motivations and barriers to adopting modular techniques in the construction industry, identifying insufficient modular expertise and practice as the most significant impediment to MiC implementation. Abdelmageed et al. (2020) reviewed studies on the challenges, characteristics, and benefits of MiC implementation. Wuni et al. (2019) reviewed MiC drivers using a total interpretive structural modeling approach to rank barriers, categorising MiC drivers into dependent, linkage, and independent classifications, with innovative competitiveness and sustainability identified as major drivers.

Despite numerous studies have address the barriers and drivers to MiC (Wuni & Shen 2020; Ali et al., 2023; Bello et al. 2023; Akinradewo et al., 2023; Agapiou 2022; Blismas & Wakefield 2009; Rahman, 2014). However, a detailed review of these studies is lacking in literature. Additionally, the existing literature does not combine a scientometric and systematic analysis of the barriers and drivers of MiC. In order to fill the research gaps, this research contribute to existing literature by conducting a comprehensive scientometric analysis of the existing articles related to MiC revealing the publication

trends, keyword analysis and their co-occurrence also, this study systematically reviews the barriers and drivers of modular integrated construction to foster its adoption and fully exploit its benefits toward providing affordable sustainable housing and ensuring environmental stability in resource utilisation.

Research methodology

Figure 1 shows an outline of the research methodology. This methodology consists of two approaches. The first approach is literature retrieval procedures, from a reputable research database to extracts relevant studies on modular construction for evaluation. In the second approach, is a mixed review method approach utilised to provide an in-depth understanding of the modular integrated construction barriers, drivers that affects its adoption as stated in past studies, to identify research gaps and future research directions. Sections below elaborate on this process. The mixed method approach involves a scientometric and systematic analysis of literature to identify the present state of research work and propose future directions.

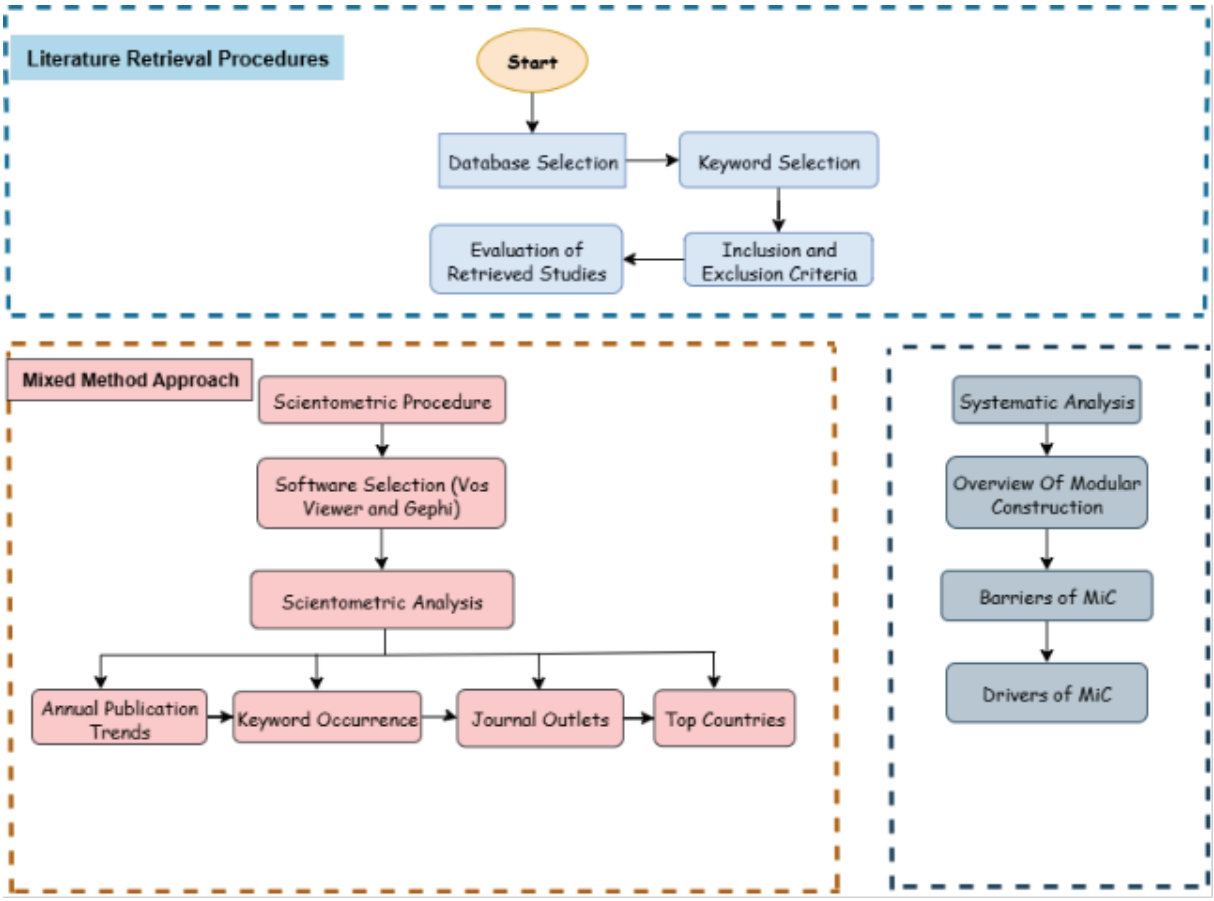

Figure 1 Outline of Research Methodology

Literature Retrieval Procedures

As shown in Figure 1 shows the illustration and detailed diagrammatic explanation of the literature search above, the search for literature was done on Scopus database. It is chosen because it contains wide range of research publication and its comprehensive coverage and strict indexing protocols (Taiwo et al., 2023).

Using the search string keyword “(TITLE-ABS-KEY("Modular Construction" OR "Modular integrated construction" OR "Offsite Construction" OR "Prefabrication" OR "Offsite manufacturing" OR "Prefabricated prefinished volumetric construction" OR "Off-site manufacturing" OR "prefabrication" OR "Industrialised Building" OR "Prefabrication construction" OR "Modular Building") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY("Barriers" OR "Barrier" OR "Challenges" OR "Hindrances" OR "Factors" OR "Constraint" "Problems") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY("Drivers" OR "Enablers" OR "Critical Success Factors" OR "CSF" OR "Strategies" OR "Solution")) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE,"English"))” according to Scopus

syntax 1112 articles were retrieved, this articles were screened to refining the documents into; (i) filtering the search with focusing on MiC and other related Offsite construction techniques ii. Limiting to Engineering and Environmental science research area (iii). Excluding articles not written in English, and limiting the years to 2000 - 2025, reduced the articles into 1057. To further refine the articles, a thorough abstract reading and articles title not related to the domain of the study were excluded which leaves us with 203 articles. Finally, a full text reading is done, and 156 articles were found worthwhile and also the inclusion of 32 articles through snowballing. Snowballing is research technique that involves inspecting the reference list of selected paper to dig out more pertinent research relevant to a particular study that were omitted during the initial search. (Taiwo et al., 2023; Akindele et al., 2024) A total number of 188 papers was utilised for this study from which insights and discussion are extracted for the scientometric analysis and systematic review.

Scientometric Analysis Procedures

Scientometric analysis is a quantitative approach used to assess the growth, structure, and connections within scientific fields by examining published literature (Xia et al., 2020). This process includes techniques such as keyword co-occurrence analysis, author co-citation analysis, and document co-citation analysis. For this research, VOSviewer and Gephi was selected. According to Akindele et al. (2024) VOSviewer excels at uncovering patterns and clusters within keyword co-occurrence data, offering clear visual representations of thematic focus and distribution in the literature. VOSviewer was employed due to its basic functionality for producing, visualising and exploring bibliometric network (Darko et al., 2019) and also the ability to display map in various different ways emphasising a different aspect of the map. In contrast, Gephi's advanced graphing capabilities enable in-depth scientific mapping, highlighting interactions among articles within a field an essential feature for identifying global research networks and collaborative relationships (Taiwo et al., 2023). Additionally, it provides convenience for gaining detailed insight into the information attainable from a particular graph or network.

Systematic Review

The Systematic Literature Review (SLR) is a rigorous and structured method used to synthesise and compare findings from relevant studies in order to meet specific research objectives (Yu et al., 2022) Its broad use across diverse fields, including construction-related research, highlights its methodological precision, clarity, and thoroughness (Khan et al., 2024). A systematic approach was used to review the relevant literature related to the study. The systematic review technique is a methodical, protocol-driven strategy for summarising research data relevant to a particular scientific subject (Whaley et al., 2016).

Results and Discussion

Scientometric Results

This section gives the results of the scientometric and systematic analysis. The trigonometric analysis including the Annual trends of publication, keywords analysis, keyword clusters and links, contribution of countries, and other mapping analyses, were highlighted. Also, the systematic analysis involves the content examination of the articles that solely align with the aim of the study.

Annual Trends of Publications

Fig 2 below shows the yearly number of publications made for the 188 retrieved articles. It delineates the number of articles published from the year 2000-2025 and gives a visual representation of the researchers output over the years.

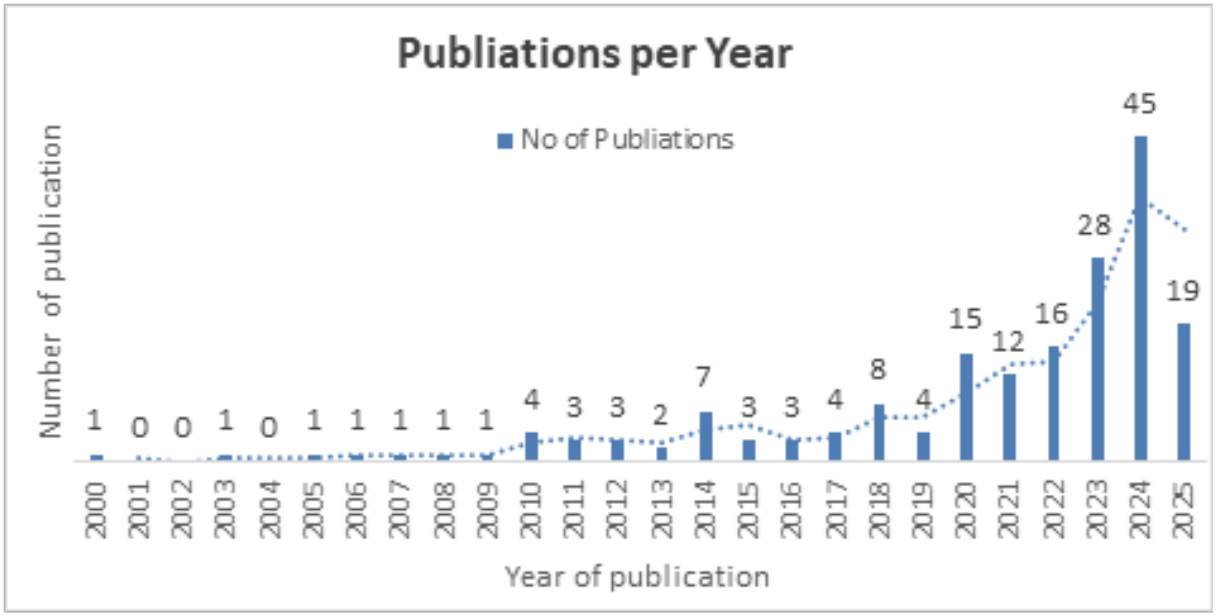

Figure 2 Annual Publication

From these analyses, it was discovered that prior to the year 2010 one article related to MIC barriers and drivers were published yearly and MiC has not been extensively explored by researchers until the 2014 and 2018. The graph also indicates output increases to 16 and 28 in the year 2022 and 2023 respectively. Then a massive increase to 45 publications in the year 2024 reflecting the world researchers' interest in the modular integrated construction.

Keyword Occurrence

Figure 3 below presents a keyword network visualisation generated using VOSviewer, displaying 6 distinct clusters represented by different colors. These networks reveal the thematic organisation and conceptual foundations of scientific fields Akindele et al. (2024) Such keyword networks effectively map knowledge domains by clarifying current research focuses and demonstrating how they are intellectually linked and structured (Darko et al., 2019).

A limit threshold of 5 was selected as it contains the necessary keywords for the study, 71 keywords out of 1280 met this criterion, though the threshold of 5 selected doesn't follow any rule. Each node represents each keyword with the node size denoting the size of number of occurrences. The connecting lines thickness varies which indicates the strength of the co-occurrence relationship among the keywords. From this network mapping reveals that Modular integrated construction, construction industry, Offsite construction is the strongest central node with the highest number of occurrences, indicating their relevancy to the research domain.

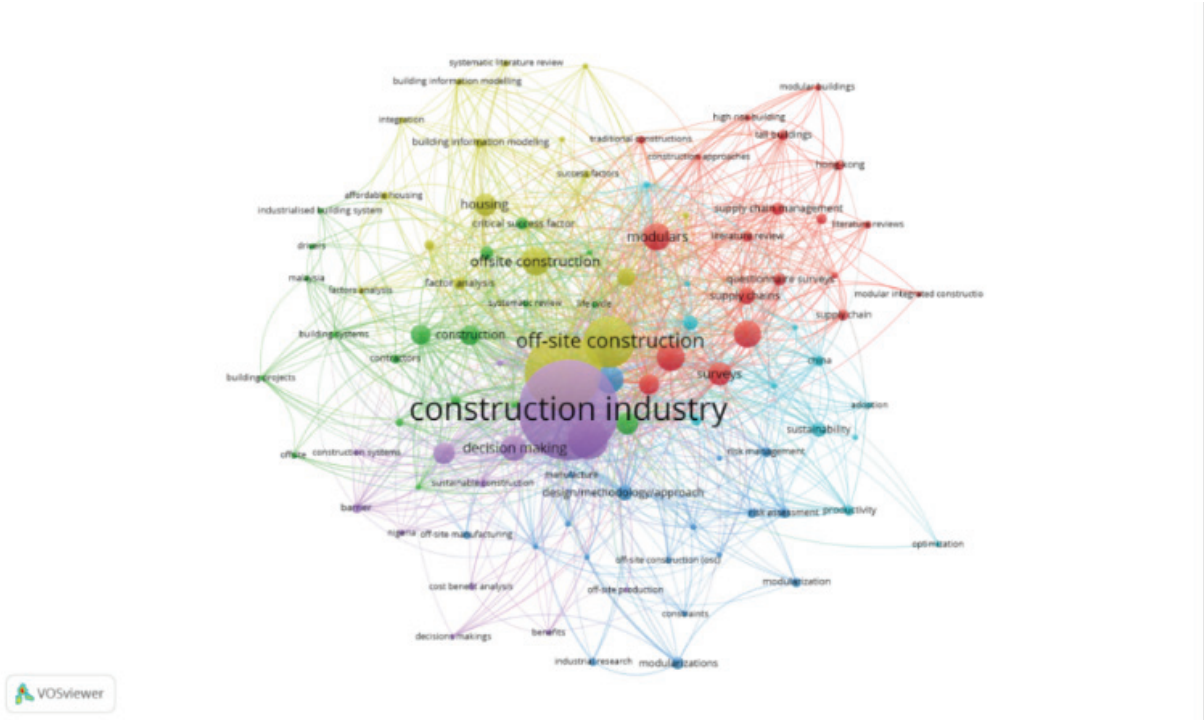

Figure 3 Scientific Network Mapping for Keyword Co-occurrence

Keyword Clusters and Links

In keyword clusters, each node represents a keyword, and its size denotes number the no of recurrences of the words in the retrieved articles. From the Figure 4 below, it is observed that modular construction and construction industry has the biggest node and the strongest links indicative of the connection between the two. Followed by offsite construction, prefabrication, construction projects and project management. This is a reflection that this innovative method of construction is gradually being implemented in the construction sector, majorly in developed countries. Also developing countries like South Africa, Nigeria, Malaysia are adopting this method despite the challenges faced.

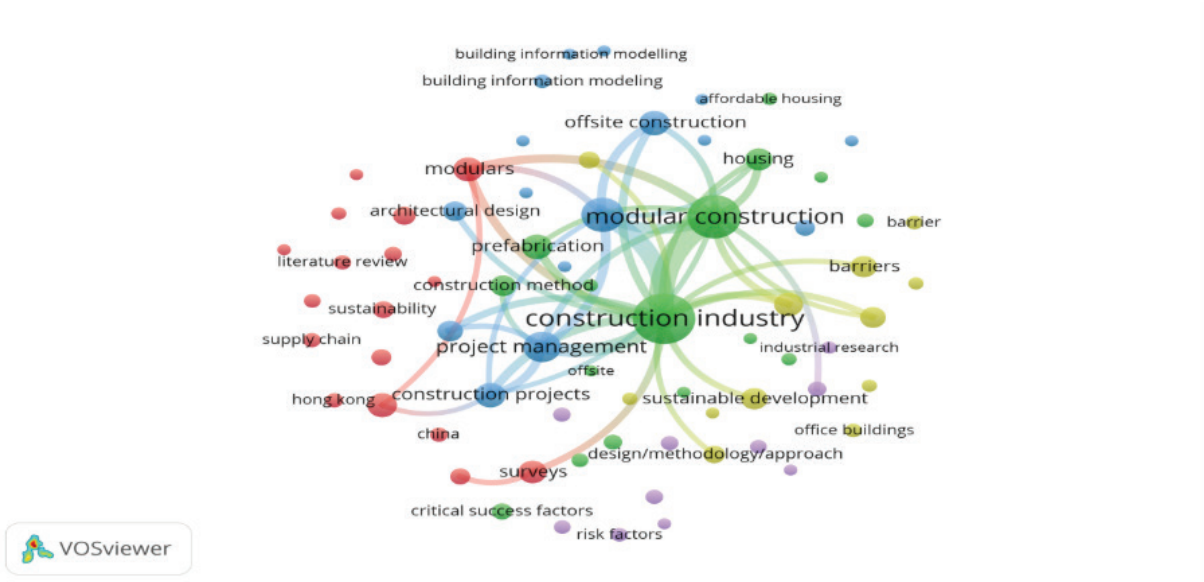

Figure 4: Keywords Clusters and Link

Top Countries

Gephi software was used to identify the leading countries contributing to the modular integrated construction (MiC) research domain. Figure 5 illustrates the number of articles published by top-

performing countries, where Hong Kong emerges with 40 articles highlighting its significant contributions and leadership in the field. Notably, other influential countries such as Australia, the United Kingdom, China, and the United States, have 37, 31, 30 and 25 respectively indicating international collaboration and mutual influence.

Further analysis using Gephi ranked these 13 countries based on Total Link Strength (TLS) and normalised citation (NC) as shown in Table 2. The top five countries by TLS are Hong Kong (469), Australia (357), the United Kingdom (338), China (220), and Egypt (132). In terms of normalised citation, Hong Kong scored 59.7, Australia 45.9, Egypt 37.0, and China 33.1. Although the United States had a relatively lower TLS and NC, it stood out with the highest number of publications (25) and an impressive 890 citations, underscoring its substantial influence and research output in the MiC domain.

Systematic Results

Accordingly, this section provides a systematic analysis of the barriers affecting MiC adoption, identifies the key drivers prompting its use, and proposes strategic solutions for the obstacles as identified in the literature.

Barriers Influencing the Implementation of MiC

The barriers identified from literature are discussed below having critical looked into them. These barriers are grouped into various construct based on their influence on MiC and do not follow any standardised method of grouping. The barriers are grouped into the following and discussed below Attitudes barrier, Knowledge barrier, Financial barrier, Design Barrier, Supply chain Barrier, Logistics and Onsite Barrier, Regulatory and Policy Barrier.

Attitudes Barrier

The adoption of modular building systems in construction follows this same pattern, necessitating that industry professionals need to develop thorough understanding and favorable attitudes toward this technology (Abdelmageed et al., 2020). Similarly, Nadim and Goulding (2011) and Gan et al. (2018) states that the adoption of off-site construction (OSC) is hindered by a persistent stigma that it is only suitable for low-income social housing and by a risk-averse industry culture resistant to change. Crucially, these negative perceptions are often driven by a lack of knowledge and direct experience with MiC, which explains why many practitioners are slow to embrace it (Rahman, 2014; Wuni et al., 2020).

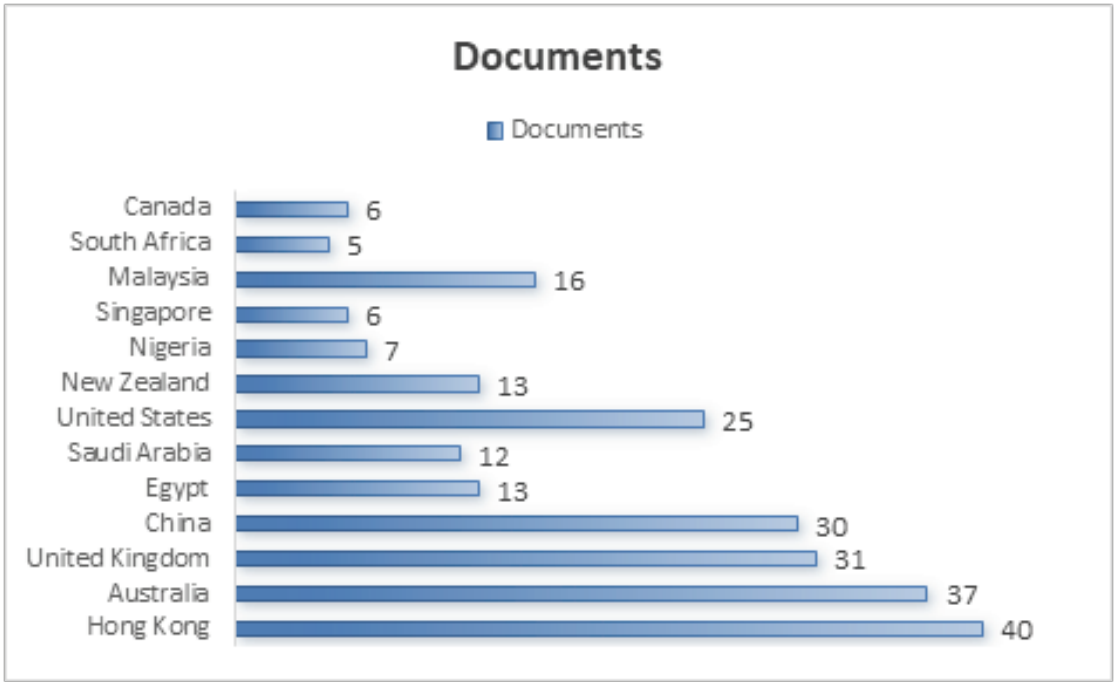

Figure 4 Countries' Contribution to MiC

Table 4 Top Countries

Countries	Total Link Strength TLS	Documents	Citations	Normalised Citations	Average Normalised Citations
Hong Kong	469	4	2553	59.7591	1.494
Australia	357	37	1769	45.9591	1.2421
United Kingdom	338	31	2309	28.372	0.9152
China	220	30	1405	33.167	1.1056
Egypt	132	13	536	37.0232	2.8479
Saudi Arabia	118	12	251	28.5261	2.3772
United States	98	25	890	17.2892	0.6916
New Zealand	84	13	161	14.342	1.1032
Nigeria	65	7	125	16.3177	2.3311
Singapore	64	6	288	5.6072	0.9345
Malaysia	20	16	263	8.6225	0.5389
South Africa	19	5	64	3.2365	0.6473
Canada	12	6	22	0.9637	0.1606

Knowledge Barrier

Ali et al. (2023) identified knowledge barriers as limitations in experience, skills, and understanding that directly influence behavioural patterns and determine the extent of innovation adoption. Agapiou (2022) emphasised that the lack of training and experience among builders, contractors, developers, designers, architects, and engineers represents a significant perceived barrier to MiC adoption. The magnitude of this challenge is underscored by Pan and Hon (2007), who identified skills and adequate MiC experience as the third most significant implementation barrier, with study participants consistently citing it as a major obstacle to prefabrication adoption.

Financial Barrier

Gan et al. (2018) and Bello et al. (2023) concur that financial barriers constitute major impediments that can adversely impact MCS adoption. Munmula et al. (2023) highlighted elevated capital requirements as an influential factor in MiC implementation, attributed to factory establishment costs, necessary machinery procurement, and overhead expenses that cannot be justified without sufficient production volume, significantly affecting modular construction adoption. Similarly, Sun et al. (2020) identified high capital costs as hindering modular integrated construction uptake due to expenses associated with establishing compliant offsite facilities.

Design Barrier

Modular integrated construction differs significantly from conventional construction, requiring entirely different approaches to design and implementation. Wuni and Shen (2020) and Pan et al. (2007) noted that MiC involves complicated module interconnections, extended lead times, and stringent tolerance requirements. These technical complexities have hindered MiC adoption rates, with researchers identifying several design and technical challenges. Ali et al. (2023) identified the absence of universal design and construction tools as the fifth most significant barrier to MiC adoption, consistent with Zhai et al. (2014) perspective that modularised, standardised, and repetitive design forms the fundamental basis for successfully integrating MC methods into projects.

Supply Chain Barrier

Luo et al. (2019) examined the risks associated with stakeholder supply chain management, noting that supply chain integration is often limited by the current economic scale and market size of modular

buildings. This limitation can lead to an array of issues, such as delivery delays of prefabricated modules and the need for reworking manufactured components (Gan et al., 2018). Aligning with this view, Sun et al. (2020) compared MiC to traditional construction methods, highlighting that modular construction is highly dependent on the reliability and sustainability of its supply chain, which includes procurement, design, manufacturing, transportation, and assembly.

Logistics and On-site Barrier

The criticality of logistics in off-site construction was also emphasised by O'Connor et al. (2014) who noted the necessity of determining the method of module transfer to the construction site before any other steps are taken. Furthermore, beyond general transportation regulations, it is crucial to investigate special traffic control requirements, such as the need for staging areas, especially in heavily populated regions (Kamali et al., 2016). This aligns with the view of Jiang et al. (2017), who noted that many developing countries lack the quality road infrastructure needed to transport large modules. Similarly, Wuni and Shen (2020) identified that dilapidated logistics lead to delivery delays, which acts as a major barrier to MiC implementation.

Regulatory and Policy Barrier

Akinradewo et al. (2023) identified regulatory frameworks and equipment availability as significant challenges in MiC adoption, given its status as an innovative construction method. The regulations needed to ensure standardised MiC implementation are unavailable, while the equipment required to meet these standards has not yet been deployed for construction use in developing countries (Yang et al., 2019). Another major obstacle to MiC utilisation is the absence of government incentives and subsidies. Zhang et al. (2024) highlighted the lack of government incentives, directives, and promotion as critical factors affecting offsite prefabrication. Additionally, Moghayedi et al. (2021) states that sustainability in affordable housing has been largely ignored, mainly due to a lack of incentives for developers and challenging regulatory environments.

Drivers Influencing the Implementation of MiC

Following the review of the Literature, 33 drivers to modular integrated construction were extracted from the pertinent studies which were grouped into the following constructs: Economic Drivers, Technical Drivers, Quality Drivers, Policy Drivers, Sustainability Drivers, Market and Social Drivers, and Knowledge and Skill Driver. This is to facilitate, a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the drivers.

Economic Drivers

The impact of cost on construction projects cannot be overemphasised, as it serves as a major determinant in project execution. Research conducted in Ghana using exploratory factor analysis and PLS-SEM on construction professionals' opinions revealed several major driving factors for off-site construction adoption. These include escalating housing deficits, high costs of permanent land acquisition, expensive cast-in-situ construction methods, and the utilisation of prefabricated shipping containers for construction purposes (Guribie et al., 2022).

Technical Drivers

The technical proficiency of modular integrated construction (MiC) is crucial for its successful implementation and is heavily dependent on precise, optimal design by professionals. Expeditious approval of architectural plans before module manufacturing is paramount (Li et al., 2018). A study by Ali et al. (2023) identified that the most influential driver for MiC adoption is the optimal design of module weights and dimensions during the initial planning stages. This requires a holistic approach that aligns the architectural vision with the real-world constraints of manufacturing, transportation, and on-site assembly. Furthermore, the design process must account for longer lead times and an early design freeze, as modifications become prohibitively expensive once manufacturing has begun (Blismas et al., 2009).

Quality Drivers

In addition to productivity gains, a stakeholder response analysis by Shaker et al. (2024) using the relative importance index identified improved project quality control as one of the top five drivers for adopting modular integrated construction (MiC). To achieve the successful on-site installation of modular building components that meet these desired quality standards, it is essential to have both an experienced workforce and a technically capable supervising team.

Policy Drivers

According to Jin et al. (2021), regulative policy drivers represent the driving forces stemming from mandatory government policies and regulations that significantly impact MiC implementation during the initial phases. Wagner (2022) emphasised that government involvement in creating policies and adopting Modular Construction Systems (MCS) practices is essential for establishing acceptability and facilitating successful implementation of this construction method. Similarly, Shahzad et al. (2023) found that government support and awareness constitute the third most influential driver for MiC adoption in New Zealand's construction industry.

Sustainability Drivers

Bello et al. (2023) emphasised the significance of MiC adoption in reducing waste generation and improving the overall quality of finished buildings. Waste reduction represents a crucial consideration in Modular Construction Systems (MCS), as it helps minimise projects' environmental impact while simultaneously reducing costs.

Market and Social Drivers

Market drivers include customer responses and receptiveness to Modular Integrated Construction (MiC), which play a vital role in promoting its widespread adoption throughout the construction sector. Conversely, social drivers focus on community concerns about safety, health, and environmental effects, as well as public understanding and the industry's openness to innovative approaches. Social considerations, especially those related to worker health and safety, have been identified as having substantial impact on the uptake of modular construction methods (Kamali et al., 2018).

Knowledge and Skills Drivers

According to Kamar et al. (2010), based on survey responses from G7 contractors, the labor force required for Industrialised Building Systems (IBS) is considerably lower than that needed for traditional construction methods. However, workers involved in IBS must be trained as skilled professionals, as they need to be significantly more quality-conscious than unskilled laborers who perform manual tasks in conventional construction.

Conclusion

This study with systematic review and scientometric analysis has provided comprehensive insights into the barriers and drivers affecting Modular Integrated Construction (MiC) adoption in developing countries. Results from the scientometic analysis reveals that 71 out of 1287 keywords retrieved from 188 articles meet the criterion of minimum frequency of 5 per keyword. It also reveals that there is a growing global interest in MiC, evidenced by the substantial increase in publications to 45 articles in the year 2024, reflecting the construction industry's recognition of MiC's potential to address affordable sustainable housing challenges. Additionally, developing countries (Nigeria and South Africa) lags behind towards the adoption of MiC due to limited knowledge reflecting from minimal research work though gradually improving.

The Systematic analysis identified seven primary barrier categories that impede MiC implementation: attitudes barriers, knowledge barriers, financial barriers, design barriers, supply chain barriers, logistics and onsite barriers, and regulatory and policy barriers. These barriers collectively create a complex web of challenges that particularly affect developing nations, where traditional construction methods remain predominant despite their limitations in meeting growing housing demands.

Conversely, seven key driver categories were identified that can accelerate MiC adoption: economic drivers, technical drivers, quality drivers, policy drivers, sustainability drivers, market and social drivers, and knowledge and skills drivers. The research demonstrates that successful MiC implementation requires coordinated action across multiple domains, with government policy support emerging as the most critical enabler.

Recommendations

Based on the comprehensive analysis of barriers and drivers, the following strategic recommendations form literature are proposed to accelerate MiC adoption in developing countries:

- Government Policy and Regulatory Framework which involves the establishment regulatory frameworks specifically designed for MiC implementation, including building codes, standards, and quality assurance protocols. Implementing financial incentives such as tax reductions, subsidies, and preferential loan schemes for developers adopting MiC technologies.
- Financial and Economic Intervention which include specialised funding mechanisms through financial institutions to address high initial capital requirements; create public-private partnerships to share investment risks and reduce financial barriers.
- Education and Capacity Building by Integrate MiC curricula into engineering, architecture, and construction management programs at universities.
- Technology and Innovation Support Promote research and development initiatives focusing on MiC technologies suitable for local contexts.
- Supply Chain and Industry development by developing local supply chain networks to reduce transportation costs and delivery challenges and also create strategic partnerships between suppliers, manufacturers, and transportation.

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SACQSP2025-39

Clearing The Clutter: Identifying Waste and Determining Lean Management Responses for Quantity Surveying Firms in South Africa – A Qualitative Interview Study

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Abstract

Despite lean principles being widely recognised for organisational improvement, successful implementation remains challenging within quantity surveying consultancy firms. Effective adoption of lean principles requires management to transform the organisational culture to align with lean values. Therefore, this study aims to explore the types of waste generated and potential mitigatory lean principles that can be adopted by quantity surveying firms in South Africa. The study utilised a qualitative research methodology with a thematic analysis of collected data. Data was obtained through semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of four professionally registered quantity surveyors from various regions across South Africa. The findings reveal that management in quantity surveying firms inadvertently generates organisational and planning inadequacies, often without awareness. Additionally, the study highlights organisational performance optimisation as a way in which these firms have identified potential applications of lean principles to reduce waste within their operations. Limited sample size and industry focus may affect generalisability. Future research should expand scope and explore lean principles across sectors for broader insights on waste reduction. Implementing lean principles in quantity surveying firms can enhance efficiency, improve resource use, and increase competitiveness. Commitment to continuous improvement and cultural change is essential for success. This paper provides insights into applying lean principles in the management of quantity surveying firms.

Keywords: Lean Principles, Quantity Surveying Firm, South Africa, Value Maximisation, Waste Minimisation.

Introduction

Quantity surveying firms are facing substantial challenges that threaten their growth (Moyanga & Agboola, 2020), with management-generated waste emerging as a critical concern. These inefficiencies often arise from actions and decisions that lack clearly defined objectives and strategic intent, which are categorised as waste (Ofori-Okyere et al., 2016). Such waste not only undermines productivity but also adversely affects employee morale and overall organisational effectiveness. Leadership practices play a pivotal role in shaping employees' operational behaviour and directly influencing the firm's overall productivity. Alarmingly, the very management practices designed to facilitate progress often perpetuate a cycle of wasteful processes. The prevalence of squandered processes within management highlights the urgent need to investigate alternative management paradigms, paving the way for enhanced efficiency and effectiveness in quantity surveying firms.

The efficiency and effectiveness of quantity surveying firms are heavily influenced by leadership styles, which directly impact employee performance (Moyanga & Agboola, 2020). In developed countries, construction timelines are generally well achieved and meticulously planned; however, in developing countries, construction projects often suffer from poor planning and unmet deadlines (Kimathi, 2016). Factors such as inadequate planning, ineffective management, poor communication, limited engagement with workers, and delays in decision-making processes contribute to significant time

overruns (Akhund, 2018). Waiting, as identified by Hossain et al. (2019), is a wasteful activity that exacerbates these inefficiencies. Lean management offers a framework for organisations to optimise processes by addressing the root causes of inefficiency, building management systems and capabilities, and engaging leaders and staff in continuous improvement as part of their daily work (Shaturaev & Bekimbetova, 2021). The construction industry has embraced the lean concept, commonly referred to as lean construction, which focuses on eliminating non-value-added activities while striving to enhance value delivery throughout the construction process. This approach is recognised for its potential to facilitate the effective use of resources (Li et al., 2020).

Moreover, lean management practices have demonstrated their versatility across various sectors, including the mining industry, where significant advancements have been documented globally (OforiOkyere et al., 2016). In the agricultural sector, particularly in vertical farming, research indicates that adopting lean principles can effectively address labour challenges (De Oliveria et al., 2020). This trend underscores the growing recognition of lean methodologies, with an increasing number of manufacturing firms integrating these principles into their operations, leading to their adoption within the mining sector in Ghana (Ofori-Okyere et al., 2016). Despite the widespread application of lean methodologies since their introduction in the early 1990s, particularly in healthcare management (Marsilio & Pisarra, 2021), there remains a notable gap in their implementation and effectiveness within quantity surveying firms.

Quantity surveying firms (QSFs) require innovative approaches to effectively address the waste generated by management practices. Lean management serves as a valuable tool that empowers management to make informed decisions aimed at improving operational efficiencies. This study aims to explore the adoption of lean principles within the management of quantity surveying firms operating in South Africa. The objectives of the study are

- to identify and categorise the types of waste generated within quantity surveying firms and
- to propose strategies for implementing lean principles to reduce waste and improve performance.

By investigating current management practices, the study seeks to identify the specific sources of waste and offer lean strategies for the effective management of QSFs. Ultimately, the goal is to enhance operational efficiency within these firms, thereby contributing to their sustainability and competitive advantage in the industry (Li et al., 2020).

The following section will review literature on sources of waste and lean management strategies. After that, the methodology is explained, results are presented and discussed, and the conclusions and recommendations are outlined.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

The aim of applying lean principles is to eliminate or reduce non-value-adding activities such as waste, variation, waiting, and low standard, and promoting value-adding activities such as ensuring quality and safety, sustainability, environmental friendliness, and customer satisfaction (Ahmed et al., 2021). Although each organisation must develop its way of conducting business, the Toyota Production System (TPS) has achieved success for Toyota in terms of waste minimisation and value addition. This success makes it a solid foundation for implementing lean principles. The TPS's 14 principles are critical for achieving and responding to constraints, as they are supported by pillars of continuous improvement and respect for people (Liker, 2020). These pillars are pertinent for achieving the sustainability goals of any business.

Waste Generated by Quantity Surveying Firms

Inefficiencies within Quantity Surveying Firms (QSFs) often emerge not merely from technical limitations but from systemic management practices that disrupt workflow and reduce value creation. Al Hammadi (2016) identifies managerial arrangements as a major determinant of project timelines, noting that delays frequently stem from fragmented planning and non-standardised approval processes. Similarly, Simushi and Wium (2020) associate time overruns with reactive managerial behaviour during project execution, were shifting expectations and inadequate coordination result in rework and schedule slippages. Opeyemi and Neubert (2021) further argue that time overruns reflect

organisational misalignment, whereby inconsistent decision-making and communication impede progress relative to planned schedules.

Challenges in financial management exacerbate these inefficiencies. Durdvey (2021) observes that imprecise cost estimation and delayed financial reporting undermine budgetary control and transparency, often necessitating unplanned adjustments that distort project performance. Such practices indicate limited integration between managerial oversight and financial systems, leading to reduced accountability and predictability in resource allocation.

The organisational environment also plays a significant role in waste generation. Ebunoluwa and Ojo (2020) highlight that inadequate recognition, insufficient logistical support, and suboptimal working conditions diminish staff morale and productivity. When combined with administrative delays (Opeyemi & Neubert, 2021), these factors result in rework, waiting, and underutilisation of skilled personnel. Ofori-Okyere et al. (2016) categorise these inefficiencies, waiting, rework, over-processing, and underutilisation of human potential, as primary sources of managerial waste within professional service settings.

Collectively, these findings indicate that waste in QSFs arises from fragmented management systems, ineffective communication, and weak financial coordination. The pattern appears systemic rather than incidental, suggesting the necessity of a structured, integrative approach that aligns leadership, organisational culture, and technological infrastructure to enhance value creation. This observation provides the rationale for the application of Lean management principles.

Lean Principles for Addressing Waste in Quantity Surveying Firms

Lean management presents a structured and evidence-based framework for reducing waste by addressing inefficiencies at their source. Shaturaev and Bekimbetova (2021) emphasise that Lean extends beyond operational tools, representing a philosophy of continuous improvement that empowers organisations to refine processes systematically. Ejsmont (2020) highlights Lean's adaptability across diverse sectors, transforming conventional management systems into collaborative and learning oriented environments. Within QSFs, Lean provides an effective framework to mitigate the managerial, financial, and organisational inefficiencies identified previously.

The five core Lean principles, identifying value, optimising the value stream, ensuring flow, synchronising demand (pull), and pursuing perfection, offer targeted strategies to address the specific waste categories evident in QSFs.

1. Identifying value as defined by the customer

Defining value from the client's perspective mitigates confusion and rework arising from unclear managerial expectations. When QSFs concentrate on activities that directly contribute to client satisfaction, such as timely reporting and accurate cost advice, non-essential administrative tasks are minimised. This approach ensures that managerial attention and resources are directed toward processes that deliver measurable outcomes, addressing communication and alignment issues identified by Simushi and Wium (2020).

2. Optimising the Value Stream

Mapping all activities involved in service delivery enables firms to identify redundant steps, including repetitive documentation reviews and overly hierarchical approval procedures. Streamlining or eliminating such steps directly reduces delays and enhances cross-departmental coordination, thereby mitigating procedural waste and slow approvals highlighted by Al Hammadi (2016) and Ofori-Okyere et al. (2016).

3. Ensuring a Smooth Flow of Value

Maintaining a continuous flow of information and work prevents interruptions that often lead to time and cost overruns. Enhanced coordination and well-defined decision-making pathways, supported by digital tools and clear communication structures, minimise waiting times and duplicate efforts. This principle addresses the systemic disruptions and rework discussed in the previous theme.

4. Synchronising Demand (Pull Principle)

Aligning work activities with verified client needs ensures that resources are deployed efficiently and only when necessary. This approach reduces premature cost estimations, redundant reporting, and unnecessary administrative tasks. The pull principle promotes responsiveness and prevents overproduction, directly countering the financial mismanagement and unplanned expenditures noted by Durdvey (2021).

5. Pursuing Perfection through Continuous Improvement

Fostering a culture of ongoing evaluation and refinement ensures that improvements are sustained over time. Empowering employees to identify and address inefficiencies enhances ownership and morale, mitigating low motivation and underutilisation of talent observed by Ebunoluwa and Ojo (2020). Continuous improvement encourages proactive problem-solving, facilitating the progressive reduction and prevention of waste.

Research Methodology and Method

This research employed an exploratory qualitative inquiry to investigate how Lean principles can be adopted by the management of QSFs to mitigate waste generation. Exploratory research is a systematic process aimed at discovering novel insights within a specific research domain (Swedberg, 2020). The study adopted an interpretivist paradigm, which seeks to understand and explain human and social realities from the perspectives of participants (Gupta & Gupta, 2022). Primary data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, with narrative inquiry employed to allow participants to recount and reflect upon the professional experiences that have shaped their perspectives (Swedberg, 2020). The interviews were designed to capture specific insights relevant to the research objectives. Participants were asked questions such as “Could you provide insights into management practices or processes that contribute to inefficiencies or unnecessary time expenditure?” and “Could you elaborate on organisational practices and decisions that may lead to cost inefficiencies or waste?” They were also encouraged to illustrate these issues with examples or scenarios. Additional questions included “In your view, how could management processes be streamlined?”, “What Lean principles are currently employed to improve efficiency?”, “What strategies would you recommend to successfully implement Lean practices?”, and “What do you perceive as the impact of Lean principles on operational performance and waste reduction?” Embedding the questions in this way ensured that responses were directly aligned with the research objectives and could be linked explicitly to the discussion of findings.

Purposive sampling was used to select participants most likely to provide relevant and valuable insights, targeting quantity surveyors who had held managerial positions for at least five years and possessed a minimum of ten years of professional experience (Campbell et al., 2020). Data collection continued until saturation was reached, defined as the point at which no new information emerged, indicating that further interviews were unlikely to yield additional insights (Swedberg, 2020). A sample size of four to twelve participants was deemed sufficient for achieving saturation and capturing rich qualitative data (Saunders et al., 2016).

The collected data were analysed using inductive thematic analysis, supported by ATLAS.ti v23, a computer-aided qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) that documents and organises the analytical process (Brito et al., 2016). The analysis followed the framework established by Terry et al. (2017), beginning with accurate transcription of the audio recordings, followed by a thorough review of transcripts to ensure familiarity and correct errors. The first round of coding involved assigning relevant codes to specific quotations, while the second round merged similar codes into categories, which were subsequently organised under broader themes to construct the research narrative. To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, measures were taken to enhance both validity and reliability. Credibility was supported by collecting data from participants with extensive managerial experience and continuing data collection until saturation was achieved, ensuring that all relevant perspectives were captured (Ahmed, 2024; Noble & Smith, 2025). Dependability was strengthened using ATLAS.ti and a structured coding process, creating a detailed audit trail that allows verification and replication of findings (Christou, 2025). Confirmability was addressed by systematically coding and documenting the analytical process to reduce researcher bias and ensure that the findings reflect participants’ perspectives rather than the researcher’s assumptions (Johnson, 2020).

Research Results and Discussion

Responses

Four participants positively engaged with the study and were successfully enrolled, consistent with the guidance of Saunders et al. (2016), who recommend a sample size of four to twelve participants for qualitative studies seeking depth rather than breadth. Although the number of participants was small, this is appropriate within interpretivist and narrative inquiry research, which prioritises rich, contextual understanding over generalisability (Boddy, 2019; Vasileiou et al., 2018). The limited sample was further justified by the homogeneity of the target population, senior quantity surveyors in managerial roles, and the focused scope of the research, both of which enhance the depth and relevance of insights obtained (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Data collection continued until saturation, which was reached after the third interview; no new themes or insights emerged (Guest et al., 2020). According to Lowe et al. (2017), saturation is not determined by a fixed number of participants but rather by the redundancy and conceptual depth of the information collected.

Profile of Respondents

To ensure the reliability and relevance of the study, participants were selected based on their extensive professional experience, specifically having more than ten years in the quantity surveying industry and at least five years in senior management positions within their respective firms, as presented in Table 1. The selected participants represented a diverse range of organisational contexts, thereby enriching the study's depth and transferability. One participant was drawn from a Northern Cape - based firm specialising in mining projects, another from a smaller commercial quantity surveying firm in Bloemfontein, while the remaining two participants were from medium-sized firms located in Cape Town and Johannesburg that also operate internationally. This variation in organisational size, location, and market focus provided a balanced perspective on management practices and lean adoption, strengthening the dependability and contextual relevance of the findings as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Respondents Profile

		Mandatory Criteria			
Participation Ref	Position	A1	A2	A3	Years of Experience
P1	Chief Executive Officer	x	x	x	15 years
P2	Director	x	x	x	25 year
P3	Chief Executive Officer	x	x	x	13 years
P4	Chief Executive Officer	x	x	x	15 years

A1: Professional registration with SACQSP
A2 Has more than 5 years in the management role
A3: A member of ASAQS

Waste Generated in the Management of Quantity Surveying Firms

The following section reveals the singular theme of generated waste that was composed of organisational and planning inadequacies encountered within the management of Quantity surveying firms, as identified through thematic analysis.

Generated Waste

Table 2 Theme 1 Categories and Codes

Theme	Category	Codes
Generated waste	Organisational inadequacies	Time waste (P3, P4) Lack of Standardisation (P2)
	Planning inadequacies	Poor planning (P3, P4) Inefficient resource allocation (P1, P3, P4)

The first category of organisational inadequacies is discussed hereafter. Time waste was one of the key factors identified as a significant source of waste, with respondents noting that it arises from various management inefficiencies, *"Why is the director doing measuring on metrics? Why is the director the one that's busy on... unless they need to quality check certain work, but they cannot do the day-todays of measurements and bending schedules and all these things"-P4*. Managerial arrangements are one of the factors that affect project completion time (Al Hammadi, 2016). It can be considered time waste when engaging in activities that do not align with your metrics, as this detracts from productive work. The involvement of the manager in performing the work may stem from the need for rework, which represents a form of time waste, as noted by respondent P3. ‘*'Okay, now, I think the biggest thing if, if you call time waste is if you rework"-P3*.

One of the factors contributing to this is a lack of standardisation. *"I need them to know the way to approach it so that when I need to review it, I don't take a day because then it would be a waste. I can't take a day to review, uh, and try to figure out where did they get that"-P3*. A lack of standardisation is closely linked to time waste; without standardised processes, significant time is wasted, *''And I picked up, um, what is causing quite a bit of, um, wastage, if I can put it that way? Is that, um, the lack of standard processes and procedures and documentation, um, being available.''-P2*. Establishing standard procedures and documentation is the responsibility of management, as opined by Al Hammadi (2016). The absence of such measures indicates a lack of accountability and contributes to wastefulness within the organisation.

The second category was composed of planning inadequacies. These types of waste are caused by underlying factors, with planning being one of the major contributing factors. Poor planning, poor management, poor communication, poor engagement with workers and delays in decision- making processes are components that lead to time overruns (Simushi & Wium, 2020), Respondents concur with the assertions made by the author. *''there's no productivity. And productivity comes from planning as well. And a lot of people, be it senior or junior or executive or a lot of people struggle from planning, okay, that's another time waster.''-P4*. They further emphasise that poor planning leads to the waste of time on unnecessary activities. *"if you don't plan properly before you start, if you go down the proverbial road and say, this is how I'm going to build my block, with not all the information required''-P3*.

"Time on so you don't waste time on unnecessary things. Yes. You know, and you as a as an executive or a manager, you need to distinguish between, um, what's critical and what's non- critical.''-P4. Engaging in unnecessary activities within management demonstrates inefficient resource allocation, resulting in junior staff being underutilised and contributing to waste. *"...it would happen that work gets allocated to two people, and between those two people, person A would think that person B is going to look at a certain, um, task, and person B thinks that person A is going to look at the same task and then when you get to the end, um, no one's looked at it and you need to go back'"-P1*. When multiple individuals are assigned the same task, yet none complete it, this indicates inefficiency in resource allocation. This is supported by Ofori-Okyere et al. (2016) when management do not pay attention to human resource in the firm, and this initiates wasteful processes; workers will not perform at their best thus making errors and causing the back and forth of rectifying them affecting the time.

Considering these findings, it becomes evident that addressing inefficiencies requires a systematic, principle-based approach. Lean principles, which have extensively validated across various industries, offer a structured methodology for minimising waste, enhancing productivity, and optimising organisational performance. The following table provides an overview of how these lean principles can be operationalised in this context.

Strategies to Mitigate Waste

This objective generated a singular theme of organisational performance optimisation. The category focusing of the implementation of lean principles is discussed hereafter.

Table 3 Theme, category and codes

Theme	Category	Codes
Organisational performance optimisation	Lean principles	1. Standardisation (P4, P3) 2. Efficiency (P2, P1) 3. Training -Continuous Improvement (P4)

Understanding and prioritising customer value is the cornerstone of lean thinking. Firms must differentiate between activities that directly contribute to customer satisfaction and those that generate waste. As P4 noted, *"Need to distinguish between, um, what's critical and what's non-critical."*

This mindset enables organisations to eliminate non-value-adding tasks and focus on critical processes that enhance productivity and quality. According to Netland (2016), value streaming involves identifying all steps in a process to separate value-adding from wasteful activities, thereby improving efficiency.

Similarly, P3 highlighted that *"the way we as an organisation can limit waste is by investing time and resources into your candidate so that they know exactly how you want to approach a certain... document."*

This illustrates that value begins with clarity, equipping employees to deliver outcomes that meet precise client expectations. Lean emphasises the uninterrupted flow of work to ensure that value is continuously delivered. Standardisation plays a critical role here. Establishing Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) ensures consistency, reduces confusion, and enables smooth workflow transitions.

As P3 put it, *"If I have a review box, that we all measure the same standard and the same templates."*

Similarly, P2 emphasised efficiency through shared documentation: *"Provide standard documentation and procedures and put it in a manual for everyone... to ensure that they can do their work more efficiently."*

Standardisation leads to predictable outcomes, reduced rework, and organisational improvement (OforiOkyere et al., 2016). The structured review process described by P4, *"If I need to approve your document, I need it two days prior… for quality check and changes"* — exemplifies controlled workflow and accountability.

Ultimately, as Kumar et al. (2022) suggest, flow arranges value-generating stages in a tight sequence, ensuring seamless product or service delivery. This was evident when P1 remarked, *"We basically halved our staff, but we're still running at the same capacity,"* illustrating improved throughput and resource utilisation.

The pull principle focuses on producing only what is needed, when it is needed, thus reducing overproduction and excess capacity. Lean thinking discourages bloated teams or redundant processes that fail to add value. As highlighted by P1's experience of maintaining productivity with fewer staff, lean systems emphasise responsiveness and precision over volume. Managers should therefore allocate resources to roles that add measurable value, aligning team size and structure with actual workflow demand. This adaptive resourcing ensures that every activity is initiated by customer or process demand, not arbitrary scheduling. Achieving perfection requires a culture of continuous improvement (Kaizen). Lean organisations constantly revisit processes to identify inefficiencies and opportunities for refinement.

P4 described this dynamic environment: *"We have continuous growth of certain individuals. And then we also do in-house training every Friday."*

Such initiatives align with Netland's (2016) view that lean's distinctiveness lies in empowering front-line workers to manage and continuously improve their work. By investing in employee development and iterative learning, organisations embed adaptability into their culture. As processes evolve, so too does capability, creating a feedback loop of innovation and improvement. This fosters long-term sustainability, operational excellence, and enhanced client satisfaction.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore the types of waste generated within quantity surveying firms in South Africa and to identify lean principles that could effectively mitigate such inefficiencies. The findings revealed that waste primarily arises from organisational and planning inadequacies, including time waste, poor standardisation, and inefficient resource allocation, all which stem from fragmented management systems and limited process alignment. These inefficiencies often originate from management practices in which senior leaders become overly involved in operational tasks rather than focusing on strategic leadership and oversight, resulting in a lack of coordination, duplication of effort,

and inconsistent communication across teams. The findings align with the theoretical underpinning of the Toyota Production System, which focuses on waste minimisation and value addition by responding to constraints within a particular organisation.

The study further established that lean management principles provide a valuable framework for addressing these challenges. Specifically, the principles of value, value stream, flow, pull, and perfection were found to be directly applicable to quantity surveying practice. Their implementation can promote standardisation, operational efficiency, and continuous improvement, thereby reducing waste and enhancing organisational performance. From these findings, several strategies were proposed to guide lean integration, including the development of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), enhanced communication channels, the use of value stream mapping to identify non-value-adding activities, and the institutionalisation of continuous training and professional development to foster a culture of improvement.

Overall, the study concludes that adopting lean management principles can transform quantity surveying firms by embedding a culture of efficiency, adaptability, and continuous learning. Lean practices empower organisations to reduce inefficiencies, streamline workflows, and sustain competitiveness in a dynamic construction environment. The findings contribute both theoretical and practical insights by extending lean thinking into the underexplored context of quantity surveying consultancy, offering a pathway for improving managerial effectiveness and organisational performance.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, quantity surveying firms should adopt targeted and practical strategies to embed lean management principles within their daily operations. A key starting point is the development of standardised operating procedures (SOPs) for core processes such as measurement reviews, document approvals, and cost reporting. These SOPs should define clear responsibilities, timelines, and quality checkpoints to prevent duplication of effort and rework, issues that were repeatedly highlighted by participants.

Secondly, firms should implement structured planning frameworks supported by digital tools such as project management software or Building Information Modelling (BIM) integration to improve scheduling, task allocation, and progress tracking. This would directly address the planning inadequacies and inefficient resource use identified in the study.

Thirdly, targeted lean training programmes should be introduced, focusing on practical skills such as value stream mapping, process flow analysis, and waste identification tailored to quantity surveying workflows. Training should begin with management teams to ensure that leadership models lean behaviour, reinforcing the cultural shift required for sustainability.

To enhance communication efficiency, firms should establish regular coordination sessions and feedback loops across management levels. For example, weekly review meetings with standardised templates for reporting can ensure consistent information flow, reduce waiting times for approvals, and encourage proactive problem-solving.

Finally, a continuous improvement programme should be institutionalised, involving periodic reflection sessions where staff identify process inefficiencies and propose lean-based solutions. This can be reinforced by mentorship structures, where senior managers guide junior staff in applying lean concepts to everyday tasks, ensuring knowledge transfer and behavioural consistency across the firm.

By implementing these specific actions, standardisation, structured planning, lean-based training, communication protocols, digital monitoring, and continuous improvement, quantity surveying firms can move beyond conceptual alignment with lean principles toward measurable performance improvement, reduced waste, and enhanced client satisfaction.

Limitations

This study was limited by its small sample size (n = 4) and its focus on quantity surveying firms within a single country (South Africa). Additionally, the research adopted a senior management lens, which may not fully capture the perspectives of junior or mid-level employees who also experience waste-related

challenges in practice. As a result, the findings, while valuable and insightful, may not be generalisable across all firm types or geographic contexts. Future research should therefore expand the sample to include a broader range of participants across different managerial levels, firm sizes, and countries to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how lean principles can be adapted and institutionalised across the global quantity surveying profession.

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SACQSP2025-54

Preamble Interlocking Concrete Pavement: A Possible Sustainable Solution to Urban Area Flooding in South Africa

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Abstract

Urbanisation has led to an increase in various types of developments and supporting infrastructure, including roads, parking areas, and driveways, in both formal and informal areas. The rise in development has led to the introduction of more impermeable surfaces, which are believed to result in increased stormwater runoff rather than ground infiltration. This runoff is often conveyed through a combination of stormwater channels and pipes, eventually leading to nearby streams and rivers to avoid flooding within urban areas. Due to the perceived increased runoff and thus increased volumes, existing infrastructure needs to be upgraded, which is not always sustainable. Industry researchers have therefore formulated various ways to reduce the pressure on the existing infrastructure by introducing more. Despite their potential, the adoption of PICP in South Africa remains limited. Existing local research has primarily focused on pavement performance and water quality impacts, while international studies support PICP's effectiveness, the lack of widespread implementation in South Africa raises questions about industry perceptions and barriers to adoption. This study explored PICP as a runoff solution as well as the perception of the industry in the adoption of PICP by industry professionals. The study revealed that, based on the methods used to measure the capabilities of Permeable Interlocking Concrete Pavements, permeable paving can increase infiltration and thus reduce runoff when the right design, construction method, and maintenance plan are implemented. The study identified significant barriers to industry adoption of PICP, particularly among senior professionals and property developers

Keywords: Sustainable Drainage Systems, Stormwater, Qualitative Research, South Africa.

Introduction

Flooding causes loss of life and worsens poverty (Byaruhanga et al., 2025). While urban development increases the flood peak discharges (Loots et al., 2022). Urbanisation has significantly altered natural hydrological processes, increasing surface runoff and elevating flood risks in urban areas (Hu et al., 2020). These changes contribute to erosion and deteriorating water quality (Liu & Armitage, 2020) and increase pollution (Robertson et al., 2019). Moreover, inadequate implementation of sustainable development practices exacerbates climate change impacts, with far-reaching environmental, economic, social, and health consequences (Mompati et al., 2024). Property development typically disrupts the hydrological and hydraulic characteristics of an area (Department of Human Settlements, 2005). In natural systems, approximately 85–90% of rainfall returns to the atmosphere via evapotranspiration, 4–5% infiltrates the ground, and the remaining 8–10% becomes surface runoff or shallow groundwater flow (Department of Human Settlements, 2019).

By 2023, over 68.82% of South Africa's population resided in urban areas (Stats SA, 2023). This rapid urban expansion has led to increased impermeable surfaces, such as roads and pavements, which reduce infiltration and intensify runoff (Monyake & Armitage, 2023). Consequently, developments are often subject to regulatory constraints aimed at mitigating flood risks (Loots et al., 2022; National Water Act – Act 36 of 1998). Traditionally, stormwater is managed through pipe and canal networks that discharge into nearby watercourses, subject to approvals from authorities such as the Department of Water and Sanitation. Developers are required to incorporate temporary storage solutions to manage increased flood peaks and protect downstream infrastructure (Van Vuuren, 2012).

Permeable Paving Systems (PPS), including Permeable Interlocking Concrete Pavements (PICP), provide a sustainable option for stormwater management. PICP is made of concrete pavers separated by joints filled with crushed aggregate, which allows water to infiltrate. These systems are suitable for roads, parking lots, and walkways (Monyake & Armitage 2023). Despite their potential, the use of PICP in South Africa remains limited. Local research has mainly focused on pavement performance and water quality effects (Monyake, 2023; Liu & Armitage, 2020; Kazoka, 2020; Schieritz, 2016; Senbore & Oke, 2021). While international studies support PICP's effectiveness, the limited adoption in South Africa raises questions about industry perceptions and barriers to implementation. This study aims to examine PICP as a runoff solution and to explore the industry's perception of adopting PICP by professionals.

Literature Review

Impact of Urban Development on Stormwater Runoff

Property development is the process involving the changing or intensification of land use to produce buildings (Reed et al., 2021). Building of roads, erection of buildings, and general improvement of factors that cause inconvenience fall under development (Department of Human Settlements, 2005). This development typically changes the hydrological and hydraulic properties of an area (Department of Human Settlements, 2005).

Stormwater is rainwater or melted snow that runs off streets, lawns, and other sites (Department of Human Settlements, 2019). In natural streams, about 85% to 90% of rainfall is returned to the atmosphere through evapotranspiration and some (4% to 5%) through infiltration, and the remainder (8% to 10%) as runoff or shallow groundwater flow towards streams and rivers (Department of Human Settlements, 2019).

Urban development in South Africa has altered hydrological dynamics, resulting in increased surface runoff, accelerated catchment response times, and diminished base flow volumes. Loots et al. (2022) highlight that these hydrological shifts have not been adequately examined within the context of rapidly urbanising regions in developing countries, where unique socio-environmental characteristics may influence stormwater behaviour.

Effective stormwater management in urban development necessitates the integration of multiple control measures aimed at regulating runoff volumes, enhancing water quality, and mitigating pollutant loads. According to the Department of Human Settlements (2019), a range of stormwater management control measures (SWCMs) are available, including detention and retention ponds, bioretention systems, rainwater harvesting, infiltration trenches, sand filters, green roofs and buildings, and Permeable Paving Systems (PPS).

Among the PPS options, three primary types are commonly employed: permeable pavers, specifically Permeable Interlocking Concrete Pavement (PICP), porous asphalt, and permeable concrete. As noted by Zanoni et al. (2019), these systems facilitate infiltration and contribute to reduced surface runoff and improved stormwater quality. In response to increasing urban flood risks, South Africa has begun to adopt Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems (SuDS), which incorporate PPS as a key strategy. These systems promote the infiltration of stormwater through the surface layer into the underlying aggregate structure, thereby attenuating flow and supporting downstream discharge management (Monyake & Armitage, 2023).

PICP, in particular, has emerged as the most widely implemented form of PPS in South Africa. It comprises concrete block pavers with engineered grooves that create voids for water infiltration. These pavers are installed over a multi-layered pavement structure consisting of coarse sand, base and subbase aggregates, geotextile membranes, and subsurface drainage systems, as demonstrated in Figure 1 below. This configuration enables effective filtration and attenuation of stormwater, making PICP suitable for a variety of urban applications, including roads, parking areas, and pedestrian pathways (Monyake & Armitage, 2023).

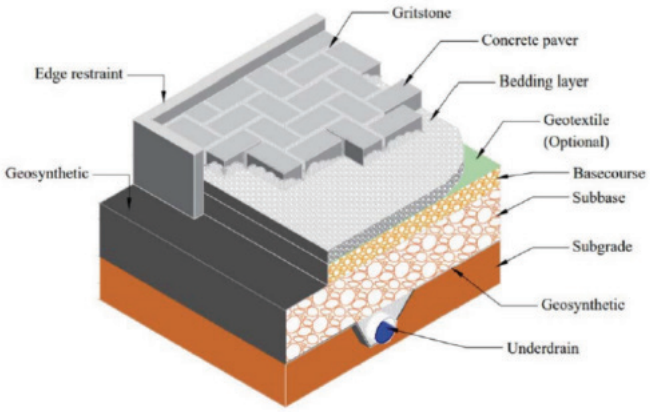

Figure 1 Typical PICP Section (Monyake & Armitage 2023)

Empirical studies (Wheater & Evans, 2009; Seidl et al., 2020; James & von Langsdorff, 2003) have shown that the replacement of permeable surfaces with impervious materials leads to reduced infiltration and heightened surface flow, thereby diminishing natural attenuation processes. Moreover, Wheater and Evans (2009) argue that the redirection of runoff through engineered conveyance systems such as pipes and canals modifies flow paths and velocities, potentially exacerbating downstream flood risks.

Contrastingly, Miller and Hess (2017) contend that stormwater responses in developing urban contexts may diverge from those observed in developed nations. Factors such as the construction of boundary walls, alterations to natural topography, and inadequate maintenance of downstream infrastructure introduce complexities that influence retention and attenuation capacities. Van Vuuren (2012) further notes that solid boundary walls can induce temporary storage effects, thereby altering expected hydrological outcomes.

Loots et al. (2022) underscore the necessity of conducting catchment-specific analyses to accurately assess the impacts of urbanisation on hydrological parameters. They advocate for the enumeration of diverse South African urban land use typologies to facilitate a more granular understanding of runoff volumes, base flow variations, and flood peak intensities. Their findings suggest that increased total flow volumes are primarily attributable to urban expansion yet caution against generalising these results without accounting for the heterogeneity of catchment characteristics across the country.

Industry Adoption of the use of PICP

Since its initial installation in South Africa in 2008, Permeable Interlocking Concrete Pavement (PICP) has gained increasing attention as a potential solution for sustainable stormwater management. Despite its theoretical benefits, including improved water quality and reduced runoff volumes, its adoption within the construction and development industry remains limited. This limited uptake is largely attributed to concerns regarding clogging, intensive maintenance requirements, and a general scepticism about its long-term effectiveness. The lack of widespread implementation may also reflect insufficient education and awareness among industry professionals regarding the functionality and benefits of PICP.

The slow integration of Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems (SuDS) into South African practice further compounds this issue. Although SuDS research began in the 1990s, much of it has been site-specific and narrowly focused, limiting its applicability to broader urban contexts. Moreover, several studies have identified methodological limitations in assessing the hydrological performance of PICP, particularly in relation to runoff reduction and infiltration capacity (Van Vuuren et al., 2021; Monyake & Armitage, 2023).

The implementation of PICP systems involves three critical phases: design, construction, and maintenance. During the design phase, key considerations include site layout (informed by topographical surveys), subsurface conditions (determined through geotechnical investigations), and hydrological parameters (based on accurate rainfall and runoff data). The selection of appropriate

paver types, structural load requirements, and edge restraints is essential to ensure system integrity. A comprehensive maintenance plan must also be developed to support long-term functionality.

Monyake and Armitage (2023) advise against the use of PICP in high-traffic zones, dusty environments, or areas with dense tree cover, as these conditions can accelerate system failure. They further recommend limiting the "run-on factor," defined as the ratio of impermeable area draining into the PICP to the area of the PICP itself, to a maximum of 2.0 to prevent hydraulic overload. Additional design considerations include maintaining a maximum slope of 5% to promote infiltration, avoiding fine materials in base and subbase layers, and incorporating geotextile membranes to separate structural layers. Sediment traps and the proper drainage orientation of adjacent buildings are also necessary to maintain system performance.

During the construction phase, the design engineer must approve a detailed work plan, and a stormwater management strategy should be implemented to divert runoff from the future PICP area. Contractors are responsible for ensuring that construction materials are protected from contamination and that the installation site remains clean throughout the process to prevent premature clogging.

Globally, PICP has demonstrated effectiveness in promoting infiltration, reducing runoff volumes, and improving water quality. Comparative studies have shown that permeable paving systems discharge significantly less water than traditional pavements and contribute positively to vegetation and ecological health (James & von Langsdorff, 2003; Wheater & Evans, 2009; Seidl et al., 2020).

Nonetheless, several disadvantages have been identified. Maintenance and operational challenges remain the primary barriers to widespread adoption. Muttuvelu et al. (2022) argue that PICP may not be economically viable when evaluated against other SuDS options, such as bioretention cells, which are often simpler and more cost-effective. Abdeljaber et al. (2022) agree with this; in their study, they analysed the cost-integrated life cycle to evaluate the financial impact on stormwater management systems, on PICP, Bioretention Cells (BC), and Infiltrated Tenches (IT). The results found that PICP had the lowest reduced run-offs compared to BC and IT. Furthermore, PICP had the highest net present cost compared to BC and IT. Permeable paving systems generally require more intensive planning and maintenance than conventional alternatives, which increases lifecycle costs (Zanoni et al., 2019). Among permeable pavement types, permeable asphalt has been identified as the most economical.

Clogging remains a significant technical concern. However, research suggests that appropriate design interventions, such as the use of double-layered systems and routine maintenance, can mitigate clogging and extend system lifespan (Sanicola et al., 2018).

Sustainable Stormwater Management and Relevant Policy And Legislation

Stormwater Management in South African urban areas particularly focuses on channelling the collected runoff to the nearest watercourse and little focus on preserving the environment (Armitage et al., 2013). This oversight has resulted in severe effects on the environment through erosion, siltation, and pollution (Armitage et al., 2013). Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems (SuDS) can be defined as the attempt to administer surface water drainage systems sustainably in line with the principle of Sustainable Development (Armitage et al., 2013). Since research of sustainable drainage systems only started taking place in the 1990s in South Africa, and has been site-specific, there has been a limited uptake in practice (Gauteng Provincial Government, 2020).

South Africa has dedicated itself to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), aiming to address poverty and inequality alongside climate change issues (Gauteng Provincial Government, 2020). SuDS is included, although not specifically, in several of the SDGs, which include Goal 6: Clean water and Sanitation, Goal 9: Industry Innovation and Infrastructure, Goal 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities, Goal 13: Climate Action, and Goal 15: Life on Land (Gauteng Provincial Government, 2020).

Government departments must coordinate to promote Sustainable Stormwater management (Gauteng Provincial Government, 2020). Sections 24, 26, and 27(1)(b) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa all talk to protecting the environment, sustainable human settlements, and food and water security, which are realised in the implementation of sustainable stormwater management in the urban environment, although not explicitly refer to SuDS (Gauteng Provincial Government, 2020).

The National Environmental Management Act (NEMA) 107 of 1998 also does not make a direct reference to stormwater, drainage, or runoff; however, it does prescribe that an environmental authorisation can only be given if the potential impact of alternatives to the activity on the environment are kept to a minimum (Gauteng Provincial Government, 2020). Furthermore, the National Water Act 36 of 1998 (Water Act), in essence, requires that water resources be protected and used sustainably. The Water Act also sets requirements that a project should meet to obtain a Water Use License, which relates to the discharge of stormwater, particularly near streams. Furthermore, it stresses the monitoring of water courses, which should be used to implement SuDS and be able to determine their consequences. The Act also mentions that it needs to start Catchment Management Agencies (aimed at developing catchment management strategies for the water resources within the area) even though some have already been established. Understanding the catchment context is therefore important to ensure that SuDS designs make an impactful contribution to water resources management. This is in line with the approach taken by Van Vuuren (2012) and Loots et al. (2022) in assessing the effect of development on the various catchments to determine their true impact on reducing stormwater runoff and other aspects. It is therefore important that the measurement of the effectiveness of in reducing runoff, SuDS takes this approach into account.

Research Methodology and Method

Research Approach

The purpose of this study was to explore the PICP as a runoff solution, as well as the perception of the industry in the adoption of PICP by industry professionals. Although PICP has become more popular than in 2008, when it was first used in South Africa, based on available research, it is still not as widely used, considering its perceived sustainability benefits. The study adopted a qualitative approach through semi-structured interviews to explore the perception of the industry on PICP as a sustainable solution for runoffs and the adoption of PICP in the industry.

Data Collection

A literature review and semi-structured interviews were conducted with 6 industry professionals, including engineers (water resource engineers, stormwater engineers, hydrologists), stormwater and PICP researchers, manufacturers of PICP, and developers. The purposive sampling method is commonly used in qualitative research, allowing the researcher to select the participants based on their knowledge and experience of the phenomena being investigated (Palinkas et al., 2015). A sample of 15 professionals was initially planned for; however, due to time constraints and the unavailability of professionals that met the criteria, only 6 professionals were interviewed.

Data Analysis

The data was analysed using the thematic analysis and following the Braun and Clarke (2006) six-step phase. The researchers familiarised themselves with the data, codes were manually formulated, and then themes were generated using those codes. The key themes are perceived effectiveness of PICP, research gaps and needs, alternative sustainable methods, policy and governance support, and industry adoption of PICP.

Results

Table 1 Participants

Participant	Industry	Profession/Role	Years Experience
A	Engineering	Professional Engineer/ Water Resources management professional/ Hydrologist	34 (In total)
B	Engineering	Researcher	4 (in PICP)
C	Engineering	Researcher	10 (in PICP)
D	Engineering	Professional Engineer	38 (In total)
E	Property and Construction	Manufacturer	5 (In PICP Manufacturing)
F	Engineering	Professional Engineer/ Academic	42 (in total) 38 (in Academia)

Theme 1: Perceived Effectiveness of PICP

The study revealed a consensus among participants regarding the potential of Permeable Interlocking Concrete Pavement (PICP) as a sustainable solution for stormwater management. However, this potential was tempered by a shared perception that its actual significance in practice remains ambiguous. While all participants acknowledged the theoretical benefits of PICP, several expressed reservations about its real-world performance, particularly in diverse urban contexts.

Professional C articulated that failures in PICP systems are seldom absolute; rather, they tend to be partial and often stem from institutional and operational discontinuities. He noted that the initial enthusiasm and oversight provided by project champions frequently dissipates due to staff turnover, promotions, or relocation, resulting in inadequate maintenance and oversight: *"At the beginning of a project, there are people who care about its performance. However, what typically happens is that these champions leave and there's no adequate handover."*

Professionals B and D emphasised the multifactorial nature of PICP performance, citing variables such as slope, storm duration, clogging potential, climatic conditions, vegetation, run-on factor, and traffic load. Professional D cautioned against a universal application of PICP, arguing that *"we could not just apply a blanket approach to the problem even though the phenomenon of development increasing runoff was not always the case."* Participant E concurred, attributing PICP ineffectiveness in certain areas to deficiencies in design, construction, and maintenance practices.

A particularly critical perspective was offered by Participant F, who disclosed that his interest in PICP stemmed not from its perceived superiority, but from its problematic implementation: *"I didn't study the use of permeable paving because it was the best solution it was one of the worst solutions that professionals were messing up, giving sustainable drainage solutions a bad name."* He further observed that successful PICP applications were largely confined to "clean" urban environments, suggesting limited suitability in areas with high dust levels, pollen-producing vegetation, and elevated run-on factors.

Theme 2: Research Gaps and Needs

The study revealed a unanimous view among participants that the current body of quantitative research on Permeable Interlocking Concrete Pavement (PICP) in South Africa is insufficient. While international studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of PICP, participants expressed concern regarding the applicability of these findings to the South African context due to climatic, geographic, and infrastructural differences. Participant D emphasised the importance of longitudinal data collection, stating, *"For any research, there's a need to collect data over time to determine if it truly is effective,"* and questioned whether international results could be reliably extrapolated to local conditions. Participant C further asserted that engineers have a professional obligation to contribute to the development of the field through empirical research.

Theme 3: Alternative Sustainable Methods

In addition to PICP, participants identified several alternative sustainable methods that may offer more practical and context-sensitive solutions for stormwater management. Participant F advocated for the use of bioretention cells, swales, rain gardens, and rainwater harvesting systems, particularly when integrated with underground storage tanks. He emphasised that maintenance should not be a deterrent to implementation, arguing that *"a good system would be easiest to maintain and., can be done by anyone."*

Moreover, the participant challenged the commonly cited constraint of limited space, stating that *"the issue of space is usually cited but this is a lie, particularly based on the amount of space dedicated to lawn space and even traffic circles in development."* This critique underscores the need for more innovative and efficient land-use planning in urban developments.

Theme 4: Policy and Governance Support

The study revealed concern regarding the adequacy of policy frameworks and governance mechanisms supporting sustainable stormwater infrastructure in South Africa. Five participants

expressed that current policies do not sufficiently hold professionals accountable for the long-term performance of systems such as PICP.

Participant D noted that environmental authorisation processes often delay engineering design timelines, stating, *"So much time in the design process has been dedicated to environmental authorisations, that time to design is shortened significantly."* This suggests a misalignment between regulatory procedures and practical implementation. Participant F emphasised the limitations of relying on central government to address micro-level infrastructure challenges, while Participant A argued that without robust quantitative evidence, it is difficult to justify policy interventions specific to PICP.

Theme 5: Industry Buy-In and Adoption

The study identified significant barriers to industry adoption of PICP, particularly among senior professionals and property developers. Participant E observed a *"general resistance to change from the older engineers," and noted that many professionals "didn't seem to get the concept and weren't willing to try because they felt it is an expensive system."*

Participant F provided insight into the economic motivations of developers, stating, *"Property Developers aim to make money, building at least cost and selling at the maximum price."* This profit-driven approach often leads to the dismissal of green technologies due to perceived cost implications, despite evidence suggesting that such assumptions may be unfounded. The findings suggest that increased quantitative research and demonstrable performance data are essential to shift industry perceptions and foster broader adoption of PICP.

Discussions

Urban flooding in South Africa remains a critical and escalating concern, driven by rapid urbanisation, the proliferation of impervious surfaces, and inadequacies in conventional stormwater infrastructure. The literature strongly advocates for the adoption of Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems (SuDS), such as Permeable Interlocking Concrete Pavement (PICP), which have demonstrated potential in enhancing infiltration and mitigating runoff volumes. However, despite international evidence supporting the efficacy of PICP, its uptake within South Africa.

Qualitative insights from industry professionals reinforce this complexity. While the theoretical benefits of PICP are widely acknowledged, its practical effectiveness is perceived as inconsistent and highly dependent on site-specific variables, including slope, rainfall characteristics, vegetation, and traffic intensity. Failures in PICP systems are frequently attributed to discontinuities in maintenance and oversight, particularly when project champions depart without adequate succession planning. This aligns with existing literature, which cautions that although PICP offers hydrological benefits, its performance is often compromised by operational and contextual challenges (Muttuvelu et al., 2022).

A significant gap identified in both the literature and stakeholder feedback is the absence of robust, long-term quantitative research tailored to South African conditions. Current studies are geographically concentrated in metropolitan areas such as Johannesburg and Cape Town, leaving other provinces underrepresented. Moreover, policy and governance frameworks were found to be insufficiently supportive of sustainable stormwater practices, with regulatory processes.

Industry adoption of PICP remains constrained by entrenched perceptions of high costs and resistance to innovation, particularly among senior engineers and property developers. These findings underscore the need for targeted education, demonstrable performance data, and policy incentives to facilitate broader acceptance of PICP and other SuDS technologies.

Conclusion

The objective of the study was to investigate PICP as a runoff solution, as well as the perception of the industry in the adoption of PICP by industry professionals. The PICP presents a promising avenue for sustainable stormwater management; however, its successful implementation requires a multifaceted approach. This includes strengthening research efforts, enhancing policy support, promoting industry education, and ensuring context-sensitive design and maintenance strategies. Future research should focus on developing reliable performance metrics and expanding case studies beyond specific provincial sites to build a more comprehensive understanding of PICP's role in South African urban

resilience. In terms of the perception of industry adoption of PICP, industry professionals are concerned with factors such as high costs and a lack of demonstrable performance data to adopt PICP as an alternative stormwater system management. PICP is more costly compared to other SuDs options. Maintenance and operational challenges are the primary barriers to adoption of the PICP system. Clogging remains a significant technical concern.

Recommendations

In light of the findings from both the literature review and qualitative analysis, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the implementation and evaluation of Permeable Interlocking Concrete Pavement (PICP) and other sustainable urban drainage systems (SuDS) in South Africa:

- Context-Specific Application of PICP
  PICP should be regarded as one of several viable SuDS options rather than a universal solution. Its application must be tailored to the specific hydrological, geographical, and urban development conditions of each site. A blanket approach, as commonly applied in conventional stormwater design, risks inefficiency and system failure in unsuitable contexts.
- Advancement of Performance Measurement Techniques
  Researchers are encouraged to develop and refine methodologies for assessing the efficiency of permeable paving systems. Improved measurement tools and protocols will strengthen the reliability of research findings and address current limitations that affect the perceived credibility of PICP performance.
- Expansion of Geographic Research Scope
  Future studies should extend beyond the predominant focus on Johannesburg and Cape Town. Empirical data from other provinces is essential to capture the diversity of urban environments and to inform regionally appropriate design and policy interventions. The absence of such data represents a significant gap in the current body of knowledge.
- Institutional Continuity and System Stewardship
  The long-term success of PICP systems depends on consistent oversight and maintenance. It is recommended that each project designate a responsible individual or “champion” to oversee system performance. Furthermore, mechanisms should be established to ensure continuity in stewardship.

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SACQSP2025-66

Household Adoption of Solar Panels in South Africa: Insights for Quantity Surveyors in Sustainable Energy Planning

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Abstract

South Africa faces the dual challenges of an unreliable electricity supply and the urgent need to transition to cleaner energy systems. Building on data from a Masters' research study on household willingness to pay (WTP) for solar PV installations (Baloyi, 2024), this paper examines the role of Quantity Surveyors (QSs) in promoting the adoption of solar technologies. Using the Theory of Planned Behaviour TPB to explore socio-economic, psychological, and informational influences on household decisions, the study analysed responses from 262 participants across all nine provinces. Factor and regression analyses revealed that perceived value, social influence, and emotional motivation are stronger predictors of WTP than household income, while affordability, technical uncertainty, and information gaps remain key barriers. The findings highlight that successful solar adoption requires more than cost reduction; it also depends on credible financial guidance, targeted education, and professional advocacy. QSs are well positioned to address these challenges through life-cycle costing, value management, and feasibility assessments, translating household interest into actionable investment decisions. By expanding their role beyond traditional cost management to strategic, household-focused interventions, QSs can support equitable access to renewable energy and contribute to South Africa's transition towards a cleaner, more resilient energy system.

Keywords: Willingness to Pay, Solar Adoption, Quantity Surveyors, Theory of Planned Behaviour, Sustainability.

Introduction

The global transition to renewable energy is one of the defining imperatives of the twenty-first century. Solar energy offers a practical solution to climate change, rising electricity costs, and energy insecurity. In South Africa, adoption of residential solar PV systems remains low despite abundant sunlight and decreasing technology costs, with only around 10% of households having installed solar systems (Mutumbi, Thondhlana & Ruwanza, 2024). Continued reliance on Eskom, a financially constrained and carbon-intensive utility, highlights the urgency of diversifying the energy mix and enhancing energy resilience (Wiese & van der Westhuizen, 2024).

Research indicates that 25% of middle-income and 43% of high-income households are willing to pay for electricity generated from renewable sources (Mulaudzi et al., 2021). However, socio-economic inequality, energy poverty, and community norms shape purchasing behaviour differently from high-income contexts (Zulu, Chabala & Zulu, 2021; Badole et al., 2024). Energy poverty disproportionately affects low-income, rural, and in most cases, these are female headed households (Ye & Koch, 2021; Ngarava et al., 2022; Lesala et al., 2024), while gender and ethnic disparities further exacerbate vulnerability (Ngarava et al., 2022; Longe, 2021).

The adoption of solar energy requires more than technological availability; it demands integrated strategies that address social, economic, and policy dimensions (Chidembo et al., 2024). QSs have the expertise to bridge financial and technical barriers through life-cycle costing, feasibility assessments, and value management, making solar investments more credible and accessible (Ritchie et al., 2023; Chamikara et al., 2020). Their strategic involvement can ensure solar adoption is equitable across

diverse communities, aligning household decision making with sustainability objectives and policy goals (Venter et al., 2025).

Building on the TPB (Ajzen, 1991), this study examines how QSs can support household adoption of solar energy by translating behavioural insights into practical, financially viable strategies.

Literature Review

The adoption of residential solar PV systems in South Africa is influenced by a combination of financial, technical, social, and perceptual factors (Mutumbi et al., 2024). Without deliberate strategies, solar technology remains primarily accessible to wealthier households, limiting progress towards an inclusive energy transition. High upfront costs, limited financing options, and uncertainty regarding long-term benefits discourage many households, even when environmental awareness is high (Zander, 2020).

Financial and technical barriers are substantial. During periods of peak loadshedding, household solar PV systems cost between R70,000 and R350,000 (Hochstetler, 2020), and retrofitting existing buildings is often complicated by limited awareness of installation methods among designers and cost professionals (Amoah & Smith, 2024). QSs are uniquely positioned to address these challenges by providing life cycle costing, feasibility analyses, and cost benefit assessments, which clarify long term savings, reduce perceived risks, and make solar investments more credible and accessible (Bolade-Oladepo et al., 2020; Babalola & Onososen, 2022; Victar et al., 2023). Strengthening QS capacity through education, professional development, and early involvement in project planning is therefore critical (Saka & Chan, 2020).

Beyond financial and technical contributions, QSs can advance sustainable construction by advising on alternative materials, embedding sustainability in cost planning, and participating in policy development (Olatunde et al., 2025; Chamikara et al., 2020). However, insufficient training, limited access to updated information on sustainable materials, and weak regulatory frameworks can limit their effectiveness (Mahame et al., 2024). Targeted policy interventions, professional education, and improved information sharing are essential to empower QSs to facilitate solar adoption (Chamikara et al., 2018; Yap et al., 2021).

Perceptions of economic and environmental value strongly influence adoption. Falling global panel prices (Breyer et al., 2021), tangible benefits such as reduced energy costs, and increased property value encourage investment (Van der Westhuizen, 2021; Wang et al., 2023). Environmental motivations, particularly among younger and more educated households, further drive adoption (Palm & Lantz, 2020; Bollinger et al., 2024). Social and emotional factors, such as observing peers installing solar systems, normalise adoption and reflect the influence of attitudes and social norms described in the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991; Curtius et al., 2018; Petrovich et al., 2019).

In the South African context, adoption is further constrained by systemic challenges such as limited industrial development and energy poverty (Ukoba et al., 2024). Successful adoption requires government incentives, energy sector reforms, professional training, and the availability of renewable technologies (Oguntona et al., 2021; Oke et al., 2023; Okiye et al., 2023). QSs can play a pivotal role in addressing financial, technical, and informational gaps, supporting a more inclusive and sustainable transition to solar energy.

Research Gap

International research has extensively explored the behavioural and economic factors that influence solar energy adoption (Mahapatra & Gustavsson, 2008; Irfan et al., 2020). However, there is limited examination of these dynamics within the South African context, which is characterised by energy poverty, income inequality, and inconsistent electricity access. Evidence shows that energy poverty affects more than half of South African households, with the greatest burden falling on low-income, rural, and in most cases these female-headed households (Ye & Koch, 2021; Ngarava et al., 2022; Lesala et al., 2024). Gender and ethnic disparities further exacerbate vulnerability, particularly among Black/African and female headed households (Ngarava et al., 2022; Longe, 2021).

While advanced modelling tools and feasibility assessments exist to optimise renewable energy systems and support sustainability objectives (Kumba et al., 2024; Nhamo et al., 2020), most studies focus on macro level technical, economic, or policy dimensions rather than household level decision-

making. There is limited research linking professional practice to the behavioural and financial factors that shape household adoption of solar energy (Khofi et al., 2025; Uhunamure & Shale, 2021). In other words, while QSs and other built-environment professionals have the technical capacity to assess feasibility and cost-effectiveness, their potential to influence household uptake has not been fully explored.

This gap underscores the need for research that integrates professional expertise with household perspectives. Specifically, there is an opportunity to investigate how QSs can use their skills in life cycle costing, affordability modelling, and value management to translate behavioural insights into actionable strategies that support solar adoption. Addressing this gap will help ensure that renewable energy interventions are both financially viable and socially equitable, contributing to a more inclusive and sustainable energy transition in South Africa.

Methodology

This study used secondary data from Baloyi's (2024) MBA research, which explored household WTP for solar PV installations throughout South Africa. Employing a quantitative, cross-sectional design based on the TPB (Ajzen, 1991), the study examined the socio-economic, behavioral, and informational factors influencing household adoption of solar energy. The conceptual framework, illustrated in Figure 1 below, provides insight into how the theory was applied to analyse the factors affecting WTP for Solar PV in the South African context (Baloyi, 2024).

The sample consisted of 262 household decision makers drawn from all nine provinces, ensuring adequate representation across income levels, regions, and demographics (Statista, 2024). Respondents were individuals responsible for household energy or financial decisions. A simple random sampling approach was employed to reduce selection bias and enhance inclusivity. Data was collected through an online structured questionnaire, which included demographic items and likert scale questions designed to measure key TPB constructs:

- **Attitude:** perceived value, environmental concern, emotional motivation
- **Subjective norms:** social and community influence
- **Perceived behavioural control:** affordability, financing access, perceived quality

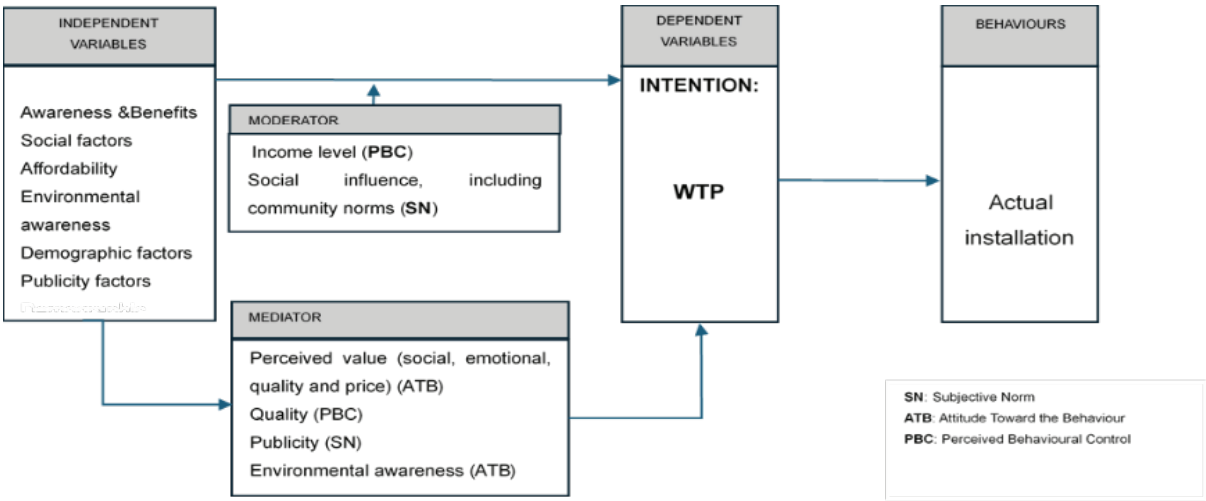

Figure 1 Conceptual Framework for the Current (Baloyi, 2024)

Factor analysis was conducted using Statistical Package Social Scieces (SPSS) to evaluate the validity and reliability of 31 questionnaire items. Eight groupings of the questions /components were initially identified, but the seventh and eighth were deemed insignificant after valilidty analysis, reducing the number of valid questions to 22. Construct validity was confirmed with a Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of 0.855 (see table 1), and reliability analysis showed Cronbach's alpha values above 0.69 (see table 2), for seven of the eight components, indicating strong internal consistency (Cortina, 1993).

Multiple linear regression and correlation analyses were performed to assess the direction, strength, and significance of relationships between independent variables and WTP. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$ (Corner, 2002; Waris et al., 2023). This methodology allowed for a rigorous evaluation of both financial and behavioural determinants of solar adoption while addressing gaps identified in previous South African research (Ngcongwane, 2023; Haque et al., 2021).

Table 1 KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser Meyer Olkin Measure of sampling adequacy	0.855
Bartletts Aproximate Chi Square	3778.84
Test of Sphecity df	465
Test of Sphecity sig.	0.000

Table 2 Reliability Results in Components

Component No	Cronbachs Alpha	Chronbachs Alpha Based on Standadised items	No of items
1	0.91	0.91	5
2	0.82	0.83	6
3	0.74	0.75	3
4	0.51	0.77	5
5	0.83	0.84	3
6	0.73	0.73	3
7	0.192	0.24	4
8	0.68	0.68	2

Findings and Discussion

Demographic Insights Shaping Solar Adoption

The demographic data shown in Table 3 below, reveal that respondents are concentrated in urban provinces such as Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, and the Western Cape, areas with higher levels of industrialisation and access to alternative energy sources. The majority of participants were between 19 and 48 years old, female, and classified as middle-income earners with monthly household incomes between R15,000 and R40,000. Over 70% are homeowners. Of these, 36% had already installed solar panels, 54% had considered installation, and 10% had not yet contemplated it (Baloyi, 2024).

This indicates a strong level of awareness and intent but a limited rate of conversion into actual adoption. The gap between consideration and implementation appears driven by affordability constraints, limited information, and uncertainty about long-term financial returns (Baloyi, 2024). While many households recognise the benefits of solar energy, they remain cautious due to the high upfront costs and lack of clear, reliable information about system performance and payback periods (Baloyi, 2024).

Table 3 Province in South Africa

Province in South Africa	Respondents %
Gauteng	63
Kwazulu-Natal	5
Limpopo	11
North West	3
Northern Cape	0
Western Cape	2
Mpumalanga	10

Free State	5
Eastern Cape	1

Table 4 below illustrates that the majority of respondents (51%) are unwilling to invest more than R50,000 in solar installations, while 29% were willing to spend between R50,000 and R100,000. Only 1% are prepared to exceed R400,000. These findings confirm that household affordability remains a major constraint, with many potential adopters priced out of the market despite the growing appeal of solar energy (Mutumbi, Thondhlana & Ruwanza, 2024).

This highlights an important opportunity for QSs to support broader adoption. Through cost modelling, life-cycle assessments, and feasibility analyses, QSs can translate technical data into practical financial guidance for households. By providing realistic cost estimates, transparent payback projections, and value for money analyses early in project planning, QSs can help bridge the gap between interest and action. This strategic involvement positions QSs as financial translators between sustainable technology suppliers, policymakers, and consumers ensuring that affordability barriers do not exclude middle-income or lower-income groups from solar adoption (Ritchie et al., 2023; Chamikara et al., 2020).

Table 4 WTP for solar panel system

WTP (R)	WTP (%)
Up to R50 000	51
R50 001 to R 100 000	29
R100 000 to R 200 000	13
R200 000 to R 400 000	6
R400 000 and above	1

Behavioural Dynamics Influencing Solar Adoption

Table 5 Summary of Hypothesis testing and Correlation results

Hypothesis Tested	Accepted	Rejected	Correlation strength
Perceived value including price, emotional, social, and quality factors positively influence household WTP for pay for solar panels.	Yes		Moderate
Quality of solar panel installation positively influence household WTP	Yes		Moderate
Increased publicity of solar energy as an alternative positively influence households WTP for solar panels.	Yes		Weak
Increased awareness of the environmental benefits of solar panels positively influences households WTP for solar panels.	Yes		Weak
Higher income levels positively affect households' WTP for solar panel installation.		Yes	Weak
Social influence, including community norms and peers' behaviour, positively affect household WTP for solar panels.	Yes		Moderate

The behavioural results derived from the regression analysis reveal that perceived value, emotional and social motivations, and awareness significantly influence WTP for solar panels. Income level, however, did not show a strong direct relationship with WTP. This suggests that household decisions are driven more by behavioural and informational factors than by pure financial capacity (Baloyi, 2024).

Social influence emerged as a moderate predictor when community members or neighbours adopt solar systems, others are more likely to follow. This finding aligns with the TPB, where social norms and perceived control influence decision making (Ajzen, 1991; Judge, Warren-Myers & Paladino, 2019). Emotional factors, such as the desire for energy independence and reduced reliance on Eskom, also featured prominently, reflecting growing frustration with South Africa's electricity instability (Wiese & van der Westhuizen, 2024).

While financial affordability remains a constraint, the analysis indicates that awareness and perceived value play stronger roles in shaping household decisions. This means that simply lowering costs may not be enough; communication, trust, and demonstration of long-term benefits are equally critical. Awareness campaigns that focus on environmental impact, household savings, and energy security could improve adoption rates (Chidembo, Francis & Kativhu, 2024; Palm & Lantz, 2020). The findings reinforce that solar adoption in South Africa is a multi-dimensional challenge, shaped not only by cost and technology but also by psychology, trust, and social influence. Addressing these behavioural drivers through professional intervention particularly from QSs who can interpret technical and financial data for non-expert audiences is essential for achieving a more inclusive and resilient energy transition.

QSs are well positioned to act as credible advisors who integrate behavioural insights into project design and communication. They can clarify life-cycle costs, illustrate return-on-investment timelines, and quantify environmental benefits in financial terms that resonate with homeowners. Moreover, QSs can collaborate with municipalities, developers, and financial institutions to design financing models that lower entry barriers and enhance consumer confidence.

Implications for Quantity Surveyors

The findings underscore the important contribution that QSs can make towards promoting the adoption of solar energy within South African households. By drawing on their expertise in life-cycle costing, affordability assessments, and value management, QSa are well positioned to provide sound financial advice to households and project developers. Their involvement at the early stages of project planning can ensure that solar installations are designed to be both affordable and suited to a range of income levels, while helping to reduce perceptions of financial risk and uncertainty. In addition, by engaging collaboratively with policymakers, engineers, and community stakeholders, quantity surveyors can help align financial feasibility with broader sustainability and social inclusion goals. Through such efforts, they can bridge the gap between public interest and practical implementation, advancing a more equitable and sustainable transition to solar energy across the built environment.

Conclusion

This study has echoed Baloyi (2024) findingd that the adoption of solar PV systems by South African households is influenced more by behavioural and informational factors such as perceived value, social influence, and emotional motivation than by income alone. While households are increasingly aware of renewable energy and motivated by environmental concerns, uptake remains limited due to affordability, technical uncertainty, and doubts about long-term benefits.

By broadening their role beyond traditional cost management to a more strategic, household-focused approach, QSs can play a key part in promoting equitable access to renewable energy and supporting South Africa's transition to a cleaner, more resilient energy system. Through life-cycle costing, value management, and feasibility analysis, QSs can translate household intentions into actionable, financially viable solutions Their involvement can reduce uncertainty, clarify long-term savings, and enhance confidence in solar investments.

Recommendations

QSs should be engaged from the earliest stages of solar projects to provide affordability assessments, risk evaluation, and value analysis that inform planning and decision-making. Continuous professional development in renewable energy, sustainability, and construction costing is essential to ensure QSs can integrate financial, social, and environmental considerations into their advice. Collaboration with policymakers, financial institutions, and developers is recommended to create inclusive financing mechanisms and incentives that make solar adoption feasible for middle- and low-income households. Future research should evaluate pilot initiatives where QSs actively apply these strategies, to measure their impact on household adoption and inform policy and industry practices.

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SACQSP2025-68

ESG Reporting and Financial Performance of REITs: A Cross-Sectional Regression Analysis of USA and South African REITs

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the empirical link between environmental, social and governance (ESG) reporting and the financial performance of Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs) across a developed market (USA) and a developing market (South Africa). ESG reporting on REITs remains underexplored in developing countries (Newell & Marzuki, 2022), which brings into question the level of sustainability and degree of financial optimisation of these REITs (Naeem, Cankaya & Bildik, 2022). This study will investigate whether the financial performance of REITs has any correlation to ESG reporting, or whether it is solely subject to the market conditions around it. The research will provide answers to the questions, (1) "Does ESG reporting in REITs of developing countries result in greater financial performance?" and (2) "If ESG-rated REITs are performing better, by what margin are they doing so in developed countries in comparison to developing countries?". To find the answer we will use cross-sectional regression analysis to compare four datasets across a ten-year period from 2013 to 2023, namely: The top 10 REITs in the USA and South Africa, and the top 10 ESG-rated REITs in the USA and South Africa (decided by largest market cap). The study will not be looking into the specific components of ESG, but rather ESG reporting as a whole. We expect to find that in both the USA and South Africa, the ESG-rated REITs have a greater financial performance, but we are unable to speculate by what margin they outperform the others by, and if that margin was the same across both countries.

Keywords: ESG Reporting - REITs - ESG-scoring - Financial Performance Indicators - Sustainability

Introduction

In the past two decades, sustainability has moved to the forefront of global business strategy, with increasing pressure on industries to adapt to climate-related risks and environmental accountability (Weavabel, 2024). Both the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the United Nations believe that climate change is the biggest threat to societies, governance and the environment in the 21st century (Altman, 2023; WHO, 2023). Evidence has shown that the real estate sector has one of the largest carbon footprints, contributing between 34-37% of CO_2 emissions globally (Garnett, 2023). This is largely due to its multidimensional structure of construction processes and post development management. Real estate investors have become increasingly aware and concerned about the ESG aspects of investments as the global economy shifts toward a sustainable future (Almusaed, Almssad & Yitmen, 2024). For REITs, the move toward sustainability is strongly tied to ESG reporting, which has become a key mechanism for improving transparency and signalling responsible investment behaviour (Brounen & Marcato, 2019). ESG reporting is the disclosure of a company's environmental, social and governance data which sheds light on its ESG practices, projects and activities which are usually aligned and guided by ESG frameworks of governments, regulatory authorities, the business itself and/or third-party institutions such as Bloomberg, who provide independent ESG ratings based on ESG reports and practices of the business (Tocchini & Cafagna, 2022; Bose, 2020). Tocchini and Cafagna's (2022) found evidence to suggest that ESG reporting improves investor transparency, increases investor confidence and highlights avenues where the business could improve sustainability which generally translates into better financial performance. High ESG scores in the investment sphere correlate with lower cost of capital and enhanced investor interest, as these scores reflect reduced operational risks and a proactive stance on sustainability (Priem & Gabellone, 2024). Researchers have also found trends which indicate that the consequence of not reporting on ESG matters lead to business model failure and declining stock values due to the multi-level impact of ESG on businesses and the current trends on sustainable investment (PlanBeEco, 2024). This poses a problem for

investors in the REIT sphere because of the large ESG impacts that the built environment has, which brings into question at what point will REITs fail if they do not step into the sustainability sphere? Therefore, the integration of ESG reporting into the operational and strategic frameworks of REITs, is quickly growing and becoming a standard of business (Almusaed, Almssad & Yitmen, 2024). Unfortunately, the main constraint that REITs face when deciding to invest in ESG reporting and frameworks is the high costs associated with it, with most REITs increasing business expenses by an average of 6.5% when investing in ESG practices (Fischhoff, 2020). With developing markets being so unique and challenging, investors are unsure whether investing in ESG reporting will pay off in the context of a developing market (Newell & Marzuki, 2022).

Investing in ESG does create financial gains, however due to the nature of real estate, the transition into green buildings and the high operational costs associated with investing in ESG practices means that in the short term there is a high amount of cash flow required and a high level of risk along with it, due to the changing market conditions impacted by external factors for example, covid-19 (Chacon, Feng & Wu, 2024). Sustainability is a long-term affair and there is proof of a medium to long term financial benefit of investing in ESG practices such as ESG reporting, investors should consider strategic and slow implementation of ESG practices into their businesses to minimise the short-term risks and reap the long-term rewards (Chacon, Feng & Wu, 2024). Topics around: REITs, ESG reporting, ESG investing and financial performance, either do not address and investigate developing countries or they only incorporate a small number of developing countries in a large dataset where specific focus on developing countries is not present. This creates a research gap: ESG performance and disclosure have been widely studied in developed economies, but there is limited analysis within developing markets despite evidence that these markets face the greatest built environment sustainability risks (World Atlas, 2024). There is also insufficient comparative research that directly tests how ESG reporting influences financial performance across different market maturities. As a result, investors in developing countries lack context-specific evidence to guide capital allocation toward ESG practices (Newell & Marzuki, 2022).

This gap will provide investors with an analysis to show how ESG reporting influences financial performance of REITs in the context of a developing country, as well as how the performance pairs against a developed country with an established REIT market which has a high level of ESG integration. To address this gap, this study conducts a cross-sectional regression analysis to examine the relationship between ESG reporting and financial performance in the REIT sector, comparing the USA as a developed market with South Africa as a developing one. Additionally, the study evaluates ESG-rated versus non-ESG-rated REITs within South Africa to establish whether ESG integration yields measurable performance advantages in a localised context. This comparative approach provides insight into the real financial implications of ESG adoption in a developing economy.

Literature Review

This literature review aims to establish the facts, challenges, unknowns, definitions and findings about ESG reporting and its connection to the financial performance of REITs. Our research will use this literature review to learn and understand the different methodologies and concepts used within the ESG and REIT sectors. We will also be looking to find the known and unknowns within ESG reporting and REITs. Our research countries are the USA and South Africa and therefore most of the literature we use will have a strong focus on these regions.

ESG Reporting

ESG reporting functions not only as a disclosure mechanism but as a strategic signalling tool through which firms communicate sustainability maturity to investors, lenders and regulators. ESG reporting is the disclosure of data relating to environmental, social and governance impacts and practices of an organisation, as well as its performance within these categories (Hossain, 2023). ESG reporting has a strong linkage to sustainability and is therefore used by businesses as a corporate framework of which they can measure and incorporate sustainability (Ahmad, Yaqub & Lee, 2023). It is therefore used by firms as a corporate framework through which sustainability can be measured, monitored and integrated into medium- to long-term value creation. ESG reporting combines both qualitative elements (such as stakeholder practices, governance culture and social equity initiatives) and quantitative indicators (e.g. carbon intensity, diversity scores, resource efficiency) to reflect a firm's sustainability position (Raghavan, 2022). A consistent finding in existing literature is that high-quality ESG disclosure enhances investor confidence, reduces information asymmetry and can lower the cost of capital by

demonstrating long-term risk management (Tocchini & Cafagna, 2022). However, Chopra et al. (2024) emphasise that ESG adoption is constrained by behavioural, contextual, methodological and data-related challenges. In practice, these barriers manifest as cost aversion (where upfront investment is perceived as a financial burden), weak internal ESG competencies, inconsistent measurement standards, and perceived risks associated with transparency. Importantly, these barriers are not merely technical: they are fundamentally shaped by institutional environments and market maturity. In developing economies with weaker regulatory enforcement, voluntary ESG reporting often becomes a strategic luxury rather than a compliance expectation, which structurally slows down adoption despite its long-term financial benefits (Chacon, Feng & Wu, 2024).

ESG reporting usually divides within the E-, S- and G- spheres and is assessed both dependently and independently of one another to get ESG scores which is the metric of measurement in the ESG space (Erol, Unal & Coskun, 2023). In the built environment in particular, ESG adoption is cost-intensive: REITs incur both reporting-related costs (data collection, auditing and verification) and transition costs (energy retrofits, carbon reduction technologies and sustainable procurement). This creates a short-term profitability drag that may discourage adoption in markets where liquidity constraints and risk-sensitive investor sentiment already limit appetite for sustainability investment (Fischhoff, 2020; Priem & Gabellone, 2024). This helps explain why, despite the undeniable environmental responsibility of the real estate sector, ESG implementation remains uneven across property markets globally, with more advanced adoption patterns in mature capital markets than in developing ones.

Although South Africa is comparatively advanced in corporate governance and disclosure (largely influenced by King IV and the JSE Listings Requirements), ESG adoption across Africa remains structurally constrained by institutional capacity, regulatory fragmentation and limited sustainability-linked financing mechanisms. In Kenya, the Capital Markets Authority has observed that ESG reporting gains material traction only when explicitly mandated under listing or reporting obligations, with purely voluntary frameworks showing very low uptake (Capital Markets Authority Kenya, 2022). Nigeria exhibits a similar trend: REITs recognise the relevance of ESG disclosure but are discouraged by weak enforcement, inconsistent regulatory guidance and the absence of financial incentives, resulting in selective or surface-level compliance (Olayinka & Temitope, 2023). In Ghana, evidence shows that weak institutional oversight, inadequate regulatory alignment and low ESG literacy across issuers limit meaningful sustainability integration (Boakye & Ackah, 2022).

Regional assessments by the African Development Bank and UNECA confirm that ESG reporting in Africa is slowed not by lack of awareness or willingness, but by market structures that do not yet reward sustainability through lower financing costs or preferential investment (AfDB, 2022; UNECA, 2023). Unlike developed markets—where sustainability performance strengthens access to capital—African REITs typically receive little to no financing advantage from ESG investment, which weakens the cost–benefit case during early adoption. This structural disconnect means that African REITs face a “timing gap”, where costs are immediate and internalised, while financial benefits are delayed and uncertain.

In South Africa specifically, ESG disclosure is advanced relative to neighbouring markets, but the real estate sector still experiences a cautionary stance due to capital intensity and slower return horizons (Newell & Marzuki, 2022). As a result, ESG adoption in South African REITs tends to be gradual and pragmatic rather than transformative, often prioritising governance elements first (which are cheaper to implement) over environmental retrofits, which require material capital outlay.

Our research will seek to address whether ESG reporting will pay off in the context of South Africa by comparing financial performance indicators of ESG-rated REITs to non-ESG-rated REITs to analyse whether there are differences in the financial performance that can be attributed to REITs having ESG ratings, and whether the financial performance indicators show signs that investing further to alleviate these challenges will prove financially viable. We will do a cross-sectional regression analysis of ESG-rated REITs in South Africa against a dataset of ESG-rated REITs in the USA to analyse whether the datasets correlate to one another, to be able to find financial trends which can be attributed to ESG reporting.

ESG and Financial Performance

The relationship between ESG reporting and financial performance is more complex than the general argument that “sustainable firms perform better” suggests. Erol, Unal and Coskun (2023, pp. 85166)

[19] concluded that, "The financial return of ESG investing in REITs looks rather fragmented". The paper investigated the relationship between ESG investing and the financial performance of 234 ESG-rated REITs across five developed economies. The paper found four main findings, (1) There is a negative relationship between corporate social performance and corporate financial performance, (2) There is a negative association between E - investing and REIT excess returns, (3)S- investing holds more value to stock market investors and (4) Governance practises have not improved financial performance in RIETs for a 17-year period. Like the gap which our research aims to bridge, Erol, Unal and Coskun (2023) [19] investigated how investing in ESG in REITs affects the financial performance of the REITs and how each component of ESG weighs towards it. From this paper we have learnt that particularly in the short term, investing in ESG is an extremely costly affair and in the short term negatively affects firm value, however Feng and Wu (2021) [21] found that there was a strong positive association between ESG reporting and firm value, debt financing and market valuations. In Erol, Unal and Coskun's paper they attributed the negative relation of ESG and firm value to be a characteristic of real estate and how the shift to green practices requires a lot of construction and reconstruction which needs an additional cash premium of 5% (Hoffman, 2016) [22]. Financial markets do not reward ESG disclosure uniformly; rather, the financial effects depend on how markets perceive ESG – either as a value-adding long-term risk mitigation tool or as a cost-intensive short-term drag on returns. In ESG literature on real estate specifically, scholars increasingly emphasise that performance outcomes are highly sensitive to (i) market maturity, (ii) regulatory incentives, and (iii) the extent of investor demand for sustainable assets (Erol, Unal & Coskun, 2023). A growing number of studies find that ESG investment in REITs initially depresses financial returns due to capital expenditure requirements, disclosure costs and management bandwidth constraints (Chacon, Feng & Wu, 2024). This aligns with a cost-based transition lens, which proposes that ESG integration entails material upfront expenditure long before financial advantages can materialise. These costs are structural rather than peripheral in property markets: ESG compliance in REITs requires asset-level retrofits, operational restructuring, and external verification processes that directly affect cash flow (Hoffman, 2016; Fischhoff, 2020). For this reason, ESG in REITs differs fundamentally from ESG in industrial corporates, where intangible governance or HR-related improvements can raise ESG scores at minimal cost. In real estate, "ESG" is capital expenditure-heavy — meaning profit impacts are visible immediately, while benefits are deferred. In contrast, in mature markets like the USA, a risk-based valuation lens applies. Here, ESG signals better internal risk governance and long-term resilience, which financial markets *actively price in* through lower cost of debt, stronger investor confidence and premium valuations (Wu & Feng, 2021; Tocchini & Cafagna, 2022). Access to green financing mechanisms, sustainability-linked debt, and institutional investor pressure all contribute to ESG being financially rewarded in developed markets, even before physical asset transformation is complete. This supports findings such as Sah, Miller & Ghosh (2013) and Morri et al. (2021), who show measurable valuation uplift among ESG-oriented portfolios in the USA and Europe.

From these contrasting literature findings, we are able to conclude one thing that was common in both papers, their conclusions made note that further research needed to be done in specific context of REIT markets as findings and conclusions cannot be generalised to apply in different markets. Our research will look to develop onto these recommendations to understand ESG reporting and financial performance in the South African context whilst using a long-established developed market (the USA) as a control to compare against.

From Erol, Unal and Coskun's (2023) study we understood that when we conduct our analysis over the 5-year period, from 2018 to 2023, it shouldn't be a surprise if we discover a negative financial performance in the short term. It was also interesting to find that the divisions of E, S and G and how they factor into the financial performance, with the environmental sphere being the largest contributor to change. Although we will not be looking into the ESG divisions it might be useful to explain and understand our data and findings. The aim of our research is to understand whether the implementation of ESG reporting in REITs of a developing market will show any signs of impacting the financial performance, unfortunately Erol, Unal and Coskun (2023) only addressed ESG matters in a context of developed countries which doesn't prove any corelation of validity that the same results will be experienced in a developing country.

In developing markets, however, the financial logic reverses. ESG expenditure is not yet compensated through cheaper financing or price premiums, causing ESG to reduce short-term competitiveness (Chacon, Feng & Wu, 2024; Newell & Marzuki, 2022). Empirical work on South Africa demonstrates that although ESG adoption may strengthen governance credibility, the environmental and social commitments required to meaningfully "shift the needle" on ESG performance are the most cost-

intensive elements, and these weaken margins in the short term (Cheruiyot, Martell & Motani, 2023). This produces an adoption paradox: REITs most in need of ESG adaptation (due to high environmental exposure) are the least financially incentivised to adopt it. Cheruiyot, Martell and Motani's (2023) adresses financial performance in a specific context however it doesn't adress ESG practices as a whole but rather its "too specific" in assessing green buildings and green portfolios. Their findings, however, might be useful to understand the findings of our cross-sectional regression and comparative analysis. They have found strong P and R^2 values in their regressions and evidence to prove that green buildings had a positive and statistically significant relationship with ROA values. Although we will be analysing a different data set, we will expect to see a similar trend that ROA values of ESG-rated REITs have a positive correlation with ESG reporting.

Furthermore, the evidence base on financial performance in African REITs remains thin and often inconclusive. African markets lack long-term datasets tracing ESG integration over sufficient time horizons to empirically test delayed value realisation. This gap is widened by the fact that most ESG-financial performance studies either focus exclusively on developed markets or include developing markets as statistical "afterthoughts" within global panels, without dedicated contextual analysis (Erol, Unal & Coskun, 2023). As a result, findings from the USA and European REITs are often incorrectly generalised to emerging markets, despite stark differences in financing structure, investor expectations and regulatory pressure.

South Africa is therefore a strategically important case study: it has the most advanced REIT framework in Africa and the greatest potential for ESG integration, yet it displays precisely the mixed, muted or negative short-term financial relationships predicted by the "transition cost" logic. In such environments, ESG does not yet *function as an asset*, but as a *liability-like cost*, absorbed upfront in anticipation of a future payoff that may only materialise once capital markets become more sustainability-sensitive.

These dynamics justify this study's comparative research design. A cross-sectional analysis contrasting the USA (risk-based value recognition context) and South Africa (cost-based transition context) provides a necessary empirical test of whether ESG reporting *is already* financially beneficial in developing REIT markets, or whether the payoff remains hypothetical and long-term. It also addresses the question of whether ESG in developing markets is primarily reputational signalling, or whether it has begun to translate into measurable financial value.

ESG reporting and disclosure has always had a long standing and strong tie to green portfolios, and the level of financial performance that these portfolios experienced has always been at the centre of questioning for both REITs and REIT investors. Papers from 2013 such as Sah, Miller and Ghosh's (2013) paper "Are green REITs valued more?", which conducted panel data regressions to analyse the impact of ESG and green portfolios on financial performance indicators, found that portfolios with ESG investment and green portfolios experienced an average of 5.68% higher returns than others (Sah, Miller & Ghosh, 2013). Similarly, Morri, Anconetani and Benfari (2020), also found that greenness and ESG ratings have a positive relationship with ROE values within their dataset. However, both Sah, Miller and Ghosh's (2013) and Morri, Anconetani and Benfari (2020) noted how important analysis be done on specific markets and economies as they strongly believe that green portfolios and ESG ratings factor differently in different markets which ultimately changes the impact they have on the different financial performance indicators.

Key Literature Findings

There is increased demand for quality information and global disclosure standards, which stems from investors' desire to assess ESG related opportunities, performance and risks (Raghavan, 2022). To meet this need for investors' confidence and further capital and debt financing, REITs should be investing in ESG practices, primarily ESG reporting as it is the step towards achieving an ESG-rating (Morri, Dipierri & Colantoni, 2024). Therefore, many researchers have highlighted a growing need for integrated ESG reporting (Buniamin & Nik Ahmad, 2015). This finding is a vital consideration for ESG data companies, as it could aid them in bolstering the services they offer clients, consequently improving the standard of ESG reporting. REITs with higher disclosure levels have low cost of debt, higher credit ratings, higher unsecured debt to total debt ratio (Wu & Feng, 2021). ESG disclosure data also factors into REIT lenders and credit agencies' decision making (Wu & Feng, 2021). These debt related ESG disclosure findings, should encourage REITs to improve their ESG disclosure levels, as doing this would make them favourable candidates for debt financing. This incentive will be beneficial

in the long run, considering how costly the development and acquisition of property can be. Due to ESG reporting and practices being so expensive it is imperative that research be done as to how they impact financial performance in market specific contexts, which is why we have used these readings, recommendations and methodologies to design our research to explore ESG reporting in a South African specific context as well as to compare it to the largest REIT market in the world to find similarities and differences, to be able to make an educated conclusion as to the influence of ESG reporting on REITs financial performance.

Research Methodology and Design

Research Philosophy: Positivist

While investigating the relationship between ESG reporting and financial performance among REITs in South Africa and the USA, the study adopts a positivist research philosophy. This approach underscores the importance of empirical observation and the scientific method, prioritising objectivity while minimising subjective biases (Park, Konge & Artino, 2020). The research involves systematic data collection, encompassing quantitative data on ESG metrics and financial indicators from both ESG rated and non-ESG rated REITs in the two countries (Park, Konge & Artino, 2020). Hypotheses are formulated to explore how variations in ESG performance relate to financial outcomes in the two market contexts and different segments of the real estate investment landscape. Statistical techniques, like regression analysis, are employed to test these hypotheses rigorously. The aim is to derive generalisable insights that shed light on if and how ESG reporting impacts the financial performance of REITs, offering valuable implications for investment strategies and regulatory frameworks in both South Africa and the USA. The key principles of positivism - objectivity, empiricism, and the use of the scientific method, makes it well suited for this type of study, which seeks to establish explanatory associations or causal relationships through quantitative analysis of large datasets. This aligns with the positivist aim of generating reliable, generalisable knowledge that can predict and control phenomena (Park, Konge & Artino, 2020).

Research Approach: Inductive

The research described would primarily adopt an inductive approach to theory development. It aims to comprehensively analyse the influence of ESG reporting on the financial performance of REITs in South Africa and the USA using quantitative methods. By collecting empirical data on financial indicators from both ESG rated and non-ESG rated REITs, the study begins with detailed comparisons and observations of these variables. Through statistical techniques such as cross-sectional regression, the research seeks to uncover correlations, patterns, trends and relationships within the data that correlate with improved financial outcomes.

Methodological Choice: Quantitative Analysis

This study employs a quantitative research design, using financial performance indicators. This will involve the collection and analysis of financial performance indicators of REITs in South Africa and the USA, focusing on variables such as ROA, ROE, ROI and excess returns. Statistical techniques such as cross-sectional regression, Sharpe ratio calculations and Tobin's Q to determine the relationship between ESG reporting and financial performance. We will also conduct a comparative analysis between ESG and non-ESG-rated REITS in South Africa to find out whether there are any trends, similarities or differences between the datasets. The reason for this methodological choice is due to the nature of REITs financial performance being numerical and comparative. The chosen financial performance indicators were selected due to their nature of being the most notable indicators of financial performance in terms of investment and firm value. All data will be sourced from Bloomberg. The Bloomberg terminal was selected as the data source due to its reliability and standardisation of ESG scoring methodologies across international jurisdictions. The chosen time frame ranges from 2018 to 2023. This period will capture short- and medium- term trends and the effects of ESG reporting on financial performance, reflecting the growing importance and integration of ESG reporting for REIT's and financial performance, reflecting the period during which ESG disclosure became more systematically integrated into global real estate investment markets.

Sampling Plan

We used the top 7 ESG-rated and top 7 non-ESG rated REITs in South Africa to compare financial performance indicators over a 5-year period from 2018 to 2023, the reason we were limited to analyse this dataset in specific was due to South Africa only having 7 ESG-rated REITs and majority of those 7 REITs had only implemented ESG ratings from 2018 onwards. Although there are more than 7 non-ESG-rated REITs in South Africa because we needed a fair basis of comparison and therefore had decided to only select 7 of these non-ESG-rated REITs, which were decided by the largest market caps. Thus, the dataset ensures parity, reflects the entire population rather than a selective sample. This allowed for both intra-market (SA ESG vs SA non-ESG) and inter-market (SA vs USA) comparison. However, this also presents a methodological constraint: the small sample size reduces statistical generalisability and increases susceptibility to outlier effects. It also introduces a maturity bias, because South Africa's ESG market is still nascent.

We have obtained ESG scores, ROA, ROE, ROI, excess returns, Tobin's Q values and Sharpe Ratios using Bloomberg which is a reputable and accurate online data provider. With our research and data being guided towards reports and online data, the ethical considerations and research error is minimal. This presents a second methodological limitation relates to the research design: a cross-sectional study cannot capture lagged ESG effects, which may only materialise over longer time horizons. ESG investments, particularly in the property sector, tend to depress short-term returns due to transition costs but may enhance financial resilience and valuation over the long term. A longitudinal or panel-based dataset could therefore produce different insights. This study acknowledges this limitation and positions its findings as reflective of current rather than ultimate ESG-financial dynamics — providing an empirical baseline for future time-series research.

Data Description

This study uses a comprehensive dataset provided by Bloomberg. The dataset is made up the financial report data of 21 REITs over a 5-year period, from 2018 to 2023, providing 246,568 observations. Out of the 21 REITs, there are 7 ESG-rated REITs from the USA and 7 ESG-rated REITs from South Africa which were used to conduct our cross-sectional regression analysis to understand the financial performance of ESG-rated REITs in different market conditions (developed market compared to a developing market), as well as to find trends and similarities which can be attributed to ESG scores. ESG in South African REITs is still emerging, meaning there is insufficient time-series depth for meaningful longitudinal inference. A panel model would incorrectly treat ESG adoption as stable across time, despite ESG scores in South Africa only becoming consistent after 2018. The period includes the COVID-19 shock, which disproportionately affected REIT valuations and rental income flows. A longitudinal study would risk misattributing short-term crisis effects to ESG, which might weaken the observed relationships. A cross-sectional design enables country-level benchmarking by holding the period constant and comparing structural differences in market maturity rather than time-based fluctuations. This is necessary for a developed vs developing market study.

The remaining 7 REITs are non-ESG-rated REITs in South Africa and were used to conduct a cross-sectional comparison with the 7 ESG-rated REITs in South Africa to analyse financial performance of REITs in the same market with the one dataset having ESG scores whilst the other does not. The way in which we selected the specific REITs was through looking at those which had the largest market caps. We were limited in selecting 7 for each data set because South Africa only has 7 ESG rated REITs and therefore we were limited in selecting 7 REITs for the other two data sets to make the comparison fair and valid. We were also limited in using a 5-year period as majority of the 7 South African ESG-rated REITs did not have ESG scores prior to 2018. We used SPSS statistics as the system to run our regression testing with a total of 246 568 data entries inputted to receive the results in the tables below. Use of SPSS ensured consistency and minimised researcher bias in the statistical interpretation. The data provided gave us access to calculate the following ROA (1), the ROE (2), Tobin's Q (3), ROI (4), Excess Returns (5) and Sharpe Ratio's (6), using the following calculations:

Return on Asset = Net Income/ Total Assets (1)
Return on Equity = Net Income/ Average Total Equity (2)
Tobin's Q = Market Value/ Total Assets (3)
Return on Investment = Net Return/ Cost of Investment (4)
Excess Returns = Returns on Investment – Returns on a Risk-free Investment (5)

$$\text{Sharpe Ratio} = \frac{E[R_a - R_b]}{\sigma_a} \quad (6)$$

Where: E= expected value, Ra= asset return, Rb= risk free return, and the denominator is the standard deviation of the asset excess return.

This study was limited by the small number of ESG-rated REITs in South Africa, as only seven had reported ESG data over the required period. This restricted the sample size and reduced generalisability, although it still reflected the entire ESG-rated REIT population in the country. The cross-sectional design also did not capture the lagged or compounding financial effects of ESG investment, which may only have materialised over a longer time horizon; a longitudinal design could therefore yield richer insights. However, the cross-sectional approach was still appropriate because the objective was to measure current market responses to ESG reporting rather than long-term outcomes. The comparison with the USA further strengthened interpretive value by contrasting a mature ESG environment with an emerging one, establishing whether ESG was already financially rewarded or remained a short-term cost burden in developing markets.

Data Findings

The tables below present all the relevant calculations, data and findings which we have used to conduct our analysis and conclusions. Table 1 displays the findings of the 7 ESG-rated REITs in South Africa, with Table 2 further displaying the findings of each of the 7 REITs used. Table 3 displays the findings of the 7 ESG-rated REITs in the USA, with Table 4 further displaying the findings of each of the 7 REITs used. Table 5 displays the summarised findings of the 7 non-ESG-rated REITs in South Africa (we did not display the findings of each of the 7 non-ESG-rated REITs because we were doing a dataset comparison between the ESG-rated and non-ESG-rated REITs in South Africa and there was no relevance of the specific REIT data). Table 6 displays the summarised findings of the 7 ESG-rated REITs in South Africa.

Table 1 South African ESG-rated REITs Descriptive Statistics

Variable	ROA	ROE	ESG SCORE	TOBIN'S Q	ROI	EXCESS RETURN	SHARPE RATIO
N	42	42	42	42	42	42	42
Minimum	-7,37%	-14,25%	0	0,53	-57,93%	-67,40%	-2,56
0764882324Maximum	6,16%	9,78%	5,78	1,09	41,10%	31,50%	0,91
Mean	0,966%	1,73%	2,88	0,83	-0,23%	-8,15%	-0,30
Std. Deviation	3,19%	5,63%	1,74	0,13	25,59%	25,64%	0,87

Table 2 South African ESG-rated REITs Regression Results

Variable	ROA	ROE	TOBIN'S Q	ROI	EXCESS RETURN	SHARPE RATIO
Growthpoint Properties Ltd						
Beta	-1,594	-1,988	-0,250	9,968	5,143	0,043
Constant	7,672	10,240	1,864	-45,799	-31,796	-0.871
R-square	0,086	0,030	0,695	0,052	0,011	0,000
P-value	0,572	0,745	**0,039**	0,663	0,845	0,977
Redefine Properties Ltd						
Beta	-1,219	2,586	-0,095	15,690	17,292	,421
Constant	-5,293	-11,606	1,298	-80,309	-21,377	-2,430
R-square	0,065	0,078	0,381	0,232	0,423	0,156
P-value	0,627	0,591	0,192	0,333	0,162	0,439
Vukile Property Fund Ltd						
Beta	0.127	0,585	-0,039	18,730	17,292	0,460

Constant	2,207	3,323	0,888	-15,315	-21,377	-0,569
R-square	0,008	0,056	0,183	0,493	0,423	0,424
P-value	0,864	0,651	0,398	0,120	0,162	0,161
Resilient REIT Ltd						
Beta	7,886	11,661	0,366	53,255	-13,020	-0,634
Constant	-18,291	-26,751	0,083	-127,380	27,719	1,358
R-square	0,006	0,005	0,027	0,015	0,001	0,001
P-value	0,888	0,895	0,754	0,815	0,955	0,953
Hyprop Investments Limited						
Beta	1,85	3,627	-0,176	51,982	44,186	1,163
Constant	-6,773	-13,199	1,392	-198,022	-176,739	-4,653
R-square	0,030	0,055	0,118	0,225	0,159	0,158
P-value	0,745	0,655	0,506	0,342	0,434	0,436
Attacq Ltd						
Beta	0,677	1,290	0,018	10,296	9,467	0,285
Constant	-1,268	-2,552	0,780	-22,870	-28,941	-0,870
R-square	0,127	0,129	0,195	0,564	0,465	0,465
P-value	0,489	0,485	0,381	0,085	0,136	0,136
Emira Property Fund Ltd						
Beta	0,469	0,942	-0,011	8,696	-17,571	0,273
Constant	0,986	1,624	0,838	-11,494	7,800	-0,614
R-square	0,174	0,225	0,069	0,469	-0,378	0,377
P-value	0,411	0,342	0,614	0,133	0,194	0,195

Table 3 USA ESG-rated REITs Descriptive Statistics

Variable	ROA	ROE	ESG SCORE	TOBIN'S Q	ROI	EXCESS RETURN	SHARPE RATIO
N	42	42	42	42	42	42	42
Minimum	0,14%	0,28%	0,00	1,2273	-47,63%	-48,52%	-1,33
Maximum	6,52%	20,98%	5,38	4,138	67,74%	66,29%	2,14
Mean	1,30%	6,26%	3,99	2,41	9,51%	7,70%	0,37
Std. Deviation	1,23%	6,20%	0,90	0,76	21,77%	21,93%	0,90

Table 4 USA ESG-rated REITs Regression Results

Variable	ROA	ROE	TOBIN'S Q	ROI	EXCESS RETURN	SHARPE RATIO
Prologis Inc.						
Beta	0,488	0,679	0,663	14,880	12,036	0,748
Constant	-1,174	-1,534	-1,580	-60,094	-47,692	-2,969
R-square	0,174	0,129	0,803	0,081	0,051	0,052
P-value	0,411	0,485	**0,016**	0,584	0,667	0,663
American Tower Corp						
Beta	-0,064	2,355	0,017	1,937	0,268	0,011
Constant	1,216	-1,624	2,766	-0,210	5,432	0,237
R-square	0,012	0,114	0,000	0,003	0,000	0,000
P-value	0,835	0,512	0,969	0,920	0,989	0,989

Equinix Inc.						
Beta	0,020	0,045	0,058	-3,305	-3,308	-0,188
Constant	0,466	1,256	2,607	21,705	20,675	1,075
R-square	0,193	0,155	0,288	0,254	0,293	0,293
P-value	0,384	0,440	0,272	0,308	0,268	0,267
Welltower Inc.						
Beta	-0,358	-0,754	0,311	24,994	21,110	0,805
Constant	2,091	4,391	-0,007	-103,063	-87,302	-3,329
R-square	0,105	0,102	0,543	0,091	0,066	0,066
P-value	0,530	0,537	0,095	0,562	0,623	0,624
Simon Property Group Inc.						
Beta	0,045	-3,947	0,203	82,993	81,727	1,991
Constant	1,370	33,018	1,330	-330,476	-327,178	-7,970
R-square	0,001	0,209	0,013	0,154	0,150	0,151
P-value	0,962	0,362	0,832	0,442	0,448	0,447
Public Storage						
Beta	0,319	2,770	0,015	4,790	3,829	0,183
Constant	2,652	0,175	3,565	-7,224	-5,506	-0,265
R-square	0,048	0,246	0,002	0,054	0,034	0,034
P-value	0,677	0,317	0,938	0,659	0,726	0,725
Crown Castle Inc.						
Beta	0,174	1,203	,127	-7,846	-8,576	-,371
Constant	0,090	-1,100	1,896	34,521	35,370	1,533
R-square	0,719	0,822	0,266	0,236	0,262	0,261
P-value	**0,033**	**0,013**	0,295	0,329	0,299	0,301

Table 5 South African Non-ESG-rated REITs Summarised Descriptive Statistics (2018-2023)

Variable	ROA	ROE	TOBIN'S Q	ROI	EXCESS RETURN	SHARPE RATIO
2018-2023	1.71%	2.63%	0,843	4.13%	-2,35	0,0768

Table 6 South African ESG-rated REITs Summarised Descriptive Statistics (2018-2023)

Variable	ROA	ROE	TOBIN'S Q	ROI	EXCESS RETURN	SHARPE RATIO
2018-2023	-0.33%	1.73%	0,83	-2.11%	-8.15%	-0,3

Findings, Analysis and Discussion

ESG-rated REITs in South Africa

For ROA and ROE, two profitability-focused metrics, ESG scores generally exhibit weak correlations. Growthpoint Properties, for example, shows negative regression coefficients for both ROA and ROE, indicating that higher ESG scores could be associated with lower profitability. However, the lack of statistical significance (p-values of 0.5720 and 0.7450, respectively) implies that these relationships could result from random variability rather than a consistent economic pattern. It may also reflect the timing mismatch between ESG capital expenditure and short-term returns in emerging markets, where the pay-off from sustainability practices tends to materialise only over a longer period. Redefine Properties follows a similar trend, with weak correlations which is consistent with literature showing that in developing markets, ESG activities are often priced as a cost rather than a value-creation signal due

to weak investor confidence and immature disclosure frameworks. For Vukile Property Fund, the relationship with ESG scores is positive but still statistically insignificant, reinforcing that where ESG shows marginal improvements, they are not yet strong enough to shift profitability in measurable terms. This pattern persists across other REITs such as Hyprop and Attacq Properties, where ESG scores do not reliably incite changes in ROA or ROE. These findings highlight the challenge of linking ESG initiatives, to short-run profitability in South Africa's capital-constrained market environment, where REITs face higher borrowing costs and limited sustainability-linked financing instruments compared to developed counterparts (Feng & Wu, 2021) [(21)].

In contrast to profitability metrics, Tobin's Q offers some of the most striking insights in this analysis. Growthpoint Properties demonstrates a significant negative relationship between ESG scores and Tobin's Q, with a high R^2 value of 0.695 and a p-value of 0.0390. This finding indicates that nearly 70% of the variance in market valuation, as captured by Tobin's Q, is explained by ESG scores, albeit in a direction that suggests higher ESG compliance may reduce market valuations. This suggests that instead of interpreting ESG initiatives as long-term value-enhancing, South African markets may currently be discounting them as cost-heavy or return-dilutive, which aligns with signalling theory in immature ESG markets — where ESG investment fails to function as a positive market signal until investor confidence and disclosure comparability strengthen. A potential explanation lies in the increased costs associated with implementing ESG measures, which may be perceived by the market as eroding shareholder value (Erol, Unal and Coskun, 2023) [(19)] or under conditions of capital scarcity. Alternatively, investors may view ESG initiatives as less profitable in the short term because South African REITs are still in early adoption phases, meaning the benefits have not yet been capitalised into market value, leading to a lower valuation. Redefine Properties also shows a negative coefficient for Tobin's Q, though the explanatory power is more moderate ($R^2 = 0.381$), and the relationship lacks statistical significance. Vukile Property Fund exhibits a similar weak negative correlation. These findings suggest that while ESG scores may influence market valuation, the extent and direction of this influence are context-dependent and moderated by investor perception, regulatory immaturity, and the absence of well-defined ESG benchmarking within South Africa's REIT landscape.

ROI, as a measure of financial performance, also demonstrate varied relationships with ESG scores. For Growthpoint Properties, ESG scores explain a modest 5.2% of the variance in returns, with no significant relationship detected ($p = 0.6630$). However, in funds like Attacq, the association becomes more pronounced. Here, ESG scores explain 56.4% of the variance in returns, with a borderline significant p-value of 0.0850. This finding suggests that ESG compliance could have a meaningful impact on returns, at least for some REITs, though the statistical evidence remains somewhat inconclusive. Similar trends are observed in Vukile and Emira Property Fund, where returns exhibit moderate explanatory power (R^2 values above 0.4), but the relationships are not statistically significant. These results indicate that the financial upside of ESG may depend heavily on a REIT's asset mix, capital structure, and the degree to which sustainability investments enhance operational efficiency rather than merely fulfil compliance obligations. Across all REITs analysed, the direction of the relationship tends to be positive, implying that ESG initiatives might support return generation, even if the evidence lacks robustness. This aligns with transition-stage ESG theory in emerging markets, where ESG begins to correlate positively with financial outcomes only once adoption moves beyond symbolic compliance toward integrated strategic execution.

Excess returns and the Sharpe Ratio, both measures of risk-adjusted performance, present an equally mixed picture. For most funds, the explanatory power of ESG scores for these metrics is low to moderate, with adjusted R^2 values often negative, reflecting poor model performance. For example, Growthpoint Properties shows an R^2 of only 0.011 for excess returns, with no statistically significant relationship ($p = 0.8450$). This further reinforces that ESG integration has not yet translated into lower perceived portfolio risk in the South African REIT sector — likely because investor confidence in ESG as a hedging mechanism remains underdeveloped. Similarly, Redefine Properties exhibits limited explanatory power for the Sharpe Ratio, and the relationship remains statistically insignificant across all models. However, in funds like Attacq and Emira, the explanatory power for these metrics improves somewhat, with R^2 values exceeding 0.4 in some cases. Nevertheless, even in these instances, the p-values remain above the threshold for significance, indicating that while ESG scores may contribute to variability in risk-adjusted performance, the strength of this contribution is insufficient to draw firm conclusions. One possible interpretation is that ESG initiatives, which often involve upfront costs and longer-term benefits, may not immediately enhance risk-adjusted returns in the South African market, especially in the post-COVID recovery period where cash preservation has been prioritised over sustainability reinvestment.

A recurring theme across all metrics and funds is the variability in the direction and magnitude of relationships between ESG scores and financial performance. While Growthpoint Properties shows significant results for Tobin's Q, Redefine Properties, and Hyprop present weaker or statistically insignificant relationships across all metrics. Attacq and Vukile demonstrate some promise in returns and risk-adjusted performance, but the statistical evidence remains inconclusive. These differences may reflect the diverse ways in which South African REITs approach ESG compliance, as well as the varying levels of market maturity and investor sentiment towards ESG principles in this region. For example, some REITs may prioritise environmental sustainability, which involves significant capital expenditure, while others may focus on governance improvements, which could yield more immediate financial benefits.

The findings also raise questions about the broader implications of ESG compliance for South African REITs. While the negative relationship with Tobin's Q in Growthpoint suggests potential trade-offs between ESG investments and market valuation, the positive trends in returns for funds like Attacq indicate that ESG initiatives can align with financial performance under certain conditions. The frequent lack of statistical significance across models underscores the complexity of these relationships and highlights the need for further investigation. Future research could explore larger sample sizes, incorporate temporal changes in ESG practices, or examine the role of external factors, such as regulatory shifts or investor demand for sustainable investments, in shaping these dynamics.

In summary, the analysis reveals that ESG scores interact with financial performance metrics in diverse and often inconsistent ways across South African REITs. While some metrics and funds suggest potential benefits or trade-offs, the overall explanatory power remains limited, and significant relationships are rare. This highlights the multifaceted nature of ESG integration in the real estate sector and underscores the need for a refined understanding of its financial implications.

ESG-rated REITs in the USA

The relationship between ROA values and ESG scores is generally weak across the REITs analysed. For example, Prologis Inc shows an R^2 value of 0.174 and a p-value of 0.411, indicating a negligible explanatory power of ESG scores on profitability. A similar trend is observed with American Tower Corp, where ESG scores explain only 1.2% of the variance in ROA, and the relationship is statistically insignificant ($p = 0.835$). Equinix Inc. displays slightly better results, with an R^2 of 0.193, but the lack of significance ($p = 0.384$) suggests that ESG compliance does not play a substantial role in determining profitability. These weak relationships echo findings in mature markets where profitability is not the primary performance channel through which ESG creates value — instead, ESG tends to translate into reputational capital, lower financing spreads, or premium valuations, which are not directly captured by ROA. However, one outlier is Crown Castle Inc, where ESG scores exhibit a strong and statistically significant positive relationship with ROA ($R^2 = 0.719$, $p = 0.033$). This suggests that, in certain cases, ESG practices may contribute to operational efficiency or profitability, particularly where ESG investment is deeply integrated into core strategic operations rather than treated as a compliance exercise. Overall, however, the findings highlight a generally weak and inconsistent link between ESG scores and profitability metrics across U.S. REITs, reinforcing global literature which argues that ESG's financial contribution manifests more strongly through market valuation and risk-based indicators rather than immediate profitability

ROE follows a similarly mixed pattern. Across most REITs, the explanatory power of ESG scores is low, and the relationships lack statistical significance. For example, Prologis Inc exhibits an R^2 of 0.129 with a non-significant p-value of 0.485, while American Tower Corp shows even lower explanatory power, with an R^2 of 0.114 and a p-value of 0.512. In contrast, Crown Castle Inc, again stands out with an R^2 of 0.822 and a highly significant p-value of 0.013, indicating a strong positive correlation between ESG compliance and equity returns. This result supports the institutional maturity argument — in developed markets where ESG reporting is standardised and widely priced in, investors interpret ESG as a positive governance and risk marker, which can enhance equity market performance. These results suggest that while ESG compliance may have a meaningful impact on equity returns for some REITs, the relationship is not consistent across the sector due to variation in strategic integration depth, investor ESG expectations, and sector-specific ESG exposure (e.g., logistics vs. retail vs. data centres). Differences in firm-level ESG strategies, geographic markets, or investor expectations could account for this variability.

Tobin's Q, a measure of market valuation, provides some of the most insightful results. For Prologis Inc, ESG scores explain 80.3% of the variance in Tobin's Q, with a statistically significant p-value of 0.016. This suggests that higher ESG scores are positively associated with market valuation, reflecting that in the U.S. market, ESG is functioning as an asset-pricing signal, especially in REITs with strong green portfolios, resilience strategies, and transparent disclosure frameworks. Other REITs, however, show less consistent results. For instance, Welltower Inc reports an R^2 of 0.543 and a borderline significant p-value of 0.095, while Simon Property Group Inc and Public Storage exhibit weaker and statistically insignificant relationships. These mixed findings highlight that the impact of ESG scores on market valuation may depend on firm-specific factors such as portfolio composition, operational transparency, and the weight investors place on sustainability practices.

Returns and Excess Returns demonstrate generally weak associations with ESG scores across U.S. REITs. For Prologis Inc, ESG scores explain only 8.1% of the variance in returns, and the relationship lacks statistical significance ($p = 0.411$). American Tower Corp and Welltower Inc exhibit similar trends, with low R^2 values and non-significant p-values, indicating limited predictive power of ESG scores for return metrics. Crown Castle Inc again provides a slight deviation, showing moderate explanatory power for Returns ($R^2 = 0.236$) and Excess Returns ($R^2 = 0.262$), although these results remain statistically insignificant. The weak relationships across most REITs suggest that returns may be influenced more by broader market dynamics, economic cycles, or firm-specific financial strategies rather than ESG compliance.

Finally, the Sharpe Ratio, which measures risk-adjusted performance, follows the overall pattern of weak and inconsistent relationships with ESG scores. For Prologis Inc, ESG scores explain only 5.2% of the variance in the Sharpe Ratio, with a p-value of 0.663. Similarly, Welltower Inc reports an R^2 of 0.066, with no significant relationship detected. These findings suggest that ESG practices may not consistently enhance risk-adjusted returns across U.S. REITs. Even Crown Castle Inc, which shows significant relationships for ROA and ROE, fails to demonstrate a meaningful link between ESG scores and the Sharpe Ratio. This aligns with emerging literature arguing that ESG functions as a resilience factor during systemic shocks (e.g., crisis hedging) rather than improving day-to-day volatility-adjusted performance

The results from this analysis underscore the complexity of the relationship between ESG compliance and financial performance in U.S. REITs. While certain metrics, such as Tobin's Q for Prologis Inc or ROA and ROE for Crown Castle Inc, show strong and statistically significant relationships, the overall pattern suggests that ESG scores alone are not reliable predictors of financial outcomes across the sector. The variability in results may stem from differences in how individual REITs implement ESG strategies, the specific components of ESG considered in their scoring, and the varying degrees of investor emphasis on sustainability in different markets.

These findings suggest that while ESG compliance can influence certain aspects of financial performance, its impact is neither uniform nor universally significant. This variability highlights the need for further research to understand the conditions under which ESG compliance translates into financial benefits, including the role of market perception, regulatory environments, and firm-level strategic alignment.

Cross-sectional Analysis

The exploration of ESG scores in South African and U.S. REITs reveals a complex and often inconsistent relationship with financial performance. In both regions, the significance and direction of ESG's impact vary substantially across different metrics and among individual REITs, suggesting that ESG compliance is neither a guaranteed driver nor a definitive hindrance to financial success.

In South Africa, the findings emphasise the limited overall significance of ESG scores in explaining financial performance metrics such as ROA, ROE, ROI and risk-adjusted measures like the Sharpe Ratio. While ESG scores exhibited some explanatory power for market valuation metrics like Tobin's Q in certain cases (e.g., Growthpoint Properties), even these relationships often leaned negative, raising concerns about potential trade-offs between ESG investments and shareholder value. The results suggest that the integration of ESG principles in South African REITs may not yet align seamlessly with short-term profitability or market valuation strategies. This could reflect the early stages of ESG adoption in the region, where the upfront costs of sustainability initiatives may overshadow their longer-term benefits. In the USA, ESG scores showed correlation to the South African findings in that there

was no strong relation to profitability. While certain REITs, such as Crown Castle Inc, demonstrated significant positive relationships with metrics like ROA and ROE, these cases were exceptions rather than a trend. For the broader sample, ESG scores generally had weak explanatory power for profitability, market valuation, returns, and risk-adjusted performance. Notable outliers, such as Prologis Inc's strong positive relationship between ESG scores and Tobin's Q, suggest that ESG can drive market valuation under specific conditions largely relating to green portfolios and development costing (Cheruiyot, Martell & Motani's, 2023) (23), potentially also influenced by investor demand for sustainability. However, across most metrics, the results were statistically insignificant, underscoring the inconsistency of ESG reporting and scoring on the financial impact even in the most developed REIT market in the world (Statista, 2024). The results from both regions highlight the variability in ESG's financial relevance, shaped by differences in market maturity, regulatory pressures, investor priorities, and the strategic implementation of ESG initiatives. While U.S. REITs, operating in a market with stronger ESG frameworks, show isolated examples of ESG alignment with financial success, the results are not universally significant. In South Africa, where ESG frameworks may still be maturing, the lack of consistent financial benefits suggests that the sector may require further alignment of ESG strategies with broader operational and market goals. ESG compliance holds promise as a driver of financial performance but remains context dependent. Its significance varies based on firm-specific factors, market perception, and investor expectations. For both South African and U.S. REITs, maximising ESG's potential requires a strategic approach that balances sustainability initiatives with financial imperatives, ensuring that ESG investments deliver both long-term value and short-term viability.

ESG and non-ESG-rated REITs in South Africa

The comparison between the ESG-rated and non-ESG-rated REITs highlighted some interesting findings. Using 183 960 data entries, we have summarised them into Table 5 and 6 above to compare the data which found that ROA, ROE and ROI of non-ESG-rated REITs were outperforming the ESG-rated REITs by 2.04%, 0.9% and 6.24% respectively. This indicates that ESG reporting and scoring is an expensive affair for REITs as they are being outperformed by non-ESG-rated REITs. A very important point to note was that the Tobin's Q values were only differentiated by 1.3%, with the non-ESG-rated REITs having a higher value which was extremely unexpected since previous literature by Cheruiyot, Martell, and Motani's (2023), and Almusaed, Almssad, and Yitmen (2024) had stated that ESG-rated REITs would have higher Tobin's Q values due to the cost of sustainable buildings and building practices. The Sharpe Ratio indicated that for ESG-rated REITs the risk-free return rate is greater than the portfolio's return rate, however we did note a massive dip in the financial performance during covid-19 in 2020-2021, and therefore we cannot confidently say that the in the long term these findings will be the same (Wullweber, 2020). We do expect that in the long term ESG-rated REITs will outperform the others by some margin due to the rise in demand for sustainable building's and building practices (Chacon, Feng & Wu, 2024).

Conclusion

The relationship between ESG scores and financial performance metrics in both the South African and USA REITs presented a complex and nuanced picture. Key performance indicators such as ROA, ROE, Tobin's Q, ROI, excess returns, and the Sharpe Ratio, revealed notable patterns that vary both in magnitude and significance across different funds. While some results suggest ESG compliance may positively or negatively influence specific metrics, the overall explanatory power is frequently limited, underscoring the multifaceted nature of ESG's impact on financial outcomes. The cross-sectional regression analysis revealed that in both countries, there were high P values, with few outliers, which proves that there is no statistically significant relationship between ESG reporting and financial performance of REITs. However, Tobin's Q emerged as the most consistent valuation metric affected by ESG scores—particularly in South African REITs—suggesting that markets interpret ESG expenditure primarily as a valuation trade-off rather than a profitability driver in the short to medium term. This finding aligns with cost-transition literature (Erol et al., 2023; Newell & Marzuki, 2022) which shows that developing markets experience ESG as an upfront cost rather than immediate value. This study advances existing evidence by showing how and where ESG begins to express financial relevance in a developing market: not through operational profitability (ROA/ROE) but through valuation perception (Tobin's Q). This provides an empirical basis for shifting ESG integration strategies away from "compliance reporting" and toward "valuation signalling".

The comparison between the markets showed that the US REIT performance substantially outperformed South Africa which we believe is due to the long history of ESG reporting and scoring, stronger investor stewardship, and more mature sustainability-linked capital markets in the USA compared to South Africa. This aligns with researchers such as Chacon, Feng and Wu (2024) [(13)], Hossain (2023) [(16)], Raghavan (2022) [(18)], and Erol, Unal and Coskun (2023) [(19)], who all suggest that investing in ESG reporting is a long-term financial benefit and a step towards REITs long term sustainability. Our findings when comparing ESG-rated and non-ESG-rated REITs in South Africa was that as a complete dataset, non-ESG-rated REITs were performing better which could possibly be due to high cost's related to ESG reporting. Our Bloomberg data showed out of the top 10 REITs of each country (by market cap), 100% comprised of ESG-rated REITs in the USA and 70% in South Africa. Our supporting literature from Newell and Marzuki (2022) [(12)], Chacon, Feng and Wu (2024) [(13)], Raghavan (2022) [(18)] and Feng and Wu (2021) [(21)], all highlight that ESG reporting and practices unlock high levels of firm value and confidence of institutions (Banks/ Investors) for debt financing, which is likely the reason ESG-rated REITs are the largest by market cap in both markets. This information, and our findings that ESG reporting and scoring have no statistically significant correlation to financial performance of REITs, even in the largest REIT economy, leads to us recommending that more research be done on firm value, debt financing and the level of resilience and sustainability that ESG reporting can provide. We also recommend that our study be repeated in 5-10 years to further investigate whether ESG reporting does become a statistically significant factor in financial performance as ESG and sustainability further develop into a standard business practice. Although we recommend repeating this study in 5–10 years to capture delayed financial benefits as ESG matures, there are also actionable implications for policymakers and practitioners today. For regulators, aligning South Africa's ESG disclosure requirements with global reporting standards, increasing enforcement certainty and introducing sustainability-linked tax or financing incentives could accelerate the transition from reputational to performance-based ESG integration. For investors, clearer ESG data comparability and education on long-term risk-adjusted value could strengthen stewardship pressure. For REIT managers, phased ESG implementation strategies focusing first on governance and low-capex environmental wins may reduce transition burdens. Such interventions could help shift ESG from a short-term cost centre to a long-term performance driver in the South African REIT market, enabling the sector to better capture sustainability-related value over time. Beyond investors, these findings hold important implications for built environment practitioners—particularly quantity surveyors (QSs), cost consultants, project managers, asset managers and ESG design professionals. Since QS professionals quantify lifecycle cost, compliance risk and value engineering strategies, they are critical in mediating the transition from ESG as a regulatory expense to ESG as a performance-enhancing investment. The results show a need for cost-modelling frameworks that better capture long-term ESG payback horizons and risk-adjusted value, rather than treating sustainability investment as pure capital outlay. For facilities managers and asset managers, this signals a shift toward operational ESG performance as a driver of future valuation, not simply "green rating compliance".

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SACQSP2025-79

Evaluating Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) Aggregate Confusion in Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs): A Multi-Tool Framework

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Abstract

A fundamental contradiction in sustainable finance directly challenges the core competencies of the Quantity Surveyor. While trustworthy Environmental, Social and Governance ("ESG") data is essential for risk appraisal, it is plagued by inconsistent assessment methodologies, i.e. a phenomenon known as "aggregate confusion". This research addresses this issue within Real Estate Investment Trusts ("REITs") which, is a critical asset class in the built environment. Challenging the sector's reliance on single benchmarks, this study argues that a multi-tool methodology is important for a resilient financial assessment of a REIT's ESG performance. Through a directed content analysis of ESG frameworks and an instrumental case study of a leading South African REIT, this research deconstructs the mechanisms of rating divergence. The findings reveal that frameworks operate on conflicting philosophies of materiality, with the "Social" pillar exhibiting the most severe divergence which is a result validated by the case study. The paper makes two critical contributions: a practical, evidence-based protocol for Quantity Surveyors and a theoretical extension of the "aggregate confusion" thesis. The study concludes that a multi-tool approach is not merely best practice but an essential risk management protocol for the modern Quantity Surveyor navigating the informational inefficiencies of the sustainable real estate market.

Keywords: ESG, Sustainability, Quantity Surveying, Aggregate Confusion, REITs.

Introduction

The adage "what gets measured, gets managed" reveals a fundamental flaw in the global project of corporate sustainability: the act of measurement itself is profoundly inconsistent. As global crises of climate change, biodiversity loss and social inequality intensify, Environmental, Social and Governance ("ESG") criteria have transitioned from a peripheral concern into a core tenet of corporate governance and investment strategy (Kotsantonis, Pinney & Serafeim, 2016). This shift is underpinned by extensive evidence linking ESG metrics to corporate financial performance (Friede, Busch & Bassen, 2015). This scrutiny is particularly acute in asset-heavy sectors such as real estate, where firms are custodians of vast portfolios of environmental and social capital (Vert Asset Management, 2025). Consequently, Real Estate Investment Trusts ("REITs"), by virtue of their significant environmental footprint and societal impact, face intense institutional pressures from a spectrum of stakeholders (Freeman, 1984) to demonstrate robust sustainability performance (Feng & Wu, 2023; Geczy, Haines & Levin, 2022; World Economic Forum, 2024).

This dynamic creates a central paradox that poses a direct and material threat to the professional practice of Quantity Surveying. The Quantity Surveyor, in their capacity as a risk manager and financial advisor, is professionally obligated to ensure financial prudence and value for money for their clients. Nevertheless, just as market demand for dependable ESG data has become essential for this function,

a powerful academic consensus confirms that the data itself is fundamentally unreliable due to inconsistent assessment methodologies. This is not a minor anomaly but a structural characteristic of the ESG landscape, a phenomenon termed 'aggregate confusion' (Berg, Kölbel & Rigobon, 2022). In response, a suite of ESG rating tools, including the Global Real Estate Sustainability Benchmark ("GRESB"), MSCI and Sustainalytics, has emerged to provide standardised evaluations, with GRESB gaining prominence in the real estate sector. However, a significant body of literature now demonstrates that these tools suffer from serious methodological limitations, including a lack of transparency (Botosan, 1997) and inherent biases that risk mispricing assets and misallocating capital on a global scale (Giese et al., 2019). All of these are a direct challenge to the QS's role in ensuring financial reliability and rigour.

Despite the well-documented "aggregate confusion" of ESG ratings (Berg, Kölbel & Rigobon, 2022), the literature has yet to systematically investigate the implications of this divergence from the perspective of the built environment professional or evaluate the viability of cross-tool validation as a corrective mechanism. This gap gives rise to this study's central research question: How can Quantity Surveyors navigate the "aggregate confusion" of divergent ESG ratings to provide dependable financial and risk advice for Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs)? To answer this, the study investigates two sub-questions:

1. How do methodological divergences between major ESG rating tools manifest in the specific context of REITs?
2. To what extent can a multi-tool validation approach mitigate the idiosyncratic biases of a single framework, like GRESB, to improve the reliability of ESG assessments?

This research scrutinises the sector's excessive dependence on institutionally accepted, single-benchmark ESG assessments and examines this phenomenon from the perspective of institutional theory. It addresses this critical gap by investigating the utility of combining GRESB with complementary ESG frameworks to enhance the accuracy, transparency and relevance of ESG evaluations for REITs. This paper employs a qualitative methodology to deconstruct the mechanics of "aggregate confusion" at a granular level, a task for which broad quantitative surveys are ill-suited. Through an instrumental case study of a leading South African REIT, it empirically explores how cross-validation among ESG tools can mitigate individual limitations and strengthen the integrity of sustainability reporting. Accordingly, this study contributes in three interrelated ways: first, it critically dissects the methodological shortcomings of popular ESG tools in the REIT context; second, it tests empirically whether a multi-tool assessment can increase evaluative reliability; and third, it presents a fact-based case for this approach in the absence of a global standard. To build this argument, the paper proceeds as follows. First, it synthesises the literature on ESG divergence and institutional theory to construct the paper's conceptual framework. Next, it details the two-phase qualitative methodology used to deconstruct and validate the phenomenon. The results are then presented and interpreted, leading to a conclusion that outlines the study's contributions and provides actionable recommendations for the Quantity Surveying profession and future research.

Conceptual Framework: Institutional Pressures and the Architecture of ESG Divergence

The Architecture of Ambiguity: How Institutional Pressures Drive ESG Divergence

Despite the growing relevance of ESG in shaping investment decisions, the measurement landscape is defined by a systemic lack of standardisation and transparency. Each rating agency deploys a proprietary methodology, resulting in divergent and often contradictory scores for the same company (Agosto & Tanda, 2024), which is a structural feature, not a flaw, of the current market (Capizzi et al., 2021). This methodological fragmentation, fuelled by hundreds of unique performance indicators (Nareit, 2019), creates confusion for the built environment professionals, such as Quantity Surveyors, who must interpret this data for financial advisory purposes. The problem stems from foundational disagreements over the scope and weighting of ESG factors, with agencies employing varied definitions of materiality and idiosyncratic weighting schemes that are rarely transparent (Dimson, Marsh & Staunton, 2020; Khan, Serafeim & Yoon, 2016). Institutional theory posits that this "architecture of ambiguity" is purposefully created by institutional restrictions and not because of a failure of the market. The concept of isomorphism explains how organisations in a field begin to resemble one another and helps clarify REITs' adoption of ESG standards. Copied behaviour due to

pressures from uncertainty cause REITs to imitate established and legitimate firms whilst normative pressures from professional bodies and benchmarks, such as GRESB, define "best practice". Additionally, coercive pressures from investors, debt providers and other stakeholders require ESG adoption to obtain capital or compliance (Hoepner et al., 2021).

These convergent forces directly led to GRESB's supremacy in the real estate industry. However, this dynamic creates a critical risk of symbolic compliance, or "greenwashing". The emphasis on disclosure-based metrics allows firms to strategically optimise their reporting to secure institutional legitimacy rather than implement substantive operational changes (Kim & Lyon, 2015). This introduces a clear source of agency cost for investors and a profound ethical challenge for the Quantity Surveyor, whose professional integrity demands the assessment of substantive, not symbolic, performance. Moreover, GRESB's historical portfolio-level focus and underdeveloped "Social" dimension highlight the inherent risks of relying on it as a single source of truth (Dimson, Marsh & Staunton, 2020; Newell, Nanda & Moss, 2023). In the absence of harmonised standards, the informational risk created by these dynamics compromises the credibility of all ESG scores and falls directly on the Quantity Surveyor to navigate and mitigate.

From Diagnosis to Prescription: A Multi-Tool Solution to a Systemic Problem

While literature confirms that strong ESG performance can confer competitive advantages through enhanced risk mitigation and stakeholder loyalty (Friede, Busch & Bassen, 2015), the compromised measurement framework makes identifying genuine performance challenging. In response, scholars have called for standardisation, yet harmonisation remains elusive (Newell, Nanda & Moss, 2023). A logical, yet critically under-explored, alternative is the adoption of a multi-tool evaluation approach (Yu et al., 2024). This strategy, leveraging cross-validation between frameworks, can mitigate the idiosyncratic bias of any single tool and provide a more holistic assessment (Capelli, Ielasi & Russo, 2023). While a counterargument exists that this divergence is a productive feature reflecting diverse investor preferences (Chatterji et al., 2016; Dimson, Marsh & Staunton, 2020), this paper contends that from the perspective of the Quantity Surveyor, such ambiguity creates unacceptable informational risk. The QS's fiduciary duty is not to navigate philosophical diversity but to mitigate quantifiable financial risk. A multi-tool approach, therefore, serves as a pragmatic "translation key" to navigate this landscape, transforming unproductive divergence into profound insight.

The existing literature has successfully diagnosed the general problem of rating divergence but has failed to move to a sector-specific prescription that is actionable for built environment professionals (Clément, Robinot & Trespeuch, 2023). Most research critiques divergence without testing practical frameworks for reconciling disparate assessments, thereby failing to address the consequences of the very institutional pressures it documents. Consequently, there is a distinct lack of robust, case-based evidence demonstrating how a multi-tool strategy might improve the ESG assessment of real estate portfolios in a manner that supports the fiduciary duties of Quantity Surveyors. This paper directly addresses this critical gap, providing a clear analysis of the benefits of using multiple ESG frameworks to achieve more reliable insights into the performance of REITs.

Research Design and Methods

Research Design and Rationale

To investigate the methodological architecture of ESG rating divergence, this study is positioned within a pragmatic research paradigm which is a choice driven by the study's focus on a practical problem and its commitment to providing an actionable solution for professional practice. The study employs a systematic evaluation model, defined by its use of structured, methodical processes to ensure impartiality and enhance the validity of its findings (Fitzpatrick, Sanders & Worthen, 2011). While quantitative studies effectively demonstrate the existence of ESG rating divergence (Berg, Kölbel & Rigobon, 2022), they are unsuited to explaining its underlying source. A qualitative methodology is necessary not only to deconstruct the design of the rating tools but also to expose the mechanics of why they diverge. Consequently, this research is designed as a two-phase qualitative inquiry. The first phase employs directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) to systematically deconstruct and compare the indicator frameworks of the selected rating tools. The second phase uses an instrumental case study (Yin, 2018) to validate and illustrate the real-world implications of the divergences identified.

The selection of a single instrumental case study design is a deliberate methodological choice. The primary goal of this research is not to measure the prevalence of multi-tool reporting across the REIT sector, but to deconstruct the underlying mechanisms of ESG rating divergence and understand its practical implications. This requires analytical depth, not statistical breadth, making an in-depth case study the most appropriate design. The chosen REIT is positioned as a “critical case” (Yin, 2018) and is an exemplary instance of a firm that is publicly committed to ESG best practice and actively reports against multiple, divergent frameworks. This makes it an ideal “laboratory” to observe how the theoretical phenomenon of “aggregate confusion” manifests in corporate strategy and reporting. While a comparative study of multiple REITs could reveal the prevalence of certain reporting behaviours, it would lack the granularity required to deconstruct the methodological architecture of the frameworks themselves, which is the central aim of this research. Therefore, the objective is not statistical generalisability but analytical generalisation, where the insights from this critical case are used to illustrate and explain a broader theoretical concept.

The findings from the content analysis are organised and interpreted using comparative benchmarking, a technique that systematically maps frameworks against one another to reveal patterns of convergence, divergence and omission, thereby aligning with the "pattern-matching" logic central to rigorous case study research.

Data Collection, Analysis and Case Selection

The research was executed via a rigorous, multi-stage protocol grounded in established content analysis methodology (Krippendorff, 2018). First, a data corpus was assembled, comprising the most recent and publicly available methodology guides from GRESB, MSCI, and Refinitiv. Second, a directed content analysis was performed. All unique performance indicators were extracted verbatim from the source documents and systematically coded into the predetermined pillars of Environmental, Social or Governance. A single researcher conducted all coding to ensure maximal consistency. While this removes the need for inter-coder reliability calculations, rigour was maintained through the creation of a clear audit trail and strict adherence to the a priori coding framework derived from the literature, which is a common practice in directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Third, the coded indicators were populated in a comparative matrix to systematically visualise and analyse the frameworks. Finally, an instrumental case study of a leading South African REIT was conducted to validate the findings.

The selected case is a prominent REIT listed on the JSE, with a significant and diversified property portfolio spanning the retail, office, and industrial sectors across South Africa and with significant international holdings. This geographical spread is relevant as it exposes the firm to a variety of regional ESG benchmarks, making it an ideal “critical case” for this study. This geographical spread is relevant as it exposes the firm to a variety of regional ESG benchmarks, making it an ideal “critical case” for this study. The REIT was selected based on three criteria: (1) its public commitment to ESG best practices; (2) its documented use of multiple, divergent ESG tools, providing a rich context for analysis; and (3) its comprehensive and publicly available ESG reporting, which enables a transparent, evidence-based examination of how a firm navigates the divergent landscape.

Trustworthiness, Rigour and Ethics

The quality of this qualitative study is guaranteed by the clear use of known trustworthiness criteria (Patton, 2008). First, there are two ways to build trustworthiness, or trust in the "truth" of the results. In the study, the pattern-matching method is used. When the instrumental case is reported in the real world, it backs up the differences that were found in the content analysis. Second, a clear and organised protocol makes it possible for results to be dependable, which means they do not change over time. The full explanation of the multiple steps used to collect and analyse data makes a clear "audit trail" that can be used to check the research process for accuracy and consistency. Third, putting the analysis directly on the verbatim indicators from the source documents makes sure that the results are confirmable, which means that they are based on the research and not the researcher's own preferences. Fourth, transferability, or how the results can be used in different situations, is looked at by using a well-known rating framework to choose an instrumental case. This gives readers a way to think about how the results might be used in different companies, industries, and institutional settings.

Ethical matters considered is that this study relies exclusively on publicly available data, including corporate ESG reports and rating agency methodology guides. Even though no human subjects were

involved, and all data is in the public domain, formal institutional ethical clearance was nonetheless obtained.

Research Results

The directed content analysis of the GRESB, MSCI, and Refinitiv frameworks shows clear differences in how many assessment categories they use and what topics they cover. This section presents these findings, first through a quantitative comparison of the primary assessment categories, and second, through a qualitative heatmap illustrating the differences in coverage. A quantitative summary reveals a notable variance in the number of distinct assessment categories each framework employs across the Environmental, Social and Governance pillars. As shown in Table 1, GRESB and MSCI use a more granular approach with a higher number of categories compared to Refinitiv, which operates at a higher level of aggregation.

Table 1 Comparative Count of ESG Assessment Categories by Framework

Pillar	GRESB	MSCI	Refinitiv
🌍 Environmental	8	9	3
🤝 Social	6	8	4
🏛 Governance	5	6	3

While Table 1 shows the quantitative variance, the heatmap in Table 2 provides a more granular view by illustrating the distinct focus of each tool. The analysis confirms that no single tool provides comprehensive coverage across all core assessment categories. For example, GRESB provides detailed coverage of asset-level operational performance, using indicators such as “Energy Consumption”, “GHG Emissions”, and “Waste Management”. In contrast, MSCI focuses more on enterprise-level climate risk, with indicators like “Climate Change Vulnerability” and “Carbon Emissions”. Similarly, within the Social pillar, MSCI provides granular coverage of supply chain risks through indicators like “Supply Chain Labour Standards”, an area not explicitly detailed in the GRESB framework. The Governance pillar shows a split between GRESB’s focus on internal policies and reporting, and MSCI’s focus on shareholder-centric issues like “Board Structure” and “Executive Pay”.

Table 2 Heatmap of ESG Framework Coverage on Key Themes

ESG Theme	GRESB	MSCI	Refinitiv
🌍 ENVIRONMENTAL			
Operational Performance (Energy, Water, Waste)	🟢	🟡	🟡
Climate Risk and Vulnerability Assessmen	🟡	🟢	⚪
🤝 SOCIAL			
Employee Health, Safety and DEI	🟢	🟢	🟡
Tenant and Community Engagement	🟢	🟡	🟡
Supply Chain Labour Standards	🟡	🟢	⚪
Privacy and Data Security	⚪	🟢	🟡
🏛 GOVERNANCE			
Internal Policies and ESG Reporting	🟢	🟡	🟡
Board Structure and Executive Pay	⚪	🟢	🟡

Key: 🟢 Comprehensive and Detailed Coverage; 🟡 Partial or High-Level Coverage; ⚪ No Direct or Explicit Coverage

Note: The heatmap illustrates the conceptual focus of each framework. 🟢 (Comprehensive) indicates the framework uses multiple, granular indicators for the theme. 🟡 (Partial) indicates higher-level or less detailed coverage. ⚪ (None) indicates the theme is not explicitly addressed. GRESB’s focus is primarily on asset-level operational performance, while MSCI’s is on enterprise-level financial and governance risks.

The instrumental case study provides real-world validation of these documented patterns. A review of the 2024 ESG Report from the case study REIT confirms that the company reports on topics that are not universally covered by all frameworks. For instance, its public reporting includes a dedicated section on its "Responsible and Ethical Supply Chain", which aligns with a core assessment category in the MSCI framework but is an area with less direct coverage in the GRESB framework. This confirms that to meet stakeholder expectations, a leading REIT's reporting strategy must address topics drawn from multiple, distinct conceptualisations of ESG.

Discussion

The divergence between ESG rating frameworks is not a matter of minor methodological variance but rather it represents a fundamental clash of philosophies with material consequences for the Quantity Surveyor. Our findings confirm that reliance on any single framework yields an assessment with significant omissions, creating a profound professional risk. This divergence is not random noise but a systematic product of the frameworks operating on fundamentally different philosophies of materiality and risk. For the Quantity Surveyor, whose professional remit is the management of cost, value and risk, this fragmented landscape presents a profound challenge. This discussion interprets the specific nature of this divergence and explores the implications for both theory and practice.

Divergence and Professional Risk: Interpreting the Pillars

The analysis of the Environmental pillar reveals a critical split between GRESB's focus on operational metrics (asset performance) and MSCI's orientation towards financial risk (asset vulnerability) (GRESB, 2024). For a Quantity Surveyor conducting due diligence, this is a significant finding. Relying solely on a strong GRESB score might lead to an accurate assessment of a REIT's current utility costs but could completely obscure the material financial risk posed by assets located in regions of high-water stress or climate vulnerability, which is a risk MSCI is designed to capture and one that directly impacts long-term asset valuation (Gao & Satchwell, 2023). This risk is magnified in the social pillar, where divergence is most pronounced. This is because the "S" in ESG currently lacks the standardised metrics common to the "E" (e.g., tons of CO2) or the legalistic frameworks of the "G" (e.g., board composition). Social factors like 'supply chain labour standards' or 'privacy and data security' are highly contextual and qualitative, leading to profound philosophical disagreements between rating agencies on what constitutes material risk.

A QS advising on a REIT that scores highly on GRESB's employee and tenant-focused social metrics could be unknowingly validating an investment with significant, unmeasured reputational and legal risks in its supply chain, which is a liability MSCI's framework is more attuned to. As confirmed by the case study, a leading REIT must report on its "Responsible and Ethical Supply Chain", validating that this is a materially relevant issue. Finally, in the Governance pillar, the frameworks measure conflicting models of corporate oversight. GRESB's focus on internal policies reflects a compliance-orientated view, whereas MSCI's emphasis on board structure and executive pay reflects a shareholder-centric, agency-theory perspective (Liang & Renneboog, 2017). A QS must understand this distinction: a REIT can appear well-governed under one framework while exhibiting potential agency problems under another.

Theoretical Implications: Refining Aggregate Confusion and Institutional Theory

These findings make a targeted theoretical contribution. They extend the "aggregate confusion" thesis (Berg, Kölbel & Rigobon, 2022) by moving from statistical demonstration to a qualitative explanation of its underlying mechanics, showing that divergence is a feature of a landscape where "ESG" has no single, stable meaning. Furthermore, the findings directly challenge the notion that this divergence is a benign 'feature' reflecting market diversity (Dimson, Marsh & Staunton, 2020). While this market-based view has merit, it fails to account for the fiduciary duty of the Quantity Surveyor. The QS's role is not to navigate philosophical diversity but to mitigate quantifiable financial risk, and from this professional standpoint, ambiguity is a critical flaw, not a feature. For a professional like the Quantity Surveyor, whose role is grounded in standardised measurement and risk mitigation, this ambiguity is a critical flaw. It introduces unquantifiable uncertainty that undermines the very purpose of due diligence.

The findings also enhance institutional theory in this context. The fact that the case study REIT reports against multiple, divergent frameworks (GRESB, MSCI, Sustainalytics) demonstrates a sophisticated response to conflicting institutional pressures. This illustrates a clear "decoupling", where the firm

adopts the reporting structures required for legitimacy in the real estate field (normative pressure from GRESB) while simultaneously signalling to financial markets using the language of shareholder-centric governance (coercive pressure from investors via MSCI), providing a textured, real-world example of how firms manage contradictory institutional demands.

Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

This study has two primary limitations that define a clear agenda for future research. First, while the instrumental case study provides rich validation, the findings related to corporate strategy and are analytically, not statistically, generalisable. Future research should apply this multi-tool framework across a larger sample of REITs to identify sector-wide patterns. Second, the analysis is based on publicly available documentation and is therefore unable to deconstruct the proprietary weighting and scoring algorithms that are critical in generating the final ratings. This means our study can explain divergence in what is measured (scope), but not conclusively how heavily each factor counts (weighting), which is a crucial component of the final score.

Future research could use advanced statistical techniques to attempt to reverse-engineer these weightings to better understand their impact. Furthermore, qualitative investigations into how Quantity Surveyors and investment managers practically reconcile conflicting ESG data in their day-to-day decision-making would provide invaluable insight into the “black box” of professional judgement.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that the divergence among ESG rating frameworks is a significant structural problem rooted in conflicting philosophies of risk, materiality and governance. For the real estate sector and the Quantity Surveyors who serve it, the analysis reveals that an institutionalised reliance on a single benchmark like GRESB produces an incomplete picture of a REIT’s sustainability profile. The finding is not that GRESB is an inherently flawed tool, but that its specific function as an asset-level benchmark has been conflated with the broader purpose of a comprehensive corporate ESG risk assessment, for which it is insufficient on its own. Acknowledging the study's qualitative design and its focus on indicator scope rather than proprietary weightings, the clear gaps identified confirm that a multi-tool evaluation strategy is an essential protocol for responsible investment.

The primary contribution of this study is a targeted theoretical and practical intervention. Theoretically, it extends the “aggregate confusion” thesis (Berg, Kölbel & Rigobon, 2022) by deconstructing the mechanics of this confusion at the indicator level, moving the debate from statistical diagnosis to qualitative explanation. Practically, it provides an evidence-based, actionable protocol for the Quantity Surveyor to mitigate the significant informational risks present in the market. Ultimately, relying on a single ESG score, even from a trusted industry benchmark, is akin to navigating a complex environment with only one instrument on the flight deck; it provides an incomplete view of the risks and opportunities ahead. Until standards harmonise, using multiple, complementary ESG tools for cross-validation is not merely "best practice" but it is an essential discipline for credible corporate governance.

Recommendations

While acknowledging that the following recommendations face practical barriers to implementation, such as institutional resistance and resource constraints, they are presented as a roadmap for enhancing the integrity and utility of ESG assessment in the built environment.

Recommendations for Industry Stakeholders

For Rating Agencies: To evolve into more comprehensive standalone tools, agencies like GRESB are encouraged to expand their scope beyond operational metrics to incorporate the enterprise-level risk factors prioritised by financial stakeholders, such as supply chain labour standards and board-level governance indicators.

- For Investors and Asset Managers: As a matter of fiduciary duty, investors should consider developing formal, internal ESG risk translation frameworks.

A sophisticated strategy involves using different frameworks for different purposes: employing GRESB for asset-level operational benchmarking while using MSCI or Refinitiv to assess corporate governance and financial risks.

- For REITs: REITs should aim to strategically report against multiple frameworks to provide a credible and holistic account of their ESG performance.

This practice demonstrates transparency and allows them to address the distinct concerns of different stakeholders.

- For Regulators and Policymakers: Regulatory bodies should work towards creating a minimum baseline for ESG disclosure for REITs to reduce ambiguity and enhance comparability across frameworks, fostering a more transparent market for all stakeholders.

Recommendations for the Quantity Surveying Profession

- Professional Guidance: Professional bodies like the SACQSP should develop and disseminate practice notes on integrating divergent ESG data into core QS services, including due diligence, life cycle costing and risk management.
- Curriculum Enhancement: Tertiary institutions are encouraged to update QS curricula to include dedicated modules on sustainable finance, ESG rating analysis and data reconciliation to equip the next generation of professionals with these critical skills.
- Upskilling and CPD: Practising Quantity Surveyors should pursue Continuous Professional Development (CPD) focused on ESG to expand their competency beyond traditional cost metrics and into the essential field of integrated value and risk advisory.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study's qualitative findings open several critical avenues for future inquiry. First, research is urgently needed to quantify the financial materiality of the specific indicator gaps identified. Second, a critical unanswered question is how investment professionals practically reconcile divergent ESG ratings; qualitative studies interviewing portfolio managers and practising Quantity Surveyors are needed. Finally, future work should deconstruct the proprietary weighting schemes used by rating agencies to determine how much of the final score divergence is attributable to weighting versus indicator selection.

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SACQSP2025-80

Introducing SCABE Theory: A Theoretical Framework for Quantity Surveyors and the Sustainability – Climate Nexus

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Abstract

The accelerating climate crisis compels a fundamental reappraisal of the Quantity Surveyor's (QS) role within South Africa's built environment. Traditionally confined to cost estimation, procurement, and contractual control, the QS profession is increasingly confronted with the imperative to embed sustainability and resilience at the core of its practice. This paper undertakes a narrative literature review, drawing on recent scholarship from Scopus, Web of Science and IBSS from the authors selective reading pool, to synthesise knowledge at the intersection of sustainability, climate action, and professional transformation. Five thematic strands emerge: the centrality of sustainability and climate imperatives, the inadequacy of the traditional QS role, persistent barriers to change, enabling drivers and opportunities, and the new competencies required for future practice.

The study advances the Sustainable Climate Action in the Built Environment (SCABE) Theory, constructed through Dubin's (1978) interpretive post positivist model of theory building. SCABE specifies constructs, propositions, boundaries, and system states that capture the QS profession's evolution from 'cost-centric equilibrium', through 'transitional disequilibrium', toward a 'sustainability-centric equilibrium'. It demonstrates how competency barriers, skills deficits, cost perceptions, regulatory weakness, moderate professional adaptation, while future drivers, digitalisation, green finance, energy costs, and policy momentum, enable transformation. The theory positions the QS as a strategic actor capable of operationalising sustainability and climate imperatives through life cycle costing, circular economy strategies, and climate-risk advisory.

Epistemologically, SCABE complements recent frameworks such as social tipping processes, green and circular building theory, resilience modelling, and social innovation in the built environment, by supplying a profession-specific lens that bridges macro-level imperatives with micro-level practice. Normatively, it charts a pathway for education, practice, policy, and professional leadership to reposition QSs as agents of systemic change. The study concludes that unless the QS profession embraces this transformation, it risks marginalisation; conversely, by adopting SCABE, QSs can reassert their relevance as architects of a just, resilient, and sustainable built environment.

Keywords: Climate Action, Circular Economy, Green Building, Quantity Surveyor, SCABE Theory.

Introduction

In April 2022, the city of Durban in South Africa was devastated by catastrophic floods that claimed over 540 lives, displaced thousands, and inflicted billions of rand in damage to infrastructure and housing (Engelbrecht et al., 2025; Nhamo, Chapungu & Mutanda, 2025). Such disasters are not isolated incidents but rather the manifestation of an escalating climate crisis in which droughts, water

scarcity, and extreme weather events increasingly define South Africa's socio-economic trajectory (Vogel & Swilling, 2018; Hellberg, 2020). The built environment occupies a critical position within this challenge: it contributes nearly 40% of global energy consumption and emissions Shin et al. (2023), while South Africa's construction industry alone accounts for almost one-fifth of the national carbon footprint (Labaran, Mathur & Farouq, 2021). Confronting this reality requires not only technological innovation but also the redefinition of professional roles within the sector.

Traditionally, Quantity Surveyors (QSs) have served as financial custodians, focusing on cost estimation, procurement, contract administration, and budgetary control (Cruywagen & Llale, 2017). Yet in a context where the production of cement alone releases approximately one kilogram of carbon dioxide per kilogram produced Akintayo, Olanrewaju & Olanrewaju (2024), financial oversight without environmental foresight is increasingly untenable. A growing body of scholarship has recognised that the profession's traditional scope is misaligned with contemporary imperatives of sustainability, resilience, and social equity (Noor, Tobi & Fathi, 2024; Prabhu Desai & D'souza, 2024). In work focused on the local complexities of sustainable development financing in South Africa, extending this debate by examining barriers to sustainable development in South Africa from an end-user perspective Weaich et al. (2023) and the intersections of green technology investment and its affects on youth unemployment (Weaich, Weaich et al., 2024). These studies underscore, the realities of sustainability, being it environmental, social or economic, the need to reconceptualise the QS as a strategic actor, capable of embedding sustainability principles at the inception of projects, and the greater development sphere, rather than responding reactively once design and cost frameworks are already entrenched, but poorly defined, fragmented across different domains of knowledge.

Nevertheless, despite this problem, extensive research into green buildings, life cycle assessments (LCA), and digitalisation through Building Information Modelling (BIM), gaps remain. Much of the literature privileges environmental science perspectives while overlooking the institutional, financial, and professional dynamics that condition the feasibility of sustainable construction in the Global South (Cooper, Ramabodu & Mashwama, 2022; Bothma, 2025). On the other hand, the agency of the QS, situated at the critical nexus of cost, value, and decision-making, has been underexplored in both academic and policy discourse. This omission has consequences: without embedding QS expertise into sustainability frameworks, barriers such as the "knowing–doing gap" (Pfeffer and Sutton, 2008), in theory, the perception of prohibitive upfront costs, and persistent skills deficits will continue to obstruct meaningful transformation.

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to critically examine and reposition the role of the QS in advancing sustainability and climate action in South Africa's built environment, framed within the Sustainable Climate Action in the Built Environment (SCABE) Theory. In synthesising the literature, the study identifies how QSs can evolve from cost-centric managers to strategic advisors who embed resilience, circularity, and long-term value into construction projects.

From this aim, the central research question is posed:

How can Quantity Surveyors, within the South African built environment, transition from a traditional cost-management role to strategic enablers of sustainability and climate action, thereby operationalising the SCABE Theory?

To address this question, the paper first conceptualises sustainability and climate action within the built environment, situating them within South Africa's socio-economic realities and global frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (Adewunmi, Simbanegavi & Weaich, 2024). It then interrogates the evolving mandate of the QS, outlining the competencies required for sustainability leadership and the barriers to their realisation (Weaich, Ndlovu, et al., 2024). Finally, it synthesises these insights into a forward-looking discussion of SCABE Theory, drawing implications for practice, policy, education, and professional leadership (Alade & Windapo, 2021).

Narrative Literature Review

This paper employs a narrative literature review to synthesise existing scholarship on the intersection of sustainability, climate action, and the evolving role of Quantity Surveyors (QSs) within the South African built environment, dividing its snowballed collection of literature into themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2023). The purpose is not only to collate existing knowledge but to critically interrogate how different bodies of literature converge, where they diverge, and where gaps

persist (Machi & McEvoy, 2022). Through this method, five thematic strands emerge, each offering insights into both the challenges and opportunities shaping the QS profession's future trajectory (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2011).

Theme 1: Sustainability and Climate Imperatives in the Built Environment

Sustainability in the built environment is widely understood as the integration of environmental, economic, and social goals (Masotya et al., 2024; Simbanegavi, Mutsindikwa et al., 2024; Weaich, 2024). Globally, the built environment contributes approximately 40% of energy consumption and emissions Shin et al. (2023), and in South Africa, construction accounts for nearly 20% of national GHG emissions (Labaran, Mathur & Farouq, 2021). Green Building (GB), also known as Sustainable Building (SB), has thus been promoted as a central strategy (Maseko, 2022; Patil et al., 2024; Simbanegavi, Weaich et al., 2024). Yet, despite policy efforts and legislative strides Bothma, (2025), the translation of these ideals into widespread practice remains limited. Scholars refer to this as the "knowing–doing gap" (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2008).

Theme 2: The Evolving Mandate of the Quantity Surveyor

The QS profession has historically prioritised cost estimation, procurement, and contract administration (Cruywagen & Llale, 2017). Increasingly, however, these traditional roles appear insufficient to address climate imperatives (Ilmi et al., 2021). Emerging scholarship calls for the QS to become a strategic advisor, embedding sustainability, circularity, and resilience into project lifecycles (Noor, Tobi & Fathi, 2024; Prabhu Desai & D'souza, 2024). The integration of digital technologies, particularly BIM, has further expanded the QS's potential influence in early-stage decision-making (Akinshipe et al., 2021). The QS's critical position in mediating between cost, value, and sustainable outcomes, yet this role remains underexplored in mainstream policy and academic discourse (Yogeshwaran, Perera & Ariyachandra, 2018; Terblanche & Root, 2024; Wong, Lim & Azizi, 2024).

Theme 3: Barriers to Transformation

Persistent barriers impede QS-led sustainability. These include perceptions of prohibitive upfront costs De Wet-Billings (2023), inadequate industry knowledge and training Wu et al., (2024), and inconsistently enforced regulations (Cooper, Ramabodu & Mashwama, 2022). Social inclusivity also remains an issue, as demographic imbalances within the QS profession risk reproducing inequities (McKeever, 2024). Without overcoming these barriers, sustainability will remain peripheral to mainstream practice.

Theme 4: Drivers and Opportunities

Despite these challenges, opportunities are expanding. Rising energy costs improve the relative competitiveness of green alternatives (Bothma, 2025). Green finance mechanisms, such as sustainability-linked loans, are gaining traction (Adewunmi, Simbanegavi & Weaich, 2024; Weaich, Weaich et al., 2024). Digitalisation, particularly BIM, enables cost-linked sustainability modelling (Alade & Windapo, 2021; Ismail et al., 2023; Ao et al., 2024). The QS's early-stage influence in project conception uniquely positions the profession to align projects with sustainability targets from inception.

Theme 5: Competencies for the Future QS

To remain relevant, QSs may need to acquire sustainability-focused competencies: Life Cycle Assessment (LCA), Whole Life Costing (WLC), Circular Economy (CE) literacy, and sustainability-oriented risk management (Oke et al., 2025). Beyond technical skills, soft skills such as leadership, communication, and ethical judgement are equally critical (Wong, Lim & Azizi, 2024). Without this transformation, the profession risks marginalisation.

Contextualising the Themes

The literature review reveals five interrelated themes that together illuminate both the challenges and opportunities confronting the QS profession in the age of sustainability and climate imperatives. The first concerns the overarching pressures of sustainability itself. The built environment is now widely understood as a sphere in which environmental, economic, and social goals must be integrated if development is to be viable (Masotya et al., 2024; Simbanegavi, Mutsindikwa et al., 2024; Weaich,

2024). Yet despite the clear evidence that the sector contributes almost 40% of global emissions Shin et al. (2023), and nearly 20% in South Africa alone Labaran, Mathur and Farouq, (2021), the translation of policy ambitions into practice remains uneven. Green Building (GB), or Sustainable Building (SB), has been promoted as a cornerstone strategy (Maseko, 2022); Patil et al., 2024); Simbanegavi, Weaich, et al., 2024), yet its adoption has been hampered by what scholars term the "knowing–doing gap" Pfeffer and Sutton (2008), wherein policy and technical clarity fail to achieve systemic uptake.

The second theme addresses the evolving mandate of the QS. Historically defined by cost estimation, procurement, and contract administration Cruywagen and Llale (2017), the traditional role is increasingly inadequate when measured against climate imperatives. Contemporary scholarship argues that QSs must expand their remit to act as strategic advisors, embedding principles of sustainability, circularity, and resilience into the project lifecycle (Noor, Tobi & Fathi, 2024; Prabhu Desai & D'souza, 2024). Digitalisation, particularly through Building Information Modelling (BIM), enhances the potential of QSs to shape project outcomes at conception (Akinshipe et al., 2021). This mediating function, positioning the QS as a bridge between cost, value, and sustainability, though this role remains underexplored in mainstream discourse (Yogeshwaran, Perera & Ariyachandra, 2018; Terblanche & Root, 2024; Wong, Lim & Azizi, 2024). The third theme considers the barriers that obstruct this transformation. Chief among these are persistent perceptions of prohibitive upfront costs De Wet-Billings (2023), deficits in professional knowledge and training Wu et al. (2024), and inconsistently enforced regulatory frameworks (Cooper, Ramabodu & Mashwama, 2022). In light of this, demographic imbalances within the profession raise concerns of inclusivity, with the risk that inequality within the QS body may reproduce inequities in the built environment itself (McKeever, 2024). Unless such barriers are overcome, sustainability is likely to remain peripheral. In counterpoint, the fourth theme points to emerging drivers and opportunities. Rising energy costs have begun to tip the balance in favour of sustainable alternatives Bothma (2025), while the growth of green finance instruments, such as sustainability-linked loans, provides new levers for feasibility (Adewunmi, Simbanegavi & Weaich, 2024). Digitalisation through BIM allows for cost-linked sustainability modelling, enhancing both transparency and integration (Adebowale & Agumba, 2023; Cartlidge, 2023; Ismail et al., 2023). Given their early-stage influence on development projects, QSs are uniquely positioned to ensure that projects are aligned with sustainability objectives from inception (Prabhu Desai & D'souza, 2024).

The fifth and final theme highlights the competencies required to sustain this evolution. Beyond their traditional technical skills, QSs must now acquire proficiency in Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) Centobelli et al. (2023), Whole Life Costing (WLC) Georgiadou, (2019), and Circular Economy (CE) literacy Schmitz, (2024), coupled with sustainability-oriented risk management (Oke et al., 2025). Yet technical proficiency alone will not suffice: the profession must also cultivate soft skills, leadership, communication, and ethical judgement, if it is to occupy a credible and influential position within the sustainability transition (Wong, Lim & Azizi, 2024). Without such transformation, the QS profession risks marginalisation at precisely the moment when its expertise could prove most indispensable.

Research Methodology and Method

The methodological architecture of this study is best understood through the heuristic adaptation of the research onion Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2023), which allows one to peel back each layer of research design in turn, situating choices within broader philosophical and procedural commitments. At its outermost layer, the study adopts a research philosophy that is interpretivist in orientation, albeit tempered by a postpositivist concern for rigour and structure (Phillips & Burbules, 2000). This dual stance acknowledges that sustainability and climate action are inherently social phenomena, mediated by perceptions, values, and institutions, yet also recognises the need for systematic and replicable frameworks, here provided through Dubin (1969) interpretive post posivistic theory-building model.

Peeling back a further layer, the study employs a research approach that is abductive rather than strictly deductive or inductive, building arguments from secondary data (Mitchell & Education, 2018). Deduction, with its hypothesis-testing closure, and induction, with its grounded generalisations, both fall short of capturing the complexity of sustainability transitions (Booth et al., 2016; Field, 2024). Abduction, by contrast, allows the researcher to move iteratively between theory and observation, drawing plausible inferences and refining constructs as new insights emerge (Peirce, 1865). It is precisely this abductive reasoning that enables the articulation of the Sustainable Climate Action in the Built Environment (SCABE) Theory as both descriptive and normative (Dubin, 1969).

The methodological choice taken is qualitative, privileging depth of insight and interpretive richness over breadth of numerical generalisation (Booth et al., 2016; Field, 2024). This is not to deny the value of quantitative analysis, but to recognise that the transformation of professional identity, here, the evolution of the QS from cost manager to sustainability strategist is a process better understood through conceptual synthesis and interpretive theorisation than through statistical measurement alone.

At the level of research strategy, the study adopts a narrative literature review (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2023). Unlike systematic reviews which emphasise comprehensiveness, the narrative approach is more selective, allowing for the critical interrogation of sources and the weaving together of diverse strands of literature in a snowballed approach to data collection, into a coherent thematic account, rather than a broad account. Databases such as Scopus, Web of Science and IBSS were utilised to ensure scholarly reliability, with no particular course of action or prompting other than using the keywords, sustainability and quantity surveyor, the approach to literature searching was extended by referring to recent literature cited in the papers themselves, with subjective opinion on 'what would' and 'would not be' relevant to answering the research question, and thematic saturation was pursued until recurring patterns and gaps became evident (Jesson, Matheson & Lacey, 2012).

The time horizon of the research is cross-sectional, capturing a snapshot of the present state of knowledge and professional practice. However, the abductive orientation lends the study a longitudinal sensitivity, since the SCABE framework anticipates how the role of the QS may evolve across the coming decades in response to climate imperatives and sustainability frameworks such as the SDGs and Paris Agreement (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2023; Weaich, Weaich et al., 2024).

Finally, at the innermost layer of the onion, the study is grounded in techniques and procedures of data collection and analysis. Peer-reviewed articles, conference papers, and relevant policy documents formed the secondary data corpus, if referenced in the articles. These were subjected to thematic analysis, with coding structured around constructs identified in Dubin (1969) model (constructs, propositions, boundaries, and system states). This method allowed for the rigorous synthesis of disparate literatures into a coherent theoretical contribution, ensuring both epistemological clarity and practical relevance (Dubin, 1969; Eisend & Kuß, 2019; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2023).

In sum, the methodological journey from philosophy to procedures reveals a carefully layered design. Interpretivism, abductive and postposivistic reasoning, qualitative method, narrative strategy, cross-sectional horizon, and thematic procedures collectively converge to support the development of SCABE Theory. In so doing, the methodology mirrors the very subject of the study: a multi-layered, systemic approach to complex and evolving phenomena in the built environment.

The next section of the study, places Dubin (1969) approach to theory building at the centre of the data analysis, placing propositions and arguments within its analysis, rather than the study's introduction, as the purpose of which is to theorise how the question can be answered and reconceptualised from the data.

Results and Theory Building

Critical Synthesis of Themes

The five themes collectively demonstrate that while the conceptual foundations of sustainability and climate action in the built environment are robust, the profession of Quantity Surveying (QS) remains at a crossroads. On one hand, sustainability has been articulated with great clarity at both global and national levels, with frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and South Africa's energy-efficiency legislation providing a guiding scaffold. On the other hand, the translation of these frameworks into practice is constrained by entrenched perceptions of cost, uneven knowledge distribution, and limited institutional enforcement.

The QS's evolving mandate emerges as both a response to, and an opportunity within, this contested terrain. The profession is uniquely placed to mediate between competing priorities, cost, value, sustainability, and resilience, yet its potential remains under-realised. Where QSs have embraced tools such as Building Information Modelling (BIM) or Life Cycle Assessment (LCA), they demonstrate the capacity to reframe project viability in terms of long-term environmental and social value. However, where QSs remain confined to a traditional cost-centric paradigm, they risk marginalisation by other built environment professionals more adept at articulating sustainability imperatives.

The "knowing–doing gap" is the fulcrum of this challenge: the disjuncture between policy frameworks and practical uptake reveals not only systemic inertia but also the absence of a collective QS voice in sustainability discourse. This silence has consequences. By failing to assert leadership in sustainability, QSs risk ceding their influence at precisely the moment when their expertise is most needed to align projects with climate goals. The stakes are high: leaving this condition unresolved threatens to perpetuate unsustainable construction practices, exacerbate climate vulnerability, and weaken the resilience of South Africa's built environment.

It is precisely within this tension that the Sustainable Climate Action in the Built Environment (SCABE) Theory is situated. By consolidating insights across themes, SCABE frames the QS as a strategic enabler of systemic change, capable of operationalising sustainability and climate action through financial, technical, and advisory expertise.

Table 1 Five themes

Theme	Key Insights	Barriers Identified	Opportunities / Enablers	QS Implications
1. Sustainability and Climate Imperatives	Built environment central to emissions; GB pivotal for mitigation and adaptation	Knowing–doing gap; weak enforcement	Global frameworks (SDGs); SA policy strides	QS must embed sustainability at project inception
2. Evolving Mandate of QS	Shift from cost-centric to strategic advisor	Profession slow to adapt; risk of marginalisation	BIM, LCA, WLC expand role	QS as sustainability-oriented value advisor
3. Barrier	Perceived high upfront costs, skills gaps, limited inclusivity	Industry inertia; weak policy	—	Without intervention, QS relevance diminishes
4. Drivers	Rising energy costs, green finance, digitalisation	—	Cost competitiveness of green alternatives; policy momentum	QS can leverage market dynamics to drive change
5. Competencies for Future QS	Technical: BIM, LCA, WLC, CE	Lack of training in sustainability	Professional education reform; CPD opportunities	Future-proof QS role depends on skill acquisition

Development of a Framework: Sustainable Climate Action in the Built Environment (SCABE) Theory

The Sustainable Climate Action in the Built Environment (SCABE) Theory provides a structured attempt to reconceptualise the role of the Quantity Surveyor (QS) in response to sustainability and climate imperatives. In framing this theory, Dubin (1969) model of theory building is employed. Dubin, (1969) proposed that theory is best understood as a system of constructs and relationships which collectively explain, rather than to traditionally explore, hence the post positivistic stance in the approach: "what is," "how it works," and "under what conditions it operates." In this approach to theory development, SCABE Theory draws together constructs from sustainability science, climate action, and professional transformation to outline both a descriptive and normative framework for the future QS role.

Theoretical Constructs

According to Dubin (1969), the first step in theory building involves defining the core constructs that form the theory's architecture. SCABE Theory identifies the following:

- Traditional QS Role – characterised by cost estimation, procurement, contract administration, and financial control.
- Current Competencies – technical and professional skills historically emphasised in QS practice.
- Competency Barriers – deficits in sustainability knowledge, training, and inclusivity that moderate transformation
- Traditional Drivers – institutional norms, procurement models, and cost-centric metrics anchoring QS practice.
- Future Drivers – enablers such as BIM, green finance, and regulatory incentives.

- Sustainability Imperatives – the demand to align construction with environmental, social, and economic goals.
- Climate Imperatives – the dual pressures of mitigation and adaptation shaping built environment futures.
- QS Strategic Role – the transitional identity in which QSs expand their advisory scope to encompass lifecycle value, circularity, and resilience.
- SCABE Framework – the consolidation of constructs into a guiding model that integrates sustainability and climate action into QS professional identity.
- Future QS Role – the aspirational role: a sustainability-oriented strategist capable of embedding climate-responsive value systems into construction.
- Forming of Theoretical Propositions

Dubin (1969) states that the lifeblood of theory, in a postpositive context lies in its propositions, for it is through these that constructs are brought into meaningful relationship. Within the Sustainable Climate Action in the Built Environment (SCABE) Theory, five such propositions are advanced. First, the traditional role of the QS, sustained by established competencies and entrenched drivers, remains constrained when confronted with the demands of climate imperatives. Second, the movement toward a more strategic professional identity is shaped by opposing forces: negatively by competency barriers such as skills deficits and institutional inertia, and positively by future drivers including digital technologies, green finance, and regulatory momentum. Third, the mounting pressures of sustainability and climate imperatives create a directional force that renders the strategic role of the QS not optional but increasingly indispensable. Fourth, the SCABE framework itself provides the mechanism Bhaskar, (2008) through which these imperatives can be woven into professional practice, offering a coherent pathway for systemic adoption. Finally, and most significantly, the theory proposes that when enabling conditions are present, acquisition of new competencies, supportive policy environments, and professional advocacy, the QS evolves into a future role: no longer a mere custodian of costs, but a sustainability strategist embedded at the heart of climate action.

Boundaries and Conditions of the Theory

According to Dubin (1969), a robust theory must make explicit the boundaries within which it holds true. The Sustainable Climate Action in the Built Environment (SCABE) Theory is thus situated within a clearly defined set of conditions. Geographically, it is bounded to South Africa, a nation marked by acute socio-economic inequalities, a carbon-intensive economy, and profound vulnerability to climate impacts. Professionally, it speaks most directly to the field of Quantity Surveying, though its principles carry potential relevance for other built environment disciplines that similarly mediate cost, value, and sustainability. Temporally, it is oriented toward the contemporary and near-future horizon of the 2020s and 2030s, a period in which climate imperatives are projected to intensify and global sustainability frameworks, most notably the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement converge to shape the trajectory of built environment transformation.

The Three Theoretical System States of Sustainable Development in the Built Environment

Dubin (1969) also emphasises that theories must account for system dynamics, recognising that professional practice evolves not in static form but through identifiable states of change. Within SCABE Theory, three such states are discerned. The first is a ‘cost-centric equilibrium’, in which the traditional role of the Quantity Surveyor predominates and barriers to transformation, skills deficits, cost perceptions, and regulatory inertia overwhelm emerging drivers.

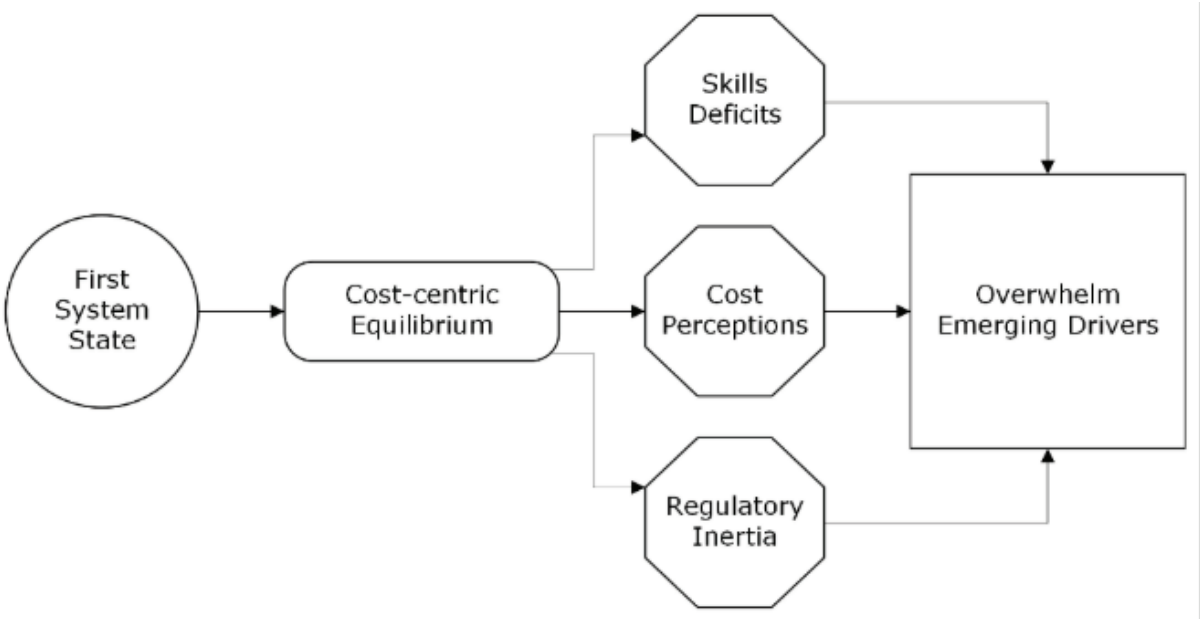

Figure 1 First State of Cost-centric Equilibrium

The second is a phase of 'transitional disequilibrium', where mounting sustainability and climate imperatives destabilise the established order, developing tensions and competing pressures that force the profession to confront its limitations.

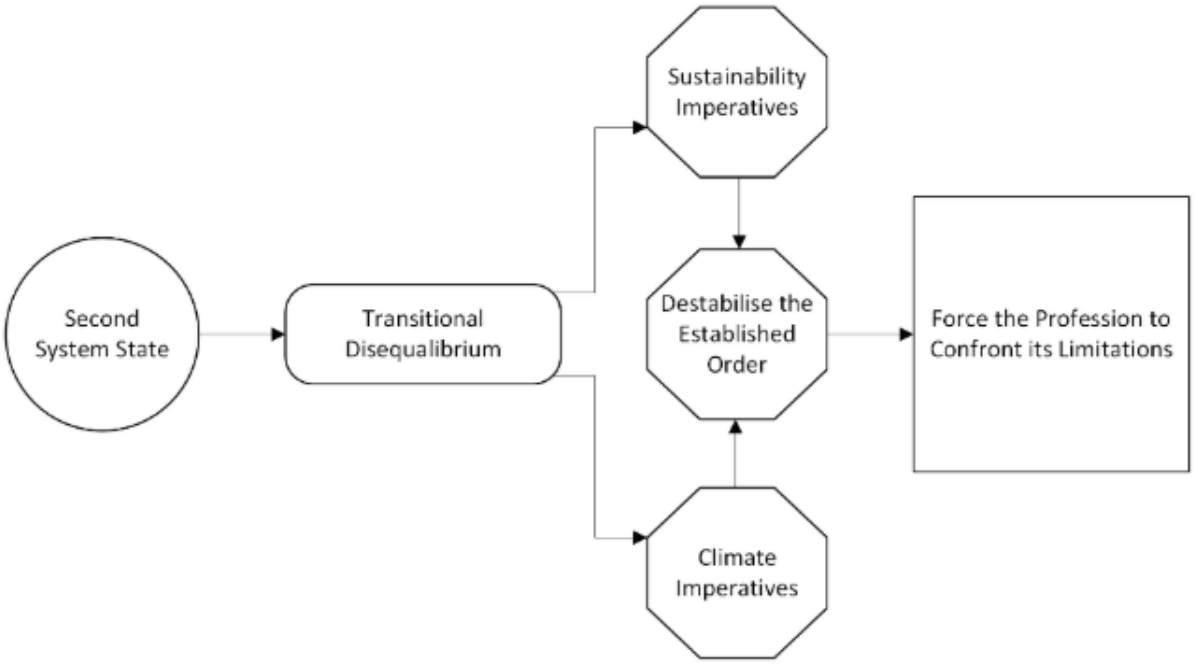

Figure 2 Second State of Transitional Disequilibrium

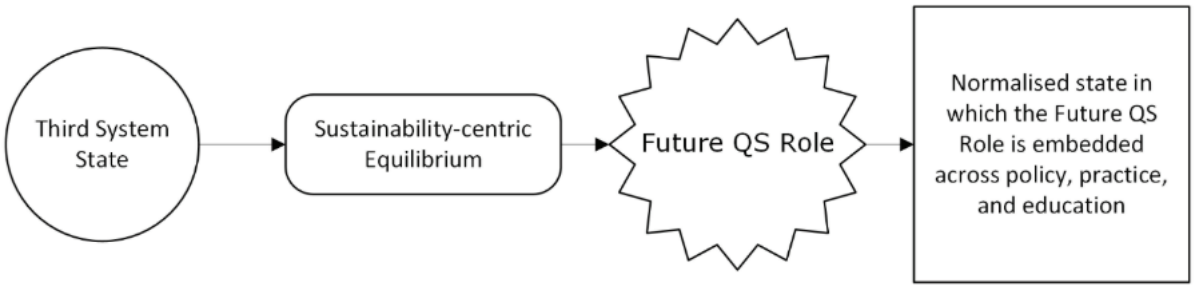

Figure 3 Third State of Sustainability-centric Equilibrium

The third is a 'sustainability-centric equilibrium', envisioned as the normalised state in which the Future QS Role is embedded across policy, practice, and education, and the SCABE framework is fully operationalised as a guide to professional conduct.

Interpretation, Abduction and Contribution Statement

SCABE Theory thus serves two functions. Descriptively, it abductively explains the current disjuncture between QS practice and sustainability imperatives, framed through the knowing–doing gap. Normatively, it interpretively explores a roadmap for professional transformation, situating QSs as systemic enablers of resilience and sustainable value. By employing Dubin, (1969) framework for theory building, SCABE achieves theoretical coherence: its constructs, propositions, boundaries, and system states collectively articulate how and under what conditions QSs may evolve into agents of sustainability and climate action.

This contribution is significant. Without SCABE, the QS profession risks marginalisation, trapped within outdated cost-centric paradigms as sustainability leadership shifts to other built environment professionals. With SCABE, QSs can reassert relevance, bridging financial expertise with climate-responsive design, and positioning themselves as architects of sustainable transformation in South Africa and beyond.

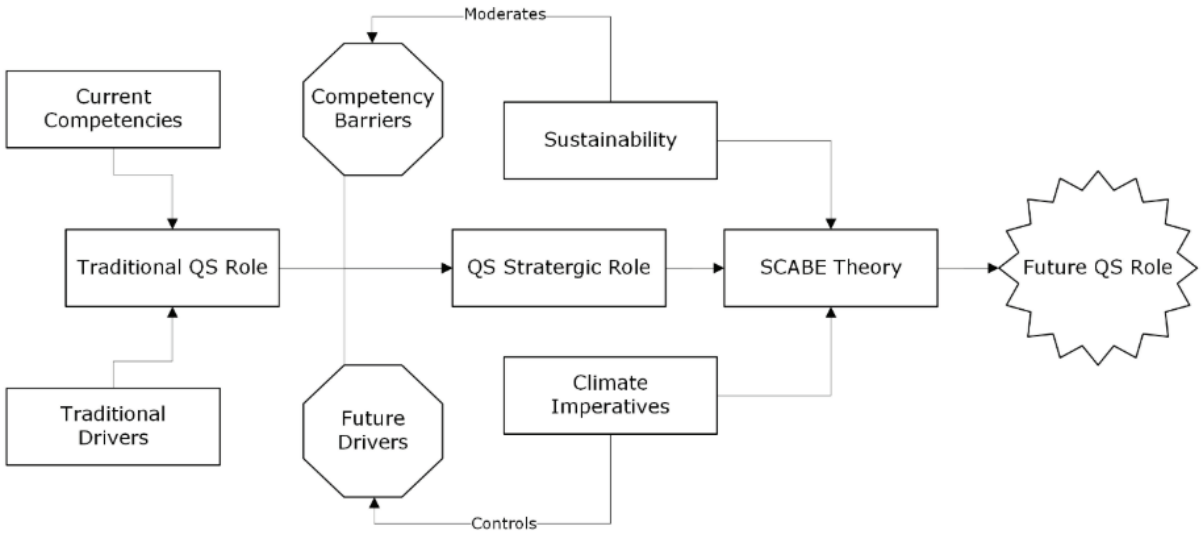

Figure 4 Descriptive and Normative Theoretical Framework for Sustainable Climate Action in the Built Environment. SCABE Theory as an interpretive framework for the evolving role of the Quantity Surveyor, adapted using Dubin's (1978) approach to theory building. The model illustrates the progression from traditional QS roles, through barriers and enablers, toward a sustainability-oriented professional identity integrated within climate action.

The diagram presents not a static snapshot but a dynamic narrative of professional evolution, tracing how the Quantity Surveyor (QS) moves from a cost-centric identity toward a sustainability-oriented role in response to the imperatives of climate and resilience. At its foundation, traditional competencies and drivers anchor the QS within the familiar contours of financial oversight and contractual precision. This "Traditional QS Role" has long provided stability to the profession, yet its very narrowness now reveals profound limitations in the face of the multidimensional challenges of the built environment. From this

baseline, the model charts a progression shaped by tension. Current competencies, sustained by traditional drivers, form the bedrock of professional practice, but the persistence of competency barriers, skills deficits, knowledge gaps, and 'institutional inertia', acts as a drag on transformation. These barriers mediate the profession's capacity to respond, tempering its ability to act decisively upon the mounting demands of sustainability and climate imperatives. Yet the narrative is not one of constraint alone. The framework also reveals the catalytic role of future drivers: digitalisation, green finance, escalating energy costs, and regulatory momentum. These forces interact with sustainability imperatives to create new vectors of possibility, enabling the QS profession to pivot from its inherited role toward one that is both more expansive and more strategically consequential.

At the heart of the diagram lies this crucial transition, the shift to the QS Strategic Role, in which the professional remit expands beyond financial stewardship to encompass advisory functions rooted in sustainability literacy, lifecycle evaluation, and resilience planning. This transition is neither inevitable nor automatic; it demands the deliberate overcoming of barriers and the embedding of new forms of knowledge and practice. It is precisely at this juncture that the Sustainable Climate Action in the Built Environment (SCABE) Theory is situated, serving as both a conceptual framework and a practical guide to reconcile cost, value, and sustainability into an integrated professional ethos.

The trajectory culminates in the Future QS Role, envisioned as a sustainability strategist who fuses financial rigour with long-term environmental and social value creation. Here, the QS is no longer merely the custodian of costs but becomes a strategic architect of resilience, equity, and sustainable transformation within the built environment.

Discussion

In positioning the Sustainable Climate Action in the Built Environment (SCABE) Theory within the wider constellation of contemporary frameworks (none of which form a complete theory), it is necessary to recognise that recent years have produced several influential contributions to the discourse on sustainability transitions in the built environment. Each of these frameworks illuminates vital dimensions of transformation, yet each leaves important gaps that SCABE is uniquely positioned to address.

Winkelmann et al. (2022), for instance, have developed a conceptual framwork that describes the notion of social tipping processes, showing how small perturbations may cascade into systemic transitions toward sustainability. While valuable for understanding macro-level dynamics, such accounts remain abstract when translated into professional practice. SCABE enriches this discourse by situating tipping logic within a specific domain, demonstrating how QSs, through their advisory roles on cost and value, may serve as critical agents in accelerating or retarding such tipping points. In a complementary vein, Ho et al. (2024) have synthesised the concepts of Green Building and Circular Building, presenting ecological performance and regenerative design as twin pillars of sustainable construction. Their framework provides a powerful technical vision, but it is primarily concerned with design and systems engineering. SCABE extends this by foregrounding the mediating role of QSs, who transform such ideals into project-level feasibility, procurement decisions, and lifecycle evaluations, thereby providing the essential "last mile" between conceptual building theory and practical adoption. The same integrative move can be seen when SCABE is set against the work of Tanguay & Amor (2024), who have sought to connect hazard-induced damage models with environmental performance metrics in order to advance resilient built environments. While rigorous, their approach privileges systems modelling and tends to overlook the human agents responsible for embedding resilience in contracts, valuations, and risk frameworks. Here again, SCABE offers an important complement: it situates resilience not only in models but in professional practice, ensuring that resilience frameworks are operationalised in projects rather than confined to technical abstraction. Similarly, Bullinger and Schiller (2025) have explored social innovation in the circular built environment, identifying the institutional, governance, and behavioural levers that underpin transformative practice. Yet their emphasis remains socio-institutional, underplaying the role of professional mediation. SCABE addresses this lacuna by positioning the QS as a pivotal actor in orchestrating such innovations, deploying financial modelling, contractual structures, and procurement strategies to give institutional form to circularity.

Taken together, these comparisons reveal the epistemological significance of SCABE Theory. Where other frameworks privilege systemic, technical, or institutional dimensions, SCABE provides a profession-specific interpretive theory that bridges macro imperatives with micro practice, global

agendas with project realities. By employing Dubin (1969) model of theory building, it articulates constructs, propositions, boundaries, and system states that transform the discourse from descriptive abstraction into a coherent mid-level theory of professional transformation. Its distinctive contribution lies in demonstrating that professions themselves, here, the Quantity Surveyor, are not passive recipients of sustainability imperatives, but reflexive agents Eisenhardt (1989) whose evolving competencies, decisions, and voices are central to achieving sustainable climate action in practice.

Conclusion

This study has critically examined the evolving role of the QS within South Africa's built environment, positioning sustainability and climate action not as optional considerations but as defining imperatives for the profession's future. A narrative literature review revealed five interlinked themes: the centrality of sustainability and climate imperatives, the limitations of the traditional QS role, the persistence of barriers to transformation, the emergence of new drivers and opportunities, and the competencies required for practice in a changing landscape. Considered together, these themes expose the persistent "knowing–doing gap" that separates policy ambition from professional reality, underscoring the need for a coherent framework to guide transformation. It is in response to this need that the Sustainable Climate Action in the Built Environment (SCABE) Theory is advanced. Drawing upon the Dubin (1969) model of theory building, SCABE identifies the constructs, propositions, and system states that chart the trajectory from a cost-centric identity to a sustainability-oriented role, positioning the QS not as a passive custodian of costs but as an active agent of climate-responsive value creation. The theory demonstrates how the profession's traditional influence, in cost advice, procurement, and lifecycle evaluation, can be leveraged to operationalise sustainability imperatives and embed climate action into mainstream practice.

The epistemological contribution of SCABE is twofold: descriptively, it illuminates the disjuncture between present practice and the demands of sustainability transitions; normatively, it articulates a pathway for the QS to evolve into a strategic enabler of resilience, circularity, and long-term value. In dialogue with recent theoretical developments, such as social tipping processes Winkelmann et al. (2022), green and circular building frameworks Ho et al. (2024), resilient built environment models Tanguay and Amor (2024), and social innovation approaches Bullinger and Schiller (2025), SCABE offers a profession-specific perspective that bridges the macro imperatives of sustainability with the micro practices of project delivery. The QS profession now stands at a critical juncture: to resist this evolution is to risk marginalisation as sustainability leadership shifts to other actors, but to embrace the SCABE framework is to claim a central role in shaping a just, resilient, and sustainable future. For academia, industry, policymakers, and professional bodies alike, this is more than a professional transformation; it is an ethical imperative that binds the built environment to the service of society and the planet.

Recommendations and Implications

The findings of this study make plain that the transition of the QS from a narrowly cost-centric figure to a sustainability-oriented professional identity cannot be achieved through individual upskilling alone. It requires systemic change across multiple domains of influence, education, professional practice, policy, and the leadership of professional bodies. Within the sphere of education and research, universities and training institutions must embed QS Sustainability Literacy (SL) (a phenomenon coined in this study), life cycle assessment (LCA), and circular economy (CE) principles at the very heart of the QS curriculum. Such programmes should not confine themselves to technical competence but must cultivate habits of critical reasoning, ethical discernment, and leadership capacity, preparing QSs to serve as advocates of sustainability in practice. Further empirical research, whether through surveys, case studies, or longitudinal analyses, is also essential, in order to test and refine the propositions of the SCABE framework and secure its relevance to evolving professional practice. Future studies should explore and explain using SCABE as its theoretical framework.

In the realm of professional practice, QSs must move decisively beyond conventional cost control and embrace tools that enable long-term value assessment, including whole life costing (WLC), BIM-enabled sustainability modelling, and climate risk frameworks. Professional firms should be encouraged to integrate sustainability into their procurement strategies and fee structures, rewarding practices that deliver resilience and environmental value alongside financial accountability. By presenting clear, evidence-based cost–benefit analyses of sustainable interventions, QSs can play a

vital role in dispelling the persistent perception that sustainability is synonymous with prohibitive upfront costs. The domain of policy and governance remains equally critical. Governments should strengthen regulatory frameworks, enforce compliance with green building codes, and create enabling conditions through coherent incentives, tax credits, and sustainability-linked financing. At the same time, it is imperative that policymakers acknowledge QSs as strategic stakeholders in climate policy discourse, ensuring that their expertise informs and shapes national sustainability agendas, as such a information campaign must be launched by the relvent stakeholders.

Finally, professional bodies and leadership such as the ASAQS and SACQSP must assume a decisive role in championing this transformation. They should set sustainability-oriented standards, updating the standard system of measurement to have a trade deictated to sustainability, include and develop financial foumulae that express the returns surrounding sustainability emphasising Returns on Sustainable Investment (ROSI), expand opportunities for continuing professional development (CPD), and promote diversity and inclusion within the profession. By adopting a unified and vocal stance in public and policy arenas, these bodies can elevate QS expertise to its rightful place as a cornerstone of sustainable transformation.

Taken together, these recommendations underscore that QSs cannot remain confined within the traditional cost-management paradigm. If empowered by education, supported through enabling policy, and galvanised by professional leadership, they can become linchpins in South Africa's transition to sustainability. The adoption of the SCABE Theory therefore carries implications far beyond the profession itself: it speaks to the resilience, inclusivity, and long-term viability of the built environment as a whole.

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SACQSP2025-85

The Role of Greenwashing in Shaping Contractors' Approaches to Green Building

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Abstract

This study explores how contractors' perceptions of green building practices influence their engagement in greenwashing within the construction sector. As the demand for sustainable construction grows, concerns have emerged about the authenticity of environmental claims made by contractors. This research addresses the gap in understanding the subjective drivers behind such deceptive practices, focusing on the South African construction context.

A qualitative, exploratory research design was employed to investigate the phenomenon of greenwashing among contractors. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight contractors registered with the Master Builders Association of Australia. Data were thematically analysed to capture patterns in perceptions, motivations, and justifications for green building practices and environmental claims.

The study revealed a clear divergence in contractors' perceptions of green building, with large contractors viewing it as a strategic opportunity benefiting both business and society. In contrast, small contractors often perceived it as a compliance-driven procedural requirement. Contractors acknowledged benefits including reduced operational costs, improved waste management, and enhanced occupant well-being. However, adoption is hindered by barriers such as high costs, limited availability of sustainable materials, inadequate information, and time-consuming implementation processes. Greenwashing emerged as a prevalent issue, primarily driven by economic pressures, competitive market dynamics, and weak regulatory oversight. Contractors reported that sustainability credentials are often leveraged for marketing purposes, tender success, and short-term profit. Larger contractors generally adhere to formal procedures, while some smaller contractors exploit regulatory gaps.

The study is limited by its small sample size and geographic scope, focusing primarily on contractors in Gqeberha, South Africa. It does not fully capture sector-wide trends or the perspectives of other stakeholders, such as clients or certifiers.

This paper contributes to the limited body of empirical research on contractor greenwashing by foregrounding the role of perception in shaping practice. The findings offer critical insights for policymakers, certifying bodies, and clients seeking to promote genuine environmental accountability in the construction sector.

Keywords: Contractors, Greenwashing, Sustainable Construction.

Introduction

"All that glitters is not gold" (Shakespeare) – a sleek, modern building labelled green may still conceal a massive carbon footprint. While the rise of green building was intended to combat environmental damage and reduce carbon emissions, evidence suggests that some contractors exploit this trend, adopting a green façade to benefit from the sustainability market without delivering meaningful outcomes (Jaradat et al., 2024).

Green building broadly refers to the design, construction, operation, and maintenance practices that minimise harm to people and the environment, while also being economically viable (Jaradat et al.,

2024). Prouty and Glover, cited in Phoya (2018), note that green buildings have moved from obscurity to mainstream prominence, shaping global sustainability discourse. Sustainability is commonly defined as pursuing development that avoids depleting natural resources or causing long-term environmental harm (Phoya, 2018). This is particularly relevant to the construction sector, which remains the largest consumer of energy and resources worldwide (Hussain, 2024). However, achieving sustainability in this sector presents significant challenges, as contractors grapple with rising costs, dwindling resources, and increasing environmental compliance demands (Athapaththu & Karunasena, 2018).

In navigating these challenges, some contractors engage in greenwashing, which is an environmentally deceptive practice that misrepresents performance. Chen et al. (2022) and He et al. (2020) describe contractor greenwashing as "false communication that misleads project stakeholders to form positive beliefs about contractors' environmental performance." Such practices distort judgments about genuine environmental management and reduce the overall effectiveness of sustainability initiatives (Wang et al., 2023). Yang (2017) illustrated how a contractor manipulated photographs on a mega project to feign compliance with waste management directives, while construction waste remained unmanaged on-site.

In South Africa, policy developments such as the Climate Change Act, signed into law by President Cyril Ramaphosa in March 2025, signal a national commitment to effective climate change policies and the long-term transition to a low-carbon economy (Fraser, 2025). Despite these regulatory advances, not all contractors are substantially adopting green practices. Instead, some resort to greenwashing to appear compliant with sustainability and legal standards (Chen et al., 2022).

Against this backdrop, this study investigates how contractors' perceptions of green building influence their engagement in greenwashing practices. Specifically, it examines contractors' challenges in implementing genuine sustainability measures and explores the underlying motivations behind deceptive practices, focusing on contractors operating in South Africa's Eastern Cape province.

Sustainability

Sustainability is broadly defined as meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, a concept first established in the Brundtland Report (World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), 1987). Initially focused on energy consumption and resource depletion concerns, sustainability has since evolved into a multidimensional agenda that incorporates environmental, social, and economic considerations, the "three pillars of sustainability" (Phoya, 2018). Hwang et al. (2018) further highlight that sustainability involves creating and responsibly managing a healthy built environment grounded in resource efficiency and ecological principles.

Over the years, several global frameworks and initiatives, including Agenda 21, the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, the Millennium Development Goals (2000), and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 2030), have expanded the sustainability agenda. Within the construction sector, sustainability emphasises reducing the negative impacts of building activities while maximising social and economic benefits (Vasconcelos et al., 2020). As Gibberd (2010) explains, sustainable construction is concerned with ecological efficiency and broader societal outcomes such as poverty reduction and equitable growth.

Despite the increasing global adoption of sustainable construction, uptake across Africa remains limited. While developed nations have reported tangible benefits, African countries, including South Africa, have been slower to adopt such practices (Dosumu & Aigbavboa, 2020). South Africa, a continental leader in sustainable construction, continues to report relatively low levels of adoption, despite efforts by government, professional institutions, and the Green Building Council of South Africa (GBCSA) (Oke & Aigbavboa, 2016). Although professional awareness has grown, adoption lags, suggesting that barriers remain unaddressed (Awuzie, Monyane, Koker & Aigbavboa, 2021). Without targeted strategies to overcome these barriers, sustainability in construction risks remaining aspirational rather than transformative.

Green Building

Green buildings are typically designed through sustainable construction practices that enhance occupant well-being, improve resource efficiency, and reduce ecological harm (Nguyen & Grey, 2016).

The global rise of green buildings has been linked to their potential to address environmental, social, and economic challenges (Hwang et al., 2018). Beyond traditional project goals of cost, schedule, and quality, green buildings emphasise life-cycle performance regarding energy efficiency, water conservation, and reduced carbon emissions (Robichaud & Anantatmula, 2011).

Green building projects differ from traditional ones because they demand innovative materials, integrated design processes, and interdisciplinary collaboration across multiple stakeholders, ranging from engineers and architects to sustainability specialists (Robichaud & Anantatmula, 2011). Globally, rating systems such as Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) and regional initiatives like the City of Austin's Green Building Program have advanced the adoption of green standards (Tinker & Burt, 2004; Ahn & Pearce, 2007).

The GBCSA introduced the Green Star rating tool in South Africa to certify green buildings (Sebake, 2008). However, despite these frameworks, the construction industry contributes significantly to environmental degradation, indicating a gap between certification systems and actual performance (Dosumu & Aigbavboa, 2018).

Greenwashing

Although the green building movement has gained traction, not all contractors genuinely adopt sustainable practices. Some engage in greenwashing, superficial or deceptive claims that create the illusion of compliance or sustainability (He et al., 2020). Contractors may conceal or misrepresent environmental performance, violate agreements, or use empty slogans to maximise profits (Shi et al., 2018). Delmas and Burbano (2012) describe such practices as "poor environmental behaviour" combined with "empty green slogans." He et al. (2020) refines this further, defining contractor greenwashing as false communication that misleads stakeholders into forming positive but inaccurate beliefs about a contractor's environmental performance.

Greenwashing has been widely recognised as a profit-driven phenomenon, where companies adopt environmental, social, and governance (ESG) labels without meaningful change (Xu et al., 2024). Beyond construction, examples such as Lululemon's 2022 ESG pledge, claiming net-zero emissions by 2050 while nearly doubling its carbon footprint, demonstrate how greenwashing undermines genuine sustainability efforts. Research confirms that greenwashing erodes consumer trust, damages brand reputation, and risks stigmatising entire industries as environmentally harmful (Rahman & Nguyen-Viet, 2023).

The term "greenwashing" was first coined by Jay Westerveld in 1986, referencing the hotel industry's towel reuse campaigns. While presented as water conservation efforts, these initiatives were primarily designed to reduce laundry costs while projecting a sustainable image (Pearson, 2010). This historical origin underscores the enduring tension between authentic sustainability and superficial claims, a tension that continues to characterise the construction sector today.

In the construction context, greenwashing refers to the practice by which contractors, developers, or other project stakeholders intentionally or unintentionally misrepresent their environmental performance or sustainability efforts to appear more environmentally responsible than they truly are. This may involve exaggerating claims of green compliance, falsifying documentation, or selectively disclosing information to create a misleading impression of sustainability (Chen et al., 2022; He et al., 2020). Greenwashing thus represents a form of environmental deception that undermines genuine sustainability by prioritising image and profit over authentic environmental performance.

Contractors' Perspective on Sustainable Construction

Contractors play a pivotal role in translating sustainability policies and designs into on-site practices. While sustainability frameworks guide project implementation, it is ultimately site managers and contractors who operationalise these measures during construction (Taofeeq, 2024). However, many contractors perceive green buildings as more expensive than conventional ones, leading to scepticism about their value (Ahn & Pearce, 2007). For contractors, financial incentives and the availability of green materials often serve as the most powerful motivators, while government policies are seen as less influential in driving adoption.

Although sustainable practices frequently originate at the design stage, contractors are pressured to utilise green materials, often at increased cost. For example, initiatives such as government-funded insulation rebates illustrate how financial support can encourage adoption (Malik et al., 2015). However, barriers remain, as contractors commonly cite cost implications as a significant constraint (Malik et al., 2015). While some stakeholders prioritise environmental outcomes over financial considerations, widespread uptake among contractors is limited unless financial viability is addressed.

Factors that Motivate Contractors to Engage in Greenwashing

Contractors engaging in greenwashing often exaggerate their environmental contributions while concealing harmful practices, presenting misleading information, implementing deceptive environmental measures, and creating false environmental images (Chen et al., 2022). Such behaviours typically involve positive environmental declarations combined with negative environmental actions, or vice versa, representing a form of organisational deception. Instances include fabricating photos or falsifying certification documents to avoid scrutiny during environmental supervision (He et al., 2020).

Economic Pressures

Economic pressures are a primary driver of greenwashing. Contractors face potentially high environmental costs associated with achieving stricter environmental standards, often imposed by owners or government regulations. The combination of short-term project timelines, safety obligations, and financial constraints creates tension between project profitability and environmental sustainability. Contractors tend to prioritise immediate financial gains and may adopt unethical practices, such as exaggerating environmental achievements, to reduce costs (He et al., 2020). Greenwashing may thus arise from the cognitive shift of contractors, moving from ethical responsibility to moral disengagement when faced with high environmental costs (Chen, 2022). However, financial incentives or cost reductions can encourage genuine adoption of sustainable practices by reconciling economic and environmental objectives.

Institutional Opportunity

Greenwashing is also influenced by institutional opportunities, which arise from weak supervisory mechanisms and ineffective regulatory oversight. Limited government enforcement, immature legislation, and insufficient monitoring by project supervisors create a permissive environment for contractors to manipulate environmental claims without fear of penalties (He et al., 2020). The allocation of project resources primarily to core objectives, such as schedule and quality, often leaves insufficient attention for environmental supervision. Consequently, contractors may engage in misleading environmental reporting, exploiting gaps in oversight while maintaining legitimacy in appearance.

Greed and Moral Disengagement

Moral disengagement is a critical psychological factor contributing to greenwashing. Contractors with weak moral self-discipline may prioritise goal achievement over ethical practices, demonstrating an excessive focus on outcomes rather than responsible processes. Such moral disengagement is linked to organisational non-compliance and increases the likelihood of unethical behaviours, including deceptive environmental practices (Chen et al., 2022).

Influence of Opportunity and Information Asymmetry

Construction projects are inherently high-investment, high-risk, and complex temporary organisations, where multiple participants coordinate and share information. Low transparency and information asymmetry facilitate opportunistic behaviours, allowing contractors to emphasise observable information while obscuring unfavourable facts. Such conditions enable contractors to make ambiguous or false claims about environmental performance, making greenwashing difficult to detect (Chen et al., 2022).

Contractor Exposure and Detection Risks

The risk of detection significantly influences greenwashing behaviours. Contractors are more likely to engage in deceptive environmental practices when penalties are minimal or enforcement is weak. Conversely, organisations that observe peers being penalised for misconduct are less likely to commit fraud themselves. Therefore, exposure to strict monitoring and potential consequences serves as a deterrent against greenwashing (Chen et al., 2022).

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research methodology to explore contractors' perceptions of green building and their engagement in greenwashing practices. Qualitative methods are particularly suited for investigating complex social phenomena, understanding lived experiences, and identifying emerging themes (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019). Such rich and detailed data enable participants to express meanings through their own words, producing non-standardised data that are subsequently categorised and analysed conceptually (Saunders et al., 2019).

Semi-structured interviews were adopted as the primary data collection method. This approach offers both flexibility and consistency, allowing participants to provide detailed narratives, examples, and explanations in their own words (Saunders et al., 2019). Seven interviews were conducted with contractors based in Port Elizabeth. In some cases, construction owners delegated site agents or construction managers to participate. Participants represented both large and small companies. This study defines small contractors as companies employing fewer than 50 full-time staff and with limited annual turnover. In comparison, large contractors employ 50 or more staff and operate across multiple projects with higher annual turnover (CIDB, 2021).

Purposive sampling selected participants who could provide the most relevant, in-depth information. Contractors were deliberately chosen based on their involvement in green building projects, whether they had worked on such projects, expressed interest in future projects, or had no prior experience. Eligibility criteria included a minimum of three years of operational experience.

Data was collected through a combination of digital platforms: four interviews via Microsoft Teams and three via telephone, reflecting the flexible nature of qualitative research and ensuring inclusivity for participants with connectivity constraints.

The data analysis followed a thematic approach, ideal for identifying, organising, and interpreting patterns in qualitative data (Terry, Hayfield, Clarke & Braun, 2017). Interview transcripts were manually prepared, coded, and structured, enabling detailed examination of participants' responses. Key themes related to perceptions of green building, barriers to implementation, and motivations for greenwashing were identified, providing a comprehensive understanding of contractors' experiences and practices.

Table 1 Participant Profile

Participant no.	Gender	Years of experience	Contractor Size
A	Female	8	Small
B	Male	12	Large
C	Female	14	Large
D	Male	13	Large
E	Male	7	Larg
F	Male	4	Small
G	Male	7	Large

Research Results

Four themes emerged from the analysis of interviews as discussed below.

Theme 1: Perceptions of Green Building

The findings revealed contrasting perceptions of green building between large and small contractors. Large contractors generally viewed green building as a positive and necessary approach to preserving the natural environment, noting that such practices "benefit not only the company but also the wider community." In contrast, small contractors often regarded sustainability initiatives as "procedural requirements undertaken merely to satisfy compliance and then disregarded."

Despite differences in emphasis, participants acknowledged several benefits of green building. Contractor A highlighted its potential to reduce waste, stating that "with the necessary technology, significant improvements could be achieved in managing construction waste." Contractor B underscored the value of innovation, observing that "the availability of a broader range of sustainable building materials and methods would further enhance its benefits." Similarly, Contractor C associated green building with "reduced operational costs and improved occupant well-being."

Nonetheless, contractors identified persistent challenges. Contractor A pointed to "the limited availability of information and clear guidelines to facilitate the integration of green building into standard practice." At the same time, Contractor B stressed that "the demands of daily business survival make the addition of 'green credentials' burdensome." Many participants agreed that the "procedural requirements for implementing green building are time-consuming."

Participants also reflected on the notion of greenwashing. Contractor A defined it as "exaggerating the sustainability of a product to create a false perception," whereas Contractor B described it as "false advertising." Notably, smaller contractors generally lacked familiarity with the term, although they acknowledged its prevalence in the industry. Contractor B observed that "it is common to encounter materials marketed as sustainable when, in fact, they are not."

Profit motives emerged as the primary driver of greenwashing, with participants agreeing that it was often used for marketing or attracting investment. Importantly, they noted that a contractor's understanding of green building shaped their engagement in greenwashing, though profit remained central. Contractor E highlighted operational risks, noting that "site-level negligence can undermine sustainable practices, and that small, medium, and micro enterprises (SMMEs) may exploit the absence of strict oversight, while larger contractors tend to comply with established rules and procedures."

At a broader industry level, Contractor B remarked on "the global shift towards greener practices" but argued that "the construction sector has not yet fully explored these opportunities. Sustainability requirements are often absent from tender documentation, except in projects specifically designed for green construction". They suggested that "incorporating measurable sustainability elements into the Bill of Quantities could incentivise contractors to implement such practices more consistently."

Theme 2: Key barriers in implementing:

Participants identified several barriers that impede the adoption of green building practices. Small contractors emphasised that "there is inadequate access to green building information," whereas large contractors acknowledged that "relevant information does exist but is insufficiently promoted." They stressed that "while resources are available, many individuals do not actively seek them out or show interest in expanding their knowledge."

Cost was consistently highlighted as a critical barrier. Both groups agreed that "adopting green building practices is challenging due to their comparatively higher costs than traditional construction methods." These expenses included training, operational adjustments, and sourcing of sustainable materials. Contractor A noted that "costs are elevated because sustainable materials are scarce and must be specially sourced."

Client priorities were also reported as influential. Contractor A stated, "Contractors primarily comply with client requirements, and clients rarely raise concerns about sustainability." Contractor D added, "While some clients desire sustainable practices, financial constraints often limit their willingness to adopt them." Participants stressed that budget limitations meant measures perceived to increase costs were frequently excluded. They suggested that "increased availability of information and clearer cost-reduction guidelines could shift perceptions towards greater acceptance of green building."

The gap between sustainability aspirations and on-site realities was a recurring theme. Many small contractors, operating on a “hand-to-mouth” basis, found sustainability requirements burdensome once projects commenced. Sustainability communication was framed mainly in compliance with client standards, which often resulted in cost overruns when not priced for at the tender stage.

Institutional and regulatory issues further compounded these challenges. While participants acknowledged that “local authorities are generally supportive of green building initiatives,” South Africa’s building codes were described as outdated and lacking explicit sustainability requirements. One participant observed, "Although the country is seen as overregulated, it is also perceived as undermanaged.” To promote broader adoption, contractors suggested integrating sustainability objectives into universally applicable building codes, covering both small-scale housing and large projects. They also noted that no voluntary contractor associations currently focus on sustainability, and that while the Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB) disseminates information, many contractors prioritise day-to-day survival and only invest in learning when seeking a competitive edge.

From a technical standpoint, participants argued that the differences between traditional and green construction methods were minimal, with the primary distinction being additional documentation. However, costly testing procedures for sustainable materials, difficulties sourcing suppliers, and a shortage of skilled workers presented significant challenges. Administrative burdens, particularly in obtaining green permits, added further strain.

Contractor F provided a practical example of material limitations in the South African context, referencing Cemza 22.5N Masonry Cement. They noted that “Cemza produces this cement using energy-efficient methods and raw materials that lower carbon emissions, aligning with global sustainability priorities. The 22.5N cement is suitable for plastering and mortar but lacks the structural strength required for slabs, beams, or columns, which require higher-grade cements such as 32.5N or 42N.” Considering this limitation, Contractor R concluded: “We have used the cement to plaster and build a brick wall, but we noticed that we would be putting much risk if we were to do the slab with the cement as it has a low strength.” This example underscores the broader challenge of insufficient availability of versatile, sustainable materials.

Theme 3: Underlying Motivations for Contractors to Engage in Greenwashing Practices

A recurring issue highlighted by participants was the intensely competitive nature of the construction industry, where environmental credentials are increasingly perceived as a marketing advantage. Contractor G explained that “the high level of competition within the construction industry makes green credentials a potential competitive advantage.” Contractor B elaborated that “competition influences marketing strategies, as contractors who promote themselves as ‘green’ are more likely to secure projects than those who do not.” This aligns with existing research showing that firms often use sustainability claims to differentiate themselves in saturated markets (Delmas & Burbano, 2011).

Similarly, Contractor D pointed out that “during the tendering stage, competitive pressure often leads contractors to omit certain cost items in order to present a lower bid and increase the chances of winning the tender.” Participants noted that sustainability-related claims, even when limited to superficial marketing statements, help contractors remain aligned with industry trends, attract investors, and appeal to clients.

While Contractor A questioned the extent of exaggerated claims, others confirmed their prevalence. Contractor A also reflected that “clients often have high expectations for sustainability but are unwilling to pay the associated costs. In cases where contractors have priced a project incorrectly, they face pressure to cut costs, which can encourage practices such as greenwashing.” This observation aligns with previous findings that client expectations and budget constraints can indirectly contribute to deceptive practices.

Participants further distinguished between deliberate and unintentional greenwashing. Some knowingly exaggerated environmental performance, while others misrepresented practices due to a limited understanding of sustainability standards. Environmental features were often highlighted to impress clients, rather than to reflect actual performance. Several participants admitted that “fronting” practices, such as falsifying documentation, were used to bolster fraudulent sustainability claims.

Education and awareness were frequently mentioned as critical countermeasures. Participants suggested that "the involvement of health and safety officers and environmental specialists, rather than leaving sustainability oversight solely to directors, could improve compliance." At the same time, financially influential stakeholders were recognised as key drivers of greenwashing, as sustainability credentials carry significant monetary value. However, participants cautioned that while financial incentives can encourage greener practices, "they may also create opportunities for fraudulent claims".

The financial burden of green building was cited as a central motivator for cost-cutting and fraudulent behaviour. As Contractor C explained, "such actions are sometimes taken to impress clients or investors." Participants reported practices such as forging documents, manipulating compliance reports, and falsely claiming responsible waste disposal or using non-potable water sources. Regulations exist but are widely ignored. For instance, contractors noted that "claims of using water from non-potable sources, such as rivers, may be made without actual implementation."

Across the group, there was consensus that short-term profit motives outweigh long-term sustainability objectives. Immediate gains, such as securing projects, were prioritised over enduring environmental goals. While awareness initiatives, such as COEGA's Going Green programme, were acknowledged, contractors viewed these as having limited effectiveness. Similarly, newsletters distributed by professional associations such as the Master Builders Association (MBA) were described as having "limited impact in changing entrenched industry behaviours."

Theme 4: Educational and Training Programs to Address Greenwashing

Large contractors demonstrated greater awareness of existing training programmes related to green building, while smaller contractors admitted being "largely unaware of such initiatives." Participants agreed that responsibility for training and awareness should rest primarily with government and regulatory bodies, given the financial barriers many companies face. As one participant put it, "government-led programmes would alleviate the financial burden on companies, making training more accessible."

Participants suggested that the Department of Trade and Industry should spearhead collaborative efforts across industry stakeholders, particularly through integrating sustainability into educational curricula to prepare future professionals. They emphasised that training should be practical and site-based to build effective implementation skills.

Willingness to engage in training varied, ranging from one hour per week to a whole week of intensive sessions. However, all participants linked the value of training to tangible outcomes, such as the ability to complete projects and achieve recognised sustainability ratings successfully. This supports earlier research emphasising the need for outcome-driven training interventions in construction sustainability (Ametepey, Aigbavboa & Ansah, 2017).

Discussion

This study reveals a significant divide in contractors' perceptions of green building. Larger contractors view sustainability as a long-term strategic asset, recognising its dual value in enhancing business competitiveness and contributing to societal well-being. In contrast, smaller contractors often perceive green practices as an externally imposed procedural requirement to ensure compliance rather than generate value. Although respondents acknowledged benefits such as reduced operational costs, improved waste management, and enhanced occupant well-being, barriers such as high implementation costs, inadequate technical knowledge, and lengthy certification processes remain persistent (Ahn & Pearce, 2007; Dung et al., 2022; Malik et al., 2015). These findings reinforce existing scholarship emphasising the need for financial incentives, accessible materials, and more substantial stakeholder commitment to support adoption (Olubunmi et al., 2016).

The findings also underscore that greenwashing is widespread in the construction sector. Contractors frequently admitted that sustainability credentials are deployed as marketing tools to attract clients and investors, often resulting in document falsification, performance exaggeration, or misrepresentation of compliance. Such behaviours align with descriptions in the literature of greenwashing as a product of profit motives, information asymmetry, and weak institutional oversight (Chen et al., 2022; He et al., 2020). Importantly, participants highlighted education and training as critical interventions, particularly for small contractors who demonstrated limited awareness of existing programmes. This finding

echoes prior calls for government-led, practical, and sector-specific training initiatives to build industry capacity (Darko & Chan, 2017; Olubunmi et al., 2016).

Overall, the study illustrates that the tension between economic imperatives and sustainability ambitions lies at the core of both constrained green building adoption and the persistence of greenwashing. Strengthening regulatory oversight, embedding measurable sustainability requirements in tender processes, and investing in training and financial incentives can help realign the industry toward authentic and verifiable green practices.

Conclusion

This research confirms that contractor perceptions play a pivotal role in shaping engagement with both green building and greenwashing. Large contractors tend to perceive green building as an opportunity to enhance competitiveness and environmental stewardship. In contrast, small contractors often regard it as an added burden, disconnected from immediate business survival. Despite widespread recognition of long-term benefits such as reduced operational costs and enhanced occupant well-being, barriers such as high material costs, lack of accessible expertise, and limited incentives remain deeply entrenched.

Greenwashing emerged as a prevalent practice, often driven by competitive pressures, weak regulation, and limited awareness of what constitutes genuine sustainability. Whereas large contractors generally comply with established processes, some small contractors exploit regulatory gaps or adopt superficial green measures, particularly in environments with limited enforcement. Knowledge gaps further compound the problem, with small contractors less likely to access or be aware of training programmes compared to their larger counterparts.

The findings align with previous studies (e.g., Malik et al., 2015) that identify cost, lack of awareness, and inadequate incentives as barriers to green adoption. However, this study extends prior work by showing that contractor size, resource availability, and market pressures strongly mediate how sustainability is perceived and practised. Without stronger regulatory enforcement, targeted education, and inclusive financial support, the gap between sustainability ideals and actual construction practices will persist.

Recommendations

This study makes three key recommendations. First, regulatory bodies can play a pivotal role in promoting genuine sustainable practices by integrating measurable sustainability requirements into all building codes and tender documentation. This would standardise expectations, reduce ambiguity, and discourage greenwashing by making compliance both verifiable and enforceable.

Second, contractors, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises, require accessible, practical, and industry-specific training to bridge knowledge and skills gaps in sustainable construction. On-site learning modules, workshops, and mentorship programmes can enhance contractors' capacity to implement green building practices effectively, rather than superficially for marketing purposes.

Third, financial and market-based incentives can be leveraged to encourage authentic adoption of sustainable practices. Subsidies, tax relief, and preferential access to projects for contractors demonstrating verifiable sustainability performance would reduce the temptation to engage in greenwashing while making environmentally responsible construction economically viable.

While this study provides valuable insights, it is limited by its small sample size and specific industry context. Future research should examine the long-term economic implications of green building adoption, evaluate the effectiveness of existing incentives and regulatory mechanisms, and investigate robust detection methods for greenwashing. Addressing these gaps would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how to accelerate genuine sustainability adoption in South Africa's construction industry.

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SACQSP2025-87

Compact Cities vs Urban Sprawl: Implications for Environmental Sustainability

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Abstract

The study presents the findings of assessing the environmental sustainability effects of compact cities compared to urban sprawl, two distinct and prevalent urban development models driving modern urban development. High-density, mixed-use developments and efficient public transportation networks characterise compact cities. Conversely, urban sprawl is characterised by low-density, automobile-dependent development, which leads to habitat fragmentation and inefficient land utilisation. Through the review of extant literature, the study builds on existing knowledge of the two urban development models and how they affect critical environmental metrics such as land use, air quality, energy consumption, and ecological footprints. Distinct from previous studies that mainly draw on experiences from developed regions, this paper focuses on the African urbanisation context, where rapid growth, limited infrastructure, and governance challenges shape the environmental implications of urban form. The review highlights context-sensitive strategies for balancing density and liveability in African cities. The study advocates for a refined understanding of urban sustainability, outlining that the effectiveness of either compactness or sprawl is contingent on local conditions, governance structures, and implementation methods. Conclusively, the study emphasises the need for an integrated approach to urban planning, thus driving sustainable infrastructure for achieving long-term environmental objectives. The study's findings are a good reference for policymakers, urban planners, and critical stakeholders promoting sustainable urban growth.

Keywords: Compact Cities, Environment, Sprawl Cities, Sustainability, Urbanisation.

Introduction

Global urbanisation is accelerating at an unprecedented pace. Li et al. (2021) project that by 2050 nearly 70% of the world's population will live in urban areas. This demographic shift is reshaping settlement patterns, driving infrastructure expansion, and exerting mounting pressure on natural systems (Gu et al., 2021). Rapid urban development has been associated with biodiversity loss (Theodorou, 2022), community displacement (Jawando & Samuel, 2020), and the replacement of natural absorbent ecosystems with impermeable surfaces (Yasin et al., 2020), which in turn exacerbate climate change impacts (O'Sullivan, 2023). These trends underscore the urgency of aligning urban growth with environmental sustainability objectives, particularly those embedded within the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Despite its frequent use in policy and scholarship, the concept of sustainability remains contested. There is no universally accepted definition, and its meaning often shifts depending on context, place, and time. To avoid ambiguity, this study adopts a working definition of environmental sustainability provided by Kalfas et al. (2023) which is the ability of urban systems to meet present needs while safeguarding ecological systems and the resource base for future generations. This framing reflects the need to integrate ecological resilience into urban planning debates.

Within this discourse, two dominant but seemingly competing models of urban development occupy much of the scholarly and policy attention: the compact city and urban sprawl. These can be viewed as opposite ends of a continuum of urban form.

The compact city model is generally characterised by high-density, mixed-use development, supported by efficient public transport systems and pedestrian-oriented design (Kjærås, 2021; Dieleman & Wegener, 2004). Proponents argue that compact cities save energy, reduce land consumption, and create more liveable urban environments (Ardeshiri & Ardeshiri, 2011; Mouratidis, 2018). A growing body of literature positions compact urban form as a more sustainable alternative, highlighting its potential to reduce per capita greenhouse gas emissions, enhance transport efficiency, and optimise infrastructure provision (Burton, 2000; OECD, 2012). Burton (2000) further emphasises that compact cities facilitate improved public transport use, reduce social segregation, and enhance access to services.

However, critiques caution against romanticising compactness. High densities may contribute to urban heat island effects (Jenks & Burgess, 2000), reduce opportunities for private green space, and limit provision for family needs (Ardeshiri & Ardeshiri, 2011). These limitations suggest that while compact cities offer measurable environmental advantages, they also introduce challenges that must be carefully managed. Thus, an enduring question arises: Is the compact city truly the optimal model for promoting environmental sustainability, or do its limitations outweigh its benefits in certain contexts?

The contrasting model, urban sprawl, is often defined by low-density, dispersed land-use patterns and single-use zoning (Zhao, 2010; Rubiera-Morollón & Garrido-Yserte, 2020; Abdulai et al., 2025). Advocates of this model argue that it allows greater housing choice, privacy, and access to green spaces such as private gardens, thereby offering residents opportunities for improved quality of life (Ardeshiri & Ardeshiri, 2011; Glaeser & Kahn, 2004). Sprawl has also been linked to moderating land prices and reducing congestion in highly compacted urban centres (Festus, Omoboye & Andrew, 2020). These claims highlight the potential of sprawl to provide certain environmental and social benefits.

Yet the criticisms of sprawl are extensive and well-documented. Its reliance on private vehicle use contributes to air pollution, congestion, and elevated carbon emissions (Yasin et al., 2020; Festus, Omoboye & Andrew, 2020; Abdulai et al., 2025). Sprawling development patterns often fragment habitats, reduce agricultural and forest lands, and diminish open spaces critical to biodiversity (Shao et al., 2021; Artmann, Inostroza & Fan, 2019). Johnson (2001) identifies a wide range of associated consequences, including degraded air quality, higher energy consumption, and reduced regional open space. Light and noise pollution further degrade wildlife habitats (Gargiulo et al., 2012), while leapfrogging development undermines the efficient delivery of infrastructure (Yasin et al., 2020). In this sense, sprawl is often seen as incompatible with the goals of sustainable urban growth.

The mixed evidence surrounding both models suggests that the environmental performance of urban form is highly context dependent. Outcomes are shaped not only by spatial configuration but also by governance capacity, socio-economic conditions, and planning implementation strategies. This complexity underscores the importance of comparative research that critically evaluates urban forms through a sustainability lens rather than assuming universal outcomes.

Building on this literature, the present study critically compares the compact city and urban sprawl models with particular attention to their environmental implications. Specifically, it assesses how each model influences four critical environmental metrics: land use, air quality, energy consumption, and ecological footprint. While the conceptual framing is global, the paper pays special attention to the African context, where urbanisation rates are among the highest worldwide and land resources remain comparatively abundant. This dual focus allows for both theoretical generalisation and contextual grounding.

The rationale for this study lies in contributing to existing academic debate on urban sprawl and compact cities as well as informing evidence-based urban policy. As cities across Africa and the broader Global South confront rapid urbanisation, planners and policymakers face the dual challenge of accommodating growth while safeguarding ecological integrity. By critically engaging with the strengths and limitations of compact and sprawling urban forms, this paper seeks to advance a more nuanced understanding of sustainable urban development, one that moves beyond binary

categorisations and instead emphasises integrated planning approaches that balance density, livability, and resilience.

By critically engaging with the strengths and limitations of compact and sprawling urban forms, the study seeks to contribute to a more contextual understanding of sustainable urban development. Accordingly, the paper pursues the following objectives:

- To compare the environmental implications of compact city and urban sprawl models, focusing on key metrics such as land use, air quality, energy consumption, and ecological footprint; and
- To examine the relevance of compactness and sprawl for promoting sustainable urban planning in rapidly growing African cities.

To achieve these objectives, the paper first reviews key theoretical and empirical perspectives on compact and sprawling urban forms. It then synthesises evidence on their environmental effects, with special reference to African contexts, and concludes with recommendations for context-sensitive urban planning strategies that advance long-term environmental sustainability.

Environmental Impact of Compact Cities

Land Use Efficiency and Conservation of Greenfield Land

Compact cities optimise land use by concentrating population, economic activities, and services within a limited geographic area. Through vertical growth, infill development, and mixed-use zoning, they consume less land per capita than sprawling urban forms (Agyemang et al., 2019). This compactness curtails the conversion of greenfield land such as agricultural areas, forests, and natural habitats into urban space, reducing habitat fragmentation and protecting biodiversity (Angelidou et al., 2022).

High-density development patterns facilitate the clustering of housing, employment opportunities, and amenities, which enables more efficient allocation of land for infrastructure such as roads, water, and energy networks (Banister & Hickman, 2020). In contrast, urban sprawl requires significantly more land for dispersed housing, wider road networks, and extended utility lines, often at the expense of natural and agricultural landscapes (Fuenfschilling et al., 2019). International examples such as Singapore's integrated land-use policy and Copenhagen's "Finger Plan" illustrate how strategic growth management can safeguard surrounding ecosystems. In the South African context, initiatives like Johannesburg's Corridors of Freedom aim to channel development along transit-oriented corridors, limiting urban encroachment into peri-urban green spaces. However, as highlighted by Gethe and Simbanegavi (2024), compact city strategies in South Africa must go beyond physical land-use efficiency to incorporate socially inclusive redevelopment approaches. Without this integration, the environmental benefits of land conservation risk being overshadowed by socio-economic exclusion, particularly in high-value urban areas undergoing redevelopment pressure. This perspective underscores the need for compact city planning to balance environmental preservation with equitable access to urban opportunities.

Air Quality and Carbon Emissions Reduction

The compact city model supports improved air quality primarily by reducing reliance on private motor vehicles. Higher population densities and mixed land uses enhance the viability of public transport systems, making them more frequent, cost-effective, and attractive to residents (Gong et al., 2018). This shift in travel behaviour leads to substantial reductions in per capita vehicle-kilometres travelled and, consequently, lower emissions of greenhouse gases (GHGs) and air pollutants such as nitrogen oxides and particulate matter (PM2.5) (Zhang et al., 2020). Recent comparative urban studies indicate that dense, transit-oriented cities report lower transport-related carbon emissions per capita compared to low-density, automobile-dependent cities (Cao et al., 2020). For example, Tokyo and Copenhagen, both exemplars of compact urban form demonstrate markedly lower GHG outputs from transport relative to sprawling North American cities. Furthermore, compact development patterns can integrate cleaner energy sources and sustainable construction techniques, further reducing stationary-source emissions (Liu et al., 2021). However, the environmental benefits of density are not automatic. Poorly managed compactness can result in localised pollution hotspots, particularly in areas with high traffic volumes or industrial clusters (Fuenfschilling et al., 2019). Effective integration of land-use and air-quality management is therefore critical to ensuring that environmental gains from compactness are realised across the urban system.

Energy Efficiency in Buildings and Infrastructure

Energy efficiency in compact cities is derived from both the physical form of the built environment and the design of infrastructure networks. Multi-storey residential and commercial buildings, common in high-density areas, benefit from shared walls, floors, and ceilings, which reduce heat loss in cooler climates and heat gain in warmer conditions. This physical efficiency translates into lower per-unit heating and cooling requirements compared to detached single-family dwellings typical of suburban sprawl (Cao et al., 2020). From an infrastructural perspective, the close proximity of buildings and users facilitates more efficient distribution of utilities such as water, electricity, and waste collection (Angelidou et al., 2022). Shorter network lengths reduce energy losses during transmission and distribution, while also lowering the capital and maintenance costs of service provision. Compact cities are also better suited to implementing district heating and cooling systems, where energy is generated and distributed from a centralised plant, further enhancing efficiency (Salat & Bourdic, 2020).

In transportation, compact layouts shorten travel distances and encourage modal shifts toward low-energy forms of mobility such as walking, cycling, and public transit (Banister & Hickman, 2020). Public transport in dense environments consumes significantly less energy per passenger-kilometre than private vehicles, contributing to overall reductions in urban energy demand (Liu et al., 2021). The combination of efficient building forms and low-energy transport networks positions compact cities as critical contributors to climate change mitigation efforts.

Ecological Footprints and Resource Efficiency

The ecological footprint of a city measures the total biologically productive area required to sustain its population's consumption patterns and absorb its waste, including carbon emissions. Compact cities typically record smaller per capita ecological footprints than sprawling cities due to more efficient use of resources and services (Agyemang et al., 2021). Dense urban forms enable economies of scale in resource provision, allowing services such as waste collection, water treatment, and energy supply to be delivered more efficiently (Angelidou et al., 2022). Concentrated demand supports the viability of recycling programmes, renewable energy infrastructure, and sustainable water management systems such as rainwater harvesting and greywater reuse (Wang et al., 2023). Additionally, compact cities can integrate green infrastructure such as urban parks, tree-lined streets, green roofs, and permeable surfaces into their dense urban fabrics, which supports biodiversity, improves stormwater management, and mitigates the urban heat island effect

While density provides structural advantages for reducing ecological footprints, these benefits depend heavily on complementary policy measures, governance capacity, and community participation. Without proactive environmental management, resource consumption in compact cities could remain high, particularly if economic growth drives unsustainable consumption patterns. Therefore, compact cities must integrate sustainability principles into every stage of planning and development to fully realise ecological footprint reductions.

Environmental Impacts of Urban Sprawl

The Impact of Low-density Urban Patterns on Land Utilisation and Environmental Degradation

Rapid urbanisation and population growth significantly contribute to inefficient land use and environmental degradation. This is primarily due to an increased demand for land and resources, which often results in unplanned urban expansion and the conversion of valuable ecological and agricultural areas (Seifollahi-Aghmiuni et al., 2022). Socioeconomic factors, such as population growth and urban sprawl, are key drivers of land degradation, forming complex environmental issues that negatively affect overall environmental quality (Seifollahi-Aghmiuni et al., 2022).

Low-density urban patterns, frequently characterised by urban sprawl, have profound implications for inefficient land utilisation and environmental degradation. Such sprawl leads to inefficient land use, causing substantial resource waste (Jiang et al., 2023). These low-density patterns increase land consumption; for example, cities with dispersed-continuous typologies consume considerably more land than compact urban forms (Chakraborty et al., 2024). Identifying inefficient urban land is critical for successful urban regeneration, with such areas often concentrated in city centers and peripheries, impacting residential, commercial, and industrial zones (Jin et al., 2023).

Urban sprawl also causes ecological damage by altering land use patterns, diminishing green spaces, and increasing impervious surfaces. This negatively affects groundwater recharge and quality (Seifolddini & Mansourian, 2012). Furthermore, increased urban sprawl is linked to higher levels of air and water pollution; for instance, urban expansion has been shown to increase air pollution and decrease water quality (Seifolddini & Mansourian, 2012). Low-density urban expansion specifically impairs water quality through increased runoff and pollution from urban activities (Wang et al., 2021). These patterns also lead to landscape fragmentation, disrupting ecosystems and exacerbating environmental degradation, a phenomenon particularly evident in cities across the Global South (Chakraborty et al., 2024).

From an economic perspective, low-density urban expansion poses a global challenge to urban land use sustainability, resulting in increased land consumption and heightened landscape fragmentation (Chakraborty et al., 2024).

In summary, low-density urban patterns significantly contribute to inefficient land utilisation and environmental degradation through resource waste, increased land consumption, pollution, and landscape fragmentation. Addressing these issues necessitates comprehensive urban planning and sustainable development strategies. Urban governance and policy must prioritise mitigating the adverse consequences associated with urban sprawl to effectively tackle urban land use sustainability challenges.

Critique of Governance and Planning Failures Contributing to Sprawl

Urban sprawl is substantially influenced by failures in governance, policy, and planning. From a planning standpoint, urban planning has struggled to control sprawl. This is largely due to fragmented suburbanisation, which is driven by ineffective methods for forecasting population and land use (Wu et al., 2017). Silva (2019) further noted that ambiguities in planning have contributed to urban sprawl, underscoring the need for clearer and more effective planning regulations.

Additionally, market failures, such as the incomplete pricing of infrastructure and environmental externalities, reduce the true cost of suburban living. This encourages excessive suburban development and urban sprawl (Brueckner et al., 2011; Cinyabuguma & McConnell, 2013). Different governmental administrations often employ varied approaches to master plan implementation, which typically results in disparate urban growth patterns. Consequently, governance capacity significantly impacts urban sprawl (Menzori et al., 2021). Regulatory failures are also major contributors to urban sprawl, suggesting a necessary shift in focus from purely physical dimensions to political considerations when addressing this issue (Ulfarsson, 2006).

Traditional management strategies frequently overlook the complex, multidimensional nature of urban sprawl, leading to gaps in planning and policy. An integrated approach that promotes compact, polycentric cities with mixed land use is therefore crucial for mitigating sprawl (Pradhan et al., 2025). Barton and Ramírez (2019) posited that state actors can inadvertently drive urban sprawl through spatial planning instruments that incorporate neoliberal and neostructural features, highlighting the significant role of public agencies in urban sprawl processes.

In summary, governance and planning failures play a critical role in fostering urban sprawl. Key factors driving this phenomenon include ineffective urban planning, market and economic forces, and persistent planning and policy gaps. Addressing these issues requires comprehensive and integrated policy frameworks, effective governance, and clear, consistent planning regulations to promote sustainable urban development and mitigate the negative impacts of urban sprawl.

Socio-economic Implications of Urban Sprawl

Urban sprawl negatively affects the social fabric of cities, leading to increased commute times, heightened racial and class segregation, and social isolation. These issues are exacerbated by low-density, sprawling development patterns (Cho et al., 2009). The crisis of spatial identities and residential cannibalism, stemming from competitive municipal spatial planning mechanisms, further intensifies the social implications of urban sprawl (Malý, 2024).

The economic implications of urban sprawl are diverse. It results in increased costs for urban networks, infrastructure construction, and the provision of public services for new developments, thereby

straining municipal budgets (Hortas-Rico, 2014). Urban sprawl signifies an inefficient use of urban land, where fewer people occupy more land, and developments are situated in areas that are challenging to service in terms of infrastructure and accessibility. Sprawl also escalates the demand for new infrastructure, leading to capital deficits that are often covered by intergovernmental transfers and real estate revenues, contributing to short-term current surpluses (Hortas-Rico, 2014).

Hence, failures in governance and planning significantly contribute to urban sprawl, resulting in a range of environmental, infrastructural, economic, and social impacts. These consequences include environmental degradation, inadequate infrastructure development, increased costs, and detrimental effects on the social fabric of cities.

Policy Recommendations

The study underscores that urban development cannot rely on a one-size-fits-all adoption of compact city or sprawl models. Instead, policy frameworks must reflect local ecological, economic, and social realities. Governments should design policies that encourage mixed-use, high-density development where infrastructure and public transit systems can support population growth efficiently, thus minimising car dependency and improving air quality. At the same time, policies must mitigate the risks of overconcentration, such as congestion and urban heat islands, through investment in green infrastructure and resilient urban design. In contexts where urban sprawl dominates, policies should prioritise controlled expansion, land-use efficiency, and ecological conservation to reduce habitat fragmentation. Importantly, policy integration across housing, transportation, land management, and climate adaptation is essential. This requires multi-level governance, where local authorities align with national sustainability agendas and international climate frameworks. The study therefore recommends a balanced, adaptive, and integrated policy regime that avoids the dichotomy of “compact versus sprawl” and instead builds hybridised, context-driven urban models.

Conclusion and Implications

The research adds to the growing discourse of sustainable urbanism by illustrating that neither compactness nor sprawl should be unconditionally praised or condemned. Rather, the results indicate a sustainability framework that is context-dependent, where the effectiveness of urban models relies on governance abilities, environmental factors, and socio-economic settings. This challenges previous urban sustainability theories that deemed compact cities as fundamentally better. Additionally, it enhances ecological urban theory by highlighting metrics like ecological footprints, land efficiency, and energy consumption as essential evaluative measures. Moreover, the study deepens systems theory within urban planning by emphasising the interrelated nature of spatial form, governance, and environmental results. By promoting a comprehensive perspective, the research portrays urban sustainability as an evolving process instead of a fixed design principle.

For practice, this study offers evidence-supported insights for urban planners, policymakers, and those involved in infrastructure. It is recommended that planners utilise scenario-based modeling tools to simulate the environmental effects of different growth patterns, thus facilitating decisions based on evidence. The results emphasise the importance of investing in sustainable transportation networks, including public transit, cycling routes, and infrastructure that supports pedestrians as essential for realising the environmental benefits of compact urban development. In areas with urban sprawl, practitioners should focus on land-use regulations, ecological buffer zones, and strategic zoning practices to find a balance between growth and environmental conservation.

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SACQSP2025-111

Industrial Symbiosis for Circularity in the Built Environment: Barriers and the Enabling Role of Digital Circular Platforms

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Abstract

The construction sector faces growing pressure to reduce waste, enhance resource efficiency, and transition toward a Circular Economy (CE). Industrial Symbiosis (IS), the reuse of waste and by-products across firms, has emerged as a potential strategy to achieve these goals. However, its uptake remains constrained by fragmented data, weak coordination, and limited integration into procurement systems. This study examines IS through the lens of green procurement (GP), conceptualised as a key strategy for embedding circular practices in the built environment. A narrative literature review was conducted, drawing on 32 academic publications identified through purposive searches, snowballing, and authoritative sources. Thematic analysis is used to (i) explore the barriers to IS adoption in developing economies, (ii) examine the enabling role of digital circular platforms in supporting IS and green procurement practices, and (iii) assess how digital platforms mediate material exchanges and stakeholder collaboration for CE in the built environment. The results highlight that barriers to IS in developing economies include limited digital infrastructure, weak data interoperability, and institutional resistance. At the same time, digital circular platforms demonstrate potential to enhance transparency, enable real-time data exchange, support material matchmaking, and reduce coordination costs. These capabilities directly strengthen GP practices by linking procurement decisions to CE goals. The study concludes that while digital circular platforms offer promising pathways for embedding symbiotic practices within GP frameworks, their adoption in developing economies requires targeted investment, supportive policy environments, and pilot implementations. The paper contributes to the circular construction discourse by providing a conceptual synthesis of IS, GP, and digitalisation, laying the groundwork for future empirical investigations in emerging market contexts.

Keywords: Built Environment, Circular Economy, Digital Platforms, Green Procurement, Industrial Symbiosis.

Introduction

Imagine a construction site where leftover concrete and bricks no longer end up in landfills but instead circulate as valuable inputs elsewhere. This vision reflects the principles of Industrial Symbiosis (IS), a system where the waste, surplus materials, or by-products of one organisation become resources for another (Boom-Cárcamo & Peñabaena-Niebles, 2022). Globally, IS is gaining traction as a strategy for environmental and economic sustainability. Iconic examples like the Kalundborg Eco-Industrial Park in Denmark demonstrate how shared resource flows among firms can lead to remarkable improvements in efficiency, cost savings, and environmental performance.

Despite its promise, IS remains underutilised in the built environment sector, where its potential to reduce construction waste and enhance circularity has not been fully harnessed (Ness & Xing, 2017). At the same time, digital technologies are emerging as powerful enablers of Circular Economy (CE) strategies. Recent frameworks highlight the importance of digital platforms and marketplaces, alongside tools such as Building Information Modelling (BIM), blockchain, and digital twins, in promoting resource efficiency, material reuse, and low-carbon practices across the construction value chain (Çetin et al., 2021). Several pilot initiatives such as the Circularity Information Platform (CIP) and the Digital Industrial Symbiosis Ecosystem (DISE) model have been proposed to support industrial symbiosis through digital means, indicating the growing interest in platform-based digital ecosystems

that can enhance smart material flows and promote sustainable procurement practices (Yu et al., 2023; Kosmol & Leyh, 2021). Yet there remains a fragmented understanding of how digital platforms can be purposefully designed and leveraged to enable IS through green procurement practices, particularly in the built environment.

Previous studies have typically explored IS and concepts like green procurement independently. For example, Kwasafo et al. (2024) found that green construction procurement practices significantly influence CE success in Ghana's construction sector, accounting for 12.8% of the variance in CE performance, highlighting procurement as a strategic entry point for advancing circularity. However, the intersection of IS and circular procurement, especially through the lens of digital platform capabilities, remains underexplored. This oversight risks missing a crucial opportunity to translate circular economy policies into actionable outcomes by using procurement as a strategic lever. Accordingly, this paper examines industrial symbiosis through the lens of green procurement, conceptualised as a key strategy for embedding circular practices in the built environment. Within this framing, the study specifically aims to; explore the barriers to IS adoption in developing economies, examine the enabling role of digital circular platforms in supporting IS and green procurement practices, and assess how digital platforms mediate material exchanges and stakeholder collaboration for CE in the built environment.

Green procurement refers to purchasing strategies that integrate environmental considerations into decision-making processes. In construction, this involves a commitment to minimising environmental impacts across all phases of a project. It includes selecting suppliers, materials, and technologies that promote sustainability, thereby reducing resource consumption, limiting waste, and enhancing environmental performance (Kwasafo et al., 2024). Conversely, the CE emphasises keeping resources in closed-loop systems to reduce environmental degradation, enhance resource efficiency, and rethink conventional production-consumption models. Even when a product reaches the end of its life, circularity ensures its components are reused, remanufactured, or repurposed. It is therefore associated with alternatives that work against linear processing (European Environment Agency (EEA), 2016, see Figure 1).

Figure 1 The Circular Economy Concept (EEA, 2016)

The IS represents a tangible mechanism for achieving CE goals, offering substantial economic and environmental benefits (Boom-Cárcamo & Peñabaena-Niebles, 2022). By facilitating the exchange of materials, including waste, that substitute commercial inputs or raw materials in other systems, IS fosters greater resource efficiency, reduces emissions, and eliminates waste compared to isolated

enterprise operations. However, implementing IS also introduces new inter-organisational relationships and collaborative supply chains among previously unrelated companies. As Fraccascia et al. (2021) explain, IS is inherently collaborative, enabling the physical exchange of materials, energy, and by-products, which in turn drives economic value for firms and environmental gains for society. This review contributes to ongoing debates on sustainable construction by providing a roadmap for leveraging digital technologies to operationalise CE principles through public and private procurement practices. In the next section, research approach for the narrative review is outlined. This is then followed by a thematic synthesis of literature across four domains, IS, green procurement, digital platforms, and their points of convergence. The paper concludes with a discussion of key insights, knowledge gaps, and future directions for research and practice.

Research Design and Methods

This paper adopts a narrative literature review approach to explore how digital circular platforms enable IS as a green procurement strategy to advance CE outcomes in the built environment. Narrative reviews are particularly suitable when synthesising insights across diverse fields, where conceptual development and contextual understanding are key (Greenhalgh et al., 2018; Ferrari, 2015). The objective of this review is to explore, organise, and interpret existing knowledge rather than to exhaustively cover all available literature, in line with the conceptual and exploratory nature of the research. The review drew on academic, policy, and industry sources to offer a thematic synthesis of ideas and practices shaping digital circularity in construction.

Literature Selection and Scope

Relevant literature was identified through purposive searches in leading academic databases, particularly Google Scholar. Google Scholar offers comprehensive coverage across various disciplines, making it suitable for interdisciplinary research topics like industrial symbiosis, circular economy, and green procurement. Martín-Martín et al. (2018) found that Google Scholar provides extensive citation data across multiple subject areas. This broad coverage ensures that diverse perspectives and studies are captured, which is crucial for topics spanning multiple disciplines. Searches employed combinations of keywords and phrases such as “industrial symbiosis,” “circular economy,” “green procurement,” “digital platforms,” “built environment,” and “construction.” To ensure comprehensive coverage, a snowballing approach was applied, examining both the references of selected papers (backward citation tracking) and the studies citing them (forward citation tracking). This iterative process enabled the identification of additional studies addressing the intersections of industrial symbiosis, circular economy strategies, green procurement, digital platforms, and the built environment. Additional gray literature was sourced from authoritative bodies, including UNEP and the European Commission, given their influence on global circular economy policy and practice. Studies focusing on the manufacturing sector were also considered where insights were transferable to the built environment. Sources were selected based on conceptual relevance, influence, and thematic richness (Snyder, 2019). In total, 32 scholarly and policy-relevant documents were included for their conceptual contribution, thematic relevance, and influence in shaping discourse on digital circularity and industrial symbiosis. The progression of literature selection is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1 Progression of Literature Selection and Source

Source	Number of Documents	Description
Initial purposive search (Google Scholar)	15	Articles retrieved using combinations of keywords and phrases; screened by title/abstract for relevance
Backward citation tracking (references of selected papers)	7	Additional papers identified from references of initially selected studies
Forward citation tracking (papers citing selected studies)	5	Additional relevant papers found via “Cited by” links in Google Scholar
Authoritative gray literature	5	Policy reports and guidance documents on circular economy and industrial symbiosis
Total	32	

While this study drew from influential and multidisciplinary sources, providing a conceptually rich synthesis that advances understanding in a relatively underexplored domain of CE in the built environment, the selection of literature may reflect certain biases related to database coverage, language (English only), and interpretivist framing.

Thematic Framing and Analysis

A thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring patterns, concepts, and insights across the selected literature. Thematic analysis, a widely accepted qualitative analytical method, provides a systematic yet flexible approach for synthesising complex information (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this study, the analysis combined deductive framing, guided by predefined categories derived from the study's objectives (e.g., industrial symbiosis, circular economy, green procurement, digital platforms), with inductive coding to capture emerging themes not anticipated in the initial framework. The process involved three main steps:

1. Familiarisation: Each document was carefully reviewed, and key passages, concepts, and processes relevant to the research objectives were extracted.
2. Coding: Extracted content was assigned preliminary codes. Deductive codes corresponded to the predefined categories, while inductive codes were created for recurring ideas and novel insights emerging from the literature.
3. Theme development: Codes were grouped into overarching themes and sub-themes, which were iteratively refined to ensure conceptual coherence and alignment with the study's aims.

This approach enabled a structured synthesis of how digital platforms interact with procurement and symbiosis processes in the built environment, highlighting barriers and enabling mechanisms, particularly in developing economy contexts. The resulting thematic framework provides a foundation for understanding the interplay between green procurement, circular economy transitions, and IS in the built environment.

Results

Descriptive Analysis

The reviewed studies demonstrate a wide geographical spread across both developed and developing economies, although the synthesis for this review placed particular emphasis on insights from developing contexts. As shown in Figure 2, the 32 articles span 14 countries, with the highest number of publications originating from the United Kingdom (6 articles), followed by China (5 articles) and the Netherlands (4 articles). The United States also features prominently with 3 articles, while countries such as Brazil, Germany, Ghana, and Italy each contributed 2 articles. Australia, Colombia, Mauritius, Mexico, Norway, and Taiwan each accounted for a single study. Notably, the thematic synthesis on barriers to industrial symbiosis (IS) adoption drew primarily on evidence from studies situated in developing countries, particularly Brazil, China, Ghana, Mauritius, Mexico, and Colombia. This enabled the review to capture region-specific constraints that are less visible in studies from more industrialised contexts

In terms of temporal distribution, publications on industrial symbiosis, circular economy, green procurement, and digital platforms have steadily increased over the past decade (Figure 3). Early contributions were sporadic, with one article each in 2012, 2013, and 2014. A noticeable growth trajectory began in 2015, with an average of 3–5 publications annually from 2016 onwards. Peaks are observed in 2021 (5 articles), and 2016, 2017, and 2020 (4 articles each), reflecting heightened scholarly attention in recent years. Despite a slight dip in 2022 and 2023, contributions continued, and 2024 already records one article, suggesting ongoing academic engagement with the subject area.

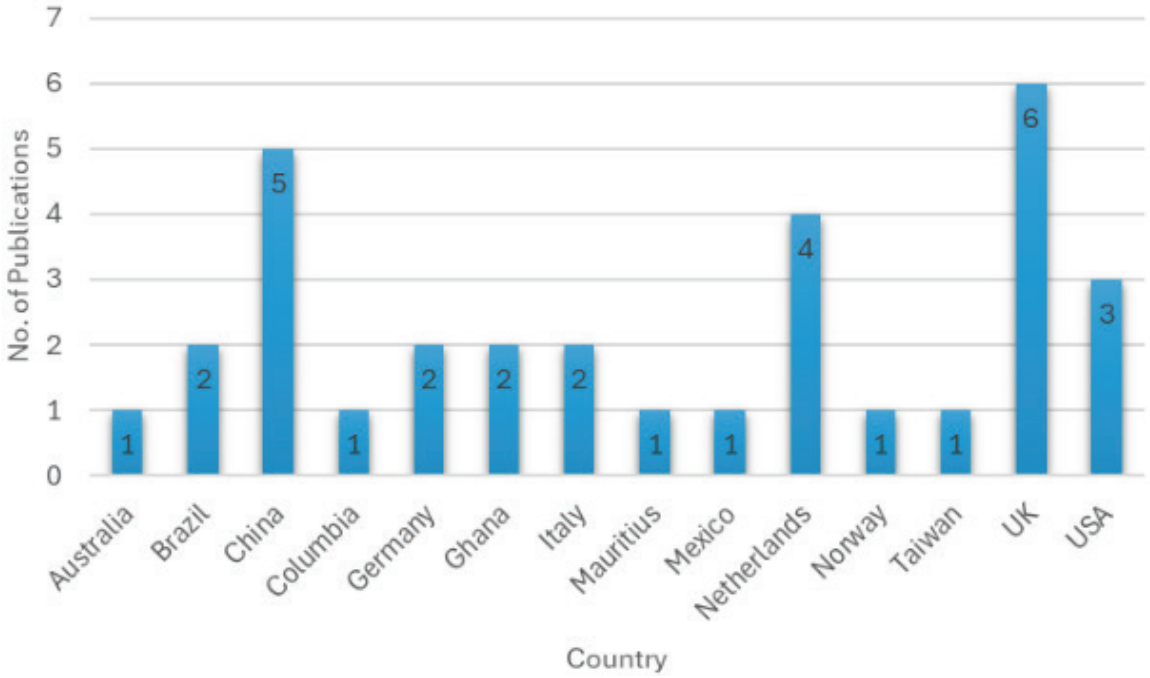

Figure 2 Publication distribution by study location

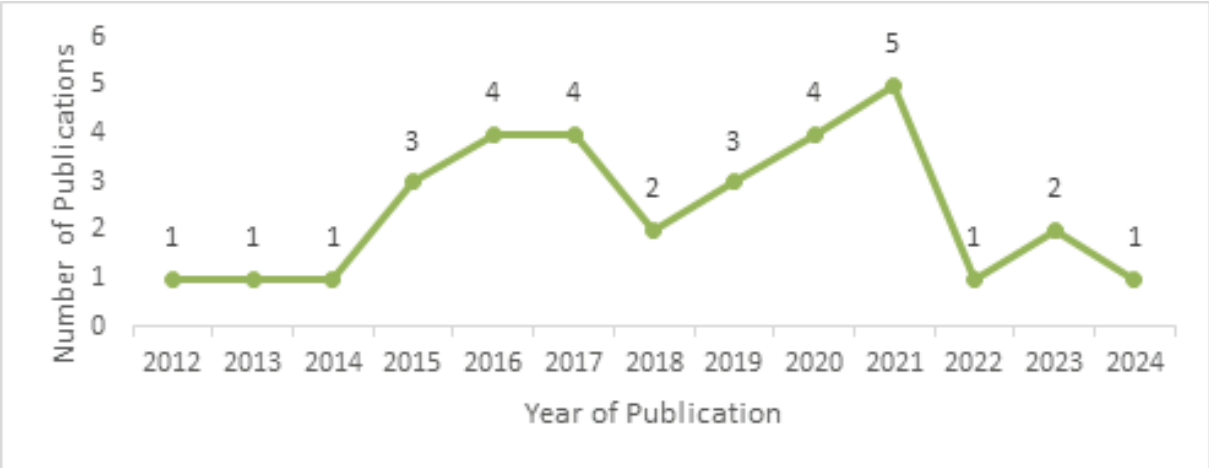

Figure 3 Publication distribution per year

Thematic Synthesis

To organise the synthesis, categories were first identified from the literature based on recurring concepts, challenges, and technological enablers related to industrial symbiosis, green procurement, and digital platforms. These categories were then grouped into overarching themes through a combination of deductive coding, guided by the study's predefined objectives, and inductive coding to capture emerging insights. Table 2 presents the resulting thematic framework, linking each objective to its respective themes and underlying categories. This structure ensures transparency in how the thematic analysis reflects both the conceptual focus and the practical barriers and enablers identified in the selected studies, particularly from developing economy contexts.

Table 2 Thematic Synthesis of Reviewed Literature

Objective	Themes	Categories
Objective 1: Barriers to Industrial Symbiosis in Developing Economies within the Built Environment	Industrial Symbiosis in Built Environment	Conceptual foundations and contextual relevance
	Barriers to IS Adoption	Regulatory gaps, institutional weaknesses, infrastructural deficits, resource constraints, socio-cultural barriers
Objective 2: The Enabling Role of Digital Platforms in Supporting IS and Green Procurement	Digital Circular Platforms	Digital tools, data-sharing systems, platform models
	Enabling Digitalisation for IS and GP	Digital technologies, big data, smart systems
Objective 3: Digital Mediation of Material Exchanges and Stakeholder Collaboration for CE in the Built Environment	Collaborative Ecosystems and Mediation	Stakeholder collaboration, material exchange facilitation
	Challenges for Platforms	Governance, trust, adoption barriers, scalability issues

Barriers to Industrial Symbiosis in Developing Economies within the Built Environment

Industrial Symbiosis in the Built Environment

IS, rooted in the broader discipline of industrial ecology, refers to a cooperative approach where the waste or by-products of one enterprise are used as inputs by another, generating shared environmental and economic benefits (Boom-Cárcamo & Peñabaena-Niebles, 2022). This closed-loop system challenges the traditional linear "take-make-dispose" production model by promoting inter-firm exchanges of materials, energy, water, and information to enhance resource efficiency and reduce environmental impact.

A classic example of IS in practice is the Kalundborg Eco-Industrial Park in Denmark, where diverse industries collaborate to exchange residual resources. This network has yielded substantial annual savings and carbon emission reductions, serving as a global benchmark for circular industrial networks. The Kalundborg case underscores the practical alignment between IS and CE principles, particularly in fostering "waste-to-resource" loops that can be scaled across sectors, including the built environment.

In the construction sector, IS holds significant promise for valorising Construction and Demolition Waste (CDW), which represents one of the largest waste streams globally. Through IS, CDW can be transformed into secondary resources such as Recycled Concrete Aggregates (RCAs) or bio-based construction materials, reducing reliance on virgin resources and diverting waste from landfills. For example, Yu et al. (2021), developed an agent-based and GIS-integrated model to simulate symbiotic networks for RCAs in the Netherlands. Their findings demonstrated that even when symbiotic arrangements are informal or implicit, coordinated collaboration among contractors, recyclers, and material suppliers can improve circular outcomes in construction material supply chains.

However, despite the potential benefits, the implementation of IS in the built environment remains limited, particularly in emerging and developing economies. Barriers include institutional fragmentation, lack of supportive policy frameworks, insufficient data and traceability of materials, limited stakeholder awareness, and weak economic incentives for symbiotic collaboration. These challenges are often compounded by informal practices in the construction sector and inadequate digital infrastructure. Table 3 presents a synthesis of the key barriers to IS adoption in developing economies, drawing on insights from contemporary literature.

Table 3 Barriers to Industrial Symbiosis in Developing Economies

Barrier	Description	Reference
Financial Barriers to Promoting IS	Limited access to funding, high logistical costs, and low return on investment hinder IS adoption. Firms in constrained economic environments tend to prioritise short-term cost-cutting over long-term symbiotic benefits	Sellitto et al. (2021)
Lack of Knowledge on Waste Trading	Many industries are unaware of the economic and environmental potential of waste trading, often defaulting to landfill disposal due to familiarity and perceived cost-efficiency.	Mauthoor (2017)
Low Awareness of IS Projects	IS remains an unfamiliar concept to many top-level managers in developing economies. Without integration into business planning and education, IS opportunities are overlooked.	Ji et al. (2020)
Weak Regulatory Frameworks	Regulatory frameworks are critical to fostering IS activities. The absence of supportive policies, enforcement, and incentives weakens the economic viability of IS. Regulations often lack the structure to promote or govern resource exchanges.	Ji et al. (2020); Mauthoor (2017)
Absence of Landfill Fees	Without economic disincentives like landfill taxes, waste disposal remains the cheaper option compared to developing IS mechanisms.	Ji et al. (2020)
Business Confidentiality Concerns	Trust issues and fear of revealing proprietary information hinder inter-firm cooperation and data sharing, which are central to IS networks.	Ji et al. (2020)
Lack of Innovation in the Business Sector	Weak research and innovation ecosystems, and limited participation from SMEs and institutions, slow the uptake of new technologies and symbiotic models.	Morales et al. (2019)
Limited Access to Green Technology	Many firms still operate with outdated technologies due to regulatory and financial constraints, making symbiotic exchanges technically infeasible.	Li et al. (2015)
Infrastructure Deficits	Poor roads, communication systems, and logistics infrastructure complicate the physical movement of waste and secondary materials.	Li et al. (2015)
Social and Cultural Barriers	A lack of social trust, collaboration culture, and commitment to shared sustainability goals can stifle symbiotic initiatives.	Ceglia et al. (2017)
Material Supply–Demand Imbalances	Misalignment between the availability and demand for materials prevents stable symbiotic relationships. Addressing this requires improved data systems and matchmaking mechanisms	Sellitto et al. (2021)

The Enabling Role of Digital Platforms in Supporting IS and Green Procurement

Digital Circular Platforms: Concepts and Capabilities

Digital platforms are central to enabling the CE by facilitating the exchange of materials, information, and services across value chains. From an economic perspective, platforms function as marketplaces that generate network effects by enabling the exchange of goods, services, and information (Parker et al., 2016). These platforms may operate within firms, across supply chains, or across entire industry ecosystems, offering scalable technological solutions that address common business challenges (Kovačič et al., 2020).

In the Architectural, Engineering, and Construction (AEC) industry, platforms are widely used for document collaboration, project management, and electronic procurement. Cloud-based systems

enable real-time collaboration among multidisciplinary teams, while digital procurement tools streamline purchasing decisions across the value chain (Kovačič et al., 2020).

However, existing recycling markets often suffer from high transaction costs and significant information asymmetries. Recyclers frequently lack sufficient information about downstream demand, which discourages investment in high-quality recycling processes (OECD, 2005). Consequently, incineration has become a dominant waste treatment method due to its lower information requirements regarding material composition (Wilts, 2012). In response, emerging digital circularplatforms are envisioned as Business-to-Business (B2B) marketplaces where companies can exchange discarded products, components, or recyclable materials to support reuse, remanufacturing, recycling, and proper waste treatment. These platforms connect actors across the circular value chain, from raw material producers to manufacturers and waste management companies, facilitating more efficient resource allocation. They can be industry-specific (e.g., focused on e-waste) or multi-sectoral, enabling materials such as metals or plastics to find new applications across diverse sectors.

Digital platforms are increasingly recognised for their potential to address coordination challenges in circular systems. McAfee and Brynjolfsson (2017), highlight how web-based platforms reduce information asymmetries, enabling new business models and more efficient market exchanges. Similarly, Gawer and Cusumano (2014), emphasise the role of platforms in fostering knowledge exchange, innovation, and productivity

While this review focuses primarily on platforms that facilitate trade through digital matchmaking between suppliers and consumers, it also acknowledges the growing potential of advanced data analytics to enhance platform functionality. Leveraging real-time ("Fast Data") and historical ("Big Data") analytics, platforms can generate insights into material flows, track resource exchanges, and optimise supply-demand matching (Reuter et al., 2013). These data-driven capabilities can support transparency and traceability, informing users about material purity, additive content, availability, quality, and timing. Moreover, algorithmic trading features can automate transactions and support reverse logistics and closed-loop systems. By reducing transaction costs and uncertainty, these platforms can enhance market participation, particularly for firms seeking to procure recycled materials or enter circular value chains. Suppliers can achieve fair pricing based on product quality, while buyers gain confidence in the materials they acquire, facilitating more reliable and sustainable production processes. Ultimately, digital circular platforms offer a promising pathway to operationalise circular economy principles by closing material loops, minimising waste, and reducing reliance on scarce primary resources.

Enabling Digitalisation of Symbiosis and Green Procurement

The digitalisation of IS and green procurement presents a transformative opportunity to address key barriers that have historically constrained the implementation of CE practices, particularly in developing countries. Digital platforms, defined as socio-technical systems that enable value creation through digital interaction (Gawer & Cusumano, 2014), play a critical role in overcoming coordination, knowledge, and market-related challenges inherent to IS.

Several studies highlight that IS has struggled to scale due to a range of systemic and operational barriers, such as information asymmetry, limited material flow data, infrastructural deficits, regulatory fragmentation, and lack of financial incentives (Li et al., 2015; Yazan & Fraccascia, 2020). Digital platforms provide a mechanism to tackle these barriers by enabling efficient data sharing, enhancing transparency, and automating material matchmaking and logistics coordination (Parker et al., 2016; Tseng et al., 2018).

One of the primary challenges in IS is the lack of knowledge and awareness about the value and possibilities of secondary material exchanges. Digital platforms address this through real-time data visualisation, searchable material registries, and AI-driven recommendations that facilitate the discovery of industrial partnerships (Reuter et al., 2013). Furthermore, the high transaction costs and confidentiality concerns often associated with material exchange are mitigated by secure cloud-based systems and smart contracts, which provide traceability and protect proprietary business information (McAfee & Brynjolfsson, 2017).

Digitalisation also enhances the regulatory and policy environment for CE by generating standardised data that can support monitoring, reporting, and enforcement (Tseng et al., 2018). This is especially

important in contexts where environmental regulation is weak or inconsistently applied. For example, platform-generated metrics, such as embodied carbon tracking, material reuse rates, or lifecycle impact scores, can inform both public procurement decisions and private sector performance evaluations.

In addition, platforms address infrastructure and logistical constraints by offering cloud-hosted services that do not require heavy local infrastructure, making them particularly suitable for developing economies (Kovacic et al., 2020). They also help balance material supply and demand mismatches by using real-time and predictive analytics to facilitate the alignment of resource needs between disparate industrial actors (Parker et al., 2016; Tseng et al., 2018).

Digital Mediation of Material Exchanges and Stakeholder Collaboration for CE in the Built Environment

Collaborative Ecosystems and Digital Mediation

Mitigating market failure may be the most important contribution of the digital platforms and algorithms discussed earlier. These platforms enhance both economic and environmental efficiency by facilitating exchanges and reducing transaction and search costs. The emerging “intelligence” of digital networks, leveraging information recombination can drive innovation and enable novel business models such as arbitrage and outsourcing (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2016; Charter, 2016). Such platforms can integrate legal, technical, and scientific knowledge to support deal-making in secondary material markets. Information failures can be addressed through digital tracking across the value chain, using Cyber-Physical Systems (CPS) that store detailed data on product and process characteristics. Enhanced transparency around material composition and origin allows resources to be directed to their most efficient use, reducing information asymmetries and the risk of “lemon markets.”

Reliable, traceable data on secondary materials can mitigate customer bias and hesitation, enabling quality guarantees that improve market confidence in recyclates. Trade automation or personalised recommendations can further reduce buyer unawareness, while design-for-disassembly information helps ensure that end-of-life products are allocated according to material value and recycling potential. This, in turn, incentivises more recycling-friendly product design.

Challenges for digital circular platforms

Digital circular platforms face several technical, organisational, and systemic challenges. Existing models, such as Rubicon Global, often rely on manually entered data or basic marketplace functions, with limited impact on resource conservation or circularity. While Industry 4.0 technologies, including CPS and the Internet of Things offer substantial potential, their integration into circular platforms remains underdeveloped.

A major barrier is the lack of a dedicated value creation network that connects industry, waste management firms, and digital service providers. Additionally, digital readiness remains low, especially among Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs).

Discussion

Barriers to Industrial Symbiosis in Developing Economies within the Built Environment

Despite the compelling promise of IS to divert CDW from landfills and improve material circularity (Boom-Cárcamo & Peñabaena-Niebles, 2022), its widespread implementation in developing countries remains constrained by a complex web of systemic and operational barriers. These challenges are particularly acute in the construction sector, where informal practices, limited awareness, and regulatory gaps prevail.

Financial constraints are among the most cited barriers. The high cost of establishing IS networks and logistical operations, combined with the absence of market-based incentives, reduces the attractiveness of IS investments (Sellitto et al., 2021). Many industries operate in cost-minimisation mode due to macroeconomic instability, rendering long-term ecological strategies infeasible. This is compounded by the absence of landfill fees in many jurisdictions, which makes landfilling a cheaper and more convenient disposal method. Institutional and regulatory inadequacies are equally significant.

In many developing contexts, weak environmental enforcement and fragmented policy frameworks fail to provide a conducive environment for IS (Mauthoor, 2017; Ji et al., 2020). There is often no structured legal or financial mechanism to incentivise material exchange or penalise wasteful practices.

Knowledge-related barriers also dominate. Limited awareness of IS and its benefits, especially at top management levels, hinders strategic engagement with circularity (Ji et al., 2020; Mauthoor, 2017). Moreover, a lack of familiarity with technical terms and applications leads to poor integration into procurement or design processes. The challenges are further exacerbated by business confidentiality concerns and mistrust among potential IS collaborators, who are hesitant to share material or operational data due to fears over intellectual property leakage (Ji et al., 2020). On the operational front, infrastructure deficits and limited access to green technologies impede the practical implementation of symbiotic activities (Yazan & Fraccascia, 2020). Obsolete infrastructure, such as underdeveloped road and communication networks, severely restricts the logistics required to support material exchange. Additionally, mismatches in the timing and volume of material supply and demand make it difficult to maintain stable resource loops (Sellitto et al., 2021; Yeo et al., 2019).

These findings are largely consistent with earlier literature, reinforcing the notion that IS adoption in the Global South is shaped by deeply rooted structural issues (Ji et al., 2020; Morales et al., 2019). However, unlike earlier studies that primarily focused on static barriers, this review highlights how digital tools are beginning to reframe these obstacles as potentially solvable coordination problems, meriting further empirical investigation.

The Enabling Role of Digital Platforms in Supporting IS and Green Procurement

The second objective of this review was to examine how digital circular platforms address the entrenched barriers to IS and facilitate green procurement in construction. Emerging literature suggests that these platforms offer significant potential to transform circular operations in the built environment through enhanced visibility, coordination, and traceability (McAfee & Brynjolfsson, 2017). Digital platforms enable centralised data sharing and visualisation of available waste streams and material demand, thereby reducing the information asymmetries that traditionally impede IS (Parker et al., 2016). By digitising registries of recyclable materials, supporting AI-driven recommendations, and matching supply with demand in real-time, platforms create new avenues for discovering industrial partnerships.

In the procurement domain, digital tools like LCA and EPDs are foundational to green procurement practices, providing decision-makers with data on material footprint and recyclability (Siminica et al., 2020). For instance, green procurement has the potential to influence supplier selection, product specification, and contract design, thereby shifting procurement from a compliance-based function to a strategic tool for circularity (Kwasafo et al., 2024). These findings diverge from earlier models of green procurement that assumed rational, uniform implementation across public institutions. Instead, the results support recent critiques (Agyekum et al., 2023) that call for contextualised digital interventions that reflect local institutional capacities. This underscores the need for longitudinal studies on how digital procurement evolves in practice, particularly in low-capacity environments.

Importantly, digital circular platforms do not merely enable transactions, they also generate real-time metrics and standardised reports that can inform policy, support compliance monitoring, and evaluate environmental outcomes (Tseng et al., 2018). This function is particularly relevant for procurement officers and regulatory agencies tasked with ensuring sustainable construction practices.

Digital Mediation of Material Exchanges and Stakeholder Collaboration for CE in the Built Environment

Digital platforms serve as socio-technical mediators that link various actors, suppliers, recyclers, policymakers, and contractors, within a unified digital ecosystem. This functionality is essential to overcoming the fragmentation and mistrust that often stymie IS in the construction sector. By leveraging technologies such as cloud computing, blockchain, and CPS, platforms create secure and transparent environments for material tracking, quality verification, and trade automation (McAfee & Brynjolfsson, 2017; Reuter et al., 2013). These capabilities address buyer hesitation around the reliability of secondary materials by offering data-backed assurance about composition, origin, and performance.

Moreover, by integrating market intelligence and regulatory compliance functions, platforms can incentivise recycling-friendly design and enable reverse logistics through algorithmic planning and predictive analytics (Parker et al., 2016; Tseng et al., 2018). This reduces uncertainty for all stakeholders and promotes more efficient closed-loop systems. While these functions confirm the value propositions articulated by Gawer and Cusumano (2014), they also extend their platform theory into new domains by operationalising material circularity in construction, an area previously under-explored. This suggests that existing digital platform frameworks should be adapted to accommodate material exchange dynamics specific to the built environment.

Digital mediation also enables collective intelligence across value chains. As Brynjolfsson and McAfee (2016) observe, the recombination of information across digital networks fosters new forms of innovation and arbitrage, which are crucial for accelerating circular transitions. Collaborative ecosystems supported by digital mediation thus emerge as viable pathways for managing the complexity of CE implementation in the built environment. However, systemic challenges remain. The development of fully functional digital circular platforms is hindered by low digital readiness, particularly among SMEs (Kovačič et al., 2020). Existing platforms often lack integration with industry-specific standards and fall short in automating complex procurement or waste exchange decisions (Charter, 2016).

This finding challenges overly optimistic assumptions in earlier work (e.g., Wilts, 2012), which assumed that basic material information portals would suffice for industrial symbiosis. the analysis suggests that unless platforms incorporate advanced analytics, interoperability protocols, and user-centric design, their practical utility will remain limited.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined IS through the lens of green procurement, conceptualised as a key strategy for embedding circular practices in the built environment. The review drew on 32 studies spanning 14 countries across both developed and developing economies, with particular emphasis on insights from developing contexts to capture region-specific barriers to IS adoption. The analysis shows that digital circular platforms can overcome these barriers by enhancing transparency, enabling real-time information exchange, and coordinating material flows. Platforms improve trust and collaboration among industrial actors, support the operationalisation of circular principles such as reuse, remanufacturing, and recycling, and stimulate innovation, network effects, and the engagement of new actors in circular economies. The review may reflect biases arising from database coverage, English-language sources, and interpretivist framing. The focus on developing economies to capture region-specific barriers may limit the generalisability of the findings to other contexts.

Policymakers should implement supportive regulations, standards, and incentives to facilitate platform adoption. Practitioners should leverage digital platforms to enhance material exchange and stakeholder collaboration. Researchers should conduct empirical studies and pilot implementations in emerging economies to evaluate platform effectiveness, governance models, and local innovation pathways. By addressing these areas, stakeholders can embed circular practices in procurement systems and advance sustainable built environment outcomes in developing economies.

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SACQSP2025-126

Carbon Tax as a Driver of Environmental Sustainability in the South African Construction Industry (A Quantity Surveyors' Perspective)

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Abstract

To achieve the net-zero emission goal by 2050 as set by the Paris Agreement, carbon tax has been employed. Although effective in cutting emission rates, carbon tax has been mostly deployed by developed nations, with emerging economies also increasingly adopting several carbon pricing mechanisms. The South African government in 2019 promulgated the carbon tax to impose financial penalties on entities exceeding the emission threshold. Stakeholders, however, perceive carbon tax as an additional burden especially in economic terms. This study investigates the perception of the construction industry cost custodians (Quantity Surveyors) on the use of carbon tax to achieve environmental sustainability. A quantitative approach was adopted for the study with the use of a well-structured questionnaire distributed to Quantity Surveyors in the construction industry. A total of 65 data sets were obtained from purposively sampled respondents. The data gathered was analysed using percentage and mean. Results revealed variables such as carbon tax being regressive, the lack of sufficient buy-in from other stakeholder groups on carbon tax, and carbon tax increasing the import dependence of the construction industry as the most highly ranked perception. This study contributes to the body of knowledge by mapping out the perception of Quantity Surveyors on a climate action tool that might impact the cost of construction projects. Additionally, it deepens the discussion on the modalities of decarbonisation within the construction industry.

Keywords: Carbon Tax, Construction Industry, Decarbonisation, Emerging Economies, Quantity Surveyors.

Introduction

The climate change crisis continues to manifest itself in different forms and across regions globally. While anthropogeny results in carbon emission from different sectors, the construction industry is one of the largest contributors (Xu & Wang 2020; Pradhan & Ghosh, 2022). The International Energy Agency (IEA, 2021) puts global carbon related emissions from the construction sector at 37%. Global concerns from nations across the world resulted in the formulation of the Paris Agreement in the year 2015, which calls for a reduction in global emissions to limit the global temperature increase in this century to 2◦C (above pre-industrial levels), with a view to a gradual further reduction of 0.5◦C over a longer period (Merven et al., 2022). With majority of countries being signatories to the Paris Agreement and the construction sector being a major contributor to ghg emissions, reducing carbon emissions along the construction value chain becomes pertinent.

Carbon tax is one of the instruments that has been adopted by several countries to aid decarbonisation. The motive behind carbon taxing is to cost the carbon dioxide that is released to the atmosphere in order to cater for the detrimental impact. Global carbon pricing continues to expand significantly with current carbon taxes now at approximately 23% of greenhouse gas emissions from 7% in 2018 (Zhao et al., 2024). The expansion implies an increasing global acceptance of carbon pricing mechanisms.

Although carbon taxes are mainly used to minimise carbon emissions, they have been noted to also boost revenue to support carbon reduction measures (Liat et al., 2022). In China for instance, almost a fivefold increase in government revenues from carbon taxes has been recorded which helps to strengthen fiscal capability for climate related policies (Zhao et al., 2024). Even though the developed nations dominate in the use of carbon taxes, emerging economies are also increasingly adopting several carbon pricing mechanisms.

Evidence exists globally that carbon pricing is effective in reducing emission rates. Jakob and Overland (2024) for instance reported in its study on green industry policy in the United State that emission growth in countries with a carbon price has on the average been around 2% lower than in countries without one. Similarly, Döbbeling-Hildebrandt et al. (2024) affirmed in its research on the evaluation of the effectiveness of carbon pricing schemes revealed emission reduction values from 4% to 15% while a study by Leroutier (2022) on carbon pricing in the U.K. also revealed a significant reduction in emission for covered entities. While majority of the carbon pricing studies are found in developed countries with more advanced carbon transition measures, developing nations like South Africa has also attempted putting in place some carbon pricing measures, its impact is however yet to be reported.

The Problem

Carbon pricing varies globally with factors such as community acceptance and international competitiveness (Zhao et al., 2024). Introduced in 2019, the South African government promulgated the carbon tax to impose financial penalties on companies exceeding emission thresholds (Qu et al., 2023). While this regulatory measure is intended to encourage the adoption of green environmental behaviors and incentivise the greening process, stakeholders in the construction sector have certain reservations towards the use of a carbon tax (Weaich et al., 2024) especially around imposing further cost burden on construction projects. According to Simpeh et al. (2023), the South African construction market might not be matured enough for the use of carbon pricing for enabling green building development. Agbajor and Mewomo (2024) further stressed that the use of carbon pricing might impose further financial burden on a volatile industry like the construction sector that is still trying to recover from the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. While carbon pricing might be effective in reducing the environmental impact of the construction industry, the probable financial impact necessitates an investigation into the perception of Quantity Surveyors on carbon tax within the construction industry. Since the major concerns about carbon tax in the construction sector have been cost related, the perception of the cost custodians (Quantity Surveyors) therefore becomes imperative.

Impact of Carbon Pricing in the Construction Industry

Among all the available climate protection strategies, carbon pricing is believed to be the most effective way of reducing ghg emissions (Liat et al., 2022). He et al. (2019) reported in its study on 55 nations over the past two decades that carbon taxes would reduce CO_2 emissions and enhance local environmental quality. Being a market-based emission reduction mechanism, Zhao et al. (2024) further stressed that carbon pricing policies hold potential for the development of green buildings. According to Du et al. (2022), dynamic carbon taxes effectively incentivise developers of carbon friendly buildings, even though increase in tax rates due to the potential financial burden of carbon taxes may reduce this positive correlation. Apart from the emission reduction potential inherent in carbon tax, economic benefits abound in almost all carbon taxes as they have been proven to provide fiscal support for other climate related policies (Yang, 2024).

According to Liat et al. (2022), the determination of the cumulative effect of carbon tax may prove somewhat difficult because of the availability of several emission reduction measures alongside factors such as economic development, which can impact carbon emissions. Despite these challenges, assessment monitoring and program evaluation remain essential in carbon tax policy impact. Several models have been used to investigate the impact of carbon tax in the construction industry. These models considered mainly the three dimensions of economy, energy, and the environment as posited by Du et al. (2025). The MARKAL model by Jaskólski (2016) for instance prioritised market allocation of green technologies and the impact therefrom as the effect of a functional carbon pricing mechanism with an intent for long-term technological transitions. Similarly, the LEAP model by Rivera-González et al. (2019) considered energy in terms of long-term sustainable electricity demand and supply forecasting as the component of a carbon tax effect model while the Wu and Han (2020) utilised an

input and output model to investigate the shifting patterns of Chinas green GDP in light of climate change. Döbbeling-Hildebrandt et al. (2024) concluded in its study that although carbon prices encourage the use of greener materials and technologies, the energy intensive nature of the construction industry however makes a reduction in energy consumption one of the success factors of the implementation of carbon pricing.

Studies have however viewed approaches such as the evaluation of renewable energy and green technology adoption are regarded as “conservatively safe” because it only impacts a small portion of the construction sector. In essence, the use of green technology and renewable energy should be throughout the life cycle of construction products if the construction sector is to effectively benefit from carbon tax. Liat et al. (2022) emphasises social acceptability, political feasibility, and cost effectiveness of emission reduction as priority areas for carbon tax implementation of developing countries.

While certain carbon tax rates can impact energy demand and result in sufficient emission reduction within the construction industry, the effect will only be limited to the macro-level of the construction sector (Du et al., 2022). Substantial carbon emission reduction lies in the manufacture of materials for construction activities (Cadavid-Giraldo et al., 2020). An increase in the unit product carbon taxes is believed to have the stimulating effect on manufacturers to intensify research and development effort (Dand et al., 2023). Caution must however be applied in increasing high unit product taxes as this may downcast the enthusiasm for emission reduction effort altogether.

Theoretical Underpinning of the Study

Being a green behavior incentivisation research, this study is premised upon the Polluter Pays Principle (PPP). The concept of the PPP falls under the parasol of absolute liability and was first discussed in the 1960s by A.V. Kneese and J.H. Dales to commercially dwindle pollution (Barthakur, 2021) although did not find prominence until the early 1970s when strict environmental regulations were first implemented (Luken, 2009). According to the PPP, those responsible for pollution should bear the costs of addressing its consequence. The PPP stresses that the polluter and not the government or society at large with a few notable exceptions should bear the financial cost of reducing unacceptable levels of pollutant discharge. The aim of the PPP is to correct social injustice by shifting pollution costs from the public to polluting enterprises, while also reducing the emission produced within the environment Zahar (2018). The PPP is closely tied to policies that are grouped under market based or economic instruments and can either take the form of taxes and/or tradable permits.

In the construction context, the PPP shifts the responsibility of cost of pollution to those directly responsible for it through levying construction materials. While most building developers and material manufacturers currently pay the bulk of carbon taxes, they transfer the cost burden to the construction clients and end-users who end up running the product. This is because the PPP does not prohibit the polluter from passing on the extra costs that he might incur in terms of preventing pollution during production, thereby increasing the cost of the product.

Research Methodology

A purposive sampling technique was employed for this study in order to select a representative sample of quantity surveyors from the general population of study. According to Fleetwood (2023), a purposive sampling technique is a reliable non-probability sampling technique which enables a researcher to advertently select participants of a research based on certain characteristics that are relevant to the focus of the study. Having identified Quantity Surveyors in the construction industry as the target group for the study, the respondents were purposively selected using a non-random sampling technique in order to ensure that the respondents to the research questionnaire have the requisite knowledge of carbon tax within the construction industry.

A total number of 65 respondents were sampled in the study using a structured questionnaire. A total number of 94 questionnaires were sent out to respondents and only 65 responses were received, constituting a 69% response rate. The internal consistency and reliability of the scale used for the questionnaire was determined using Cronbach’s Alpha. Questions relating to the perception of professionals on carbon tax in the construction industry were posed to the respondent with a 5-point Likert scale where 1 represents strongly disagree, 2 represents disagree, 3 represents neutral, 4 represents agree, and 5 represents strongly agree. The data collected through the questionnaire was processed using the SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) software and analysed thereafter.

Different statistical tools were used for analysis. Percentages were used for the demography of the respondents while measure of central tendency (mean) was used for the perception variables, which were then ranked in descending order of the mean values obtained.

Respondents Background

Respondent Organisation

The category of construction organisation the respondents belonged to was enquired in the questionnaire. The data revealed 81.5% of the respondents work in private organisations, while 18.5% work in public organisations. The questionnaire was mostly administered to quantity surveyors in private firms with only 18.5% from the public sector, implying a fair mix of respondents from both the private and public sector.

Academic Qualification of Respondent

The data revealed 4.6% of the respondents are holders of a Diploma certificate, 36.9% have a Bachelor's degree, 15.4% have a Honors degree, 35.4% have a M.Sc. (Master of Science) degree, and 7.7% have a Ph.D. This implies that most of the respondents are academically fit to take the survey, and their responses can be relied on.

Number of Years in the Construction Industry

29.2% of the respondents have a working experience of within 5 years while the remaining 18.5%, 23.1%, 13.8% and 15.4% have a working experience of 6-10 years, 11-15 years, 16-20 years and above 20 years respectively. This implies that most respondents have experience between 1 – 5 years with only nineteen having above 15 years, but their opinion was equally considered.

Stakeholder Group Belonged To

52.3% of the respondents work with contractors, 20% work within consultancy firms while 9.2% are in the academia. 7.7% work within client organisations, 9.2% work with public institutions/government and 1.5% Sub-contractor. Although majority of the respondents work with contractors, the spread of respondents among the various stakeholder groups implies a balanced perception on carbon tax issues.

Test of Internal Consistency and Scale Reliability

Table 1 Internal Consistency and Reliability of Survey Items

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	No of Items
.897	11

The reliability statistic of the measurement scale for the study is shown in Table 1. The value of 0.897 indicates a good reliability for the study, implying that all the eleven variables in the study are measuring the same construct (Q.S. perception on carbon tax). It further reveals that the variables in the survey are correlated with each other.

Perception on the Implementation of Carbon Tax

The perceptions were coined into eleven (11) variables which are presented in Table 2. It can be seen from Table 2 that all the eleven variables had a mean score above 3.80. This implies an affirmation of agreement with all the perceptions provided to the respondents of the study. From Table 2, "Carbon tax being regressive because of the increased financial burden on construction clients" ranked top with a mean value of 4.40, while "Carbon tax not achieving sufficient buy-in from other stakeholder groups" ranked 2nd with a mean value of 4.28. "Carbon tax increases import dependence of the construction industry", "Carbon taxed products are excessively expensive when compared to their environmentally unfriendly counterparts" and "Carbon tax strain the cost planning of construction projects" ranked 3rd, 4th and 5th with mean values of 4.26, 4.25, and 4.20 respectively. The least ranked variables were

"Carbon pricing increases the cost of energy which invariably strain the construction process" and "Carbon tax discourages clients from investing in the construction sector" both in the 10th position with mean value of 3.88.

Table 2 Perception of Quantity Surveyors on the Use of Carbon Tax in the Construction Industry

Perception	Mean	Rank
Carbon tax is regressive because it increases financial burden on construction clients	4.40	1st
Carbon tax does not achieve sufficient buy-in from other stakeholder groups like industry associates and trade unions.	4.28	2nd
Carbon tax increases import dependence of the construction industry	4.26	3rd
Carbon taxed products are excessively expensive when compared to their environmentally unfriendly counterparts	4.25	4th
Carbon tax strain the cost planning of construction projects	4.20	5th
Carbon tax reduces employment in the construction industry	4.12	6th
Environmental benefits diminish as carbon prices increases	4.12	6th
Carbon pricing creates more resistance than regulation to environmental sustainability	4.06	8th
Carbon tax reduces competitiveness of construction local products vis-à-vis their foreign counterparts	3.97	9th
Carbon pricing increases the cost of energy which invariably strain the Construction process	3.88	10th
Carbon tax discourages clients from investing in the construction sector	3.88	10th

1 represents strongly disagree, 2 represents disagree, 3 represents neutral, 4 represents agree, 5 represents strongly agree

Conclusion

The perception of Quantity Surveyors on the use of carbon tax to achieve environmental sustainability in the construction industry are numerous. However, the regressive nature of carbon tax due to the increased financial burden it imposes on construction clients is the most prevalent. This implies that the imposition of carbon tax on construction materials can increase project cost and invariably increase financial burden on construction client which may impede the growth of the construction industry. Efficient redistribution of the revenues generated through carbon tax, alongside sensitisation on the misconception on the net cost of carbon tax will help improve the perception of Quantity Surveyors. The redistribution of carbon tax may take the form of support schemes like financial support to clients in order to alleviate the hardship imposed on them.

Further research is recommended to investigate the perception of other project professionals such as the Architects, Project Managers and Engineers on carbon tax. This will enable policy makers to know the concern of the construction industry practitioners on the adoption of carbon tax on construction products and how best to improve such discernment. While other stakeholder groups are equally as important as construction professionals as regards workable climate actions within the construction context, an improved perception of the core professionals in the industry will help encourage both the incorporation of environmentally friendly practices within the industry and improved advocacy throughout the built environment ecosystem.

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The Evolving Role of Quantity Surveyors and the Built Environment Professionals

SACQSP2025-10

The Use of Artificial Intelligence in Enhancing Quantity Surveying Practice in South Africa: Towards a Contextualised Framework

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Abstract

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is reshaping professional practices in the built environment, including Quantity Surveying (QS), through automation, predictive analytics, and intelligent decision support. Globally, AI has improved accuracy in cost estimation, risk prediction, and project intelligence, yet its adoption in the South African construction industry remains constrained by technological, educational, and organisational barriers. This study develops a contextualised AI integration framework tailored to enhance QS practice in South Africa by identifying critical barriers, enablers, and strategies for adoption. A qualitative, exploratory approach was adopted through a narrative literature review. Findings highlight that while AI's benefits—speed, precision, and enhanced forecasting—are well established, local challenges persist, including digital illiteracy, fragmented infrastructure, and institutional misalignment. However, opportunities also exist in the form of affordable cloud-based tools, policy momentum around digital transformation, and lessons from international sustainable development agendas that position AI as a catalyst for innovation and professional relevance. Drawing from both global literature and local realities, the paper synthesises key findings from existing studies to identify the enablers, barriers, and contextual factors influencing AI adoption in Quantity Surveying. Based on these insights, it proposes a conceptual framework grounded in three interdependent pillars—technological enablement, human-capital development, and organisational/policy alignment—and offers supporting recommendations to guide practitioners, educators, and policymakers in navigating the digital transition. The study contributes to bridging the gap between emerging digital innovations and South Africa's practical readiness, while setting a foundation for future empirical validation.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Digital Transformation, Integration Framework, South Africa, Quantity Surveying.

Introduction

The construction industry is experiencing rapid digital transformation, with Artificial Intelligence (AI) emerging as a major disruptor. Across the built environment, AI is improving cost estimation, risk forecasting, design optimisation, and project management, delivering measurable gains in productivity and accuracy. For Quantity Surveyors (QS), these tools transform traditional functions such as measurement, cost control, and contract administration, supporting faster and more data-driven decision-making (Afzal, Shafiq & Jassmi, 2021; Ivanova et al., 2023; Sawhney, 2023). However, AI adoption in developing contexts remains limited. In South Africa, uptake has been slow due to fragmented digital infrastructure, skill shortages, and weak institutional and policy support (Osunsanmi, Aigbavboa & Oke, 2018; Akinshipe et al., 2021; Portia, 2023). These barriers highlight that technology alone cannot drive transformation; success depends equally on human capability, organisational culture, and regulatory readiness. Through a comprehensive literature review, this study identifies barriers and enablers of AI adoption and divides them into three interdependent domains: technological enablement, human-capital development, and organisational-policy alignment. The findings of the study contribute to current discourse on digital transformation in QS practice.

Literature Review

The aim of this literature review is to examine existing research on the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) within the Quantity Surveying (QS) profession, with a focus on identifying contextual barriers, enablers, and strategies relevant to South Africa. A narrative literature review approach was adopted, as it allows for the synthesis of diverse conceptual and empirical studies to generate new theoretical insights. Sources were identified through structured searches across major databases (Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar) and professional body publications, using keywords such as "AI in construction," "digital transformation," "quantity surveying," and "South Africa." Articles were included based on relevance to QS practice, AI applications in cost management and project delivery, and studies addressing digital readiness in developing contexts. Exclusion criteria eliminated papers not related to the built environment or lacking methodological clarity. The review is organised thematically into four main sections: (1) digital transformation in the construction industry, (2) applications of AI in Quantity Surveying, (3) barriers to AI adoption, and (4) enablers and opportunities for AI integration in South Africa. This structure provides a logical flow from global insights to contextual realities, forming the foundation for the proposed conceptual framework.

Digital Transformation in the Construction Industry

Digital transformation in construction is widely framed as the strategic integration of digital technologies into organisational processes and business models to improve productivity, collaboration, and value creation (Vial, 2019; Parviainen et al., 2017). Across the sector, tools such as Building Information Modelling (BIM), Artificial Intelligence (AI), cloud platforms and the Internet of Things (IoT) are being deployed to automate measurement, enhance cost and risk forecasting, and support lifecycle decision-making (Afzal, Shafiq & Jassmi, 2021; Zou et al., 2020; Sawhney, 2023). Beyond efficiency, BIM–AI workflows increasingly link digitalisation to sustainability outcomes by enabling optimised material use, energy modelling and whole-life cost assessments (Vinuesa et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2024). In developing contexts, however, the pace and distribution of adoption remain uneven. South African construction faces well-documented constraints—fragmented ICT infrastructure, high implementation costs and limited digital leadership—which contribute to inconsistent digital maturity across firms (Akinshipe et al., 2021; Regona, 2022; Oke, Aigbavboa & Otasowie, 2022). At the same time, recent trends point to improving readiness: affordable cloud-based solutions and Software-as-a-Service models are lowering barriers for SMEs, while national and industry initiatives increasingly recognise BIM and AI as levers for efficiency and resilience (Ade-Ibijola & Okonkwo, 2023; RLB, 2024; Mongane, 2024). Taken together, these dynamics suggest a window of opportunity—but also underscore that technology alone is insufficient without parallel attention to skills, governance and data foundations. This study responds by synthesising the literature to propose a contextualised framework to guide AI integration in South African Quantity Surveying.

Applications of Artificial Intelligence in Quantity Surveying

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has emerged as one of the most transformative technologies in construction, redefining traditional Quantity Surveying (QS) functions through automation, optimisation, and data-driven insights (Zou et al., 2020; Afzal, Shafiq & Jassmi, 2021; Sawhney, 2023). Within QS practice, AI tools increasingly assist with cost estimation, measurement, tender adjudication, and contract administration—areas that have historically been time-intensive and prone to human error (Ivanova et al., 2023). Computer-vision algorithms now enable automated quantity take-offs directly from BIM or 2D drawings, while AI-assisted cost-estimation systems generate real-time pricing updates by combining historical cost data, productivity indices, and market trends (Zou et al., 2020; Ivanova et al., 2023). Natural-language-processing (NLP) systems further enhance contract analysis and claims management by scanning digital contracts, flagging potential risks, and streamlining reporting (Xu et al., 2021; Ade-Ibijola & Okonkwo, 2023). Collectively, these tools elevate QS professionals from manual measurement toward analytical, advisory, and decision-support roles. The convergence of BIM and AI also enables dynamic integration of design and cost data, allowing real-time lifecycle-cost modelling and predictive risk analysis that improve project accuracy and sustainability (Mongane, 2024; Akinshipe et al., 2021). Although global evidence confirms measurable efficiency gains, successful implementation still depends on data readiness, ethical oversight, and contextual fit.

For South Africa, where fragmented systems and variable digital literacy persist, these challenges reinforce the need for a structured and context-specific framework to guide sustainable AI integration in QS practice.

Barriers to AI Adoption in Quantity Surveying: Global and Local Perspectives

While Artificial Intelligence (AI) is widely recognised as a transformative force in construction, its adoption within Quantity Surveying (QS) remains uneven across global regions (Zou et al., 2020; Afzal, Shafiq & Jassmi, 2021; Ivanova et al., 2023). In developed economies, strong digital ecosystems, robust infrastructure, and enabling policy frameworks have accelerated AI implementation in cost estimation, project control, and lifecycle modelling (Sawhney, 2023). By contrast, developing contexts face persistent barriers that slow adoption, particularly where technical, cultural, and institutional readiness remain limited (Akinshipe et al., 2021; Osunsanmi, Aigbavboa & Oke, 2018). Globally, the most common challenges include high implementation costs, data fragmentation, and skill shortages. Many firms still rely on unstructured or siloed project data, making it difficult to train or deploy AI systems effectively (Ivanova et al., 2023; Ade-Ibijola & Okonkwo, 2023). Concerns about cybersecurity, ethical accountability, and job displacement further contribute to resistance among professionals and clients (Kolade & Owoseni, 2022; Ayana et al., 2024). In South Africa, these global barriers intersect with deeper structural realities—such as fragmented ICT infrastructure, unreliable internet access, and uneven digital investment across firms (Regona, 2022). Limited training opportunities and outdated curricula have also left many QS graduates underprepared for digital practice (Mavasa & Terblanche, 2023; Moyo, 2022). Moreover, the absence of national AI standards or policy guidelines creates uncertainty around compliance and ethical implementation (RLB, 2024; Portia, 2023). Together, these factors illustrate that technical innovation alone cannot drive transformation; adoption must be supported by systemic improvements in education, governance, and institutional coordination to avoid deepening inequalities between firms and professionals.

Enablers and Opportunities for AI Integration in South Africa

Despite the challenges outlined above, several developments indicate improving readiness for Artificial Intelligence (AI) adoption within South Africa's construction and Quantity Surveying (QS) sectors. Technologically, the growing affordability and accessibility of cloud computing, AI-enabled software, and mobile applications have lowered barriers to entry, especially for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (Manzoor et al., 2021; Ade-Ibijola & Okonkwo, 2023). Subscription-based and open-source models now allow firms to test digital solutions incrementally without heavy upfront investment. At the policy level, South Africa is gradually aligning with national and global digital-economy strategies that recognise AI and BIM as drivers of efficiency and sustainability (Regona, 2022; RLB, 2024). Government-supported innovation hubs and public–private partnerships are beginning to foster experimentation and knowledge sharing across disciplines (Le Jeune, Ontong & Moghayedi, 2023). Within education, universities are updating QS curricula to include digital construction, BIM, and data-analytics content, while continuous professional development (CPD) programmes help practising surveyors acquire new digital competencies (Mavasa & Terblanche, 2023; Moyo, 2022). These combined initiatives demonstrate growing institutional awareness and an improving technological base. However, they also reveal that enablers alone are insufficient without coordination across technology, human capital, and governance. This reinforces the need for a contextualised framework that aligns these drivers under a unified strategy for sustainable AI integration in South African Quantity Surveying practice.

Theoretical and Conceptual Perspectives on Digital Transformation

Digital transformation in construction is best understood as a socio-technical transition rather than a purely technological shift. It involves the interaction of innovation, institutional frameworks, and human behaviour within evolving professional contexts (Vial, 2019; Parviainen et al., 2017). To interpret this complexity, the study draws on two complementary theoretical lenses: the Multi-Level Perspective (MLP) and the Technology–Organization–Environment (TOE) framework. The MLP explains how innovations such as AI evolve through interactions between niche technologies, established institutional regimes, and wider socio-economic environments (Geels, 2002; Llale, 2021), while the TOE framework highlights how organisational readiness, technological capacity, and environmental pressures jointly influence adoption (Tornatzky & Fleischer, 1990).

Together, these theories provide the foundation for understanding AI adoption in Quantity Surveying as a multi-layered, context-dependent process shaped by infrastructure, education, and policy. Building on these insights, this study develops a contextualised AI integration framework that aligns global best practice with South Africa's institutional and professional realities.

Research methodology and method

The literature indicates that AI integration in Quantity Surveying (QS) is a socially embedded and context-dependent process influenced by technical, organisational, and cultural realities. To interpret these interdependencies, the study adopts a constructivist philosophical stance, recognising that knowledge in this domain is shaped through interaction between global theory and local practice. This perspective supports the use of abductive reasoning, which enables iterative movement between theoretical insights and contextual interpretation to generate practical frameworks. This orientation provides the philosophical bridge between the literature review and the methodological approach outlined below. The research strategy is qualitative and exploratory, focusing on conceptual framework development. Exploratory research is justified because AI integration in QS remains emergent, and the study seeks to clarify meanings, identify patterns, and propose structured responses to an under-researched problem (Stebbins, 2001; Yin, 2018). Conceptual framework development enables synthesis of existing knowledge into structured models that can later be empirically validated (Jabareen, 2009; Eisenhardt, 1989). Data were collected through a narrative literature review, which allows a structured yet flexible synthesis of diverse sources, including academic studies and industry reports (Green, Johnson & Adams, 2006; Ferrari, 2015). Searches across Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar were complemented by grey literature such as professional body reports and policy documents to ensure breadth and relevance (Booth, Sutton & Papaioannou, 2016).

The development of the contextualised AI integration framework followed an iterative, multi-stage process to ensure both academic rigour and practical relevance. The process began with an environmental scan and literature mapping to identify global and local trends in AI adoption within construction and QS (Booth, Sutton & Papaioannou, 2016; Green, Johnson & Adams, 2006). Keyword searches such as “AI in construction,” “digital transformation in QS,” and “technology adoption in South Africa” enhanced transparency and replicability (Kitchenham & Charters, 2007). Key insights from the literature were then coded thematically into three domains—technological enablers, human-capital readiness, and institutional/policy alignment—allowing identification of patterns and contradictions across studies (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Thomas & Harden, 2008). These themes were subsequently organised into a conceptual structure informed by the Technology–Organization–Environment (TOE) and Multi-Level Perspective (MLP) frameworks, which view digital transformation as a socio-technical transition shaped by interactions between technology, organisations, and their environments (Tornatzky & Fleischer, 1990; Geels, 2002; Llale, 2021). The emerging framework was then calibrated to the South African context by accounting for infrastructural gaps, SME constraints, and educational misalignments (Fabiyi, 2024; Mienye, Sun & Ileberi, 2024). Finally, through iterative refinement, the framework evolved into three interdependent pillars—technological enablement, human-capital development, and organisational/policy alignment—forming the foundation for the proposed contextualised model (Eisenhardt, 1989; Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Webster & Watson, 2002).

Contextualised AI Integration Framework

Building on the findings of the narrative literature review, this study proposes a Contextualised Artificial Intelligence (AI) Integration Framework for Quantity Surveying (QS) in South Africa. The framework synthesises global insights and local realities identified in the thematic analysis and is designed to guide AI implementation in practice. It comprises three interdependent pillars—technological enablement, human-capital development, and organisational/policy alignment—each representing a distinct dimension of readiness identified through the literature. Cross-cutting enablers such as change management, localisation, and ethical awareness reinforce interaction among the pillars to ensure sustainability and context-specific adaptability. Similar multi-dimensional frameworks have been applied successfully in construction-innovation research to capture the interplay between technology, people, and institutions (Jabareen, 2009; Eisenhardt, 1989; Oke, Aigbavboa & Otasowie, 2022).

The first pillar, technological enablement, refers to the digital infrastructure, tools, and systems necessary to apply AI effectively in QS. It encompasses the adoption of AI-enabled software for cost estimating, digital Bills of Quantities (BoQs), claims modelling, and lifecycle forecasting (Ivanova et al., 2023; Sawhney, 2023; Afzal, Shafiq & Jassmi, 2021). These systems rely on robust data pipelines—structured cost libraries, digitised archives, and interoperable databases—that can interface with BIM and enterprise resource planning (ERP) platforms (Zou et al., 2020; Nguyen Van & Nguyen Quoc, 2021). For example, a QS firm using an AI-based cost-estimation tool can only obtain reliable results if historic project data are cleaned, classified, and consistently coded for reuse. Data readiness therefore

becomes the foundation of AI implementation. Without structured datasets and interoperable systems, adoption remains limited to isolated pilot applications (Osunsanmi, Aigbavboa & Oke, 2018; Regona, 2022). Emerging-market studies further highlight that affordable cloud-based platforms and subscription-driven Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) models have reduced entry barriers, enabling SMEs to adopt AI workflows without large capital investment (Manzoor et al., 2021; Mongane, 2024; Parsafard et al., 2024). These developments show that technological enablement is not merely about access to software, but about building a data and systems environment capable of sustaining intelligent, context-specific automation. In South Africa, this process is constrained by uneven digital infrastructure, fragmented project data, and limited interoperability between platforms used by QS firms. Many small and medium-sized enterprises still rely on manual estimating tools or legacy systems lacking integration with BIM and AI applications. Addressing these gaps requires scalable, low-cost cloud-based solutions and shared digital repositories that allow gradual transition toward automation. This highlights why the proposed framework emphasises localised technological strategies aligned with South Africa's infrastructural and institutional realities.

The second pillar, human-capital development, focuses on the skills, competencies, and professional mindsets required for sustainable AI integration in QS. It involves three tiers of capability: (i) digital literacy—a functional understanding of AI concepts and data ethics; (ii) data-analytics competence, including cost simulation, statistical modelling, and data visualisation; and (iii) interpretive intelligence—the ability to translate AI outputs into sound professional judgements (Mavasa & Terblanche, 2023; Moyo, 2022; Ivanova et al., 2023). These skills are developed through both formal education and in-service training. South African universities have begun embedding BIM and introductory AI content into QS curricula, often using project-based learning to expose students to digital workflows (Mavasa & Terblanche, 2023; Llale, 2021). Within industry, firms are introducing structured CPD programmes and micro-credentials that teach data-driven cost estimation, automated measurement, and AI-assisted claims analysis (Oke, Aigbavboa & Otasowie, 2022; Stonehaven, 2025). For example, a professional workshop on AI-enabled cost modelling allows practitioners to interpret algorithmic estimates alongside traditional methods, reinforcing human oversight and accountability. Literature consistently warns that without targeted investment in human capability, technological adoption becomes superficial and fails to yield productivity gains (Akinshipe et al., 2021; Le Jeune, Ontong & Moghayedi, 2023). Reforming QS education and lifelong learning pathways is therefore essential to cultivate a workforce that can critically engage with AI tools rather than passively operate them. This pillar positions human expertise as the decisive enabler that transforms digital technologies into practical, value-adding tools within QS practice.

The third pillar, organisational and policy alignment, addresses the institutional, organisational, and regulatory structures that enable or constrain AI adoption in QS. Effective integration requires both internal leadership commitment and external policy support. Within firms, leadership plays a decisive role in championing digital pilots, developing implementation roadmaps, allocating resources, and cultivating a culture that rewards innovation (Le Jeune, Ontong & Moghayedi, 2023; Akinshipe et al., 2021; Vial, 2019). QS consultancies that appoint "digital champions" or establish internal task teams to manage BIM–AI initiatives demonstrate faster adoption and stronger staff engagement. At the policy and regulatory level, clear digital standards, ethical guidelines, and implementation protocols are essential for reducing uncertainty and fostering confidence across the industry (RLB, 2024; Ayana et al., 2024; Kolade & Owoseni, 2022). National-level alignment—such as integrating AI in built-environment professional policies or establishing data-governance frameworks—can create stable conditions that encourage private-sector investment. Conversely, the absence of such alignment often leads to hesitation among firms to invest in unregulated technologies (Portia, 2023; Regona, 2022). In resource-constrained environments like South Africa, public–private partnerships (PPPs), innovation hubs, and industry–academia collaborations act as catalysts for digital diffusion. These initiatives provide shared platforms for piloting technologies, exchanging knowledge, and co-developing localised AI solutions (Ade-Ibijola & Okonkwo, 2023; Fabiyi, 2024; Domingo et al., 2024).

Strengthening coordination between professional councils, government departments, and higher-education institutions will therefore accelerate ecosystem-level maturity. Ultimately, this pillar underscores that AI adoption is not merely a technical process but also a governance and leadership challenge. When organisational vision and policy direction are aligned, technological and human enablers gain traction—creating an environment where digital innovation can be sustained and scaled within QS practice.

Figure 1 below presents the contextualised conceptual framework, synthesised from the literature and developed to guide AI integration in QS practice within the South African construction industry. It draws from digital-transformation models (Oke, Aigbavboa & Otasowie, 2022), AI adoption frameworks (Meta Tjebane, Musonda & Okoro, 2025), and scenario-planning research in QS by Llale (2021). The framework consists of three interdependent domains—technological enablement, human-capital development, and organisational/policy alignment—all rooted in local context and driven by continuous feedback and change management. It reflects the finding that AI integration is not linear but cyclical, requiring institutional support, professional readiness, and technological infrastructure to interact iteratively.

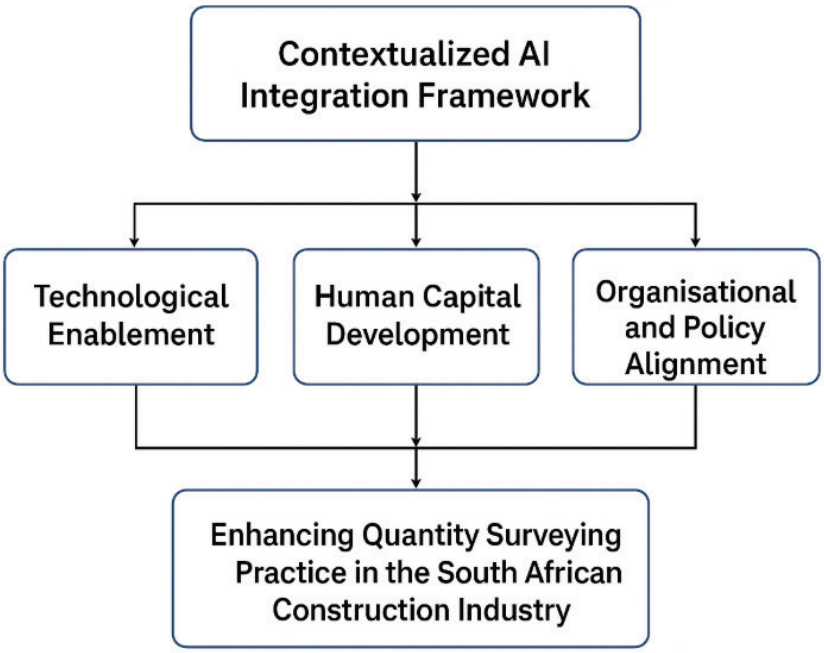

Figure 1 Conceptual Framework for AI Integration in Quantity Surveying

Discussion: Interpretation of the Contextualised AI Framework

The contextualised AI framework integrates three interdependent dimensions—technological enablement, human-capital development, and organisational/policy alignment—to provide a systemic view of AI adoption in Quantity Surveying (QS) practice. It emphasises that technological innovation alone is insufficient without parallel investment in digital skills and supportive policy structures. The framework bridges the gap between global models of digital transformation and South Africa's infrastructural, educational, and institutional realities, offering a roadmap for sustainable implementation. Technological enablement establishes the data and digital infrastructure required for automation; human-capital development ensures professionals possess the competencies and ethical literacy to interpret AI outputs responsibly; and organisational/policy alignment promotes leadership, regulation, and long-term implementation.

Collectively, these pillars reinforce one another, confirming that sustainable AI adoption in South Africa's QS profession depends not only on technology but also on continuous human development and clear governance—a perspective particularly critical for emerging economies.

Contextual Sensitivity and Localisation

A defining strength of the proposed framework lies in its localisation to South Africa's socio-technical context. Unlike many global AI-adoption models that assume high digital maturity, this framework explicitly recognises the structural constraints of the South African construction environment—uneven internet access, fragmented ICT systems, and under-resourced tertiary institutions (Akinshipe et al., 2021; Fabiyi, 2024; Mienye, Sun & Ileberi, 2024). These realities directly influence the pace and feasibility of AI implementation in QS. The framework primarily operates at the meso level, linking

organisational practice with professional and institutional structures. However, it also interfaces with the micro level through firm-based adoption of AI tools and the macro level through alignment with national digital policies. This multi-level positioning ensures that the framework remains both practical for implementation and relevant for broader policy and educational reform. Localisation within the framework involves adapting each pillar to national realities. Under technological enablement, strategies should prioritise scalable cloud-based solutions and incremental digitisation of cost libraries for firms with limited resources. For human-capital development, interventions must embed AI and digital-construction modules in university curricula and CPD programmes, particularly beyond metropolitan centres (Mavasa & Terblanche, 2023; Moyo, 2022). Within organisational and policy alignment, localisation requires coordinated initiatives between professional councils, the Department of Public Works, and higher-education institutions to establish clear standards and ethical frameworks (RLB, 2024; Portia, 2023). Embedding these contextual considerations ensures that AI adoption is not a one-size-fits-all process but a responsive, staged transition grounded in South African realities (Osunsanmi et al., 2018; Regona, 2022; Llale, 2021). This interpretation aligns with socio-technical theory and the Multi-Level Perspective (MLP), which conceptualise transformation as the interaction between technological innovation, institutional frameworks, and societal pressures (Geels, 2002; Llale, 2021; Vial, 2019). By integrating education, infrastructure, and policy factors, the framework enhances both its theoretical robustness and its practical applicability, positioning it as a realistic pathway for guiding digital transformation in the South African QS profession

Conceptualisation to Implementation

Although this study is conceptual, the framework identifies clear entry points for implementation across the South African QS ecosystem. Each stakeholder group—firms, universities, and policymakers—plays a distinct role in operationalising the framework's three pillars. For firms, it provides a roadmap for piloting AI applications in high-value functions such as cost estimation, claims management, and tender analysis, where measurable efficiency and accuracy gains have been documented (Ivanova et al., 2023; Afzal, Shafiq & Jassmi, 2021). Implementation may begin with small-scale pilots integrating AI-assisted quantity take-offs with existing BIM workflows, supported by structured data libraries and staff training. Such incremental adoption reduces risk while building capability and confidence. For universities and training institutions, the framework encourages curriculum reform that embeds digital-construction modules, data analytics, and AI fundamentals within QS programmes (Mavasa & Terblanche, 2023; Moyo, 2022; Llale, 2021). Industry-linked projects and micro-credential courses should expose students to real-world digital platforms, ensuring that graduates gain both conceptual understanding and applied digital literacy. For policymakers and professional bodies, implementation involves establishing clear digital standards, ethical guidelines, and incentives to support innovation. Examples include grant funding or tax incentives for SMEs adopting AI-based systems and accreditation of AI-related CPD programmes (RLB, 2024; Ade-Ibijola & Okonkwo, 2023). Aligning public-sector procurement policies with digital-transformation goals can further accelerate industry-wide adoption. Collectively, these pathways reaffirm the iterative and systemic nature of digital transformation: firm-level adoption must be matched by educational reform and supported by enabling policy environments (Jabareen, 2009; Eisenhardt, 1989; Dubois & Gadde, 2002). Coordinated action across these domains will enable sustainable, scalable, and inclusive AI integration in the Quantity Surveying profession.

Framework Limitations and Future Research

As a conceptual study, this research is limited by the absence of empirical validation. The proposed framework, developed from secondary literature, should be tested in real-world QS and construction settings to assess its practicality and relevance. Given the rapid evolution of AI technologies, the model will require periodic updates to reflect emerging digital practices and policy changes (Stonehaven, 2025; Vinuesa et al., 2020). Future studies could apply Delphi panels, expert interviews, or comparative case analyses to refine the framework's pillars and evaluate its effectiveness across organisational contexts, ensuring it remains adaptable and evidence-based within South Africa's evolving construction environment.

Conclusion

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is reshaping global construction practice, with significant implications for the Quantity Surveying (QS) profession. This study highlighted AI's potential to enhance cost estimation,

forecasting, and contract administration while recognising the persistent challenges that limit its adoption in South Africa. These include inadequate digital infrastructure, low digital literacy, high implementation costs, and fragmented institutional support. Educational programmes also remain misaligned with industry needs, producing graduates who are often unprepared for digital practice. Without targeted and coordinated intervention, AI adoption in QS will continue to benefit only well-resourced firms, deepening professional inequalities. This study developed a contextualised AI integration framework tailored to South Africa's socio-technical conditions. The framework comprises three interdependent pillars—technological enablement, human-capital development, and organisational/policy alignment—that together provide a structured roadmap for sustainable AI adoption in Quantity Surveying practice. The findings emphasise that successful implementation requires alignment between people, technology, and governance. Practically, the framework supports collaboration among firms, universities, and policymakers to strengthen digital capacity and ensure that South Africa's QS profession remains relevant and competitive in the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

Recommendations

To advance AI integration in Quantity Surveying, firms should pilot AI tools in focused functions such as cost estimation and claims management while improving data-management systems. Universities should embed AI, BIM, and data analytics in QS curricula and expand continuous professional development (CPD) opportunities. Policymakers should establish clear digital standards, targeted incentives, and collaborative partnerships that support adoption across firms, including SMEs. Future research should empirically validate the framework and examine its ethical and professional implications.

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SACQSP2025-12

Challenges Faced by Quantity Surveying Graduates at the Start of Their Careers

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Abstract

The transition from university to professional practice is a critical challenge for quantity surveying (QS) graduates, often exposing gaps between theoretical knowledge and real-world industry demands. This study investigates the challenges South African QS graduates face as they enter the profession and explores strategies to improve employability, a pressing concern given the impact on project performance and industry efficiency. A qualitative interpretivist approach was employed, using semi-structured interviews with eight recently graduated QSs, selected through purposive and snowball sampling. The small sample size limits generalisability and positions this study as an exploratory study. Data were recorded, transcribed, and analysed using a six-step thematic analysis (Cernasev & Axon, 2023), supported by an audit trail. Ethical protocols were followed, ensuring voluntary participation and anonymity. The following six themes emerged from the data, providing a comprehensive view of graduates' experiences: (i) knowledge and curriculum gaps between academia and practice; (ii) soft skills and interpersonal challenges; (iii) work environment and workplace culture; (iv) skill development and mentorship; (v) emotional and psychological impact; and (vi) work-life balance and career development. Findings indicate that while graduates possess strong theoretical foundations, they often lack practical, interpersonal, and professional skills required for complex projects. The results highlight the need for curricula that integrate hands-on experience, mentorship, and active engagement with industry. This study offers actionable insights for higher education institutions, industry stakeholders, and policymakers to enhance graduate preparedness, strengthen professional competencies, and align QS education with the evolving demands of the construction industry.

Keywords: Employability, Graduate Transition, Quantity Surveying Graduates, Skills Gap, Workplace Readiness.

Introduction

The transition from academia to professional practice represents a critical and often challenging period for graduates, marked by the need to adapt rapidly to workplace demands (Monteiro et al., 2021). For many, this phase is characterised by uncertainty, stress, and a sense of inadequacy, as graduates attempt to apply theoretical knowledge in practical, real-world contexts. Studies indicate that in South Africa, a notable proportion of quantity surveying (QS) graduates struggle to meet the expectations of employers, resulting in additional workplace training and mentorship programs to bridge gaps that could have been addressed during formal education (Mavasa & Terblanche, 2023). Such challenges not only hinder individual professional development but may also compromise organisational efficiency and the broader quality of construction projects, highlighting the critical importance of adequately preparing graduates for the workforce.

Employability theory provides a useful lens for understanding this transition, emphasising that the capacity to gain and maintain employment is not solely dependent on academic knowledge, but also on the development of skills, attributes, and personal competencies that align with industry requirements (Yorke & Knight, 2004; Knight & Yorke, 2003; Harvey, 2001). From this perspective, the gap between university curricula and workplace expectations can be understood as a misalignment between the competencies fostered during higher education and those demanded in professional practice. Previous studies have explored QS graduate competencies in international contexts, including Sri Lanka (Karunasena et al., 2015; Yogeshwaran et al., 2014) and Malaysia (Ilmi et al., 2021; Tokijan & Aziz, 2023). However, these investigations either lack relevance to the South African

context or fail to capture graduates' first-hand perspectives on the challenges encountered when entering the profession.

Addressing this gap is essential, as inadequate preparation of graduates carries substantial consequences. If unaddressed, these deficiencies may lead to prolonged adjustment periods, reduced productivity, compromised project outcomes, and diminished graduate confidence—ultimately affecting the overall quality and competitiveness of the South African construction industry. Therefore, it is imperative to examine these challenges through the lens of graduates themselves, identifying both the knowledge and skill deficits and the strategies that could enhance employability.

This study aims to explore the challenges faced by QS graduates in South Africa during the initial stages of their professional careers and to investigate potential strategies to mitigate these challenges. Specifically, the objectives are: (i) to identify the challenges that QS graduates experience when transitioning from academia to professional practice, and (ii) to provide recommendations on interventions, training, or curriculum adjustments that could enhance their employability and readiness for industry demands. By situating the study within the framework of employability theory, this research seeks to provide actionable insights for higher education institutions, employers, and policymakers to strengthen graduate preparedness and professional competency in the construction sector.

Literature Review: Employability and Competency Skills of Quantity Surveyors

Employability Skills of Quantity Surveyors

Employability research consistently highlights that QS employers prioritise generic skills over narrow technical competencies. Karunasena et al. (2015), surveying 122 QS graduates across Sri Lanka, the Gulf, the UK, and Australia, identified communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and adaptability as core employability skills. These findings underscore the global nature of the employability gap, where deficiencies in transferable skills undermine graduate competitiveness across markets. Building on this, Mustaffa and Husain (2024) conducted a systematic literature review of QS employability studies and distilled key ingredients spanning communication, lifelong learning, adaptability, teamwork, and professional ethics. Their review frames employability as multi-dimensional, stressing that universities must integrate both cognitive and non-cognitive skills to prepare graduates for volatile labour markets.

Context-specific studies reveal variations in emphasis. In Malaysia, Ilmi et al. (2021), through a survey of 41 QS practitioners, reported employer dissatisfaction with graduates' practical readiness, particularly measurement and construction knowledge. Tokijan and Aziz (2023), surveying 70 QS professionals, similarly found persistent gaps in soft skills and adaptability. Complementing these findings, Mustapa et al. (2022), drawing on responses from QS consultancy firms in Selangor ($n \approx 100$), showed how the COVID-19 pandemic amplified employer demand for resilience, flexibility, and ICT literacy, with soft skills (adaptability, positive attitude) rated more highly than technical skills. Similarly, Wong, Lim and Azizi (2024), in a study of approximately 200 Generation Z QS graduates across Malaysian universities, highlighted time management, teamwork, ethics, and digital competence as central to employability. These studies together show that while soft skills dominate globally, contextual disruptions such as pandemics and generational change alter the specific constellation of skills employers prioritise. In Nigeria, Ahmadu et al. (2023), based on survey data from 108 QS consultancy firms, identified industry interaction, self-motivation, and entrepreneurial skills as the most influential for employability, alongside technical competence. Their findings expand the debate by showing that employability is not only about individual graduate attributes but also about the extent of industry–graduate engagement.

Technical Competencies of Quantity Surveyors

Beyond employability, technical competencies remain vital. Yogeshwaran et al. (2014), analysing competency frameworks from professional bodies (IQSSL, RICS, AIQS, PAQS), mapped QS competencies across six domains: construction economics, management, technology, law, IT, and business administration. Yet gaps between theoretical training and workplace mastery persist. Similarly, Ilmi et al. (2021), in their survey of 41 practitioners, emphasised employer concern that while curricula cover technical content, graduates often lack the practical mastery to apply these competencies effectively.

South African Context

South African studies echo these themes. Haupt and Armoed (2017), interviewing 10 QS employers, found that new QS graduates lack a balanced combination of theoretical, practical, and experiential knowledge. Employers valued passion and practical readiness but reported that graduates are ill-prepared for industry realities. Mavasa and Terblanche (2023), in a study of QS firms, similarly stressed the integration of practical and soft skills into QS curricula to enhance employability. Compared with international evidence, South African graduates face similar shortcomings (weaknesses in soft skills, limited experiential exposure, and inadequate digital readiness), but there is less research capturing graduates lived experiences of these transitions.

Knowledge Gap and Relevance to Current Study

Taken together, international and regional evidence reveals three consistent themes: (i) employability hinges more on soft and transferable skills than on technical knowledge alone (Karunasena et al., 2015; Mustaffa & Husain, 2024; Mustapa et al., 2022; Wong et al., 2024); (ii) contextual factors such as pandemics, labour market shifts, and generational differences shape the specific skills in demand (Ilmi et al., 2021; Ahmadu et al., 2023); and (iii) a persistent gap exists between university curricula and workplace expectations (Haupt & Armoed, 2017; Mavasa & Terblanche, 2023).

However, while large-scale surveys and systematic reviews offer breadth, they often rely on quantitative methods and employer perspectives. There remains limited understanding of QS graduates' own experiences of transitioning into practice, particularly in the South African context. The present study seeks to address this gap by foregrounding graduates' narratives of employability and competency development, thereby offering nuanced insights for curriculum reform and professional readiness.

Research methodology and method

This study aimed to explore the challenges faced by recently graduated quantity surveyors (QS) as they entered professional practice in South Africa. To gain rich, in-depth insights into participants lived experiences, a qualitative research approach was adopted, guided by an interpretivist philosophy. This approach was chosen because it allows for a nuanced understanding of complex social phenomena, capturing the subjective realities and perspectives of graduates, insights that cannot be adequately measured through quantitative methods.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which provided a flexible framework for participants to share detailed experiences while allowing the researcher to probe emerging issues for greater depth and clarity. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants with relevant experiences, supplemented by snowball sampling to reach a total of eight respondents. Participants represented a range of recent graduates working in different sectors and organizations within the South African construction industry. The small sample size positions this research as exploratory in nature.

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. The transcriptions were analyzed using thematic analysis as outlined by Cernasev and Axon (2023), following six systematic steps: familiarisation with the data; initial coding; generating themes; ensuring validity and reliability of themes; defining and naming themes; and interpreting and reporting findings. An audit trail was maintained throughout the research process to ensure transparency, traceability, and rigor in data analysis. This included detailed records of coding decisions, theme development, and analytical memos, enhancing the trustworthiness of the study. Ethical considerations were strictly observed. Ethical clearance was obtained from the university, and all research protocols were followed. Participation was voluntary, and participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality throughout the study.

Despite these measures, some limitations of the study should be acknowledged. The sample size was small, consisting of only eight participants, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, participants were drawn from a limited geographic and professional context, which may not fully capture the experiences of all QS graduates across South Africa. Finally, as with all qualitative research, the findings are influenced by the interpretations of the researcher, though the use of an audit trail and thematic analysis techniques mitigates potential bias.

Research results

The data analysis section of this study explores the challenges faced by Quantity Surveying graduates as they transition from academic institutions to the workplace. The findings are based on a thematic analysis of responses from recent graduates, providing insight into the gaps in knowledge, skills, and expectations encountered during this crucial period of career development. The analysis highlights both the personal and professional difficulties experienced, as well as the areas in which academic programs could improve to better prepare students for the demands of the industry.

The following six themes emerged from the data, which provide a comprehensive view of the experiences of graduates: Knowledge and curriculum gaps between academia and practice; soft skills and interpersonal challenges; work environment and workplace culture; skill development and mentorship; emotional and psychological impact; work-life balance and career development. Figure 1 maps the themes and sub-themes discussed below.

Knowledge and Curriculum Gaps Between Academia and Practice

Graduates highlighted a significant gap between the theoretical knowledge acquired at academic institutions and its practical application in the workplace. While their studies provided a solid foundation in quantity surveying theory, many participants reported that they lacked the hands-on experience required to perform effectively in real-world settings. This echoes findings from Haupt and Armoed (2017), who also reported that South African QS graduates were underprepared for professional realities. Theoretical training predominantly focused on residential projects, leaving graduates underprepared for the complexities of commercial and large-scale developments. This gap encompassed diverse areas, including construction management, contract preparation, feasibility studies, cost control, and pricing, which are critical in professional practice.

In addition to knowledge gaps, several shortcomings in the academic curriculum were identified as contributing to the challenges faced by graduates. Participants indicated that their training did not adequately cover the legal aspects of the profession, such as contract law and dispute resolution, which are essential in navigating professional responsibilities. Similarly, financial management, budgeting, and cost control received insufficient attention, despite being central to the role of a quantity surveyor in the workplace.

The curriculum's strong focus on residential projects further exacerbated the disconnect, as graduates were not exposed to the complexities inherent in larger commercial developments, including advanced feasibility studies and project management requirements. There was also a notable disparity in the use of technology: academic training emphasized manual processes, whereas contemporary professional practice relies heavily on digital tools for estimating, costing, and project management. Ilmi et al. (2021) also highlighted this misalignment in Malaysia, where employers expressed dissatisfaction with graduates' readiness in digital and practical applications.

Beyond technical skills, graduates reported that soft skills such as communication, leadership, and time management were not adequately developed during their academic training. As a result, they often felt unprepared to navigate the fast-paced, high-pressure environments they encountered upon entering the workforce. Collectively, these gaps in both knowledge and curriculum highlight the need for greater integration of practical training, industry-relevant projects, and professional skills development within quantity surveying education.

The findings showed that graduates struggled to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world contexts, particularly in larger commercial projects. This reflects a misalignment between the competencies fostered during higher education and those demanded by the workplace. According to Yorke and Knight (2004), employability is not just about knowledge, but the development of transferable skills and attributes that enable graduates to adapt to work environments. The observed gaps suggest that universities need to ensure curricula foster both knowledge and applied skills, supporting employability. The lack of practical application mirrors Yorke and Knight's (2004) notion that employability is dependent on both knowledge and the ability to use that knowledge effectively in diverse work contexts. This also aligns with Yogeshwaran et al. (2014), who mapped QS competencies and found that practical mastery was often lacking despite curriculum coverage.

Soft Skills and Interpersonal Challenges

Soft skills were one of the key areas that graduates felt were underdeveloped during their academic training. Communication, both verbal and written, was a critical issue for many. Graduates struggled to communicate clearly with architects, clients, and other professionals, leading to misunderstandings and mistakes in project management. Similar challenges have been reported in Sri Lanka and Nigeria, where communication and teamwork were consistently identified as the most critical employability skills (Karunasena et al., 2015; Ahmadu et al., 2023). In particular, they found that they lacked the writing skills necessary for drafting contracts, reports, and professional emails, which are vital for quantity surveyors.

Additionally, graduates faced challenges in working within teams, often struggling to collaborate effectively with engineers, architects, and contractors. The importance of developing teamwork skills, managing professional relationships, and learning how to navigate office dynamics was emphasized. Leadership skills were also underdeveloped, with some graduates expressing imposter syndrome when placed in positions of responsibility. They lacked confidence in their abilities, which affected their performance and ability to assert their expertise.

Networking and building relationships was another area graduates highlighted. Many mentioned that developing professional relationships with colleagues, mentors, and industry professionals would have helped ease the transition into the workplace. However, they often found these networks lacking, leading to feelings of isolation and confusion.

Graduates reported insufficient preparation in communication, leadership, and time management, which negatively affected their workplace integration. Employability theory emphasises personal attributes and competencies, including professional skills, as critical components of employability (Knight & Yorke, 2003; Harvey, 2001). The need for stronger soft skills aligns with Mustaffa and Husain's (2024) review, which underscored communication, adaptability, and teamwork as universal employability requirements. Enhancing these soft skills in academic programs can reduce transition challenges and improve graduates' confidence. The need for stronger soft skills aligns with Knight and Yorke (2003), who argue that employability includes the development of professional attributes, not only technical knowledge.

Work Environment and Workplace Culture

The transition from university to the workplace was marked by a sharp contrast in work culture. Graduates found it difficult to adjust to the formal, structured environment of the office, especially when compared to the more relaxed atmosphere of university. Professional expectations around dress codes, office hierarchies, and behavior were unfamiliar and overwhelming for many. Graduates had to quickly adapt to working in a professional setting where punctuality, adherence to deadlines, and office conduct were critical.

Furthermore, graduates had to navigate the complexities of office politics and diverse work environments. They were unprepared for the range of cultural, religious, and gender dynamics they encountered in the workplace. In many instances, respondents mentioned the challenge of balancing respect for diversity with professional communication to avoid offending colleagues. They also noted the difficulty of working in teams with varying age groups and backgrounds, which contributed to interpersonal challenges. This finding aligns with Karunasena et al. (2015), who identified teamwork and interpersonal communication as critical employability skills often underdeveloped in QS education.

Graduates also highlighted the immense pressure they faced to meet deadlines. Unlike university, where extensions were often available, workplace deadlines were rigid and missing them could have significant consequences. The high workload and expectation for long hours added stress to the already challenging transition, making it difficult to achieve a work-life balance. Similar pressures were emphasised by Mustapa et al. (2022), who reported that resilience and flexibility became top-rated skills for QS employability during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Skill Development and Mentorship

A critical theme that emerged was the lack of sufficient mentorship in the workplace. Some graduates reported that their mentors were either absent or disengaged, which left them to navigate the

workplace challenges on their own. In contrast, others who had supportive mentors noted that their growth was significantly accelerated through guidance and feedback. Graduates emphasized the importance of having mentors who not only answered questions but also engaged them in deeper learning and skill development.

In terms of practical skill development, many respondents noted that they had to learn key aspects of the job on the fly. This included contract administration, construction management, and software usage. While academic training focused more on theory, the workplace required hands-on experience and the ability to adapt quickly. Graduates found themselves needing to learn tasks such as managing large-scale budgets, estimating costs, and measuring quantities without the foundation provided by academic institutions. This resonates with Yogeshwaran et al. (2014), who found that although QS curricula formally cover technical competencies, graduates still lack practical mastery when transitioning to industry.

The lack of peer support was another issue, with some graduates feeling isolated and unsure where to turn for help. In contrast, those who had good relationships with their colleagues were able to rely on others for advice and assistance.

Graduates relied heavily on workplace mentorship to bridge skill gaps, indicating that formal education alone did not fully prepare them. The reliance on mentorship programs reflects Yorke and Knight's (2004) view that employability encompasses the ability to adapt and engage in continuous learning. It also echoes Mavasa and Terblanche (2023), who emphasised that employability in South Africa depends on combining soft skills, mentorship, and practical exposure.

Emotional and Psychological Impact

The transition from university to the workplace also had a significant emotional and psychological impact on graduates. Many struggled with imposter syndrome, particularly when given significant responsibilities despite their inexperience. Graduates found it challenging to reconcile their perceived lack of knowledge with the expectations placed on them by employers.

The pressure to perform, meet deadlines, and handle high-stakes financial transactions led to feelings of anxiety, stress, and depression. Some respondents described how the intense pressure to perform, coupled with the fear of making mistakes, affected their mental health. In some cases, graduates reported feeling overwhelmed to the point where it affected their sleep and overall well-being. The fear of failure, combined with a lack of confidence in their skills, contributed to these emotional challenges. These findings parallel those of Wong et al. (2024), who noted that Generation Z QS graduates reported high stress linked to workload expectations and time management issues.

Some graduates also noted how long it took to build the confidence needed to perform tasks efficiently. The lack of feedback and support in some workplaces led to feelings of insecurity and stress, making it more difficult to improve and develop their skills.

Work-Life Balance and Career Development

Graduates found it difficult to strike a balance between their professional and personal lives. The demands of the workplace, long hours, and intense pressure left little room for personal time. Many respondents spoke of sacrificing their free time initially to meet the expectations of their employers but eventually realized that maintaining a healthy work-life balance was crucial to avoid burnout. This reflects Mustapa et al. (2022), who found that during the pandemic, QS employers increasingly valued graduates who could balance adaptability with sustainable work practices.

In terms of career development, many graduates felt that they were not given enough insight into the diverse career paths available within the quantity surveying profession. The focus in academic institutions was often limited to traditional roles, leaving graduates unaware of other opportunities in areas such as banking, consulting, or project management. Exposure to different career pathways was seen as a potential improvement to their academic training. Ahmadu et al. (2023) similarly emphasised entrepreneurial skills and industry engagement as critical in expanding career options for QS graduates.

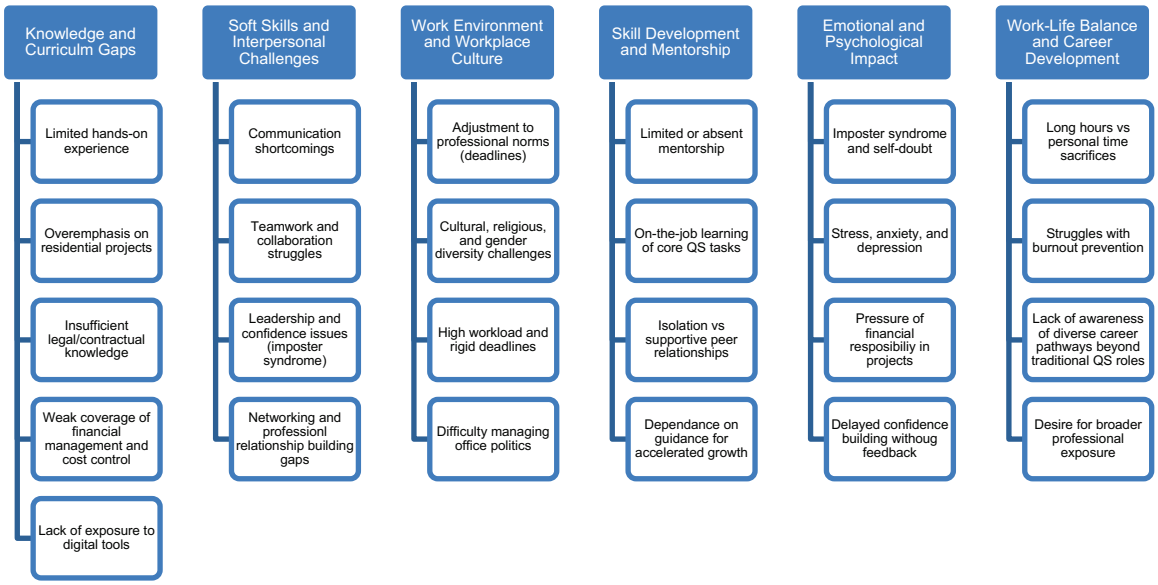

Figure 1 Thematic map

Discussion

The findings of this study provide a nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by South African Quantity Surveying (QS) graduates during their transition from academia to professional practice. These challenges both support and extend the employability framework proposed by Yorke and Knight (2004), underscoring the importance of integrating technical competence, professional skills, and adaptability into higher education curricula to improve graduates' readiness for the workforce.

The transition from the relatively informal university environment to the structured and hierarchical workplace emerged as a significant challenge. At university, a 50% pass rate allows students to progress without full mastery of technical skills, and enforcement of deadlines is often lax. In contrast, the professional environment demands precision, adherence to deadlines with potential contractual repercussions, consistent attendance, compliance with office protocols, dress codes, and professional hierarchies, as well as an understanding of office politics. Graduates were confronted with the need to rapidly internalize these expectations while simultaneously learning to manage work-life balance and cultivate professional relationships. Additionally, gender disparities within the QS profession posed further challenges for female graduates.

A prominent finding was the gap between theoretical knowledge acquired at university and practical application in the workplace. Graduates frequently struggled with technical tasks such as contract administration, measurement, valuations, pricing, cost reporting, and building material calculations, confirming previous observations by Ilmi et al. (2021). While these competencies are included in the curriculum, the combination of limited depth in instruction and the ability to pass courses without full mastery contributes to skill deficits. This aligns with the employability framework, which emphasizes not only knowledge acquisition but also the development of demonstrable competencies (Yorke & Knight, 2004; Harvey, 2001; Knight & Yorke, 2003).

Soft skills represented an equally significant challenge. Graduates reported difficulties in communication, teamwork, negotiation, conflict resolution, emotional regulation, ethical decision-making, and interpersonal interactions. Deficits in these areas negatively impacted confidence, and in some cases, contributed to emotional strain or depressive symptoms. These findings corroborate the literature indicating that employers place high value on soft skills in recruitment and career progression (Zaini et al., 2022; Moyo et al., 2023).

Participants demonstrated adaptive strategies to mitigate these challenges, including seeking mentorship, prioritizing work focus, gradually increasing task complexity to build confidence, optimizing work-life balance through hobbies, and engaging in support networks. These strategies highlight

graduates' agency in developing employability, consistent with the principles of employability theory (Yorke & Knight, 2004).

From a curriculum perspective, these findings indicate a need for more rigorous and structured skill development. In addition to technical instruction, higher education programs should incorporate practical exposure, soft skills training, software proficiency, time management, industry-specific terminology, management skills, financial literacy, and entrepreneurship. Guest lectures from industry professionals and exposure to diverse career paths, including consulting, site management, banking, and mining, would further enhance preparedness.

Finally, this study identified unique insights specific to the South African context. While international studies (Karunasena et al., 2015; Yogeshwaran et al., 2014; Ilmi et al., 2021; Tokijan & Aziz, 2023) highlight generic skill gaps, this research demonstrates the compounded impact of insufficient skill mastery, work-life balance challenges, and contextual workplace culture on the employability of QS graduates. In particular, the relatively low pass rate and lack of repeated assessment mechanisms appear to exacerbate skill deficiencies, suggesting that current curricula may need redesign to ensure mastery, not merely completion.

Conclusion

The transition from academia to professional practice remains a critical and often challenging period for quantity surveying (QS) graduates, requiring both technical proficiency and robust employability skills. This study highlights that, while university curricula address essential technical competencies, graduates frequently lack the soft skills, practical experience, and adaptive capacity needed to navigate the professional environment effectively. International and South African studies collectively indicate gaps in communication, teamwork, problem-solving, self-management, and technological proficiency, as well as deficiencies in practical application of theoretical knowledge.

Importantly, this study underscores the value of integrating graduates' perspectives to understand the nuanced challenges they face, revealing that effective preparation extends beyond academic achievement to encompass professional readiness, adaptability, and lifelong learning. The findings suggest that stronger collaboration between universities and industry stakeholders, alongside curriculum enhancement that prioritises experiential learning and employability skills, is essential for bridging the gap between graduate capabilities and industry expectations.

In summary, the key takeaway is that improving QS graduate employability requires a holistic approach: one that combines technical competence, soft skill development, and exposure to real-world professional challenges. Addressing these elements not only enhances individual career success but also contributes to the broader efficiency, quality, and sustainability of the construction industry in South Africa.

Recommendations

For Further Research

Graduate-Centric Studies: Future research should explore in greater depth the lived experiences of QS graduates across diverse regions in South Africa, employing qualitative or mixed-method approaches to capture nuanced perspectives on the challenges of professional transition. Future iterations could expand the participant pool and incorporate comparative data from multiple regions to enhance the generalizability of findings.

Longitudinal Studies: Investigating graduates over time would provide insights into how employability skills and competencies evolve with professional experience and identify persistent gaps that need academic or workplace intervention. This aligns with challenges identified under 'Work-Life Balance and Career Development,' where early workplace stress and burnout highlight the importance of tracking longer-term transitions.

Curriculum Effectiveness: Research evaluating the impact of specific curriculum enhancements, such as experiential learning modules, industry internships, and soft skills training, on graduate employability is recommended to guide evidence-based educational reform. This directly responds to gaps identified under 'Knowledge and Curriculum Gaps' and 'Soft Skills and Interpersonal Challenges.'

For Stakeholders

Higher Education Institutions: Universities should strengthen collaboration with industry partners to co-develop curriculum content that aligns with professional demands. Emphasis should be placed on practical exposure, soft skills development, and contemporary technological competencies. Universities and academic institutions should implement mechanisms to ensure mastery of technical skills, rather than solely relying on theoretical instruction and assessment. While students may be taught core quantity surveying competencies, the current system often allows them to pass without achieving full practical proficiency. As discussed under 'Knowledge and Curriculum Gaps,' curricula should incorporate repeated, hands-on exercises, practical simulations, and competency-based assessments that verify students can consistently apply their knowledge in real-world scenarios. Additionally, periodic skills audits and reflective assessments could be used to monitor and reinforce mastery, ensuring graduates enter the workforce fully competent and confident in their technical abilities. Although these recommendations are based on insights from a small sample of eight respondents, they provide valuable exploratory direction for curriculum reform and should be further tested in larger, more representative studies.

Industry Employers: Employers are encouraged to implement structured mentorship and induction programs for newly graduated QSs to support their professional integration and reduce reliance on remedial training. This reflects findings under 'Skill Development and Mentorship,' where supportive guidance was shown to accelerate growth and confidence.

Professional Bodies: Organisations such as the South African Council for the Quantity Surveying Profession (SACQSP) should provide guidance on competency frameworks and endorse programs that enhance employability skills, ensuring graduates meet industry standards. This recommendation is consistent with the gaps identified under 'Emotional and Psychological Impact,' where uncertainty and lack of confidence were exacerbated by unclear professional expectations.

Policy Makers: Government and regulatory agencies should incentivise partnerships between academic institutions and industry through funding, accreditation requirements, or industry placement programs to enhance graduate readiness. This addresses the systemic misalignment highlighted across themes such as 'Knowledge and Curriculum Gaps' and 'Work Environment and Workplace Culture.'

By implementing these recommendations, stakeholders can collectively bridge the gap between academic preparation and workplace expectations, fostering a competent, adaptable, and industry-ready QS workforce.

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SACQSP2025-14

Navigating Fee Discounting: Financial Resilience Strategies in South African Quantity Surveying Firms

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Abstract

Excessive fee discounting has become a persistent feature of the South African quantity surveying (QS) profession, threatening the financial viability, perceived professional value and quality of the discipline. While prior studies have documented the negative impacts of fee discounting on profitability and service standards, less attention has been paid to understanding how QS firms continue to operate and adapt under these sustained financial pressures. This study investigates how financial resilience is enacted in QS firms facing chronic fee erosion. Drawing on theories of financial resilience, sensemaking and institutional isomorphism, and using thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with nine directors and senior professionals in Gauteng, the research examines how QS practitioners interpret market challenges, negotiate client expectations, and develop adaptive strategies. The findings show that resilience is both intentional and emergent. Firms employ lean staffing, outsourcing, digitalisation and selective tendering, while also framing resilience as an ethical commitment to service quality and professional identity. However, these adaptations come with persistent trade-offs, such as reduced project volumes, staff attrition and the erosion of professional boundaries in deregulated markets. This study contributes to resilience literature by demonstrating that financial resilience is not solely a technical capacity, but a socially constructed process shaped by identity work and institutional pressures. The study is limited by its small, geographically confined sample, which constrains generalisability. However, it provides valuable insights for practitioners, policymakers, and professional bodies. Recommendations include the adoption of cost-based pricing models, greater advocacy for value-based procurement and institutional reforms to balance competition law with the protection of professional standards.

Keywords: Financial Resilience, Fee Discounting, Quantity Surveying Firms, Professional Standards, Sense-making Theory.

Introduction

The increasing prevalence of fee discounting in professional services globally has triggered considerable concern about the long-term sustainability, quality, and viability of professional practice across disciplines (Adesi et al., 2018). Within the built environment, quantity surveyors (QSs) play a pivotal role in maintaining financial discipline and accountability, mitigating financial risks, and safeguarding investment returns. However, this role has come under increasing strain due to intensifying market pressures and a widespread culture of fee undercutting, particularly in competitive tendering environments where price is often weighted more heavily than qualifications, expertise, or scope of service (Amoah & Steyn, 2022).

This erosion of professional fee structures has become pronounced in the South African context, where anecdotal and empirical accounts reveal that clients in the private sector routinely demand fee reductions ranging from 30% to 50% below recommended tariff guidelines (Maseko & Duma, 2023). The 2024 Guideline Tariff of Fees published by the South African Council for the Quantity Surveying Profession (SACQSP) does not advocate for, nor accommodate, fee discounting. Rather, the document clearly states that: "*The Guideline Tariff of Professional Fees is not intended to be prescriptive but provides a structured and fair basis for determining reasonable compensation for professional services rendered*" (South African Government, 2025). Combined with the Competition

Commission's prohibition of mandatory fee scales (South African Government, 1998), this regulatory silence has created a vacuum in which professional services are commodified, and price-based competition dominates value-based selection.

The implications are far-reaching. Some firms now submit tenders below their internal cost structures**,** exposing themselves to unsustainable financial strain**,** undermining staff morale, and eroding their ability to attract or retain skilled personnel (Okwonkwo & Wium, 2018). Compounding these risks are reputational threats: repeated delivery failures, reduced technical oversight, and project delays can ultimately degrade client trust and damage the status of the profession. As Maseko and Duma (2023: 19) warn: "*Without enforceable fee floors, the market became susceptible to a 'race to the bottom' as firms competed on price rather than value*."

Despite these challenges, many QS firms remain operational, suggesting that they have developed strategic responses either proactively or reactively to survive in an increasingly hostile economic environment (Ramabodu, 2023). Much of the existing literature treats resilience as a reactive phenomenon, the ability to "*bounce back*" after disruption, rather than examining it as a strategic, proactive capacity that is continuously constructed, refined, and enacted in practice (Zungu & Laryea, 2024). In doing so, prior studies often underplay the socially constructed nature of strategy; how professionals interpret disruptions, make sense of uncertainty, and negotiate what constitutes a legitimate or viable course of action. This lack of attention to sensemaking leaves an important gap in understanding financial resilience not merely as recovery, but as an unfolding process of strategy formation embedded in social, professional, and institutional contexts.

The aim of this paper is therefore to examine how financial resilience is enacted within South African QS firms facing chronic fee discounting. The objectives are threefold: (i) to identify the adaptive strategies employed by firms to sustain financial viability; (ii) to explore how practitioners interpret and make sense of discounting pressures; and (iii) to analyse how institutional pressures and professional identity shape both conformity and resistance to market norms.

To achieve these objectives, the study is guided by three complementary theoretical perspectives. Financial resilience theory explains how organisations sustain viability under economic strain, focusing on resource management, cost structures, and adaptability (Zahedi et al., 2022). Sensemaking theory highlights how professionals interpret ambiguous conditions and construct plausible strategies in contexts of uncertainty (Weick, 1995). Institutional theory, particularly isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), explains how market and regulatory pressures shape conformity and constrain professional autonomy. Together, these perspectives frame resilience not as a fixed trait or financial buffer but as a dynamic, socially embedded process of strategic adaptation.

Literature review

Understanding how professional service firms (PSFs) maintain viability under sustained financial pressure requires a conceptualisation of resilience that moves beyond static definitions and engages critically with processes of adaptation and meaning-making. This is especially relevant for PSFs, which face chronic rather than acute adversity and must navigate pressures such as fee discounting, shifting client expectations, and regulatory changes. To address these pressures, this review examines three strands of scholarship that together frame the study: financial resilience in PSFs, sensemaking as a resilience enabler, and resilience-as-practice.

Financial Resilience in Professional Service Firms

Resilience scholarship has transitioned from a narrow understanding of a firm's ability to recover from shocks to a broader conceptualisation involving proactive anticipation, adaptive capacity and long-term learning (Duchek, 2020). Rather than viewing resilience as a static feature, it is now understood as a dynamic capability that unfolds in three interrelated phases: sensing threats, coping with immediate disruptions, and adapting to new conditions over time (Hillmann & Guenther, 2021).

Financial resilience specifically refers to an organisation's capacity to maintain financial viability under sustained economic pressures while continuing to deliver core services (Zahedi et al., 2022). It encompasses the ability to absorb revenue shocks, sustain cash flow, and adapt cost structures without undermining long-term survival. In public and corporate contexts, financial resilience is often associated with practices such as diversifying revenue streams, flexible cost management, and

building reserves for future shocks (Nguyen, 2025). For PSFs, this resilience involves far more than maintaining liquidity or profitability. For PSFs, this resilience involves far more than maintaining liquidity or profitability. Resilient firms strategically manage profitability, cash flow stability, capital adequacy, and operational flexibility while continuing to invest in staff development, technological capabilities, and service quality (Adesi et al., 2018; von Nordenflycht, 2010).

Emerging research suggests that QS firms adopt parallel strategies, such as outsourcing, digitalisation, project selectivity, and lean staffing models, to withstand prolonged fee erosion (Ramabodu, 2023). However, while these adaptive measures are observable, they remain fragmented in the literature and have not been theorised as financial resilience within PSFs. More importantly, little is known about how QS practitioners themselves interpret these practices and construct them as legitimate strategies under market pressure. This gap necessitates a shift from treating financial resilience as a technical or accounting outcome to examining it as a socially constructed and enacted strategic capacity.

It requires sustaining service quality, professional reputation, and ethical commitments even under adverse market conditions (von Nordenflycht, 2010). Resilient PSFs strategically manage profitability, cash flow stability, capital adequacy, and operational flexibility while continuing to invest in staff development, technological capabilities, and service quality (Adesi et al., 2018). Importantly, resilience is not a fixed state but an ongoing process of interpretation, adaptation, and organisational learing (Duchek, 2020).

In their review of management research, Hillmann and Guenther (2021) argue that most studies have lacked clarity on what resilience entails in different contexts and call for greater attention to the interplay of social, cognitive, and behavioural processes that underpin resilient outcomes. This turn toward capability-based models has coincided with a recognition that resilience cannot be reduced to a firm's structural features or financial buffers. Instead, it must be examined as an emergent property shaped by an organisation's routines, culture, and decision-making practices (Raetze et al., 2021). In knowledge-intensive firms such as PSFs, where standardisation is low and ambiguity is high, these internal processes may be particularly central. Yet, the literature remains skewed towards manufacturing and large corporates, limiting the applicability of prevailing models to the service sector (Annarelli & Nonino, 2016). This creates a need to explore how resilience is achieved in PSFs where fluctuating client demands, complex fee structures, and evolving institutional norms impose distinct forms of stress.

Resilience in Professional Service Firms

PSFs, including law, engineering, consultancy, and QS firms, differ from other organisations in key ways. Their outputs are intangible, knowledge-based, and highly dependent on human expertise and client relationships (von Nordenflycht, 2010). In such contexts, resilience is less likely to reside in operational slack or formal contingency planning and more in the informal, interpersonal, and interpretive mechanisms that shape everyday work practices.

Emerging research recognises that resilience in PSFs is often achieved through social capital, professional identity, and adaptability at the level of practice (Fietz et al., 2021). However, Branicki et al. (2023) argue that resilience scholarship has largely neglected professional contexts. They highlight the unique pressures facing PSFs, such as commercial-professional tensions and normative expectations, and call for frameworks that account for the professional, institutional, and ethical dimensions of resilience. For instance, in PSFs like QS, the pressure pressures to reduce fees intersect with professional obligations to maintain service quality and uphold ethical standards, creating a complex landscape of competing demands. Responses to these threats, whether through internal restructuring, client engagement strategies, or new service models, must therefore be understood within this complex institutional terrain.

Empirical research on resilience in PSFs remains sparse, especially in the context of chronic stressors such as sustained fee compression, technological change, or declining trust in professional expertise. You and Williams (2023) found that in Chinese business service firms, long-term resilience was closely tied to the firms' ability to cultivate relational capital and interpret evolving market expectations. Similarly, Chih et al. (2022) show that resilience in construction-related PSFs during the COVID-19 pandemic was less about strategic reinvention and more about adaptive micro-practices: adjusting work processes, redistributing roles, and renegotiating deliverables. These studies reinforce the need

to move beyond viewing resilience as a post-crisis rebound and toward resilience as an ongoing, contextually grounded process of situated adaptation.

Sensemaking as a Resilience Enabler

Sensemaking theory provides an analytical lens. As defined by Weick (1995), it is the process through which organisational actors interpret ambiguous, complex or threatening events, enabling them to construct plausible understandings that guide action. Sensemaking becomes especially relevant in situations of persistent uncertainty, where threats are not clearly defined or time-bound. Under such conditions, how individuals and groups interpret adversity can shape the range and direction of possible responses (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014).

Studies show that in professional environments, sensemaking influences the scope of strategic responses. For example, van der Merwe et al. (2020) found that professionals who interpreted crises as meaningful and manageable were more effective in sustaining collective action. Similarly, Dupont et al. (2023) demonstrated that framing and prioritisation, rather than the threats themselves, determined organisational effectiveness in cyber-resilience.

In QS firms facing sustained fee discounting, sensemaking may determine whether the situation is framed as an existential threat, an inevitable market trend, or an opportunity for service innovation. These framings influence strategic choices, emotional responses, and collective morale. Furthermore, senior leaders in PSFs often function as sense-givers, shaping how threats are narrated internally, thereby influencing what becomes thinkable or actionable. Sensemaking is inherently connected to identity, as Weick (1995) emphasises that it is "*grounded in identity construction*." In this view, how professionals interpret uncertainty is inseparable from how they define and position themselves. Identity work, understood as the ongoing effort to form, maintain, and revise coherent professional selves in response to contextual pressures (Brown, 2015), therefore provides an important lens for examining how practitioners frame resilience strategies in professional service settings.

Institutional Theory and Professional Boundaries

Institutional theory provides further context for understanding resilience in deregulated markets. Dimaggio and Powell (1983) describe institutional isomorphism, as a dominant norm to maintain legitimacy. In this context, coercive pressures from clients and procurement frameworks, alongside mimetic imitation of competitors' discounting practices, reinforce the entrenchment of fee erosion. Such conformity poses risks to professional autonomy. Noordegraaf (2011) shows how liberalised markets blur professional boundaries, while Muzio et al. (2013) emphasise that institutional change can erode the normative authority of professions. Placing QS firms within this perspective highlights that resilience strategies are negotiated not only within firms but also in relation to external pressures that constrain independence and challenge professional identity.

Research methodology and method

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative, exploratory research design grounded in an interpretivist paradigm. The interpretivist stance was adopted because the study aimed to understand how QS firms in South Africa interpret and respond to the persistent challenge of fee discounting. Interpretivism is appropriate where research seeks to capture the subjective meanings, experiences and perceptions of participants rather than to produce generalisable statistical patterns (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020).

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine senior QS professionals, including directors and partners, who had who had direct experience with fee discounting. A purposive sampling strategy was used to identify information-rich participants and snowball sampling extended the pool by asking each interviewee to recommend further participants meeting the criteria (Seetharaman, 2016). Initial participants were identified through professional and industry networks as a pragmatic means of accessing senior quantity surveying professionals who met the inclusion criteria. Interviews continued until data saturation was reached, meaning no new themes or insights were emerging (Seetharaman, 2016).

An interview guide with open-ended questions ensured that core topics were covered while allowing participants the flexibility to elaborate on issues they deemed important. All interviews were conducted virtually via Microsoft Teams or Zoom, a pragmatic choice that enabled participation from geographically dispersed respondents. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was audio recorded with participant permission to ensure an accurate record of the conversation. Transcripts were subsequently produced verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis following the six-phase framework by Braun and Clarke (2006). This involved familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes among codes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Thematic analysis was chosen for its flexibility and capacity to identify patterns of meaning across qualitative data, which was well-suited to the exploratory nature of this study. Unlike content analysis, which often quantifies code frequencies, thematic analysis provides a purely qualitative, detailed, and nuanced account of the data (Özden, 2024).

Coding was conducted inductively, with themes emerging from participants' narratives rather than being imposed a priori. Codes were iteratively clustered into broad categories, which were then refined through repeated comparison with the raw data to ensure they reflected participants' perspectives. Throughout the analysis, the researchers engaged in reflexive discussion to bracket their biases and ensure that the themes remain grounded in the evidence from the interviews.

Research results

While existing literature has widely acknowledged the damaging consequences of fee discounting such as the erosion of profitability and compromised service quality, there has been limited focus on how professional service firms, particularly QS firms, actively adapt to these pressures. The study filled that gap by exploring the internal processes through which QS firms navigate persistent financial strain while maintaining professional identity and operational performance.

The participant group consisted of nine directors and senior QS professionals with substantial experience in both public and private projects. Their firms ranged from micro-enterprises with fewer than ten staff to medium-sized practices of up to one hundred employees. This diversity of backgrounds enabled perspectives across different organisational forms and market niches, supporting transferability of the findings. Firm size was classified in line with the South African National Small Business Amendment Act (2004), which defines micro (≤10 staff), small (11–50 staff), and medium (51–100 staff) enterprises within professional services. Notably, firm size shaped adaptive responses: micro and small practices reported more reliance on outsourcing and flexible staffing, while medium firms demonstrated structured systems for fee negotiation and digital process integration. This variation provided comparative insight into how organisational scale influences financial resilience and strategic adaptation. Table 1 summarises the key demographic characteristics of the sample.

Table 1 Participant Demographics

ID	Role	Firm size	Primary sector	Experience (Y)
P1	Director	Micro (≤10 staff)	Private	15
P2	Senior QS	Small (11–50 staff)	Public/Private mix	12
P3	Director	Micro (≤10 staff)	NGO/Private	18
P4	Partner	Small (11–50 staff)	Private	20
P5	Director	Medium (51–100 staff)	Public	22
P6	Senior QS	Micro (≤10 staff)	Private housing projects	10
P7	Director	Small (11–50 staff)	Public infrastructure	14
P8	Partner	Medium (51–100 staff)	Mixed-use developments	17
P9	Director	Micro (≤10 staff)	Private & NGO mix	16

Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method, the codes were inductively refined into five interconnected themes that capture how QS firms preserve quality and identity while navigating financial pressure: ubiquity of fee discounting, strategic adaptation, resilience as emergent and intentional, trade-offs of adaptation, and the role of institutions. Each theme is presented in Table 2 and supported by illustrative quotations and contextualised examples, providing insight into how financial resilience is constructed in practice.

Table 2 Summary of Key Themes and Insights of Financial Resilience in QS Firms

Theme	Description	Illustrative codes	Data sources
Ubiquity of fee discounting	Discounting is entrenched, especially in private sector; public sector somewhat buffered.	"50% norm"; "race to bottom"; "price outweighs quality"	P1, P2, P3, P5, P6
Strategic adaptation	Lean models, outsourcing, digitalisation, clustering, and discount thresholds offset fee erosion.	"clustered schools"; "lean staffing"; "AI-generated minutes"; "set thresholds"	P2, P3, P4, P6, P7
Resilience as emergent and intentional	Both deliberate (financial buffers, agile systems) and reactive (COVID, late payments) resilience observed.	"build fat"; "scan environment"; "survival instinct guided by intelligence"	P4, P5, P6, P8
Trade-offs and the limits of adaptation	Strategies sustain survival but create costs: layoffs, low morale, avoided tenders, burnout.	"staff left or retrenched"; "burnout"; "avoided tenders"	P1, P3, P5, P7, P9
Role of institutions	Mixed views on weak regulation; fee scales as non-prescriptive; innovation in cost-based models.	"fee scale is"; "friends developed formula"; "institutions silent"	P1, P3, P6, P8, P9

By shifting focus from what is lost under fee discounting to how firms adapt, the findings suggest that firms blend strategic planning with real-time learning to maintain performance. Their ability to reconfigure operations, manage reputation, and reprioritise project pipelines demonstrates a nuanced and active resilience strategy that has been underexplored in literature.

Furthermore, the data show that resilience is not only an organisational trait but a professional identity practice. Firms enact resilience not merely to survive economically but to uphold the credibility of the QS profession in a highly competitive and under-regulated market.

Thematic Insights

The Ubiquity of Fee Discounting

Fee discounting has become an entrenched norm within the QS profession, particularly in South Africa's private sector. Participants in the study consistently described how discounts of between 20% and 50% below recommended guideline fees were reported as routine, driven largely by competitive tendering environments that prioritise cost over competence. As P1 stated: "*In private clients, 50% is currently the norm*." These accounts reveal ongoing sensemaking, where discounting was framed as unavoidable and legitimate simply because it had become industry-wide practice.

The prevalence of discounting echoes earlier research showing that private clients routinely demand steep reductions from QS firms (Maseko & Duma, 2023) and that consultants often bid below cost structures (Okwonkwo & Wium, 2018). This aligns with coercive and mimetic isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), where firms conform to external pressures or imitate competitors to maintain legitimacy, even when practices undermine professional standards.

Participants contrasted private and public procurement. Although the public sector is more regulated, below-cost bidding persists, accelerating the commodification of QS services. This mirrors Amoah and Steyn's (2022) finding that professional services in deregulated contexts risk a "race to the bottom."

Notably, participants were divided in their interpretations. Some viewed discounting as a taken-for-granted business practice, while others considered it an existential threat to professional sustainability and service quality: "*This is not sustainable for the industry… the quality of service ends up being compromised*" (P2). This divergence illustrates the sensemaking process (Weick, 1995): some practitioners framed discounting as unavoidable, others as corrosive to ethics and quality. Both framings influenced strategic responses.

This systemic race to offer the lowest price challenges the profession's long-term viability. As several participants argued, without stronger value-based procurement frameworks, the emphasis on lowest price risks eroding quality, trust, and legitimacy.

Strategic Adaptation as a Resilience Mechanism

To navigate discounting, participants described varied yet converging adaptive practices to ensure financial resilience. Cost rationalisation was prominent, including lean staffing, outsourcing, and clustering projects to reduce overheads, as P3 explained: "*Going for clustered schools in the same area is good because the overheads can be shared… it offsets the impact of discounting*." Such practices align with the dynamic capabilities framework (Teece, 2007), which highlights the importance of adaptive resource reconfiguration in volatile environments.

Several respondents operated as micro-enterprises, relying on outsourcing and freelance project delivery to reduce overheads, thereby sustaining operations on minimal fixed costs. Firms also invested in digitalisation and automation, with P4 noting that "*most tasks are outsourced… some of the tasks such as minutes are generated through AI"*. The adoption of AI-based documentation tools and cloud-based project management systems further enabled efficiency gains and rapid service delivery. These findings resonate with Ramabodu (2023), who noted that digitalisation and outsourcing are increasingly deployed in QS firms to cope with fee pressures.

Participants further linked a surge in the number of registered QS professionals and micro-firms has intensified market competition, which diluted professional differentiation and drove fees down. In this context, adaptation was described as adaptive resource reconfiguration that enabled resilience in a volatile market. Selectivity was equally important, with firms introducing internal thresholds for "acceptable" discounts and rejecting tenders that exceeded them. To this point, P2 recalled that "*a client required us to provide a discount of almost 60% and unfortunately we ended up losing the project… it did not make business sense*". These practices were narrated not simply as cost control but as strategic and ethical acts, evidence of financial resilience enacted through boundary-setting.

Resilience as Emergent and Intentional

Resilience in QS firms was described as both deliberately planned and emergent in response to external shocks. Some firms proactively built financial buffers ("fat") into their business models and invested in agile systems. P5 emphasised the need to "*understand the micro and macro environment for operations and respond accordingly*" Others developed resilience reactively, shaped by repeated exposure to challenges such as delayed payments, fee erosion, and crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. As P4 reflected that "*the survival instinct is inbuilt but has to be guided by information… market intelligence is necessary*". This dual perspective aligns with evolving theories of resilience as both a latent organisational trait and a dynamic, context-dependent process (Hillmann & Guenther, 2021). However, the dual perspective also shows how practitioners engaged in sensemaking, interpreting shifting environments and translating them into practical responses.

COVID-19 reinforced cost-sensitivity, with clients equating value to cheaper fees. This entrenched price benchmarking and further commodification, echoing Chih et al.'s (2022) finding that professional service resilience during COVID-19 often involved micro-level adjustments rather than structural reinvention. In such a climate, firms with strong ethical leadership and internal cultures rooted in professionalism, efficiency, and integrity were better positioned to maintain standards. P2 stressed that "*we always make sure that even if we take on a discounted project, we do not compromise the quality of our work and effort*", underscoring the critical role of leadership and professional identity in maintaining standards despite financial constraints. This illustrate identity work (Brown, 2025), where leaders framed resilience not just as financial survival but as the protection of professional credibility, signalling to clients and staff that QS identity is defined by standards of quality and integrity rather than by lowest price.

Trade-offs and the Limits of Adaptation

Resilience came with significant trade-offs. Participants reported adverse consequences such as reduced project volumes, staff retrenchments, declining morale and withdrawal from unprofitable market segments. P1 explained that "*some staff members could see the writing on the wall and decided to look for greener pastures. Some were laid off*", illustrating how financial strain directly affected employment stability. Such consequences reflect the limits of adaptation, where resilience sustains short-term survival but risks undermining long-term viability (Raetze et al., 2021). Some firms avoided public tenders due to resource limitations, while others experienced burnout from prolonged operation below cost-recovery thresholds. These constraints highlight the limits of adaptation, where resilience may be sustained only at the cost of long-term viability.

Under coercive and mimetic isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), QS firms began replicating market behaviours not because they were strategically sound, but because peers and clients expected discounting as the norm. Participants described discounting as "*a norm*" (P1), "*part of my everyday pricing strategy*" (P3) and noted that "*with private clients 50% is currently the norm*" (P5). These accounts reveal sensemaking processes, where discounting was framed as unavoidable and legitimate simply because it had become industry-wide practice. This reflected a loss of agency, with practitioners interpreting conformity itself as the only viable path to survival.

Beyond financial consequences, participants expressed concern about the erosion of professional standards. P3 warned that "*the biggest risk… is competing with candidates… not professional QS*", pointing to growing encroachment by underqualified practitioners. This echoes Noordegraaf's (2011) concern that professional boundaries blur in liberalised markets, threatening legitimacy.

While firms enacted resilience, it often entailed costs to workforce stability, professional identity, and ethical integrity. These trade-offs highlight that resilience should not be idealised as inherently positive, a critique also raised by Amoah & Steyn (2022).

The Role of Institutions and Professional Bodies

There was mixed sentiment about the role of regulatory bodies. Some participants supported stronger enforcement of ethical codes and entry requirements, while others cautioned against regulatory overreach, citing the Competition Commission opposes prescriptive fee guidelines. P1 explained that "*the fee scale is a guideline. It is not prescriptive*", highlighting the regulatory tension that constrains institutional action. This regulatory ambivalence was interpreted as a reason for discounting's persistence, reflecting institutional sensemaking where external constraints are framed as limiting professional autonomy (Muzio et al., 2013).

Instead of prescriptive enforcement, participants called for a middle path supporting cost-based pricing models, developing non-binding reference frameworks, and offering guidance on sustainable practice without violating antitrust principles. P1 emphasised the need for innovation, noting that "*a few of my friends have come up with a formula… I think this might be a game changer*". This bespoke fee-calculation model, based on actual costs and margins, was framed as a more viable alternative to the outdated guideline tariffs. Such innovations illustrate how practitioners engaged in identity work, constructing professional credibility around disciplined, transparent costing methods that differentiated them from competitors willing to undercut fees without justification.

These findings echo Branicki et al. (2023), who argue that resilience in professional contexts requires both firm-level adaptation and institutional reform. They also align with Zungu and Laryea (2024), who stress that organisational resilience in construction firms depends on both capabilities and institutional frameworks.

Discussion

The current study set out to explore how financial resilience is enacted in South African QS firms operating under the chronic pressure of fee discounting, guided by theories of resilience, sensemaking, and institutional isomorphism. The objective was not only to identify adaptive strategies but also to understand how practitioners interpret market pressures and construct these practices as legitimate or ethical responses. The findings show that resilience is socially constructed through both strategic

adjustments and interpretive framing, confirming that QS firms are not passive recipients of discounting pressures but active agents negotiating survival under deregulated market conditions.

Existing scholarship often portrays resilience as either reactive recovery or preconfigured capability (Duchek, 2020; Hillmann and Guenther, 2021). The present study extends this by demonstrating resilience as simultaneously deliberate and emergent, strategically embedded in business models yet continually reconstructed through everyday sensemaking. This duality echoes Lengnick-Hall and Beck's (2005) description of resilience as both antecedent and outcome but, importantly, highlights how professional actors make sense of volatility and translate it into workable strategies. In framing discounting as either tolerable or unacceptable, and by narrating professionalism as "non-negotiable," practitioners enacted resilience as an ongoing interpretive and moral project rather than a fixed organisational trait.

The findings demonstrate that professional identity shaped how QS practitioners framed resilience. This aligns with scholarship emphasising that professions maintain legitimacy through normative commitments and boundary maintenance (Muzio et al., 2013; Noordegraaf, 2011). In this study, cost-based pricing tools and selective resistance were not only financial measures but also identity practices, reinforcing credibility in a deregulated market. Such practices show that resilience in PSFs must be understood as both an economic and symbolic project, extending existing resilience theory beyond technical adaptation to include professional meaning-making.

Institutional theory provides further insight. Discounting was widely described as "a norm," supporting DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) account of isomorphism. Yet the evidence also showed that firms resisted by refusing unsustainable tenders or withdrawing from projects that threatened long-term viability. This reveals that isomorphic pressures do not fully erase agency but confine it to more cautious forms of resistance, enacted through selective conformity and boundary-setting. These findings resonate with Branicki et al. (2023), who emphasise the need to examine resilience in professional services as a negotiated process shaped by both institutional logics and professional commitments.

At the same time, the limits of resilience were evident. Retrenchments, staff attrition, and declining morale demonstrated that survival was often achieved at significant organisational cost. The entry of underqualified practitioners into the market further illustrated risks of deprofessionalisation, echoing concerns raised by Amoah and Steyn (2022) and reinforcing Raetze et al.'s (2021) critique that resilience should not be understood as an inherently positive capacity. These findings underline that while QS firms demonstrate ingenuity and adaptability, firm-level resilience alone cannot resolve systemic fragilities rooted in regulatory and institutional environments (Amoah & Steyn, 2022; Noordegraaf, 2011).

Conclusion

This study critically examined how QS firms in South Africa enact financial resilience under chronic pressures of fee discounting. The analysis shows that resilience is not a fixed organisational trait or a simple post-crisis recovery, but an evolving process that combines deliberate strategies with adaptations shaped by repeated exposure to market volatility. Firms relied on lean staffing, selective tendering, outsourcing, digital innovation, and project clustering to sustain operations. These measures enabled survival but also revealed the interpretive dimension of resilience, as practitioners set thresholds of acceptability for discounting and consistently framed service quality as non-negotiable.

Resilience was also found to be inseparable from professional identity. The defence of credibility and reputation was regarded as essential alongside financial viability. Bespoke fee calculators and cost-based pricing models illustrate how technical tools functioned as symbolic resources through which firms reaffirmed professional legitimacy in a deregulated environment. At the same time, resilience came at a cost: retrenchments, constrained growth, and declining morale were widespread, while the entry of unqualified practitioners further eroded professional boundaries. These trade-offs underline that resilience may sustain firms in the short term but can undermine long-term sustainability, echoing critiques that resilience is not uniformly positive.

Situated within theories of sensemaking and institutional isomorphism, the study demonstrates how QS firms balance conformity with selective resistance. Fee discounting was entrenched as a market norm, reflecting coercive pressures, yet firms also exercised agency by withdrawing from projects that

threatened financial viability or professional standards. The key contribution of this research lies in extending resilience scholarship into professional service contexts by showing that financial resilience is both deliberate and emergent, shaped by institutional constraints and professional commitments. For scholars, the study advances understanding of resilience as a dynamic process that integrates adaptation, identity work, and selective resistance. For practitioners and professional bodies, it provides evidence of the strategies that sustain viability under fee erosion while highlighting the trade-offs and risks that threaten long-term sustainability. For policymakers and regulators, it highlights the limits of firm-level adaptation and the need for systemic reform to safeguard professional integrity.

Recommendations

This study highlights three main directions for strengthening the resilience and professional integrity of QS practices under chronic fee discounting. First, firms should adopt context-sensitive pricing models that reflect the actual costs, value, and complexity of service delivery. These models must be supported by stronger client education and advocacy to shift procurement practices from 'lowest price wins' toward value-based evaluation, with professional bodies providing the necessary tools and market insights to enable this transition. Second, institutional reforms are needed to balance competition law with the protection of professional standards. While prescriptive fee setting is restricted, regulatory councils and associations can still develop non-binding benchmarks, advisory services, and capacity-building initiatives, particularly for micro and small practices most exposed to fee erosion. Finally, future research should extend this analysis across professional service domains and regional contexts to compare how resilience strategies vary under similar deregulated conditions, offering insights that can inform broader policy and industry reform.

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SACQSP2025-17

A Proposed Short Course Framework; Bridging the Academia-Industry Skills Gap Among Graduate Quantity Surveyors in South Africa

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Abstract

The ever-evolving construction industry undergoes several transformations. This evolution intensifies the complexity of projects and therefore directly impacts the role of Quantity Surveyors. As the construction industry evolves and changes, the Quantity Surveying profession is also forced to evolve beyond the traditional management practices and skills. The feedback from industry, as identified through existing literature findings, state that Quantity Surveying graduates are not equipped with the needed soft skills, technical skills, professionalism, ethical awareness and digital fluency to participate in modern projects. Therefore, this study aims to explore the top five most highly demanded skillsets required by industry, which is used as the foundation for the development of a proposed short course framework. A mono method approach was adopted for the study consisting of a qualitative literature-led methodology as the primary approach. The results found through various existing literature indicate a clear pattern of deficiencies amongst graduate Quantity Surveyors in areas of communication, digital capabilities, ethical judgement, self-management and conflict resolution. The proposed targeted short course framework, titled "Industry-Ready: Essential Skills for Graduate Quantity Surveyors" consists of five core modules targeting specific soft skills, ethical expectations, self-management, digital skills and real-world scenario simulations. The study further recommends that input from Quantity Surveyors and SACQSP through qualitative focus group discussions and interviews will be advantageous to ensure the contents covered in the proposed framework truly reflects the skills that are required by industry.

Keywords: Short course, Graduate Quantity Surveyors, Quantity Surveyor Competencies, Education, Employability.

Introduction

Employers are not only looking at the technical abilities of graduate Quantity Surveyors, but also noticing the lack of adaptability, professionalism and communication competence among their newly appointed employees. This issue is echoed by numerous Quantity Surveying firms across South Africa, which highlights the growing concern about the professional readiness of graduate Quantity Surveyors entering the industry. While graduates display sufficient knowledge and abilities in technical skills, their lack of soft skills hinder their ability of integrate smoothly into the workplace.

Background

There is a continuous dissatisfaction from industry regarding the lack of soft-skill competence amongst graduate Quantity Surveyors in South Africa. Although universities equip graduates with the needed technical abilities required to measure, cost and interpret tender documentation, these graduates frequently lack the professional and interpersonal skills demanded by the industry (Van Eck, 2024; Mavasa & Terblanche, 2023). The lack of soft skills has tangible implications, as graduates struggle to engage with clients and contractors, adapt to workplace culture, and manage their time effectively (Zaheer et al., 2021). Early findings from Nkado (2000) emphasised that interpersonal skills and managerial techniques should be taught alongside technical skills. Two decades later, similar issues persist through the findings of Mtebula (2014), who identified that poor workplace etiquette and professional maturity continue to be evident among graduates entering the workplace. Van Eck (2024)

found that 75% of employers stated that soft skills are the primary obstacles hindering graduate employability.

Knowledge Gap

Multiple studies have documented the soft skills deficiencies among graduate Quantity Surveyors, however there is limited evidence of how implementable interventions managed to bridge or narrow this gap. Researchers mostly recommend curriculum reform, improved mentoring structures and stronger partnerships with industry to improve these deficiencies (Van Eck, 2024; Mavasa & Terblanche, 2023). While these recommendations are likely to assist with improving the existing shortcomings, they require significant time to be effectively implemented. Due to the slow rate of implementation proposed solutions, the gap continues to affect graduates' employability and employer dissatisfaction.

Aims and Objectives

In direct response, this study aims to identify the most prominent soft skills, technical capabilities, digital fluency and behavioural competencies expected of Quantity Surveying graduates through in-depth analysis of existing literature. Furthermore, the study aims to design a targeted short course framework that addresses the most critical skill gaps.

Advance Organiser

The structure of this paper follows with the literature review, which details the evolving role of the Quantity Surveying profession, the shift in required competencies as demanded by the industry and the existing skills gap between Quantity Surveying graduates and industry expectations. Furthermore, the literature review assesses how short courses can be utilised as a tool to enhance graduate capabilities. The next section outlines the research methodology, elaborating on the qualitative approach adopted through literature analysis. This is followed by the presentation of key findings and results. The penultimate section concludes the study, and finally practical recommendations are provided for tertiary institutions, including the design of the proposed short course framework.

Literature Review

The evolving Role of Quantity Surveyors, Graduate Competencies, Workplace Expectations and Skill Gaps

When one hears the word "Quantity Surveyor", the image of an analytical, precise and organised professional dealing with accurate measurements, architectural plans and construction costs most likely comes to mind. Whilst this "picture" remains central to the profession, it is important to consider that technical abilities may no longer be at the forefront of most highly desired skills. Like everything in life, things change, people evolve, methods advance, and the Quantity Surveying industry is no exception. This sophisticated field has undergone significant transformation due to technological advancements, project delivery methods, diverse client types and expectations, sustainability considerations, and the continually evolving professionals entering the industry. Traditionally, the responsibilities of a Quantity Surveyor revolved around cost planning, tender documentation preparation and financial control of construction projects (SACQSP, 2023). However, in the modern digital era, Quantity Surveyors are expected to adopt a more strategic, collaborative and technologically driven role (RICS, 2025). Quantity Surveying education in South Africa is structured around the standards set by the South African Council for the Quantity Surveying Profession (SACQSP), which aims to develop the fundamental technical competencies required by the profession. These include cost estimation, tender documentation, measurement of construction drawings, construction law, and contract administration. Accredited universities across South Africa deliver programmes aligned with these competencies to ensure that graduates are adequately prepared for professional registration and early career practice (SACQSP, 2023). While these technical skills remain fundamental, they alone are no longer sufficient for professional success. Van Eck (2024) highlights a lack of soft skills, professional awareness, and workplace readiness among Quantity Surveying graduates. Numerous employers have similarly noted a significant skills mismatch between what is being taught at universities and what is expected in the workplace. The SACQSP (2023), has recently acknowledged this mismatch in its competency guidelines, which advocates for the inclusion of

attributes like communication skills, ethics, interdisciplinary collaboration and digital integration. Both earlier studies (Nkado, 2000), and more recent studies (Mavasa & Terblanche, 2023; Mtebula, 2014; Van Eck, 2024) highlight the evolving skills requirements of the Quantity Surveying profession and examine the workplace readiness of graduates. Collectively, these studies reveal deficiencies in practical exposure, digital fluency, and soft skills such as communication, teamwork, leadership and ethical decision making. Van Eck (2024) conducted a comprehensive investigation into soft skill development among candidate Quantity Surveyors in South Africa, revealing that while technical skills remain essential, they are insufficient for early career success without complementary professional behaviours and soft skill characteristics. The key soft skills identified in her study include self-management, analytical thinking, interpersonal interaction, professionalism and ethics. Notably, 75% of the participants in her study agreed that these skills are lacking or non-existent among graduates, while 95% emphasised the importance of cultivating these skills prior to employment. These findings provide valuable insight for informing the development of the proposed short course modules. To emphasise that the plea from industry has been ongoing since the early 2000s, Nkado (2000) highlighted the importance of management orientated skills, such as project management and advance financial management should be approached within a managerial rather than purely technical context, thereby shifting the focus from technical skills to soft skills. Although Nkado's (2000) findings are dated, similar concerns have since been echoed, with employers indicating that graduated should be capable of handling not only technical tasks but also managerial responsibilities such as client management, business awareness and dispute resolution (Zaheer et al., 2021; Mavasa & Terblanche, 2023). The explicit lack of soft skill assessment mechanisms and limited engagement with industry practitioners remain among the primary reasons for the absence of these skills within the Quantity Surveying curriculum (Mahasneh et al., 2015). Existing literature provides valuable insights into the soft skills required for early career development among professionals. While these studies offer recommendations for change and improvement, they often fail to offer practical implementable strategies to align tertiary education with current industry needs (Mavasa & Terblanche, 2023; Van Eck, 2024). The studies that propose solutions are discussed further in the literature review, with specific reference to Table 3. With the persistent concern from industry, suggest that existing educational reforms have not effectively bridged the gap between academia and industry. This raises a critical question: if the skill deficiencies are well known, why are South African Quantity Surveying education institutions slow in adapt by integrating the required competencies into their curriculum? Therefore, this study aims to build on the valuable findings from the existing literature, to develop and propose an evidence-based short course that can be integrated into the higher education system to bridge the gap between academic preparation and industry expectations. If there is no intentional shift in the Quantity Surveying education system, graduates will continue to face reduced employability, lengthy onboarding periods and ongoing employer dissatisfaction.

Short courses as a tool to enhance graduate capabilities

In the context of slow curriculum reform, short courses have been proven an agile tool for supplementing graduate skill sets to respond to industry needs (Collins, 2023). As the construction industry continues to evolve, tertiary institutions often struggle to keep up the pace with emerging trends. While it may be possible to incorporate new developments at a theoretical level, the lack of practical and in-depth teaching leaves graduates lagging behind industry expectations. Short courses provide intensive, targeted and blended learning interventions that provide flexibility and targeted content to address the evolving competencies required of construction professionals (Mahasneh et al., 2015). Unlike full programme revisions, short courses can be developed rapidly through collaboration with industry partners, allowing them to accommodate graduates, students and professionals alike. In several Middle Eastern countries, short courses are used as a pre-graduation intervention to ensure students transition smoothly from tertiary education into the workplace (Mahasneh et al., 2015). Furthermore, short courses offer valuable opportunities for academic-industry collaboration, where industry leaders can directly contribute and influence curriculum by incorporating real-world scenarios, mentorship and current practises within the construction industry. Numerous short courses available that focus on various aspects of the Quantity Surveying industry. The courses offered by Nelson Mandela University (2018), CPD Consult (2025), RIB CCS (2025) and the University of the Free State (2024), primarily focus on technical aspects of Quantity Surveying, while those offered by Wits Plus (2025), ASAQS (2025) and GetSmarter (2025) address both technical and soft skill development. The existing short courses offered by the abovementioned entities are summarised in Table 1 below, which outlines the course name, provider, structure, and learning outcomes or focus areas. The list is not

exhaustive and includes only those courses that have been publicly advertised or made available online.

Table 1 Short Courses related to Quantity Surveying

Course Name	**Provider**	**Structure of the course**	**Learning outcomes/Focus Modules**	**Reference**
Quantity Surveying Short Course	University of Witwatersrand (Wits Plus)	Credit bearing course towards the Honours degree. Students who complete the course will receive a Certificate of Competence. This course is offered virtually.	The short course covers the following modules: Research and Professional Skills, Construction Law, Dispute Resolution, Construction Project Management, Cost Evaluation and Control.	Wits Plus (2025)
Pricing Building Work	Nelson Mandela University	A four-day short intensive programme focussed on construction finance.	This course covers the following: Construction Finance, Measurement and Pricing of Building Works, BOQ preparation and Cost planning.	Nelson Mandela University Department of Quantity Surveying (2018)
Estimating, Costing & Pricing of Construction Tenders	CPD Consult	A two-day CPD course offering fundamentals of estimating, costing and pricing of tenders	This course covers the following: Cost estimation, Measurements, Cost build ups, Tender pricing strategies, cash flow predictions, Cost Risk analysis, and Competitive bidding methods.	CPD Consult (2025)
ASAQS CPD Webinars	ASAQS	Various CPD Webinars covering various topics within the construction industry	The CPD Webinars cover: Financial Feasibility Studies, Digitalisation, Decarbonisation, Construction Law, QS Lifestyle, QS Practice, Diversification of the QS field, Public sector, Measurement of Building Works.	ASAQS (2025)
Construction Management Online Short Course	University of Cape Town – Get Smarter	8-week online course that focus on management and project delivery.	This short course covers: Project planning, Risk management, Stakeholder	GetSmarter (2025)

			management, Cost control, and Leadership skills.	
BIM & Digital QS Practices	RIB CCS South Africa	Professional training by the vendor.	This training course covers: Practical training on 5D BIM, Pricing, Cost modelling, Progress valuation and cost reporting.	RIB CCS (2025)
Short learning programmes in Quantity Surveying, Construction Management and Project Management (QCP)	The University of the Free State	The courses are offered through online lectures through the LMS platform; Blackboard.	These courses consist of: Introduction to Building Quantities, Introduction to Building Materials, Introduction to Building Economics, Introduction to Property Development, and Introduction to Construction Project Management.	University of the Free State (2024)

Research Methodology and Method

Research Methodology

This study adopts a exploratory mono method qualitative design. It primarily draws on existing literature to explore the mismatch between educational outcomes and industry expectations, with the aim of identifying technical and soft skills required in the Quantity Surveying workplace. The research relies heavily on recently published findings, prior studies and professional competency standards, all of which provide valuable data related to the South African Quantity Surveying industry. This methodological approach enables the researcher to synthesise existing knowledge (Booth, Sutton & Papaioannou, 2016). The aim of the research approach is to consolidate existing evidence and apply it to the development of a practical intervention in the form of a short course. The research approach consists of an inductive approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Research Method

The research method consists of three interrelated stages, beginning with analysing existing literature. A review of local literature was conducted to explore the evolving role of Quantity Surveyors within a digital and interdisciplinary environment, and skills gaps identified in previous studies. The second stage involved analysing the key findings from empirical studies to compare and validate recurring themes and to identify priority areas for targeted intervention. The final stage of the research focussed on designing the proposed short course framework, which was directly informed by the findings from the existing literature. Employing a mono-method approach enhances validity of the study by drawing on the strengths of previous findings that has examined the topic in depth (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Population and Sampling

The population of this study consisted of existing empirical and professional literature addressing graduate employability and competency development within the Quantity Surveying and Construction Management disciplines. The study made use of non-probability purposive sampling (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), focussing on studies that directly investigated skills, employability, and graduate readiness among Quantity Surveyors. The studies that were included in this study are contextually relevant to the South African Quantity Surveying industry. Patterns, gaps and themes were critically

analysed from a range of scholarly and professional works, including those by Ahmadu et al. (2023), Ajayi et al. (2020), ASAQS (2023), Karunasena et al. (2017), Marzuki et al. (2023), Mavasa and Terblanche (2023), Mtebula (2014), Nkado (2000), Shafie et al. (2014), Van Eck (2024) and Zaheer et al. (2020).

Data collection Methods

The study employed documentary and secondary data collection methods. The data for this study was primarily drawn from empirical research studies published in peer-reviewed journals, professional frameworks and policy documents, and institutional course materials and competency outlines. The document analysis was chosen as the preferred data collection method as it allowed for systematic examination of existing findings (Bowen, 2009).

Data Analysis Techniques

The study employed an inductive thematic analysis, which involved categorising extracted information into themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The study begins with analysing specific findings from existing studies, thereafter recurring themes were identified and grouped into five skill categories. Thereafter the study developed a proposed short course framework grounded in the evidence found through literature analysis. Data extraction to determine the most prominent skills gaps mentioned among literature was conducted and represented in Table 2 below.

Table 2 Synthesis of Extracted Data

Category/Theme	No. of studies referencing the category/theme	Authors
Soft Skills	9	Ahmadu (2023), Ajayi (2020), Karunasena (2017), Marzuki (2023), Mavasa & Terblanche (2023), Nkado (2000), Shafie (2014), Van Eck (2024)
Professional Behaviour	7	Ahmadu (2023), Mtebula (2014), Van Eck (2024), Zaheer (2020), ASAQS (2023), Mavasa & Terblanche (2023), Nkado (2000)
Ethics in the Workplace	3	ASAQS (2023), Van Eck (2024), Zaheer (2020)
Digital Fluency	2	ASAQS (2023), Zaheer (2020)
Workplace Experience / Readiness	4	Mtebula (2014), Shafie (2014), Marzuki (2023), Mavasa & Terblanche (2023), Nkado (2000)

Reliability and Validity

The studies credibility was achieved through the adoption of triangulating evidence across multiple resources (empirical findings, frameworks, and institutional curriculum) (Noble & Heale, 2019).

Ethical Considerations

This study did not collect data through human participation, however ethical integrity was established through citation of all academic work, no sensitive data or information was included in the study and ethical approval aligning with CPUT's Ethical Research Policy was obtained.

Research Results

Due to the literature-led methodology, the results derived from the review of existing South African studies are presented in this section. The findings from the literature provides a foundation for the preliminary design of the short course framework, which aims to address the existing skills gaps among graduates transitioning from education to industry. Furthermore, the findings of the study provide insights into the extent of the skills gap between academia and industry and highlight proposed solutions previously identified in literature.

Finding 1: Graduate skill deficiencies in South Africa

The first finding highlights the skills mismatch between higher education and professional practise. **Table 3** below provides an overview of the main themes identified across relevant studies examining the skills gaps among graduate Quantity Surveyors in South Africa.

Table 3 Quantity Surveying skill deficiencies in amongst literature

Skill Category	Type of skill	Authors
Soft Skills	Poor communication on a verbal and written format	Mavasa & Terblanche (2023), Van Eck (2024), Ajayi et al. (2020)
	Low self-confidence and weak interpersonal skills	Ahmadu et al. (2023), Shafie et al. (2014), Mavasa & Terblanche (2023), Marzuki et al. (2023)
	Inability to work independently Unable to manage time effectively	Van Eck (2024), Karunasena et al. (2017), Mavasa & Terblanche (2023)
	Unable to work well in teams	Van Eck (2024), Mavasa & Terblanche (2023), ASAQS (2023), Zaheer et al. (2020)
	Lack of conflict resolution	Van Eck (2024)
	Lack of fast integration into work environment (unable to adapt)	Van Eck (2024), Mavasa & Terblanche (2023), Zaheer et al. (2020)
Professional Behaviour	Lack of professional maturity	Mavasa & Terblanche (2023), Van Eck (2024), Zaheer et al. (2020)
	Weak workplace etiquette Not work-place ready	Van Eck (2024), Mtebula (2014), Mavasa & Terblanche (2023)
	Poor understanding of organisational culture	Van Eck (2024), Mavasa & Terblanche (2023)
Ethics in workplace	Lack of ethical awareness	SACQSP (2021), Van Eck (2024)
Digital fluency	Limited to no exposure of software applications such as BIM or other digital cost tools	Mavasa & Terblanche (2023), Van Eck (2024), Zaheer et al. (2020)
Workplace Experience	Lack real project exposure	Van Eck (2024), Mtebula (2014), Mavasa & Terblanche (2023), Nkado (2000)

Finding 2: Misalignment between tertiary education and professional practice

Existing literature repeatedly highlights the misalignment within the current Quantity Surveying education curriculum. While graduates may meet all the academic requirements, many fail to demonstrate the behavioural and professional standards expected by industry employers.

Finding 3: Proposed solutions across literature

Proposed solutions from existing literature vary among authors. There are five proposed solutions which includes competency frameworks, soft skill development, partnership and collaboration, curriculum reform, and mentorship and involvement of professional bodies. Table 4 below provides further insights to the proposed solutions. Existing literature presents various solutions for closing the skills gap between academia and industry. As shown in Table 4, it can be debated that these proposed solutions have the potential to help bridge the gap; however, the lack of implementation limits our ability to assess their effectiveness. Future research is recommended to examine the proposed

solution and evaluate their impact on graduate readiness. Therefore, this study explores and alternative proposal; an implementable solution designed to produce measurable evidence if its effectiveness in addressing existing skills gaps.

Table 4 Proposed solutions for minimising the skills gap between graduates and industry

Proposed solutions	Description of solution	Authors
Competency Frameworks	A competency-based review of the Quantity Surveying profession in South Africa. Four categories of competencies (technical, managerial, financial and professional) should be used to evaluate course content in tertiary education institutions.	Nkado (2000)
	A comprehensive competency framework where educational institutions should focus less on technical knowledge to ensure graduates are well-rounded and market ready.	Zaheer et al. (2021
	A soft skills development framework where higher educational institutions and employers can cultivate and assess soft skills during early career development.	Van Eck (2024)
Soft Skills Development	The study calls for higher educational institutions to embed the four soft skill categories (self-management, interaction, analytical skills and professionalism) into their curriculum. Employers should also deliberately mentor their candidates to cultivate these soft skills and a suggestion for SACQSP to integrate these skills into the APC.	Van Eck (2024)
	Integration of soft skills into Quantity Surveying programmes offered at educational institutions.	Mavasa & Terblanche (2023)
University and Industry Partnerships	Recommend that collaboration should take place between employers, professional bodies and universities to ensure graduates gain workplace experience prior to appointment.	Zaheer et al. (2021)
	Suggesting workshops, mentorship programmes and internships to align student skills with industry needs.	Mavasa & Terblanche (2023)
Curriculum Reform	Recommends curriculum reform to evolve beyond technical measurements, but also include project management, marketing and financial management.	Nkado (2000)
	Recommend a more competency-based curriculum that balances technical, practical and personality-based skills.	Zaheer et al. (2021)
	Recommend integration of sustainability, digital fluency and employment related initiatives to ensure curriculum reflects industry needs.	Mavasa & Terblanche (2023)
Mentorship and Professional Bodies' Role	ASAQS and SACQSP are directly involved with mentoring and CPD training. She recommends that explicit soft skills should be integrated into the APC requirements.	Van Eck (2024)
	Expand CPD awareness amongst students to encourage participation.	Zaheer et al. (2021)

Finding 4: Existing Short Courses and Their Limitations

The short courses discussed in this study reveals that, while they contribute meaningfully to continuous professional development, they predominantly focus on technical aspects rather than the holistic

skillset demanded by industry. Institutions offering short learning programmes, have all developed short learning programmes that address elements of construction finance, cost control, digitalisation, project management, and measurement principles. However, a critical gap remains; many of these short courses lack explicit integration of soft skills, professional behaviour, and ethical training; the very areas identified by employers as the most deficient among graduate Quantity Surveyors.

Discussion

The following chapter consist of the discussions and findings based on the main objectives of the study.

Objective 1: To identify the most prominent soft skills, technical capabilities, digital fluency and behavioural competencies that are expected of Quantity Surveying graduates through in-depth analysis of existing literature findings. Findings related to Objective 1; the most prominent skills lacking among graduate Quantity Surveyors are divided into five categories below.

The most prominent skill category that lacks within graduate Quantity Surveyors have been found to be soft skills. These include poor communication on a verbal and written format, low self-confidence, weak interpersonal skills, inability to work independently, ineffective time management, poor teamwork, limited conflict resolution skills, and slow adaptation to the work environment. The soft skills found within the existing literature revolves around the personal attributes and personal abilities of students; this category is one of the most important categories as several studies found that employers rank the social skills as highly required for employment of graduate quantity surveyors. The second skill category is professional behaviour. This includes attributes like lack of professional maturity, weak workplace etiquette, work-place unpreparedness, poor understanding of organisational culture. This category falls somewhat into the soft skill category; however, it has been deliberately separated into a second category, due to the high emphasis on professionalism and workplace readiness specifically relating to the Quantity Surveying industry. The third skill category revolves around ethics in the workplace. This category focusses on the lack of ethical awareness within graduate Quantity Surveyors. Findings from literature indicates that graduates fail to recognise that situations or decisions has ethical implications. The skills include fairness, honesty, right and wrong and professional responsibility. This skill is underdeveloped in graduates mostly due to lack of sensitivity, experience and training. The fourth category deals with digital fluency. This includes skills such as limited to no exposure of software applications such as BIM or other digital cost tools. This skill category falls within the technical abilities of graduates, with a heavy focus on digital proficiency. Literature findings state that graduates are deemed capable of technical aspects like measurements, cost planning and control and contract administration, however the lack lies within applying the technical abilities on digital platforms. Therefore, the skill itself needs to evolve from paper-based application to digital based application. The final category is workplace experience. Findings are primarily focussed on the lack real project exposure. The graduates can theoretically apply certain skills to scenarios, however when it comes to converting theory to application, that is when the lack of experience comes to light. For a student to become proficient within this category, they require experience through experimentation and actual performance of the tasks, reflection which involve analysing what has been done and rectifying any mistakes, progressiveness which comes from repeating the stimulation and lastly the student requires supervision from a qualified practitioner.

The five categories above encompass the most prominent skills that are required and demanded by industry and therefore will form the core of the proposed short course framework.

Objective 2: To design a targeted short course framework that addresses the most critical skill gaps. Based on the findings from Objective 1, this study can continue to objective 2. The design of the proposed short course is discussed in greater detail in the recommendation section of this study. The design of the short course revolves around the five core categories from Objective 1. Each category is designed to have its own designated content and assessment techniques to maximise the potential of successfully delivering the skills across to the participants.

Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the most prominent skills required of graduate Quantity Surveyors when entering the industry. It was conducted in direct response to ongoing concerns from industry that graduates are often unprepared lack specific skills required for professional practice. If graduates are

not adequately equipped to meet market expectations, their employability prospects are significantly reduced. The study constructively identified five core categories of attributes and skills; soft skills, professional behaviour, ethics in the workplace, digital fluency and workplace experience. Based on these findings the study developed a proposed short course framework to address the skills shortcomings among graduates. This study relied on the findings of previous literature, which allowed room for providing future recommendations. Ultimately, the proposed short course may not necessarily eliminate the skills gap but aims to narrow it by providing an interim implementable solution whilst curriculum reform, competency frameworks or partnerships amongst universities and industry are being developed.

Recommendations

The following recommendations based on the findings of this study starts with the implementation of a targeted short course. It is recommended that tertiary institutions who offer Quantity Surveying programmes, integrate this framework into their educational offerings as a graduation intervention. A secondary recommendation is that if tertiary institutions cannot offer the short course at their universities, that they recommend or motivate their students to attend the short course at universities who has the short course on offer. The course is designed to be accessible, flexible and content-rich with heavy reliance on practical application of certain attributes. The proposed short course framework aims to consist of five designated modules. There are restraints and limitations to this research, as it draws solely from secondary data and does not include validation through contemporary quantitative surveys or qualitative interviews. It is recommended that further research should focus on validate the proposed short course framework by obtaining input from professional bodies and industry experts, to ensure it relevancy and applicability. Additionally, further research is recommended to examine the proposed solutions and evaluate their impact on graduate readiness.

Table5 below provides an overview of the proposed short course framework.

Table 5 Short course proposal

Short Course Title:	The Core Skills for Graduate Quantity Surveyors in the 21st century
Short Course Aim:	This course aims to equip students with the knowledge to enhance their soft skills, technical capabilities, professionalism, ethical awareness and digital fluency. Graduates who apply for this course should have the basic understanding of the Quantity Surveying profession. This course is aimed at students who want to develop specific attributes as required by industry and potentially enhance their chances of employability.
Faculties/Units:	Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment
Purpose of the course:	This course is a direct response to the industry plea for tertiary institutions to attend to the large skills gap between academia and the Quantity Surveying industry. The rationale for the development of the course is the high unemployment rate amongst graduates in South Africa as well as slow curriculum reform amongst higher education institutions.
Who will benefit from this course:	The course is designed for students, graduates and employees who aim to enhance their personal capabilities and attributes within the quantity surveying industry. The course aims to benefit the students, as they will be able to enhance the most prominent and requested skills amongst quantity surveyors entering the industry. This therefore will benefit the employers of these graduates, as employers will receive well rounded, informed and further developed employees who possess the much-needed skills as required by industry. Thirdly, the tertiary institutions will benefit from this course as they will be confident in producing market ready graduates.
Qualification:	The student will receive a certificate of completion once the course has been successfully passed.

Duration:	It is suggested that this course is provided on a hybrid method, where both face-to-face and virtual sessions will take place. The course is to be offered over a duration of 12 weeks (36 hours).
Entry requirements:	Student who is currently enrolled or have completed a National Diploma in Construction, BSc in Quantity Surveying, BTech or similar qualifications in a relevant field. Students must have their own computers/desktops and access to stable internet.
Course structure:	This course is meticulously designed to provide in depth understanding of the most prominent attributes required by industry. The course is made up of five core modules as depicted below.
Module 1 – Communication and Interpersonal skills in the construction industry	The objective of this module is to enhance the communication abilities of graduate quantity surveyors and how they effectively communicate with clients, contractors, consultants and teams. The content that will be covered during this module will be based on students having to understand the context of site-based versus office-based communication, all expected written communication skills required by quantity surveyors, such as the effective writing of meeting minutes, technical emails and assisting with writing up of site instructions. Furthermore, this module will focus on techniques on how to engage with clients, understanding the type of clients and how to effectively explain complex construction related scope issues with non-technical clients. Delving into conflict resolution, where students will be exposed to real-life contract disputes, variation claims and professional team disagreements. During this module the students will be trained on their reporting skills which will include the preparation of concise cost reports and reporting on valuation justification to their clients. Lastly this module will focus on specific stakeholder communication skills such as being able to adapt your communication style according to the different interactions with various construction stakeholders. The assessment methods for this module aims to consist of role-play simulations and incorporating professional communication professionals to present their content to the students and assessment on preparation of technical reports.
Module 2 – Ethics in Quantity Surveying Practice and Professional Behaviour	This module aims to enrich the ethical awareness and professional conduct of Quantity Surveyors in alignment with the SACQSP code of conduct. The content that will be covered in this module will consist of the SACQSP's Code of Conduct where the students will be provided with and overview and its application in real life practice. Discussions related to bribery, manipulation of measurements, tender irregularities and conflict of interest will be covered to ensure students are made aware of the unethical behaviours that they could expect in the workplace. The enhancement of professional conduct through timekeeping techniques, email etiquette, how to present yourself during meetings and how to conduct yourself of construction sites. Lastly to enhance the understanding of organisational culture, what type of behaviour would be expected from them on a construction site vs in an office setting. The assessment methods for this module will consist of case studies where ethical breaches occurred, simulation of disciplinary hearings and essay writing on ethical decisions during cost management.
Module 3 - Digital Capabilities for Quantity Surveyors	This module aims to introduce the practical aspects of Quantity Surveying to introduce modern digital tools that are currently being utilised within Quantity Surveying firms. The content that will be covered during this module would be the practical introduction into Building Information Modelling, where students will learn how Quantity Surveyors use this program for quantity take-off, lifecycle costing and potential clash detection. Introduction to WinQS, CostX, Candy CCS to ensure students are informed on the basic navigation of these

	measurement tools with the use of digital drawings. Introduction to project management tools to enhance students' time management of tasks. The assessment during this module will consist of practical and guided tutorials of digital platforms like BIM, CostX, WinQS and CCS Candy. Compiling quantity take-offs and bill production using the applicable software.
Module 4 – Work Readiness and self-management	This module aims to cultivate practical habits for students to work independently, adapt to different work conditions and scenarios, and techniques on how to integrate into the high-paced work environment. The content that this module aims to cover will consist of time management and task management where students will learn the importance and skills of prioritising tasks during the different stages of construction life cycle. Techniques on how students should manage stress, conflict and navigate multiple project demands. And lastly is enhancing their understanding on goalsetting and professional development, where they would be expected to complete their SACQSP logbooks, what career development courses are available for development from a candidate to professional. The assessment types would consist of designing planners with conflicting deadlines, goal setting and future-mapping their career development plan.
Module 5 – Collaborative Project Simulation	This module aims to create a simulation of real-world scenarios to provide practical construction scenarios that require team integration. The content to be covered during this module is creating a team based tender evaluation where groups receive complete tender documents and will be tasked to evaluate all tender documents and make a professional recommendation to their client/principal agent. Simulation of site cost management where groups will be required to manage fictional cost reports, variation claims and payment certificates across the project's life cycle. Integration of communication modules where groups are expected to practice communication skills, digital skills and ethical judgements. The assessment of this module's content will be done through group reports, group debates, technical reports and observations.
Assessment:	This short course aims to invite working Quantity Surveyors, contractors, mentors and communication professionals to co-facilitate certain aspects of the course offerings. For successful completion of the course, the attendee needs to obtain a passing mark of at least 50%. Re-assessments will be provided to students who did not meet the pass mark.
Method of delivery:	The course will be presented via LMS platform such as Blackboard, Vula, Amathuba or similar. Students will be expected to attend online and face-to-face sessions throughout the duration of the course. The face-to-face sessions will form an integral part of the cultivation of certain skills, therefore it is suggested that a hybrid method is followed.
Resources:	All notes, books and media are provided via the LMS, which should be accessible via mobile and computer systems.
Lecturer requirements:	A minimum of one facilitator is required; more would be beneficial. The lecturer is to have a minimum qualification of an Advance Diploma in Construction Management/Quantity Surveying, BSc in Quantity Surveying or similar with at least 2 years of working experience in the building industry.
The financial requirements for this course has been explicitly left out, as each institution will have their own fees related to lecturers, guest speakers, venue hire, catering, stationary, etc.	

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SACQSP2025-19

Learner Agency Profiles in Team-Based Problem-Based Learning: Viewpoints from Construction Management and Quantity Surveying Students

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ABSTRACT

This empirical study investigates how university students exhibit learner agency within team settings and investigates which aspects of these settings students find most supportive for their education. Learner agency involves students' willingness and ability to take initiative and act in their education. These skills are relevant for preparing the student for the world of work in construction management and quantity surveying, developing critical attributes demanded in professional practice in these fields. The study investigates how students in construction management and quantity surveying recognise and exercise their capacity to direct and make choices about their learning process. The purpose was to determine which aspects of students' ability to take control of their learning they consider most crucial. Cultivating the ability to take initiative, make decisions, and adapt to different environments directly enhances their readiness and effectiveness for professional roles. The study comprised university students from Cape Town, South Africa, registered in a construction project management course within the engineering faculty. Q methodology was selected as the methodological approach for collecting and interpreting both qualitative and quantitative data. Q methodology permits researchers to investigate people's subjective viewpoints and quantify patterns in these viewpoints. The analysis identified three distinct student learning profiles, Team-Autonomous, Externally Engaged, and Individualistic, cumulatively explaining 41% of the total variance. These highlight divergent preferences in teamwork, lecturer guidance, and prior knowledge, while sharing a common positive attitude towards exploring new ways of learning. The research resulting from the Q methodology study on learner agency in Construction Management and Quantity Surveying students suggests comprehensive lessons and recommendations for improving teaching, learning practice, and curriculum design, primarily by directing the specific needs and challenges highlighted by the three distinct learner profiles.

Keywords: Agency, Problem-Based Learning, Q Methodology, Construction Management, Quantity Surveying.

Introduction

Learner agency is increasingly recognised in higher education for its strong association with learner-centred pedagogies, self-regulated learning, collaborative engagement, and the cultivation of autonomy. It is conceptualised as students' capacity and willingness to act, emerging from the dynamic interplay between self-directed learning efforts and contextual influences. Research indicates that agentic learning is positively correlated with self-efficacy, metacognitive awareness, learning competence, academic performance, and the development of skills such as critical thinking and professional identity formation. Crucially, competencies linked to learner agency, including initiative-taking, independent action, self-direction, and informed decision-making, foster essential attributes for professional practice in construction management and quantity surveying. Developing these capabilities enhances graduate preparedness and effectiveness in professional roles within these disciplines.

Globally, professional education, including engineering and related disciplines, is increasingly adopting problem-based learning in response to industry concerns regarding graduates' workplace readiness (Mkhize & Reddy, 2025) and evolving accreditation standards (Erkir & Kayapinar, 2025). Problem-based learning is a well-established pedagogical approach that supports accreditation outcomes by

engaging students in collaborative problem-solving of complex, real-world challenges (Leming, 2025). This methodology aligns with the Cape Peninsula University of Technology's (CPUT) focus on transformative, competency-based learning (CPUT, 2021; de Wet, 2021; James, Malkin & Nusche, 2025), aimed at equipping quantity surveying and construction management graduates with the skills required to meet contemporary industry demands (CPUT, 2024). Since 2019, project-based learning initiatives have been embedded within the CPUT Construction Management and Quantity Surveying curricula. While initial pilot studies indicated enhancements in deep learning and collaborative skills, they also highlighted students' continued dependence on lecturers as primary knowledge sources (Zamiri & Esmaeili, 2024), suggesting that reshaping learners' perceptions of their active role is a gradual process necessitating deliberate pedagogical intervention (Mercer, 2011b).

While existing literature reports individual learner agency, there remains a accepted limitation in the empirical understanding of agency enactment and resource utilisation, particularly within team settings. Agency is suggested to be both individual and collective, combining resources for shared goals. Furthermore, although the theoretical discussion regarding agency enactment resides mainly in broader international research, scholarship specifically focusing on African or South African perspectives on learner agency, teamwork, or Problem-Based Learning is limited. A deeper, context-specific empirical investigation is therefore warranted into how Construction Management and Quantity Surveying students perceive and utilise their agency in collaborative Problem-Based Learning environments. This empirical study adopts Bandura's (2008) model of human agency to frame the analysis of student perspectives across three fundamental, interrelated dimensions: intrapersonal, behavioural, and environmental. The cost of leaving this condition unresolved is that graduates may lack the fully developed independent, self-regulated, and collaborative agency necessary to navigate complex, real-world construction projects successfully.

This study addresses these identified gaps by empirically investigating student perspectives on learner agency in collaborative problem-based learning contexts within Construction Management and Quantity Surveying education. The overall aim is to explore how these students identify and effect their capacity to direct and make choices about their learning process within team settings.

The specific objectives of this study are to:

1. Identify the distinct profiles (viewpoints) of learner agency enactment among Construction Management and Quantity Surveying students in team-based problem-based learning settings.
2. Determine which specific elements of the problem-based learning approach students view as most effective in defining their learner agency, framed by Bandura's (2008) three dimensions (intrapersonal, behavioural, and environmental).
3. Offer discipline-specific pedagogical implications for improving agency, self-directed learning, and professional readiness in Construction Management and Quantity Surveying education.

Following this introduction, the paper first reviews the literature on learner agency and positions the study within problem-based learning contexts. The following section details the research methodology, presenting the justification for using Q methodology and outlining the research procedure, including the use of KADE analysis. The results then present the three distinct learner profiles identified: Team-Autonomous, Externally Engaged, and Individualistic. Lastly, the discussion compares these findings with previous research, and the conclusion offers insights and specific recommendations for lecturers and stakeholders in the Construction Management and Quantity Surveying disciplines.

Literature review

Conceptualising Learner Agency in Professional Education

Learner agency is recognised in higher education as a critical capacity encompassing autonomy, self-direction, responsibility, ownership, and reflection, all believed important for professional readiness and educational success (Alhadabi & Karpinski, 2020; Klemenčič, 2023). It is described as the students' willingness and ability to act, arising from the dynamic interaction between their self-directed learning efforts and the surrounding contextual influences. Agentic learning is empirically linked to self-efficacy, academic outcomes, and the formation of professional identity (Annala et al., 2023; Darvin & Norton, 2023; Klemenčič, 2023). In professional fields like Construction Management and Quantity Surveying, the ability and willingness to take initiative, act independently, and make decisions in complex scenarios are critical attributes for graduate effectiveness. Therefore, understanding how agency is

cultivated and enacted provides a direct link between educational pedagogy and professional competence, addressing industry concerns about readiness for the workplace (Mkhize & Reddy, 2025; Erkir & Kayapinar, 2025).

This study operationalises learner agency through Bandura's (2008) social cognitive model of human agency. While recognising the existence of other contemporary models, Bandura's framework, with its clear focus on triadic reciprocal causation, offers a robust and comprehensive lens to analyse how individual cognition, observable actions, and the environment constantly interact. This model identifies three central and interrelated dimensions guiding learning and agency development: the intrapersonal (cognitive, affective, motivational), the behavioural (autonomous actions and self-regulation), and the environmental (social context and team dynamics) (Bandura, 2008; Sökmen, 2021; Du & Naji, 2021).

Agency Enactment in Problem-Based Learning Team Settings

Problem-based learning (Problem-Based Learning) and project-based approaches are widely accepted in engineering education to foster competencies critical for agency, such as collaboration, problem-solving, and autonomous learning (Hmelo-Silver, 2004; Fischer, 2025; Leming, 2025). This pedagogy aligns with institutional priorities, such as CPUT's emphasis on transformative learning (CPUT, 2021; de Wet, 2021; James, Malkin & Nusche, 2025). However, the literature shows critical tensions and gaps involving how agency is enacted, particularly in team settings, despite the developing encouragement of teamwork. Agency, in team contexts, is suggested to be both individual and collective, needing individuals to pool resources for shared goals.

The Intrapersonal Dimension and Student Reliance

The intrapersonal aspect underscores a student's self-perception, efficacy, and motivation (Alhadabi & Karpinski, 2020; Sökmen, 2021). Agency is enhanced when learners feel confident in their ability to develop new skills and perceive the Problem-Based Learning approach as contributing positively to their professional growth (Annala et al., 2023). Problem-Based Learning is known for improving motivation by highlighting theory-practice connections. Yet, research highlights challenges, such as findings from CPUT pilot studies where students persistently rely on instructors as their primary source of knowledge (Zamiri & Esmaeili, 2024). This persistent reliance on lecturers contradicts the philosophy of Problem-Based Learning and shows a shortfall in the intrapersonal dimension, suggesting that learners may lack full self-efficacy or belief in their ability for independent knowledge acquisition. This highlights that shifting learners' beliefs and mindsets is a gradual process involving focused pedagogical effort (Mercer, 2011b).

The Behavioural Dimension and Self-Regulation

The behavioural dimension focuses on self-regulation, the intentional management of cognition, motivation, and emotion during learning (Sökmen, 2021). Self-regulated learning is central to Problem-Based Learning and a major intended outcome of project-based teamwork (Hmelo-Silver, 2004). Agentic students are proactive, organising project work, consulting diverse information resources, and participating collaboratively. However, the literature notes significant variability, particularly among students with limited Problem-Based Learning capability, who may prioritise personal tasks and marks over real collaborative resource sharing (Du & Naji, 2021). This raises the question of how Construction Management and Quantity Surveying students successfully interpret individual self-regulatory skills into actual collective action when managing complex project obstacles and diverse information sources, as is required in real-world construction projects. The consensus that students "explored a variety of sources to support our project work" suggests an underlying agentic behaviour, but the depth of self-directed learning remains questionable.

The Environmental Dimension and Team Dynamics

The environmental dimension investigates how students interpret and engage with their learning context, especially the team, class, or institution. Supportive environments, instructor feedback, and reciprocal discussion are crucial for agency (Annala et al., 2023; Bovill & Woolmer, 2020). Effective teams demonstrate strong collaboration through interdependence, conflict management, and self-directed organisation. Critically, poorly performing Problem-Based Learning teams frequently demonstrate passive agency by over-relying on lecturers and provided materials (Zamiri & Esmaeili, 2024). This reveals that the learning environment, particularly the team setting, can either enable or

inhibit agency. The literature is limited in identifying the specific environmental elements students themselves perceive as most influential for enabling their agency, especially within the Construction Management and Quantity Surveying disciplines.

Contextual and Disciplinary Specificity: The Knowledge Gap

The current body of research on learner agency and Problem-Based Learning tends to situate arguments generally within international engineering education. A significant gap exists in empirical studies focusing specifically on the complex requirements of built environment professions like Quantity Surveying and Construction Management. These disciplines require unique forms of collaborative agency for project success and risk management. Furthermore, much cutting-edge science derives from cultural and educational contexts distinct from South Africa. While CPUT is committed to preparing skilled professionals to meet industry demands (CPUT, 2024), the effect of local factors and limited prior experience with collaborative methods can impede the full adoption of agentic behaviours (Zamiri & Esmaeili, 2024). Therefore, an empirical investigation that includes African/South African scholarship is vital to enhance the local contribution and ensure pedagogical implications are contextually sensitive.

In summary, while the theoretical link between learner agency and success in Problem-Based Learning is established (Du & Naji, 2021; Lyngdorf, Du & Lundberg, 2023), a substantial knowledge gap persists regarding: 1) The diversity of subjective viewpoints (profiles) on agency enactment in collaborative team settings; 2) The specific perceptions of agency among students in Construction Management and Quantity Surveying education; and 3) Which aspects of the Problem-Based Learning environment (intrapersonal, behavioural, or environmental) are perceived by students in this specific African context as most significant for determining their capacity to direct their own learning. This study employs Q methodology to address these gaps by examining the subjective viewpoints of Construction Management and Quantity Surveying students regarding their agency within team-based Problem-Based Learning contexts.

Research Methodology and Method

Q methodology was selected as the research approach for this study to explore the unobservable and uncertain characteristics of human subjectivity regarding learner agency, aligning with the requirement for a research method that can capture divergent viewpoints within a seemingly homogenous group (Ramlo, 2020). Q methodology is a distinct research method often classified as mixed methods, as it combines qualitative data collection with quantitative (statistical) techniques to identify shared patterns and factors in subjective viewpoints (Stephenson, 1953; Damar & Sali, 2022). This approach provides a robust means to explore the importance of different problem-based learning characteristics to learner agency, a topic relatively new in engineering education research (Desing & Kajfez, 2020; Chaaban, Tarlochan, Chen & Du, 2025; Lyngdorf, Du & Lundberg, 2023). The justification for using Q methodology is supported by its ability to provide layered insights into the subjective perceptions of students in specific professional fields, making it predominantly well-suited for discovering the diverse expressions of learner agency within the Construction Management and Quantity Surveying contexts at CPUT, thereby addressing the demand for disciplinary specificity.

The study adhered to a standard Q methodological procedure. The research procedure commenced with the development of the concourse, representing the universe of statements relevant to the study topic (the Q set) derived from prior research on learner agency in problem-based learning (Du et al., 2022) and the authors' implementation experience (Stephenson, 1953). The resulting Q set construction involved deductively producing 40 statements anchored in Bandura's (2008) three interconnected dimensions of learner agency: intrapersonal, behavioural, and environmental. These statements, all framed in the present tense, were designed to capture insights of agency enactment within a team-based problem-based learning environment (Du et al., 2022). The participant sample consisted of 33 university students registered in a construction project management course within the engineering faculty at CPUT, reflecting a high response rate of 83% from a class of 40 Construction Management and Quantity Surveying students. This sample was tasked with rank-ordering the 40 statements on a quasi-normal distribution grid ranging from -5 (less important) to +5 (rather important), reflecting their subjective viewpoints on learner agency. The exploratory nature of this study dictates that the findings aim for factor generalisability (the identified profiles are views that possibly exist in the wider population), rather than statistical generalisability of the population sample.

The data analysis was conducted using KADE software (Banasick, 2019), involving centroid factor extraction followed by Varimax rotation. This process yielded a three-factor model, which cumulatively explained 41% of the total variance. While the choice of this three-factor solution was guided by its theoretical relevance, as it provided the clearest and most interpretable perspectives aligning with Bandura's tri-dimensional framework, it is also reinforced by the fact that explaining 41% of variance is regarded as a robust result in the social sciences, where human behaviour is inherently complex. Factor intercorrelations were insignificant, which further supported the selection of the three-factor model over a purely statistical selection grounded on eigenvalues alone. The final factor interpretation followed a qualitative, abductive approach, including both within and across-factor comparisons and integrating participants' post-sorting responses to supplement the descriptions of each factor and strengthen the trustworthiness of the results (Brown & Militello, 2016; Ramlo, 2020). Finally, the study was conducted in strict adherence to the ethical protocol of the institution, ensuring informed consent and managing potential risks associated with participation.

Research Results

The KADE analysis of the Q-sort data produced three distinct subjective profiles (factors) among Construction Management and Quantity Surveying students, representing differing perspectives on learner agency in team-based Problem-Based Learning environments (see Figure 1). Together, these three factors account for 41% of the total variance, which is considered a strong and meaningful outcome in light of the complexity and variability typical of human behaviour in social science research. The identification of these factors, Factor 1: Team-Autonomous, Factor 2: Externally Engaged, and Factor 3: Individualistic, delivers the crucial data necessary to answer the research question concerning which elements of the Problem-Based Learning approach students view as most influential in shaping their learner agency.

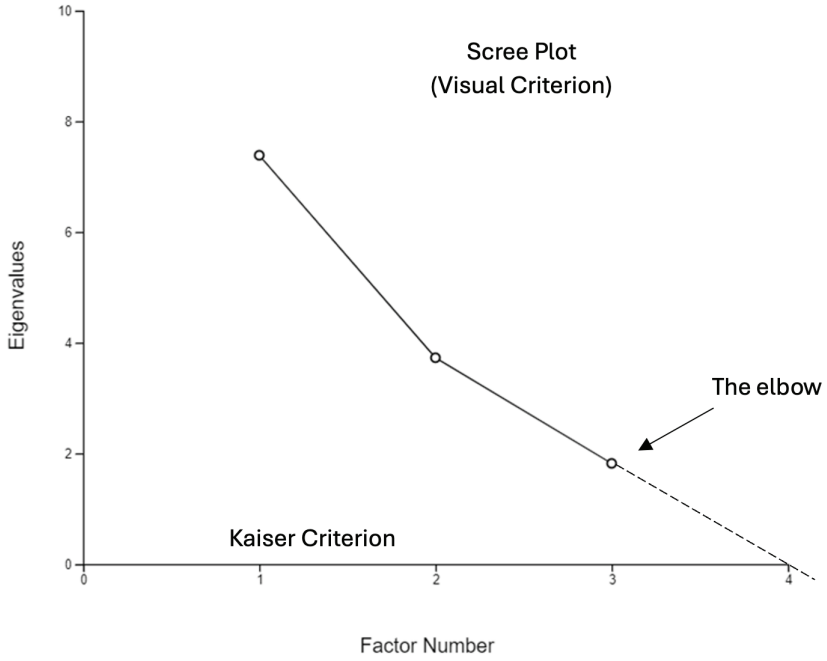

Figure 1 Screen Plot of Eigenvalues showing the Kaiser Criterion (Eigenvalue ≥1.0) and the visual elbow, both of which suggest retaining three factors. (source: KADE)

The first profile, Team-Autonomous and Internally Focused Learners (23% of variance explained), is defined by a strong inclination for internal team organisation and self-reliance. Students aligning with this profile decidedly valued the environmental and behavioural dimensions of agency related to effective team method, strongly agreeing with statements such as

"Our team distributed tasks among members effectively" (Q-sort value (QSV) 5) and
"I prioritised the tasks assigned to me during the teamwork" (QSV 4).

Conversely, they actively rejected external reliance, giving the lowest ratings to

"Our team was given the problem by the instructor" (QSV -5) and
"Our team relied on materials provided by the course instructor to keep our work on track" (QSV -4),

demonstrating a preference for self-management and team autonomy in acquiring knowledge and setting objectives. In the intrapersonal dimension, they showed a neutral or slightly negative view toward the importance of prior project-based learning knowledge or challenging the instructor's role as the primary knowledge source.

The second profile, Externally Engaged and Instructor-Guided Learners (12% of variance explained), demonstrates an orientation towards seeking support and guidance from both external peers and instructors. Behaviourally, this profile placed the highest importance on engaging with sources external to their immediate team, strongly rating.

"Our team regularly engaged with other teams to learn from their progress" (QSV 5)
and valuing instruction by strongly agreeing with
"Our team was given the problem by the instructor" (QSV 4).

They also rated the consistent monitoring of plans highly (QSV 4). Intriguingly, in the intrapersonal dimension, this group strongly rejected the importance of their own existing knowledge, assigning the lowest possible rating to

"I began the course with prior knowledge about project-based learning" (QSV -5)

…and negatively rating the effectiveness of Problem-Based Learning in maximising learning, suggesting they rely heavily on the immediate, external structure for guidance rather than internal confidence or prior experience. Environmentally, they positively rated structured team management elements, such as appointing a leader and addressing conflicts.

The third profile, Individualistic and Prior-Knowledge Valuing Learners (6% of variance explained), highlights a critical tension between individual performance and discomfort with collaborative dynamics. This profile expressed agency through strong individual effort and internal resources, highly valuing them.

"I made a concerted effort to contribute to both team and individual performance" (QSV 5)

…and placing significant importance on their own prior knowledge (QSV 4). Behaviourally, they emphasised self-reliance by strongly consulting various sources of expertise beyond the instructor (QSV 4) and independently selecting project topics (QSV 3), while also welcoming a shift away from the instructor as the primary source of authorised knowledge (QSV 2). Critically, this profile was primarily defined by its negative perceptions of the environmental dimension related to team interaction, expressing strong disagreement with essential collaborative actions like

"I felt comfortable expressing my opinions within the team" (QSV -5),

appointing a leader (QSV -4) and addressing conflicts (QSV -4). This reveals that for these learners, agentic contribution tends to be individually focused and potentially hindered by perceived difficulties in team engagement.

Despite these clear divergences in how students enact agency and utilise the three dimensions identified by Bandura (2008), the KADE analysis identified key areas of consensus across all three profiles. A shared positive sentiment was found towards the intrapersonal dimension of exploration, reflected in the consensus statement.

"I enjoyed exploring and applying new ways of learning" (QSV 3).

Behaviourally, all factors agreed on the general importance of using diverse information sources, as demonstrated by the consensus statement.

"Our team explored a variety of sources to support our project work" (QSV 1, 2, 1),

suggesting a baseline understanding of self-directed resource seeking. Individual proactive behaviour was also consistently rated neutrally or positively, with agreement on statements such as

"I took initiative throughout the team project process" (QSV 0) and
"I offered constructive feedback to other team members" (QSV 0, 1, 2).

These consensus findings suggest a fundamental, positive motivation toward agentic learning exists across the student population, even when their preferences for team structure and external support vary significantly (see Table 1).

Table 1 Summary of Student Learning Preference Profiles (Based on KADE Analysis)

Profile Title	Variance Explained	Defining Statements (Strongest Agreement)	Defining Statements (Strongest Disagreement)	Consensus Statement Across All Profiles
Factor 1: Team-Autonomous and Internally Focused Learners	23%	QSV 5: Our team distributed tasks among members effectively. QSV 4: I prioritised the tasks assigned to me during the teamwork.	QSV -5: Our team was given the problem by the instructor. QSV -4: Our team relied on materials provided by the course instructor to keep our work on track.	I enjoyed exploring and applying new ways of learning (QSV 3).
Factor 2: Externally Engaged and Instructor-Guided Learners	12%	QSV 5: Our team regularly engaged with other teams to learn from their progress. QSV 4: Our team was given the problem by the instructor.	QSV -5: I began the course with prior knowledge about project-based learning. QSV -3: I applied previous project-based learning experiences.	I took initiative throughout the team project process (QSV 0).
Factor 3: Individualistic and Prior-Knowledge Valuing Learners	6%	QSV 5: I made a concerted effort to contribute to both team and individual performance. QSV 4: I began the course with prior knowledge about project-based learning.	QSV -5: I felt comfortable expressing my opinions within the team. QSV -4: Our team appointed a leader; Our team addressed conflicts among members.	I offered constructive feedback to other team members (QSV 0, 1, 2).

Discussion

The KADE analysis produced three unique subjective factors representing Construction Management and Quantity Surveying students' perceptions of learner agency in team-based Problem-Based Learning settings, which together accounted for 41% of the total variance. This variety in viewpoints, even within a relatively homogenous professional student group, confirms that agency expression is a multifaceted process encompassing personal cognition, motivation, self-efficacy, and active participation (Bandura, 2008; Klemenčič, 2023). Using Bandura's (2008) triadic reciprocal causation model as a lens allows for a critical comparison of the three profiles, Team-Autonomous (Factor 1), Externally Engaged (Factor 2), and Individualistic (Factor 3), highlighting how they align with, diverge from, and build upon existing literature across intrapersonal, behavioural, and environmental dimensions.

Within the intrapersonal dimension, notable differences emerged concerning the importance of prior knowledge and the effectiveness of Problem-Based Learning. Factor 3 placed strong emphasis on possessing prior knowledge (QSV 4), indicating that individual preparedness and internal resources are seen as essential for self-directed learning, consistent with literature highlighting self-efficacy as a core trait of agentic learners (Annala et al., 2023). Conversely, Factors 1 and 2 largely rejected the position of prior Problem-Based Learning experience (QSV-1 and QSV-5, respectively), indicating that they either do not perceive their pre-existing attributes as critical to success in the current context or

they lack confidence in the transferability of experience. Regardless of this divergence, a universal positive consensus existed across all profiles regarding the statement "*I enjoyed exploring and applying new ways of learning*" (QSV 3). Despite variations in confidence, this common motivation points to an underlying intrinsic drive for agentic learning that educators can harness (Mercer, 2011b; Klemenčič, 2023).

The behavioural dimension underscores differing approaches to autonomy and guidance, which directly influence self-regulated learning (Sökmen, 2021). Factors 1 (Team-Autonomous) and 3 (Individualistic) demonstrated a pronounced preference for independent action and the pursuit of resources. Factor 1 negatively rated reliance on instructor-provided materials (QSV -4) and sought team autonomy (QSV -5 for "*Our team was given the problem by the instructo*r"), aligning with the core self-directed principles of Problem-Based Learning (Hmelo-Silver, 2004). In contrast, Factor 2 (Externally Engaged) welcomed receiving the problem from the lecturer (QSV 4) and placed high value on collaborating with other teams (QSV 5), indicating a reliance on external guidance to structure their learning. The passive presentation of agency observed in Factor 2, characterised by instructor dependence, confirms earlier findings from pilot studies at CPUT that students continue to rely heavily on instructors as their primary source of knowledge (Zamiri & Esmaeili, 2024). This ongoing challenge indicates that changing teacher-centered beliefs demands deliberate pedagogical effort (Mercer, 2011b), even when Problem-Based Learning is consistently applied (Du et al., 2025). Importantly, there was a consensus across all profiles that "*Our team explored a variety of sources to support our project work*" (QSV 1, 2, 1), suggesting that the act of resource seeking is universally acknowledged, though the source and the depth of this exploration differ significantly, indicating varying levels of self-regulation.

The environmental dimension exhibited the strongest tensions around collaboration. Factor 1 emphasized internal team dynamics and individual contributions, placing high value on efficient task distribution (QSV 5) and ease in voicing opinions (QSV 4). Factor 2 also valued structured team management, such as appointing a leader (QSV 3) and deal with conflicts (QSV 2). In direct contrast, Factor 3, while valuing individual contribution (QSV 5), showed a strong rejection of nearly all team interaction elements, assigning the lowest rating to feeling comfortable expressing opinions (QSV -5) and assigning a leader (QSV -4). This finding indicates that, for a notable subset of Construction Management and Quantity Surveying students, agentic engagement remains individualistic and may be constrained by limited psychological safety or underdeveloped conflict resolution and collaboration skills (Bovill & Woolmer, 2020; Du & Naji, 2021). This challenges the fundamental expectation of collective agency in professional education, where interdependence is essential for Construction Management and Quantity Surveying projects (Erkir & Kayapinar, 2025). The divergence shows that while proactive individual behaviour is a common consensus on "*I took initiative throughout the team project process*" (QSV 0), converting this into effective, comfortable team engagement remains a central challenge.

Overall, identifying these three distinct profiles adds empirical depth, moving beyond broad assessments of Problem-Based Learning effectiveness and directly addressing the knowledge gap concerning how agency is enacted in team contexts within Construction Management and Quantity Surveying education in African higher education (Mkhize & Reddy, 2025). The findings confirm established literature that Problem-Based Learning nurtures exploration and diverse resource use, but they also challenge the assumption of universal self-directed learning adoption, particularly by highlighting the persistence of instructor reliance (Factor 2) and the significant discomfort with team dynamics (Factor 3). This calls for pedagogical adjustments that deliberately support both collective and individual forms of agency, preparing graduates for professional practice and underscoring the need for discipline-specific strategies that recognize the diversity of student perspectives.

Limitations of the study

The limitations of this study should be understood primarily within the scope and nature of Q methodology itself. As an exploratory, mixed-methods approach, Q methodology focuses on identifying patterns of subjective viewpoints (*factor generalisability*) rather than statistically representative population characteristics (*statistical generalisability*) (Ramlo, 2020; Stephenson, 1953). Therefore, while the participant sample of Construction Management and Quantity Surveying students at CPUT yielded three robust factors, perceptions of non-participating students or those from other universities or cultural contexts might differ, limiting the direct transferability of the findings. Furthermore, a limitation of the methodological presentation concerns the selection of the three-factor solution; while

the choice was theoretically justified based on alignment with Bandura's (2008) framework, the paper's dependence on theoretical relevance over purely statistical criteria alone means that a robust justification citing specific statistical measures such as eigenvalues or scree plots was omitted, which affects the transparency of the factor analysis. Concerning scope, the study's focus on agency using a 40-item Q set deductively derived from Bandura's (2008) tri-dimensional model of agency means that other closely related concepts critical to professional development, such as motivation, professional identity, or student well-being, may have been seemingly undervalued or not investigated in isolation. Even though the study successfully captured dissimilar perspectives, the non-participatory research approach means that deeper, more longitudinal insights into the development of agency or the reasons behind the strong negative viewpoints on teamwork (such as those observed in Factor 3) could not be fully explored, signifying that alternative methods such as follow-up interviews might offer richer qualitative data in future research (Mercer, 2011b, 2012;). Lastly, the statements used in the Q set were anchored to the specific team-based Problem-Based Learning context of this construction project management course, meaning that diverse learning environments or course contexts might require different Q sets to fully capture the many expressions of learner agency.

Future perspectives for research

Grounded on the identification of three distinct learner agency profiles, future research should adopt various specific directions to enhance the understanding and cultivation of professional readiness in Construction Management and Quantity Surveying education, addressing the necessity for more focused and contextualised recommendations. Firstly, a longitudinal investigation is necessary to document the development and evolution of these identified agency profiles (Team-Autonomous, Externally Engaged, and Individualistic) over the course of the Construction Management/Quantity Surveying curriculum (Mercer, 2012). Such studies should explore the interaction between learner agency, self-efficacy, motivation, and the formation of professional identity, particularly evaluating whether the dependency observed in the Externally Engaged profile (Factor 2) reduces over time, or if the discomfort with collaboration (Factor 3) improves through targeted scaffolding. Given the critical findings regarding team dynamics, future research must also explicitly investigate the interplay between individual and collective agency within Construction Management/Quantity Surveying team settings, concentrating on the specific team factors and environmental conditions that facilitate self-regulation, as this remains seldom examined in existing research (Zhao & Zheng, 2014; Bandura, 2008). The persistent challenges of passive agency and instructor reliance observed in this study (Zamiri & Esmaeili, 2024) necessitate comparative studies using Q methodology across diverse social groups, such as students with widespread prior Problem-Based Learning experience, students in other engineering disciplines, or, critically, students from other African or Global South institutions (Du et al., 2022; Lyngdorf, Du & Lundberg, 2023). Such comparisons would improve the local contribution by understanding how cultural or contextual factors influence the expression of agentic behaviours. Lastly, research could investigate agency enactment in Problem-Based Learning environments with varying design features, for example, comparison of traditional problem-based settings with project-based environments that highlight the delivery of a tangible final product, which is highly relevant to Construction Management and Quantity Surveying professional roles (Mills & Treagust, 2003). These research avenues will provide the empirical grounding needed to develop discipline-specific pedagogical models that warrant all three profiles of learners achieve the robust, collaborative, and self-directed agency required by the industry.

Conclusion

This study effectively explored how Construction Management and Quantity Surveying students perceive the enactment of learner agency within team-based problem-based learning contexts at CPUT, thus addressing a critical knowledge gap regarding agency dynamics in team settings within professional built environment education. Using Q methodology, which proved effective in capturing nuanced subjective viewpoints (Ramlo, 2020), the research identified three distinct and divergent perspectives: Team-Autonomous (Factor 1), Externally Engaged (Factor 2), and Individualistic (Factor 3), which cumulatively explained 41% of the total variance. This empirical diversity confirms that agency is a complex phenomenon guided by Bandura’s (2008) triadic reciprocal model, encompassing highly variable student perceptions concerning their own resources (intrapersonal), their actions (behavioural), and their reliance on the environment (environmental).

The findings underline an important challenge in fostering professional agency: while students universally express a positive intrinsic motivation for "exploring and applying new ways of learning" (QSV 3), their ability for self-direction remains inconsistent. The persistence of the Externally Engaged profile (Factor 2), which values being given problems and relies on instructor guidance, reflects the continued belief in the instructor as the primary source of knowledge (Zamiri & Esmaeili, 2024). This passive enactment of agency implies that the shift to fully self-directed learning remains a gradual process requiring deliberate pedagogical intervention (Mercer, 2011b). Significantly, the Individualistic profile (Factor 3) highlights an important strain in collaborative professional development: these students, despite valuing individual contribution and prior knowledge, actively reject key team dynamics like expressing opinions and formal leadership structures. This advocates that for a considerable portion of the student body, the development of professional collaboration, essential for Construction Management and Quantity Surveying practice, is actively stalled by perceived psychological discomfort or lack of requisite teamwork skills.

In conclusion, this study presents vital discipline-specific understandings that move beyond broad advice for Problem-Based Learning by articulating specific pedagogical strategies tailored to these three profiles. To successfully prepare graduates for professional roles that demand high levels of self-reliance, initiative, and decision-making (Mkhize & Reddy, 2025; Erkir & Kayapinar, 2025), educators in Construction Management and Quantity Surveying must implement targeted interventions. These interventions should both scaffold collaborative skills to address the uneasiness of the Individualistic profile and systematically dismantle the reliance on the instructor to strengthen self-efficacy and promote fully autonomous, resourceful engagement in all students (Du & Naji, 2021). The documentation of these distinct viewpoints through Q methodology poses valuable theoretical and empirical perspectives, providing actionable advice for enhancing professional readiness within the African higher education context.

Recommendations

Recommendations for stakeholders, including educators and curriculum designers in Construction Management and Quantity Surveying, are specifically derived from the findings concerning the three separate learner agency profiles identified: Team-Autonomous (Factor 1), Externally Engaged (Factor 2), and Individualistic (Factor 3), and the universal areas of consensus. These recommendations aim to employ actions that foster the comprehensive, self-directed agency required for professional practice.

To improve structured and resourceful team agency (addressing Factor 1), educators must move beyond simple facilitation and clearly link efficient team processes (e.g., effective task distribution, QSV 5) to meaningful professional learning outcomes. Assignments should be designed to foster autonomy within clear frameworks, setting well-defined project objectives while granting teams the flexibility to determine how they organise and execute their tasks, therefore supporting self-management while providing essential scaffolding. Furthermore, given the preference for self-reliance in this group, explicit strategies should be employed to encourage strategic resource seeking beyond the team's immediate internal knowledge, such as requiring the use of industry standards, specialised tools, or external mentors, thereby strengthening the proactive seeking behaviour essential in professional Construction Management/Quantity Surveying contexts.

To develop critical external engagement and integrated prior knowledge (addressing Factor 2), interventions must focus on dismantling the reliance on the lecturer as the sole source of knowledge (QSV 4 for being given the problem by the lecturer). Lecturers should frame problems not as tasks to be solved but as ambiguities to be analysed and redefined, simulating the complexity of real-world scenarios. To counter the refusal of prior knowledge (QSV -5) and strengthen students' understanding of transferable skills, reflective activities must be integrated into the curriculum, explicitly prompting students to recall and apply prior problem-based learning experiences or other relevant skills to new projects. This approach clearly builds individual efficacy and competence in self-directed learning (Mercer, 2011b, 2012). Furthermore, structured opportunities for collaboration with other student teams should be intentionally embedded to replicate the collaborative, cross-functional nature of built environment projects, which Factor 2 highly values (QSV 5 for engaging with other teams).

To enhance collaborative individualism (addressing Factor 3), which showed significant uneasiness with essential team dynamics (QSV -5 for comfort in expressing opinions; QSV -4 for addressing conflicts), educators must prioritise scaffolding teamwork skills through direct instruction and guided

practice. This instruction should include effective communication, constructive conflict resolution, consensus-building, and adaptive leadership (Bown, 2009; Gao, 2010; Larsen-Freeman, 2019). Projects should be structured to clearly define robust individual responsibilities within the broader collective goal, ensuring that individualistic learners can contribute meaningfully while still engaging with the team. Crucially, trust-building activities are required to foster mutual respect and psychological safety, enabling these learners to feel more secure in extracting their professional opinions and relying on teammates. Rotational leadership and other team roles can further help reduce discomfort with formal team structures and foster a broader understanding of team coordination.

Lastly, to influence the universal intrinsic motivation for learning reflected in the consensus statement "*I enjoyed exploring and applying new ways of learning*" (QSV 3), lecturers should design authentic and challenging tasks that stimulate curiosity and knowledge application to novel, professional situations. Promoting metacognitive consciousness is equally important; by encouraging students to reflect on how they explore and apply new learning, educators help them develop a conscious understanding of their own adaptive learning agency, which is essential for professional development in Construction Management and Quantity Surveying (Mercer, 2011b, 2012). Overall, these strategies support the cultivation of a more comprehensive and resilient sense of professional agency, fulfilling the commitment to preparing skilled Quantity Surveying and construction professionals to meet industry demands (CPUT, 2024; James, Malkin & Nusche, 2025).

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SACQSP2025-21

Determining Environmental, Social and Governance Compliance Factors for Namibian Contractors: A Pilot Study

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ABSTRACT

Namibian construction companies face growing pressure to align with Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) standards due to advanced procurement regulations. However, the nature of these factors remains unclear for most Namibian construction firms. Therefore, this paper aims to determine the Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) compliance factors that construction firms in Namibia must prioritise. The pilot study employed a quantitative research approach using a structured questionnaire distributed to Namibian contractors with at least 20 expected valid responses. Data was analysed using the relative importance index, to determine the perceived importance of various ESG compliance factors. The study revealed pertinent ESG compliance factors for Namibian contractors. Environmentally, efforts include reducing emissions, using green materials, and managing water and energy efficiently. Socially, emphasis is most placed on worker safety, fair labour practices, community relations, and inclusivity. For Governance, ethical conduct, compliance, transparency, and effective leadership were most impressed on. Such a comprehensive ESG approach helps construction firms build resilience, improve reputation, and drive sustainable development. Focusing exclusively on Namibia contractors limited the generalisability of the findings to the whole construction sector. This pilot study offers practical focus areas to improve ESG integration within Namibian construction firms. It advances ESG compliance specific to Namibian contractors and offers actionable interventions for contractors, professional bodies, and academic institutions. Its recommendations promote a more sustainable, ethically guided, and socially responsible construction sector in Namibia.

Keywords: ESG Compliance, Contractors, ESG Compliance Factors, Namibia.

Introduction

ESG denotes Environmental, Social, and Governance, representing a framework of standards and criteria utilised to assess a company's sustainability, ethical implications, and long-term performance beyond conventional financial measurements (Cundill & Wilson, 2020). Over the years there is an unprecedented focus on Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) factors and their integration into systems of business management, evaluation, and development (Shilongo, 2023). Nevertheless, the construction industry is under even more strain to embrace ESG frameworks because of its colossal ecological footprint, multifarious stakeholder ecosystem, and increased scrutiny in public procurement processes (Kocmanová & Dočekalová, 2012; Markopoulos et al., 2020). In Namibia, the shift towards ESG governance frameworks is more perceptible with the evolving construction policy frameworks, increased regulatory requirements, and ESG procurement policy compliance (Prakash, 2020; Shilongo, 2023). As much as there is global momentum, the consideration of ESG factors within the Namibia construction industry remains a significant gap. Numerous contractors function in a highly constrained resource environment and regulatory framework coupled with limited awareness on the value of ESG (Shilongo, 2023). While there is a body of international literature exploring the impact of ESG on corporate sustainability, there is hardly any literature that applies those insights to Namibia's socio-economic and regulatory environment. This gap underscores the need to examine local contractors' perceptions and the steps involved in ESG compliance with construction industry

frameworks as it pertains to operational and reputational outcomes (Keinänen-Toivola et al., 2018). The purpose of this study is to determine the key Environmental, Social, and Governance compliance factors that Namibian construction companies must prioritise. In addressing these objectives, the study contributes to the conversation on sustainable construction and offers practical guidance for contractors working in Namibia's shifting legislative and business environment. The literature is reviewed in the next section, after which the methodology of the study is explained. Consequent to that the results are discussed and the conclusions and recommendations outlined.

Literature review

The following section considers existing knowledge and scholarly perspectives relevant to Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) practices in the construction industry. It begins by outlining the theoretical framework that underpins ESG. The review then explores ESG compliance factors in detail, focusing on environmental, social, and governance dimensions.

Theoretical Framework

The Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) paradigm states that investors and organisations should include the impact of the environment, social responsibility, and governance integrity into their company operations and investment decisions. Its primary goal is to encourage socially responsible and sustainable behavior that goes beyond financial prosperity (Schanzenbach & Sitkoff, 2020; Daugaard & Ding, 2022). In this sense, ESG has a dual purpose: it encourages businesses to operate morally and helps investors choose businesses that can manage ESG risks and take advantage of sustainability opportunities to generate long-term value. Turner and Baker (2019) assert that by encouraging proactive risk management and resource efficiency, the incorporation of ESG concepts into company strategy improves flexibility and creativity. The ESG framework is theoretically consistent with stakeholder theory, which argues that balancing the interests of multiple stakeholders is more important for company performance than putting shareholders first (Mahajan et al., 2023). Additionally, it aligns with the institutional theory, which describes how organisations adjust to legal and societal forces in order to become legitimate (Ngatjizeko & Botha, 2022).

Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) compliance factors

Environmental compliance factors

Activities such as material transportation, heavy machinery operation, and energy-intensive processes significantly contribute to greenhouse gas emissions, accounting for a large share of global carbon output (Jing et al., 2019). Scholars such as Isaksson and Linderoth (2018) highlight that mitigating these impacts requires a systematic shift toward sustainable practices, including the adoption of eco-friendly materials, energy efficiency measures, and comprehensive waste management systems. Similarly, Branch et al. (2019) and Cruz et al. (2023) argue that although these interventions show promise, their success relies on the availability of local resources, the implementation of policies, and the readiness of contractors to incur higher initial costs. Conceptually, sustainable building is consistent with ecological modernisation theory, which argues that through technical advancement and legal frameworks, environmental preservation and economic growth may reinforce one another (Cruz et al., 2023). Critics counter that this strategy frequently ignores contextual constraints, especially in underdeveloped nations where adoption is hampered by a lack of institutional capacity and restricted access to green technology (Xidonas & Essner, 2024). The transferability of these standards to local markets that confront capacity and cost constraints is still a concern, despite the fact that many businesses are working toward certifications like LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) (Shilongo, 2023). Furthermore, there is evidence that implementation is still inconsistent and mostly project-specific rather than systemic, despite the growing popularity of renewable energy integration through solar panels, efficient building systems, and water conservation measures (Cruz et al. (2023). When taken as a whole, the literature shows agreement on the need for environmental reform in the construction industry, but it also displays disagreement about how to actually do it in various regulatory and economic environments. This emphasizes the necessity of conducting studies that critically analyse the ways in which environmental compliance procedures might be modified to accommodate Namibia's changing building environment.

Social compliance factors

In the construction sector, social factors cover a wide range of elements, including as community ties, worker welfare, health and safety measures, stakeholder participation, and fair working conditions. Due to its labor-intensive nature and frequent reliance on low-skilled and migrant labor, the industry is often questioned about fair salaries, contractual stability, and occupational well-being (Hasan et al., 2018). Although scholars like Sfakianaki (2019) and Yap et al. (2024) concur that good stakeholder engagement and open communication can reduce many of these social risks, corporate culture and regulatory oversight, rather than voluntary ethics, frequently determine how much a company adopts such practices. One of the most prominent indications of social responsibility in the construction industry continues to be health and safety. While the implementation of training programs, safety audits, and modern protective equipment has improved safety records in developed markets, studies by Hasan et al. (2018) and Shilongo (2023) show that due to limited enforcement capacity and financial constraints, implementation across developing economies remains inconsistent. This implies that institutional commitment and contextual adaptation are both necessary for the adaptability of international best practices to local contexts like Namibia. The social sustainability profile of construction companies is further defined by community participation. Public resistance and long-term reputational harm are risks for projects that neglect to handle community consequences including noise, traffic congestion, relocation, or environmental degradation (Agustin & Koestoer, 2025). On the other hand, it has been demonstrated that programs that promote communication, local employment, and benefit-sharing within the community increase project legitimacy (Shilongo, 2023). In addition to these practical considerations, scholars like Xie et al. (2017) and Yap et al. (2024) highlight that social performance include encouraging gender parity, workforce diversity, and inclusive employment practices aspects that are sometimes overlooked in construction ESG studies. While there is general consensus in the literature that social sustainability is essential to ESG compliance, opinions vary on how much social concerns are incorporated into fundamental business plans. Fewer studies critically assess how social metrics are assessed, prioritised, or enforced, especially in emerging economies, even if many outline what socially responsible development should look like. This disparity emphasizes the necessity for more analytical research on Namibian contractors' perceptions and operationalisations of the social aspect of ESG beyond compliance requirements.

Governance compliance factors

Corporate leadership, moral behavior, legal compliance, and open reporting are all essential elements of governance in the construction sector that impact organisational responsibility and sustainability performance. To manage risks and guarantee moral and accurate decision-making, robust governance structures are necessary (Alreshidi, Mourshed & Rezgui, 2017). However, many construction companies restrict governance's revolutionary potential by seeing it as a compliance exercise rather than a strategic value system, as Agustin and Koestoer (2025) argue. In addition to well defined responsibilities, supervision procedures, and internal controls, effective governance also necessitates a culture that values honesty above rapidity, especially when it comes to project execution and procurement. Adherence to regulations is still essential to effective government. Although adherence to labor, construction, and environmental regulations lowers operational and reputational risks, uneven enforcement and disjointed regulatory frameworks frequently erode accountability in emerging economies, as noted by Dufvelin (2018) and Yap et al. (2024). This highlights a disconnect between the official endorsement of policies and their actual implementation, which is a problem that is particularly pertinent to Namibia, as poor governance can jeopardise public trust and project performance. Building stakeholder trust requires both ethical behavior and transparency. Transparent disclosure of financial performance, ESG efforts, and risk exposures improves credibility and investor trust, according to studies by Prakash (2020) and Dufvelin (2018). Agustin and Koestoer (2025) warn, however, that transparency efforts are frequently insufficient and motivated more by outside reporting demands than by a sincere desire for moral leadership. There is also a continuous disconnect between policy rhetoric and reality, as seen by the widespread support for anti-corruption initiatives and adherence to competition rules but rather uneven implementation. Improved governance results are also linked to inclusive leadership and a diverse board, according to an expanding corpus of research. It has been demonstrated that diverse boards with members from a range of socioeconomic and professional backgrounds improve the caliber of decision-making and ethical monitoring (Prakash, 2020; Shilongo, 2023). However, in the construction industry, where leadership systems are frequently uniform and hierarchical, diversity is still lacking. When taken as a whole, these observations show that although governance is generally accepted as a fundamental component of ESG compliance, its scope, inclusiveness, and integrity of enforcement

nonetheless differ greatly depending on the situation. This emphasizes how governance systems in Namibia's construction sector require a more context-sensitive understanding that goes beyond formal compliance to actual responsibility and moral leadership.

ESG factors are relevant in the construction industry in the following areas, see Table 1.

Table 1 ESG factors

ESG FACTORS	OVERVIEW	REFERENCES
ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS		
Environmental Impact Reduction	Construction has a considerable environmental impact, including ecological devastation, resource depletion, energy usage, and greenhouse gas emissions.	Sassen et al. (2016); Shilongo (2023)
Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation	The building industry contributes to climate change mitigation by reducing greenhouse gas emissions and boosting people's capacity to adapt to the effects of climate change.	Shilongo (2023)
SOCIAL FACTORS		
Social Responsibility and Community Engagement	Construction projects can have considerable social impacts at local level as they may induce displacement and loss of traditions, and provoke conflict.	Lioui & Tarelli (2021); Saiful Azlin Puteh Salin et al. (2023)
Labour Rights and Workplace Safety	Construction is associated with a number of labour rights violations such as, most importantly terrible working conditions, interestingly, worker underpayment, benefits take a back seat.	Beukert & Sigurdsson (2022); Saiful Azlin Puteh Salin et al. (2023); Shilongo (2023)
Ethical Supply Chain Management	Environmental, social and governance (ESG) policies are integrated in management of supply chain in construction. This ensures accountability in the supply chains, integrity in procurement and sourcing as well as responsible sourcing.	Shilongo (2023)
GOVERNANCE FACTORS		
Governance and Ethical Business Conduct	Governance structures determine ethical behaviour and accountability in, and openness within, the construction sector. Appropriate governance customs, such as; sound internal controls, effective risk management and good compliance systems are all facets of the construction industry’s concerns in the ESG.	Bhagat & Bolton (2007); Dufvelin (2018); Prakash (2020)
Long-Term Asset Value and Resilience	Addressing ESG concerns can increase the efficiency and sustainability of construction projects over time by relating sustainable principles in the design, construction, and operation phases of assets.	Alhaddi (2015); Ameer & Othman (2012); Lowe, (2003); Shilongo (2023)
Investor and Stakeholder Expectations	There is an integration of construction projects with ESG concerns so as to respond to the ethical investment practices, transparency, and corporate responsibility that investors and stakeholders are calling for.	Dufvelin (2018); Kocmanová & Dočekalová (2012)

Research methodology and method

Post-positivism was selected for this study. The reason is that post-positivism is generally thought to be appropriate especially in a study that is based on perceptions and accepts that reality is imperfect, but probable, and influenced by various factors (Saunders et al., 2016). The study used a mono-method choice, the quantitative method. Quantitative research aims to quantify or measure anything (Saunders et al., 2016). It may be used to find answers, create hypotheses, test relationships, and manage a bigger workforce. The objective necessitated quantitative data gathering, hence, a survey questionnaire, was deemed most appropriate for this study and this was supported by a similar study by Prakash (2020). Systematic sampling was used to gather data. As a probability sampling technique, systematic sampling selects participants from a population at predetermined, regular intervals. The sampling interval (k), which is determined by dividing the population by the desired sample size, is then determined. After selecting a starting point at random, each kth person is chosen till the sample is full. Though it may add bias if there are hidden patterns in the population list, this approach is straightforward, guarantees even coverage of the population, and takes less time (Thomas, 2023). The population consisted of the 184 construction companies registered with CIF. For this pilot survey, at least 20 legitimate responses were expected, enabling descriptive statistical analysis as recommended by In (2017). Therefore, the sample size for the data collection is at least 20. The online survey was created using QuestionPro. There was three parts to the questionnaire. For each of the three parts of the questionnaire, there was closed-ended questions. In the first part, respondents were asked for general information about their gender, experience, degree of qualification, contact information and organisation data (Bhandari, 2023). Respondents were asked to score using a 5-point Likert scale, which was taken from the main body of current research. Numbered from 1 to 5, the response options for goals two and three will be as follows: “not important”, “of little importance”, “somewhat important”, “important” and “very important" (Bhandari & Nikolopoulou, 2023). The results of the pilot study present the evaluation of the questionnaire’s validity, reliability, and clarity before its distribution to the selected firms. The objectives data was analysed by use RII (Relative Importance Index) and the evaluation scale (Gündüz, Nielsen & Özdemir, 2013). According to Gbajobi et al. (2018) RII= ΣW 0 <RII >I, Where W= the weight given to each factor by the respondents ranges from 1 to 5, (where "1" is very low, "2" is low, "3" is moderate "4" is high and "5" is very high), A = highest weight (i.e., 5 in this case) and; N = the number of responses.

Formula: RII = Σ W / (N * A) (Gündüz, Nielsen & Özdemir, 2013, p. 135).

Results and Discussion

Profile of respondents and response rate

Table 2 General profile of the respondents

Respondents’ Particular	**Frequency**	**Percentage (%)**
Field of Qualification		
Construction Management	1	5
Quantity Surveying	10	50
Civil Engineering	0	0
Environmental Management	0	0
Sustainable Development	2	10
Project Management	3	15
Real Estate and Property Development	2	10
Architecture	1	5
Other (Please specify): Urban planning	1	5
TOTAL	**20**	**100**
Respondents’ Particular	**Frequency**	**Percentage (%)**
Highest education level		
Certificate	3	15
Diploma	0	0
Post Graduate Diploma	1	5

Bachelors	7	35
Honors	7	35
Masters	2	10
TOTAL	**20**	**100**
Years of experience in the construction industry		
0 – 5	9	45
6 – 10	6	30
11 – 15	5	25
16 – 20	0	0
Above 20	0	0
TOTAL	**20**	**100**
Type of projects involved in		
Small-scale residential and commercial projects	6	30
Medium-scale public and private infrastructure projects	10	50
Large-scale and complex infrastructure projects	4	20
TOTAL	**20**	**100**
Company's grade classification		
Grade 1 (Highest)	5	25
Grade 2	5	25
Grade 3	8	40
Grade 4	1	5
Grade 5 (Lowest)	1	5
TOTAL	**20**	**100**

This pilot survey gathered a total of 20 responses, providing an adequate information for assessing respondents' overall profiles in the field of construction that is sustainable. Despite the tiny sample size, it was deemed trustworthy. According to Johanson and Brooks (2010), sample sizes of 10 to 30 respondents are frequently adequate in pilot studies, and the 20 affirms collected fell well within this range, providing for valuable insights into the characteristics of the target audience. As presented in Table 2, the respondents represented diverse academic backgrounds, with half (50%) holding qualifications in Quantity Surveying. In terms of educational attainment, the majority of respondents possessed higher education degrees, with 35% holding bachelor's qualifications and another 35% holding Honours degrees. When considering professional experience, nearly half of the respondents (45%) had between 0–5 years of experience. Notably, none of the participants had over 15 years of experience, suggesting the sample largely reflected early- to mid-career professionals. With respect to the type of projects undertaken, the majority were involved in medium-scale public and private infrastructure projects (50%). Regarding company grading classification, 40% of respondents were employed in Grade 3 companies, while 25% each represented Grade 1 and Grade 2 companies. Only a small proportion worked in Grade 4 (5%) and Grade 5 (5%) firms. This mix demonstrates that the study captured insights across companies of varying capacities, from high-grade to lower-grade firms.

Importance of various ESG compliance factors

Environmental compliance factors

The analysis of the Relative Importance Index (RII), as shown in Table 3, revealed that Waste Management ranked as the most important environmental compliance factor, with an RII of 0.910, demonstrating that it is deemed very important by respondents in boosting sustainable construction practices. At the lower end of the ranking, Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation (RII = 0.750) and

Carbon Footprint & Emissions (RII = 0.720) were rated as the least important environmental compliance factors in this study.

Table 3 RII for Environmental Compliance Factors

Environmental Compliance Factors	**RII**	**Ranks**
Waste Management	0.910	1
Water Conservation	*0.870*	2
Energy Efficiency	*0.870*	2
Sustainable Materials	0.850	3
Environmental Impact Reduction	*0.820*	4
Climate Resilience	*0.820*	4
Biodiversity Protection	0.760	5
Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation	0.750	6
Carbon Footprint & Emissions	0.720	7

Social compliance factors

The analysis of the Relative Importance Index (RII), as shown in Table 4, for social compliance factors revealed that both Labour Rights and Fair Wages, as well as Health and Safety, were ranked as the most important factors, each with an RII of 0.940. This indicates that ensuring fair labour practices and safeguarding worker safety are considered the highest priorities in achieving social sustainability in the Namibian construction industry. Supply Chain Responsibility (RII = 0.830) and Diversity and Inclusion (RII = 0.820) were ranked lowest among the factors, though still rated as significant.

Table 4 RII for Social Compliance Factors

Social Compliance Factors	RII	Ranks
Labor Rights and Fair Wages	*0.940*	1
Health & Safety	*0.940*	1
Customer & Tenant Well-Being	0.890	2
Social Responsibility and Community Engagement	0.860	3
Ethical Supply Chain Management	0.850	4
Supply Chain Responsibility	0.830	5
Diversity & Inclusion	0.820	6

Governance compliance factors

The analysis of the Relative Importance Index (RII), as shown in Table 5, for governance compliance factors revealed that Transparency and Reporting was ranked as the most important (RII = 0.880). This indicates that clear disclosure, open communication, and accurate reporting are viewed as the highest governance priorities in Namibia's construction sector, as they enhance accountability and build trust among stakeholders. Long-Term Asset Value and Resilience was ranked lowest (RII = 0.810).

Table 5 RII for Governance Compliance Factors

Governance Compliance Factors	RII	Ranks
Transparency & Reporting	0.880	1
Investor and Stakeholder Expectations	0.870	2
Governance and Ethical Business Conduct	*0.830*	3
Board Diversity & Leadership	*0.830*	3

Risk Management	*0.830*	3
Long-Term Asset Value and Resilience	0.810	4

Discussion

Environmental compliance factors

According to the Relative Importance Index (RII) analysis, Waste Management ranked in first place (RII = 0.910), supporting the views of Shilongo (2023) and Zhao et al. (2022) that efficient waste management is still essential to sustainable building. The strong operational focus of Namibian construction companies is reflected in this prioritisation, where quick economic and environmental advantages are obtained through observable and quantifiable measures like recycling, segregation, and regulated disposal. This finding's coherence with global research such as Cruz et al. (2023) and Prakash (2020) which indicates that contractors frequently prioritise sustainability criteria that are both observable and economically viable. Similarly, Namibia's context-specific resource restrictions and global sustainability frameworks are becoming convergent, as seen by the high rankings of water conservation and energy efficiency (RII = 0.870 each). These elements are essential for cutting emissions and resolving water shortage concerns, which are especially pertinent in Namibia's semi-arid climate, as indicated by Shilongo (2023). The triple bottom line (TBL) concept, which emphasizes striking a balance between economic, environmental, and social performance, is supported by the findings. The pragmatic adaptation of global sustainability concerns to local operational realities is therefore demonstrated by contractors' emphasis on energy and water efficiency, where resource efficiency immediately lowers costs and improves compliance with growing green standards (Sassen et al., 2016).

Sustainable Materials' comparatively high score (RII = 0.850) further demonstrates the industry's growing conformity to global green construction standards. This result is consistent with the findings of Prakash (2020) and Isaksson & Linderoth (2018), who contend that using renewable resources and obtaining green certifications (such as LEED) is a way to comply with regulations and enhance one's reputation. The outcome also shows the increasing market demand for environmentally friendly structures, indicating that sustainability in Namibia's building industry is progressively moving from a voluntary practice to a crucial commercial need. This pattern is consistent with institutional theory, which holds that external forces like as investors, legislative frameworks, and customer expectations influence organisational practices to become more environmentally responsible. On the contrary, only modest attention was paid to Climate Resilience and Environmental Impact Reduction (RII = 0.820 each). Even while contractors acknowledge their significance, these elements are frequently seen as long-term strategic objectives rather than urgent operational requirements. Due to a lack of funding, inadequate enforcement, and an emphasis on immediate results, developing countries usually deprioritise complicated or expensive sustainability projects, as noted by Prakash (2020) and Dlamini (2022). This research reveals a discrepancy between local capacity limitations and global ESG standards. Despite its widespread importance, the undervaluation of climate resilience may also be a result of a lack of institutional incentives and technical expertise for project-level climate risk assessment, an area that needs more robust policy direction and professional development. Persistent implementation gaps are revealed by the lowest-ranked factors, such as Carbon Footprint & Emissions (RII = 0.720), Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation (RII = 0.750), and Biodiversity Protection (RII = 0.760). These results are in line with those of Ruppel and Ruppel-Schlichting (2016) and Shilongo (2023), who point to a lack of regulatory enforcement, a lack of experience, and the belief that these kinds of projects are not essential to project completion. Theoretically, this gap shows how little local construction companies have embraced ESG governance concepts, with sustainability continuing to be driven by compliance rather than being ingrained in business strategy. Institutional encouragement, focused training, and reward systems that make long-term environmental performance a quantifiable aspect of project success is necessary to close this gap.

Social compliance factors

Labor Rights, Fair Wages, and Health and Safety were ranked highest (RII = 0.940 each) in the Relative Importance Index (RII) analysis of social compliance factors, highlighting their crucial role in guaranteeing fair treatment and protecting worker well-being in the construction industry. The results of Beukert and Sigurdsson (2022), Saiful Azlin Puteh Salin et al. (2023), and Shilongo (2023) all

emphasize that equitable compensation, job stability, and safe working conditions are essential components of social sustainability, and this strong prioritisation is consistent with their findings. These findings support the idea that, due to its labor-intensive nature and reliance on unskilled and vulnerable workers, Namibia's construction sector frequently puts immediate human welfare issues ahead of more intangible societal projects. The findings therefore reflect an ethical and practical orientation consistent with Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, suggesting that the sector focuses first on fulfilling workers' basic safety and security needs before advancing to higher-level social objectives. The industry's growing sensitivity to end-user satisfaction is highlighted by the relatively high ranking of Customer and Tenant Well-Being (RII = 0.890), which is consistent with Sacranie and Lymer's (2022) view that construction outcomes should improve quality of life. The analysis suggests that social value in building now encompasses the long-term usage, comfort, and safety of finished structures rather than just project completion. Tenant welfare is becoming increasingly important, which indicates that Namibian contractors are becoming more socially conscious. This is in line with worldwide trends where consumers want buildings that promote community inclusion and well-being (Cruz et al., 2023; Prakash, 2020). A move toward life-cycle thinking, where social performance is assessed during a project's whole existence rather than just after completion, is reflected in this focus on post-construction social repercussions. A growing but still moderate commitment to the wider societal function of construction is reflected in the rating of Social Responsibility and Community Engagement that follows (RII = 0.860). This conclusion implies that although companies acknowledge the importance of community development and stakeholder participation, these initiatives continue to take a backseat to primary worker welfare concerns, which is in line with Lioui and Tarelli (2021) and Saiful Azlin Puteh Salin et al. (2023). Smaller companies frequently view community involvement as a volunteer endeavor rather than a strategic element of corporate social responsibility (CSR), which may be the result of low institutional and financial capabilities. However, the rating shows a growing understanding of how important community interactions support project acceptability, company legitimacy, and enhanced reputation all of which are essential components of sustainable business practices.

Factors with lower rankings in Namibia's construction business, new yet undeveloped facets of social governance are shown by Diversity and Inclusion (RII = 0.820), Supply Chain Responsibility (RII = 0.830), and Ethical Supply Chain Management (RII = 0.850). Despite the fact that these components are becoming more and more important throughout the world as markers of fair and open corporate practices (Prakash, 2020; Sassen et al., 2016), their comparatively lower rating in the study indicates that such policies are still mostly goal oriented. This might be explained by the unstructured character of regional supply chains for construction, a lack of strict oversight procedures, and a lack of knowledge of global ESG norms. Theoretically, this points to a gap in institutional equality where resource and regulatory constraints prevent global social compliance norms from spreading evenly into emerging environments.

Governance compliance factors

Transparency and Reporting placed highest (RII = 0.880) among the governance compliance factors analysed by the Relative Importance Index (RII), highlighting its crucial role in fostering accountability, credibility, and trust between construction companies and their stakeholders. This outcome is consistent with the findings of Bhagat and Bolton (2007), Dufvelin (2018), and Prakash (2020), who emphasize that open and honest reporting of financial performance, project risks, and ESG activities boosts investor trust and lowers the possibility of corruption and poor management. This finding demonstrates a growing understanding that transparency is not just a compliance requirement but also a strategic asset for reputation management and investment attraction in Namibia, where the construction industry has frequently come under fire for procurement irregularities and bad governance.

Investor and Stakeholder Expectations (RII = 0.870), the second-highest ranking component, supports the growing importance of matching corporate operations with ethical and social standards. According to Dufvelin (2018) and Kocmanová & Dočekalová (2012), responsiveness to stakeholder concerns on ethics, justice, and sustainability is an important aspect of modern governance that goes beyond regulatory compliance. The outcome shows that construction companies are realizing that meeting stakeholder expectations is essential for obtaining project approval, finance, and social license to operate, in addition to being a reputational need. Businesses that don't communicate openly with their stakeholders run the danger of regulatory issues, community backlash, and a decline in their ability to compete, according to De, Lokuwaduge and De Silva (2020). For long-term legitimacy and

sustainability in Namibia, where building projects are either community-dependent or publicly sponsored, this kind of involvement is essential. While firms acknowledge the significance of structural and ethical governance, they are seen as secondary to more pressing transparency and stakeholder concerns, as evidenced by the moderately ranked factors Governance and Ethical Business Conduct, Board Diversity and Leadership, and Risk Management (RII = 0.830). This could be a result of the industry's practical prioritisation, where regulatory compliance and open accountability improve reputation more quickly than internal governance changes. However, according to researchers like Prakash (2020) and Saiful Azlin Puteh Salin et al. (2023), organisational resilience and strategic stability are based on moral behavior, inclusive leadership, and efficient risk management. Strong risk management frameworks, for example, lower the chance of cost overruns, project delays, and legal non-compliance, while diverse boards often improve oversight and decision-making. Therefore, their moderate ranking suggests that governance maturity in the Namibian construction sector remains developing, with emphasis still placed on reactive rather than proactive governance mechanisms.

Finally, among governance criteria, Long-Term Asset Value and Resilience (RII = 0.810) were ranked lowest. Despite its acknowledged importance, this low priority suggests that short-term operational and financial considerations frequently take precedence over long-term sustainability planning. The statement made by De, Lokuwaduge, and De Silva (2020) that long-term asset resilience is essential to sustained wealth generation is not supported by this study's findings. The industry's ability to prioritise project delivery schedules above strategic asset management, limited institutional capability, and unclear governmental contexts might all be contributing factors to this factor's undervaluation. Additionally, it implies a disconnect between awareness and execution, which is common in emerging markets where short-term survival frequently trumps long-term governance efforts.

Conclusion

Namibian construction companies face growing pressure to align with Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) standards due to advanced procurement regulations. However, the nature of these factors remains unclear for most Namibian construction firms. The study of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) compliance factors in the Namibian construction sector gives useful information about existing sustainability objectives and opportunities for development. The study aimed to determine the importance of ESG compliance factors for construction firms. Key findings show that waste management and efficient resource use were evaluated as the most important environmental compliance factors, showing the increased emphasis on sustainable practices. For the social compliance factors, labour rights, fair wages, and health and safety were identified as major factors, supporting the sector's commitment to worker protection and fairness. The most critical aspects identified under governance factors were transparency and reporting, as well as investor and stakeholder expectations, emphasizing the importance of accountability and trust. While these aspects were assessed as important overall, certain essential areas, including diversity and inclusion, long-term asset resilience, and broader supply chain responsibility, were scored lower, implying that they are still secondary priorities. This demonstrates the need for a more comprehensive integration of ESG principles within the companies, extending beyond immediate compliance to establish sustainability as a long-term strategic aim.

Recommendations and Limitations

The following recommendations are suggested: Professional bodies and academic institutions should offer training and awareness programs that provide contractors and stakeholders with the knowledge and skills to integrate ESG compliance into everyday operations. Construction organisations can institutionalise ESG compliance standards by integrating them into project planning, monitoring, and reporting procedures to ensure that sustainability is actively practised rather than merely recognised. Industry regulators and governments may explore tightening ESG compliance standards to encourage better responsibility, particularly in underserved areas like as diversity, inclusion, and long-term resilience. In addition to these feasible measures, future research may compare Namibia to other Sub-Saharan countries to examine regional variations and similarities in the implementation of ESG. Insight into the development of sustainable practices in the construction industry might also be gained from longitudinal studies that monitor ESG integration over time. Additionally, stakeholder-specific assessments that look at clients, contractors, and regulators independently might help us better understand the many factors that influence and hinder ESG compliance. This study focuses solely on Namibian contractors, limiting the findings' applicability to the broader construction sector. Other critical

stakeholders, like as clients, consultants, suppliers, and regulators, were excluded, despite the fact that their viewpoints on ESG compliance may differ. Furthermore, because legislative and market conditions differ in different countries, the results may not entirely apply beyond Namibia.

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SACQSP2025-40

Soft Skills and Graduate Employability in Quantity Surveying: A Situational Judgement Test among Honours Students

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Abstract

In today's competitive built environment sector, technical expertise alone is no longer sufficient for professional success. Employers increasingly value soft skills; competencies, behaviours, attitudes, and personal attributes that enable professionals to adapt, collaborate, and lead effectively. For Quantity Surveyors (QS), these skills are essential rather than optional. Yet evidence suggests a persistent gap between the soft skills employers' demand and those demonstrated by emerging QS graduates. This study investigates how QS Honours students in South Africa perform in three employer-identified priority areas: communication, ethics and morals, and critical thinking. These skills were assessed using a Situational Judgement Test (SJT) comprising six scenario-based questions designed to simulate professional challenges. Data were collected from 18 students at a single institution, which limits the generalisability of the findings. The results indicate that across all three domains, most participants performed at the lower end of the scale, signalling gaps in communication strategy, ethical judgement, and critical reasoning. While the small sample size restricts broader claims, the methodological contribution lies in applying a performance-based SJT to measure actual soft skill proficiency rather than relying on perceptions or self-reports. The implications are clear. Professional QS bodies could draw on these findings to refine accreditation standards, ensuring qualification frameworks place equal weight on technical and interpersonal proficiency. Higher education institutions may use the evidence to redesign curricula, embedding soft skills training within core modules. For students, the message is equally important: mastering technical content is only part of professional preparation; cultivating communication, ethical judgement, and critical thinking is vital to sustaining long-term success. By highlighting these gaps, the study contributes to the discourse on graduate employability and calls for a collaborative response from academia, industry, and students.

Keywords: Graduate Employability, Professional Competencies, Quantity Surveying, Situational Judgment Test, Soft Skills.

Introduction

Unemployment remains one of the most pressing socio-economic challenges in developing countries such as South Africa (Maskaeva & Msafiri, 2021). It reduces economic welfare, erodes productivity, and leads to the underutilisation of human capital (Oluwajodu et al., 2015). In 2023, South Africa's unemployment rate reached 32.9%, ranking among the highest globally (Statistics South Africa, 2023). Youth are particularly vulnerable, lacking both the work experience and skills sought by employers (Oluwajodu et al., 2015; De Lannoy et al., 2018). In 2022, unemployment stood at 63.9% for individuals aged 15–24 and 42.1% for those aged 25–34 (Statistics South Africa, 2022). These alarming figures have prompted the South African government, among others, to declare youth unemployment an urgent priority (Mseleku, 2022).

Education (particularly higher education) is widely recognised as a key strategy for addressing youth unemployment (Mseleku, 2022). In South Africa, policy reforms have expanded access and addressed historical inequities (Sabela & Masuku, 2020), resulting in substantial growth in university enrolments (Oluwajodu et al., 2015). However, despite improved access, graduate unemployment remains high, signalling that qualifications alone are insufficient to secure employment (Mseleku, 2022).

A key contributing factor is the misalignment between higher education curricula and labour market expectations (Oluwajodu et al., 2015). In the Quantity Surveying (QS) profession, graduates often lack the employability attributes demanded by employers (Oni & Aina, 2020; Seidu et al., 2021). In today's competitive job market, graduates cannot rely solely on academic credentials, as many candidates possess similar qualifications (Seidu et al., 2021). Instead, they must develop a balanced combination of technical (hard) skills and interpersonal (soft) skills to gain a competitive advantage (Clarke, 2018).

Soft skills, defined as "a broad set of skills, competencies, behaviours, attitudes, and personal qualities that enable people to effectively navigate their environment, work well with others, perform well, and achieve their goals" (Oni & Aina, 2020), differ from hard skills, which are quantifiable and typically acquired through formal education or work experience. Soft skills are often personality-driven and critical for professional success (Karunasena et al., 2015; Oni & Aina, 2020). While academic excellence and experience were once primary hiring criteria, employers now seek well-rounded graduates who demonstrate both technical proficiency and strong soft skills (Seidu et al., 2021).

Existing literature highlights a consistent skills gap between university training and industry requirements (Shafie et al., 2014; Oluwajodu et al., 2015). In the QS field, studies in Nigeria and elsewhere reveal that employers perceive graduates as ranking low in employability due to deficiencies in soft skills (Oni & Aina, 2020). Employers frequently identify communication, ethics and morals, and critical thinking as essential competencies, yet often report these as lacking among graduates (Shafie et al., 2014; Oni & Aina, 2020; Mavasa & Terblanche, 2023). Despite the importance of these skills, limited empirical research has assessed the actual proficiency levels of QS Honours students in South Africa.

The aim of this study is to assess the level of proficiency in selected soft skills, identified by employers as critical to professional success, among QS Honours students in South Africa. To achieve this aim, the study seeks to: (i) Identify soft skills regarded by employers as critical for the QS profession; (ii) Select and apply an appropriate instrument to evaluate students' performance in these skills; (iii) Analyse the results to determine the extent of students' proficiency in the identified soft skills.

Literature review

Graduate Employability

Graduate unemployment remains a persistent global challenge, driven by a variety of interrelated factors (Oluwajodu et al., 2015). A primary cause of both graduate unemployment and employer dissatisfaction within the built environment sector is the misalignment between the skills graduates possess and the evolving requirements of the labour market (Thayaparan et al., 2011). Oluwajodu et al. (2015) further attribute graduate unemployment to limited employability, the type and relevance of qualifications, field of study, the quality of secondary and tertiary education, and unrealistic salary expectations. Consequently, graduate employability has become an increasingly prominent priority in higher education policy worldwide, as policymakers develop strategies to ensure that higher education institutions (HEIs) equip students with the competencies necessary for labour market success (Tomlinson, 2012).

The concept of employability has gained prominence in response to the rapid transformation of the world of work (Shafie et al., 2014). Although definitions vary, employability is broadly understood as encompassing the combination of academic capabilities, personal attributes, and job-specific skills that enable individuals to secure and sustain employment (Shafie et al., 2014). Hillage and Pollard (1998) define employability as:

- the ability to gain initial employment;
- the ability to remain employed and transition between roles within the same organisation to meet new job requirements; and
- the ability to obtain alternative employment when necessary, demonstrating independence in the labour market through the capacity to manage career transitions within and between organisations.

Accordingly, graduates must acquire both job-specific technical skills and a diverse range of transferable "soft skills" to maximise their employment prospects (Shafie et al., 2014). Tomlinson (2012) observes that graduates increasingly recognise the competitive nature of the labour market and the need to differentiate themselves beyond academic qualifications alone. However, some scholars

argue that employability should not be reduced to individual attributes only, as structural labour market conditions and employer practices also play a significant role (Clarke, 2018; Holmes, 2013). This suggests a tension between "supply-side" approaches that emphasise graduate skills and "demand-side" realities that reflect broader economic constraints.

The Role of Higher Education Institutions in Graduate Employability

Since the 1980s, the societal and economic roles of HEIs have been subject to increasing scrutiny (Clarke, 2018). Governments and employer organisations have continually exerted pressure on universities to demonstrate the tangible value and effectiveness of tertiary education (Clarke, 2018). Policymakers expect measurable returns on investment in higher education in the form of employable graduates capable of driving sustainable economic development (Holmes, 2013). In parallel, employers expect HEIs to produce graduates who can deliver immediate workplace value, combining technical expertise with a range of other relevant competencies (Harvey, 2000). Hinchliffe and Jolly (2011) contend that these expectations are driven by the shift towards a knowledge economy, increasing globalisation, and the need for a highly skilled workforce to address contemporary and future societal challenges.

Hillage and Pollard (1998) define graduate employability as the "knowledge, skills, and attributes that graduates are expected to be able to demonstrate they have acquired in higher education." This reinforces the notion that graduate identity is shaped by distinctive attributes cultivated through higher education (Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011). Throughout their studies, students engage in a wide range of intellectual and personal development activities, enabling more advanced ways of thinking and applying knowledge. Consequently, a qualification should signify not only subject-specific knowledge but also the ability to apply that knowledge effectively in diverse contexts (Clarke, 2018). Historically, a degree was considered a near-guarantee of employment, signifying both knowledge and intellectual capability (Harvey, 2000). In the modern labour market, however, academic attainment alone does not ensure employment, as employers often perceive graduates to lack essential skills, highlighting a disconnect between educational outcomes and workplace demands (Oluwajodu et al., 2015).

Education at all levels (primary, secondary, and tertiary) serves as a foundation for the development of competencies and values essential for both social and professional success (Dada & Majekodunmi, 2020). Nevertheless, research highlights a recurring contradiction: while employers increasingly demand work-ready graduates, HEIs continue to emphasise broader intellectual formation and lifelong learning (Harvey, 2000; Holmes, 2013). This tension underscores the difficulty of aligning educational outcomes with shifting workplace demands.

The Role of Soft Skills in Graduate Employability

Oni and Aina (2020) highlight a significant gap between employer expectations and the capabilities of modern graduates. While graduates often possess advanced technical and job-specific skills, they frequently lack essential personal attributes, commonly referred to as "soft skills", that are critical for workplace success (Oni & Aina, 2020). In response to industry demands, the enhancement of soft skills has become a strategic focus within higher education policy globally (Seidu et al., 2021). The global shift from a manufacturing-based to a service-driven economy has further underscored the importance of human attributes in professional contexts (Sharma, 2018). Graduates must now demonstrate both technical proficiency and interpersonal capabilities such as communication and teamwork to thrive in the dynamic labour market (Sharma, 2018). Yet Afroze et al. (2019) caution that while soft skills are valued, there remains inconsistency in how employers define and assess them, leading to a persistent skills gap narrative that may not fully reflect graduates' actual capabilities. This indicates a need for more standardised and evidence-based approaches to measuring soft skills.

Soft skills are defined as "a wide range of skills, competencies, behaviours, attitudes and personal qualities that enable people to effectively navigate their environment" (Oni & Aina, 2020). These include, but are not limited to, communication, empathy, time management, language proficiency, personal habits, and critical thinking (Oni & Aina, 2020). In contrast, hard skills (quantifiable, job-specific abilities) were once the sole requirement for employment (Oni & Aina, 2020). Since the late 20th century, however, soft skills have emerged as a critical differentiator in employability (Oni & Aina, 2020).

Empirical evidence underscores their importance: Sharma (2018) cites research indicating that 75% of long-term job success is attributable to interpersonal skills, with discipline-specific knowledge accounting for the remainder. Similarly, John (2009) reports that hard skills contribute only 15% to workplace success, compared to 85% for soft skills. Employers increasingly value attributes such as adaptability and social maturity, which enable graduates to navigate challenges and build effective workplace relationships (Sharma, 2018). In an era of intensified global competition, a workforce proficient in soft skills is essential for organisational agility and resilience (Afroze et al., 2019). However, such figures often derive from consultancy or training literature and are not universally supported by empirical studies, raising questions about their generalisability.

Soft Skills in Quantity Surveying

Soft skills and employability within the quantity surveying (QS) profession have been the subject of extensive research, with numerous studies identifying the competencies essential for QS practitioners (Adekunle et al., 2019). Driven by evolving client demands, technological advancements, and globalisation, the QS profession has seen its traditional roles expand and, in some areas, diminish (Shafie et al., 2014). The QS remit now extends well beyond financial management to encompass contract documentation, risk allocation, legal advisory roles, value engineering, project management, and related functions. As a result, QS graduates must distinguish themselves in the competitive job market, particularly through the development of soft skills (Shafie et al., 2014).

Shafie et al. (2014) examined employer perceptions of QS graduates' soft skills in Malaysia, identifying critical thinking, communication, independent working capability, professional ethics, and self-confidence as the top expected attributes. However, graduates were perceived as deficient in critical thinking, problem-solving, decision-making, communication, and independent working skills. Similarly, Oni and Aina (2020) surveyed Nigerian QS employers, who ranked creativity, leadership, confidence, and communication as the most valued general labour market skills. Specifically for QS roles, decision-making, leadership, self-confidence, critical thinking, and the ability to perform under pressure were prioritised.

Karunasena et al. (2015), in a cross-country study involving Sri Lanka, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Oman, the United Kingdom, and Australia, identified communication, teamwork, and self-management as differentiating skills for graduate QSs. These findings broadly align with international perspectives (e.g. Yusof et al., 2024), though recent research highlights generational differences: Generation Z QS graduates tend to be digitally fluent but may lack resilience and face-to-face communication confidence. This suggests that the soft skills gap is not uniform but context- and cohort-specific.

South African research has also added important insights. Van Eck (2024) surveyed candidate QSs and, through factor analysis, clustered soft skills into four groups (self-management, analytical, interaction, professionalism/ethics). Their findings confirmed substantial skills gaps in self-management and communication. However, Van Eck's work relied on self-reported perceptions of skills, rather than direct performance measurement. This is a crucial distinction: while surveys identify what people believe about soft skills, they do not capture how individuals actually behave when confronted with complex, real-world scenarios.

Other QS-focused studies have drawn on Belbin's Team Role framework (Oke et al., 2016; Olatunji et al., 2014) to explore how personality-linked roles influence project team performance. These studies demonstrated that QSs tend to adopt "Monitor Evaluator" and "Team Worker" roles, which are analytical and supportive functions critical to project success. While valuable, these role-based typologies do not provide a fine-grained measure of specific soft skills like communication or ethical reasoning. They describe professional tendencies, but they do not test actual competence in situational judgement.

By contrast, more recent scholarship has moved towards measurement frameworks. Parker (2022) used a Delphi study to create a composite performance index for soft skills in construction, while Davies et al. (2025) applied decision-support tools to embed soft skills in public infrastructure evaluation. Lai (2013) specifically advocated Situational Judgement Tests (SJTs) as a superior method for capturing social intelligence, since SJTs reveal what individuals would do in applied scenarios rather than what they think they can do. Together, these studies reflect a methodological shift from descriptive surveys to performance-based assessment.

Assessment of Soft Skill Levels

Aligned with the study's overarching aim to evaluate and enhance the employability of QS Honours graduates, this research will explicitly measure proficiency in three core soft skills: communication, ethics and morals, and critical thinking. A structured Situational Judgement Test (SJT) will be administered to simulate realistic professional scenarios, requiring respondents to select the most appropriate course of action. This method provides an objective measure of decision-making processes, behavioural tendencies, and value alignment, thereby generating quantifiable data on students' soft skill capabilities.

Unlike prior QS research that has relied primarily on perception-based surveys (Van Eck, 2024; Shafie et al., 2014; Oni & Aina, 2020) or personality-role profiling (Oke et al., 2016; Olatunji et al., 2014), this study advances the field by employing a direct test of actual performance under situational pressure. SJTs thus provide richer and more actionable insights into employability: they bridge the gap between theoretical expectations and demonstrated competence. In doing so, this study contributes not only to QS pedagogy but also to the wider debate on how best to measure employability in the built environment professions. By drawing on recent frameworks (Lai, 2013; Parker, 2022; Davies et al., 2025), the study positions itself within the growing body of empirical, method-driven soft skills assessment research.

Research methodology and method

Research Philosophy, Approach, and Sampling

This study adopts a positivist research philosophy, which assumes that reality exists independently of human perception and is governed by objective laws (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). From an ontological perspective, positivism aligns with realism, while its epistemological stance is objectivism. Under this paradigm, the researcher remains detached from the subjects, making objective observations without influencing the phenomena being studied.

A deductive approach was applied, as the research sought to evaluate the soft skill levels of Quantity Surveying (QS) Honours students in order to test the proposition that QS education contributes to the development of such skills over the course of study. Given the need to generate and analyse numerical data, a quantitative research design was deemed most appropriate, as it allows for the identification of patterns and relationships between measured variables (Amaratunga et al., 2002).

The target population comprised all QS Honours students enrolled at South African higher education institutions in 2024. The accessible population was a cohort of 30 students from a single institution. A simple random sampling technique was used, with all students receiving a link to the online test and invited to participate voluntarily. Of these, 18 students completed the assessment, representing a 60% response rate.

Soft Skills Assessment

The study employed a soft skills assessment to measure three targeted competencies: communication, ethics and morals, and critical thinking. Such measurement tools are widely used to track progress and evaluate the effectiveness of educational interventions (Galloway et al., 2017). While soft skills assessment remains an evolving area of research, instruments typically vary in form, content, scoring approach, and performance standards (Stecher & Hamilton, 2014).

Three main categories of soft skills assessments exist: (i) self-reports, where individuals rate themselves (e.g. Likert scales), (ii) ratings by others, where peers or supervisors assess behaviour, and (iii) performance-based assessments such as simulations and Situational Judgement Tests (SJTs). This study selected the SJT format, as it combines scenario-based realism with lower cost and ease of administration, while reducing bias compared to self-reports.

Research Instrument

The questionnaire was adapted from a Situational Judgement Test developed by Zakaria (2013). The SJT presented six hypothetical, profession-relevant scenarios, each with multiple response options. The scenarios were specifically designed to elicit responses that demonstrate the target soft skills,

while maintaining contextual relevance to the QS profession. The instrument's format allows for simulation of professional decision-making without the logistical and financial challenges of full-scale simulation exercises.

Data Collection Procedure

The SJT was administered online via a secure platform. Participants accessed the questionnaire through a link distributed via institutional communication channels. Standardised instructions were provided, and no time limit was imposed to encourage thoughtful responses. All responses were anonymised prior to analysis to ensure confidentiality.

Data Analysis

Responses were scored according to a predefined rubric derived from the original Zakaria (2013) instrument. The scoring rubric allocated weighted values to each response option, with higher scores reflecting greater alignment with effective communication, ethical soundness, and critical reasoning. The rubric was pilot tested on a small sample (n=3) for clarity, after which minor adjustments were made. Descriptive statistics (means, medians, frequency distributions) were computed to determine overall skill levels within each domain. Comparative analysis was used to identify relative strengths and weaknesses in the cohort's skill profile.

Reliability and Validity

The SJT is an established assessment tool that has undergone content validation by subject-matter experts and alignment with theoretical frameworks on workplace soft skills. This supports its content and construct validity in measuring the intended skill set. However, this study did not conduct a statistical reliability test such as Cronbach's alpha due to the small sample size (n=18). This is a recognised limitation, as internal consistency could not be confirmed quantitatively. Future studies with larger cohorts should apply Cronbach's alpha or split-half reliability to strengthen confidence in the instrument's robustness.

Despite this, content validity was supported by expert review, and construct validity was ensured through alignment with established SJT frameworks (Zakaria, 2013; Lai, 2013). Thus, while reliability testing was limited, the instrument maintains theoretical and practical validity.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics committee prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, with informed consent obtained from all respondents. No personal identifiers were collected, and all data were stored securely in compliance with institutional data protection guidelines.

Research Results and Discussion

Question 1: Communication

The first scenario assessed communication anxiety and the ability to articulate effectively, adapted from Zakaria (2013: 76–77). The scenario was as follows: A friend from rural KwaZulu-Natal is visiting you in Cape Town and is unfamiliar with the roads, navigating with a map. After work, you take him sightseeing around the city. While resting at a restaurant, an English tourist approaches your friend for directions to the Cape Town International Convention Centre (CTICC). What would you do?

Participants ranked four possible responses from most effective to least effective:

A) Let your friend help the tourist;
B) Give directions to the tourist and expect your friend to assist using his map;
C) You give directions to the tourist;
D) Give directions to your friend and ask him to relay them to the tourist.

A correct ranking of C–B–D–A indicated strong communication skills. Three students (17%) selected 'ABCD', three (17%) chose 'CBAD', two students (11%) ranked 'DBAC' and 'BCAD' or 'CABD', and

one student (6%) each selected 'CDAB', 'BADC', or 'BACD'. Overall, 67% scored low, 6% moderate, and 28% high.

These results suggest that while students generally demonstrate the confidence to communicate without anxiety, many lack a nuanced understanding of the most effective communication strategy in this context. The inability to identify the correct ranking highlights the need for targeted improvement in communication skills.

Question 2: Communication

The second scenario, adapted from Zakaria (2013: 83), again evaluated communication anxiety: You are the Chairperson of the Opening Ceremony Committee for a university programme. Shortly before the event, the master of ceremonies becomes unavailable due to illness. The event script and the committee laptop are with him, and there is no draft text available. Time is running short. What would you do?

Responses to be ranked were:

A) Using the programme schedule, take on the role of master of ceremonies without a script;
B) Prepare a brief speech and take on the role;
C) Instruct another committee member to take over the role;
D) Instruct another committee member to take over, with you as the last resort if no replacement is found.

The correct ranking was A–B–D–C. Option A demonstrates the highest confidence under pressure, while B shows some preparation but lower spontaneity. Option D indicates reluctance, and C shows avoidance. Four students (22%) ranked 'BCAD' or 'BADC', three (17%) chose 'CABD' or 'BACD', two students (11%) ranked 'CADB', and one (6%) selected 'ADBC' or 'ABCD'. Overall, 44% scored low, 50% moderate, and 6% high.

No student ranked the sequence correctly, suggesting moderate communication anxiety when faced with unplanned public speaking situations. The findings of question one and two support earlier studies that identified communication as the most critical employability skill for QSs (Shafie et al., 2014; Oni & Aina, 2020; Yusof et al., 2024). However, unlike employer-perception surveys that simply report communication as "important," this study shows evidence of actual difficulty in applying communication under pressure. This performance-based deficit aligns with Van Eck (2024), who reported self-management and communication as key weaknesses among South African candidate QSs. The SJT results therefore confirm, in practice, what earlier surveys suggested in perception.

Question 3: Ethics

The third scenario, adapted from Zakaria (2013:77-78), measured professional ethics and morality through the attribute of hard work: Your team must compile an evaluation report for a completed project. Each member is assigned a section. Three days before the presentation, you find some sections do not meet agreed standards. What would you do?

Options were:

A) Identify mistakes and ask for a rewrite within one day;
B) Ignore these sections and focus on important parts;
C) Assist in correcting sections while teaching proper writing;
D) Ask other members to correct their sections.

The correct sequence was A–C–D–B. Three students (17%) ranked 'BDAC' or 'BACD', two (11%) chose 'ACBD' or 'DCBA', and one (6%) each selected from multiple other incorrect sequences. Overall, 67% scored low, 17% moderate, and 17% high.

Only two students correctly identified the ranking, suggesting that hard work and responsibility as components of professional ethics require strengthening in this group.

Question 4: Ethics

The fourth scenario, adapted from Zakaria (2013: 86-87), also measured hard work and enthusiasm: A new staff member joins your group, slowing the work process. What would you do?

Options were:

A) Work overtime to complete tasks;
B) Ask the staff member to speed up;
C) Assist the staff member and offer help;
D) Ask the staff member to spend more time with the group to adapt more quickly.

The correct ranking was C–D–B–A. Six students (33%) ranked 'DCBA', two (11%) selected 'BACD', 'CDBA' or 'CBDA', and one (6%) each selected other combinations. Overall, 61% scored low, 6% moderate, and 33% high.

Although no student identified the exact correct order, many placed C and D, both positive responses, towards the top, suggesting some recognition of supportive workplace behaviour. This contrasts with Shafie et al. (2014), who reported ethics as a relative strength among Malaysian QS graduates, and also with Oni & Aina (2020), who found that Nigerian QS employers highly valued decision-making and ethical leadership. The present study highlights that, in this South African sample, ethical responsibility is weaker than expected. This difference may reflect contextual variations in curriculum emphasis or professional culture. Importantly, Parker's (2022) Delphi study also identified ethics as a dimension of professional competence but operationalised it through consensus ratings, whereas the current SJT captures how ethics is enacted in practice. This suggests that testing-based approaches may reveal weaknesses that perception-based surveys fail to detect.

Question 5: Critical Thinking

The fifth scenario, adapted from Zakaria (2013: 82), assessed critical thinking in problem-solving: You wish to purchase a computer and have identified several options. A salesperson suggests a brand not on your list, claiming it meets your needs and is affordable. What would you do?

Options were:

A) Ask the seller questions to confirm suitability;
B) Re-evaluate your options and research further;
C) Accept the seller's recommendation;
D) Request to test the computer before deciding.

The correct sequence was B–A–D–C. Five students (28%) ranked 'ABDC', four (22%) 'BADC', three (17%) 'ABCD', and one (6%) each chose other incorrect sequences. Overall, 33% scored low, 44% moderate, and 22% high. Four students achieved the correct ranking, indicating strong critical thinking. However, the majority demonstrated only partial application of critical thinking processes.

Question 6: Critical Thinking

The final scenario, adapted from Zakaria (2013: 85–86), measured critical thinking regarding a socio-economic issue: Petroleum is a depleting resource. The government recommends reducing petroleum consumption. What is your opinion?

Options were:

A) Use public transport to save costs;
B) There is still plenty of petroleum in unexplored areas;
C) Petroleum usage pollutes the environment;
D) Reducing consumption can lower oil company monopolies and market prices.

The correct sequence was D–C–A–B. Four students (22%) ranked 'CDBA', three (17%) 'ABCD', two (11%) selected 'ADCB', 'BCAD', 'ACBD', 'BDAC', or 'ADBC', and one (6%) ranked 'BACD'. Overall, 56% scored low, 22% moderate, and 22% high. No student ranked the sequence correctly, suggesting limited capacity for unconventional or "out-of-the-box" reasoning in this context.

The results of question five and six align with findings from Karunasena et al. (2015), who identified critical thinking as one of the weakest competencies across multiple countries, and with Van Eck (2024), who clustered analytical skills as an area of deficit among South African QSs. The inability to apply unconventional reasoning in the petroleum scenario also echoes Yusof et al. (2024), who found that Gen Z QS graduates excel in digital adaptability but lack resilience and deep critical analysis. Furthermore, Davies et al. (2025) argued that structured decision-support models can embed critical thinking into project evaluation frameworks, while Lai (2013) demonstrated the value of SJTs in measuring "social intelligence". Together, these frameworks highlight that while critical thinking is consistently emphasised in theory, it remains underdeveloped in practice, something this study makes visible through applied testing rather than self-report.

Overall, these findings indicate that most students possess low to moderate communication and critical thinking skills, and weaker ethical reasoning than suggested by prior employer-perception studies. Unlike descriptive surveys (e.g. Shafie et al., 2014; Oni & Aina, 2020; Van Eck, 2024) or team role frameworks (Oke et al., 2016; Olatunji et al., 2014), this study provides evidence from actual performance under situational pressure. By applying SJTs, it reveals practical gaps that are not always visible in self-report or employer-rating methodologies. This positions the current research as a methodological advancement, moving from perceptions of employability to demonstrated competencies.

Conclusion

Soft skills, encompassing competencies, behaviours, attitudes, and personal attributes, are increasingly recognised as essential for professional success in the Quantity Surveying (QS) profession. Despite this, a persistent gap remains between the soft skills expected by employers and those demonstrated by recent graduates.

The aim of this study was to assess the proficiency of QS Honours students in three soft skills identified by industry stakeholders as critical: communication, ethics and morals, and critical thinking. Using a Situational Judgement Test (SJT) adapted from Zakaria (2013), data were collected from 18 students at a South African higher education institution. The research achieved its objectives by (i) confirming that these three skills are prioritised by employers, (ii) applying an established SJT instrument to evaluate student performance, and (iii) analysing proficiency levels to identify skill gaps.

The findings reveal clear weaknesses in all three domains. In communication, 67% of students scored low on the first scenario and 44% low on the second, showing limited ability to select effective strategies under pressure. In ethics, over 60% scored low in both scenarios, indicating difficulties with responsibility and collaborative professionalism. In critical thinking, while 22% achieved high scores in one scenario, no student correctly ranked the socio-economic reasoning scenario, suggesting narrow or conventional thinking patterns. These results provide evidence of uneven but generally weak performance across the sample.

These outcomes differ from Shafie et al. (2014), who found ethics to be a relative strength in Malaysia, and Oni & Aina (2020), who identified ethical leadership and decision-making as valued by Nigerian QS employers. Instead, the present findings align more closely with Van Eck (2024), who reported self-management and communication deficits among South African candidate QSs, and with Yusof et al. (2024), who noted that Generation Z QS graduates often lack resilience and advanced interpersonal skills. By demonstrating that ethical and critical reasoning are particularly underdeveloped, this study highlights gaps not visible in perception-based surveys.

The contribution of this study lies in its methodological approach: unlike prior research that asked employers or graduates to report on soft skills, this study tested actual performance through an SJT. This performance-based evidence provides stronger insights into how QS students respond in practice, offering a more reliable indication of workplace readiness.

For QS education in South Africa, the results suggest three implications: (i) targeted curriculum interventions are needed to build communication confidence and ethical decision-making, (ii) critical thinking exercises should go beyond technical problem-solving to include socio-economic reasoning and unconventional analysis, and (iii) formal integration of SJT-style assessment could help track student progress and align competencies more closely with industry expectations.

Recommendations

Short-term (educators and module convenors):

Embed structured, scenario-based soft skills training, such as SJT-style exercises, within core QS modules. This is particularly important given the 67% low scores in Communication Scenario 1 and the absence of correct rankings in Communication Scenario 2, which highlight gaps in communication strategy and anxiety under pressure. Incorporate ethics-focused case studies and role-play activities to strengthen professional responsibility, directly addressing the over 60% low scores in Ethics Scenarios 3 and 4, where students struggled with responsibility and collaborative behaviours. Provide targeted workshops on problem-solving and argumentation to enhance critical thinking, referencing Critical Thinking Scenarios 5 and 6, where the majority only partially applied reasoning and no student ranked the socio-economic scenario correctly.

Medium-term (curriculum designers and departments):

Develop targeted modules or electives that formally integrate soft skills development into QS programmes. Introduce assessment rubrics that weight communication, ethics, and critical thinking alongside technical skills, ensuring that learning outcomes explicitly reflect graduate employability needs. Partner with industry to co-design authentic scenarios for assessment, ensuring contextual realism and stronger transferability of skills.

Long-term (professional bodies, accrediting institutions, and policymakers):

Engage with professional bodies such as SACQSP and ASAQS to ensure that accreditation standards explicitly require evidence of soft skills development, aligning QS education with international trends. Encourage accrediting bodies to mandate periodic performance-based testing of soft skills (e.g., SJT, simulations) as part of programme audits, moving beyond self-report surveys to ensure objective evaluation. Promote ongoing professional development pathways for graduates and practitioners that reinforce employability through soft skill training. While this study provides valuable insights, its findings are limited by the small sample size (n=18) drawn from a single institution. This restricts the extent to which the results can be generalised to the broader population of Quantity Surveying graduates in South Africa. Consequently, caution should be exercised in interpreting the outcomes as representative of the sector at large. Nonetheless, the use of a Situational Judgement Test (SJT) remains a robust methodological approach, offering an objective means of capturing actual performance in soft skills rather than relying on self-reports or employer perceptions. Replication with larger and more diverse samples would enhance the external validity of the results while retaining the methodological strengths demonstrated here.

Future research should also examine the effectiveness of different pedagogical tools (e.g., SJTs, simulations, team-based projects) in building soft skills and compare results internationally to benchmark South African QS graduates against global peers.

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SACQSP2025-42

Assessing Succession Planning in South African Built Environment Organisations

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Abstract

Companies use succession planning to ensure a seamless transfer of skills, leadership, or possession. However, the lack of proper succession planning has caused major issues in South African built environment enterprises, resulting in significant problems, including the loss of valuable knowledge, skills, and expertise, predominantly as the labour force ages and withdraws. This study assesses the benefits and implications of succession planning within the South African built environment companies. This research employed a quantitative methodology. A structured questionnaire survey was administered to professionals in the built environment, including engineers, construction managers, architects, and quantity surveyors. The professionals were selected using the convenience sampling technique. The data gathered from the questionnaires were examined using descriptive statistical methods and exploratory factor analysis. The findings revealed the top five benefits of succession planning as strategic vision alignment, improved retention and engagement, service continuity guarantee, promoting training and development, and ensuring uninterrupted leadership. The exploratory factor analysis grouped the factors into three categories: factor one was risk management, factor two was the firm's continuity, and factor three was training and skills development. This investigation of succession planning for built environment companies within South Africa highlights the benefits that construction professionals can capitalise on to improve succession planning within these organisations. This study provided professionals with knowledge on the benefits of succession planning to overcome the difficulties faced by organisations in the built environment.

Keywords: Business Continuity, Built Environment, South Africa, Skills, Talent.

Introduction

Implementing a succession plan guarantees that companies remain operational and uninterrupted even when essential staff depart for new opportunities, resign due to retirement or pass away (Kenton, 2022). Furthermore, it will possibly facilitate a fluidity consequence, allowing the workforce to gain possession in a thriving firm. Implementing succession planning is a strategic approach for companies to safeguard they are absolutely prepared to advance all staff members, not just those in leadership or top management roles (Kenton, 2022). One of the frequent anxieties of chief executives is losing their significance and failing to have a substantive influence on the organisation. The idea can be very demanding, particularly when it comes to making arrangements for the future of companies. Succession planning can, however, be a chance for South African built environment companies to develop capacities, tap into a range of perspectives, and establish a lasting future if done effectively (Hawke, 2021; Liphadzi et al., 2019).

Succession planning, which implies recognising and progressing potential forthcoming superiors within a company, is a crucial procedure that ensures a company's continued accomplishment. Inadequate succession planning is a significant problem in the built environment organisations in South Africa, potentially leading to the loss of valuable institutional knowledge, skills, and expertise, particularly as the workforce ages and staff retire. For construction firms that want to ensure their future success, they should not disregard the difficulties and issues related to succession planning (Van der Kamp, 2021). Despite the benefits of succession planning, research on the key factors influencing succession planning for leadership progress in the built environment is scarce. Research on the labour force in the built environment, despite human resources being vital, has not provided significant benefits for the South African built environment, in terms of retaining and replacing its workforce (Zighan, 2021). Succession planning principles are relatively rare in a trivial construction firm (Nyoni, 2019). It is also necessary for those chosen for succession within an organisation to receive guidance (Van der Kamp, 2021). Therefore, the study examines the benefits of succession planning and in what manner succession planning can be enhanced for the built environment organisations in South Africa.

This study aimed to examine succession planning within the built environment organisations. The built environment region, encompassing construction, engineering, architecture, and project management, is pivotal to South Africa's economic progress and infrastructure expansion (CIDB, 2022; Statistics South Africa, 2021). Despite its importance, many firms in this sector face challenges in formulating and implementing effective succession planning strategies, which are essential for sustaining leadership pipelines and organisational competitiveness (Groves, 2007; Garman & Glawe, 2004). Previous research highlights that succession planning enhances organisational performance, employee retention, and leadership continuity (Rothwell, 2016). Accordingly, this study examines succession planning within the Built Environment in South Africa, identifying key benefits and providing insights that apply not only to the local industry but also to similar contexts internationally.

Literature review

Succession planning in organisations within the South African built environment

Business continuity is ensured through a deliberate succession planning process, which involves identifying and formulating forthcoming leaders (Owolabi & Adeosun, 2021; Rothwell, 2016). Succession planning best practices typically involve early identification of talent, structured mentoring, leadership development programmes, and aligning with long-term strategic objectives (Rothwell, 2016; Groves, 2007; Klaczak, 2023). For instance, Groves (2007) emphasises mentoring and coaching as mechanisms for leadership continuity, while Urban and Nonkwelo (2022) highlight succession planning's role in achieving transformation and inclusivity within South African organisations. Valeri and Baggio (2022) stress the importance of expertise transfer mechanisms, pointing to how informal mentoring complements formal training. However, best practices remain contested: while some authors promote systematic, centralised approaches (Rothwell, 2016), others argue for flexibility tailored to organisational culture (Thomas, 2022). Importantly, most of these frameworks are derived from Western corporate settings, with limited adaptation to developing-economy contexts. In the Built Environment within South Africa, succession planning must grapple with sector-specific challenges such as skills shortages, limited training capacity, and transformation imperatives (Siambi, 2022; Aghimien et al., 2023). Yet, little research assesses whether these international best practices translate effectively into this context, creating a critical gap for investigation.

To ensure a smooth transition and continued prosperity, built environment organisations need to find and develop potential successors within their own ranks. Vaiman et al. (2021) suggest that companies can prepare individuals for future leadership positions by pinpointing those who possess the necessary skills, expertise, and experience. During this process, employee performance, potential, and how well they match the company's values and goals are completely assessed (Vaiman et al., 2021). Providing them with prospects for guidance and development can also enable them to suit more competent (Ritchie, 2020). Preparing for a leadership transition not simply ensures continuousness although it motivates employees by offering opportunities for career progression. To achieve success in an ever-changing sector, built environment enterprises must identify potential successors within their organisation (Barton, 2019). Companies in the building environment sector must assess their personnel's capabilities, skills, and development prospects if they wish to thrive in today's highly competitive marketplace. Initially, businesses can identify their employees' skills, which enables them to determine their vigor and limitations and create a guidance and development strategy (Siambi,

2022). Proficiency assessments help identify whether staff possess the necessary learning and abilities to fulfil patron requirements effectively (Alade, 2022). Barton, as stated by Barton (2019), agrees with Siambi (2022) that assessing growth potential facilitates the identification of individuals with high potential, who can then be groomed for leadership roles. Businesses in the built environment can secure long-term success in a rapidly changing sector by investing in skill development, building expertise, and cultivating individuals with development potential (Alade, 2022).

To develop future leaders within companies in the built environment, mentorship programs must be implemented. These packages provide guidance, support, and expertise transfer for young talents from experienced professionals (Klaczak, 2023). Leadership, communication, and problem-solving skills are all fostered through mentoring (Barton, 2019), which also cultivates a sense of community and facilitates personal growth. Companies operating in the built environment can secure a robust supply of skilled leaders who drive innovation and success by investing in mentoring initiatives (Siambi, 2022). Ultimately, these measures promote sustainable growth in the built environment industry. To maintain a seamless exchange of knowledge and skills within built environment companies, it is crucial to employ effective knowledge transfer methods. Seasoned experts training and coaching younger employees through mentorship programs is one effective strategy, as noted in Valeri and Baggio (2022). Frequent team engagements and seminars can also enhance association and knowledge by encouraging a belief in data revealing. Implementing technological programs for messages and documents also facilitates the transmission of knowledge between diverse projects and locations (Klaczak, 2023). Ultimately, adopting these strategies will enable companies to safeguard valuable knowledge and ultimately boost their market share.

Documentation of essential information and experience is crucial for businesses operating in the built environment. Having access to a repository of vital information is essential for the smooth functioning of projects in a sector where innovation and productivity are paramount (Nawari & Ravindran, 2019). Documenting best practices, lessons learned, and expert perspectives may help businesses refine their decision-making processes and avoid similar errors in the future (Nawari & Ravindran, 2019). This knowledge library can also be a valuable resource for promoting ongoing development and training new staff members (Rothwell & Prescott, 2022). Recording essential knowledge, as stated by Valeri and Baggio (2022), is key for built environment firms to deliver excellent facilities while staying economical in the marketplace. To achieve the victory and growth of built environment companies, educational schemes to bridge the skills deficit need to be provided. These businesses require skilled staff who can successfully oversee challenging projects and meet client requirements (Grosse et al., 2023). Employers can offer their staff the knowledge and skills required for professional success by providing training initiatives (Rothwell & Prescott, 2022). This enhances employee performance, as well as increasing the company's overall productivity and competitiveness (Grosse et al., 2022). Therefore, companies operating in the built environment that aim to achieve lasting success should devote investment in educational schemes.

Significance of succession planning for organisations

Organisations can achieve success despite changing circumstances through succession planning, which facilitates a seamless handover of leadership and personnel (Wildman, 2020). Henry Fayol's theory recommended a succession plan for companies in the centuries as leadership continuity (Siambi, 2022). Key to the importance of succession planning is the need for dedicated learning and abilities in the built environment sector (Ritchie, 2020). Experts in this discipline typically acquire in-depth expertise over a long interval of time (Ritchie, 2020). If there is no proper succession planning in place, this vital knowledge may be at risk of being lost when senior executives retire or vacate their roles (Wildman, 2020). Organisations can guarantee the transfer of this expertise to future generations by identifying potential successors at an early stage and offering them suitable training and mentorship opportunities (Ritchie, 2020).

Lengthy schedules and complex projects are typical in the built environment sector. Sudden departures or retirements could create a leadership gap that might hinder ongoing projects and lead to delays or increased costs (Tucker, 2020). Ensuring the availability of qualified personnel through succession planning mitigates these risks by providing a leadership succession pathway when needed (LeCounte, 2022). Planning for the next stage of a project aids in retaining knowledge and simultaneously promotes worker inspiration and commitment (Amore et al., 2021). Workforces who perceive apparent avenues for advancement within their organisation tend to be more committed and motivated in their

roles (Tucker, 2020). This, as stated by the researcher, results in a rise in productivity and creativity across the board for the sector.

Benefits and implications of succession planning

Firms operating in the infrastructure and construction sectors face specific challenges that are crucial for effective succession planning. One of the key benefits of succession planning in the South African context is the continuity it provides to built businesses, as noted by Nkwabi and Mboya (2019). To ensure a seamless transition, these companies may prepare for the retirement or departure of key executives by locating and cultivating internal candidates with leadership potential (Knickmeyer, 2020). Maintaining consistency serves to boost client confidence and minimise disruptions to ongoing projects.

Implementing succession planning helps to retain staff and increase their level of engagement. Employee commitment is stronger when they see opportunities for growth and career progression within an organisation (Flak, 2021); consequently, employee turnover rates decrease, and companies can retain valuable knowledge and expertise (Tucker, 2020). Knickmeyer (2020) further notes that succession planning has considerable implications for South Africa's transition in addition to these benefits. The country has a long-standing record of inequality, particularly concerning the representation of women and individuals from ethnic minorities in positions of authority (Winsborough, 2023). Environmentally-driven businesses can contribute to a more balanced society by offering opportunities for underprivileged groups through the implementation of inclusive succession strategies that prioritise diversity (Tucker, 2020). Access to education and training, which is often limited, may hinder the development of suitable successors from underrepresented groups, as stated by Campopiano et al. (2020). Moreover, cultural norms surrounding ageism and resistance to change may hinder effective succession planning, as noted by Nkwabi and Mboya (2019). For businesses in the built environment to achieve long-term success, a well-structured succession plan is a vital requirement, as emphasised by Ojeyemi (2021). According to Winsborough (2023), this ensures a trouble-free transition in leadership and allows the business to continue to prosper even after key personnel retire or depart from the company. Having a plan in place offers certain advantages.

A well-planned succession strategy helps maintain stability within a company. Having someone on standby to take on leadership responsibilities prevents power vacuums or operational disruptions (Thomas, 2022). Maintaining consistency is essential in areas such as construction and architecture, where projects often take years to complete and require ongoing management (Ojeyemi, 2021). A succession strategy enables effective talent development and retention. (Thomas, 2022) Implementing succession planning early on enables organisations to equip potential successors with the guidance and instruction they require to develop into forthcoming superiors (Nkwabi & Mboya, 2019). Boosting worker incentive and commitment to the organisation occurs when this is done. Moreover, having a well-planned succession strategy enhances the status of built environment organisations (Theus, 2019). Firms that display a lasting outlook and strategic planning inspire conviction in their clients and investors. According to Damer (2020), people are more likely to trust businesses with contingency plans in place for emergencies. Developing a well-organised succession plan is essential for businesses in the built environment, as it ensures stability, facilitates talent growth, and enhances their reputation (Theus, 2019). Parties can ensure their forthcoming victory even in the features of changing leadership dynamic forces by allocating resources to progressing such a strategy (Damer, 2020).

Changes in leadership within companies operating in the built environment can be challenging as they may disrupt normal operations and compromise long-term sustainability (LaCross et al., 2019). Companies should employ sophisticated strategies to ensure uninterrupted operations and minimise disruptions. Above all, a comprehensive succession plan should be established. The strategy should discover possible beneficiaries ahead to ensure an efficient transition of power when the time comes. (Damer, 2020) Organisations can reduce disruptions caused by sudden leadership variations by changing internal capacity (LaCross et al., 2019). Effective interaction is also crucial. Company employees should be informed about upcoming leadership changes and their impact on business operations, as stated by Amanquah (2021). Open communication among employees promotes confidence and reduces ambiguity. Knowledge transfer is also essential during leadership changes (Creta & Gross, 2020). To ensure a seamless handover of responsibilities, outgoing leaders should pass on their expertise to their replacements. Part of this involves sharing data about active initiatives, client connections, and strategic plans, as Amanquah (2021) pointed out. Furthermore, maintaining continuity during leadership transitions necessitates building strong relationships with clients, a point

made by Damer (2020). Customers should have confidence that their requirements will be met even with new leadership. Maintaining regular contact with customers throughout the transition process helps alleviate concerns and ensures business continuity (Creta & Gross, 2020). Fostering a culture that is adaptable within the organisation reduces the impact of leadership transitions. Organisations can navigate these changes more smoothly by motivating employees to accept change and adapt quickly to new circumstances (Damer, 2020). Conducting regular performance assessments for outgoing senior executives and potential replacements allows companies to identify areas for development prior to a change occurring (Kiwia et al., 2020). This enables the creation of customised mentoring or training programs aimed at cultivating upcoming leaders (Amanquah, 2021).

Research methodology

Investigation such as research involves a thorough and systematic examination, exceeding current understanding to gather precise and comprehensive details, thereby providing a basis for inquiry and descriptive explanation on the subject matter in question (Ebekozien et al., 2025). The research procedure involves a systematic process of gathering data, analysing data, and interpreting the findings through an investigation aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of the issue at hand. This research employed a quantitative methodology. The researchers chose the quantitative research approach based on investigative research, including a questionnaire-based survey. Analysing the results of the research and concluding that the collected data was facilitated by this. Creswell (2013) and Ebekozien et al. (2025) are cited. The incorporation of quantitative methods is necessary for researchers to attain the highest possible outcomes.

Gauteng Province was chosen for the study due to its status as South Africa's economic and construction hub, with the highest concentration of Built Environment firms and professionals. Its dynamic construction activity and diverse professionals make it an ideal location to examine succession planning practices and their perceived effectiveness. The target population in this study consisted of experts who are registered with the different professional societies in South Africa. Probability samples can establish whether a component is present or absent within the sample (Baltes & Ralph, 2022). Conversely, non-probability samples are unable to determine the likelihood of an element being included in the sample (Purwanto, 2022). A non-probability sampling technique known as convenience sampling was employed in this inquiry to choose the respondents who were being investigated. A sample of 66 professionals from South Africa was identified. The respondents comprised experts from working in architecture, construction and project management, engineering, and quantity surveying firms.

The questionnaires consisted of two sections. Section A - Background Information. This information will help researchers when they are interpreting the findings. Benefits of succession planning for firms in the built environment sector. A five-point Likert scale, assessing the level of agreement, was used to evaluate the benefits of succession planning for the built environment companies. The questionnaire was developed in association with the literature review to evaluate succession planning for the South African built environment companies. The researchers chose Google Forms for participants to access a link that directed them to the questionnaire, which was then submitted once completed. The data analysis process entails comprehending written data and visual representations. This involves structuring the information for analysis and subsequently conducting a thorough examination of the data. Understanding the collected data will help the researchers decode its significance. Statistics can be organised by merging responses from relevant experts when it pertains to a specific focus, or can be organised in detached replies (Irwin, 2008). The data was examined using statistical methods including Mean Item Score (MIS), standard deviation (SD), and exploratory factor analysis (EFA). In this study, the exploratory factor analysis was performed to collect data regarding the uniqueness of the factors in order to assess their suitability for factor analysis. The EFA was employed to validate and ensure the reliability of the assessment of the benefits of succession planning. The EFA was conducted using SPSS version 21. The EFA was embraced using SPSS version 21.

Research ethics procedures aim to cause no harm and to provide benefits to study participants and the global community (Walliman, 2011). The study adhered to research ethics guidelines that ensured the participants' emotional and physical well-being were not compromised throughout the study.

Research results

Background characteristics

The background characteristics data provided lists the respondents' roles, their highest level of educational attainment, and their years of experience. The illustration provided in Figure 1 depicts the various roles undertaken by professionals within the industry. The data shows that 3% are architects, 50% are quantity surveyors, 19.7% are engineers, 15.2% are construction managers, and 12.1% are construction project managers.

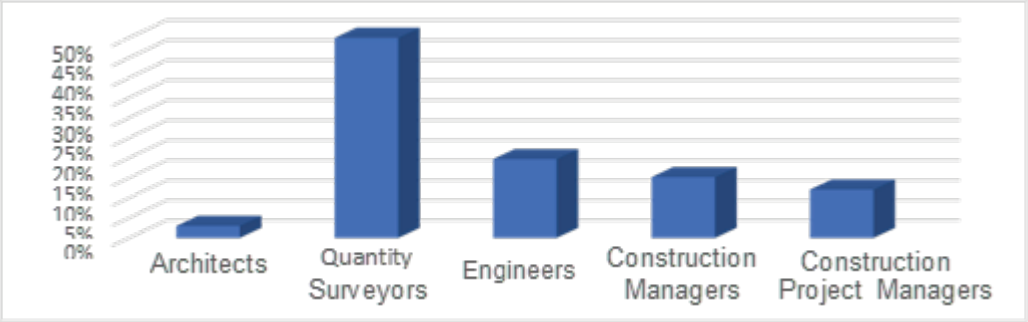

Figure 1 Respondents' profession (Source: Fieldwork, 2024)

Figure 2 illustrates the highest educational qualifications held by the respondents. According to the results, 24.2% of the participants held a diploma, while 50% had bachelor's degree, 16.7% had an honours degree, 7.6% had a master's degree, and 1.5% held a doctoral degree.

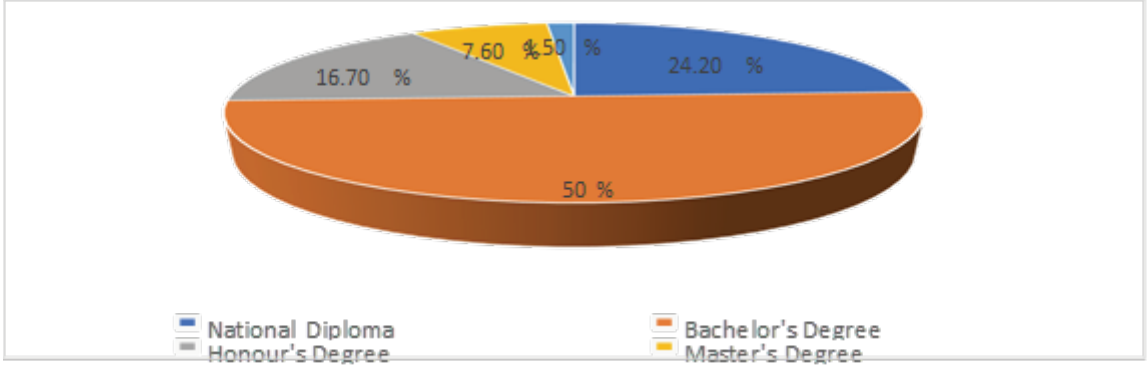

Figure 2 Respondents' qualifications (Source: Fieldwork, 2024)

The data in Figure 3 demonstrates the work experience of the industry respondents it indicates that 60.6% had experience spanning 0-5 years, 21.2% had experience in the 6–10-year range, 12.1% had experience range of 11-15 years, 4.6% had experience within the 16–20-year range, and 1.5% had over 20 years of working experience in the construction sector.

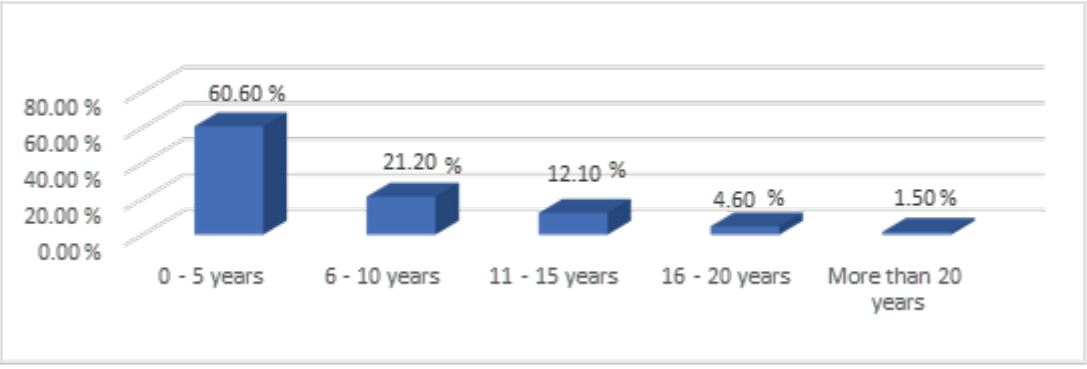

Figure 3 Respondents' working experience (Source: Fieldwork, 2024)

Benefits of succession planning within South African built environment firms

This part highlights the advantages of succession planning for firms operating within the built environment. The mean item scores of the variables, along with the EFA results, are shown. Furthermore, the results of all the descriptive analyses reveal the ranking of each approach in decreasing order. The descriptive analysis table also displays the separate mean scores along with the SD of every organisation's approach.

Descriptive analysis of succession planning for built environment organisations

The findings shown in Table 1 indicate the mean item score ranking. Respondents used a five-point Likert scale to rank the factors, with ratings of 1 (Strongly disagree), 2 (Disagree), 3 (Neutral), 4 (Agree), and 5 (Strongly agree). The top-ranked factors included 'Strategic vision alignment' with a mean of 4.20 and a SD of 0.754, 'Improve retention and engagement' with a mean of 4.17, and 'Service continuity guarantee' with SD of 0.821 and 0.858.

Ranked third, 'Encourage employee training and development' received a mean ranking of 4.15 and a SD of 0.852, followed closely by 'Ensure uninterrupted leadership' in fourth place with a mean of 4.12 and a SD of 1.068, and then 'Maintain brand integrity and reputation' in fifth, which had a mean value of 4.06 and a SD of 0.899. The table reveals that 'Career advancement assurance' was the sixth-ranked option with a mean score of 4.05 and a SD of 0.991, while both 'Mitigates risk' and 'Seamless transition assurance' secured seventh place with a mean score of 4.03 and SD of 1.045 and 0.790, respectively. Ranked eighth, the organisation's protection from unforeseen change scored a mean of 4.02, with a SD of 0.960. Ninth place went to 'Exposes weaknesses and accentuates the skills shortages-', with a mean rating of 3.91 and a SD of 0.931.

Table 1 Benefits of succession planning (Source: Fieldwork, 2024)

Benefits	N	Mean	SD	Rank
Strategic vision alignment	66	4.20	.754	1
Improve retention and engagement	66	4.17	.821	2
Service continuity guarantee	66	4.17	.852	2
Encourage employee training and development.	66	4.12	1.068	3
Ensures uninterrupted leadership	66	4.06	.899	4
Maintain brand integrity and reputation	66	4.06	.899	5
Career advancement assurance	66	4.05	.991	6
Mitigates risk	66	4.03	1.045	7
Seamless transition assurance	66	4.03	.790	7
Protect the company from unforeseen change	66	4.02	.960	8
Expose weaknesses and accentuate the skills shortages-shortages.	66	3.91	.931	9

Exploratory factor analysis of succession planning for South African built environment firms

This section discusses the benefits of succession planning using Cronbach's Alpha for reliability and EFA methodologies. The Cronbach's Alpha of the 9 benefits was 0.901, higher than the recommended 0.70 minimal criterion (DeVellis and Thorpe, 2021). The analysis found the benefits had p-values < 0.05 with a Kolmogorov-Smirnov value, thus violating the assumption of a normal distribution and requiring analytic techniques adaptable to the normality assumption.

The KMO value from the PCA results was 0.824> 0.70, indicating that the data were adequate for EFA. The results showed evidence because Bartlett's test of sphericity had a p-value less than 0.05. According to Shrestha (2021), Bartlett's test examines the factorability of the correlation matrix, which provides a chi-square test along with associated df and p-value. Table 2 showed that over half of the variation in each indicator was extracted, with an average variance of 0.648, ranging from 0.880 to 0.552, being above 0.50 (50%) in the results. Figure 4: Illustration of the best number of components extracted from the dataset using EFA. The matching component numbers are plotted against it. The

benefits were grouped under three components in Table 2. Component 1 had the greatest variance contribution, with 53.134%. This is inconsiderate as, after rotation, Component 1 accounts for 53.134% variance. Components 2 and 3 account for 14.010% and 11.63%, respectively. The overall variance explained by the three components is 78.781%, acceptable in research since it depicts the extracted factors as a representative of the data set. Rotation ensures that each component has captured a distinct and meaningful portion of the variance for improved interpretability. The five components are indicated on the Scree plot before the steep slope breaks. The three components preceding the discontinuity in that slope suggest the clusters to be explained in this factor analysis, which will undergo direct Varimax rotation. Direct Varimax rotation was chosen due to the correlations among the 9 variables. Consequently, the direct Varimax rotation yielded the pattern matrix illustrated in Table 2. This provides an explanation of the variable classifications under each of the five (5) components, which are jointly identified in the total variance explained and scree plot illustrated in Figure 4.

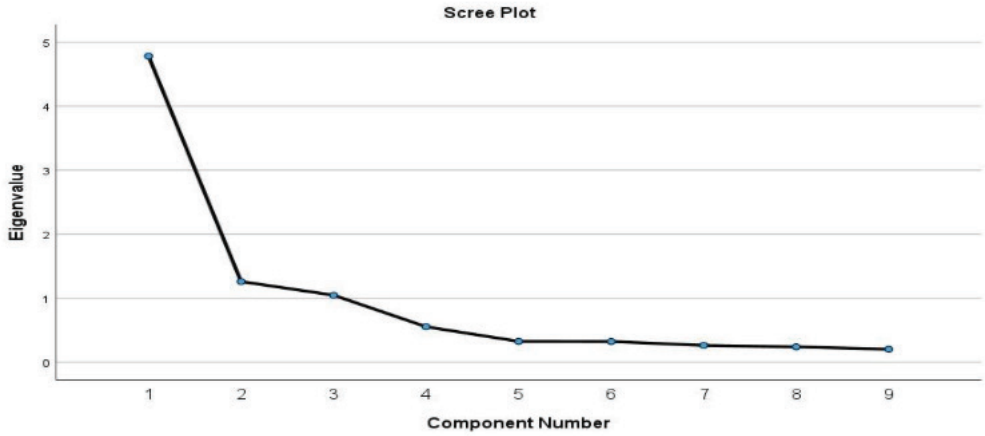

Figure 4 Scree Plot (Source: Fieldwork, 2024)

Table 2 EFA results of benefits of succession planning (Source: Fieldwork, 2024)

Benefits	Components			Extraction
	1	2	3	
Ensures uninterrupted leadership	.876			.822
Career advancement assurance	.825			.781
Protect the company from unforeseen change	.774			.749
Mitigates risk	.761			.787
Maintain brand integrity and reputation	.686			.602
Service continuity guarantee		.904		.877
Seamless transition assurance		.798		.787
Exposes weaknesses and accentuates the skills shortages			.870	.840
Encouraging employee training and development			.866	.845
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalisation.				
a. Rotation converged in 5 iterations.				
Total Variance Explained				
Eigenvalue	4.782	1.261	1.047	
Eigenvalue AR	4.782	1.261	1.047	
% of Variance	53.134	14.010	11.63	
Cumulative %	53.134	67.144	78.781	
KMO	0.846			

Discussion

Biographical characteristics

The background characteristics provided include details such as level of education and occupation. The investigators can evaluate the impact of these factors on the study's results by utilising the demographics mentioned in Van den Berghe (2022). According to Keleş (2022), factors such as age and education level can influence how individuals perceive and respond to survey questions. Participation in an occupation may also provide participants with specific know-how that they bring to the investigation (Sheldon & Brady, 2022). It was crucial for the researchers to collect and examine the participants' biographical details to reach accurate conclusions and make informed decisions based on the study's findings. Respondents in the study were South Africans aged 26 to 30, living in the provinces of KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng.

Benefits of succession planning within South African built environment firms

The top-ranked factors were 'Strategic Vision Alignment,' 'Improving Retention and Engagement,' 'Service Continuity Guarantee,' and 'Encourages Training and Development,' as demonstrated in Table 1. Incorporating succession planning into their strategic vision is essential for firms to retain knowledgeable employees and maintain business continuity, as evidenced by research conducted by Siambi (2022), Owolabi and Adeosun (2021), and Flak (2021). Furthermore, businesses must promote the training and development of their employees, a point highlighted by Baggio (2022).

The EFA results feature cluster one, dubbed Risk management, which encompasses five key variables: 'Ensure uninterrupted leadership' (0.876), 'Career advancement assurance' (0.825), 'Protect the company from unforeseen change' (0.774), 'Mitigates risk' (0.761), and 'Maintain brand integrity and reputation' (0.686), all of which are connected to mitigating risks via succession planning. The total variance of these components is 53.288%, which makes it the highest beneficial aspect of succession planning for South African built environment firms. Research on this cluster of factors supports the notion by Nkwabi & Mboya (2019) that businesses in the infrastructure and construction sectors face unique challenges necessitating effective succession planning. One of the key benefits of succession planning in South African businesses is the continuity it provides. According to Knickmeyer (2020), these businesses can ensure an efficient transcision of leadership when key executives retire or depart by identifying and fostering potential successors within the company.

Cluster two is named 'Firms' Continuity', consisting of two variables that have been loaded onto it. The variables in question comprise 'Service continuity guarantee' (0.904) and 'Seamless transition assurance' (0.798). These variables are observable in relation to the continuity of South African built environment firms through their succession planning strategies. Subsequently, the total variance of 23.125% positioned this cluster as a benefit of succession planning for South African built environment firms, in second place after cluster 1. Damer's (2020) study supports the notion that companies need to employ intelligent strategies to ensure continuity and minimise disruption. Above all, a comprehensive succession plan must be established. This plan should identify potential successors well in advance to ensure an efficient transmission of power at the appropriate time. Departing leaders should ensure a seamless transition by sharing their expertise with incoming successors. This involves sharing information about active initiatives, client connections, and strategic plans (Amanquah, 2021).

This cluster is identified as training and skills development, comprising two key elements: exposes weaknesses and accentuates the skills shortages, which have a correlation of 0.870, and encourages training and development, with a correlation of 0.866. The cluster's overall variance of 23.587 percent classifies it as the lowest-ranked in the benefits of succession planning for South African built environment firms. Cataloguing these factors enhances succession planning for firms that specialise in the built environment, in accordance with Damer's (2020) research, which showed that fostering a culture of adaptability within a company can mitigate the effects of leadership changes. Organisations can navigate these transitions more smoothly by motivating employees to accept change and adapt quickly to altered circumstances. Conducting regular performance reviews for both departing executives and potential successors, according to Amanquah (2021), allows businesses to identify areas for improvement before a transition and subsequently enables the implementation of tailored programs for mentoring or training to develop future leaders.

Conclusion

The literature review shows that succession planning for construction industry companies offers several benefits, including maintaining stability within the organisation, ensuring continuity and long-term viability, and ensuring a smooth transfer of leadership responsibilities. The examined factors were grouped under the following three principal categories: (1) Risk management; (2) Companies' ability to continue operating; (3) Training and skills development. The extent of the factors' influence was determined and ranked based on the survey findings collected from respondents. The most advantageous outcomes of succession planning include: maintaining continuous leadership, a commitment to career progression, safeguarding the firm from abrupt unforeseen change, minimising risk, and upholding brand integrity and reputation. These findings indicate that succession arrangement is advantageous for built environment companies in South Africa. In conclusion, the study's theoretical and empirical discoveries fulfilled its specified goals.

Firms in the construction industry should consider implementing succession planning as a practical measure. This will facilitate a smooth handover of leaders for firms. Experts in the field should develop customised training courses and seminars tailored to the unique needs of the built environment sector. These programs must focus on developing effective leadership, addressing sector-specific challenges, and implementing succession planning tactics. Professionals should establish a routine review process to assess the effectiveness of succession plans and make necessary adjustments due to changing organisational needs, market trends, and technological advancements. Foster a culture within the organisation that supports the development of talent, fosters growth, and promotes ongoing learning. Individuals who actively contribute to succession planning and employee development within the organisation are worthy of recognition and incentives.

Several limitations were encountered during the execution of this research study. Initially, a quantitative research approach was chosen over interviewing professionals to gather their opinions in a qualitative research context. The study's findings generalise that its evaluation of succession planning aligns with the results from South Africa.

Additional research can be performed to monitor the outcomes of succession planning over an extended period of time through study and assessment of the long-term stability and operational effectiveness of businesses following leadership transitions. Explore the challenges that successful leaders have overcome and their effect on administrative growth. To explore the effectiveness of leadership development initiatives in cultivating future leaders across different levels within organisations. Examine the impact of these programs on organisational stability and the development of talent during succession phases.

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SACQSP2025-43

Leveraging Human Resource Information Systems (HRIS) to Empower Quantity Surveyors in South Africa's Digital Construction Landscape

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Abstract

Despite growing attention to digital transformation in construction, limited research has focused on how HRIS, typically used for payroll and recruitment, can support workforce development, skills tracking, and strategic human resource management for quantity surveyors. Using a combined scientometric analysis and narrative synthesis methodology, the study analysed 297 documents from Scopus and 49 from Web of Science to map key research trends, themes, and gaps. The analysis revealed four major research clusters: Human Resource Management, E-Learning, Sustainable Development, and Human Factors, all directly linked to how HRIS can enhance training, workforce planning, performance management, and inclusion in the construction sector. The study found that while HRIS is underused in construction, it holds strong potential to support Quantity Surveying 4.0 by aligning digital skills with project needs and national transformation goals. The study concludes that HRIS should be seen as a support system and a strategic tool for empowering professionals and improving project outcomes. It recommends further research on customising HRIS for construction roles and calls on stakeholders to invest in digital HR systems, training, and policies supporting long-term workforce development. These findings are relevant for researchers, construction firms, policymakers, and professional bodies interested in bridging the gap between digital innovation and human resource capacity in the built environment.

Keywords: HRIS, Quantity Surveying, Construction 4.0, Workforce Development, South Africa.

Introduction

Human Resource Information Systems (HRIS) are digital tools designed to manage and automate various human resource functions, including employee data management, payroll, recruitment, performance tracking, and benefits administration (Tayade, 2025:163). These systems centralise Human Resources (HRs) information, helping organisations streamline processes and make informed decisions. Popular HRIS software solutions include SAP SuccessFactors, which offers comprehensive talent management and learning development capabilities; ADP Workforce Now, known for its payroll management and regulatory compliance features; Workday, which integrates HR, finance, and planning functions; and BambooHR, which focuses on employee data management and performance tracking. These HRIS platforms help organisations improve efficiency, reduce administrative costs, and enhance strategic decision-making related to workforce management (Abuhantash, 2023:240). Furthermore, Human Resource Information Systems (HRIS) have revolutionised human capital management, with a growing body of evidence suggesting their pivotal role in driving organisational

effectiveness across various industries (Hossain et al., 2025:215; Handayani et al., 2025:350). These systems, which integrate the functions of recruitment, payroll, performance management, and employee development into one centralised digital platform, have long been used to streamline administrative processes. However, their potential for strategic workforce management remains underappreciated in many fields, particularly construction. In South Africa's rapidly digitising construction sector, HRIS can serve as a game-changer for quantity surveyors and professionals who oversee project cost management, budgeting, and financial oversight. As the construction industry faces mounting pressures from technological advancements and labour market challenges (Musonda & Okoro, 2021:1056), a comprehensive digital approach to managing human resources is becoming increasingly critical.

The quantity surveying profession in South Africa is crucial to the success of construction projects, yet it is not immune to the challenges faced by the broader industry (Musonda & Okoro, 2021:1057; Akinradewo et al., 2023:98). The studies explained that while technological innovations like Building Information Modelling (BIM) have seen widespread adoption, the use of HRIS to address the human capital side of the equation remains underdeveloped. Furthermore, South African construction firms face unique challenges: skills shortages, difficulty in talent retention, and the necessity for continuous professional development (Samuel & Moagi, 2022:1504; Aghimien et al., 2023:1135). Despite these challenges, the role of HRIS in fostering a more agile, efficient, and well-equipped workforce is not well-explored within the field of quantity surveying. Previous studies have mainly focused on the technical dimensions of construction digitisation but have overlooked how human resource management systems can support quantity surveyors in enhancing their capabilities (Aghimien et al., 2024:2; Aleke et al., 2025:2019). For instance, Mohamed (2023) illustrated HRIS's utility in other industries but failed to address its application in the specialised, project-based construction world. Furthermore, while research has investigated the general adoption of HRIS in various sectors, the potential for HRIS to directly impact workforce training, productivity, and skill alignment in the South African construction context has not been adequately explored. This gap in the literature leaves a critical space to investigate the intersection of HRIS and the quantity surveying profession in South Africa.

In light of this, the existing literature on digital transformation in construction is often incomplete, particularly in its treatment of HRIS as a tool for workforce management. While studies such as those by Junussova et al. (2022:2) and Raza et al. (2023:4) focus on technological tools like BIM and project management software, they leave out the role of HRIS in enabling workforce agility and competency management. On the other hand, research in HRIS adoption within construction is generally limited to basic administrative functions, such as payroll management or recruitment, rather than its potential for fostering professional growth and aligning human resources with organisational strategies (Tayade, 2025:163). This oversight raises a critical question: Why has there been so little focus on HRIS as a means to support professional roles like quantity surveyors, whose work directly impacts project delivery and financial outcomes? By addressing this gap, this paper aims to explore how HRIS can be adapted to meet the specific needs of quantity surveyors in South Africa, thus helping to empower professionals, improve workforce management, and ensure the competitiveness of firms within an increasingly digitalised construction environment. If this gap remains unaddressed, the cost could be substantial, leaving construction firms ill-equipped to leverage their human resources effectively, leading to inefficiencies, higher turnover, and an overall decline in sector performance. The objective of this research is (1) explore how HRIS supports QS roles, (2) identify existing research gaps, and (3) propose recommendations for integration in South Africa's construction sector. This study aims to examine how Human Resource Information Systems (HRIS) can empower quantity surveyors in South Africa within a rapidly digitalising construction industry. As the sector adopts Construction 4.0 technologies, new tools are needed to manage professional skills, workforce data, and strategic HR planning. The structure of this paper will proceed as follows: a review of HRIS in the context of the broader construction industry, an exploration of the quantity surveying profession in South Africa, followed by a presentation of research findings, and concluding with recommendations for the adoption and implementation of HRIS.

Human resource information systems (HRIS) across industries

Human Resource Information Systems (HRIS) have become essential tools in managing human capital across various industries, allowing organisations to streamline administrative processes and improve decision-making. These systems help automate critical HR tasks such as recruitment, payroll management, performance evaluation, and training, consolidating all employee-related data into one

centralised platform (Tayade, 2025:163). In healthcare, HRIS supports the management of large and often decentralised workforces, improving record-keeping, compliance with health regulations, and ensuring the efficient deployment of medical staff (Tursunbayeva et al., 2017:634). In retail, where employee turnover is high and workforce optimisation is key, HRIS enables companies to track employee performance, better manage recruitment processes, and implement targeted training programs (Wang, 2024:224). Furthermore, HRIS has proven to be a strategic asset that enhances workforce management, reduces operational costs, and provides data-driven insights into the workforce's strengths and weaknesses (Wang, 2024:223; Hossain et al., 2025:215). Across these industries, HRIS has fundamentally shifted how organisations manage their human resources, helping them stay competitive in increasingly fast-paced markets.

According to Arini et al. (2025:300), in the financial services sector, the role of HRIS is critical due to the growing complexities of compliance and regulatory requirements. Financial institutions often manage large, diverse workforces, necessitating accurate data management and transparency. In this industry, HRIS supports administrative functions like payroll and benefits management and more strategic tasks, including performance tracking, talent management, and workforce analytics. Muhammad et al. (2021:25) added that by integrating HRIS with business intelligence tools, financial organisations can analyse employee performance, productivity, and retention trends, thus enabling better decision-making regarding compensation, promotions, and leadership development. Furthermore, Ahmad et al. (2024:80) buttressed the points above, stating that HRIS can help companies navigate the complexities of regulatory compliance, ensuring that they meet the necessary labour standards and reporting requirements. Wang (2024:225) corroborated that by providing valuable insights into workforce dynamics, HRIS allows financial institutions to align human capital with organisational goals better, driving improved business performance in a highly regulated industry.

The manufacturing sector, characterised by a large, often shift-based workforce, also benefits significantly from adopting HRIS (Ololade et al., 2023:2). The efficient management of human resources in manufacturing involves challenges such as meeting safety standards, optimising workforce productivity, and ensuring appropriate workforce scheduling. HRIS addresses these challenges by automating attendance tracking, managing training and safety compliance, and improving workforce scheduling. Moreover, Handayani et al. (2025:360) added that HRIS systems in manufacturing help link employee performance to key performance indicators (KPIs) related to production targets, facilitating better workforce planning and resource allocation. These systems enable managers to identify skills gaps, improve workforce development strategies, and ensure high operational efficiency. In addition, Limon (2025:91) stated that adopting HRIS in manufacturing has enhanced both productivity and safety, providing valuable insights for continuously improving production processes. Despite its importance, HRIS adoption in the manufacturing sector has been slower than in other industries, primarily due to concerns about implementation costs and resistance to change (Alam et al., 2016:2). However, the growing recognition of its benefits has led to increased adoption, making it an indispensable tool for improving workforce management in the manufacturing sector.

Human resource information systems (HRIS) in quantity surveying

The application of Human Resource Information Systems (HRIS) in the quantity surveying profession remains underexplored, especially in countries like South Africa, where the construction industry faces unique challenges. Quantity surveyors, whose role involves managing construction projects' financial and contractual aspects, require tools that can effectively coordinate and manage their workforce and project demands. While HRIS has become a standard tool in healthcare, finance, and retail industries, its potential to enhance workforce management in construction, particularly for quantity surveyors, has received limited attention (Tursunbayeva et al., 2017:634; Wang, 2024:224; Arini et al., 2025:300). Udekwe & Iwu (2025:210) point out that, although digital technologies such as Building Information Modelling (BIM) and project management software are widely used in construction, the role of HRIS in managing the human capital side of the industry remains significantly underutilised. On the other hand, Safapour et al. (2022:2) argue that HRIS can be valuable in any industry that relies on project-based teams, such as the construction sector. This view suggests that HRIS could offer substantial benefits for quantity surveying firms, especially if the systems are adapted to address the specific needs of this professional group.

HRIS can significantly enhance quantity surveying by improving workforce management and professional development. In workforce management, it supports task allocation, competency tracking,

and project assignment (Thomas et al., 2001:239; Tayade, 2025:164), with tools like SAP SuccessFactors and Workday enabling better deployment of skilled surveyors based on competencies, availability, and past performance (Akter & Al Maruf, 2025:408). Optimising allocation improves productivity and reduces risks (Sihombing, 2024:644), yet many firms still use manual methods that cause inefficiencies (Chandramohan et al., 2022:1375). Effective adoption requires technology, training, and change management to overcome resistance (Jayadeva et al., 2022:5796). In professional development, HRIS can track certifications, identify skill gaps, and manage training for adapting to evolving laws, contracts, and digital tools like BIM (Bal et al., 2022:198; Bangura, 2024:26; Wang, 2024:224). However, many firms limit HRIS use to basic functions, missing opportunities to build stronger, more competent teams and meet industry demands.

In addition to workforce management and training, HRIS can improve performance evaluation and decision-making in quantity surveying firms. Performance management is a key area where HRIS can contribute to the success of quantity surveyors, as it allows firms to monitor individual performance and align it with project goals. As Hossain et al. (2025:217) noted, HRIS can integrate performance data with business goals, enabling companies to make better promotions, compensation, and project team composition decisions. In quantity surveying, this feature could help identify high performers who may be suitable for leadership roles or high-value projects, while also highlighting areas where additional training or support may be required. Furthermore, HRIS systems like BambooHR offer tools that help firms manage feedback and employee engagement, which are critical for maintaining a motivated and effective workforce (Geshkov, 2021:118). However, Wang (2024:226) cautions that while HRIS can provide valuable data for performance management, its success depends on how effectively that data is interpreted and used. Without proper training in data analytics and performance evaluation, quantity surveying firms may struggle to extract meaningful insights from HRIS data, thus limiting their potential impact. While HRIS systems promise to improve workforce management, professional development, and performance evaluation in quantity surveying, their adoption in the construction industry has been slow and uneven. The South African construction sector must look beyond technical tools like BIM and embrace digital systems that enhance human resource management. Nagendra and Deshpande (2014:62) stress the importance of aligning HR strategies with business objectives, which HRIS can help achieve. However, as Khera & Gulati (2012:7) warn, the full benefits of HRIS can only be realised if firms are willing to invest in training, change management, and strategic planning. For quantity surveying to fully benefit from HRIS, firms must move beyond using it for administrative tasks and leverage its strategic capabilities to empower their workforce and improve project outcomes. If firms fail to do so, they risk missing out on a powerful tool that could enhance both individual professional growth and organisational efficiency in the increasingly digitalised construction industry.

Human resource information systems (HRIS) and digital technology for quantity surveying 4.0

Human Resource Information Systems (HRIS) are evolving from basic administrative tools into strategic systems that align human capital with organisational goals, particularly within the digitally transforming construction industry. As the sector adopts Construction 4.0 principles, characterised by automation, integration, data exchange, and cyber-physical systems, the concept of *Quantity Surveying 4.0* has emerged, reflecting how digital technologies reshape the role and practice of quantity surveyors (Ryan et al., 2020:48). Quantity Surveying 4.0 involves not only using traditional cost management techniques but also leveraging tools like Building Information Modelling (BIM), cloud computing, Internet of Things (IoT), and real-time data analytics to improve project outcomes (Stephen et al., 2024:182). HRIS can be a valuable enabler, integrating workforce data with digital construction platforms to track competencies, forecast staffing needs, and link individual performance with evolving project demands. As Wang (2024:227) and Hossain et al. (2025:217) emphasised, HRIS provides centralised access to employee data, allowing firms to make more informed decisions about resource deployment and upskilling needs in real time when connected to digital project environments.

The fusion of HRIS and digital construction tools brings new capabilities to the quantity surveying practice. For instance, modern HRIS platforms such as SAP SuccessFactors and Workday can be integrated with BIM-based project management systems to automatically align employee skills with specific project tasks. This is critical in a digital-first construction environment, where quantity surveyors are expected to work within automated estimating systems, cloud-based procurement workflows, and 5D cost modelling platforms. Furthermore, HRIS can support these demands by providing live dashboards of workforce skills, certification statuses, and project availability, helping

firms deploy the right quantity surveyor to the right project at the right time (Handayani et al., 2025:360). It can also support predictive workforce planning by analysing past project data and forecasting future resource needs, helping firms avoid understaffing and over-allocation. Despite these advantages, adopting HRIS to support Quantity Surveying 4.0 remains inconsistent and often undervalued. While technologies like BIM and scheduling software have become standard in many large firms, HRIS is still underutilised, typically limited to basic functions such as payroll and attendance tracking (Hossain et al., 2025:218). This limited use reflects a broader challenge in the construction industry: the tendency to prioritise tools that support physical outputs (designs, schedules, materials) over systems that help people (training, deployment, performance). In regions like sub-Saharan Africa, barriers such as limited digital infrastructure, high implementation costs, and resistance to change further slow down HRIS integration (Chibuzor et al., 2021:28). Moreover, many firms lack a strategic HR vision that connects human resource management with digital transformation goals.

Existing research strongly supports the value of human resource information systems (HRIS) in sectors like healthcare, finance, and manufacturing in improving efficiency and decision-making. It often focuses on basic functions like payroll and recruitment, overlooking strategic uses such as training, competency tracking, and performance analytics. In construction, and especially in quantity surveying, there is a noticeable gap in research exploring how HRIS can support professional growth, workforce planning, and digital readiness. Though technologies like BIM and AI are reshaping the field through Quantity Surveying 4.0, most HRIS studies assume a level of digital maturity lacking in many regions, such as sub-Saharan Africa. As a result, there is limited understanding of how HRIS can be adapted to the everyday needs of quantity surveyors. This gap highlights the urgent need for context-specific research that repositions HRIS as a strategic tool in the digital transformation of construction.

Research methodology

The scientometric results were interpreted through a narrative lens to connect emerging themes, such as human resource management, e-learning, and sustainability, to the context of South African quantity surveying. This approach allowed for deeper insights into how HRIS can support professional development and digital readiness in construction. Scientometric analysis was chosen for its ability to map intellectual structures, identify key contributors, and highlight emerging trends within a broad scholarly field (Stephen & Aigbavboa, 2025:8). It offered a data-driven lens to explore how HRIS-related research connects with construction sector innovations and workforce management. To complement this, a narrative synthesis was used to interpret the practical implications of the findings, particularly how HRIS is discussed concerning workforce challenges, digital transformation, and role evolution within quantity surveying. This combination of methods allowed for both a structured overview of the literature and a more interpretive understanding of how HRIS supports or limits digital integration in construction.

Data for the scientometric analysis were sourced from two leading academic databases, Scopus and Web of Science (WoS), and selected for their comprehensive coverage of peer-reviewed research in the construction and digital technology fields. In Scopus, a Boolean search string, “Human Resource Information Systems” AND “Digital Construction” OR “quantity surveyor” OR “cost consultant”, was applied across all fields to ensure a broad dataset. This search initially retrieved 347 documents, which were manually screened and refined to a final dataset of 297 documents, with no subject-area filters applied to capture cross-sectoral perspectives. The same search logic, adapted to WoS syntax, yielded a final set of 49 articles after removing duplicates and irrelevant results. No date or subject restrictions were used, enabling a longitudinal view of the literature. Scientometric analysis was conducted using Biblioshiny (R-based bibliometrix package) to evaluate research productivity, co-authorship, and citation patterns. VOSviewer software was then used to visualise keyword co-occurrences and thematic clusters (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017:960). This rigorous and transparent approach supported the study's goal of mapping the knowledge landscape at the intersection of HRIS, digital construction, and the quantity surveying profession.

Research results

Figure 1 present key bibliometric indicators from the scientometric analysis of literature on Human Resource Information Systems (HRIS) and digital construction, focusing on quantity surveying and cost consultancy. The dataset spans 1987–2025, covering 38 years and comprising 297 documents from

213 outlets authored by 901 contributors, including 47 single-authored papers. An annual growth rate of 8.2% highlights the rising interest in HRIS and its relevance to Construction 4.0, aligning with this study's aim to explore HRIS as a tool for empowering quantity surveyors in South Africa's digitalising construction industry. Collaboration patterns show an average of 3.57 co-authors per document and 9.4% international co-authorship, reflecting the multidisciplinary and global engagement in this field. The dataset includes 916 unique author keywords and 7,076 references, indicating broad thematic diversity and strong links to related research areas. With an average document age of 5.8 years and a citation rate of 14.38 per paper, the literature demonstrates growing academic attention to how HRIS supports professional skills management, workforce data integration, and strategic HR planning within digital construction contexts.

Figure 1 Research spans across publications

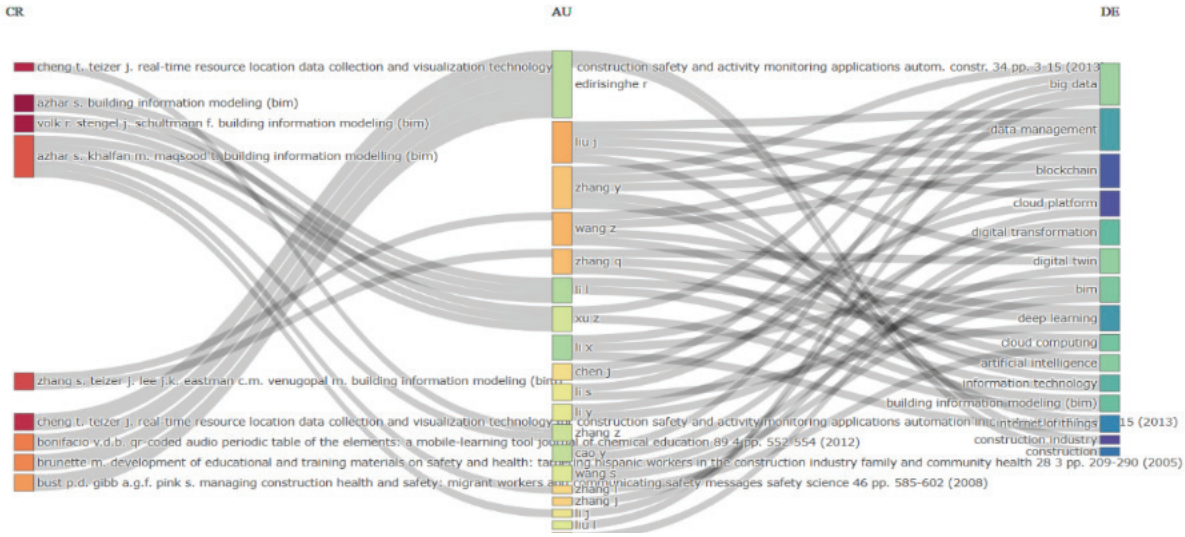

Figure 2 Three plot diagram

Figure 2 shows a three-field Sankey diagram linking the most-cited references (CR), contributing authors (AU), and dominant keywords or themes (DE) in the literature on Human Resource Information Systems (HRIS) and digital construction, especially in quantity surveying. It addresses which publications, researchers, and topics shape this field. Seminal works like Cheng & Teizer (2013) study on real-time resource location and Azhar et al.'s contributions to BIM are heavily cited, underscoring their role in connecting technology with construction workforce management. Influential authors such as Liu J., Zhang Y., Wang Z., and Xu R.Z. feature prominently, indicating strong research activity and collaboration. Recurring themes include "BIM," "digital twin," "cloud computing," "blockchain," "artificial intelligence," and "big data," alongside broader categories like "digital transformation" and "information technology" that link these tools to workforce and management applications. The flow of connections highlights how key works and prolific authors drive integration of digital tools into construction HR practices, with BIM and cloud computing dominating as enablers of real-time, data-driven project and resource management.

Four main research clusters emerged: Human Resource Management, E-Learning, Sustainable Development, and Human Factors. Each reflects HRIS's capacity to improve digital training, workforce planning, and inclusion within construction. Findings show that HRIS remains underused but offers strong potential to enhance Quantity Surveying 4.0 by aligning digital competencies with project needs. Table 1 shows the thematic clustering results from the scientometric analysis, highlighting four dominant research themes within the literature on Human Resource Information Systems (HRIS) and digital construction, especially concerning the evolving role of quantity surveyors. The table answers the question: What are the field's most influential and internally developed research themes based on co-word analysis? The clusters are evaluated using Callon Centrality (indicating the degree of interaction with other themes), Callon Density (indicating internal development or maturity of the theme), Rank Centrality (relative importance), and Cluster Frequency (volume of related documents).

Table 1 Thematic clusters of keyword occurrences (authors')

Cluster Label	Callon Centrality	Callon Density	Rank Centrality	Cluster Frequency
Human Factors	6.810	72.356	2	287
Sustainable Development	6.114	61.508	1	181
E-Learning	12.109	39.942	3	196
Human Resource Management	15.391	55.905	4	1297

The cluster labelled "Human Resource Management" ranks highest in frequency (1,297), indicating that this is the most widely addressed topic within the field. It also holds the highest Callon Centrality value (15.391), confirming its strong connectivity to other themes such as digital tools, workforce analytics, and training systems. In contrast, "E-Learning", with a centrality score of 12.109 and a frequency of 196, reveals a growing but still emerging area of research, likely tied to digital skill development and remote workforce enablement in construction. The cluster "Human", while smaller in volume (287), shows the highest Callon Density (72.356), indicating a well-developed thematic area, possibly reflecting deep discussions around human factors, user experience, and organisational behaviour about HRIS. Lastly, "Sustainable Development" appears with high density (61.508) and notable centrality (6.114), suggesting its growing relevance as digital HR practices begin to align with environmental and social governance (ESG) priorities in construction. Together, these clusters reflect the multidimensional nature of current research, spanning technology, training, people, and sustainability, and confirm that HRIS is not only an administrative tool but a strategic enabler in the digital construction ecosystem.

Discussion (narrative review)

Cluster 1, Sustainable Development, is crucial in advancing the agenda of Leveraging Human Resource Information Systems (HRIS) to Empower Quantity Surveyors in South Africa within a digital construction landscape. As sustainability becomes a core requirement in construction projects, quantity surveyors are expected to contribute not just to cost control but also to resource efficiency, environmental compliance, and lifecycle costing (Chandramohan et al., 2022:1375; Aleke et al., 2025:2020; Limon, 2025:92). These studies explain that HRIS can support this expanded role by aligning human capital with sustainability-driven competencies and tracking professional development in areas such as green building certification, carbon estimation, and sustainable procurement. For instance, HRIS platforms like SAP SuccessFactors or Workday can be configured to monitor employee progress in sustainability training. This ensures that quantity surveyors stay current with international standards like LEED or Green Star. Moreover, HRIS can identify skills gaps in sustainable construction practices through workforce analytics and recommend targeted learning paths, fostering a more informed and future-ready QS workforce (Khera & Gulati, 2012:10; Limon, 2025:92). This is particularly important in South Africa, where national infrastructure development is increasingly guided by sustainable development goals (SDGs), placing greater pressure on firms to align their human resources with long-term environmental performance. By embedding sustainability metrics into performance reviews, training plans, and recruitment strategies, HRIS empowers quantity surveyors to take on more strategic roles in delivering digitally enabled, environmentally responsible construction projects, ultimately reinforcing professional relevance and national development priorities.

Cluster 2, Human, is highly relevant to the topic "Leveraging Human Resource Information Systems (HRIS) to Empower Quantity Surveyors in South Africa, a digital construction landscape paradigm", as it centres on the human dimensions of digital transformation, skills, behaviour, adaptability, and workforce dynamics. In the shift toward Quantity Surveying 4.0, the profession requires technical proficiency and high levels of digital literacy, collaboration, and change readiness (Ryan et al., 2020:48; Noor et al., 2023:211). HRIS serves as a bridge between technological advancement and human capability by enabling organisations to monitor and develop the soft and digital skills needed for modern construction environments. For example, HRIS platforms can track proficiency in tools such as Building Information Modelling (BIM) or cost modelling software. At the same time, it also supports personalised development plans that focus on leadership, remote collaboration, and adaptability, traits essential in multidisciplinary, digitally integrated project teams. In South Africa, where workforce diversity and transformation are key national goals, HRIS can also help monitor equity, inclusion, and representation across project teams, supporting policies that empower historically disadvantaged groups in the construction profession (Wang, 2024:227). Moreover, using data analytics to identify performance trends and flag employee disengagement, HRIS provides early insights into human factors that may affect project outcomes or professional well-being (Hossain et al., 2025:242; Akter & Al Maruf, 2025:430). This human-centred functionality positions HRIS as a management tool and a strategic enabler for building a more adaptive, digitally fluent, and empowered quantity surveying workforce.

Cluster 3, E-Learning, is central to transforming the quantity surveying profession within the context of "Leveraging Human Resource Information Systems (HRIS) to Empower Quantity Surveyors in South Africa, a digital construction landscape paradigm." As the construction industry becomes increasingly digitised, the demand for continuous, flexible, and targeted learning is rising, particularly for quantity surveyors who must adapt to tools like Building Information Modelling (BIM), cost estimation software, and integrated project delivery systems (Ebekozien & Aigbavboa, 2024:1524). HRIS platforms are uniquely positioned to deliver and manage e-learning at scale. Systems such as SAP SuccessFactors and Cornerstone OnDemand provide centralised access to digital training modules, certification tracking, learning analytics, and skills gap assessments (Evans-Uzosike & Okatta, 2020:137). For example, a South African construction firm could use HRIS to mandate BIM training for junior quantity surveyors, monitor completion rates, and assess knowledge retention through built-in evaluations, aligning this learning with project needs. Yulianah (2024:1503) added that e-learning features within HRIS also promote equity by giving geographically dispersed or resource-limited professionals access to the same development opportunities, supporting transformation in a country where access to traditional training can be uneven. Additionally, as Markova (2012:83) highlights, HRIS enables a shift from static learning models to dynamic, responsive systems that evolve with the organisation's strategy and technology adoption. This capacity to embed e-learning within HR systems ensures that quantity surveyors remain current, competitive, and empowered in a rapidly evolving digital construction landscape.

Cluster 4, Human Resource Management, is the foundational pillar for realising the goal of "Leveraging Human Resource Information Systems (HRIS) to Empower Quantity Surveyors in South Africa, a digital construction landscape paradigm." As the most frequent and interconnected cluster in the analysis, it underscores the critical role of structured, strategic HR practices in supporting the professional growth and deployment of quantity surveyors in a digitally evolving industry. Traditional HR management in construction has often been reactive and administratively focused. However, with the integration of HRIS, it can shift toward a more proactive, data-driven, and employee-centred approach (Karwehl & Kauffeld, 2021:8). For quantity surveyors, performance reviews, career progression, training, recruitment, and retention strategies can be directly aligned with digital competency development and project demands. For example, a South African construction consultancy can track employee contributions across multiple projects using a platform like Workday, identify high-performing quantity surveyors, and create tailored promotion or development pathways tied to digital skill sets such as cost modelling or contract automation (Sasidharakarnavar, 2025:99). Furthermore, HRIS enhances transparency in workforce planning by offering real-time insights into talent distribution, availability, and workload, which is essential for managing teams in complex, multi-site construction environments (Tayade, 2025:164; Sasidharakarnavar, 2025:100). Moreover, as Zhang & Chen (2024:1483) illustrated, HR systems become strategic when they are closely tied to the firm's long-term goals, something HRIS enables through its capacity to integrate performance data, project outcomes, and employee feedback into actionable workforce strategies. This strategic alignment is particularly crucial in Quantity Surveying 4.0, where the profession must evolve rapidly in response to digital innovation, environmental regulations, and global competition. Therefore, robust

human resource management, underpinned by advanced HRIS tools, is not just a support function; it becomes a core driver of professional empowerment, organisational agility, and industry transformation.

The findings from the scientometric data generally agree with what was expected based on the existing literature, but they also offer some new perspectives. For example, the strong presence of themes like Human Resource Management, E-Learning, and Sustainable Development supports what authors like Markova (2012:81), Bal et al. (2022:199), Bangura (2024:27) have argued that HRIS is becoming more strategic and integrated into broader business and professional goals. However, while the literature often emphasises the importance of HRIS in industries like finance and healthcare, the data shows that construction, especially quantity surveying, is still underrepresented, which suggests a gap between theory and practice. Furthermore, this reiterates that digital transformation in construction often ignores the human resource aspect. Interestingly, the scientometric findings highlight Human and E-Learning as well-developed themes, which are not always reflected in previous QS-specific studies. Subsequently, this could mean that while digital HR tools exist, they may not yet be fully adapted to or adopted by quantity surveyors. Therefore, further investigation is necessary, especially to understand how HRIS can be customised for quantity surveying roles. The results don't necessarily make previous work questionable, but they show that past research may have focused too much on technology and not enough on people and skills. This highlights a weakness in earlier research methods, which often overlooked workforce systems as part of a digital construction strategy.

Conclusion

This study has clearly shown that Human Resource Information Systems (HRIS) can play a strong and useful role in helping quantity surveyors do better in their work, especially in a construction industry that is becoming more digital. Using a mix of scientometric analysis and literature review, the study explored how HRIS connects with important areas such as Human Resource Management, E-Learning, Sustainable Development, and Human Factors. These areas show that HRIS is not just about handling basic HR tasks like payroll, but also about helping workers grow their skills, manage their work better, and support fair and inclusive workplace practices. In the case of South Africa, where transformation and skills development are key national goals, HRIS can help construction firms track training progress, match the right people to the right tasks, and build a more skilled and diverse team of quantity surveyors. HRIS should be recognised as more than an administrative system. It is a strategic enabler for professional empowerment and digital transformation in construction. The research also found that while digital tools like BIM and cloud-based project management are used more often, HRIS is still underused in construction, especially regarding quantity surveying.

One of the key messages from this study is that HRIS should not be seen as just a background system for handling employee records, but as a central tool that can support the future of the quantity surveying profession in a digital world. In South Africa, where the industry faces challenges like a shortage of skilled workers and the need to include more people in the profession, HRIS offers real solutions. It can help manage training, track digital skills, support fair hiring, and ensure the right people are assigned to the right projects. However, the study also found a clear gap between what HRIS can do and how it is used. This means that companies need to invest more in learning how to use HRIS properly and find ways to link it with other digital systems already used in construction. Future research should focus on how HRIS can be designed better for construction roles and how companies can be supported in using these tools in practical and straightforward ways. Overall, using HRIS well can help quantity surveyors grow in their careers, make projects run more smoothly, and support the construction industry's digital transformation in a way that includes everyone.

Recommendations

Based on this study's findings and conclusions, further research should focus on how HRIS can be specifically tailored to meet the daily needs of quantity surveyors in South Africa, including features for skill tracking, digital training, and workforce planning. Researchers should explore how HRIS can be better integrated with other digital construction tools like BIM and cost management systems to create a more connected and efficient working environment. For stakeholders such as construction firms, industry bodies, and policymakers, the study recommends investing in HRIS training, raising awareness about its full capabilities, and developing guidelines for its effective use in quantity surveying. Furthermore, government agencies and professional councils should also support the

development of national digital HR frameworks that align with transformation goals and digital construction strategies. Future research should focus on adapting HRIS to construction-specific roles, while policymakers and industry bodies should promote investment in HRIS training and integration with existing digital construction tools. Taking these actions will help ensure that HRIS is adopted and fully used to empower quantity surveyors and strengthen the construction workforce in the digital era.

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SACQSP2025-63

Ethics Under Pressure: Quantity Surveyors' Perspectives on Integrity and Misconduct in South Africa

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Abstract

This paper examines how South African quantity surveyors experience ethical challenges in practice. It focuses on integrity under pressure, on how risks concentrate in routine work, and on how professional identity is shaped by systemic influences and by the South African Council for the Quantity Surveying Profession (SACQSP). A qualitative, interpretivist design was used. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten registered quantity surveyors across public and private sectors. Data were coded in first and second cycles and interpreted through cross-case, reflexive thematic analysis. Five interrelated themes were identified: (1) Integrity under pressure—integrity is central but often becomes a survival calculus under client/political scrutiny; (2) Pressure architecture of practice—ethical risk clusters at repeatable workflow nodes (tender briefings and scoring, VOs, valuations/payment certificates, EoTs, certification); (3) Normalising the barrel—climate signals (fee discounting, title misuse, ownership opacity) make drift appear routine; (4) Enforcement that matters—deterrence depends on usable, timely and visible processes (multi-channel reporting with case IDs, acknowledged throughput, plain-language sanction signalling); and (5) Becoming a credible profession—identity is sustained by Code literacy, case-based learning, clear title/authority boundaries and public-interest framing. As an in-depth qualitative study with ten participants, the aim is analytic insight rather than statistical generalisation. The South African QS context and self-reported experience bound transferability. Future work could extend the sample and compare sectors or regions using qualitative, longitudinal designs. Actionable levers include document-before-decide routines at risk nodes, dual sign-off on payment certificates, independent review for high-value changes, SACQSP multi-channel reporting and regular sanction bulletins with a published penalty schedule, title discipline, and case-based CPD developed with ASAQS. The study links micro-decisions to system conditions, naming where integrity is tested and specifying governance and educational mechanisms that make ethical conduct practicable under pressure.

Keywords: Quantity Surveying, Ethics, Integrity, Professional Identity, South Africa.

Introduction

Ethical challenges in South Africa's construction industry place quantity surveyors in a precarious position where integrity is both essential and endangered. Transparency International (Baloyi, 2022) reports that South Africans perceive bribery as pervasive in public services, a systemic condition that inevitably influences the built environment professions. Similarly, Ramabodu (2023) highlights that professionals, including quantity surveyors, are regularly exposed to pressures such as collusion and fee manipulation. These examples show that ethical practice is not an abstract expectation but a lived reality shaped by governance failures, client demands, and financial constraints. This situates quantity surveyors at the frontline of ethical decision-making and frames the urgency of exploring their perspectives on misconduct and integrity.

The South African construction sector's vulnerability to unethical practices underscores the importance of understanding both systemic and professional factors that shape quantity surveyors' decisions. Tijani, Xiaohua and Osei-Kyei (2020) demonstrate how stress and mental health pressures heighten vulnerability to unethical behaviour, while Oke, Ogunsemi and Adeyelu (2019) argue that competency development strengthens resilience. Taken together, the literature suggests that ethics is shaped by an

interplay of personal pressures, organisational culture, and systemic dysfunction, yet these perspectives are not fully integrated in existing accounts. Recognising this complexity highlights the need for a focused examination of how quantity surveyors themselves interpret and navigate ethical challenges within this contested environment.

Despite increased scholarly attention to ethics in construction, research has failed to capture the profession-specific ethical realities of South African quantity surveyors. Much of the existing research privileges quantifiable indicators—such as compliance rates, misconduct prevalence, and leadership frameworks—while neglecting practitioners' lived realities. Panahi et al. (2015) examined value conflicts across stakeholders but did not isolate QS-specific dilemmas; Graham, Nikolova and Sankaran (2020) reviewed leadership but left unexplored how it affects QS ethics; Abubakar (2024) linked spirituality to leadership values but ignored financial constraints in QS practice; and Chiu and Ng (2015) discussed trust without considering client-driven pressures. These omissions matter because corruption and client influence are endemic in South Africa, amplifying risks that remain poorly understood at the practitioner level (Ebekozien et al., 2021). The costs of unresolved gaps include eroded credibility, compromised project quality, and loss of public trust (Marsh et al., 2021). Identifying this underexplored area justifies the present research, which aims to foreground the lived experiences of quantity surveyors to address these gaps.

The purpose of this paper is to critically explore how South African quantity surveyors perceive and experience ethical challenges, with a particular focus on the tensions between personal integrity, systemic pressures, and professional responsibility. To achieve this aim, the study is guided by four specific objectives:

- To investigate quantity surveyors' perceptions of the current ethical climate in the profession.
- To identify common forms of misconduct and pressures.
- To examine the tension between personal integrity and systemic pressures within the construction industry.
- To reflect on how the South African Council for the Quantity Surveying Profession (SACQSP) shapes professional identity and values of integrity through its standards and regulations.

These objectives build directly on limitations in previous studies, shifting the focus from compliance metrics and abstract frameworks to practitioners' real-world perspectives. By clarifying its aims in relation to the knowledge gap, the study positions itself as both academically significant and practically relevant.

The central argument of this paper is that ethics in quantity surveying cannot be understood solely through compliance frameworks but must be explored through practitioners' lived experiences under systemic pressure. Prior studies have highlighted either external dysfunctions (Baloyi, 2022; Ebekozien et al., 2021) or internal competencies (Oke et al., 2019), but few have integrated both perspectives. This divergence demonstrates that integrity is shaped simultaneously by systemic corruption, client pressures, and the professional resilience nurtured by regulatory standards and personal values. Therefore, strengthening ethics in the profession requires combining regulation, professional development, and practitioner voices into a coherent framework.

To build this argument, the paper is structured to guide the reader through a logical sequence. It begins by situating ethical challenges in the South African construction sector and critically reviewing existing literature. It then outlines the research design, before presenting findings organised thematically around practitioner experiences. These are integrated with scholarly debates in the discussion, and the conclusion draws together the central argument, highlighting both academic contributions and practical implications for strengthening ethical resilience within the profession.

Literature Review

The ethical climate within the quantity surveying profession is shaped by a complex interaction of individual responsibility and systemic pressures that influence ethical decision-making. Existing research has focused on various aspects of ethics in the built environment, highlighting the crucial role of integrity, accountability, and transparency in ensuring fair and effective project delivery. However, a gap remains in understanding the lived experiences of quantity surveyors, particularly under the influence of socio-economic factors and client demands. This literature review examines the fundamental concepts of ethics in construction, with a specific focus on the challenges faced by

quantity surveyors in upholding integrity amidst external pressures, including corruption, unemployment, and competitive market dynamics. By synthesising relevant studies on ethical frameworks, systemic drivers, and professional identity, this review lays the groundwork for understanding how ethical dilemmas shape professional conduct and identity within the quantity surveying field.

Introduction to Professional Ethics in Construction

Ethics in the built environment professions refers to the principles that guide professional conduct, focusing on integrity, accountability, and social responsibility. These frameworks serve as benchmarks for fairness and transparency in the construction, architecture, and engineering industries. Hashemiamin et al. (2023) argue that organisational trust is rooted in these ethical principles, compelling professionals to act in the interests of both clients and society. This illustrates how ethics serves as a foundation for professional legitimacy and the social contract in the construction sector, making integrity central to the profession's value system. This understanding of ethics, with integrity at its core, aligns with the study's aim to examine how systemic pressures shape professional identity and ethical decision-making in quantity surveying.

At the core of this ethical framework is integrity, which forms the foundation for trust in professional relationships. Integrity, defined as the alignment of words and actions, provides a reliable basis for collaboration and effective communication. Frieder and Basik (2016) highlight that integrity significantly influences professional outcomes, while Issa et al. (2018) emphasise its role in improving cooperation and reducing conflict among stakeholders. These studies show that integrity is not merely a moral ideal but a practical necessity in the collaborative nature of construction projects. Cultivating integrity among professionals thus strengthens teamwork, reduces friction, and enhances project success, indicating that trust grounded in integrity improves communication and cooperation across project teams.

The relationship between integrity and trust extends into the realm of project quality. Parast (2019) identifies trust as a multidimensional construct that includes integrity, which is vital for maintaining high-quality standards in construction projects. Trust fosters a shared commitment to ethical practices, which directly influences adherence to quality benchmarks. When integrity is consistently demonstrated, stakeholders are more likely to uphold safety protocols, building codes, and workmanship standards, resulting in superior project outcomes. Meng (2015) further illustrates that VFM (value for money) is not simply about cost minimisation but about balancing cost, quality, and efficiency through trust-driven collaboration, which ensures that projects deliver lasting benefits while maintaining ethical standards.

Integrity also plays a significant role in risk management within construction projects. Mpinganjira et al. (2017) argue that ethical conduct helps manage risks proactively, reducing disputes and claims that can derail projects. By embedding integrity in professional practice, quantity surveyors can anticipate and address potential legal and financial pitfalls, ensuring smoother project delivery. This underscores how a commitment to ethical standards provides stability in an inherently risky environment, offering a safeguard against uncertainties. Furthermore, integrity supports transparency in decision-making, ensuring that professional and client interests are adequately protected throughout the project.

Moreover, integrity fosters innovation and sustainability in the built environment by promoting trust-based cultures that encourage collaboration. Strahorn et al. (2017) argue that when integrity is embedded in organisational culture, it empowers professionals to share innovative ideas and explore sustainable solutions. This ability to innovate is essential for long-term resilience, as integrity-driven collaboration leads to creative problem-solving and the adoption of new methods that benefit both project quality and societal outcomes. As the construction industry faces future challenges, integrity not only enhances present project delivery but also ensures that sustainable and innovative practices are prioritised.

Ethical Climate in Quantity Surveying

Systemic pressures and the prevalence of unethical practices such as bribery, collusion, unfair tendering, and corruption influence the ethical climate in quantity surveying. Agyekum et al. (2021) note that unethical practices, particularly during the tendering process, are deeply embedded in socio-political pressures, especially in developing economies. Similarly, Signor et al. (2017) highlight that collusion within Brazil's infrastructure sector stems from political interference and profit-driven motives,

underscoring how corruption is often normalised within construction practices. These findings point to a broader issue in quantity surveying: professionals must navigate an ethical landscape rife with pressures that normalise misconduct, eroding industry integrity.

Collusion and unethical conduct challenge quantity surveyors' professional responsibilities, especially in procurement processes. Bhagat and Jha (2023) argue that collusion distorts market competition, weakening the impartiality that quantity surveyors are supposed to maintain during tender evaluations. Shan et al. (2017) identify the lack of adequate monitoring in construction projects as a significant factor that enables such practices. These studies emphasise that the erosion of ethical standards during procurement stages undermines both professional credibility and public trust in the construction sector, highlighting the importance of reinforcing transparency and fairness.

Both individual behaviour and systemic issues contribute to the prevalence of bribery and corruption. Brown and Loosemore (2015) explain that corruption in the Australian construction industry is often driven by normative pressures, in which professionals perceive unethical practices as common and justify their participation. Shan et al. (2016) argue that survival pressures in competitive markets often push professionals to compromise their ethical standards, normalising unethical practices as necessary for success. This reinforces the argument that unethical conduct is not solely a result of individual moral failings but is embedded in the broader cultural and market dynamics, creating a challenging ethical environment for quantity surveyors.

Addressing these ethical challenges requires stronger ethical frameworks and institutional reforms. Wang et al. (2022) stress the importance of cultivating integrity-driven cultures to combat collusion, while Agyekum et al. (2021) advocate for clearer professional conduct guidelines to enhance accountability. Zhou et al. (2021) argue that ethical education and training programs are essential in reshaping professional behavior by embedding integrity in quantity surveying practice. These reforms are crucial in shifting the profession towards a proactive approach to ethical governance, helping to address systemic pressures and restore trust in the profession.

The integration of technology into procurement processes offers another solution to the ethical challenges faced by quantity surveyors. Cui (2023) discusses how incentive contracts can reduce collusion, while Ma et al. (2022) demonstrate that improved procurement technologies create transparency, thereby curbing unethical practices. For quantity surveyors, adopting these technologies can streamline procurement and enhance accountability, safeguarding ethical integrity while enabling more efficient project delivery.

Systemic Pressures on Ethics

Systemic pressures, including unemployment, client demands, and industry corruption, significantly impact ethical decision-making in quantity surveying. These pressures often create situations in which quantity surveyors face moral dilemmas, balancing survival with the maintenance of ethical principles. Hashim et al. (2021) found that when professionals face job insecurity, they may prioritise economic survival over ethical standards. The fear of job loss and financial instability can push quantity surveyors to conform to organisational or peer expectations, often at the expense of personal integrity (Clayton & Staden, 2015). This highlights how external socio-economic pressures erode individual ethical standards, leaving professionals vulnerable to compromising their ethics in daily practice.

Client demands also exert significant pressure on quantity surveyors, especially when clients prioritise cost savings or expedited timelines. Hashim et al. (2021) suggest that the urgency to meet client expectations often leads to unethical practices, such as cutting corners or providing inflated estimates to secure business. This dynamic pushes quantity surveyors to adopt a more transactional approach, undermining the professional identity that emphasises fairness and integrity in cost management. The pressure to satisfy client demands challenges the professional standards expected of quantity surveyors, forcing them to balance ethical considerations with the practical demands of clients.

Industry corruption further exacerbates the challenges faced by quantity surveyors. Liu et al. (2024) describe how systemic corruption, such as bribery and collusion, becomes normalised in construction environments, leaving quantity surveyors with limited options but to conform. Shan et al. (2017) argue that corruption becomes ingrained when unethical practices are widespread, shifting ethical boundaries and leading professionals to rationalise dishonest behaviour. This culture of corruption undermines the

professional integrity of quantity surveyors and damages the trust that is critical for the successful delivery of construction projects.

The “survival vs integrity” dynamic is central to understanding the ethical climate within the quantity surveying profession. Quantity surveyors often face competing pressures to secure employment, meet client demands, and maintain ethical standards. Hashim et al. (2021) emphasise that ethical education and support systems are essential for helping quantity surveyors navigate these pressures effectively. Fostering a culture that prioritises ethical decision-making can help professionals uphold their moral convictions, even in the face of significant challenges. The role of individual ethical sensitivity, as highlighted by Wang et al. (2025), further underscores the importance of personal responsibility in making ethical decisions under pressure.

Gap in Literature

While existing research primarily focuses on misconduct cases or perceptions of ethical behaviour in isolation, a significant gap remains in understanding the lived experiences of quantity surveyors under pressure. Most studies, such as those by Agyekum et al. (2021) and Shan et al. (2017), offer valuable insights into corruption and collusion but fail to examine the personal and professional challenges quantity surveyors face daily. This gap is particularly noticeable in the South African context, where systemic pressures such as economic instability and client demand heighten these challenges. Furthermore, the "survival vs integrity" dynamic remains underexplored, especially in contexts where systemic pressures are most pronounced. Addressing this gap requires qualitative research that examines how quantity surveyors navigate ethical dilemmas in real-world settings, particularly in environments marked by systemic corruption and job insecurity.

Research methodology and method

Paradigm and Research Design

This study adopts an interpretivist research philosophy, aiming to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of South African registered quantity surveyors regarding ethical conduct and the enforcement of professional standards by the South African Council for the Quantity Surveying Profession (SACQSP). Interpretivism was chosen because it aligns with the research aim to understand participants' subjective views and context-specific realities. This exploratory qualitative approach is appropriate for investigating how professionals navigate ethical dilemmas and interact with regulatory frameworks.

Alignment with Research Aim

The research employs a qualitative design to investigate ethical challenges, misconduct, and the effectiveness of SACQSP’s enforcement from the perspective of registered quantity surveyors. By conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews, the study explores professionals’ personal insights into ethical pressures, reporting mechanisms, and enforcement shortcomings, directly addressing the research questions.

Sampling and Participants

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select registered quantity surveyors with at least three years of experience in the profession. This criterion ensures that participants have sufficient practical exposure to both ethical challenges and the enforcement mechanisms of SACQSP. Data collection continued until saturation was reached, meaning no new themes emerged after interviewing 10 participants. The participants were diverse in terms of geographic location and sector (public vs private). However, the study focused solely on registered quantity surveyors, excluding non-registered professionals and other stakeholders, such as clients and contractors.

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted online via Zoom or Microsoft Teams. Each interview lasted between 45 to 60 minutes, and the interview schedule was structured into four sections:

- Formalities: Introduction, consent, and ethical considerations.
- Background: General questions on participants' career and motivations.
- Perceptions of SACQSP's enforcement: Experiences with ethical violations and enforcement effectiveness.
- Challenges and strategies: Barriers to enforcement and suggested reforms.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to process and analyse the interview data, following the six-phase process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The process included familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, and reviewing and naming themes. The analysis was inductive, meaning themes emerged from the data rather than being predetermined. The qualitative data were coded using Atlas.ti software to identify patterns and recurring themes related to ethical misconduct and enforcement challenges.

Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by Nelson Mandela University's Research Ethics Committee (REC-H) under reference [2180] (valid from 27 June 2025 to 26 June 2026). Participants were fully informed about the purpose, their voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. Written consent was obtained, and all personal data were anonymised to ensure confidentiality. The study adhered to strict ethical guidelines, ensuring participants' rights and privacy were protected. All data were stored securely and only accessible to the research team. Ethical clearance was obtained prior to data collection, in accordance with university requirements.

Rationale for Method Choices

Qualitative, semi-structured interviews were selected because they allow for a flexible and in-depth exploration of participants' views, providing rich insights into their experiences with ethical challenges and enforcement mechanisms. This method aligns with the interpretivist approach, which seeks to understand individual perceptions and socially constructed realities. Given the limited research on enforcement practices within SACQSP, this qualitative approach was most appropriate for uncovering themes and generating new insights about enforcement gaps and barriers.

Transparency and Replicability

All processes were thoroughly documented, from sample selection and data collection procedures to data analysis techniques. The methodological choices are clearly justified, allowing for potential replication by other researchers interested in exploring ethics enforcement in professional regulatory bodies, particularly in the context of the built environment.

Integration with Article's Argument

The methodology directly supports the research aim by providing context-rich data on the effectiveness of SACQSP's enforcement mechanisms, focusing on the lived experiences of registered quantity surveyors. This foundation enables a nuanced understanding of ethical breaches, enforcement limitations, and potential reform strategies, which directly inform the study's findings and recommendations.

Research Results and Discussion

This section reports how South African quantity surveyors (QSs) perceive and navigate ethical challenges in everyday practice, and how system-level conditions shape those experiences. Drawing on ten semi-structured interviews analysed through a systematic thematic analysis, five interrelated themes were identified: (1) Integrity Under Pressure, (2) Pressure Architecture of Practice, (3) Normalising the Barrel (ethical climate and incentives), (4) Enforcement That Matters? (visibility, capacity, deterrence), and (5) Becoming a Credible Profession (identity, pride, responsibility). These themes integrate first-person narratives, workflow locations of pressure, climate-level rationalisations, and governance mechanisms into a coherent account of "integrity under pressure". The themes, subcategories, and illustrative codes are presented in Table 1 and serve as the organising scaffold for the discussion. The results indicate a consistent pattern: ethical compromise or resistance is not

explained by personal character alone, but by the configuration of three interacting logics. First, a pressure architecture focused on tenders, variation orders, claims, and payment certificates creates multiple decision points. Second, a permissive ethical climate—reinforced by fee discounting, role/title opacity, and normalising talk ("everyone does it")—lowers the cost of manipulation. Third, the enforcement system's practical features (reporting usability, case throughput/capacity, visibility of sanctions) materially affect perceived certainty of consequences. Where documentation habits, leadership backing, and code literacy are strong, QSs more often resist; where reporting channels are unusable, case cycles slow, or sanctions are invisible, pressure tactics spread. Professional identity and public-interest framing operate as the glue: identity work, CPD and transparent signals (bulletins, gazetted outcomes) draw a line between what is tolerated and what is not, stabilising ethical practice over time. Table 1. Results coding tree for research question: "How do South African quantity surveyors perceive and experience ethical challenges in practice, and how do systemic pressures and SACQSP enforcement shape their decision-making and professional identity?"

Table 1 Coding tree

Emerging Themes	**Subcategories**	**Codes**
1. Integrity Under Pressure	A. Personal Stance & Values	• "integrity" as core value • "buck stops with you" • professional pride vs temptation
	B. Moral Calculus & Rationalisations	• "right thing is hard" • "cut our losses and move on" • "everyone does it"
	C. Risk, Retaliation & Cost	• "you become a target" • job/blacklisting fears• physical safety concerns
	D. Resistance Tactics & Supports	• documentation/audit trail as shield • escalation to leadership/client • invoking contract/Code clauses
	E. Whistleblowing Experiences	• barriers to reporting ("can't call", emails unanswered) • need for protection/anonymous routes
2. Pressure Architecture of Practice	A. Procurement & Tendering	• tender briefings capture/influence • tender evaluation report manipulation • scoring/shortlisting drift
	B. Contract Administration & Payments	• signing payment certificates "with values that don't exist "• valuation pressure on interim certificates • final account inflation
	C. Change, Claims & Time	• variation order (VO) gaming • claims inflation (cost/quantities) • extension-of-time (EoT) adjudication pressure
	D. Relationship & Power Pressures	• client/PM demands ("client wants…") • contractor inducements ("brown envelope") • QS–contractor/client collusion points
	E. Political & Contextual Interference	• "politicians want a slice" • public-sector leverage over processes
3. Normalising the Barrel (Ethical Climate & Incentives)	A. Climate Talk & Normalisation	• "industry is rotten and corrupt" • "everyone does it" narratives • institutionalised corruption language
	B. Incentive Distortions	• discounts on gazetted fees • commercial pressure to undercut

	C. Role/Title & Capability Gaps	• candidates “running projects” • title misuse / signature opacity • shareholding/ownership ambiguity
	D. Rationalisation Lexicon	• euphemisms (“just adjust”, “how things work”) • shifting responsibility to “system”
	E. Sectoral Contrasts & Stakes	• public money / service-delivery emphasis • private vs public differences in frequency/type
4. Enforcement That Matters? (Visibility, Capacity, Deterrence)	A. Access & Reporting Usability	• website-only channel; “can’t call” • emails unanswered / no acknowledgement • need for portal + hotline + case tracking
	B. Throughput, Consistency & Backlog	• quarterly sittings; ~6-month cycles • complaint-led model limits coverage • proportionality/consistency concerns
	C. Visibility & Deterrence	• gazetted sanctions; publish names • dashboards/bulletins with case summaries • schedule of penalties
	D. Capacity & Resourcing	• vacant/insufficient legal-compliance officers • funding for investigations
	E. Partnerships & Governance Architecture	• SACQSP–ASAQS MoU / parallel firm-level discipline • links to AGSA/DPWI for oversight
	F. Whistleblower Protections	• safe, anonymous reporting • anti-retaliation assurances
5. Becoming a Credible Profession (Identity, Pride, Responsibility)	A. Identity & Status	• “held in very high regard” • desire to be a credible profession • role-modelling and mentorship
	B. Code Literacy & Ethics Learning	• “read the Code” habits • case-based ethics CPD • assessment/refresh of ethics knowledge
	C. Public-Interest Orientation	• value-for-money / service delivery focus • duty to the public/client
	D. Early Socialisation & Education	• from varsity level—drive ethics early • onboarding/induction practices
	E. Feedback & Transparency Signals	• ethics bulletins/webinars/forums • visible sanctions building pride/deterrence

Theme 3 sets the boundary conditions - the climate and incentive structure within which QSs operate. Themes 1 and 2 show how those conditions materialise as concrete pressure points and lived dilemmas, including the moral calculus, risks and resistance tactics. Theme 4 explains what makes enforcement matter in practice - usability, throughput/capacity, visibility, and partnerships - clarifying when rules become real deterrents. Theme 5 integrates the account through professional identity and public-interest responsibility, linking governance signals and ethics learning to durable norms. Each theme is unpacked in the subsections that follow, using the subcategories and codes in Table 1 to interpret patterns in relation to the study’s professional ethics and regulatory governance framework.

Theme 1, Integrity Under Pressure

Interview accounts position integrity as the organising principle of professional identity, yet note a gap between ideal and practice: “honesty and integrity is one of the key values of a quantity surveyor… [but] there is a lack of honesty and integrity in the profession” (Interviewee 1). Prior studies associate integrity with trust, cooperative problem-solving and reliable delivery (Meng, 2015; Mpinganjira et al.,

2017; Parast, 2019; Strahorn et al., 2017). The present data indicate that choices are repeatedly forced at "high-control" nodes—tender evaluation, variation orders (VOs), interim valuations and payment certificates, extension-of-time (EoT) claims, and final accounts—often under time and client/political scrutiny. In these moments, respondents describe a survival calculus in which professional ideals are weighed against personal and organisational risk: "if you alone do not agree… you become a target… people will do anything to make your life miserable" (Interviewee 8). The pattern is consistent with research showing that tenders and claims concentrate manipulation opportunities and that normalised "that's how it works" talk erodes resistance (Bhagat & Jha, 2023; Brown & Loosemore, 2015; Shan et al., 2016; Shan et al., 2017; Hashim et al., 2021). In South Africa, politically exposed projects and payment-linked roles elevate stakes, while uneven governance capacity raises the perceived cost of refusal (Ramabodu, 2023; Osei-Kyei, 2020; Adeyelu, 2019). Resistance is most credible when supported by documentary discipline (audit trails, clause-based justifications), explicit reference to contract/Code provisions, and visible leadership backing (Parast, 2019; Mpinganjira et al., 2017). Deterrence weakens where reporting channels lack usability and visibility: "you can't call… you can only email… a lot of these cases kind of stall" (Interviewee 6). Integrity therefore appears as a situated achievement, enabled by evidence, leadership and credible consequences.

Theme 2, Pressure Architecture of Practice

Ethical risks cluster along a repeatable workflow: "evaluate tender offers… prepare a tender evaluation report… [handle] variation orders… valuations… extension-of-time claims… [and] final accounts" (Interviewee 9). At these control points, demands to bend rules become concrete. Examples include pressure to certify non-existent value - "sign payment certificates with values that don't exist" (Interviewee 4) - and inducements or interference ("brown envelope", Interviewee 5; "politicians want a slice", Interviewee 2). This mirrors the procurement "hot zone" (Bhagat & Jha, 2023; Brown & Loosemore, 2015; Shan et al., 2016; Shan et al., 2017; Hashim et al., 2021). Two tender-stage mechanisms are salient: scoring/shortlisting drift and manipulation of evaluation reports. Across nodes, three recurrent levers explain vulnerability: information asymmetry (scope for selective interpretation), discretion under time pressure (drift presented as "reasonable"), and documentation quality (thin records privileging narrative over fact). Standards tend to hold where minutes, evidence and oversight are strong; they slip in rushed valuations under ambiguous records and pressure. Practical implications are architectural: minuted briefings; transparent scoring with explicit checks for drift; document-before-decide rules for VOs/EoTs with independent review above thresholds; standardised valuation evidence (photographic logs, measurement sheets, site checks); and dual sign-off for payment certificates. These measures operationalise the integrity–performance link (Meng, 2015; Mpinganjira et al., 2017; Parast, 2019) at the loci where misconduct incubates (Bhagat & Jha, 2023; Shan et al., 2017).

Theme 3, Normalising the Barrel (Ethical Climate & Incentives)

Respondents describe an ethically permissive climate in which questionable practices feel routine: "this industry is… rotten and corrupt" (Interviewee 8); "institutionalised corruption" (Interviewee 2). Rationalising talk ("everyone does it"), fee discounting, title misuse (candidates fronting projects) and ownership opacity recalibrate what is acceptable. "Discounts on the gazetted fees" were said to squeeze margins and dilute guardrails (Interviewee 2), while title/ownership ambiguity blurs accountability (Interviewee 1). The literature anticipates these pathways: collusion risk rises where norms drift and oversight weakens, and social proof reduces resistance (Brown & Loosemore, 2015; Shan et al., 2016; Shan et al., 2017; Bhagat & Jha, 2023; Hashim et al., 2021); price competition without quality safeguards encourages opportunism at tender/claim interfaces (Shan et al., 2017; Bhagat & Jha, 2023). Sectoral contrasts appear: public-sector projects carry service-delivery and public-money stakes; private-sector pressures differ in frequency and form. Given South African conditions (Ramabodu, 2023; Osei-Kyei, 2020; Adeyelu, 2019), these cues likely have stronger effects. Mechanistically, climate acts through normative talk, economic signals and status ambiguity, shifting the baseline for Theme 1's calculus and intensifying Theme 2's choke points. System responses should link fee policy to enforceable conduct expectations and transparent exceptions; tighten title discipline and ownership/interest disclosure; and foreground counter-norms alongside rules.

Theme 4, Enforcement That Matters? (Visibility, Capacity, Deterrence)

The data distinguish enforcement "on paper" from enforcement in use. The latter depends on access, acknowledgement, throughput and public signalling. Where these qualities are weak, deterrence is symbolic: "you can't call… you can only email… a lot of these cases kind of stall" (Interviewee 6);

Gazette notices were described as rare and hard to find - “in the past ten years it’s been issued two times… it must be readily available… even on social media” (Interviewee 10). Fear depresses reporting, hence requests to strengthen anonymity (Interviewee 4). Reform work argues that codes and education alter behaviour only when paired with accessible channels and transparent, regular sanctioning (Wang et al., 2022; Zhou et al., 2021; Agyekum et al., 2021). Three elements follow: usability (hotline + portal, immediate acknowledgement, trackable IDs), throughput/capacity (timely investigation/adjudication with adequate resourcing), and visibility (plain-language sanction bulletins, published penalty schedule). In the South African context, complementary moves include information-sharing with ASAQS, standardised penalties and anonymised case notes that teach as they deter. Under conditions of usability, timeliness and visibility, enforcement dampens pressure, resets climate signals and widens the space for integrity.

Theme 5, Becoming a Credible Profession (Identity, Pride, Responsibility)

Professional identity emerges as both aspiration and operating discipline. Calls to be “credible… held in very high regard” (Interviewee 6) sit alongside practice anchors: read and apply the Code; learn from concrete cases; signal integrity externally. A public-interest orientation - “value for money” in client work - was emphasised, particularly for public projects (Interviewee 4), and identity was grounded in conduct: “act according to the Code of Conduct” (Interviewee 1). Prior work links integrity, credibility and transparency to fewer disputes and steadier delivery (Meng, 2015; Mpinganjira et al., 2017; Parast, 2019; Strahorn et al., 2017). The present contribution shows how identity is embedded in routine practice, thereby withstanding Themes 1–3 and responding to Theme 4. Three elements recur: code literacy and situated learning (case-based CPD at tender/VO/EoT/certification nodes) (Wang et al., 2022; Zhou et al., 2021; Agyekum et al., 2021); transparency signals (plain-language sanction bulletins, accessible Gazette summaries, ethics briefings); and role-modelling/early socialisation (mentoring, clear title/authority boundaries). Where fee discounting and title opacity persist, identity talk without visible practice has limited traction. Credibility, as a social licence, requires deliberate production through the above routines.

Conclusion

The study set out to explore how South African quantity surveyors perceive and experience ethical challenges in practice and to examine how systemic pressures and SACQSP enforcement shape ethical decision-making and professional identity. The analysis shows that integrity functions as a situated achievement rather than a stable attribute, arising from the interaction of routine decision nodes, an ethically permissive climate, and the credibility of enforcement. Professional identity - framed by public-interest obligations and the Code of Conduct - provides a normative anchor, but its enactment depends on the conditions under which decisions are made.

In relation to the first two objectives, the forms and locations of ethical pressure were found to be patterned rather than episodic. Pressures coalesce where money and opportunity are determined - tender briefing and scoring, variation initiation and justification, measurement and valuation for payment, extension-of-time adjudication, and certification. These nodes are characterised by information asymmetries, discretionary space under time pressure, and uneven documentation quality, which in combination create affordances for selective interpretation and drift. The same practitioner can therefore act differently across projects as these local conditions vary. Addressing the third objective, the decision process resembles a moral calculus in which anticipated retaliation, labour-market precarity, and normalised talk about “how things work” weigh against professional ideals. Integrity tends to hold where documentary discipline and clause-based reasoning are routine, leadership support is visible, and the certainty and speed of consequences are credible. Where reporting routes are opaque or slow and sanctions are not salient, short-term accommodation becomes rational. The fourth objective - professional identity and SACQSP enforcement - reveals identity as an operational discipline sustained by case-based ethics learning, title discipline, and public-interest framing, but rendered reliably enact-able only when enforcement is usable, timely, and visible. In this configuration, SACQSP’s disciplinary architecture and ASAQS’s educational and communicative roles are complementary: credible channels and transparent signalling convert stated values into repeated practice. Overall, the aim is met: ethical conduct in quantity surveying emerges from the alignment of node-specific controls, climate cues, and enforcement design. Where these elements cohere, integrity becomes practicable and professional identity gains traction; where they do not, even strongly held values are overwhelmed by survival logics.

Recommendations

The recommendations translate the analysis into concrete actions for the workflow points where ethical risk is greatest, and for the institutions that set and signal standards. Client bodies and PMOs should stabilise decision quality at tendering and contract-administration nodes by minuting and publishing briefing records within 48 hours, requiring criterion-level reasons for all scores with chair review of outliers, and enforcing a document-before-decide rule for variation orders, extension-of-time claims, valuations and payment certificates. QS leads should embed evidence packs—drawings, measurement sheets, dated photographs, site notes, and a short clause-based note—into approvals, while clients separate preparation from approval by requiring dual sign-off on payment certificates. For material changes, an independent technical review should be triggered above a defined threshold (for example, ≥5% of contract value or ≥R2 million). These steps are low-cost, template-driven and auditable, and they reduce discretion where pressure is typically applied.

Regulatory deterrence must become usable, timely and visible. SACQSP should operate multi-channel reporting (hotline and web portal) that issues case IDs, acknowledges submissions within 24 hours and publishes service targets for triage and investigation. Quarterly plain-language summaries of disciplinary outcomes, linked to Gazette notices, together with a published schedule of penalties, would strengthen proportionality and predictability. Title discipline and signature audits should be enforced to prevent candidates acting beyond their authority, and guidance should clarify conflict-of-interest disclosure and record-keeping requirements. POPIA-compliant anonymity and multilingual access are essential to protect candidates and practitioners in smaller firms.

Education and profession-wide communication complete the system. ASAQS, in collaboration with SACQSP, should deliver case-based continuing professional development mapped to the actual decision points—tender scoring, VO/EoT adjudication, valuation and certification—with subsidised access for under-resourced regions. Association channels should amplify regulatory signals through explainers and short webinars so that rules are translated into everyday judgement and clients understand what credible practice looks like. At project level, clients and firms should issue threat-response playbooks (escalation ladder, SAPS liaison, pause criteria) at induction and require annual ownership/interest disclosures from all signatories to close accountability gaps.

Monitoring should rely on auditable indicators: the timeliness and completeness of briefing minutes; completeness of scoring justifications; prevalence of evidence packs; coverage of dual sign-off and independent reviews; reporting service levels; consistency of sanctions; title-discipline conformance; and CPD participation with learning gains. Publishing these measures through a simple sector dashboard would sustain transparency, support learning and make integrity a visible, routine feature of QS practice.

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SACQSP2025-65

Restructuring Professional Fees for Quantity Surveyors in South Africa: Insights from Economic and Actuarial Modelling

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Abstract

The South African Council for the Quantity Surveying Profession (SACQSP) commissioned an Actuarial and Analytics professional to review the 2015 gazetted professional fees and develop a baseline fee structure that reflects current and future economic conditions for sustainable quantity surveying practices in South Africa. The study used statistical modelling based on operating expenses, economic indices, and simulated project distributions. Data was collected through surveys and comparative analyses. Due to low initial response rates, SACQSP and the actuarial team implemented targeted online surveys and telephone outreach. A total of 287 members participated in the second survey, with 97 submitting usable financial data. This data informed an economic model categorizing firms as small, medium, or large based on turnover. Expenses were allocated to typical project values, and cost-based fees were adjusted for profit and inflation using the Consumer Price Index (CPI) and Building Cost Index (BCI). The study found that the 2015 fees, based on 2010 guidelines with a 32% uplift, did not keep pace with inflation. Between 2015 and 2022, the BCI rose to 39%, and CPI increased by 66%, which affected the profit margins. The proposed 2025 structure recommends an 18.5% fee increase and a 66% rise in hourly rates to reflect inflation. Limited survey participation affected the volume of financial data, potentially impacting representativeness. Future studies should encourage broader member involvement for improved accuracy. Recommendations include annual fee reviews, improved data collection, exploration of alternative fee models, and development of tools such as a fee calculator and standard financial reporting templates. The proposed structure aims to support a viable, competitive, and adaptable quantity surveying profession in South Africa.

Keywords: Professional Fees, Quantity Surveying, Economic Model, Inflation Adjustment, Sustainability.

Introduction

The construction industry remains a central pillar of economic development the various professions playing a key role (Alaloul et al., 2022). Amongst those key professionals are quantity surveyors (QSs) who ensure the financial and contractual aspects of projects are managed effectively. They are professionals responsible for estimating costs, providing advice on purchasing, managing contracts, and financial reporting (Nur Aishah Mohd Noor et al., 2020; Yap et al., 2022; Ebekozien et al., 2023). Across the globe, QSs ensure that construction projects are delivered within budget and in line with cost-effective practices. Thus, there is a need for professional registration of QS professionals. This to not only to uphold standards of practice and ethical conduct but also to reinforce the recognition, regulation, and remuneration of QSs within the built environment (Ebekozien & Aigbavboa, 2024). Despite the critical nature of their work, the sustainability of the quantity surveying profession in South Africa is increasingly undermined by outdated fee structures that no longer reflect the economic realities of practice.

The South African Council for the Quantity Surveying Profession (SACQSP) is the statutory body regulating the quantity surveying profession in South Africa, as established under the Quantity Surveying Profession Act, 2000 (Act No. 49 of 2000). Its mandate includes registering professionals, accrediting educational programmes, ensuring ethical conduct, and prescribing guidelines for professional fees. The most recent officially published guideline on professional fees was issued through Board Notice 122 of 2015, published in Government Gazette No. 39480 on 4 December 2015.

This guideline was based on 2010 economic data, adjusted by 32% to account for inflation and prevailing market conditions at the time (SACQSP, 2015). According to Statistics South Africa (StatsSA, 2022), The Consumer Price Index (CPI) increased by approximately 66% between 2015 and 2022, while the Building Cost Index (BCI), as reported by the Bureau for Economic Research (BER, 2022), rose by around 39%. These figures highlight the growing disparity between prescribed fee guidelines and the actual economic conditions that quantity surveying firms face. This discrepancy has placed significant financial strain on quantity surveying firms, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which have been disproportionately affected by shrinking profit margins and rising operational costs. In response to these challenges, the SACQSP initiated a comprehensive review of the existing fee structure (Mishiyi et al., 2019).

While some studies have recognised the difficulties of using old fee systems (Mishiyi et al., 2019; Surajbali & Crafford, 2025), there is a notable absence of attempts to develop a robust, data-based model that accurately reflects the present economic landscape in South Africa. There is a scarcity of research that integrates real cost information, inflation rates, and actuarial modelling to establish a flexible, evidence-supported fee structure. SACQSP's recent initiative to request an actuarial and analytics assessment of the 2015 fee guideline represents a groundbreaking advancement in this direction. By leveraging actual financial information from professionals, categorising companies according to revenue, and considering inflation and market spread, the research effectively fills a notable void in academic and policy literature.

The objective was to develop a revised, evidence-based model that accurately captures the cost of providing professional quantity surveying services in the current economic climate. The review involved financial and financial modelling, analysis of market trends, and consultation with industry stakeholders to establish a more sustainable and adaptable baseline for professional fees. This paper presents the outcomes of that review. It outlines the approach to developing the new fee model, provides a rationale for the proposed adjustments, and discusses the implications for the profession. By aligning fee structures with the economic challenges experienced by practitioners, the proposed model aims to restore financial sustainability, enhance professional standards, and support the long-term viability of the quantity surveying sector in South Africa. Typically, introductions consist of the following elements in paragraph format.

The SACQSP, established under the Quantity Surveying Profession Act (Act No. 49 of 2000), is responsible for fee regulation and professional oversight. Its most recent fee guideline prior to this study was Board Notice 122 of 2015 (Government Gazette No. 39480), based on 2010 data and adjusted by 32%. However, the 2024 Guideline Tariff of Professional Fees, published on 21 February 2025 (Government Gazette No. 52152), supersedes this framework, introducing retrospective application from 1 May 2024. This update underscores the need for continuous fee recalibration grounded in empirical and economic rationalization principles. Moreover, the Competition Commission’s concerns about anti-competitive fee scales highlight the need for transparent, evidence-based fee-setting approaches that protect both public and professional interests.

Literature review

The Expanding Role of Quantity Surveyors in a Complex Construction Economy

Professionals in construction estimating in modern construction now have a much broader role than just estimating costs and measuring them (Samarasekara et al., 2024). They also handle tasks like procurement strategy, financial control, managing contractual risks, and considering lifecycle costs (Hong et al., 2018). Busco et al. (2024) point out the increasing complexity of construction projects and stricter regulations. Therefore, quantity surveyors must play a crucial role in ensuring that project budgets align with delivery outcomes, managing financial risks, and securing value-for-money throughout project lifecycles.

Just like the global roles, South African quantity surveyors are vital for controlling costs, ensuring project transparency (Fobiri et al., 2022). They are also maintaining financial accountability due to economic fluctuations, regulatory limitations, and infrastructure challenges (Zhang et al., 2024). Despite their critical role, quantity surveyors are still constrained by traditional fee structures that fail to consider the expanded scope and financial risks associated with their services. The increasing gap between the complexity of services provided and their compensation highlights the urgency of adopting a fee system that matches current economic and professional standards (Adesi et al., 2023).

Regulatory Oversight and the Fee-Setting Mandate of SACQSP

In South Africa, the regulation of the quantity surveying profession is governed by the Quantity Surveying Profession Act, No. 49 of 2000, which established the South African Council for the Quantity Surveying Profession (SACQSP). SACQSP's duties include accrediting educational programs, registering professionals, ensuring ethical practices, and creating guidelines for professional fees. By performing these regulatory tasks, SACQSP aims to protect the public interest and promote the development and longevity of the profession (SACQSP, 2015).

Importantly, SACQSP operates under the supervision of the Council for the Built Environment (CBE)—a statutory body established by the Council for the Built Environment Act, No. 43 of 2000. The CBE oversees all six built environment professional councils, including SACQSP, and reports to the Department of Public Works and Infrastructure (DPWI) (Republic of South Africa, 2000). The structure guarantees that SACQSP's regulatory actions are in harmony with national transformation, infrastructure progress, and professional norms within the built environment sector.

SACQSP's most recent gazetted guideline for professional fees was issued in Board Notice 122 of 2015 and published in Government Gazette No. 39480. The guideline was based on 2010 economic data and included a 32% increase to reflect inflation at the time (SACQSP, 2015). However, this structure has not been revised in nearly a decade, despite significant economic changes, highlighting a critical regulatory shortfall. In contrast to organisations like the Australian Institute of Quantity Surveyors (AIQS) that adjust fee structures frequently in response to market changes, South Africa's approach remains stagnant and less applicable (Mills et al., 2022).

After nearly a decade of delay, the South African Council for the Quantity Surveying Profession (SACQSP) issued the 2024/2025 Guideline of Fees (Government Gazette No. 52152, February 2025), superseding the 2015 version. This update resulted from an actuarial and economic reassessment driven by the need to comply with the Competition Commission's regulatory requirements and to incorporate empirical cost modelling across quantity surveying practices. The revised guideline not only adjusts fee scales and stage apportionments to reflect inflationary trends and workload distribution but also acknowledges new technology-related disbursements and simplifies variation reimbursement procedures. Overall, the 2024/2025 Guideline represents a practical institutionalization of evidence-based, inflation-responsive, and data-driven adjustments long advocated in contemporary quantity surveying scholarship.

Economic Pressures /Growing Misalignment in Fees and Economic Rationalization Theory

The South African quantity surveying profession is grappling with significant economic challenges that have led to a growing misalignment between professional fees and the actual costs of service delivery. Despite the increasing operational costs, the current fee structures have stayed mostly unchanged, not aligning with the economic challenges practitioners encounter. The study of Cumberlege and Claasen (2014) shows that professional fees are frequently reduced by 30% to 40%, with some firms charging significantly less than the Tariff of Professional Fees set by the South African Council for the Quantity Surveying Profession (SACQSP), which can lead to financial instability and hinder sustainable operations. This practice of reducing fees is not sustainable because it frequently leads to firms operating at a loss, which ultimately affects the quality of services provided, compromising resources and expertise (Maboya & McKay, 2019).

The differences in fee structures among professionals in the built environment pose a major challenge to achieving optimal sector performance. The analysis by Ramabodu (2023) of fee scales in different professions in South Africa showed that lower fee scales are linked to subpar performance and present risks to consultants, such as reduced resources and limited growth opportunities. The study highlights the importance of standardizing fee structures, improving transparency, and promoting ethical practices to establish a fairer and more sustainable built environment sector. In addition to enhancing professionalism, client trust, and industry credibility, ongoing economic pressures, combined with outdated fee structures and widespread fee reductions, have presented a difficult situation for quantity surveying professionals in South Africa (Maseko & Duma, 2023). Resolving these issues demands a collaborative approach to updating fee guidelines, ensuring ethical practices, and incorporating flexible strategies that adapt to the industry's changing economic landscape.

This section applies Economic Rationalization Theory to frame professional fee restructuring within the broader contexts of economic sustainability, regulatory economics, and institutional accountability. The theory emphasizes efficiency and sustainability in pricing systems by ensuring that fees reflect both operational realities and fair market value (Weber, 1978; Simon, 1997). In professional service contexts, it promotes a balance between cost recovery, ethical standards, and competitive equity (Friedman, 2020). In South Africa, the SACQSP's fee regulation functions as an institutional mechanism for rationalizing market dynamics by aligning economic indices such as the Consumer Price Index (CPI) and Building Cost Index (BCI) with professional value delivery. Studies by Cumberlege and Claasen (2014) and Ramabodu (2023) reveal that irrational fee discounting disrupts market equilibrium and weakens professional sustainability. In contrast, rationalized fee models such as those used by the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) and the Australian Institute of Quantity Surveyors (AIQS) employed data-driven calibration to ensure service quality and fairness. Globally, these models integrate inflation tracking, project complexity, and resource costs, thereby validating the application of rationalization principles in achieving transparent, sustainable, and economically coherent fee regulation.

Comparative International Models for Fee Structuring

Globally, professional associations have adopted responsive and data-driven approaches to professional fee determination. The RICS in the United Kingdom publishes detailed fee scales tied to service complexity, project size, and risk levels, while also conducting member surveys and market studies to inform fee adjustments (Holt et al., 2025). Similarly, the AIQS issues fee guidelines that reflect project type, regional cost trends, and inflation adjustments (Mills et al., 2022). These models recognise that professional fees should cover operational costs and support quality, risk management, and innovation. By contrast, South Africa's fee model lacks such adaptive features. It neither reflects project complexity nor accommodates ongoing economic fluctuations. Consequently, local QS firms are forced to compete in a fee environment that encourages underbidding and compromises service quality, undermining professional dignity and long-term sector resilience (Mishiyi et al., 2019).

Sustainability and Equity in Professional Practice

Sustainability in professional practice is increasingly measured by a firm's ability to deliver consistent, high-quality services while maintaining operational resilience, attracting and retaining skilled professionals, and contributing to sectoral transformation (Rosário & Figueiredo, 2024). For QS firms in South Africa, the absence of an inflation-adjusted, economically viable fee structure erodes this sustainability. Emerging black- and women-owned firms, in particular, face structural challenges. These firms often lack capital reserves and are disproportionately affected by pricing pressures and delayed payments (Tlapana & Mngeni, 2021). Within the public sector, current procurement strategies prioritise the lowest bids, exacerbating the financial instability faced by newcomers and small enterprises (CIDB, 2021).

Insufficient fees further hinder the sector's capacity to attract and retain young professionals. Candidacy programmes frequently provide minimal or no compensation, and due to restricted growth opportunities within the current fee frameworks, numerous skilled professionals exit the industry altogether (Okonkwo & Wium, 2018). Consequently, a 'brain drain' occurs, jeopardising the future capacity and leadership within the profession. Lacking the financial resources to integrate digital tools like BIM, cost-management software, and e-tendering platforms, firms lag in technological adoption, thereby constraining their competitiveness and capacity to fulfil contemporary client demands (Zhang et al., 2024).

Research Method

This study adopted a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative data collection and actuarial modelling. Its central aim was to reassess the 2015 gazetted professional fee structure for Quantity Surveyors (QSs) in South Africa and produce a revised, evidence-based baseline aligned with current and anticipated economic conditions.

Two main data streams informed the analysis. Primary data was gathered via a structured online survey (SurveyMonkey) developed by the appointed actuarial consultants and circulated by SACQSP. To improve participation, a follow-up telephone survey targeted non-responsive respondents. Secondary data comprised the 2010 and 2015, and 2024 SACQSP gazetted fee schedules, Consumer

Price Index (CPI) statistics from Statistics South Africa and Building Cost Index (BCI) figures from the Bureau for Economic Research. Fee guidelines from related professions, such as architects and project managers, were also reviewed for benchmarking purposes.

From 520 practitioners invited to the second survey phase, 287 responded, and 97 submitted complete, usable financial records. These respondents represented small, medium, and large QS firms, categorised by average turnover over the preceding three years. Firm size thresholds were defined as small (<R1 million annual turnover), medium (R1–10 million), and large (>R10 million). Financial data were normalized and analysed using CPI and BCI adjustments up to 2024, reflecting the latest inflationary trends reported by StatsSA (2024) and the Bureau for Economic Research (2024). The survey collected detailed information on annual income, operational expenditure, project value distribution, and billing practices. Expense categories included salaries, premises, communications, repairs, travel, professional services, insurance, IT systems, finance charges, marketing, printing, training, outsourcing, depreciation, and other overheads.

The actuarial modelling process projected the cost of operating a QS practice on a sustainable and competitive basis. Using simulation techniques, model entities were developed for each firm size category, with annual expenses allocated to project value bands from the 2015 guidelines. The Cost Base Fee for each band was calculated by dividing average expenses by the mean project value, followed by adjustments for profit margins and the relative movements in CPI and BCI. Hourly rates were recalculated by applying cumulative CPI growth of 66.07% to the 2015 figures.

The methodological approach adopted in this study aligns closely with the actuarial research process commissioned by the SACQSP in developing the 2024/2025 fee structure, reinforcing the validity of data-driven economic modelling in professional fee regulation. The actuarial modelling process applied rationalization principles by simulating cost–revenue interactions under varying inflationary and market demand conditions. This approach embodies the core tenets of Economic Rationalization Theory, providing a systematic, evidence-based justification for fee structures grounded in measurable economic indicators and ensuring that professional remuneration reflects both market efficiency and operational sustainability.

Data Analysis and Results

Average income and Expenses of SA-QS firms

Table 1 shows the average turnover and operating expenses over the past three years for the three categories of QS firms in South Africa. Small firms reported an average turnover of approximately R478,402 and average expenses of R688,608; medium-sized firms recorded R2,547,992 in turnover and R2,299,778 in expenses; and large firms reported R36,636,081 in turnover with expenses averaging R37,006,319. The analysis assumes that each firm charges fees sufficient to cover its operating costs while generating a sustainable profit for shareholders. For each category, average expenses were allocated across the range of project value bands typically undertaken within a financial year. These expenses were then adjusted using the Consumer Price Index (CPI) to project both current and future costs. The projected expenses were compared with changes in the Building Cost Index (BCI) to assess whether fees calculated as a percentage of project value would adequately offset costs and maintain financial viability.

Table 1 3-year average income and expenses of SA-QS firms

Group	Average turnover /income	Average Expenses
Small	R478 402	R688 608
Medium	R2 547 992	R2 299 778
Large	R36 636 081	R37 006 319

2010 versus 2015 fees guideline

The subsequent stage involved adopting the 2015 guideline as the baseline fee structure for adjustment. Figure 1 shows the comparison of the 2010 versus the 2015 fees guideline; the 2015 rates were originally derived from the 2010 schedule with a 32% increase but have remained unchanged

since. Consequently, any growth in income for firms charging according to the 2015 guideline has stemmed solely from rising project values, driven by general increases in construction costs. This trend indicates that operational costs have escalated at a faster rate than revenue growth.

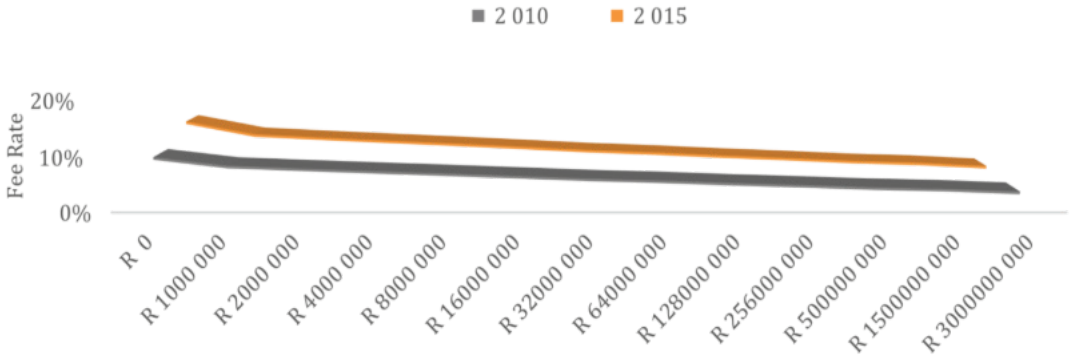

Figure 1: 2010 versus 2015 fees guideline; Source: Quantity Survey Gazetted tariff of fee 2010 & 2015.

Consumer Price Index versus Building Cost Index

Between 2015 and 2022, the Consumer Price Index (CPI) increased by 66.07%, while the Building Cost Index (BCI) rose by 39.26%. The gap between these two indices represents an estimated 19.26% erosion in profit margins, as illustrated in Table 2. For instance, if the 2015 fee structure supported a profit margin of 15%, maintaining that margin by December 2022 would require a 19.26% upward adjustment to the fee schedule.

Table 2 CPI versus BCI

Index change from 2015 to 2022 Dec		Expense Ratio
Building Cost Index	39.26%	85.00%
General Inflation	66.07%	101.37%
Change required	19.26%	19.26%

A simulation-based approach was applied to develop model entities for each firm category. The model incorporated two key random variables: the number of projects undertaken annually and the expenses allocated to each project value band. The distribution patterns for these variables were derived from data supplied by SACQSP. The modelling process allocated a firm's total annual expenses across all projects expected to be executed within the financial year in which those costs were incurred. Projects were classified into value bands in accordance with the 2015 Guideline Tariff of Professional Fees.

The Cost Base Fee excluding profit was determined by dividing the average expenses per project band by the corresponding average project value, with the latter calculated as the midpoint between the lower and upper limits of the band. Profit margins were then incorporated based on two market factors of (a) the demand for quantity surveying services, and (b) the available supply of qualified practitioners. Adjusting the Cost Base Fee for profit margins produced the revised baseline fee structure. Under this model, the 2023 baseline structure represents an average increase of 19% over the 2015 rates, with proportionally greater uplifts applied to lower-value projects to ensure their financial viability.

Comparison of Hourly rate from 2007 to 2015 and 2023-2025

The final stage involved adjusting hourly rates to align with the proposed 2023-2025 fee structure. As shown in Table 3, the revised rates represent a 66.07% increase over 2015 levels, consistent with the cumulative growth in the Consumer Price Index (CPI) between 2015 and 2025. These figures,

excluding VAT, were derived by applying the inflationary adjustment directly to the 2015 hourly rates, ensuring that remuneration levels reflect the actual cost escalation experienced over the period.

Table 3 2007 to 2015 hourly rate and 2025 proposed hourly rate compared

Experience	2007 to 2015				2025		
	2007	2015	% Change	Annual increase	2025	% Change	Annual increase rate
Not exceeding 5 years' experience	540	850	57%	5.8%	1 412	66.07%	6.5%
Exceeding 5 years and not exceeding 10 years' experience	880	1 700	93%	8.6%	2 823	66.07%	6.5%
Exceeding 10 years' experience	1 190	2 400	102%	9.2%	3 986	66.07%	6.5%
Specialist work (minimum 10 years' experience)	1 490	3 000	101%	9.1%	4 982	66.07%	6.5%

The left-hand column of Table 3 indicates the percentage change in hourly rates between 2007 and 2015, during which rates rose by at least 57%, equating to an average annual increase of approximately 5.8% over eight years. The right-hand column presents the proposed adjustment from 2015 to 2025, reflecting a 66.07% increase in line with cumulative actual and projected inflation over the period. This adjustment equates to an average annual increase of roughly 6.5%, ensuring that hourly remuneration remains consistent with prevailing economic conditions.

Discussion

The results highlight a clear disconnect between the 2015 gazetted fee structure and the economic realities confronting QS firms in South Africa. Operating costs have escalated at a rate far exceeding the growth in the Building Cost Index, eroding profit margins and exerting excessive pressure on small and medium-sized enterprises. The proposed model addresses this imbalance by introducing inflation-linked adjustments to safeguard profitability, applying differentiated fee increases across project value bands with proportionally higher adjustments for lower-value projects and recalibrating hourly rates in line with cumulative inflation to maintain remuneration equity across experience levels.

A comparative review with fee schedules for architects and project managers confirmed that QS fees have fallen behind, a trend that risks undermining both competitiveness and service quality. Bringing QS fees in line with relevant economic indicators not only secures financial sustainability but also strengthens the profession's ability to invest in skills development, adopt emerging technologies, and advance equitable transformation within the sector. Nonetheless, the model's reliability is heavily dependent on the quality of the underlying data. The relatively small pool of usable financial submissions of 97 firms underscores the importance of establishing more comprehensive and, where necessary, mandatory data collection mechanisms. Without accurate and representative cost information, future fee adjustments risk being based on incomplete evidence.

The 2025 SACQSP Guideline substantiates this study's central argument that static fee structures undermine professional sustainability. The actuarial recalibration process, rooted in income-expense modeling and inflation adjustment, reflects precisely the evidence-based approach advocated herein. Notably, the redistribution of fee apportionment toward earlier project stages (70% up to Stage 4) represents a policy-level recognition of cost and risk alignment principles central to this study's proposed model.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study presents an empirically derived baseline fee structure for the quantity surveying profession in South Africa, reflecting an average increase of 19% over the 2015 guideline. By integrating the

differential movements of the Consumer Price Index (CPI) and the Building Cost Index (BCI) into the modelling process, the proposed framework aims to restore profit margins that have been eroded over the past eight years. This approach provides a sustainable mechanism for regular fee adjustments that are responsive to prevailing economic conditions, thereby protecting professional standards and ensuring the delivery of quality services.

To maintain the relevance and accuracy of the guideline, it is recommended that SACQSP adopt an annual review process in which adjustments are based on the difference between CPI and BCI movements, complemented by full actuarial reviews at least every two years. Strengthening the evidence base for such reviews will require the introduction of mandatory financial reporting fields within SACQSP's membership system, with participation encouraged through Continuing Professional Development (CPD) incentives. The fee structure could be further enhanced by incorporating alternative pricing models that take account of project complexity, duration, and scope, thereby increasing flexibility and relevance across diverse project types.

The development of a digital fee calculator hosted on the SACQSP website would promote transparency and standardisation in fee estimation for both practitioners and clients. Additionally, targeted capacity-building programmes and supportive policy measures should be introduced to assist smaller firms, particularly those owned by historically disadvantaged groups, in adapting to the revised fee framework. Finally, sustained engagement between SACQSP, government bodies, and industry stakeholders will be essential to ensure that procurement policies and professional fee structures are aligned in a way that fosters sustainability, competitiveness, and equitable growth within the profession.

The introduction of the 2025 fee guideline provides an institutional precedent for periodic actuarial reviews and inflation-linked adjustments. It reinforces the need for SACQSP to implement continuous data-driven monitoring systems and digital fee management tools—recommendations aligned with this study's call for an integrated, technology-supported fee restructuring framework.

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SACQSP2025-73

Implementing Blockchain Technology for Transparent and Secure Cost Management in Quantity Surveying in South Africa: A Review

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Abstract

This study investigates the potential of blockchain technology to improve transparency and security in cost management processes within the Quantity Surveying profession in South Africa. It aims to identify the key benefits, challenges, and factors influencing the adoption of blockchain in this context, contributing to the wider discussion on digital transformation in the construction sector. The study also examines how blockchain integrates with wireless sensor networks, its role in enhancing transparency and security in cost management and highlights key success factors for future implementation in the South African construction industry. A qualitative approach was used through a systematic literature review (SLR), employing the PRISMA framework to guide a bibliometric analysis of peer-reviewed articles published between 2019 and 2025. Data were collected from major academic databases, including Scopus, ScienceDirect, IEEE Xplore, Web of Science, Energies, and Emerald Insight. Thematic analysis identified recurring barriers, implementation gaps, and contextual factors influencing blockchain adoption in cost management. Findings suggest that blockchain, combined with wireless sensor networks and data analytics, can notably improve cost transparency, reduce financial disputes, and enhance data security. The results affirm that blockchain increases transparency and security in cost management through immutable records, automated smart contracts, and real-time data integration, ultimately fostering greater trust and fewer disputes among stakeholders in the South African Quantity Surveying environment. Despite these advantages, challenges such as technological complexity, regulatory uncertainty, limited technical skills, and resistance to change act as significant barriers to widespread adoption in the South African construction sector. The review highlights the importance of stakeholder collaboration, supportive policies, and customised training programmes as essential enablers of successful blockchain adoption. A rising interest in pilot projects and academic research indicates a promising outlook for the technology's future deployment. However, the study is limited by reliance on secondary data, with many insights derived from international contexts that may not fully reflect local industry realities. This underscores the need for empirical research involving South African professionals to validate findings and tailor solutions to local conditions. In conclusion, the research offers a foundational understanding of blockchain's role in cost management for Quantity Surveyors and provides a valuable resource for both academics and industry practitioners seeking innovative methods of cost control in construction.

Keywords: Blockchain Technology, Wireless Sensor Networks, Data Analytics, Cost Management, Security.

Introduction

There is a digital transformation taking place in the South African construction industry, and one of its aims is to create trust, transparency, efficiency, and accountability within the industry (Otasowie et al., 2023). Quantity Surveyors (QS) are tasked with effective cost management and serve as the stewards of financial risk and management within projects, making them a key profession with a huge role to play in this evolution (Ebekozien & Aigbavboa, 2023). Although there are cost management practices in place, traditional cost management systems are often plagued by inefficiencies, data manipulation, and disputes over financial records. Dissatisfaction with cost management practices often hinders the project outcome and erodes trust amongst stakeholders. New technologies designed to reduce the

impact of cost management-related issues are actively being developed, and these include blockchain (Aigbavboa & Kissi, 2025a; Akinradewo et al., 2021).

Blockchain technology, originally developed for cryptocurrency transactions, has evolved into a practical means of safe and transparent management of data across many industries (Kim et al., 2022). The decentralised ledger technology guarantees that the data entered, and the transaction time-stamped and subsequently reportable as verifiable in a block or linked chain manner that is inalterable or tamper-proof, which is beneficial when veracity and legitimacy are needed (Zeberga et al., 2024). For construction cost management, blockchain could be utilised to manage record financial transactions, manage the procurement process, and record contractual obligations in an immutable and potential tampering and fraud-free manner (Plevris et al., 2022). This would be especially significant in South Africa's construction industry, where the industry experiences significant challenges with both corruption, cost overruns, and delays. In quantity surveying, such attributes assure improved reliability of data in the fact that every transaction or cost item is fully verifiable without reliance on prospective information, reducing dispute opportunities and mismanagement of funds (Chakraborty et al., 2024; Cheng et al., 2021). Additionally, smart contracts in blockchain allow for programmable, self-executing agreements, which could lead to the automation of significant financial functions such as the release of payments and compliance evaluation of contracts (Ammendolia, 2023; Balaji et al., 2024). These elements collectively can establish a means of management from a reactive and human error-prone process to a more proactive method that can streamline the process and enhance the trust of all project participants (Cheng et al., 2021). Overall, these features would transform cost management from an error-prone, reactive process into a proactive, streamlined process that reinforces trust amongst all participants in the project (Aigbavboa & Kissi, 2025b; Chakraborty et al., 2024).

The integration of blockchain with wireless sensor networks (WSNs) and data analytics increases the potential of blockchain even further in the QS profession (Mishra et al., 2025). WSN can be used to collect real-time data on material usage, labour hours and equipment productivity, which can then be secured on a blockchain platform and analysed (Alkhfaji, 2023). The combination of the two technologies supports better decision making, fewer manual errors and accessibility to cost data for everyone. Additionally, smart contracts, which are self-executing agreements within the blockchain, could automate payments and check compliance with contractual provisions, further reducing the burden of project delivery (Ammendolia, 2023; Balaji et al., 2024).

The uptake of blockchain in South Africa’s construction industry has been slow, despite its potential to change the industry (Zeberga et al., 2024). Among others, challenges including a complex technology challenge, the limited pool of skilled support professionals, the unknown and unregulated space of blockchain, and people’s resistance to change have limited the uptake of the technology (Aigbavboa & Kissi, 2025a; Otasowie et al., 2023; Plevris et al., 2022). There is an increase in piloting projects, interest from academia, and potential uptake, which is positive. The aim of the paper is to consider the potential of blockchain technology in the QS profession for cost management, including the potential benefits and challenges to adoption. The paper will make use of a systematic literature review and thematic analysis and serves as an avenue for exploring and building on how blockchain technology can provide better transparency and security in QS practices, and what practical steps can be taken to overcome some barriers to its adoption in South Africa. This investigation not only contributes to the evolving discourse on digital transformation in construction but also addresses a critical knowledge gap specific to the South African context. In doing so, the paper seeks to provide both theoretical insights and practical recommendations that can guide industry stakeholders, policymakers, and academics towards leveraging blockchain technology effectively to enhance cost management, reduce disputes, and build greater trust across all phases of construction projects.

Review of blockchain technology for cost management

The use of blockchain technology for construction cost management has gained prominence in recent years and is increasingly considered an innovative response to historic issues of transparency, accountability and data integrity in the built environment. As financial managers and cost controllers in construction projects, the discipline of Quantity Surveying stands to gain considerably through the application of blockchain systems. The literature identifies blockchain's potential to transform cost management context at scale or intra-organizationally, through its provision of immutable records, automated payment system facilitation through smart contracts, and real-time, multidirectional stakeholder data sharing. This discussion will appraise recent academic literature to consider the

technological, organisational and contextual aspects affecting blockchain adoption within the cost management scope, for the sake of identifying research themes for consideration in future research.

Blockchain technology in construction cost management

Blockchain technology is a disruptive solution in construction cost management by creating decentralised and immutable digital ledgers that improve transparency, security, and efficiency in the recording of financial transactions (Akinradewo et al., 2021). Unlike traditional centralised databases, which can be subject to manipulation and errors, blockchain allows anyone who is a stakeholder on a construction project to see a real-time, tamper-proof ledger documenting the transaction history of projects (Kim et al., 2022). The increased transparency in how funds are deployed helps decrease fraudulent behaviours that have traditionally existed on construction projects across the globe, such as false billing and cost manipulation (Aigbavboa & Kissi, 2025a; Ebekozien & Aigbavboa, 2023). The inclusion of smart contracts, which are self-executing programs on the blockchain, automates the processes surrounding the issuing of payments, achieving milestone verification, and ensuring compliance with contract terms and conditions (Ammendolia, 2023; Balaji et al., 2024; Chakraborty et al., 2024). A reduction of human error and disputes through the application of automated contracts leads to quicker payment cycles and better trust between parties (Cheng et al., 2021). Kim et al. (2022) found that blockchain is most promising for project cost/cange management, contract bidding and formation, and procurement evaluation in construction.

The application of blockchain in construction encompasses not only cost tracking but also procurement, contract management and project oversight, where visibility and trust are important (Plevris et al., 2022; Zeberga et al., 2024). Through blockchain, all involved parties see the status of bids, material certifications and progress of contracts on a verifiable and transparent platform, allowing for easier workflows and less burden of administration (Cheng et al., 2021). For example, construction companies could receive immediate payments after finishing a job, mitigating cash flow problems related to delayed payments (Plevris et al., 2022). Additionally, blockchain stores transaction records in an immutable format, offering auditors and regulators a transparent record that supports accountability and compliance with regulations (Akinradewo et al., 2021).

Smart contracts are a hallmark of blockchain, and they serve to affordably integrate payment processes while managing contractual provisions without the need for intermediaries (Balaji et al., 2024). Wu et al. (2020) proposed a blockchain-based smart contract (BBSC) system to facilitate payment freezing and disbursement cycles within the construction project lifecycle. Their prototype illustrated efficiencies and certainty with regard to progress payments while addressing persistent issues such as late or non-payment. The efficiencies with respect to the administration of BBSC reduced burden and ensured payments were made with respect to tracked milestones, facilitating the implementation of enhanced financial discipline through the construction project lifecycle (Wu et al., 2020).

Timing and readiness are critical success factors for adopting blockchain in construction cost management. For South Africa, the readiness to utilise blockchain technology remains somewhat uncertain. Industry stakeholders must align and sync their technological capacity, regulatory frameworks and market acceptance to fully exploit the potential of blockchain. Research indicates there is a need for stakeholders to collaborate on assembling interoperable and trusted digital ecosystems. Pilot projects and government-supported initiatives indicate growing momentum and provide case studies to address obstacles to adoption and further demonstrate the value of the benefits of adopting blockchain globally. As a result, blockchain technology is incrementally establishing itself as a foundation of the Construction 5.0 digital transformation journey and revolutionising construction cost management.

Wireless Sensor Networks (WSNs) and Data Analytics

Wireless Sensor Networks (WSNs) are now being utilised in construction settings to monitor and collect real-time usage data regarding materials, labour productivity and equipment operation (Mishra et al., 2025). A WSN consists of autonomous sensor nodes that are spatially distributed, where the sensor nodes can monitor, collect, and transmit real-time data regarding a range of physical parameters across a construction site. Integrating sensor nodes with blockchain automates secure data logging and accurate records, supporting effective cost management (Abd El-Moghith & Darwish, 2021; Wu et al., 2020). WSNs enable detailed, continuous monitoring of site conditions, material use,

equipment, and environmental factors in construction (Mishra et al., 2025). The ensuing visibility inherent in WSNs creates access to a higher level of accuracy and detail to assess budgets and monitor the progress of projects, while limiting human error and improving decision-making (Wu et al., 2020). In terms of recent research and technological advances in WSNs, there has been a much-needed and developed emphasis on the use of energy management for routing protocols, as well as the efficiency of the data routing through energy consumption analytics, as a network lifetime approach, to ensure a reliable and sustainable data flow throughout the duration of the project (Abd El-Moghith & Darwish, 2021).

Combining WSNs with blockchain enables efficient cost management in construction by providing reliable, real-time data directly linked to an immutable ledger (Nguyen et al., 2024; Wu et al., 2020). This prevents tampering and ensures information accuracy, which is crucial to avoiding disputes and cost overruns (Alkhfaji, 2023; Mishra et al., 2025; Wu et al., 2020). Continuous data collection allows quantity surveyors and project managers to track actual site activity against plans and budgets, improving resource control and enabling prompt responses to emerging excess costs. Wireless Sensor Networks (WSNs) gather real-time data on such factors as material consumption, labour productivity, equipment performance, and environmental impact (Wu et al., 2020). This data enables predictive forecasting of costs through recognition of trends, such as resource usage rates, idle time, and time spent working ahead of or behind schedule (Abd El-Moghith & Darwish, 2021). For example, sensors which track the usage of cement can indicate the likelihood of material shortages, while labour sensors can signal inefficiencies that could contribute to cost overruns (Wu et al., 2020). Data analysis using data analytics tools can inform proactive decision-making and budget management.

Data analytics in construction works alongside WSNs to convert large volumes of collected sensor data into insights useful for cost forecasting, risk management, and resource optimisation (Basheer et al., 2023; Capocasale & Perboli, 2022). Techniques such as machine learning and statistical modelling use both historical and real-time data to identify cost patterns, anticipate possible overruns, and support resource allocation decisions (Abd El-Moghith & Darwish, 2021). These predictive methods contribute to more accurate budgeting and help lower the likelihood of rework or supply chain interruptions (Basheer et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2024). Analytics is also used to find inefficiencies that may create waste, assisting efforts toward better resource utilisation and environmental sustainability (Weerasooriya et al., 2024). The adoption of data analytics tools in the construction sector indicates a growing interest in leveraging sensor data for project cost management, risk mitigation, and punctual delivery (Akinradewo et al., 2021; Ebekozien & Aigbavboa, 2023).

WSNs and data analytics are essential parts of the digital transformation currently occurring in construction cost management (Mishra et al., 2025; Weerasooriya et al., 2024). Together with blockchain's secure and open data management, they produce real-time, accurate, and trustworthy cost management tracking mechanisms (Wu et al., 2020). This integration has addressed some of the long-standing predicaments in traditional cost management practices and provides a way for data-driven cost management to become possible, improving accountability and lessening disputes while achieving better financial and operational outcomes for construction projects (Ebekozien & Aigbavboa, 2023).

Adoption challenges and opportunities in South Africa

The challenges facing blockchain diffusion in South Africa’s construction industry are exacerbated by the technological, regulatory, and cultural conditions in the country (Zeberga et al., 2024). Physical challenges caused by an inconsistent supply of energy and outdated digital assets in many of the construction firms pose practical challenges to the blockchain functions that ensure their continuous and trusted operation (Plevris et al., 2022). Regulatory dilemmas are also evident with a lack of clarity regarding legal frameworks governing blockchain data, the validity of smart contracts, and the admissibility of electronic records, which feeds regulatory uncertainty and lowers trust in the industry (Zeberga et al., 2024). Furthermore, resistance to change, which stems from longstanding traditional practices and concerns around job displacement, influences stakeholder scepticism (Chakraborty et al., 2024; Cheng et al., 2021). Blockchain adoption in Quantity Surveying depends on several key factors, including technological readiness, regulatory clarity, stakeholder collaboration, and professional training. Pilot projects also play a vital role in demonstrating practical value. Addressing these elements through joint efforts between government, academia, and industry is essential to unlock blockchain’s full potential in cost management. The barriers highlight the need for investment in

infrastructure, regulatory clarity, and educational and training initiatives to foster technical development and build trust among users.

Despite all these adoption challenges, blockchain offers significant benefits for cost management in Quantity Surveying, including increased transparency, reduced fraud, and automated payments via smart contracts (Ammendolia, 2023). In South Africa, ongoing digital initiatives and research reflect growing interest in blockchain applications for construction. The technology enables secure, unbiased access to project data for smaller firms and enhances public sector procurement integrity through immutable audit trails (Akinradewo et al., 2021; Zeberga et al., 2024). There are various advantages to blockchain adoption for cost management in Quantity Surveying, especially around improved transparency, security, and efficiencies (Otasowie et al., 2023). The immutable record of blockchain helps eliminate concerns and builds confidence in data manipulation between stakeholders. The cryptographic methodology in blockchain ensures the accuracy of cost data, and programmable payment mechanisms provided by smart contracts will automate payments and compliance checking, reducing bottlenecks and disputes (Akinradewo et al., 2021). Real-time access to cost information allows for improved decision-making and reduces administrative and paperwork burdens, and the technology's ability to create an undistorted audit trail for the financials supports accountability (Plevris et al., 2022). These advantages address some longstanding challenges that have impacted the South African construction industry, such as contractor corruption, cost overruns, and payment disputes. Blockchain provides substantial platforms for cost management transformation (Kim et al., 2022).

Achieving these benefits will require a coordinated strategy involving government, industry, and academic stakeholders to establish effective policy frameworks, modernise digital infrastructure, and provide training to support the local industry (Chakraborty et al., 2024; Cheng et al., 2021; Plevris et al., 2022). Such collaborative efforts are essential for overcoming existing barriers and advancing the next phase of digital transformation (Ebekozien & Aigbavboa, 2023). By leveraging the transformative potential of blockchain technology, South Africa can enhance transparency, efficiency, and trust in construction cost management systems.

Research methodology and method

A literature review is a systematic approach designed to evaluate existing scholarship within a specific field rigorously (Rivard, 2024). Literature reviews commonly take the form of either narrative or systematic reviews (McKenna, 2024). Narrative reviews address a range of topics at varying levels of depth by drawing on established literature without adhering to a singular methodological framework (Yong et al., 2024). In contrast, systematic reviews provide an in-depth analysis of the literature, employing clearly defined methodologies to investigate specialised research questions. Unlike narrative literature reviews, systematic reviews thoroughly identify and assess the current body of knowledge, thereby advancing new insights across a broader domain (Younis et al., 2024).

This study employed a systematic literature review method to thoroughly evaluate and synthesise the existing literature on the use of blockchain technology in construction cost management, with a specific focus on the Quantity Surveying profession in South Africa. We employed an SLR approach to promote a robust, transparent, and reproducible process of identifying relevant peer-reviewed publications between 2019 and 2025, which were believed to provide the latest developments and academic discourse on the use of blockchain for the construction industry. The review process adheres to the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework, which facilitated a systematic process to identify, screen, and include relevant articles published in prime leading academic databases, such as ScienceDirect, Scopus, Energies, Emerald Insight, IEEE Xplore, Web of Science, etc. The PRISMA standards outline four essential phases that must be adhered to in a systematic review: (1) identification, (2) screening, (3) eligibility, and (4) inclusion. Thematic analysis promoted a framework for identifying patterns related to benefits, barriers, and factors to adopt blockchain technology for cost management and to provide a consistent way of obtaining knowledge on the potential and pitfalls of the technology in a South African context.

Search strategy

The study applied the PRISMA framework for a systematic literature review, focusing on peer-reviewed articles from 2019 to 2025 sourced from ScienceDirect, Scopus, and Web of Science due to their comprehensive coverage of engineering, construction, and technology research. Using targeted keywords and Boolean operators, the search was refined by publication date, relevance to

construction, and whether the content was empirical or theoretical regarding blockchain's applicability in the industry. Duplicates were eliminated, and articles were screened for relevance based on title, abstract, and full text, ensuring only high-quality, relevant literature contributed to the review.

Inclusion & exclusion criteria

Included studies

- Published between 2019 and 2025
- Peer-reviewed journal articles and reputable conference papers
- Studies focused on blockchain technology in construction cost management
- Research relevant to the Quantity Surveying profession
- Provided insights into digital transformation in the construction industry and adoption challenges
- Relevant to South Africa or comparable emerging economies
- Studies using empirical data, case studies, or theoretical frameworks

Excluded studies

- Articles published before 2019
- Studies outside the cost management or construction industry context
- Non-peer-reviewed sources (e.g., blogs, opinion pieces, news articles or editorials lacking empirical grounding)
- Non-English publications
- Research conducted in industries outside construction, such as finance or healthcare
- Duplicate studies or those lacking sufficient methodological detail

Screening process

A multi-stage screening process was used to select relevant literature on blockchain in construction cost management. Articles were first screened by title and abstract for topic relevance, then by full text for methodological quality and contextual fit with Quantity Surveying in South Africa. A de-duplication procedure was performed using reference management software to avoid duplicate entries within these databases; they automatically detected duplicate entries and removed them based on title, author, and publication information. Only peer-reviewed journal articles were included after removing duplicates. The selection prioritised studies addressing blockchain integration, wireless sensor networks, data analytics and adoption challenges. From 159 initial articles, 61 underwent full-text review, resulting in 39 studies meeting all criteria. The PRISMA flow diagram shows this process. Thematic analysis identified key trends, barriers, and readiness indicators across technological, institutional, and social factors.

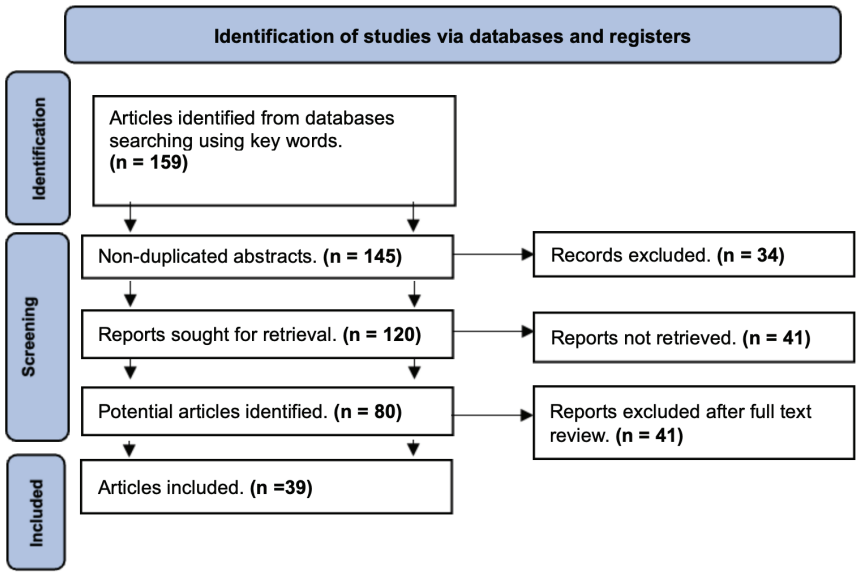

Figure 1 Publication retrieval process

Research results and discussions

Enhancing transparency and security in cost management

Blockchain technology provides a decentralised and immutable ledger system that creates significantly improved transparency in construction cost management (Ebekozien & Aigbavboa, 2023; Otasowie et al., 2023). Traditional Quantity Surveying practice stores cost data through a server-based centralised database; such databases can be manipulated by someone with access and can even be accessed by someone unauthorised (Cruywagen & Snyman, 2006; Morena & Amoah, 2021; Yu et al., 2024). Blockchain technology makes it practically impossible to corrupt or hack the recorded data and time attribution through the use of its decentralised system (Akinradewo et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2022). It adds another layer of transparency to help build trust in the construction cost management industry and can be particularly valuable in many instances of multi-party construction projects where disputes arise regarding the allocation of cost and/or payment (Chakraborty et al., 2024; Otasowie et al., 2023).

Security is another incredible advantage of blockchain as it relates to cost management. Because it is cryptographically secure, there is no chance of the data being tampered with or falling to cyber threats (Ammendolia, 2023; Balaji et al., 2024). When combined with the functionality of smart contracts, you streamline security while thriving on automation to reduce reliance on manual intervention with payment processes and reduce the risk of fraudulent costs and payment amounts elicited (Wu et al., 2020). There have been studies, as recently as last year, indicating the financial differences blockchain systems can create, which liberate the audit capacity for practitioners investigating financing discrepancies, making them indispensable in high-risk construction settings.

In the South African context, where corruption and cost overruns are common in public infrastructure projects, blockchain could provide a strong opportunity to increase accountability. During the life of a project, blockchain can become a secure and transparent platform for handing in project financials, for example, allowing Quantity Surveyors to create a strong financial discipline that ensures funds are spent appropriately (Capocasale & Perboli, 2022). This is similarly aligned to broader initiatives that seek to improve governance and efficiency in the construction industry (Ebekozien & Aigbavboa, 2023).

In Gauteng Province, South Africa, a research study was conducted by Otasowie et al. (2023) to investigate blockchain adoption in construction logistics. The research results indicated that blockchain actually enhanced the capacity of trust and transparency in material distribution as well as cost accounting. The drivers of blockchain adoption included improved knowledge of blockchain, co-operation with stakeholders, and organisational readiness (Capocasale & Perboli, 2022). The research also demonstrated how smart contracts enhanced payment processes and reduced paperwork within South African construction projects. Blockchain and smart contracts can create competitive advantages in construction, as this environment is one consumed by high regulation and resource limitation (Ammendolia, 2023; Balaji et al., 2024; Otasowie et al., 2023).

Integration with Wireless Sensor Networks

Wireless sensor networks (WSNs) are essential for transforming construction sites, providing real-time data collection about cost-related parameters, e.g., material usage, labour productivity, equipment performance (Mishra et al., 2025). When WSNs are combined with blockchain, they can offer a reliable and secure means of recording the same data in an automated fashion that is verifiable and tamper-proof (Abd El-Moghith & Darwish, 2021). This means more accurate data is not only recorded automatically but also ensures quantity surveyors can track costs and project progress with extreme accuracy (Yu et al., 2024).

WSNs help with predictive analytics to allow QS professionals to detect possible cost overruns and make informed adjustments about future costs (Nguyen et al., 2024). Sensors about delays due to materials or inefficient labour can be readily available to monitor labour efficiency and make the best use of procurement (Weerasooriya et al., 2024). WSNs will log data securely and accessibly for every authorised stakeholder, allowing decision-makers to make informed decisions together and collectively (Mishra et al., 2025). In addition, WSNs combined with blockchain can enforce contracts automatically using smart contracts, which could initiate a payment or alert events and actions whenever data updates or changes occur in real-time and record follow-through tasks or record arrangements (Nguyen et al., 2024). Not only does this improve the administrative tasks, but it also seems to be

allowing for further accountability of recording payments by creating specific obligations to proceed with payment for milestone achievements (Khalid et al., 2024). In South Africa, where construction sites continuously face logistical and operational impediments, this approach could transform the nature of controlling costs and improving project outcomes on behalf of all stakeholders.

An experimental study conducted at Concordia University involved various wireless technologies for indoor construction tracking and found that Synapse SNAP Technology outperformed all other technologies related to reliability and accuracy, confirming the possibilities of WSNs being feasible for dynamic resource tracking (Nguyen et al., 2024). Although this was not in South Africa, the results would at least provide some relevance to the context of the local environment where indoor construction tracking is critical. In South Africa, pilot projects of working with Internet of Things (IoT) and blockchain technology for monitoring infrastructure demonstrate examples of scale deployment.

Challenges impacting widespread adoption

Although there is a future opportunity, the blockchain technology continues to face challenges to its adoption in South Africa's construction industry. One of the larger challenges is the lack of skills at the level of Quantity Surveyors and other members of the construction group (Claasen & Cumberlege, 2014; Ontong & Moghayedi, 2023). Blockchain systems require the skills associated with cryptographic, distributed computing and smart contract creation, which are still in short supply in the local industry (Oke et al., 2024). Any hesitancy in adoption is also compounded by regulatory uncertainty (Oke et al., 2024). Currently, South Africa does not have a complete legal framework to sufficiently account for the use of blockchain technology in transactions, particularly related to construction and financial transactions (Ontong & Moghayedi, 2023). This brings about confusion for the industry stakeholders who are concerned with regulatory compliance, liability and data privacy implications. In addition, there are conservative mechanisms within construction that keep the industry slow to change (Wu et al., 2023). The adoption of WSNs requires the construction supply chains to have the level of infrastructure required to have a consistent internet connection and access to advanced hardware on sites (Nguyen et al., 2024). This has limited WSN initiation on construction sites, especially in rural and underdeveloped locations (Abd El-Moghith & Darwish, 2021; Mishra et al., 2025). Addressing the potential will require purposeful efforts by governments, the academic community, and industry stakeholders to build capacity, develop policies, and pilot projects that demonstrate the value of economic development in managing cost and project performance (Cheng et al., 2021; Plevris et al., 2022). A principal component analysis was undertaken in South Africa, which identified main barriers to blockchain implementation, specifically a shortage of skilled human capital and a lack of clarity in the legal environment. The review indicated the need for education for all interested parties in the industry and for policy change to enable adoption (Plevris et al., 2022). Another review also showed that while smart contracts offer significant benefits, they need legal clarity, and users need to upskill to ensure the successful deployment of smart contracts in the South African construction context (Cheng et al., 2021).

Table 1 Literature highlights significant challenges facing the adoption of blockchain in the QS profession.
Source: (Ammendolia, 2023; Balaji et al., 2024; Capocasale & Perboli, 2022; Chakraborty et al., 2024; Cheng et al., 2021; Oke et al., 2024; Plevris et al., 2022; Yu et al., 2024)

No.	Challenge
1	Lack of technical expertise
2	Regulatory uncertainty
3	Resistance to change
4	High implementation costs
5	Limited awareness and understanding
6	Fragmented industry structure
7	Inadequate digital infrastructure
8	Data privacy concerns
9	Integration challenges with legacy systems
10	Lack of pilot projects and empirical evidence

Success factors and opportunities for future implementation

Effective implementation of blockchain in Quantity Surveying will require consideration of a number of important factors. Firstly, all the stakeholders need to work together (Akinradewo et al., 2021; H. Wu et al., 2023). Construction projects encompass multiple stakeholders, including the client, contractors, consultants and suppliers, who all need to be willing to use shared digital platforms and workflows (Plevris et al., 2022; L. Wu et al., 2020). It is critical that trust can be built, and relationships formed that allow stakeholders to work collaboratively, and not against each other (Ammendolia, 2023; Balaji et al., 2024; Zilin et al., 2023). This will make any integration much smoother (Wu et al., 2023).

Secondly, it is necessary to develop bespoke training courses to train QS professionals on how to effectively operate blockchain systems (Ebekozien & Aigbavboa, 2023; Hunhevicz & Hall, 2020; Oke et al., 2024). Universities and professional bodies can support this by creating curricula and programs of learning for the industry to implement (Ebekozien & Aigbavboa, 2023). Certification programs for local authorities and project stakeholders can also help bridge the infrastructural gap and prepare roles for digital transition processes.

Finally, pilot projects and academic research will offer some advantages for testing and improving blockchain solutions in real-life situations. Pilot projects will offer empirical evidence on cost-sensitive; provide evidence range of benefits and limitations to the use of blockchain in construction cost management (Chakraborty et al., 2024; Cheng et al., 2021; Plevris et al., 2022). Pilot projects can also help to avoid the pitfalls seen in competing systems by informing future decisions. South Africa is currently an environment that needs this sort of change; the construction industry is seeking improvements in efficiency and laterally large (operational and reputational) transparency, making it an excellent time for innovation, like blockchain. With the right support and strategic actions, all stakeholders can make blockchain a core area of modern QS practice (Oke et al., 2024).

A survey of 140 construction professionals in South Africa by Otasowie et al. (2023) found that trust, collaborative psychology, and organisational capabilities are the most important drivers of blockchain adoption. The study suggested targeted training and pilot programs to build momentum. Internationally, smart contracts have been used to automate payment escrow, progress, and quality assurance, which can then be adapted in South Africa.

Table 2 Literature highlights key success factors and opportunities for future implementation of blockchain in the QS profession. Source: (Ammendolia, 2023; Balaji et al., 2024; Capocasale & Perboli, 2022; Chakraborty et al., 2024; Cheng et al., 2021; Ebekozien & Aigbavboa, 2023; Oke et al., 2024; Otasowie et al., 2023; Plevris et al., 2022; H. Wu et al., 2023; Zilin et al., 2023)

No.	Success factors and opportunities
1	Stakeholder collaboration
2	Customised training and education
3	Supportive regulatory frameworks
4	Pilot projects and demonstration cases
5	Academic and industry research
6	Integration with emerging technologies
7	Digital transformation momentum
8	Transparency and anti-corruption potential
9	Cost and time efficiency gains
10	Global learning and adaptation

Conclusions and recommendations

This study set out to explore the potential of blockchain technology to enhance transparency and security in cost management within the Quantity Surveying profession in South Africa. Through a systematic literature review and thematic analysis, the research identified blockchain's ability to provide immutable, decentralised records that reduce fraud, improve trust, and streamline financial processes through smart contracts. Blockchain has significant potential for improving the transparency, trustworthiness, and efficiency of cost management practices and processes in the QS profession in

South Africa. The integration of blockchain with wireless sensor networks and data analytics further advances cost management by enabling trustworthiness in the real-time flow of data that allows for stronger awareness for decision-making and monitoring. The application of blockchain in the South African construction industry is, however, limited by infrastructure issues, regulatory uncertainty and an ingrained resistance to change and innovation created by industry culture in reality. The challenges here reinforce the complexity of the environment within which digital transformation must take place, and the South African developing economy context to be more specific.

Despite these advantages, the study also revealed significant barriers to adoption, including limited technical expertise, regulatory uncertainty, and infrastructural constraints. These challenges are particularly pronounced in the South African context, where the construction industry is still in the early stages of digital transformation. However, the findings also highlight a growing interest in blockchain applications, supported by academic research and pilot projects, suggesting a positive trajectory for future implementation.

Despite these obstacles, the stark potential and emerging interest in pilot projects and research within academia show a positive direction toward implementation as a whole. The results indicate that for blockchain implementation to occur, not only is the acceptance of the technology itself needed, but also a supportive regulatory landscape, capacity building, engagement with multiple stakeholders, and technology acceptance. Bridging the digital skills divide and building industry-wide acceptance through education and successful missions and demonstrations will be crucial. The most notable address of the importance of research identified is within the South African context, where there is limited empirical research and good case studies and practical implementations that speak directly to what can and cannot be developed and the opportunities and limitations of the technology. Ultimately, blockchain does represent a disruptive enabler of future cost management practices for Quantity Surveying services and fits in with larger global disruptions in the construction sector towards digitisation and smart construction.

The review underscores that blockchain is not a one-size-fits-all solution but rather a tool that must be adapted to the specific needs and realities of the local construction industry. Its successful adoption will depend on a combination of technological readiness, stakeholder collaboration, and institutional support. The study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on digital innovation in Quantity Surveying and provides a foundation for future empirical research in the South African context. To promote the successful adoption of blockchain technology in Quantity Surveying, it is recommended that stakeholders facilitate pilot projects in practical construction environments. These pilot initiatives, ideally undertaken with both public and private sector actors, can be a medium for evidence to try out the working application of blockchain in relation to cost management. These projects will then generate analysis of findings, limitations and change which can ultimately encourage industry uptake, or policy development. Additionally, one of the most significant recommendations is the establishment of appropriate training and capacity-building programs. Quantity Surveyors and other related construction professions need to be trained in the necessary technical capacity to understand and use blockchain systems, smart contracts and data analytical systems. Industry associations, universities and professional councils should be working together to create blockchain-related modules in university courses and ongoing Continuing Professional Development (CPD) to best support the construction sector. Moreover, a clear and supportive regulatory environment must be established. All stakeholders, particularly policymakers, must work with industry experts in defining guidelines or approaches to data privacy, delegating digital signatures, enforceability of smart contracts and addressing liability issues. A well-defined legal environment will support lowering uncertainty and therefore encourage investment in blockchain.

The role of stakeholder engagement and awareness raising also has an important role to play. Many of the barriers to blockchain adoption are due to a lack of understanding and an unwillingness to change. Workshops, seminars, and forums can all significantly reduce the mystique and help build a shared vision to help shape the role of the technology in transforming cost management practices. Not only could these platforms facilitate the development of communities of practice, but also expand the relationships of clients, contractors, consultants, and regulators.

Lastly, the use of blockchain and other technologies should be adapted for the particular needs and constraints of the South African construction industry. For instance, lightweight, low-cost blockchain platforms could be developed that eschew existing digital functionality when they are not available. The

localisation of technology will ensure greater applicability and relevance to the user, increasing the likelihood of successful adoption and continued use in the future.

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SACQSP2025-74

Fostering Interdisciplinary Collaboration for Ethical Governance and Professionalism in the Built Environment: A Review of the Strategic Roles of Quantity Surveyors and Planners in Project Delivery

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Abstract

Infrastructure projects are interdisciplinary, complex, costly, and encumber control issues. Projects of this nature usually evoke environmental, social, and political unrest within the local environment, requiring the vital role of professionalism to ensure projects are delivered successfully. Research in the Built Environment has shown that the level of performance and professionalism in this sector requires intervention. Professionalism is not just about ethics but also about conduct, competence, accountability, and consistency in project management and delivery. For Quantity Surveyors, professionalism entails conducting scientific cost analysis, managing risk, and contractual management at all stages of a project. For Planners, it ensures regulation and management of land use, resource allocation and the coordination and integration of multiple sectors and stakeholder engagement. There is a strong inter-relationship observed between the role played by the Planner and that of the QS in improving professionalism for improved project delivery. Using a qualitative approach and systematic literature review guided by PRISMA standards, the research critically analyzed 93 scholarly articles and global case studies from 2015 to 2025. Findings reveal a strong correlation between a lack of professionalism and project failures of infrastructure projects that have negated professionalism, resulting in overruns, collapse of buildings, abandonment, deterioration of the environment, and sustained poor reputation of the industry, to mention a few. To address these challenges, the study recommends the establishment of a comprehensive professional accountability framework under the Council for the Built Environment (CBE). Key strategies include mandatory ethics training, interdisciplinary collaboration between quantity surveyors and planners, enhanced regulatory oversight, stakeholder engagement, and promotion of innovation through continuous professional development. Overall, the study concludes that professionalism is not merely a desirable attribute but a foundational requirement for the successful planning, execution, and governance of infrastructure projects, essential for delivering long-term value and achieving sustainable national development.

Keywords: Infrastructure, Professionalism, Quantity Surveyor, Planner, South Africa**.**

Introduction

Infrastructure development acts as a driver of global economic growth, social well-being, and environmental sustainability, which enables the enhancement of connectivity, access to services, and competitiveness, thereby strengthening global connections (Demir & Zakaria, 2025). Kusi et al. (2025) assert that infrastructure development in South Africa serves as the backbone for socio-economic growth and effective infrastructure projects, which are now prioritized nationally. Successful completion of these projects depends on technical and financial resources, as well as leadership, professionalism, and management practices. Professionals are responsible for leading, managing, and controlling infrastructure projects, which have become a critical factor in their successful completion and meeting project objectives as outlined in the project charter (Kerzner, 2025). To foster professionalism, the South African government recognizes the need for qualified and accountable professionals who are

entrusted with the nation's infrastructure projects to ensure that public funds are used efficiently, and quality standards are met (Singo & Mafunisa, 2023). There is a strong emphasis on professionalism in improving project delivery, which promotes ethical conduct to mitigate delays, cost overruns, and low-quality results (Dindi, 2022). Through the integration of professionalism into project leadership in Quantity Surveying and Town and Regional Planning, the South African construction industry aims to improve reliability and sustainability in infrastructure development.

Quantity surveyors act as the financial and contractual stewards of construction projects, especially in financial and contractual-related issues at all stages (Weerasooriya et al., 2025). They are required to integrate a high level of professionalism within their practice when dealing with clients, contractors, and other stakeholders, as professionalism enhances fairness, transparency and precision. On the other hand, town and regional planners, as professionals involved in projects, are mainly responsible for spatial and strategic planning of infrastructure development, ensuring that it aligns with the land use policies, environmental considerations, and community needs (Xin & Qian, 2025). Their role consists of coordinating multifaceted interests and seeing to it that regulatory frameworks relating to the infrastructure developments adhere to professional ethics and evidence-driven decision-making. Thus, from the vantage point of view regarding the duties of quantity surveying and town regional planning, professionalism is not isolated from ethical conduct, diligent planning and effective communication throughout the project life cycle. The study aims to investigate how promoting interdisciplinary collaboration between quantity surveyors and planners can improve ethical governance, accountability, and professionalism in construction project delivery within the built environment by identifying projects that exhibit a deficiency in professionalism and assessing the consequences of such deficiencies.

Research methodology

This study utilised a qualitative approach, adopting a systematic literature review. To ensure transparency and reproducibility, the publication retrieval process adhered to the standards outlined by Kitchenham (2004). The study used interpretivism, which is defined by Curry (2020) as a philosophy that focuses on understanding human experiences, social interactions, and meanings within specific contexts rather than testing hypotheses statistically. The study used data from a literature review that spanned from 2015 to 2025 to gather recent data that aligns with the research. This systematic review employed a rigorous and systematic approach to identify, evaluate, and integrate concepts and methods from selected journals. In this study, the initial search was conducted utilizing Google Scholar, applying the search terms (" Professionalism") AND ("Infrastructure projects") AND ("Quantity surveyors") AND ("Town planners" OR "Urban planners"). Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) guidelines were followed to design and report the review. Figure 1 demonstrates the publication retrieval process. Data retrieval was conducted using the standards outlined by Kitchenham (2004). A data extraction procedure was employed to identify pertinent information from the selected papers. Data collected from each article included the article title, abstract, and keywords related to the study. The researchers carefully examined the publication and eliminated studies that did not meet the specific exclusion criteria outlined in Figure 1. Ultimately, 93 papers were selected for a thorough and critical analysis. Data extracted from these papers was analysed using thematic analysis.

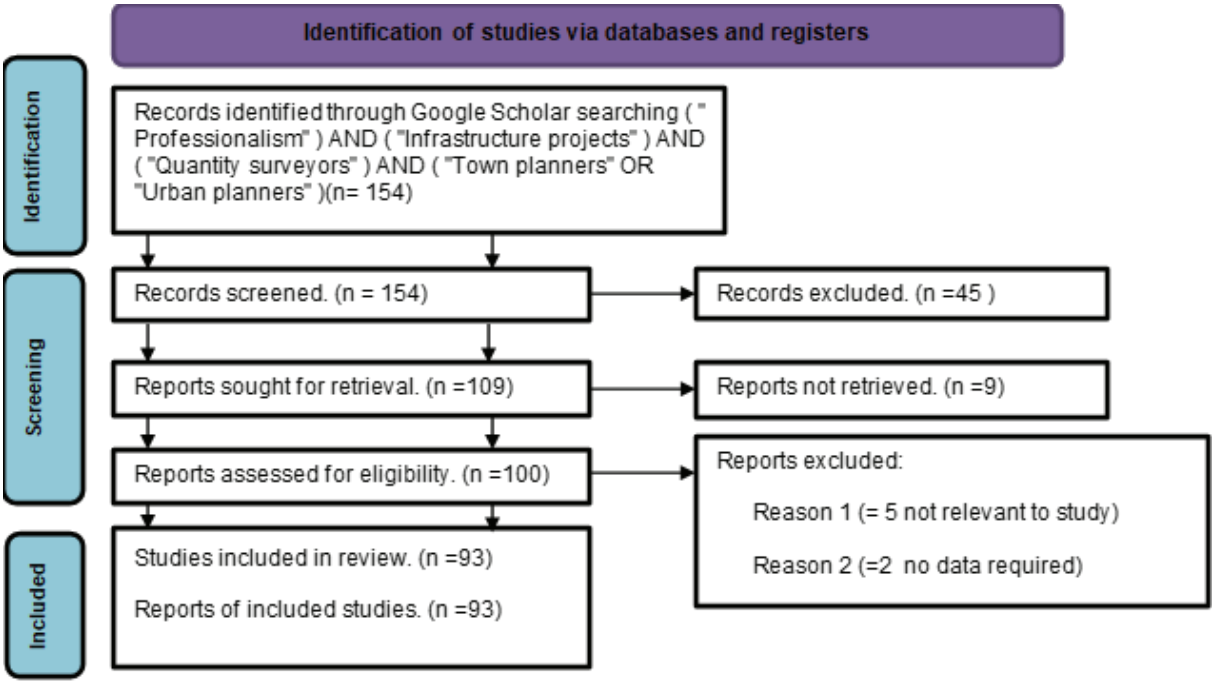

Figure 1 Data retrieval process

Results

Case studies of infrastructure projects that have negated professionalism

In the past decades, there have been various high-profile infrastructure projects that faced challenges due to a lack of professionalism among the experts involved. These cases involve issues such as unethical behavior, poor leadership, governance failures, and mismanagement by professionals. Table 1 below outlines case studies that suffered due to a lack of professionalism-related issues.

Table 1 Case studies of infrastructure projects that have negated professionalism (Source: Researchers)

Case study project	Location	Cause of failure	Impact	Citations
Berlin Brandenburg Airport	Germany – Airport/Rail Transport	Poor project management and governance	Nine years behind schedule and with a cost overrun of €7 billion.	Schlote (2016), Sedlin et al. (2020), Haas and Markovič (2023)
Metro Line 12	Mexico – Urban Transit	Ethical and professional failures in project execution and oversight Poor construction practices	Catastrophic structural failure killed 26 people and injured dozens.	Zepeda (2021), Reuters (2021), Phadtare (2025)
Morandi Bridge	Italy – Highway Bridge	Governance and maintenance failures.	The collapse of the Morandi Bridge and killed 43 people	AP News (2018), Lexology (2020), Malomo et al. (2020)
V.C. Summer Nuclear Project	USA – Power Generation	Professional malpractice	The project was abandoned and $9 billion was wasted	Choose Energy (2020), US DOJ, (2023)
Muskrat Falls Hydroelectric Project	Canada – Energy	Mismanagement	$6.5 cost overrun.	Memorial University, (2019),

				Barnard-Chumik et al. (2022)
Medupi Power Station	South Africa – Energy	Institutional and professional failings	Budgets have more than doubled. Project was estimated at ~R69 billion but by 2016 had a forecast cost of R160 billion	Mokwena (2020), Green Building Africa (2020), Marcatelli (2020)
Kusile Power Stations	South Africa – Energy	Institutional and professional failings	Multi-year delays, doubled costs, and underperformance due to corruption in procurement	Mokwena (2020), Green Building Africa (2020)
Xe Pian-Xe Namnoy Dam Collapse	Laos – Hydropower	Unethical construction practices.	Dam collapsed, releasing a devastating flood that swept away villages and killed at least 40 people.	International Rivers (2019), Inclusive Development International (2019)
Berlin Brandenburg Airport	Germany	Poor project governance, design defects, and inadequate quality control.	Severe delays (nine years late) and cost overruns (over €7 billion)	Fiedler and Wendler (2016), Phadtare (2025), Gemünden et al. (2025)
Metro Line 12	Mexico City	Negligence	The collapse of an elevated rail section killed 26	Sepúlveda (2021), Noubissi et al. (2024)
V.C. Summer Nuclear Expansion	USA	Unethical practices	Abandoned after $9 billion spent	Kirkland (2021), Ojiako (2023)
Estina Dairy Project	Vrede, Free State	Lack of professionalism	Misuse of funds, and the project was abandoned	AmaBhungane (2018), Zondo Commission (2022)
Giyani Water Project	Limpopo	Poor planning	Billions were spent with little progress	Auditor-General of South Africa (2021)

Impacts of a lack of professionalism in construction projects

Lack of professionalism from the quantity surveyors and town planners causes many challenges in construction projects, which negatively affect the project's success. Table 2 outlines the impacts of professionalism deficiencies in construction projects.

Table 2 Impacts of a lack of professionalism in construction projects (Source: Researchers)

Impact	Description	Citations
Cost overruns	It occurs when the final project expenditure exceeds the initial budget due to poor cost control, inaccurate estimates, or financial mismanagement.	Asiedu and Adaku (2020), Famiyeh et al. (2017), Alshihri et al. (2022), Niazi and Painting (2017)
Schedule delays	Arise when project completion takes longer than planned because of poor planning, resource shortages, or unforeseen disruptions.	Castañeda et al. (2025), Kumarand Kumari (2025), Habetemeherit et al. (2025), Al-Otaibi et al. (2025)

Abandonment of the projects	Happens when projects are permanently halted before completion, often due to financial insolvency, governance failures, or stakeholder withdrawal.	Habetemeherit et al. (2025), Mba et al. (2025), Ifeanyi et al. (2025), Nzeako et al. (2025)
Compromised quality	Results when work fails to meet required standards, specifications, or performance levels, leading to substandard outputs	Yang et al. (2025), Coffie et al. (2025), Hosain (2025)
Increased rework	Involves repeating or correcting completed work because of errors, defects, or non-compliance with specifications	Gumusburun Ayalp and Arslan (2025), Zerihun et al. (2025), Guo et al. (2025)
Frequent disputes and litigation	Reflects recurring conflicts between stakeholders that escalate into legal action, often caused by contract breaches or miscommunication.	Yildiran and Demirdogen (2025), Anand and Anand (2025), Rajapaksha et al. (2025)
Safety incidents	Involve workplace accidents, injuries, or fatalities resulting from unsafe practices, inadequate training, or lack of safety measures.	Murtaza et al. (2025), Waqar et al. (2025), Sarvari et al. (2025), Kim et al. (2025)
Regulatory non-compliance	Occurs when projects fail to adhere to legal, environmental, or industry standards, resulting in penalties or work stoppages.	Ghafoor et al. (2025), Farid and Razak (2025), Konadu et al. (2025), Tolu-Alalade et al. (2025)
Loss of stakeholder trust	Emerges when repeated failures or unethical conduct erode confidence from clients, investors, and community members.	Coffie et al. (2025), Habetemeherit et al. (2025), Odiaka et al. (2025), Isang et al. (2025)
Waste of resources	Involves inefficient or unnecessary use of time, labour, materials, and finances that reduce overall project value	Aftab et al. (2025), Isang et al. (2025), Pittri et al. (2025), Chuene et al. (2025)
Damage to professional reputation	Happens when repeated unprofessional behaviour harms the credibility of individuals or organisations.	Oni (2025), Otim et al. (2025), Vega et al. (2025), Habetemeherit et al. (2025), Francis et al. (2025)
Reduced socio-economic benefits	Occurs when projects fail to deliver intended community, employment, or economic gains.	Firose et al. (2025), Mwankusye et al. (2025), Akadiri (2025), Unegbu et al. (2025)
Project failure	Describes the inability of a project to achieve its intended objectives in terms of cost, time, or quality	Smejoff et al. (2025), Isang et al. (2025), Yang et al. (2025), Al-Otaibi et al. (2025)
Poor stakeholder engagement	Involves inadequate communication, consultation, or inclusion of key stakeholders during project decision-making.	Isang et al. (2025), Coffie et al. (2025), Motalebi et al. (2025), Olatunde et al. (2025)
Erosion of ethical standards	Represents the normalisation of corrupt, dishonest, or unfair practices within project operations.	Odiaka et al. (2025), Sweering (2025), Victoria (2025), Vega et al. (2025)
Environmental harm	Represents the normalisation of corrupt, dishonest, or unfair practices within project operations.	Isang et al. (2025), Arshad et al. (2025), Oke et al. (2025), Aliu et al. (2025)
Low staff morale	Arises when poor leadership, working conditions, or management practices reduce worker motivation and satisfaction.	Slil et al. (2025), Vega et al. (2025), Twinamatsiko and Ealias (2025)
Ineffective risk management	Involves failure to identify, assess, or mitigate potential project risks, leading to vulnerabilities and setbacks.	Yang et al. (2025), Dipakbhai and Rajgor (2025), Al-Otaibi et al. (2025)

Negative public perception	Develops when poor performance or unethical behaviour damages the industry's or project's public image.	Isang et al. (2025), Merryweather Powell and Shibeika (2025)
Difficulty in securing future funding	Occurs when a history of poor professionalism discourages investment or financial support for future projects.	Al-Otaibi et al. (2025), Smejoff et al (2025)
Reduced innovation	Happens when a lack of forward-thinking approaches or avoidance of best practices limits technological and process advancements.	Nelumdeniya et al. (2025), Isang et al. (2025)

Discussion

Theme 1: Case studies of infrastructure projects that have negated professionalism =

Through the analysis of the case studies, various projects have failed dismally due to a lack of professionalism, which entails poor governance, ethical lapses, and inadequate oversight, which acted as drivers for project failures. In the global perspective, projects such as Berlin Brandenburg Airport in Germany, Mexico City's Metro Line 12, the Morandi Bridge in Italy, the V.C. Summer Nuclear Project in the USA, and the Muskrat Falls Hydroelectric Project in Canada suffered substantial delays, cost overruns, structural failures, and in some cases, fatalities due to mismanagement, lack of governance and poor professionalism (Schlote, 2016; Zepeda, 2021; AP News, 2018; Choose Energy, 2020; Memorial University, 2019). Furthermore, in South Africa, Medupi and Kusinle power stations are evident cases of the impacts of a lack of professionalism, institutional weaknesses, and corruption, which led to massive cost overruns and delays in the project deliveries (Mokwena, 2020; Green Building Africa, 2020). Additionally, the Estina dairy project and Giyani water project were abandoned due to poor planning and misuse of funds (AmaBhungane, 2018; Auditor-General of South Africa, 2021). These findings underscore the severe financial, operational, and societal consequences of neglecting professional standards in infrastructure project governance from quantity surveying professionals to town planners. Therefore, this shows that a lack of professionalism in the construction sector poses a high risk to the project's success.

Theme 2: Impacts of a lack of professionalism in construction projects

The study found that a lack of professionalism in leadership, management, and controlling infrastructure projects significantly affects the project performance, especially from the quantity surveyors and town planners. As a result, the projects are subjected to cost overruns, schedule delays, and even abandonment of projects were identified as common consequences of poor cost control, inaccurate budgeting, ineffective planning, and weak governance (Asiedu & Adaku, 2020; Castañeda et al., 2025; Habetemeherit et al., 2025). These negative outcomes due to a lack of professionalism, financial resources, institutional planning, and stakeholders' confidence become compromised. Furthermore, quality becomes affected due to increased reworks, which stem from non-compliant design errors, and inadequate oversight, which undermines the functional and structural integrity of infrastructure projects.

Additionally, through a lack of professionalism, safety incidents, regulatory compliance, and loss of stakeholder trust emerge as critical reputational and operational risks that arise due to a lack of good conduct in infrastructure projects (Murtaza et al., 2025; Ghafoor et al., 2025; Coffie et al., 2025). Unsafe conditions and a lack of adherence to environmental standards lead to fines, work stoppages, and life-threatening accidents, which affect the infrastructure projects negatively and can even compromise the success of the projects holistically. Lack of stakeholder confidence becomes a long-term negative impact of continuous unethical practices, which can further lead to waste of resources and damage to professional reputation, and reduced socio-economic benefits (Aftab et al., 2025; Oni, 2025; Firose et al., 2025). These impacts extend beyond the individual project, influencing institutional credibility and the perceived reliability of the construction sector as a whole.

Lastly, for a strategic perspective, Isang et al. (2025), Odiaka et al. (2025) and Slil et al. (2025) argue that poor stakeholder engagement, unethical practices, environmental harm, and low employee morale

are some of the key outcomes of unprofessionalism in infrastructure projects. Furthermore, unprofessionalism leads to ineffective risk management, which puts the project in a very vulnerable situation, whereby unforeseen challenges could contribute to the holistic failure of the project, contributing to negative public perception and difficulty in securing future funding in the construction sector (Yang et al., 2025; Al-Otaibi et al., 2025). Moreover, reduced innovation caused by a preference for outdated practices over modern, evidence-based approaches prevents infrastructure projects from leveraging advancements in technology and sustainable practices (Nelumdeniya et al., 2025). Holistically, these findings indicate that professionalism is not simply a desirable trait but a critical requirement of infrastructure project success, requiring strong ethical conduct, robust technical competence, and effective leadership from Quantity Surveyors and Planners.

Conclusion

The study concludes by indicating that professionalism and ethics are a very critical requirement that needs to be integrated in infrastructure projects, which enhances effective leadership, management, and control of the infrastructure projects, especially from the perspectives of quantity surveyors and town planners. Ethical conduct, technical competence, transparency and adherence to standards are key in professionalism. Which, when adhered to, ensure projects are completed within the budget, on schedule, and with the required quality, holistically enhancing stakeholder satisfaction. In the absence of these professional traits, projects are often subjected to cost overruns, schedule delays, low quality, safety incidents and a lack of stakeholder trust. These negative impacts of a lack of professionalism not only affect the project objectives but also pose a lasting negative impact on the construction sector. Thus, the study highlights that integrating professionalism throughout the project lifecycle enables quantity surveyors and planners to mitigate risks, promote innovation, enhance socio-economic benefits and enhance stakeholder confidence in infrastructure development. This requires a commitment to continuous professional development, strict adherence to ethical codes and the establishment of strong governance structures to guide decision-making. By prioritising professionalism, project teams can ensure that infrastructure initiatives deliver optimal value, align with sustainability objectives. and contribute positively to national development goals. Thereby, securing long-term success for both the projects and the institutions involved.

The analysis of the two themes reveals a consistent and compelling link between the lack of professionalism and the failure of infrastructure projects. Through both global and local case studies, it becomes evident that poor governance, ethical breaches and weak oversight have directly led to cost overruns, project delays, structural failures, and, in extreme cases, loss of life. These failures are not isolated incidents but recurring consequences of systemic lapses in professional conduct, particularly among key professionals such as quantity surveyors and town planners. The second theme further reinforces this understanding by detailing the multifaceted impacts of unprofessionalism, ranging from compromised safety, quality, compliance to the erosion of stakeholder trust, environmental degradation and long-term reputational harm. Ultimately, the findings highlight that professionalism is not optional but foundational to project success. Upholding ethical standards, demonstrating technical expertise, ensuring transparency, accountable leadership must be core tenets in infrastructure development. Without these, the sustainability, functionality and public value of infrastructure projects remain at constant risk.

Recommendations

The study recommends a holistic built environment approach that promotes interdisciplinary education and professional integration, which integrates collective learning and ethic-based modules that combine quantity surveyors, planners and other professionals. Furthermore, to mitigate the negative impacts of unprofessionalism in infrastructure projects, it is recommended that a comprehensive Council for Built Environment (CBE) professional accountability framework be established and enforced across all stages of project development. This framework should include (1) Mandatory professional ethics training and certification for all built environment professionals, particularly design consultants, to ensure adherence to ethical standards and good governance practices. If any individual contravenes these ethical guidelines or is found guilty of professional misconduct should face clearly defined consequences, which may include financial penalties and the revocation of professional status. (2) QS-Planning based interdisciplinary knowledge base exchanges can be split into two sections, the first being, on greenfield mega projects, there is an integration of the QS under the Planner to aid in budget estimations before the commencement of the six project stages and the inclusion and

onboarding of the formal professional team. Secondly, during the implementation of the six project stages, the planner can provide support ot the QS by ensuring the professional team does not veer off from necessary regulatory and governance requirements to ensure each of these two professionals leverages the strengths of one another. (3) Stronger regulatory oversight by professional bodies and government agencies, including regular audits, compliance checks, and performance evaluations to identify and address professional misconduct early. (4) Integrated project governance structures, where clear roles, responsibilities, and communication channels are established to promote collaboration, transparency, and accountability among all stakeholders. (5) Stakeholder engagement and public participation mechanisms to enhance transparency, build trust and ensure that projects are aligned with community needs and expectations. (6) Promotion of innovation and evidence-based practices, supported by continuous professional development, to move away from outdated methods and embrace sustainable, efficient solutions. Lastly, by institutionalizing these measures, the local built environment can strengthen professionalism, reduce project risks, and enhance the overall credibility, quality, and success of infrastructure delivery.

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SACQSP2025-77

Challenges in Quantity Surveying Registration: Insights from Literature

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Abstract

This paper investigates the persistent barriers that hinder candidate quantity surveyors from progressing to professional registration, with a specific focus on the candidacy phase defined by the South African Council for the Quantity Surveying Profession (SACQSP). It aims to deepen the understanding of systemic, institutional, and practical factors that hinder successful progression from candidate to professionally registered practitioner, with a view to informing future research and policy reform within the built environment. A systematic literature review was conducted to examine studies on professional registration, regulatory frameworks, and comparative professional pathways, focusing on Quantity Surveying. The study centres on the SACQSP route but incorporates lessons from international practices and other South African professional councils, including SACAP, SACPCMP, and ECSA, to contextualise local challenges. An initial targeted keyword search yielded 30 publications, of which 4 articles met the inclusion criteria. The study identifies a low rate of progression from candidacy to professional status, highlighting barriers such as institutional and workplace constraints, limited mentorship opportunities, inadequate structured support, inconsistent implementation of training guidelines, lack of awareness of professional competencies, and misalignment between academic preparation and professional expectations. These issues reflect broader global challenges in the built environment professions, underscoring the need for structural and policy-level interventions. The findings suggest a reimagined approach to candidacy that aligns with both industry needs and international benchmarks. This study does not present new empirical data but synthesises existing literature to inform future investigations. The paper provides insights for professional bodies, employers, and higher education institutions to better support candidates through the registration process, suggesting reforms to enhance the effectiveness and accessibility of the candidacy framework. The paper addresses an under-researched area in Quantity Surveying by examining barriers to successful registration, distilling insights from existing literature, identifying gaps, and proposing directions for further empirical investigation within the South African context.

Keywords: Quantity Surveying, Professional Registration, Candidacy Phase, SACQSP, Mentorship.

Introduction

The development of a resilient, competitive, and ethically grounded construction industry depends significantly on the successful transition of graduates into professionally registered practitioners. Within the built environment professions, Quantity Surveying included, the candidacy phase represents a critical juncture in shaping the quality, capacity, and sustainability of the professional workforce. Challenges experienced during this phase affect a wide range of stakeholders, from professional bodies that rely on a steady pipeline of registrants to uphold industry standards; to employers that require skilled, accredited professionals to deliver complex projects; higher education institutions that are evaluated by the real-world performance of their graduates; and, perhaps most directly, aspiring professionals who face personal and structural obstacles that impact career progression, job security, and industry retention. Despite the centrality of professional registration to the overall health of the built environment sector, research into the barriers encountered during the candidacy phase remains limited. Previous studies conducted by Dalibi, Muhammed and Ibrahim (2015) have highlighted the importance of early professional engagement through student membership initiatives. However, these efforts often fall short without systemic support mechanisms that extend beyond recruitment and into

sustained mentorship, structured workplace integration, and clear registration pathways. A failure to address these gaps not only hampers individual career development but also risks undermining the industry's long-term capacity and competitiveness.

This study examines the candidacy phase within the Quantity Surveying profession, with particular attention to the South African context. While the challenges identified are often global in nature, the focus on the South African Council for the Quantity Surveying Profession (SACQSP) provides a case for understanding how national regulatory frameworks, institutional practices, and socio-economic dynamics interact to either enable or inhibit successful professional registration. This study further focuses on the academic route to registration in South Africa. The aim is to offer insights that inform policy, educational reform, and professional practice across the system.

Literature Review

Overview

The literature review examines international routes to professional registration in various Built Environment Professions (BEPs). It will also examine in more detail the routes to registration for South Africa BEPs, including SACQSP, South African Council for the Architecture Profession (SACAP), South African Council for the Project and Construction Management Profession (SACPCMP) and Engineering Council of South Africa (ECSA), delving deeper into the registration categories and statistics, comparing the different council's overall registration trends. The study then looks further into existing literature specifically related to the Quantity Surveying Profession in South Africa to identify potential gaps.

International Routes to Professional Registration

To set out different routes to professional registration current international routes are reviewed. Table 1 is a comparison of South Africa's professional registration processes for quantity surveyors with those of Commonwealth countries such as the United Kingdom (UK), Canada, Australia, and New Zealand is justified by their shared historical, legal, and institutional foundations. The South African QS profession was established within a Commonwealth legal framework, closely reflecting the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) model in regulatory structures, candidacy pathways, and professional standards. In addition, South Africa's mutual recognition agreements and international linkages with these bodies facilitate professional mobility and competency alignment. Commonwealth countries also share comparable educational and accreditation systems. Critically, the UK, Australia, and Canada represent mature, globally recognised systems that provide relevant lessons for policy transfer and reform.

It is also relevant to compare the professional registration processes of quantity surveyors locally with those of other Built Environment Professions (BEPs) such as architects, engineers, and project managers, as these professions operate under the same statutory framework in South Africa and share similar governance, legislative mandates, and competency standards. Cross-professional comparison can reveal systemic differences or best practices within the broader regulatory environment, highlighting whether challenges are unique to the QS profession or indicative of wider structural issues. This dual benchmarking approach strengthens the analysis by situating QS registration within both its local professional context and comparable international regulatory frameworks.

Table 1 International Routes to Registration. Sources: Authors' Own Compilation (AIQS, 2024; CIQS, 2024; RICS, 2024, NZIQS, 2024; SACQSP, 2024; SACAP, 2024; ECSA, 2024; SACPCMP, 2024, SISV, 2024)

Profession	Regulatory Body	Legal Status of Registration	Key Steps to Registration
Australia			
Quantity Surveyor	AIQS	Voluntary	Accredited degree → Work experience → Portfolio & interview
Canada			
Quantity Surveyor	CIQS	Voluntary	Recognised degree →Work experience → Professional exam → CPD → Ethics compliance

United Kingdom			
Quantity Surveyor	RICS	Voluntary	Degree [RPL] → APC structured training → Assessment Interview
South Africa			
Quantity Surveyor	SACQSP	Mandatory	Accredited degree [RPL] → Work experience (logbook) → Assessment interview → Professional registration
Architect	SACAP	Mandatory	BAS + MArch → Candidacy phase → Professional practice exam → Registration
Engineer	ECSA	Mandatory	BEng/BTech → Candidacy phase → Outcomes-based assessment → Registration
Construction Project Manager	SACPCMP	Mandatory	Qualification → Experience → Exam/Interview → Registration
New Zealand			
Quantity Surveyor	NZIQS	Voluntary	Test → Application → Committee Approval → APC
Singapore			
Quantity Surveyor	SISV	Voluntary	Degree → Work experience → QS Competencies → Assessment

As can be seen in Table 1, there are various pathways to professional registration for built environment professionals, ranging from mandatory in South Africa to voluntary in many other countries. In most cases, these pathways require a relevant degree, practical experience, and an assessment process such as an interview or examination.

Routes to National QS Professional Registration

The following section focuses on the routes to registration in the South African context. According to the Quantity Surveying Professions Act, No. 49 of 2000, the SACQSP is mandated to register suitably qualified persons into the profession. The SACQSP provides various pathways for registration through two primary streams: Academic routes and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) routes, as delineated in Table 2 and Table 3 below.

Table 2 Academic Routes to Registration. Source: From SACQSP Annual Report (2023: Online)

Entry Qualifying Programme	**SACQSP Accredited QS Degrees**		**SACQSP Accredited Cognate Degrees +**		**Non-Accredited QS Degree**		**Inter-national Agreement**
Route Code	**1A**	**1B**	**2**	**2B**	**3A**	**3B**	**4**
NQF Credit	480	360	48	360	480	360	480 equivalent
SAQA/NQF Exit Level	8	7	8	7	8	7	8 equivalent
Professional Skill Modules (PSMs)	-	12 [18]	Programme Dependent	12 [18	Programme Dependent	12 [18]	PSM 2 & PSM 7
Min. Duration of a PrQS Supervision	3 yrs	4 yrs	4 yrs	5 yrs	4 yrs	5 yrs	-
Max. Candidate Registration Period **	10 yrs	10 yrs	10 yrs	10 yrs	10 yr	10 yrs	-
Compulsory Interim Submission	1 off	1 off	1 off	2 off	1 off	2 off	-
Compulsory Final Submission	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	-
QS Diary	✓ 3 yrs	✓ 4 yrs	✓ 4 yrs	✓ 5 yrs	✓ 4 yrs	✓ 5 yrs	-

General Report	-	-	-	-		-	✓
Detailed Resume	-	-	-	-	-	-	✓
Project Specific Report	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
APC Interview	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Experience in RSA*	-	-	-	-		-	1 yr

Notes: * This period may include secondment, external appointed PrQS supervision whilst working under a PrQS in a construction environment. Min. of 12-months in RSA. ** Commences from the date of initial registration. Candidates registered before 2007 given 5 years to complete their PrQS registration process. + Limited to BSc CM and BSc Property Studies from (UP) and (UCT). A min. of 50% of proven duration under PrQS supervision may be backdated.

Table 2 presented above illustrates seven (7) distinct registration pathways, contingent upon an individual's qualifications or affiliation with other international councils engaged in reciprocal agreements with the SACQSP. The qualification NQF level, and accreditation of the institution where the qualification was obtained, influence the route available to the candidate. Prospective registrants can ascertain their eligibility for specific routes prior to formal registration with the SACQSP. The Professional Skills Modules (PSMs) requires the candidate to complete twelve (12) examinations, previously eighteen (18), depending on year of registration. The PSMs are based on a variety of areas of competency required for professional registration. The prescribed duration of supervision by a Professional Quantity Surveyor (PrQS) range between three (3) to five (5) years, accompanied by variations in the frequency of interim report submissions.

Table 3 RPL Routes to Registration. Source: From SACQSP Annual Report (2023: Online)

Entry Qualifying Programme	**Matric OR N4**	**Non-QS Tertiary Diploma and Degree**	**National Diploma in Building**
Route Code	5	6	7
NQF Credit	120	240 / 360 / 480	240
SAQA/NQF Exit Level	4 - 5	6 - 8	6
Professional Skills Modules (PSMs)	12 [18]	12 [18]	12 [18]
Min. Duration Under PrQS Supervision Before Application*	15 yrs#	10 yrs#	5 yrs#
Additional Duration Under PrQS Supervision with Diaries & Logbook	3 yrs	3 yrs	3 yrs
Min. Candidate Registration Period	5 yrs	5 yrs	5 yrs
Compulsory Interim Submission	1 off	1 off	1 off
General Report – Current	✓	✓	✓
Detailed Resume	✓ 10 yrs	✓ 10 yrs	✓ 5 yrs
Project Specific Report	✓	✓	✓
APC Interview	✓	✓	✓

Notes: * This period may include secondment, external appointed PrQS supervision whilst working under a PrQS in a construction company. Min. of 12 months in South Africa. # This period of RPL requires to be proven upon application.

Table 3 depicted above, delineates three distinct registration pathways contingent upon RPL. Candidates opting for these routes may undertake either twelve (12) or previously eighteen (18) PSMs and are mandated to undergo supervision by a PrQS for a period ranging from five (5) to fifteen (15) years before submitting their candidacy application. After achieving candidate status, additional practical experience under the guidance of a PrQS is requisite for a duration of three (3) years. Figure

1 below outlines the registration processes for both the academic and RPL routes to registration within the SACQSP.

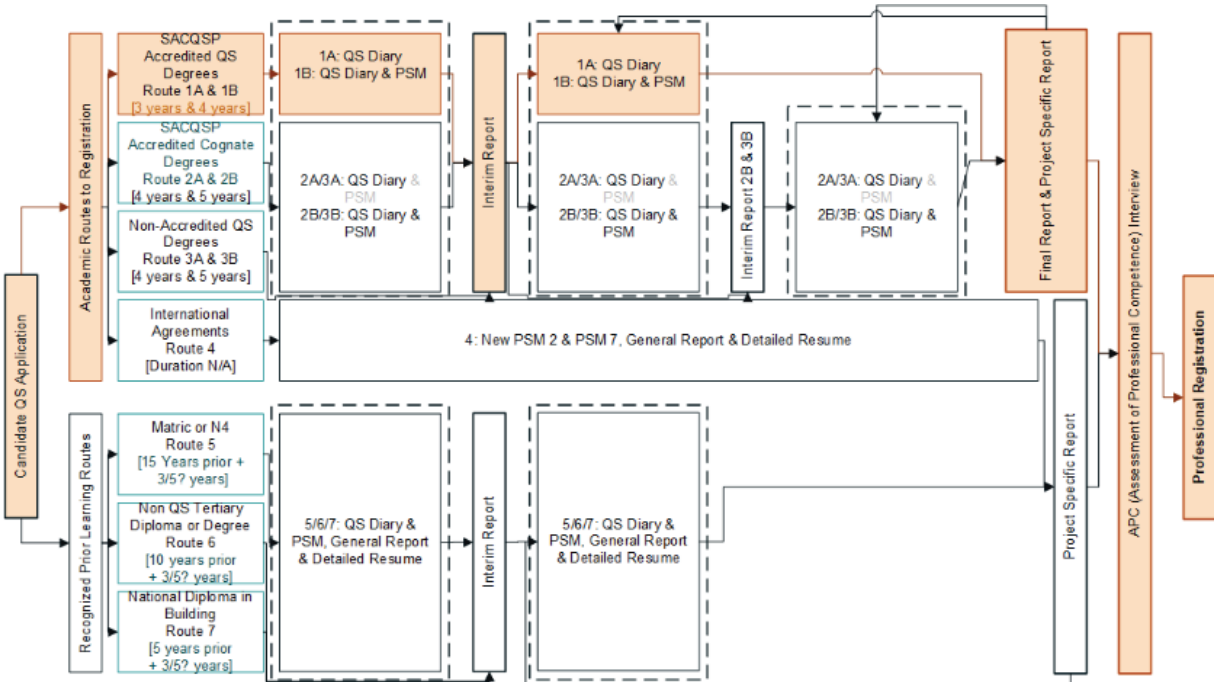


Figure 1 SACQSP Registration Routes (Source: Authors' Own Compilation)

Figure 1 illustrates all seven routes to registration; however, this study focuses on the academic routes, specifically Routes 1A and 1B, as indicated above. These routes pertain to candidates who have completed a Quantity Surveying degree at an accredited higher education institution within South Africa.

Accredited QS Programmes offered by Tertiary Institutions in South Africa

The academic route is predicated on the completion of an accredited qualification; Table 4 below provides a comprehensive overview of the institutions currently offering accredited programs recognised by the SACQSP. These programmes are designed to meet the academic and professional requirements for candidates pursuing registration in the profession. The table details the specific institutions, programme names, and their corresponding National Qualifications Framework (NQF) Level, highlighting the variety of educational pathways available for candidates. This information is essential for understanding the landscape of accredited educational opportunities that support the professional development of future Quantity Surveyors. Currently, nine (9) Higher education institutions offer recognised qualifications.

Table 4 SACQSP Route 1A & 1B Accredited Programmes per Tertiary Institution. Source: From SACQSP Website (2024: Online)

Institution	Programme	Accreditation Status	Credit/NQF	Graduating Class … to…
Cape Peninsula University of Technology	Advanced Diploma in QS	Conditional	120 / Level 7	2021-2025
Central University of Technology	Bachelor of Construction in QS	Conditional	360 / Level 7	2021-202
	Post Graduate Diploma in Construction in QS	Conditional	178 / Level 8	2021-2025
Durban University of Technology	Bachelor of the Built Environment (BBE) – Construction Studies	Unclear	240 / Level 7	2023-2027
	BBE Honours in QS	Conditional	360 / Level 8	2023-2027

University of Johannesburg	BSc Construction Studies	Provisional	360 / Level 7	2021-2025
	BSc Honours QS	Provisional	480 / Level 8	2021-2025
University of the Witwatersrand	BSc QS	Full	360 / Level 7	2023-2027
	BSc QS Honours	Full	480 / Level 8	2023-2027
	BSc Construction Studies	Full	360 / Level 7	2023-2027
University of Cape Town	BSc Construction Studies	Full	360 / Level 7	2023-2027
	BSc Honours QS	Full	480 / Level 8	2023-2027
University of the Free State	BSc Construction Economics & Management	Full	360 / Level 7	2023-2027
	BSc QS	Full	360 / Level 7	2023-2027
	BSc QS Honours	Full	480 / Level 8	2023-2027
University of Pretoria	BSc QS	Full	360 / Level 7	2024-2028
	BSc QS Honours	Full	480/ Level 8	2024-2028
Nelson Mandela University	Advanced Diploma QS	Full	120 / Level 7	2023-2027
	BSc Construction Economics	Full	360 / Level 7	2025-2029
	BSc QS Honours	Full	480 / Level 8	2025-2029

From the list of programmes and institutions, there are currently eight (8) programmes that facilitate entry into the Academic Route 1A (NQF Level 8) with the Council, and twelve (12) programmes that provide access to Route 1B (NQF Level 7) for professional registration.

SACQSP and CBE Membership Statistics

Warren and Wilkinson (2008) argue that while the importance of professional body membership has not changed, there has been a change in the attitude of young members, specifically students, towards membership. The declining level of student enrolment and participation should be a major concern for all stakeholders as it may pose a threat to the future of the profession. Below are the SACQSP membership statistics for the years 2011 to 2024, presented for contextual reference.

Table 5 SACQSP Membership Statistics 2011-2024. Source: SACQSP Annual Reports 2011-2024 (SACQSP, 2024: Online)

Year	No. of Registered PrQSs	PrQS % Flux	No. of Registered CanQSs	CanQS % Flux	Total Registered QSs	Total % Flux
2011	1799		1101		2900	
2012	1801	0,11%	1248	13,35%	3049	5,14%
2013	1954	8,50%	1522	21,96%	3476	14,00%
2014	1897	-2,92%	1662	9,20%	3559	2,39%
2015	1936	2,06%	1807	8,72%	3743	5,17%
2016	2042	5,48%	1940	7,36%	3982	6,39%
2017	2105	3,09%	1998	2,99%	4103	3,04%
2018	2192	4,13%	2147	7,46%	4339	5,75%
2019	2271	3,60%	2151	0,19%	4422	1,91%
2020	2294	1,01%	1836	-14,64%	4130	-6,60%
2021	2409	5,01%	2045	11,38%	4454	7,85%
2022	2507	4,07%	2212	8,17%	4719	5,95%
2023	2580	2,91%	2414	9,13%	4994	5,83%
2024	2551	-1,12%	2402	-0,50%	4953	-0,82%
Overall Change 2011-2024	**752**	**41,80%**	**1301**	**118,17%**	**2053**	**70,79%**

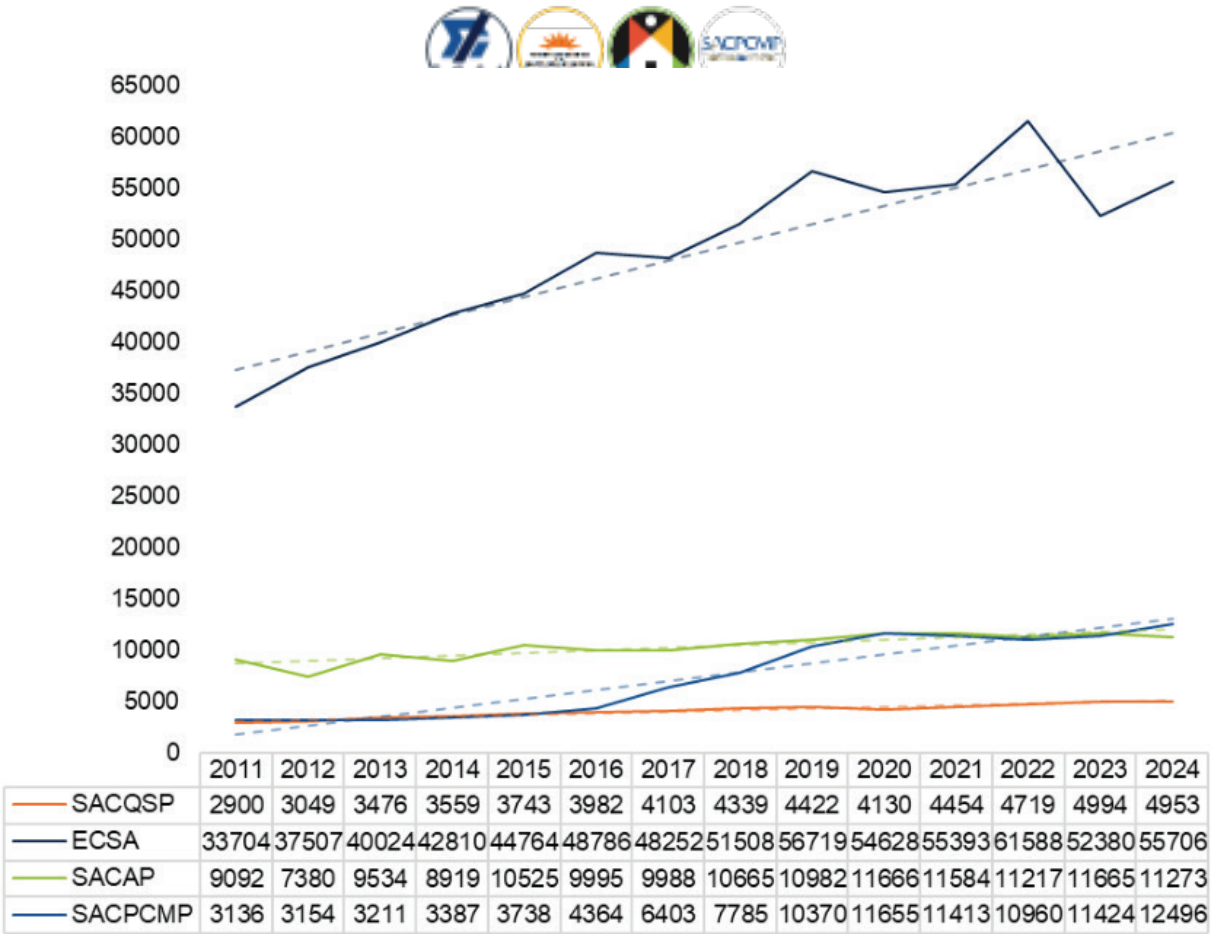
As presented in Table 5, from 2011 to 2024, the SACQSP experienced a growth of 41.80% in its PrQS membership category, marking an increase from 1799 to 2551, constituting a rise of 752. Concurrently, the CanQS membership category of the SACQSP witnessed a more aggressive increase of 118.17%, with numbers increasing from 1101 to 2402, reflecting a rise of 1301. In total, both categories collectively indicated an increase of 2053 during this period.

To ascertain whether this pattern is unique, statistics from other Council for the Built Environment (CBE) councils were collected and subsequently compared. Figure 2 below delineates comparative growth trends with other Built Environment Councils. The councils included for comparison in Table 6 below include the ECSA, SACAP and SACPCMP.

Table 6 CBE Councils Comparative Membership Statistics 2011-2024**.** Source: SACQSP, ECSA, SACAP, SACPCMP Annual Reports 2011-2024 (SACQSP, ECSA, SACAP, SACPCMP, 2024: Online)

Year	Pr SACQSP	Can SACQSP	Pr ECSA	Can ECSA	Pr SACAP	Can SACAP	Pr SACPCMP	Can SACPCMP
2011	1799	1101	22953	10751	7608	1484	2345	791
2012	1801	1248	24144	13363	6223	1157	2290	864
2013	1954	1522	25241	14783	7683	1851	2192	1019
2014	1897	1662	26566	16244	7258	1661	2232	1155
2015	1936	1807	27342	17422	8330	2195	2297	1441
2016	2042	1940	28307	20479	7997	1998	2793	1571
2017	2105	1998	28195	20057	7997	1991	3936	2467
2018	2192	2147	29114	22394	8426	2239	4818	2967
2019	2271	2151	34492	22227	8592	2390	6250	4120
2020	2294	1836	30846	23782	8931	2735	6993	4662
2021	2409	2045	32950	22443	8640	2944	7060	4353
2022	2507	2212	37042	24546	8419	2798	7266	3694
2023	2580	2414	30221	22159	8843	2822	7882	3542
2024	2551	2402	29247	26459	8836	2437	8858	3638
Overall Change 2011-2024	752	1301	6294	15708	1228	953	6513	2847
Overall Flux % 2011-2024	40,80%	118,17%	27,42%	146,11%	16,14%	64,22%	277,74%	359,92%

Table 6 presents the growth in membership for both the candidate and professional categories within the Built Environment Councils in South Africa. The SACQSP exhibits the lowest overall numerical increase in membership among all councils. The SACQSP's candidate category shows a significant increase of 118.17%, compared to a 40.80% increase in the professional category. This indicates a disconnect in the candidacy phase within the council, where candidates are not successfully transitioning to professional registration. Furthermore, Table 6 reveals that this issue is not exclusive to the SACQSP but is prevalent across all Built Environment Councils. Figure 2 below visually represents the membership growth across the various Built Environment Councils, complementing the data presented in Table 6.



	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
SACQSP	2900	3049	3476	3559	3743	3982	4103	4339	4422	4130	4454	4719	4994	4953
ECSA	33704	37507	40024	42810	44764	48786	48252	51508	56719	54628	55393	61588	52380	55706
SACAP	9092	7380	9534	8919	10525	9995	9988	10665	10982	11666	11584	11217	11665	11273
SACPCMP	3136	3154	3211	3387	3738	4364	6403	7785	10370	11655	11413	10960	11424	12496

Figure 2 Growth trends for various Built Environment Councils in RSA (Source: SACQSP, ECSA, SACAP, SACPCMP Annual Reports 2011-2024 (SACQSP, ECSA, SACAP, SACPCMP, 2024: Online))

Figure 2 illustrates a consistent growth trajectory observed over the preceding decade for ECSA and SACPCMP. Conversely, the data indicate a relative stagnation in registrations for SACAP and SACQSP. While SACAP exhibits a marginal increase, SACQSP displays negligible growth and registers the lowest numbers among the councils. This pattern prompts the necessity for a comprehensive investigation aimed at elucidating the underlying factors contributing to this phenomenon and devising potential remedial measures to address the observed trend.

CBE Membership Categories

The built environment councils in South Africa encompass a diverse array of membership categories, spanning both professional and candidate designations. Table 7 delineates the various membership categories within each council.

Table 7 CBE Councils Membership Categories. Source: SACQSP, ECSA, SACAP, SACPCMP Annual Reports 2011-2024 (SACQSP, ECSA, SACAP, SACPCMP, 2024: Online)

Council	Candidate Categories	Specified Categories	Professional Categories
SACQSP	Professional Quantity Surveyor		Candidate Quantity Surveyor
ECSA	Professional Engineer		Candidate Engineer
	Professional Engineering Technologist		Candidate Engineering Technologist
	Professional Certificated Engineer		Candidate Certificated Engineer
	Professional Engineering Technician		Candidate Engineering Technician

SACAP	Professional Architect		Candidate Architect
	Professional Senior Architectural Technologist		Candidate Senior Architectural Technologist
	Professional Architectural Technologist		Candidate Architectural Technologist
	Professional Architectural Draughtsperson		Candidate Architectural Draughtsperson
		Building Control Officer	
		Student	
SACPCMP	Professional Construction Manager		Candidate Construction Manager
	Professional Construction Project Manager		Candidate Construction Project Manager
	Professional Construction Mentor	Construction Mentor	
	Professional Construction Health & Safety Agent		Candidate Construction Health & Safety Agent
		Construction Health & Safety Manager	Candidate Construction Health & Safety Manager
		Construction Health & Safety Officer	Candidate Construction Health & Safety Officer

Table 7 provides an overview of the nature and diversity of membership categories available across four (4) professional councils in the built environment. As depicted, multiple membership classes are offered in the professional, candidate, and specified categories by all councils, namely ECSA, SACAP, and SACPCMP, except for the SACQSP, which provides only a single membership class within both the professional and candidate categories.

Existing Research on Candidacy Phase for Quantity Surveyors in South Africa

There is a notable lack of research examining the candidacy phase for Quantity Surveying graduates within the South African built environment. Existing studies are limited in both number and scope, providing only fragmented insights into the challenges faced by candidates and the support structures available to them. For example, Harinarain et al. (2023) conducted a quantitative study based on 40 valid responses, identifying several challenges encountered during candidacy, including the transition from university to professional practice, insufficient technological proficiency, inadequate workplace induction, heavy initial workloads, registration difficulties within contracting firms, and discomfort in seeking clarification. Proposed solutions centred on individual strategies such as mentorship, development of core competencies, improved use of industry software (e.g., WinQS, CostX, DimX), enhanced IT skills, and increased engagement with mentors and colleagues. While this study provides valuable practical insights for current and prospective candidates, it does not offer a systemic or policy-level perspective on candidacy challenges.

Similarly, Emuze et al. (2015) employed a qualitative approach to explore the relationship between job insecurity and professional development during candidacy, highlighting the critical role of employers in supporting registration. Participants emphasised the need for employer-led training aligned with professional council requirements to facilitate the registration process.

Despite these contributions, research in this domain remains sparse and fragmented, with few studies undertaken over the past decade. Critically, there is limited investigation into the structural and institutional dimensions of the candidacy process within the South African built environment, representing a significant gap in the literature that warrants further empirical and conceptual exploration.

Research Methodology and Method

To explore barriers affecting candidate Quantity Surveyors' progression toward professional registration, a systematic literature search was conducted to identify, evaluate, and synthesise studies on challenges in the candidacy or early-career phases across Quantity Surveying and related Built Environment professions. Academic databases searched included Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, EBSCOhost, and Sabinet African Journals. The search covered literature published between 2010 and 2024, using Boolean operators to combine three thematic areas:

- Professional registration processes,
- Candidacy/early-career development, and
- Quantity Surveying/Built Environment in South Africa context.

Inclusion criteria were peer-reviewed articles, reports, or conference papers focusing on challenges during candidacy or early-career phases in Quantity Surveying or related professions in South Africa. Exclusions included non-English sources, irrelevant topics, and grey literature lacking scholarly rigour unless published by professional councils. From 72 initial sources, 30 were retained for full-text review, with 4 studies (2015-2025) included based on relevance and methodological quality.

Data Analysis

The selected literature, indicated in Table 8 below, was thematically analysed to extract recurring challenges. The themes were developed through a qualitative thematic analysis of existing empirical and conceptual studies relating to professional registration in the built environment, with a specific focus on Quantity Surveying in South Africa. Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach, the documents were systematically read and coded to identify recurring patterns and key challenges discussed across the sources. Codes were then grouped and refined into higher-level themes, capturing both structural and individual-level barriers. The resulting themes reflect the intersection of demographic factors, institutional processes, and sectoral dynamics that collectively shape the professional registration landscape for specifically QSs.

Table 8 List of Sources Analysed**.** Source: Authors' Own Compilation

Author(s) and Year	Context	Method	Key Findings
Ramabodu & Nena (2024)	Demographics-Based Impediments to Professionalization in the South African Built Environment	Mixed method, literature review with statistical evidence from document analysis	Demographic-based challenges: Skills gap and project complexity, knowledge transfer, diversity of perspectives, unequitable resource allocation, workplace dynamics, inclusivity and ethics
Musonda, Nana-Addy & Okoro (2024)	Professional Registration and Candidate Mentoring in South Africa's Built Environment: Challenges and Solutions	Qualitative approach using a focus group (panel) discussion	Main Challenges: skills pipeline, implementation of mentorship programmes also looking at strategies to improve candidate mentoring
Harinarain, Joosab & Vawda (2023)	Challenges faced by South African candidate quantity surveyors (CanQS) during candidacy phase	Survey of 40 candidate and recently registered QSs; analysed using SPSS.	Main challenges: workplace transition, logbooks, mentorship, IT/software skills. Solutions: mentoring, practical exposure, CPD, technology learning, adaptability. Mentorship reduces challenges.
Emuze, Sinethemba & Botha (2015)	Candidate professional development in South Africa over multiple disciplines	Phenomenological study - interviews with candidate professionals; analysed thematically.	Candidate development challenges: limited practical exposure, weak mentorship, and gaps between academic learning and workplace practice.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study provide critical insights into the key challenges associated with the professional registration process within the South African built environment. Drawing on both qualitative and quantitative studies, this section presents an analysis of the experiences and perspectives of candidates. The results highlight significant trends and barriers in the built environment that impact the transition from candidacy to professional registration, with particular emphasis on the Quantity Surveying profession. Furthermore, these findings offer a basis for proposing informed recommendations aimed at improving registration practices and aligning them with international standards of excellence.

Findings – Challenges and Barriers to Professional Registration

Figure 3 outlines the key challenges and barriers experienced by candidates during the candidacy phase of professional registration within the South African built environment. These challenges, identified through both empirical data and qualitative feedback, reflect a range of issues that hinder the progression from candidate to fully registered professional. The table categorizes these barriers according to their nature, whether structural, institutional, or individual, and highlights their prevalence across various professional bodies. Understanding these obstacles is crucial for developing targeted interventions aimed at improving the candidacy experience and promoting successful professional registration outcomes. This summary captures the cross-disciplinary barriers facing Quantity Surveyors (QS) and to a lesser extent Architects, Engineers, and Construction Project Managers in their progression toward professional registration in South Africa. Table 9 indicates the themes identified and provides a short outline of the core issues identified under each theme.

Table 9: Challenges experienced during the candidacy process. Source: Authors' Own Compilation

Theme	Core Issues Identified	References
Training, Recognition & Awareness	Uneven access to training linked to historical inequalities; technological knowledge gaps (e.g., WinQS, CostX); low public awareness of the QS profession, especially among underrepresented groups.	Emuze et al. (2015) Harinarain et al. (2023) Musonda et al. (2024) Ramabodu & Nena (2024)
Transition to Work	Limited practical training during studies; inadequate workplace induction; exclusionary organisational cultures affecting women and historically marginalised groups.	Harinarain et al. (2023) Ramabodu & Nena (2024)
Registration & Support Structures	Unequal access to guidance and mentoring; unclear APC and registration requirements; lengthy, complex processes that deter progression, especially for underrepresented groups.	Emuze et al. (2015) Harinarain et al. (2023) Musonda et al. (2024)
Financial Barriers	High CPD, APC, and registration costs; financial strain due to workload–CPD conflicts; disproportionate impact on lower-income candidates.	Harinarain et al. (2023) Ramabodu & Nena (2024)
Professional Value, Ethics & Recognition	Limited public and industry recognition of QSs; gender and racial disparities raising ethical concerns; lower perceived value and prospects for marginalised groups.	Ramabodu & Nena (2024)
Academic–Professional Misalignment	Misalignment between academic training and professional competencies; limited practical exposure during studies; non-recognised qualifications slowing progression.	Harinarain et al. (2023)
Time & Experience Constraints	High work demands limiting time for logbooks and CPD; experience requirements burdensome; gendered work–life balance pressures affecting progression.	Harinarain et al. (2023)
Mentorship & Guidance	Inconsistent and inadequate mentorship; unclear APC guidance; limited mentor availability; mentor dominance over project work; lack of structured mentorship frameworks.	Emuze et al. (2015) Harinarain et al. (2023) Musonda et al. (2024)

Table 9 above illustrates that many candidates face structural barriers, such as economic constraints and the disparities between the technology utilized in higher education and that employed in industry. Furthermore, institutional barriers, including rigid registration requirements and inconsistent mentorship and support, emerge as key contributors to the low rates of professional registration. Key insights from this study include the following: Mentorship and workplace integration are the most common structural gaps, especially in Quantity Surveying, gender and racial transformation challenges persist, regulatory complexity and bureaucracy affect all professions, undermining confidence in professional councils, economic contraction and reduced public investment limit experiential opportunities, especially in rural or emerging areas.

Discussion

The findings reveal that core barriers include a lack of structured mentorship, poor alignment between academic training and professional expectations, and limited employer support. The findings reveal that mentorship and supervision, while repeatedly cited as enablers, are inconsistently implemented due to time constraints and a lack of institutional accountability. Unlike the RICS Pathway in the UK, which incorporates employer-led development plans, the South African system appears to place the onus on the candidate with limited structured support. The implications of this study for policy and practice includes that the study may inform professional bodies on the need for clearer training guidelines or digital supervision tools. Also, it may inform the incentivization of mentorship or structured employer led support. Finally, it may inform work-integrated leaning or curricula adjustments in higher education institutions such as that institutions may play a proactive role by embedding professional registration outcomes into final-year modules and linking students with mentors through organised alumni programmes.

Limitations of the study are acknowledged. There is a limited sample of reviewed studies that met the inclusion criteria. The focus of the study does not capture the lived experiences of candidates across provinces or under different employer types but rather focuses solely on secondary data. The geographical and professional scope of this study focuses primarily on the Quantity Surveying Professionals in South Africa.

Conclusion

The findings of this research underscore the existence of multiple barriers to professional registration within the built environment, with particularly pronounced challenges in the SACQSP. These obstacles have contributed to the slow growth of the council's professionally registered membership over the past decade. Although other built environment councils have demonstrated relatively stronger growth trajectories, they too encounter persistent difficulties in transitioning candidates to full professional registration. Research on these issues within the South African context remains limited, and few practical, evidence-based interventions have been proposed to strengthen the candidacy process. While the SACQSP provides several pathways to registration, all ultimately lead to a single professional category, unlike other councils that offer multiple registration classes. Existing literature identifies structural, institutional, and individual barriers, yet proposed strategies have largely focused on addressing individual-level challenges, leaving broader systemic and organisational constraints insufficiently resolved.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed to enhance the promotion of professional registration within the Quantity Surveying profession. The following recommendations may be considered for industry, academia, regulatory bodies and for future research:

Table 10 Study Recommendations. Source: Authors' Own Compilation

Recommendation Category	Recommendations
Industry (Public and Private Entities)	● Establish structured mentorship programs for QS candidates. ● Promote early engagement in CPD aligned with SACQSP. ● Provide multidisciplinary project experience. ● Advocate for faster, streamlined assessment processes.

Academia (Higher Education Institutions)	● Align curricula with SACQSP and international competency standards. ● Integrate internships, WIL, and simulation-based practice. ● Raise awareness of global registration standards. ● Encourage research on professional registration challenges.
Regulatory (Councils and Associations)	● Streamline candidacy processes with digitisation and clear guidance. ● Implement structured mentorship/coaching programs. ● Benchmark against Commonwealth best practices. ● Enhance transparency of requirements and timelines. ● Explore cross-professional alignment with other BEPs.
Future Research	● Track QS candidates longitudinally to identify success factors. ● Assess industry-academia-council collaboration. ● Expand comparative studies internationally. ● Explore interdisciplinary registration and harmonisation opportunities.

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SACQSP2025-82

Catalysing South Africa's Housing Crisis through Participation in Innovative Housing Approaches: What Contribution can Quantity Surveyors Make?

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Abstract

South Africa's efforts and achievements in providing adequate housing and upgrading of informal settlements from 9.1 million in 1996 to 17.8 million in 2022 has been lauded by UN-Habitat; however, the government admits there is still a significant housing backlog (Augustine, 2024). As the population grows, alternative housing delivery models need to be adopted to address the housing gridlock and ensure that every citizen has access to adequate housing as enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa 1996. Using an innovative housing project (Project X) in Cape Town as a case study, the research study seeks to investigate the role that Quantity Surveyors play in an innovative housing delivery model, documenting the contributions they can make beyond the traditional functions of the profession, thereby helping to address the housing crisis. Adopting an interpretivist paradigm to explore the roles of quantity surveyors involved in Project X required an inductive, qualitative approach. The single-case pilot study design allowed for data to be collected through desktop studies and semi-structured interviews held with three professional QSs from both public and private sectors. Through thematic analysis, key opportunities for QS contributions during the pre-contract and implementation stages of innovative housing projects emerged. The findings reveal that a Quantity Surveyor, over and above providing traditional quantity surveying services, needs to work cohesively and collaboratively with the client entity and project team to drive the sustainability agenda by engaging with the community to better understand their needs and directly liaising with government bodies and funding sources. Ultimately, Quantity Surveyors' advocacy for the adoption of innovative yet sustainable housing models requires them to notionally step outside their comfort zone and become part of the societal driving force catalysing the housing crisis.

Keywords: Housing Crisis, Innovative Housing Approaches, Sustainability, Collaboration, Quantity Surveyors.

Introduction

Urbanisation is a significant 21st-century factor, with the number of people moving to urban areas increasing due to the desire to gain access to better facilities (Manomano et al., 2016). South Africa's urbanisation rate is increasing, with 2023 reports extoling a 68.82% urbanisation rate (O'Neill, 2022) which means that more people are moving to urban areas, thus impacting on the housing demand and supply. According to the National Housing Needs register, this translates into 2.4 million households requiring housing (Centre for Affordable Housing Finance in Africa (CAHF), 2023). The legacy of racial spatial planning enacted during the Apartheid era through legislations such as the Group Areas Act of 1950 and the Municipal Location Act of 1901, laid the foundation for the current housing predicament (Dooling, 2018). Thirty years since the 'rainbow nation' era (circa 1994), nearly 10 million people still do not live in formal housing (StatsSA, 2025) informal settlements tend to be located far away from central economic activity (Newton & Schuermans, 2013), further exasperating the unemployment dilemma plaguing South Africa (Gqada, 2012).

In South Africa, the Department of Human Settlements has a directive from the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa 1996 to provide access to adequate housing (Republic of South Africa, 1996, South African Government, 2025). However, despite government interventions, housing remains a significant challenge (South African Housing & Instructure Fund (SAHIF), 2020). Motlhabane (2015) cites population growth, corruption and municipal maladministration of the government housing delivery systems as accelerants of the housing backlog, potentially hampering the government from meeting its mandate of delivering adequate housing to the public (Amoah, 2023).

As acknowledged by the President in his speech during the State of the Nation Address (SONA, 2025) the State must reassess the housing delivery system to alleviate the housing crisis. According to Boin et al. (2017) a crisis is an optimistic term as a threat can still be alleviated if different stakeholders collaborate and step up to the challenge. Hence, timely response from the Executive Director of the Association of South African Quantity Surveyors (ASAQS) highlighted the crucial roles that Quantity Surveyors (QSs) will play in ensuring that the state's goals are achieved (Association of South African Quantity Surveyors (ASAQS, 2025). Laishram and Tawalare (2021) have noted that the QS is an important member of the professional team on a construction project, as they act as the "financial police". The Western Cape government's annual report has identified one of the reasons for inefficient housing delivery as the lack of financial management skills from historically disadvantaged individuals (HDI) contractors (Department of Human Settlements, 2023). This begs the question whether the government would have been more successful in meeting the housing targets since 1994 had they fully utilised QSs as consultants and mentors for the housing contractors.

As the Quantity Surveying Profession (QSP) holds great significance in society (Cruywagen & Llale, 2017), this paper explores the key challenges experienced by traditional approaches to housing delivery, compares the roles played by QSs in traditional and innovative housing models, and thus aims to identify the key QS contributions required to address the housing crisis.

Literature review

According to the General Household Survey 2024, 84.1% of people live in formal housing, 3.9% live in traditional housing and 11.7% live in informal dwellings (Stats SA, 2025). However, despite government interventions, housing remains a significant challenge (SAHIF, 2020), thus alluding to traditional housing delivery models not being as effective as needed. The challenges of traditional housing delivery are explored to determine pressure points where QS's involvement in innovative housing models could make a difference.

Challenges experienced by traditional housing delivery models

In 1994, the South African democratic government introduced the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), a tool designed to develop and uplift communities affected by the apartheid system (Motlhabane, 2015). The initiative had an agenda to tackle the injustices created by the apartheid government by addressing the people's basic human rights to adequate housing and aimed to provide one million houses from 1994 to 1999, within the first five years of its establishment (South African Government, 2025). Three decades into South Africa's democracy, and the demand for affordable housing has grown exponentially and seems inaccessible for South Africans living in informal settlements with no basic services. Realising their initial social housing programme was overzealous, the government introduced other initiatives in 1996 and 2004, namely, the Growth Employment Redistribution Strategy (GEAR) and Breaking New Grounds (BNG), to patch the shortcomings of the RDP (Khowa-Qhoai & Tyali, 2024).

The housing programmes provided by the government have faced persistent shortcomings in terms of implementation and outcomes. The National Housing Code of 2009 provides the National Norms and Standards for the construction of stand-alone dwellings to the Department of Human Settlements, which states that the design of the houses must be two bedrooms with a separate bathroom and an electrical installation board (Department of Human Settlements, 2009). Mkuzo Tim et al. (2019) highlight, however, the propensity of structural and design defects which undermine the durability and long-term sustainability of the BNG-type dwellings. The BNG house design is a forty square meter (40m2) single-story dwelling that is free-standing with basic services (Ndifuna Ukwazi, 2024), and Wilcox et al. (2024) noted that this traditional government housing design overlooks the need for incremental upgrading, which leads to the occupants informally extending their homes. Incidentally, Klug and Vawda (2009) argue that while the BNG policy theoretically promotes sustainable human

settlements, the practicality of those objectives has remained hindered by poor execution mechanisms, limited community participation and the persistence of top-down delivery models.

The capital subsidy finance model forms the financial backbone of South Africa's state-subsidised housing system, particularly under the RDP and BNG policies. The financing model requires the government to provide a once-off, non-repayable subsidy to qualifying low-income households to fund the acquisition of basic housing, including the cost of land, planning approvals, and construction (Tissington, 2010). The BNG policy retained the core structure of the capital subsidy but expanded its scope to include a broader range of housing typologies and development scenarios, including in-situ upgrades and rental housing (Huchzermeyer, 2009). Mkuzo Tim et al. (2019) observed that despite improvements in design under BNG, the underlying finance model remains heavily reliant on state funding, with limited engagement of private sector finance or end-user contributions. Despite improvements to the housing unit size and finishes' specification, the financial model still results in limited long-term maintenance, leading to degradation over time.

The BNG programme aims to provide tenure security as residents may secure the title deeds of their house on the condition, they do not sell their BNG house during the first 8 years of ownership (Ndifuna Ukwazi, 2024). Despite the tenure security, Shashika Development Management Services' study cited by Ndifuna Ukwazi (2024) reported that over 1.5 million BNG beneficiaries are not on the Deeds registry and as a result do not own title deeds.

Innovative Approaches in Housing

Innovation has been defined in multiple ways across literature. Damanpour and Schneider (2009) define innovation as the creation and implementation of new ideas, practices or behaviours. Similarly, the European Union (1997) describes innovation as the implementation of a new or significantly improved products (good or service), or processes, a new marketing method, or a new organisational method in business practices, workplace organisation or external relations. In contrast, Schumpeter's concept of "creative destruction" cited in Taylor (2017), views innovation as the creation of something new through combinations of existing resources. Adopting Schumpeter's perspective on innovation, allows innovative housing approaches to include existing construction resources and methods, implemented in novel or different ways. As Ebekozien et al. (2023) notes, such approaches may also include the use of non-conventional building materials, the involvement of different stakeholders and out-of-the-ordinary designs. Understanding these different conceptions of innovation provides a foundation for examining how such ideas manifest within South Africa's housing sector and the role of QSs in facilitating them.

Role of Quantity Surveyors

The Quantity Surveying Profession (QSP) has been in existence for centuries in the United Kingdom (Ashworth et al., 2013), and more than a century in South Africa (Maritz & Siglé, 2021). In the formative years of the profession, QSs were only involved in the production of the Bills of Quantities (BOQ) and Final Account measurement, highlighting the profession's historical focus on quantification and cost documentation. However, over the years, scholars such as (Mbachu, 2015) and Wao (2015) argue that this traditional role has evolved in response to the dynamic nature of the construction industry and the increasing client demands. Their perspectives suggest a shift from a narrowly technical function to a broader managerial and advisory role.

The Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) (2024) defines a Quantity Surveyor as a vital financial professional in the construction industry, specialising in costing buildings from inception to completion and ensuring that projects meet the specified quality and legal standards. Locally, the South African Council of the Quantity Surveying Profession (SACQSP) South African Council for the Quantity Surveying Profession (SACQSP) (2013) defines QSs as trained, experienced specialists who have acquired comprehensive knowledge of construction procurement and contracting methods, finance, and economics. The Association of South African Quantity Surveyors (ASAQS) (n.d) and Babu Reddy (2017) enunciate that QSs offer a plethora of services, including feasibility and viability studies, preparation of estimates and bills of quantities, tender evaluations, procurement and contract documentation, negotiating contracts with contractors, as well as life cycle cost analysis. This highlights that the QS is positioned to offer detailed analyses to identify over and underspending as well as assess the project cost at every stage before, during, and after construction.

While RICS, ASAQS and SACQSP highlight financial expertise as a core skillset, the South African entities place a greater emphasis on procurement and contracting, reflecting regional priorities. Collectively, these definitions reveal an ongoing tension between the conventional and contemporary understanding of the QS, suggesting that the profession's identity continues to evolve in response to globalisation and industry transformation. Zhou et al. (2016) reinforces this by noting that QSs are involved in ensuring that projects achieve their long-term strategic and financial objectives.

Quantity Surveyors' contribution in improving housing delivery models

Monyane et al. (2018) noted that in public sector developments, the QS performs traditional cost planning; however, decisions are solely at the discretion of the architect, and no collaboration is present from all the professionals in the project. The critical analysis by Marutlulle (2021) of the ramifications of housing inadequacy in South Africa found that there is a need for collaboration between the government, including municipalities, the private sector, and state-owned enterprises to develop strategies for land delivery suitable for human settlements, through the Housing Development Agency. Involving the QS at the precontract stage ensures that design decisions are closely linked to the cost, leading to a balanced design that delivers optimal value to the client (Morrison et al., 2022).

Xegwana et al. (2025) emphasise that housing outcomes are shaped by government departments, municipal staff, and beneficiaries. Collaboration of stakeholders increases the odds of project success (Spellacy et al., 2020). A construction project can be understood as an inter-organisational process, which requires the coordinated efforts of all stakeholders to complete the project within predetermined parameters (Monyane et al., 2018). Freeman (1984:46) cited in Ebekozien et al. (2024) defined stakeholders as "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organisation's objectives". Within the South African housing sector, the stakeholders would be the end-users, the facilitators such as the built environment professionals and contractors, the government as both funders and regulators of housing developments, and the client, which could be government or non-government agencies (Department of Human Settlements, 2024; Department of Planning, 2016). Mohlasedi and Nkado (1998) argue that end users are one of the primary stakeholders in housing schemes, a reality that appears forgotten in mass public housing projects.

Olanrewaju and Anahve (2015) acknowledge that the QSs are often pressed upon to provide holistic services, beyond the 'scope" of the construction industry. Principal agency and project management are some of the growth areas predicted for the QSP (Wao, 2015). Embracing integrated project delivery principles, combines stakeholder management with digital technology to improve collaborative project environments, with QSs being involved from the inception of projects Mudaly (2025).

QSs have 'superpowers', namely remarkable adaptability and resilience in managing uncertainty. QSs tend to be flexible to changed project circumstances, able to adopt new information and make informed decisions, proactively conduct risk assessments and implement contingency plans Ndlovu et al. (2024). That said, QSs could benefit from understanding the theory of risk management principles, which they tend to unknowingly practice, to better reduce, retain and transfer risk (Agha & Ogbonna, 2022).

Methodology

The research study followed an interpretivist research philosophy, as it seeks to understand human experiences and meanings within their real-world context, and allows exploration of first-hand knowledge and perceptions (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). Aligned with this philosophy, an inductive research approach was adopted because it allows insights to emerge from collected data rather than testing predetermined hypotheses (Kim, 2021). A qualitative method allows optimal discovery of in-depth real-world issues, unpacking underlying causes and processes while allowing participants to share their experiences (Tenny et al., 2022). Strategically, a case study approach enables the facilitation of an in-depth investigation of complex issues within their real-life context (Baxter & Jack, 2015). While appreciating the known pitfalls of adopting a case study approach, especially a single case study, (Flyvberg, 2006), the research study deliberately styles itself as a pilot study, thus intimating that further, more substantive studies would benefit from the lessons learnt during the pilot study (Malmqvist et al., 2019).

It was in this spirit that a single case study of an innovative housing project, named 'Project X', in Cape Town was used to provide a deeper and nuanced understanding of a touted innovative housing

initiative and to allow a detailed exploration of the roles of QSs within Project X. Project X is a pilot project located in a suburb within the City of Cape Town Metropolitan Municipality, often referred to as a 'township' with informal settlements and formal neighbourhoods. It aims to upgrade informal settlements into safe, higher-density row house-like typology without displacing residents. The Project X model is a double-storey 37-86m^2 units that feature solar panels, a solar geyser, and firewalls for safety with a functional layout that includes bedrooms, living areas, and amenities powered by renewable energy. The design of the homes was done through an integrative design process, which sought to combine collective expertise and resources. The project housed over 400 beneficiaries in 70+ housing units at a development cost of R50 million. Project X also provided the community with public open spaces, a shared community centre and access to solar power. Project X was conceptualised more than a decade ago and involved many stakeholders (local community members, government officials, built environment practitioners, impact investors, NGOs and international donors). The funding model relied mainly on international donations; however, the residents invested as well according to a unique funding model which was tailored to each household's income.

Data was collected using desktop studies (website information and shared project documentation) and semi-structured interviews with three private and public sectors professional QSs who were engaged in project X directly and indirectly to probe their involvement and challenges faced in their pursuit of alleviating the housing backlog. To maintain the anonymity of the participants, they are given code names Quantity Surveyor one, two, and three (QS1, QS2, QS3). QS1 is directly involved in 'Project X' and has over 20 years of practising as a professional QS. QS2 holds a governmental position, is indirectly involved in 'Project X' and has over 6 years of experience working specifically in public housing delivery. QS3 is practising as a traditional QS consultant, with 6 years of experience in housing development. The interview protocol was reviewed and approved by the relevant university ethics committee.

The data was analysed using the six-phased thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (cited in Anakok et al. (2025)) which includes getting acquainted with the data, coding, identifying initial themes, developing and reviewing themes, clarifying and naming themes, and writing up the findings. This process enabled the research to highlight important patterns regarding QS contributions during the pre-contract and execution stages, while also highlighting barriers and opportunities within the innovative housing models.

Research Results

The following themes were identified from the interviews conducted regarding the contributions that QSs can make to catalyse the housing crisis through innovative housing approaches.

- Stakeholder engagement
- Alternative funding models
- Feasibility and viability studies
- Value management
- Project management
- Risk taker vs risk averse

Stakeholder engagement facilitator

The interviewees each highlighted the different stakeholders that a QS should engage with as follows: the local community facilitators and members, government officials, property developers, built environment and legal professionals. One interviewee also highlighted the involvement of QSs with impactful investors and international donors in housing projects.

> "*When redeveloping existing townships, the community has to buy into your project."* **QS1**
> *"Remember, it's all city-owned land, so the city owns it, and we have our own conveyancing team and lawyers."* **QS1**
> *"We spent a lot of time on design. I mean, we've won lots of architectural awards and design awards for it."* **QS1**
> *"... primary role is to release land to the private sector for affordable housing development… We then also do financial feasibility modelling, so that's how … work with private sector QS consultants to test the numbers as well, that is feasible."* **QS2**

> *"We're performing both roles from a planning perspective with the city and the private sector developers, looking at the actual developer who has been, subsequently, now trying to develop and put these units on the market."* **QS3**

The collaboration and combination of stakeholders is recognised as key factors to influence construction projects (Ebekozien et al., 2024). All participants appreciated that the crisis cannot be solved by entities operating in silos or in isolation to each other.

Alternative funding models

The interviewees all acknowledged that the traditional funding models are an obstacle to faster housing delivery. QS2 sketched a grim picture of the government's various housing financing programmes that have either changed names or become defunct over the last 30 years. QS3 stated that there is not enough funding to support the number of social housing projects in the Western Cape. QS2 noted that the City of Cape Town has over 400,000 households on the Housing Needs Register but suggested further research could reveal that not everyone needs the state "*to resolve their housing solution*".

> *"That's what we're busy with at the moment on all of our projects, trying to find ways of making developments feasible, whilst not having to rely on government funding, because that is ultimately starting to be the ultimately the handbrake on a lot of these projects relying on funding from the City and the SHRA [Social Housing Regulatory Authority]."*- **QS3**

QS3 had a strong belief that it's up to QSs to find alternative funding that does not solely rely on the government. All the participants are aware of the challenges and are actively looking for ways to alleviate the funding issue. QS1 outlined the challenges posed by private funding:

> *'I'm kind of a full-time fundraiser as well as the QS these days. We are getting most of our funding at the moment from a private [foundation]. I go over there every year to present the work we want to do and submit our funding application. We know that it's not sustainable in the long term, but you've got to have somebody who believes in the work you want to do so that you can create examples of that work, real-life examples so that you can use the real example to get other funding."* **QS1**

Feasibility and viability studies implementation

All three participants report that they commission and or engage in financial feasibility modelling on land parcels privately identified or released by the City of Cape Town for social housing projects. The QSs actively seek ways in which these projects can become viable.

> *"So, currently, what we are doing is that we are looking at trying to make those sites viable so that the developers will then go and they'll build on them, buy the land from the city, and then they'll build a viable project that they can then call social housing."* **QS3**

Project X, for example, has a shared community centre which is geared towards generating income for the registered Housing Association, thus allowing for maintenance and future upgrade projects for the community.

Value management

QS1 highlighted the need for QSs to invest time in value management of multiple design configurations. Moving away from a 'one size fits all' approach is key and requires QSs working closely with architects and designers to ensure a housing project accommodates the needs of the future homeowners. QS1 emphasised the need for design efficiency in functionality and spatial configuration, thus implying that reiterative value engineering is needed to establish optimum layouts. Referring to Project X, QS1 stated that *"… we do double-storey units. So what it means is we're able to be much more efficient with our site space. …Obviously, you can imagine double stories taking up half the floor area compared to if everything had to be single-storey. If I take this one project community as an example,… 72 families were living on the site originally, [whom] we moved off when we started construction … if you take that same site area and you were going to do an RDP housing on it… we'd only be able to build 32 RDP houses on that site… we've built a whole Community Centre, and we've built a public play Park safe area with a road through for fire engines to access if there's ever a fire."*

Project management

QS1 has a project management background and implemented those skills in successfully running Project X.

> *"I originally became involved in [Project X] and eventually started doing the project management of that."* **QS1**

Risk taker vs risk averse

QS1 highlighted the importance of soft skills such as persistence, perseverance, negotiation skills, communication, creative problem-solving skills, and a can-do attitude, which are drivers of their innovative approach.

> *"In the pilot project that we did, we built without consent. Because the city of Cape Town didn't believe that it would be possible to do what we are doing, they were like you guys are crazy, you're never going to succeed. You're going to fail right out straight from the outset. So, we will make the land available, but we're not really going to assist you with too much."* **QS1**
> *"In the project that we're just starting, it will be sectional title ownership, which is the first time it's ever been done in a Township in South Africa, so it's going to be super exciting to see how that works out and the city again said to us, we don't really know sectional titles ever going to work. But because we've already proven ourselves with the community, they said we'll support you."* **QS1**
> *"We rely mostly on [private] foundations and so on to fund the projects."* **QS1**
> *"There are a lot of obstacles, but you know you can work through it, and we've built up our relationship with the communities we have now, a very good relationship with the City of Cape Town."* **QS1**

Discussion

The aim of the study is to explore the role Quantity Surveyors can play in an innovative housing delivery model, documenting the contributions they can make beyond the traditional functions of the profession. This section will discuss the findings as per the themes identified.

Stakeholder engagement

From the findings, community engagement in Project X is the driver of the design model, and the QS worked as the enabler who ensured that the end user's needs are met through the design through robust value engineering. Additionally, the QS functioned as an intermediary between private investors and the government to ensure that Project X obtained the financial resources it required to be successful. It could be argued that value is generated through the QS taking the lead co-ordinating design workshops with the community, the ultimate "clients" of the housing project, and negotiating with local authorities on their behalf. Not only does their engagement with community stakeholders and funding partners demonstrate their central coordinating role in ensuring project feasibility, but it also enhances social acceptance of the project.

Moreover, the public sector's contribution of making serviced land available for Project X proved to be a significant symbol of collaboration between stakeholders, and consolidated the research finding of Marutlulle (2021) of the need for collaboration between multi-stakeholders. Similarly, this aligns with Spellacy et al. (2020) who emphasise the significance of collaboration on project success. The findings highlight the significance of positioning QSs as central facilitators of communication and integration between stakeholders, suggesting that future initiatives could benefit from ensuring a QS occupies this role.

Alternative funding models

Unsurprisingly, the involvement of donor funders as the main sponsorship for Project X reinforced the need for QSs to be involved in innovative housing model approaches. According to QS3, reliance on only government funding is one of the factors that causes stagnation, as it leads to developments not being feasible. However, Project X had multiple sources of funding from international foundations, government subsidies, and impact investors, with international foundations contributing the largest

share. Not only did the QS play a proactive role in navigating financial constraints and identifying alternative funding streams, but their involvement reassured donors that responsible fiscal management was in place. The reliance on donor funding highlights a shift towards hybrid financing models in innovative housing delivery. It suggests that innovation is not only technical or design-related, but also financial, where QSs must adapt to manage complex funding mechanisms. Tissington (2010) and Mkuzo Tim et al. (2019) caution that the dependence of traditional housing models on government funding often leads to inefficiencies and project stagnation. The findings of the research study could be extrapolated to suggest that alternative funding through donor and impact investment partnerships may accelerate housing delivery when effectively managed by the QS. The impact of this is that QSs need to develop and refine their financial negotiation, cost modelling and stakeholder coordination skills, as this could enhance the financial feasibility of innovative housing approaches.

Feasibility and viability studies

QSs use their traditional skills and expertise in conducting feasibility studies and life cycle cost analyses as the foundational basis to perform tasks beyond their conventional roles. Not only did QS1 utilise their technical skills to incorporate sustainability into the design whilst maximising the number of housing units, but the inclusion of an income generating shared community centre provides funds for future maintenance of the Project X precinct, thus improving the scheme's overall viability. This demonstrates QSs' ability to apply their conventional expertise in new contexts to improve project sustainability and affordability. Morrison et al. (2022) highlighted the importance of QS involvement at the precontract stage to ensure that design decisions are closely linked to costs, leading to a balanced design that delivers optimal value to the client and Project X supports this view by showing that QSs can influence design innovation and long-term community viability, not just cost optimisation.

Value management

The design of Project X not only includes affordable living units but also a community centre and trading units, which allow for economic activity in the precinct, thus indicating that the emphasis of holistic value management extends beyond minimal cost considerations to encompass the social and economic sustainability of the housing project community. QS1 highlighted the importance of investing in the value management of multiple design configurations, emphasising that moving away from a 'one-size-fits-all' approach is essential. This requires QSs to collaborate closely with urban planners, designers and architects to ensure that housing projects respond to the needs of future homeowners. Through value engineering, QSs can establish a range of optimal layouts that strategically balance affordability, functionality and long-term social value. Thus, the original inclusion of value management in the arsenal of QSs skills primarily as a method of cost optimisation (Male & Kelly, 1990), has evolved to include participatory and socio-economic dimensions, ensuring that housing designs remain adaptable and inclusive.

Project management

QS1's background in project management significantly contributed to the successful implementation of Project X thus illustrating how QSs operating in innovative housing contexts are expanding their traditional cost management role to encompass project coordination and resource mobilisation.

The QS's dual involvement in project management and fundraising reflects a broader transformation of the profession, where technical expertise is integrated with leadership and strategic decision-making. This supports Olanrewaju and Anahve (2015) observation that modern QSs act as project integrators, bridging technical and managerial functions. The implication is that QSs involved in innovative housing projects would be prudent to cultivate managerial and entrepreneurial skills to navigate multi-stakeholder processes, align design and funding goals, and ensure project feasibility.

Risk taker vs risk averse

Through QS1, it became evident that soft skills such as negotiation, creative problem-solving, and a proactive attitude were critical in mobilising diverse stakeholders to collaboratively implement Project X. QS1 recalls that the City of Cape Town doubted the project's feasibility, reflecting a context in which government institutions often adopt a risk-averse stance. Despite initial scepticism, QS1 believes that the project teams' persistence and success in delivering the initial project established credibility with the local government, leading to support for subsequent initiatives such as the introduction of sectional

title ownership, which will be a first in a township context. This finding demonstrates that innovation in the housing sector frequently depends on professionals' willingness to assume calculated risks and challenge conventional systems. The QS's role extends beyond technical and cost management functions to one of leadership, advocacy, and strategic experimentation. This aligns with Loosemore (2015)'s argument that risk-taking behaviour and adaptive leadership are essential for fostering change in the built environment.

All participants in the research study understand the magnitude of the housing crisis and acknowledge the challenges that come with trying to go beyond the traditional QS role and implement innovative approaches to housing delivery. The QSs challenged the boundaries of traditional QS roles and utilised their technical and professional competency to make Project X come to reality.

Conclusion

Brill and Raco (2021) argue that crises, particularly housing crises, require the phlegmatic scientific approach of academia to offer potential insights often missed in market-led crisis-driven regulatory contexts that only serve to further entrench cul-de-sac solutions. Hence this study has provided evidence to suggest that the QSP possess skills that can address the current challenges faced.

The research findings show that the QS needs to be the driver of stakeholder engagements from the project team to the end user and be the lead thinker in finding alternative funding models for traditional housing models to reduce reliance on government funding and help accelerate the housing delivery process. The QSs need to utilise their technical expertise, such as performing feasibility and viability studies to investigate and determine project success in the early stages. They also need to cultivate entrepreneurial thinking and resilience to enhance their capacity to drive innovation in housing delivery, thus enabling them to be the advocates for change in the built environment.

Areas of future research could involve multi-case research of innovative housing projects to further explore the QS extent and depth of involvement, exploring the impact of appointing QSs as principal agents in traditional public-sector housing projects to address the housing delivery challenges in South Africa.

Recommendations

The research suggests the QSP can make a contribution to help alleviate the housing crisis. QS skills are underutilised in traditional housing delivery models, so greater involvement in financial "policing" at the most fundamental levels of housing delivery could have a profound impact. The QSP, through its professional bodies, should petition government for involvement in policy and process development. Similarly, professional training and institutional frameworks should educate towards adoption of risk-tolerant practices that enable QSs to explore unconventional solutions while maintaining ethical and financial accountability. Ultimately, this balance between prudence and boldness is crucial for addressing South Africa's housing crisis through innovative approaches.

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SACQSP2025-83

Job Satisfaction and Motivation Drivers of Quantity Surveyors in South Africa

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Abstract

This paper investigates the factors influencing job satisfaction and motivation among South African quantity surveyor, with a specific focus on Millennial and Generation Z professionals who play an essential role in the construction industry. Understanding the evolving drivers of satisfaction and motivation is critical for improving productivity, retention and well-being in the construction industry. Job satisfaction refers to the level of contentment experienced by QSs in their work, while motivation captures the factors that drive performance. A quantitative descriptive survey design was adopted, and an electronic questionnaire was distributed to members of the Association of South African Quantity Surveyors (ASAQS). A total of 48 valid responses were received. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and comparative analysis). The findings indicate that most quantity surveyors in South Africa reported high levels of job satisfaction and motivation. The strongest motivators were creative and challenging work, recognition for performance, and opportunities for career growth, confirming the prominence of intrinsic factors over traditional extrinsic motivators such as remuneration. Approximately 67 % of respondents were aged 41 years or younger, highlighting a generational shift in professional values toward autonomy, flexibility, and self-development. The study concludes that South African QSs are increasingly motivated by opportunities for meaningful engagement and growth rather than purely financial incentives. The findings align with international studies in Malaysia and Tanzania, reinforcing the global shift in professional motivation trends. The paper acknowledges the limitations of the low response rate and the regional focus of the survey. The paper cautions against generalizing the results to other contexts, as cultural differences may affect the findings. The paper recommends that QS firms prioritise creative work environments, recognition systems, and transparent advancement pathways to sustain engagement and enhance job satisfaction within the evolving workforce.

Keywords: Job Satisfaction, Motivation, Quantity Surveying, South Africa.

Introduction

The satisfaction of employees has become a key organizational objective since the 1960s, with job satisfaction being regarded as a prerequisite for organizational success (Cheng, 2024). Locke (1976) originally defined job satisfaction as the positive or pleasurable emotional experience that results from one's job, while Badubi (2017) recently rationalized it as the extent to which people gain enjoyment from their endeavors at work. An individual's level of job satisfaction is therefore associated with their favorable or unfavorable attitude to-wards their job (Gazi et al., 2024). Job satisfaction is however a multidimensional concept that consists of various dynamics such as service conditions, salary level, opportunities for career advancement, relationships with co-workers, processes of performance evaluation, the type and amount of supervision, and the work itself (Brunetto & Farr-Wharton, 2002). This paper focuses specifically on Millennials and Generation Z quantity surveyors, who now form over 60% of the profession (SACQSP, 2021). Their workplace expectations differ significantly from earlier cohorts, necessitating a contemporary re-evaluation.

While Zhang et al. (2023) highlighted the significance of job satisfaction and motivation toward the well-being of people in the construction industry, Bowen et al. (2008a) maintained that research on these aspects has mostly focused on construction workers. Lian and Ling (2018) recently again noted that

research on the job satisfaction and motivation of pro-fessional staff in the construction industry is still limited, with Herman (2019) underlining that there is especially a scarcity of material on the quantity surveying profession regarding the topic. This study, therefore, set out to remedy this gap by administering an opinion survey of South African quantity surveyors, with this paper reporting on the job satisfaction levels and motivating factors of quantity surveyors in South Africa. South African quantity survey-ors were specifically chosen because they represent a homogeneous group of professionals that are regulated by statute in the country.

Accordingly, this study investigates the evolving job satisfaction and motivation drivers of South African QSs to identify shifts aligned with generational change.

Literature review

Job Satisfaction and Motivation

There is firstly a difference between job satisfaction and motivation. Job satisfaction measures or explains the degree of a person's contentment in their job, while motivation considers the driving factors behind the execution of an individual's work-related activities (Jongo et al., 2019). Research on job satisfaction has further mainly focused on different variables that can be grouped into two central categories: the characteristics of the work itself, and the personal characteristics of employees (Keng et al., 2018), while motivation studies emphasise intrinsic drivers in competitive environments (Herman, 2019).

Consistent with modern organisational behaviour texts, content (need-based) theories explain what motivates (e.g., needs, goals), while process theories explain how motivation unfolds (e.g., expectancy, equity) (Robbins & Judge, 2023; Uhl-Bien, Piccolo & Schermerhorn, 2020). Job satisfaction is the evaluative attitude employees hold toward their work (how pleased they are overall), whereas motivation is the set of forces that initiate, direct and sustain effort. In QS research, satisfaction has been linked to commitment/retention, while motivation aligns with performance-oriented behaviours and discretionary effort (Gazi, Yusof & Islam, 2024; Bakotić, 2016).

Studies into the first group of characteristics have usually focused on aspects such as leadership style (Saleem, 2015; Akhtar & Nazarudin, 2020); work characteristics (Steyn & Vawda, 2014; Hauff et al., 2015), work environment, and conditions (Raziq & Maulabakhsh, 2015; Agbozo et al., 2017; Bashir et al., 2020); job security (Vujičić et al., 2015; Shin et al., 2019); disability (Pagán-Rodríguez, 2015; Romeo et al., 2020); firm size (Artz, 2008; Casuneanu et al., 2019); and differences in racial-ethnic perceptions (Friday & Friday, 2003; Friday et al., 2004; Darabant & Narayanan, 2021).

Studies into the second group of characteristics have been concerned with issues such as education level (Santa-Cruz et al., 2016; Solomon et al., 2021), health (Malik et al., 2011; Aronsson et al., 2021), age, and gender (Moyes et al., 2006; Weberova et al., 2013); rank (Holden & Black, 1996; Lorincová et al., 2018); length of service (Sarker et al., 2003; Haq & Chandio, 2014); marital status (Azim et al., 2013; Dey et al., 2020); ethnicity (Campbell, 2011; Choi, 2017); and psychological well-being (Wright et al., 2007; Kosec et al., 2022).

It is furthermore highly unlikely that a common acceptable theory of motivation will be developed due to motivating factors being embedded in people that vary over time and based on circumstances (Langford et al., 2016). Motivation theories have therefore been classified in various ways because of the sheer complexity of the subject, with the most common categories being content and process theories. Content theories, also known as need theories, attempt to explain 'what motivates'. They try to define the components required to drive human behaviour by identifying the needs of people, along with their relative strengths, and the goals that they pursue to ensure these needs (Hellriegel et al., 1995; Uhl-Bien, Piccolo & Schermerhorn, 2020; Robbins & Judge, 2023). These theories are therefore concerned with what directs, energizes, and shapes behaviour, with the most renowned of them being Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943, 1954), McGregor's theory of X and Y (1960), Herzberg's two-factor theory (1959, 1966), Alderfer's ERG theory (1972), and McClelland's achievement theory (1961, 1975). Uhl-Bien et al. (2020) however emphasized that these theories have generally been criticized for being too descriptive and static, as well as lacking empirical support.

Process theories furthermore endeavour to explain 'how to motivate' and are therefore concerned with analysing and describing how personal factors influence the motivation of people (Herman, 2016). The

most well-known of these theories are Adams's equity theory (1963), Vroom's expectancy theory (1964), Porter and Lawler's expectancy theory (1968), and Locke's goal-setting theory (1968). Latham (2007), Naoum (2011), Hitt et al. (2017), and Uhl-Bien et al. (2020) can be consulted for a detailed overview of these need and process theories.

Job Satisfaction and Motivation in the Construction Industry

Bowen et al. (2008b) noted that the content theories of motivation have extensively been used for research in the construction industry despite being criticized for their deficiency in empirical support. Navarro (2009) also specifically regarded Maslow's, Vroom's, and Herzberg's theories as useful models for researching motivational behaviours in the industry. Based on this, Maslow's theory was adopted for this study because it presents a fitting benchmark to measure factors that influence the motivation of quantity surveyors.

Based on the basic, psychological, and self-fulfilment needs of people, Maslow developed a five-stage theory that positions the needs of human beings in various categories and ranks their attainment. These categories, in terms of decreasing priority, are physiological needs (shelter, food, clothing); security and safety needs (physical protection and assurance of survival); social needs (association and fellowship with others); esteem needs (getting acknowledgment from others); and self-actualisation needs (the desire for achievement or to leave a legacy).

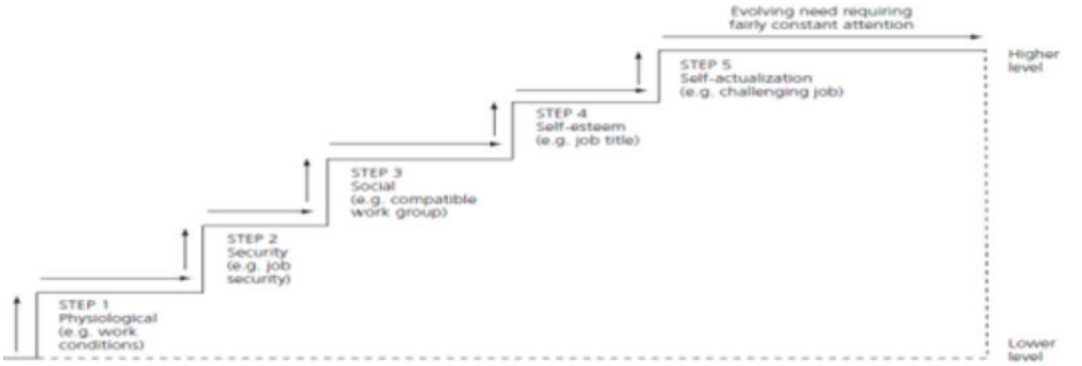

Figure 1 Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Source: Naoum, 2011)

Maslow's theory has further been successfully applied in numerous empirical studies in the industry since the 1970s. The bulk of the research, however, focused on-site personnel such as construction managers and workers until the late 1990s, with studies considering professional consultants, such as engineers, architects, quantity surveyors, and project managers, only starting to gain traction from 2000 onwards (Navarro, 2009; Lian & Ling, 2018).

Considering this, the job satisfaction and motivation of South African quantity surveyors were comprehensively researched by Bowen and his colleagues during 2007 and 2008. Bowen et al. (2007; 2008a) investigated the racio-ethnic and gender differences regarding motivation and job satisfaction in the quantity surveying profession in post-apartheid South Africa. The first study (2007) examined the differences between 'white' and 'non-white' quantity surveyors, whereby they concluded that the majority of both groups liked their jobs and that the main motivators were job security for 'non-whites' and salary for 'whites'. 'Non-whites' however indicated that they felt marginalized in terms of being recognized by their employers for their achievements. The second study (2008a) compared gender and racial differences and found that the respondents again generally liked their work and that the majority would recommend the profession to others. Females also had a stronger liking for their work compared to males and were more emphatic in recommending their chosen careers. The main motivators for females were work flexibility, maternity entitlement, and promotion prospects. The majority of 'whites' and 'non-whites' also indicated that they were content with their job and would choose them again. Although the studies collectively indicated that most respondents were satisfied with their jobs and would undertake their career again, differences in the levels of job satisfaction were found based on both race and gender, with more 'whites' and females conveying a higher degree of job satisfaction than their 'non-white' and male counterparts.

Bowen and Cattell (2008) and Bowen et al. (2008b; 2008c) further studied the job satisfaction and motivation of South African quantity surveyors based on Maslow's hierarchy. The first study (2008)

determined that feelings of personal satisfaction, recognition for extraordinary work, non-repetitive and varied work, opportunities for creative and challenging work, participation in decision-making that affects work areas, opportunities for social interaction, and degree of supervision were all significant motivators. The second study (2008b) determined that quantity surveyors were generally satisfied with their jobs, while their main motivating factors were personal satisfaction from undertaking their work, little supervision while performing their work, being part of a team, doing creative and challenging work, and receiving recognition for work performed well. The third study (2008c) compared the motivation and job satisfaction of employers and employees in the quantity surveying profession, whereby they found that employers were slightly more content with their jobs than employees. The primary motivating factors for employees were a low level of supervision, feelings of accomplishment, and participation in a working team. The main motivators of employers were feelings of personal satisfaction from undertaking the work, encouragement to show initiative and collaborative teamwork. These studies collectively indicated that personal characteristics were insignificant motivators and that the vital motivational factors were related to the content and nature of the work, in other words, various and creative tasks, the significance of the work performed, and the recognition received. Their findings contradicted the conventional interpretation of Maslow's model, which maintains that the lower needs must first be satisfied before the higher needs can be activated.

Van Eck and Burger (2016) lastly studied the motivational aspects of Generation Y (people born between 1981 and 1996) in the South African quantity surveying industry, whereby they determined their primary motivators to be workplace flexibility, social interactions, and meaningful and interesting work. This indicated that working millennials, people then aged be-tween 25 and 35, wanted to be judged on their work performance instead of physical presence at work while valuing relationships, feedback, and recognition more than compensation. They also liked undertaking projects that they felt would make the world a better place, while working in teams where they could interact with their colleagues. To effectively motivate millennial quantity surveyors, the authors determined that technology should be used that allows workplace flexibility, they should be mentored and guided while receiving regular feedback and recognition, and they should be told why their work is important and shown how it con-tributes to the bottom line. This again indicated that the respondents prioritized Maslow's higher-level needs of self-actualisation, esteem, and belonging.

The aim of the research was to establish how satisfied South African quantity surveyors were with their jobs along with determining the factors that influence the motivation of individuals within the profession. The study further aimed to build on the solid groundwork laid by Bowen and Cattell (2008) and Bowen et al. (2007; 2008a; 2008b; 2008c). In the last 15 years be-tween those studies and this one, it is worthwhile to compare the similarities and differences. People born after 1980, which are millennials and Generation Z, currently comprise 61% of the QS profession (SACQSP, 2021), while in 2012 millennials comprised 29% of the profession (SACQSP, 2012). Although the 2012 SACQSP annual report was published 4 to 5 years after Bowen and Cattell (2008) and Bowen et al.'s (2007; 2008a; 2008b; 2008c) studies, it was used for assessment because it is the earliest version of the document found online. Further, considering that the oldest millennials would have only been 28 years old during the afore-mentioned studies, it can be assumed that they would have comprised a tiny minority of the profession. The comparison of the reports and general observation therefore indicates that there has been a significant change in the generational demographics of the profession since 2008.

Research methodology and method

A quantitative descriptive survey design was adopted to examine the levels of job satisfaction and motivation among quantity surveyors in South Africa. This approach was chosen because it involves the analysis of numbers to establish the 'what' (Farrell et al., 2017). A comprehensive literature review informed the design of the questionnaire, ensuring that the items reflected key motivational and satisfaction variables previously investigated within the construction and quantity surveying domains. The questionnaire consisted primarily of closed-ended questions using five-point Likert scales to measure job satisfaction and motivational drivers. The structure drew upon established scales employed in prior QS motivation research, particularly those guided by Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Herzberg's two-factor model (Navarro, 2009; Bowen et al., 2008b). The instrument was piloted with five practising quantity surveyors to verify clarity, content validity, and response time. Based on feedback, minor adjustments were made to item wording before formal distribution. Data were collected electronically using Google Forms, and responses were automatically captured for analysis (Maree & Pietersen, 2019).

The target population comprised registered members of the Association of South African Quantity Surveyors (ASAQS), which represents professional, associate, and student members across the country. The sampling frame was therefore the ASAQS membership list, with access to respondents facilitated by the Association's distribution of an electronic survey link. In total, 48 valid responses were received. Although modest, this represents a comparable response size to other quantitative motivation studies in the built environment (Shoura & Singh, 1998; Singh, 2000; Lian & Ling, 2018). Shoura and Singh (1998) used Maslow's theory to test the motivational parameters of civil engineers from a specific region of the United States of America (USA), whereby they sur-veyed 39 professionals. Singh (2000) thereafter similarly used Herzberg's theory to determine the motivating and demotivating drivers of region-based civil engineers in the USA, whereby he only surveyed 26 professionals. Oyedele (2010) used a conceptual model to research the motivational drivers of construction project designers in Ireland, whereby he surveyed 51 ar-chitects and structural engineers. Lian and Ling (2018) lastly studied the job satisfaction of quantity surveyors in Singapore, whereby they surveyed 56 professionals. Accordingly, the sample was considered adequate for descriptive statistical analysis, which aims to identify general tendencies rather than to infer population parameters. The mean scores and standard deviations were calculated, with the results consequently being compared against the existing literature (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016; Ellis, 2017).

Ethical clearance for the study was granted by the University of the Free State Humanities Research Ethics Committee. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and no personal identifiers were collected. Reliability was ensured through internal consistency checks using Cronbach's α coefficients for each construct, while content validity was strengthened by basing items on well-established theoretical frameworks and by expert review during pilot testing.

Research results and Discussion

Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the 48 respondents. Respondents indicated their year of birth, which was used to classify them according to generation definitions. Based on this data, 67 % were aged 41 years or younger, thereby qualifying as Millennials or Generation Z, consistent with the generational definitions adopted in this study. This aligns closely with the South African Council for the Quantity Surveying Profession's (SACQSP, 2021) observation that younger professionals now constitute the majority of the registered QS workforce. This demographic shift reinforces the relevance of re-examining motivational and satisfaction dynamics within the profession, as younger cohorts are widely recognised for valuing flexibility, autonomy and self-development over purely extrinsic rewards (Van Eck & Burger, 2016; Herman, 2019). In terms of gender, most re-spondents identified as male. The majority of the respondents were also located in Gauteng and the Western Cape, with the remainder distributed quite evenly throughout South Africa. There were however no participants from the Eastern Cape and Northern Cape provinces.

The bulk of the respondents were further professional or associate ASAQS members (PMAQS or AAQS), which indicated that they are also affiliated with the SACQSP. In terms of years spent at their current company of employment, 44% of the respondents had worked for the company for 1 to 5 years, while 56% had worked there for more than 5 years.

Table 1 Characteristics of respondents (n=48)

No	Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
1	**Gender**		
	Male	35	73%
	Female	13	27%
2	**Province**		
	Gauteng	23	48%
	Western Cape	13	27%
	KwaZulu-Natal	4	9%
	Limpopo	3	6%
	Free State	2	4%

	Mpumalanga	2	4%
	North West	1	2%
3	**ASAQS Membership**		
	Professional Member	26	54%
	Associate Member	16	33%
	Member	6	13%
4	**Years worked at current company**		
	1 to 5	21	44%
	6 to 10	8	17%
	11 to 15	3	6%
	16 or more	16	33%

Job Satisfaction

Table 2 indicates that the majority of respondents were satisfied with their current positions (mean = 4.13). This finding is consistent with earlier South African research by Bowen et al. (2008b) and supports international evidence that quantity surveyors generally express moderate to high levels of job satisfaction (Jongo et al., 2019; Keng et al., 2018).

However, while earlier studies identified remuneration and job security as dominant satisfiers (Bowen et al., 2008a), the present findings suggest a shift towards intrinsic and self-fulfilment drivers among younger professionals. Respondents frequently cited challenging work, professional growth, and recognition as more influential than financial factors echoing the patterns reported among millennial QSs in Malaysia (Keng et al., 2018) and Tanzania (Jongo et al., 2019). This confirms a generational transition in the profession's value system, where intrinsic motivators increasingly outweigh traditional extrinsic ones.

Table 2 Satisfaction with current job

Description	Very dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Unsure	Satisfied	Very satisfied	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
	1	2	3	4	5		
Job satisfaction	0%	6%	15%	40%	40%	4.13	0.89

The respondents were further asked a two-folded question in terms of how likely they are to recommend their current work as well as choose the same career again. Table 3 (below) indi-cates that the majority of the respondents are likely to recommend their place of work as well as reselect their career. The fact that they are likely to recommend their current workplace is supported by their generally high levels of job satisfaction, as well as that most of them have worked there for more than 5 years. The finding on career choice is also again aligned with the results of Bowen et al. (2007; 2008a; 2008b; 2008c). Although most respondents are likely to choose the same career again, the finding does also indicate that there are fluctuations in the levels of job satisfaction of quantity surveyors from time to time.

Table 3 Recommendation of workplace and reselection of career

Description	Extremely Unlikely	Unlikely	Unsure	Likely	Extremely Likely	Mean Score	Standard Deviation

	1	2	3	4	5		
Recommend workplace	2%	0%	18%	36%	44%	4.21	0.88
Reselect Career	16%	9%	19%	28%	28%	3.40	1.42

Motivation

Motivation to Perform Work

Respondents reported high motivation levels to perform their work (Table 3 - mean = 4.04) and a strong perception that motivation directly affects job performance (Table 4 - mean = 3.96). These results corroborate Herman et al. (2014) and Herman (2019), who similarly found that motivation is a primary driver of productivity among QSs.

The dominance of intrinsic motivators, such as creative and challenging work, autonomy, and recognition, aligns with Maslow's higher-order needs and with previous research that highlighted a generational preference for purposeful work and self-development opportunities (Van Eck & Burger, 2016). This pattern suggests that for younger QSs, motivation and satisfaction interact synergistically: satisfaction is sustained by opportunities for meaningful engagement, while motivation drives continued professional effort.

Table 4 Motivation to Perform work

Description	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Very Often	Always	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
	1	2	3	4	5		
Motivated to work	0%	6%	25%	27%	42%	4.04	0.96

The influence of Motivation on Work Performance

Table 5 summarises respondents' perceptions of how their level of motivation influences their work performance. The results show that the majority of respondents believe their motivation significantly affects their job performance, with a mean score of 3.96. This indicates that motivation is perceived not merely as a personal attribute but as a central driver of professional output among South African quantity surveyors. This finding is supported by Herman et al. (2014), who studied the impact of motivation on the job performance of quantity surveyors in Malaysia, whereby they similarly determined that motivation is a key factor that drives quantity surveyors to perform better, which results in higher productivity.

Table 5 Motivational Influence on Work Performance

Description	Not important	Slightly important	Moderately important	Important	Very important	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
	1	2	3	4	5		
Motivation towards job performance	10%	5%	10%	29%	46%	3.96	1.30

Motivating Factors

Based on a five-point Likert scale, the respondents were asked to indicate the importance of each Maslow factor towards their level of motivation, with the scales ranging from 'not important' = 1 to 'very important' = 5. Table 6 indicates the mean score, standard deviation, and ranking of the 12 factors that were offered in the questionnaire. Considering Sullivan and Artino Jr. (2013) once more, it is evident that all the factors obtained strong support. However, the five most important factors that influence motivation were: a challenging and creative work environment, job promotion prospects, satisfaction from the work done, autonomy and flexible work schedule, and recognition of achievements. These findings are closely aligned with the results of Bowen et al. (2007; 2008a; 2008b; 2008c) and Van Eck and Burger (2016) and imply that consultancy firms should foster challenging and creative work environments that provide workers with a sense of achievement through meaningful and pur-poseful work. Dollard et al. (2000) and Keng (2018) further emphasized that empowerment is a powerful motivating factor that is associated with higher morale and greater enthusiasm to-ward work, while a lack of autonomy results in frustration and job strain. Differences however emerge between the findings of this study and the results of Bowen et al. (2007; 2008a; 2008b; 2008c), with this study's respondents ranking job security and job promotion prospects as more important motivators. This could be due to the competitiveness of the job market after the COVID-19 pandemic (Nemteanu et al., 2021), while there was a shortage of quantity surveyors in South Africa in the early 2000s (Bowen et al., 2008b). Although remuneration would be different based on the region and province of employment, level of experience, and position within a company, it was generally regarded as an ordinary motivator. This indicates that quantity surveyors are content if they deem their remuneration to be market-related and aligned with their job responsibilities (Onukwube, 2012).

Furthermore, the least important motivating factors of this study were: work conditions, social interaction, and participation in a team. This indicates that physical working space, which includes elements such as thermal comfort, lighting, and noise control, should be of an adequate standard but does not have to be exceptional. Also, although quantity surveyors val-ue their time at work, social interaction in terms of team building activities and staff lunches are not vital, as well as opportunities to undertake projects as part of a team where they can engage with their colleagues.

Table 6 Motivating Factors According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs

No.	Factor	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	Rank
1	Physiological needs:			
	a) Money	4.10	0.83	7
	b) Work conditions	3.66	1.26	12
2	Safety needs:			
	Job security	4.15	0.90	6
3	Belonging needs:			
	a) Job promotion prospects	4.29	0.77	2
	b) Feedback on past performance	3.85	1.20	9
	c) Participation in a team	3.77	0.97	10
	d) Social interaction	3.71	0.90	11
4	Esteem needs:			
	a) Recognition of achievements	4.23	0.86	5
5	Self-actualisation needs:			
	a) Satisfaction from the work done	4.25	0.81	3
	b) Challenging and creative work environment	4.44	0.74	1
	c) Varied and non-repetitive work	3.91	1.09	8
	d) Low degree of supervision (autonomy) and flexible work schedule	4.25	0.91	4

Table 7 indicates the collective importance of the motivational factors when they are grouped in terms of Maslow's hierarchy. The pre-eminence of esteem and self-actualisation needs is apparent, closely followed by safety needs. Physiological and belonging needs are the least important categories. This finding is overall closely correlated with Bowen et al. (2008b; 2008c) who similarly determined that the categories of self-actualisation, esteem, and safety needs were the main drivers of motivation. This further reveals that intrinsic needs, such as responsibility and achievement, power, and having a challenging job, are valued over extrinsic needs such as money and material benefits, and that firms should be grateful for the role of self-actualisation and esteem in motivating quantity surveyors.

Table 7 Categorical Importance of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

No.	Group	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	Rank
1	Physiological needs	3.88	0.31	5
2	Safety needs	4.15	0.00	3
3	Belonging needs	3.91	0.26	4
4	Esteem needs	4.23	0.00	1
5	Self-actualisation needs	4.21	0.22	2

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study found that most QSs reported high job satisfaction and motivation levels. Data was collected through a web-based survey, in the form of a questionnaire, that targeted members registered with the Association of South African Quan-tity Surveyors (ASAQS). The analysis revealed that intrinsic factors, such as creative and challenging work (mean = 4.44), recognition (mean = 4.29), and opportunities for professional growth (mean = 4.21) play a more significant role in sustaining motivation and satisfaction than extrinsic factors such as remuneration (mean = 3.64). Important motivational factors were reported to be doing challenging and creative work, prospects of a job promotion, personal satisfaction in undertaking the work, and minimal supervision with a flexible work schedule.

These results confirm a generational shift within the profession. The majority of respondents (67 %) were Millennials or Generation Z, who place greater value on flexibility, autonomy, and career development than on purely financial incentives. Although not explicitly analysed by gender, flexibility and self-directed learning opportunities emerged as important motivators for younger professionals across the sample.

The findings align with international studies (Keng et al., 2018; Jongo et al., 2019; Herman, 2019), suggesting that contemporary QSs share a global preference for meaningful, growth-oriented work environments. The sample of 48 responses was adequate for descriptive analysis but limits statistical generalisability to the entire profession. Future studies could expand the sample size, include comparative age and gender analyses, and explore longitudinal changes in satisfaction and motivation across career stages.

This study recommends that South African quantity surveying firms prioritise motivators such as creative and challenging work, recognition, and opportunities for professional growth, as these were the strongest drivers of satisfaction and motivation. Enhancing flexibility, autonomy, and transparent career pathways can further improve engagement and retention, particularly among younger professionals. Periodic monitoring of motivation and satisfaction trends is also advised to ensure that organisational strategies remain responsive to the evolving values of the QS workforce.

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SACQSP2025-86

Building Resilience in Quantity Surveying Microenterprises in South Africa

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Abstract

Micro-quantity surveying enterprises (μ-QSEs) are numerous in South Africa, yet they face high early-stage attrition, underscoring a gap in growth guidance tailored to fee-regulated, compliance-intensive professional services. This study identifies the capabilities that enable μ-QSEs to sustain growth in the first five years and demonstrates how these capabilities inform a QS-specific maturity lens. An interpretivist, exploratory design was employed, involving ten semi-structured interviews with μ-QSE owner-managers operating across public–private segments. These interviews were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, allowing lived experience to guide theory-informed interpretation. Five interdependent capability domains emerged. (1) External Environmental Factors (Economic & Regulatory): proactive sensing of interest-rate cycles, procurement reliability, and compliance timing to reduce bid rework and defend fees. (2) Strategic Business Development & Operations: disciplined bid/no-bid selectivity, pricing realism, partner mobilisation, and lightweight standard operating procedures that compress award-to-invoice cycles. (3) Human Capital & Internal Capacity Building: mentoring, a balanced junior–senior mix, and tool-supported workflows that convert scarce senior time into reliable throughput. (4) Relationship Management & Professional Conduct: trust-building behaviours, credibility artefacts, and ethics-led service that convert first projects into repeat work and referrals. (5) Internal Mindset & Strategic Planning: a clarifying "why," short rolling plans, and routine after-action reviews that orchestrate learning and course correction. Across domains, resilience depends less on resource abundance than on dynamic capabilities - the ability to sense, seize, and reconfigure under volatility - thereby extending Resource-Based Theory with a QS-specific configuration that foregrounds institutional engagement and relational credibility. This configuration aligns with, and sharpens, prior evidence on reputation effects, selective positioning, and light process discipline in small professional firms. Practically, the findings prioritise low-overhead levers for μ-QSEs and their ecosystem: strengthening client-network and partner practices; streamlining compliance readiness and procurement navigation; codifying simple SOPs; and embedding people development to avoid capacity chokepoints. Conceptually, the study provides the foundation for a QS maturity framework that treats credibility milestones and planning cadence as explicit dimensions of progression. By evidencing how μ-QSEs absorb shocks (navigating disruption), mobilise networks (collaboration), and invest in enduring capability (a sustainable future), the study aligns with the conference theme while offering actionable guidance for practitioners, professional bodies, and policy stakeholders.

Keywords: Micro-enterprises, Quantity Surveying, Growth Factors, Resilience, Maturity Framework.

Introduction

South Africa's construction market exhibits structural fragility that exposes micro-enterprises to cyclical demand shocks, procurement uncertainty and compliance costs, raising early-stage exit risk for quantity surveying (QS) micro-enterprises (StatsSA, 2020; Department of Small Business Development [DSBD], 2023; South African Revenue Service [SARS], 2025). These conditions foreground the practical question of which organisational capabilities stabilise performance under

volatility; the focus on QS micro-enterprises are therefore warranted. Policy debates similarly emphasise targeted support for micro-firms (Rungani, 2022).

QS micro-enterprises operate within a profession shaped by formally defined identification of work, registration pathways and ethical conduct standards, which differentiate QS markets from generic small-firm settings (SACQSP, 2011; SACQSP, 2020). Evidence from South Africa documents persistent barriers to participation in procurement and tendering—information asymmetries, fee pressure, and credibility signalling—that intensify vulnerability at the start-up and early growth stages (Mishiyi et al., 2019; Nyamagere, 2010). Small-business turnover volatility further amplifies exposure to shocks (StatsSA, 2020), reinforcing the need for selectivity, compliance readiness and relational trust. These features define a QS-specific operating environment; hence, the analysis emphasises capability demands arising from profession-specific regulation and market structure.

Classical stage models describe typical organisational evolution but are contested for sectoral fit and explanatory sufficiency in turbulent contexts (Greiner, 1972; McMahon, 1998). Generic small-firm frameworks cite drivers such as opportunity recognition, positioning, and process efficiency; however, they tend to enumerate rather than integrate these into a configuration adapted to regulatory and procurement dynamics (Sidik, 2012; Rungani, 2022). Within QS scholarship, studies specify critical success factors and opportunity pathways but give less attention to the routines that reconfigure scarce resources when conditions shift (Frei & Mbachu, 2013; Vermaak & Crafford, 2023). This indicates a consequential gap: the capability configuration underpinning QS micro-enterprise performance under volatility remains under-explained; addressing this gap motivates the investigation.

The paper aims to identify the factors that accelerate early-stage growth in South African QS micro-enterprises and to articulate an evidence-based set of resilience capabilities that can inform a QS-specific maturity assessment framework. The aim is grounded in resource-based and dynamic capabilities perspectives, which explain performance through valuable resources and routines that sense, seize, and transform in the face of turbulence (Eikelenboom & de Jong, 2019). Small-firm policy instruments and procurement rules shape opportunity access and compliance costs (Republic of South Africa, 2004; DSBD, 2023), while professional regulation structures scope and conduct (SACQSP, 2011, 2020). This framing connects sector conditions to the capabilities investigated.

The central argument is that competitiveness in QS micro-enterprises depends less on resource abundance than on a small number of resilience capabilities that enable disciplined opportunity selectivity and process control, deliberate capability and resource development, relationship management, and professional credibility, as well as an internal, planning-led mindset. Evidence from QS success-factor and construction services research supports the salience of client network quality, selective tendering, and capability investment for sustained performance (Frei & Mbachu, 2013; Mishiyi et al., 2019; Vermaak & Crafford, 2023). Viewed through a dynamic-capabilities lens, these elements suggest that sensing and seizing opportunities, as well as reconfiguring routines to meet compliance and market shifts, provide the mechanism by which micro-enterprises maintain their viability (Eikelenboom & de Jong, 2019). This argument underpins the proposal for a QS-specific maturity lens that embeds institutional engagement and credibility milestones alongside operational discipline, aligning with the conference emphasis on navigating disruption, collaboration and a sustainable future.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, the literature review synthesises work on small-firm growth, QS market structure and resilience capabilities. Second, the research design appropriate to the empirical context is outlined, with attention to sampling and thematic analysis consistent with qualitative standards. Third, thematic findings from QS micro-enterprise owner-managers are presented and discussed in relation to the proposed capability configuration. Finally, implications for scholarship, professional bodies and policy stakeholders are drawn, connecting the contributions to navigating disruption, fostering collaboration and advancing a sustainable future.

Literature Review

Sector & niche conditions

South Africa's construction market remains fragile, heightening the exposure of small professional practices to demand volatility and procurement risk. Sentiment indicators report subdued confidence (Bureau for Economic Research, 2025), and sector briefs note intensified price competition and thin

margins for QS micro-enterprises (ASAQS, 2023; 2024). Under such conditions, viability turns on capability choices rather than scale.

Procurement arrangements introduce asymmetries that disadvantage newer or smaller firms. Barriers, including information asymmetry, credibility-signalling hurdles, and administrative burdens, reduce tender success (Mishiyi et al., 2019; Claasen & Cumberledge, 2014), while competitive tendering sustains fee pressure (ASAQS, 2023, 2024). Compliance frameworks further shape costs and processes: professional obligations (registration, Identification of Work) define scope (SACQSP, 2011; SACQSP, 2020), tax and administration affect cash-flow and workload (SARS, 2025; DSBD, 2023). Revenue volatility compounds these pressures; national statistics record pronounced fluctuations in small-business turnover, with significant survival implications (StatsSA, 2020). The combined effects of macro fragility, procurement asymmetries, compliance burden, and volatility justify a capability-oriented analysis.

Firm-level capability lenses

Dynamic capabilities and the resource-based view are well-suited to regulated, procurement-mediated QS markets. Dynamic capabilities focus on routines that sense shifts, seize opportunities, and reconfigure assets in the face of turbulence (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000), while the resource-based view explains performance through the deployment of valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable resources (Barney et al., 2021). Together, these lenses foreground how scarce technical, relational, and organisational resources are converted into defensible positions despite fee pressure.

Entrepreneurial cognition refers to the recognition and enactment of opportunities under conditions of uncertainty (Alvarez & Busenitz, 2001). In QS micro-enterprises, cognitive schemas shape bid/no-bid choices, partner selection, and credibility signalling in information-asymmetric contexts. When recognition is paired with disciplined commitments and post-award adaptation, advantages translate into performance through seizing/reconfiguring routines (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000; Alvarez & Busenitz, 2001). These perspectives imply a parsimonious architecture, characterised by strategic development and disciplined selectivity, human/organisational capability development, relational credibility, and client networks, as well as a planning-led internal mindset (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000; Barney et al., 2021; Alvarez & Busenitz, 2001).

Strategic development & disciplined selectivity

Strategic development is most effective when opportunity selection and positioning align bids with demonstrable strengths. Selective tendering and clear positioning increase win rates and margin protection in professional services (Frei & Mbachu, 2013), while reputation and demonstrated competence influence QS public-procurement awards beyond price, cautioning against undifferentiated low-fee bidding (Claasen & Cumberlege, 2014). Disciplined bid/no-bid routines and scope selectivity thus convert scarce marketing effort into defendable pipelines.

Selectivity is strengthened by a lightweight process discipline that stabilises delivery costs. Evidence from South African small construction services firms shows that standardising core routines—such as brief capture, measurement checkpoints, and internal review—reduces rework and cash flow strain (Vermaak & Crafford, 2023). In QS micro-enterprises, such standardisation shortens award-to-invoice cycles and lowers task-effort variance, linking front-end choice quality to back-end cost reliability. While Frei and Mbachu (2013) are not QS-specific and Vermaak and Crafford (2023) do not identify causality, convergence on selectivity, positioning, and routine control supports this capability bundle and motivates attention to relational credibility next.

Relational credibility & client networks

Relational credibility converts initial engagements into repeat work and referrals, dampening revenue volatility. Trust-based relationships, regular contact, and reliability cues drive repeat business and fee defensibility in professional services (Frei & Mbachu, 2013). In South African public procurement, track record, competence, and compliance history shape awards alongside price (Claasen & Cumberlege, 2014), indicating that credibility management reduces perceived risk.

Network mobilisation expands access where information asymmetries and reputation thresholds disadvantage newer firms; collaborative arrangements and visible past performance mitigate these

disadvantages (Mishiyi et al., 2019). Low-cost artefacts, such as concise case notes, verifiable references, and consistent conduct—and targeted partnerships align capability gaps with bid requirements (Frei & Mbachu, 2013; Mishiyi et al., 2019). Although procurement evidence is public-sector-oriented and professional-services studies are broader than QS, the consistent message is that routinised signalling and purposeful network building stabilise pipelines, provided concentration risk is managed through selective client diversification.

Internal mindset & planning / toward maturity

Generic stage models outline organisational evolution but provide limited sector-sensitive guidance under fee regulation, procurement asymmetries, and compliance load. Greiner's phases and the Churchill–Lewis life cycle, as consolidated by McMahon (1998), foreground crisis-driven change; however, this approach risks mis-specifying priorities, as credibility signalling and regulatory timing dominate access to work (SACQSP, 2011; SACQSP, 2020). Performance, therefore, depends on an internal, planning-led mindset that sequences small, repeatable capability gains under turbulent conditions.

Dynamic-capabilities and resource-based perspectives specify how such a mindset operates: sensing demand and rule shifts, seizing matched opportunities, and reconfiguring processes to meet compliance and delivery constraints (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000; Barney et al., 2021). Practical coordination devices—such as concise goals, bid/no-bid criteria, after-action reviews, and rolling cash-flow checkpoints—lower variance and institutionalise learning (Eikelenboom & de Jong, 2019). Aligning review cycles to procurement calendars and professional obligations integrates external requirements with internal routines, reducing administrative slippage and reputational risk (SACQSP, 2011; SACQSP, 2020; DSBD, 2023). A QS-specific maturity trajectory is thus conceived as progression across milestone behaviours—compliance readiness, documented bid criteria and reviews, basic process standardisation, visible credibility artefacts—rather than firm size (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000; McMahon, 1998; SACQSP, 2011, 2020).

Theoretical framework

Entrepreneurship theory posits that innovation, opportunity recognition, and effectuation serve as catalysts for early firm trajectories, highlighting entrepreneurial orientation as a prerequisite for growth (Mishra & Zachary, 2015). In volatile, fee-regulated services markets, orientation alone is insufficient. Resource-Based Theory (RBT) explains performance differentials by the possession and deployment of valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable resources, placing human capital, professional credibility, and relational networks at the centre of μ-QSE advantage (Barney et al., 2021; Alvarez & Busenitz, 2001). Where these assets are commoditised or thin, opportunity recognition does not translate into sustained outcomes, signalling the need for orchestration mechanisms beyond mere resource endowment.

Dynamic Capabilities Theory (DCT) provides these mechanisms by specifying routines that sense environmental shifts, seize viable options, and reconfigure assets and processes in the face of turbulence (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000; Eikelenboom & de Jong, 2019; Dejardin et al., 2023). For μ-QSEs exposed to cyclical demand and procurement constraints, dynamic capabilities clarify how scarce technical, organisational, and relational resources are continually recombined to preserve viability. Life Cycle Theory (LCT) complements this view by emphasising stage-contingent vulnerabilities and transitions—particularly the move from start-up to early growth, where credibility thresholds and compliance timing are most salient (Muda et al., 2016; Mosca et al., 2021; De Sousa et al., 2024).

Competitive direction is informed by classical strategy tools, adapted to QS realities. Porter's generic strategies and Ansoff's matrix illuminate positioning and expansion routes (Tanwar, 2013; Leitner & Guldenberg, 2010; Ngo, 2023; Hussain et al., 2013; Ferreira, 2024), but their underlying assumptions—scale economies, product emphasis, and discretionary pricing—require adjustment for small, fee-regulated professional services (Bellamy et al., 2019). In μ-QSEs, defensible positioning typically entails niche focus, partnership-led scope extension, and selective market development, each contingent on dynamic capabilities to adjust under shocks.

Integrating these perspectives yields a layered model of μ-QSE growth (Figure 1). The foundation comprises entrepreneurial orientation and opportunity utilisation (Mishra & Zachary, 2015; Muda et al.,

2016; Mosca et al., 2021; De Sousa et al., 2024). The middle layer emphasises resource deployment and capability development grounded in RBT and DCT—human/organisational upgrading, credibility building, and process standardisation (Alvarez & Busenitz, 2001; Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000; Eikelenboom & de Jong, 2019; Barney et al., 2021). The apex concerns strategic positioning and growth trajectory, informed by Porter/Ansoff logics adapted to QS (Tanwar, 2013; Leitner & Guldenberg, 2010; Ngo, 2023; Hussain et al., 2013; Ferreira, 2024; Bellamy et al., 2019). The framework implies that resilience arises when entrepreneurial orientation is channelled through dynamic routines that orchestrate scarce resources, embed compliance and institutional engagement, and align positioning with credible, low-overhead pathways. The empirical study that follows examines this configuration qualitatively to identify context-specific growth drivers and to inform a tailored maturity assessment lens for South African μ-QSEs.

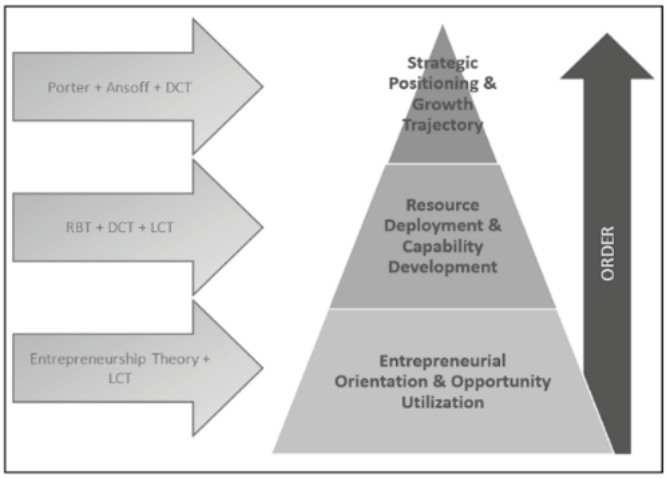

Figure 1. Theoretical framework depicting μ-QSE growth factors in South Africa (Source: Own illustration)

Methodology

This study investigates the factors that accelerate the growth of micro-quantity surveying enterprises (μ-QSEs) in South Africa. The research design was grounded in a subjectivist ontology and an interpretivist paradigm, recognising that μ-QSE realities are socially constructed through the lived experiences of their owners. Interpretivism was selected because it is well-suited for exploring complex, context-dependent issues where meaning is embedded in personal and professional practices (Saunders et al., 2023). The study followed an inductive, qualitative design, enabling themes to emerge directly from participants' narratives (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Alignment with Research Aim

The central aim was to identify growth factors that strengthen the resilience and sustainability of μ-QSEs during their vulnerable early years. A qualitative interpretivist approach enabled the research to capture context-rich perspectives that are often overlooked by quantitative methods. The design is therefore aligned with the need to build a foundation for a tailored maturity assessment framework for QS microenterprises.

Sampling and Participants

A purposive, non-probability sampling strategy was adopted to select owners of μ-QSEs across South Africa. Inclusion criteria followed the National Small Business Act definition of microenterprises (fewer than ten employees; turnover under R7.5 million) (Republic of South Africa, 2004; ASAQS, 2023). The focus was on firms operating within their first five years, identified as the period of highest failure and vulnerability (Mhlongo & Daya, 2023). Twelve participants were interviewed, consistent with Creswell and Creswell's (2018) guidance that qualitative studies commonly reach saturation between three and ten participants. While not statistically representative, the sample provided variation in geography, market focus, and ownership profile, offering information-rich cases for analysis.

Data Collection Methods

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, which strike a balance between consistency and flexibility. This method was chosen because it allowed participants to articulate their experiences in their own words, while ensuring comparability across cases. Five core questions, informed by the literature (Bushe, 2019; Ogujiuba et al., 2023), guided the interviews. These explored motivations for establishing enterprises, challenges encountered, strategies for resilience, definitions of success, and support needs. Probing questions enabled deeper exploration of issues such as competition, compliance, and professional credibility. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using NVivo-supported thematic analysis. The coding process consisted of three stages: open coding to capture initial concepts, axial coding to establish relationships, and selective coding to integrate categories into overarching themes. This structured process reflects established qualitative practice (Saunders et al., 2023). To enhance analytic trustworthiness, an audit trail of coding decisions was maintained in NVivo, while findings were compared with existing literature to check for convergence or divergence (Saunders et al., 2023).

Ethical Considerations

The study received approval from the University of the Free State General/Human Research Ethics Committee (clearance number: UFS-HSD2024/0240). Participants provided written informed consent after receiving full disclosure of the study's aims, procedures, and rights, including voluntary withdrawal. Confidentiality was protected by anonymising transcripts and storing digital data securely. Ethical conduct was guided by principles of respect, integrity, and confidentiality (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Rationale for Method Choices

The study's context shaped the methodological decisions and aims. A qualitative, interpretivist approach was necessary to capture the nuanced realities of μ-QSE growth, which are influenced by regulatory pressures and professional norms — factors often missed in quantitative models. Semi-structured interviews provided the depth required to explore sensitive issues such as fee discounting and compliance burdens, while purposive sampling ensured the inclusion of cases most affected by early-stage vulnerabilities. These choices together form a coherent strategy for developing a context-sensitive understanding of growth dynamics.

Clarity, Order, and Integration

The methodology is presented in a logical sequence: paradigm, alignment, sampling, data collection, analysis, and ethics. Each step builds upon the previous one, ensuring clarity and enabling replicability. Importantly, the methodology is embedded within the article's argument, not treated as a stand-alone technical insert. The interpretivist stance, purposive sampling, and thematic analysis are all directly linked to the study's aim of laying the foundation for a QS-specific maturity assessment framework.

Results and Discussion

This section reports how South African quantity surveying (QS) micro-enterprises build resilience and early-stage growth within fee-regulated, procurement-mediated markets. Drawing on ten semi-structured owner-manager interviews analysed through reflexive thematic analysis, five interrelated themes were identified. Each theme integrates operational routines and decision logics that shape opportunity access, delivery reliability, reputation formation, and planning discipline. The themes, sub-categories, and illustrative codes are presented in Table 1 and serve as the organising scaffold for the discussion.

The results indicate a consistent pattern of pragmatic, capability-centred adaptation. Firms emphasise selective client/project acquisition and lightweight process control, deliberate development of people and culture, routinised credibility building, and ethics-led service, as well as a planning-led mindset anchored in a clear vision, measurable goals, and iterative learning. Performance differences are

explained more by the disciplined configuration of these routines than by firm size. The discussion interprets each theme in relation to the study's theoretical frame, highlighting how external conditions channel strategic choices and how human, relational, and planning capabilities collectively stabilise growth.

Table 1 Results coding tree for research question: "What factors accelerate the growth of μ-QSEs in SA from start-up?"

Emerging Themes	Sub-Categories	Codes
1. External Environmental Factors (Economic & Regulatory)	A. Economic Stability & Favourable Conditions	▪ Lowering of the lending rate ▪ Stable and secure economy
	B. Regulatory & Industry Environment	▪ Municipalities sticking to prescribed timelines ▪ Addressing BBBEE impact ▪ Charging fees without excessive discounts
2. Strategic Business Development & Operations	A. Client & Project Acquisition Strategy	▪ Securing more projects ▪ Focusing on bigger value projects ▪ Working with developers with multiple ongoing developments ▪ Securing more direct projects ▪ Diversifying clients and product offerings ▪ Acquiring more work
	B. Operational Efficiency & Expansion	▪ More efficient operational management ▪ Building more efficient processes ▪ Maintaining ideal "capacity : income" growth ▪ Expanding operations
3. Human Capital & Internal Capacity Building	A. Talent Acquisition & Development	▪ Employing young professionals ▪ Empowering star employees ▪ Providing opportunities for younger generation ▪ Starting a training facility ▪ Maintaining right ratio between junior and senior staff
	B. Organisational Culture & Support	▪ Giving employees tools and support ▪ Recognition and structured rewards strategy ▪ Encouraging personal and professional development ▪ Building a strong company culture
4. Relationship Management & Professional Conduct	A. Networking & Credibility	▪ Investing more in organic networking ▪ Building credibility and strong relationships with clients
	B. Service Delivery & Ethics	▪ Being indispensable in service provided ▪ Honesty and accountability in communication with clients ▪ Providing high-quality, affordable services that add value ▪ Exceeding expectations

5. Internal Mindset & Strategic Planning	A. Vision & Beliefs	▪ Fruition of all created and engaged opportunities ▪ Eliminating limited beliefs ▪ Having a clear vision ▪ Having a clear "Why?"
	B. Business Planning & Measurement	▪ Clear business strategy and five-year plan ▪ Measuring progress against goals ▪ Focus on continuous learning and adaptation ▪ Taking a step-by-step approach ▪ Strategic plans for accelerated service delivery

Theme 1 identifies contextual enablers and constraints that set the boundary conditions for growth. Themes 2–5 show how selective market engagement, process discipline, capability development, and credibility-centred relationships convert scarce resources into repeatable performance. Theme V integrates these practices through vision-led planning and measurement, providing the cadence that links external conditions to firm-level outcomes. Each theme is unpacked in the subsections that follow, using the sub-categories and codes in Table 1 to interpret patterns in relation to the theoretical framework.

Theme 1: External Environmental Factors (Economic & Regulatory)

Macroeconomic and regulatory conditions influenced the decisions of most participants, especially firms heavily reliant on municipal/public work. Demand tracked financing costs and sentiment - “the construction sector has been under pressure … and interest rates have impacted the pace of new developments” (Interview 6). When lending eased and the economy felt steadier, pipelines revived and discounting pressure fell; this pattern accords with sector confidence and fee-pressure briefs (Bureau for Economic Research, 2025; ASAQS, 2023, 2024). Procurement reliability and compliance load were decisive: slippage against advertised municipal timelines resulted in bid rework, deferred awards, and invoicing delays; where timelines were met, award-to-invoice cycles were shortened. BBBEE rules influenced partnering and team composition, while clarity and consistency facilitated bid assembly (DSBD, 2023; SACQSP, 2011, 2020). Persistent fee pressure intersected with credibility thresholds - “regulatory compliance was complex for a small firm … competition from established players made it hard to win tenders” (Interview 8) - echoing documented procurement asymmetries and reputation effects (Mishiyi et al., 2019; Claasen & Cumberlege, 2014). Interpreted through dynamic capabilities, macro easing enlarges briefs to sense; predictable procurement enables cleaner seizing; clear policy pathways support reconfiguration (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000). The theme therefore, sits squarely with the capability framing and sector evidence (ASAQS, 2023, 2024), specifying how external conditions bound viable bidding and fee defensibility.

Theme 2: Strategic Business Development & Operations

Growth hinged on winning the right work and running it simply. Pipeline quality improved with direct access and repeat developers - “the importance of agility, direct client involvement, and staying lean” (Interview 2) - and through earlier partnering to “strengthen our pipeline” (Interview 9). These choices align with professional services findings that selective positioning and partnerships protect margins and increase award probabilities beyond price (Frei & Mbachu, 2013; Claasen & Cumberlege, 2014). Operationally, small, repeatable routines (templates, shared workspaces, brief checkpoints) compressed award-to-invoice cycles - “Our operations are streamlined… standardised templates… and Google Workspace” (Interview 8) - consistent with evidence that light process discipline reduces rework in small construction services (Vermaak & Crafford, 2023). Capacity remained the binding constraint - “What hinders us now is capacity” (Interviews 1 & 6) - so firms staged growth, balancing higher-value projects with steady smaller work (Interview 10). Framed by dynamic capabilities, disciplined selectivity enhances seizing (bid/no-bid fit), while lightweight standardisation enables reconfiguration that keeps delivery variance low (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000). The theme thus integrates the literature’s reputation/positioning logic with operational control findings, showing how

selective acquisition, combined with simple SOPs, translates scarce resources into stable pipelines and margins.

Theme 3: Human Capital & Internal Capacity Building

Progress was a people-and-practice challenge: culture, mentoring, and tool-supported routines expanded delivery capacity. Founding intent centred on values - "more personal, flexible, and values-driven" (Interview 2) - with early learning-by-doing: "two years to learn how to adapt… relationships were as important as technical skills" (Interview 5); "about six months to adjust… convincing clients to trust a brand-new firm" (Interview 9). Capacity building relied on enabling juniors and standardising workflows - "merge traditional QS expertise with modern data-driven tools" (Interview 9); "digital tools… cloud-based estimating… to keep overheads low" (Interview 8). This emphasis aligns with RBV's focus on human and relational capital as sources of advantage (Barney et al., 2021) and with small-firm evidence on rework reduction via light standardisation (Vermaak & Crafford, 2023). Credibility accumulation and people development were intertwined - "one of our early challenges was credibility… that a one-year-old firm could manage multi-million-rand projects" (Interview 9) - reinforcing professional-services findings on reputation pathways (Frei & Mbachu, 2013). In capability terms, mentoring and SOPs expand seizing capacity (more work at quality), while shared tools and culture enable reconfiguration (faster onboarding, lower variance) under volatility (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000). The theme situates human-capital routines as the platform that turns selective opportunities into reliable throughput.

Theme 4: Relationship Management & Professional Conduct

Relationship depth and conduct powered pipeline stability and fee defensibility. Credibility was cumulative - "reputation is earned one project at a time…" (Interview 1) - and person-centred: "Clients trust people, not logos" (Interview 2). Persistence in networking preceded repeat work - "six months of trial, error, and networking… before we… started getting repeat business" (Interview 4). Hands-on, accountable delivery - "I was hands-on with every project" (Interview 6) - and predictable updates reduced perceived client risk, raising selection probabilities and enabling guideline-proximate fees. These mechanisms align with findings that reputation/credibility influence awards beyond price (Claasen & Cumberlege, 2014) and that trust-based ties drive repeat business in professional services (Frei & Mbachu, 2013). The theme adds conduct-level granularity (personal contact, case notes, reliable communication) to those logics within QS constraints. Where access was mediated by anonymous portals, participants reported thinner margins and less repeat work, consistent with procurement asymmetries noted in the literature (Mishiyi et al., 2019). Relationship routines therefore operate as a capability that converts first engagements into quasi-proprietary pipelines.

Theme 5: Internal Mindset & Strategic Planning

An internal, planning-led mindset converted volatility into clearer choices and more reliable delivery. Vision anchored direction - "merge traditional QS expertise with modern data-driven tools" (Interview 9) - while persistence and adaptive review sustained execution (Interview 6). Operating at micro scale required shedding big-firm assumptions - "unlearn the mindset of a large firm… wearing multiple hats" (Interview 10) - and building cadence - "two years to find our rhythm" (Interview 11). In dynamic-capabilities terms, a clear "why" sharpens sensing; a short, living plan improves seizing (bid/no-bid, near-term goals); scheduled reviews enable reconfiguration (tuning workflows, roles, partnerships) (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000). This complements RBV's emphasis on human/organisational capital (Barney et al. 2021) and converges with small-firm evidence on the benefits of light process discipline (Vermaak & Crafford, 2023). The theme thus positions mindset and cadence as integrators that connect selective market engagement to operational control and sustain credibility through consistent follow-through.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 2 synthesises the study's theoretical lenses with the five empirical themes to explain how South African QS micro-enterprises configure resilience under volatility. Entrepreneurship theory and classical strategy tools (Ansoff; Porter) inform opportunity creation and positioning, while Life-Cycle Theory clarifies early-stage vulnerabilities (Mishra & Zachary, 2015; Tanwar, 2013; Leitner & Guldenberg, 2010; Ngo, 2023; Hussain et al., 2013; Ferreira, 2024; Muda et al., 2016; Mosca et al., 2021; De Sousa et al., 2024). The Resource-Based View foregrounds human and relational assets,

and Dynamic Capabilities Theory specifies the routines that sense shifts, seize opportunities, and reconfigure processes (Barney et al., 2021; Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000; Eikelenboom & de Jong, 2019). These lenses converge in strategic development, expressed as disciplined bid/no-bid choice, niche focus, and partnership formation.

The external environment shapes the pay-offs to these choices. Economic easing and predictable procurement timelines enlarge the pool of viable bids, whereas fee pressure and procedural drift compress it (ASAQS, 2023, 2024; Claasen & Cumberlege, 2014; DSBD, 2023). In parallel, human capital - encompassing mentoring, junior-senior ratios, tool provisioning, and streamlined SOPs - provides the delivery platform that makes larger, better-fit work credible; routine delivery further professionalises teams, reinforcing strategic options (Vermaak & Crafford, 2023). At the centre, an internal mindset of clear vision and short planning cadences orchestrates the sense-seize-reconfigure cycle, translating environmental signals and strategic intentions into operational change.

Ultimately, relationship management serves as the primary channel for achieving outcomes. Reliable follow-through, ethical conduct, and predictable communication institutionalise credibility, convert first engagements into repeat work, and defend fees; these effects feedback to strengthen positioning and enable further capability investment (Frei & Mbachu, 2013; Claasen & Cumberlege, 2014). The interpretive claim is that resilience arises not from resource abundance, but from a configuration: selective strategic development, human capital routines, and a planning-led mindset that together convert external conditions into credible, relationship-based pipelines. This QS-specific configuration operationalises RBV and DCT and underpins the proposed maturity lens.

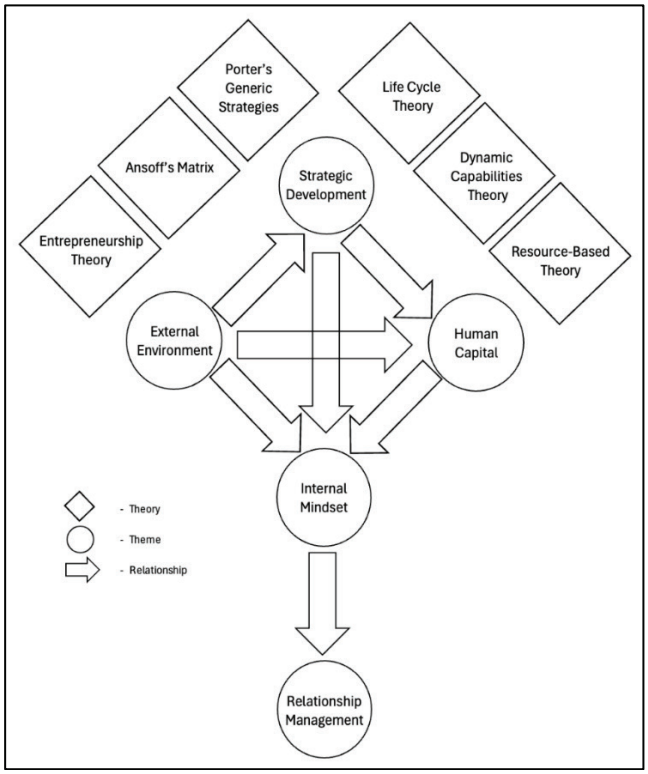

Figure 2 Conceptual Framework depicting µ-QSE Growth Factors in South Africa. Source: Own illustration

Conclusions

This study aimed to identify factors that accelerate early-stage growth in South African quantity surveying (QS) microenterprises and to articulate an evidence-based capability configuration for resilience in the face of volatility. The analysis answers this aim by showing that performance depends less on resource abundance than on a configuration of four interlocking capabilities: selective strategic development and disciplined operations; human-capital routines that convert junior effort into reliable delivery; relationship management and ethics-led conduct that turn first projects into repeat work; and an internal, planning-led mindset that orchestrates short sense–seize–reconfigure cycles. The core

take-home is concise: win selectively, run simply, invest in people, and plan in short cycles - these together stabilise pipelines and defend fees in fee-regulated, procurement-mediated markets.

These conclusions are consistent with the totality of the evidence reported: interview themes converged on selectivity, lightweight process control, credibility, and cadence, aligning with prior work on reputation, process discipline, and dynamic adaptation in small professional firms. Inference is bounded by a qualitative design, owner-manager self-report, and a South African QS context; effects should therefore be interpreted as credible mechanisms rather than causal magnitudes. Generalisability is strongest for early-stage QS micro-firms operating in mixed public–private markets; caution should be exercised when transferring to other professions or mature firms, particularly where procurement, fee regulation, or compliance differ.

Recommendations

At the firm level, the highest-priority actions are low-overhead and immediately feasible. QS owner-managers should institute a one-page rolling plan - articulating vision, three to five goals, explicit bid/no-bid criteria, and a monthly review cadence. Time scarcity can be mitigated by fixing a 60-minute session each month using a simple template. Progress should be monitored through the share of bids meeting criteria and completion of a monthly cash-flow checkpoint. In parallel, firms should codify lightweight SOPs for brief capture, measurement checkpoints, and internal review, supported by standard toolsets (templates and a shared workspace). Where licence costs or training pose barriers, initial adoption can rely on low-cost cloud tools. Operational impact is tracked through the award-to-invoice cycle time and the number of rework incidents per project. Credibility should be formalised through one-page case notes and verifiable references, paired with post-project check-ins; effects are observed in the repeat-work ratio and the average discount to guideline fees.

A second, strong but conditional, tier applies where modest resources are available. Firms should pre-assemble BBBEE-compliant partner constellations and diarise internal bid gates against municipal milestones. Risks include partner availability and shifting calendars; mitigations include a two-deep partner bench and quarterly calendar updates. Monitoring focuses on bid rework events and bid mobilisation lead time. At the professional interface, ASAQS should provide micro-firm toolkits (bid/no-bid templates, SOP checklists, and reference formats) and short clinics on credibility signalling and fee realism, with uptake assessed through member participation, self-reported discounts to guidelines, and repeat work ratios.

A third, context-dependent tier addresses system constraints. Procuring authorities/municipalities should publish and adhere to milestone calendars and issue variance notes when slippage occurs; feasibility is medium and requires a process owner. Performance is tracked by on-time tender percentage and average award delay. DSBD and finance partners should pilot working-capital products aligned with QS cash cycles, prioritising new entrants and underserved regions. Evaluation includes uptake, delinquency, and 24-month survival rates.

Cross-cutting evaluation at the owner level should review, quarterly, five indicators—win rate on “fit” bids, average discount to guideline, award-to-invoice cycle time, repeat-work ratio, and junior:senior ratio—against the one-page plan, adjusting actions accordingly. These recommendations remain proportionate to evidence and feasible for micro-enterprises.

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SACQSP2025-90

Reimagining Graduate Attributes for Construction 4.0 Readiness in South African Quantity Surveying and Construction Management Education

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Abstract

This paper explores how discussions on Construction 4.0 (C4.0) and Construction 5.0 (C5.0) are reshaping graduate attribute (GAs) considerations in Quantity Surveying (QS) and Construction Management (CM) education in South Africa. The study aims to evaluate how students, lecturers, and industry professionals perceive the integration of attributes or soft skills in curricula and propose strategies for curriculum transformation. An abductive convergent mixed-methods design was adopted, with the current paper primarily focusing on the quantitative data sets collected through semi-structured questionnaires across five accredited South African Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and industry participants (students: n = 95; lecturers: n = 29; industry: n = 327). Descriptive analyses were utilised to validate the relevance of existing generic GAs. In comparison, qualitative data were used for contextual purposes in the triangulation of the statistical data. The study revealed strong consensus among students, lecturers, and industry professionals on the relevance of nine core GAs, particularly problem-solving, critical thinking, and digital literacy. While the existing GA framework was broadly endorsed, participants, especially students and industry stakeholders, suggested expanding the list to include practice-oriented and well-being-focused competencies. The findings underscore the need for responsive curriculum design that integrates technical and human-centric skills to meet the demands of Construction 4.0 and 5.0. The study focused on nine specific GAs, and responses are based on self-reported perceptions within South Africa, which may be influenced by the respondents' institutional and industry culture, as well as their professional exposure. The study highlights the need for HEIs to align curricula with evolving industry demands by embedding dynamic, stakeholder-informed GAs that bridge technical and human-centric competencies for Construction 4.0 and 5.0 readiness. The study contributes to the future alignment of QS education by providing insights into the relationship between knowledge, skills, competencies, and attributes.

Keywords: Graduate Attributes, Construction 4.0, Construction 5.0, Curriculum Transformation, Innovation Readiness.

Introduction

Graduate Attributes (GAs) have gained significant attention in higher education globally as institutions respond to evolving demands for enhanced graduate employability (Barrie, 2004:262; Griesel & Parker, 2009:ix; UFS, 2019:2) and the impact of Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) technologies (Schwab, 2016:1; Morrar, Arman & Mousa, 2017:12). In the context of the Construction Built Environment (CBE), the role of GAs becomes even more pertinent as they underpin the development of the professional and interpersonal skills required for future-ready graduates (du Plessis & Holtzhausen, 2025:2-3). As curricula increasingly incorporate digital transformation imperatives, understanding the role of GAs in realising Construction 4.0 (C4.0) effectiveness is timely and essential (Lu, 2017: 1-3; Sawhney, Riley & Irizarry, 2020:3). Furthermore, GAs appear to have critical potential in shaping a Construction 5.0 (C5.0) framework, which prioritises technological fluency and human-centred capabilities (Newman et al., 2021:510; van Heerden et al., 2023:4).

For statutory and professional bodies within the construction disciplines, graduate readiness continues to be measured primarily through the lens of competencies (du Plessis & Holtzhausen, 2025: 3). While these frameworks are essential, they often fall short of explicitly addressing the broader developmental aspirations tied to soft skills and applied knowledge (Van Eck, 2024:33). Thus, to fully integrate GAs

within professional learning pathways, higher education institutions (HEIs) must reflect critically on the conceptual relationship between knowledge, skills, competencies, and attributes (KSCA) (Warier, 2014: 19). The nuanced interdependence of these components informs both the vertical (outcomes, assessment, and progression) and horizontal (module integration and teaching coherence) alignment of curricula, both of which are crucial for authentic teaching and learning within CBE education (Koc et al., 2020:464; Begić & Galić, 2021:7; Frake-Mistak, Friberg & Hamilton, 2023:4&7).

Aims: This study applies the principles of Expansive Learning (Engeström, 2001: 138) to interrogate the current positioning of GAs in QS and CM programmes. As part of a broader doctoral inquiry, a convergent mixed-methods approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2018: 218) was used to capture the perceptions of three stakeholder groups: industry practitioners, lecturers, and students regarding the relevance and applicability of nine proposed GAs. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics (Creswell & Creswell, 2018:173), while thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 5 & 14) was applied to qualitative responses collected through a semi-structured survey instrument. This methodological framework provided a grounded foundation for understanding both the acceptance of and resistance to GA implementation.

In response to the complexities revealed, this paper argues for initiating Change Laboratories (Garraway, 2021), a method rooted in Expansive Learning, to facilitate participatory curriculum transformation. These laboratories provide a collaborative platform for stakeholders to surface contradictions (Posillico et al., 2023), explore innovative solutions, and develop contextually responsive, future-ready curricula tailored for the realities of Construction 4.0 and 5.0.

Literature Review

The transformative nature of the construction sector under Industry 4.0 (I4) and the shifting priorities in higher education (HE) call for the reconsideration of how competencies and graduate attributes (GAs) are conceptualised within South Africa's Construction Built Environment (CBE), particularly in Quantity Surveying (QS) and Construction Management (CM). While regulatory frameworks remain grounded in skills, knowledge, and competencies (CIOB, 2018; RICS, 2019; SACPCMP, 2020; SACQSP, 2014), they often overlook behavioural dimensions essential for employability (UFS, 2019: 7), in a technological evolving industry (Newman et al., 2021: 558). Conceptual models by Barrie (2004), Griesel and Parker (2009), and Van Eck (2024) redefine GAs to include communication, adaptability, and emotional intelligence as qualities increasingly valued by employers. To address systematic misalignments, the Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) and Expansive Learning (EL) (Engeström, 2001) offer a framework for institutional transformation through stakeholder collaboration and reflection. Collectively, the literature underlines the need for integrating GAs as a strategic educational and developmental response in the transition from Construction 4.0 (C4.0) to the human-centric paradigm of Construction 5.0 (C5.0) (Newman et al., 2021: 510; van Heerden et al., 2023: 4).

Built Environment Competency

Competence within the South African CBE is primarily defined by professional councils such as the South African Council for the Quantity Surveying Profession (SACQSP) and the South African Council for the Project and Construction Management Professions (SACPCMP) (Hauptfleisch, 2024: 24). These frameworks emphasise measurable knowledge and skills while often underrepresenting values, behaviours, and soft skills essential for graduate success in real-world contexts (CIOB, 2018; RICS, 2019; SACPCMP, 2020; SACQSP, 2014). While Warier (2014:19) conceptualises graduate attributes (GAs) as integral components of overall competence, suggesting that true professional competence lies at the intersection of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviours. As such, HEIs have increasingly recognised the need to embed GAs into their curricula to bridge the gap between academic training and workplace readiness (Normand & Anderson, 2017). This shift is also mirrored in the growing international emphasis on aligning higher education outcomes with the realities of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), or Construction 4.0 (C4.0), where technological, behavioural, and ethical competencies coalesce to define employability in the digital era (Lu, 2017:1-10; Sawhney, Riley & Irizarry, 2020: 3).

Built environment transformative shifts: Leveraging C4.0 and innovation diffusion for enhanced efficiency, sustainability and adaptability

Integrating C4.0 technologies, including Building Information Modelling (BIM), AI-based decision support systems, and real-time data tools, transforms the built environment by demanding new forms of adaptability (Marinelli, 2023: 16) and lifelong learning from professionals (Dhunpath et al., 2021:126-129). These changes pressure HEIs to teach digital tools and foster the broader meta-skills required to adapt to constant change. As GAs form the conceptual vehicle for such preparedness, their inclusion is critical to enable graduates to meet future-fit demands such as sustainability, interdisciplinary collaboration, and resilience (Mansour et al., 2023:1460). However, the rate of curriculum transformation in South Africa remains slow and fragmented, with limited integration of technological adaptability and soft skill development across traditional modules.

Conceptualising Graduate Attributes for the South African CBE

Barrie (2007) highlighted the importance of recognising the progression of GAs from remedial (stand-alone) foundational interventions through teaching professional-specific GA processes up to the contributing learner-focused progression of GAs. Griesel and Parker (2009) were among the first South African scholars to systematically map the relationship between higher education outcomes and employability, arguing that GAs serve as the "translational layer" between academic content and workplace expectations. The conceptualisation in this study distinguishes between module content (the "what") and graduate attributes (the "how") (Hill et al., 2021:54), noting that transformative education requires both vertical alignment (across years of study) and horizontal alignment (across disciplines and competencies) (Frake-Mistak et al., 2023:4 & 7). This integration ensures that students acquire knowledge and are empowered to apply it ethically and innovatively within evolving workplace contexts (UFS, 2019: 14). van Heerden et al. (2023) further affirm the need to embed soft skills into built environment education. These expectations challenge educators to reframe curricula to include attributes such as emotional intelligence, communication, and adaptability, not merely as peripheral outcomes but as core components of professional identity, grounded in Law of Diffusion of Innovation (Rogers, 2003:68-218).

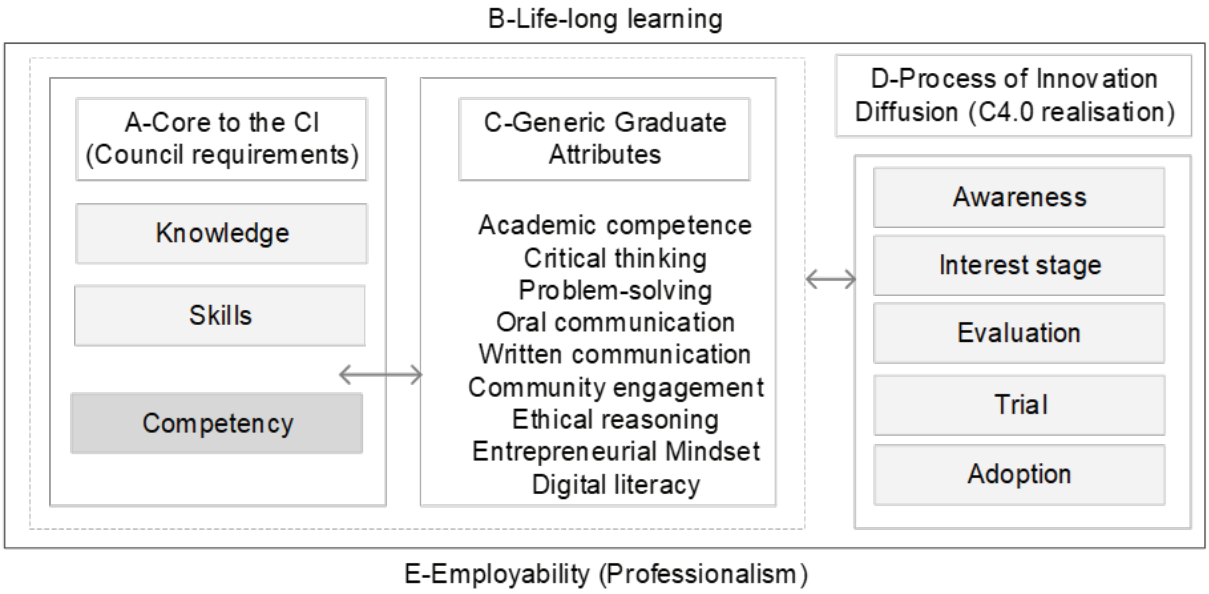

Figure 1: Conceptualisation of Module Content and GAs in the South African CBE. (Source: Adapted from Rogers (2003: 170); Barrie (2004: 262); Griesel & Parker (2009); UFS (2019))

For the study, nine general GAs were considered as defined by the UFS teaching and learning strategy (UFS, 2019: 10):

- **Academic competence:** Development of knowledge, skills, and values through engagement with discipline-specific content.

- **Critical thinking:** The ability to explore issues and ideas comprehensively before forming an opinion or conclusion.
- **Problem-solving:** Designing, evaluating, and implementing processes to address open-ended questions or achieve defined goals.
- **Oral communication:** Purposeful presentations aimed at increasing knowledge, fostering understanding, or influencing listeners' attitudes, beliefs, or behaviours.
- **Written communication:** The effective use of various writing technologies to combine texts, data, and images for meaningful communication.
- **Community engagement:** Applying knowledge, skills, and values to contribute meaningfully to diverse communities through cultural and social awareness.
- **Ethical reasoning:** The capacity to assess right and wrong in human conduct, considering both personal values and social contexts.
- **Entrepreneurial mindset:** Possessing the attitudes, skills, and behaviours necessary for academic, personal, and professional success.
- **Digital literacy:** The confident and effective use of digital technologies to access, evaluate, create, and communicate information in technology-rich environments.

Expansive Learning within the Activity Theory Framework

Engeström's (2001, 2015) theory of expansive Learning (EL) offers a useful analytical lens to respond to these systemic shifts. Within this framework, contradictions between existing practices (e.g., outdated curricula) and emerging needs (e.g., C4.0 integration) are used to motivate collective transformation.

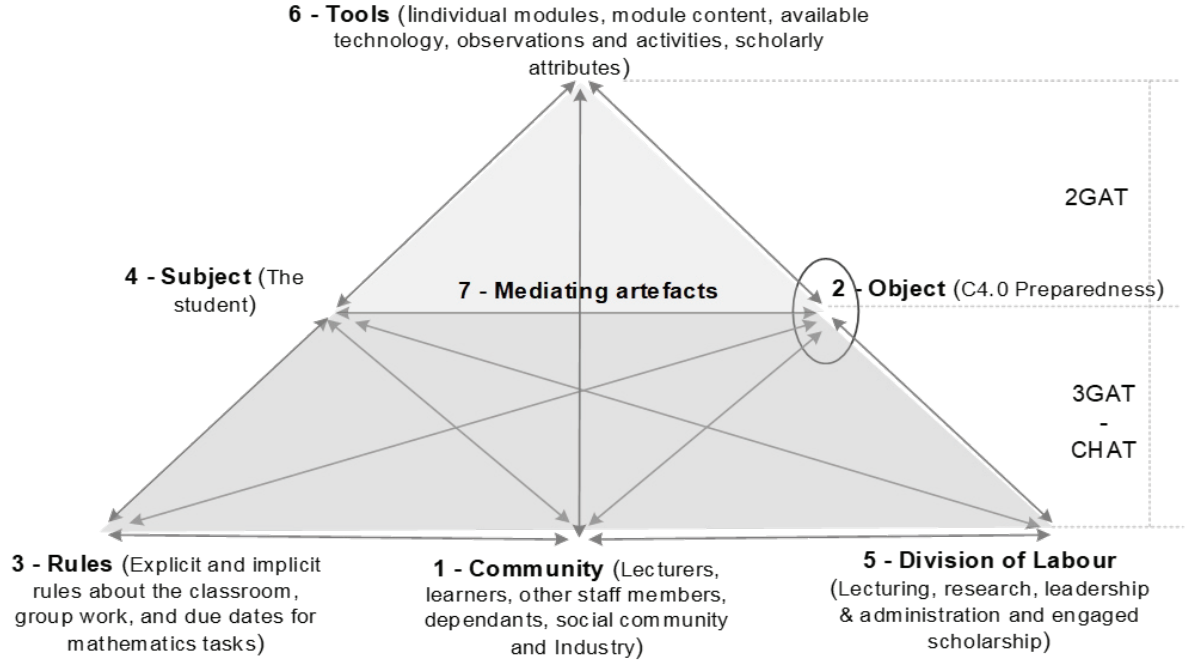

Figure 2 Cultural Historical Activity Theory within QS and CM programmes (Adapted from: Engeström (2001:135); Jones & Hashim (2014: 3&7); Crawford & Hasan (2006:6-8), Spinuzzi (2020))

The expansive learning activity system builds on this foundation, mapping who learns (students, lecturers, industry), why they learn (to resolve contradictions in curriculum and practice), what they learn (technological and collaborative practices), and how they learn (through reflective cycles of questioning and innovation). The emphasis on contradictions aligns with the findings of Garraway (2021), who advocates for Change Laboratories as a participatory intervention method (Engeström & Sannino, 2010:15-16) to support systemic educational transformation in the South African CBE. By incorporating these frameworks, this study positions graduate attribute development not as a static checklist but as an expansive, collaborative process for future-focused curriculum reform (Posillico et al., 2023).

Collectively, the reviewed literature highlights tensions between global advancements in C4.0/ C5.0 education and South Africa's slower curriculum transformation, underscoring the need for contextual responsiveness.

Research Methodology

This study employed a convergent mixed-methods approach within a pragmatist paradigm (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018:70), underpinned by Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) and Expansive Learning (Engeström, 2001:138), to explore the integration of Graduate Attributes (GAs) in South Africa's Quantity Surveying (QS) and Construction Management (CM) curricula (du Plessis & Holtzhausen, 2025: 23). The rationale for this design was to simultaneously collect and analyse quantitative and qualitative data to triangulate (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018:62) stakeholder perspectives and examine systemic educational challenges related to Construction 4.0 and 5.0 transitions. Guided by a pilot study, a purposeful sampling approach [a subset of probability sampling (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014:142) was adopted.

Data were collected through a semi-structured online survey consisting of Likert-scale questions and open-ended questions (Naoum, 2007:73). The survey instrument was distributed via mailing lists, LinkedIn, and alumni networks, targeting three groups: students (n = 95 – an estimated 3.92% of the total population), lecturers (n = 29 - an estimated 34.8% of the total population), and industry practitioners (n = 327 - an estimated 3.68% of the total population). The industry cohort included both registered (Pr QS = 90; Can QS = 108; Pr CPM = 39; Can CPM = 32; Pr CM = 17; Can CM = 2) and non-registered practitioners (n=39) across various career stages and professional roles. Student and academic participants were drawn from five accredited South African higher education institutions, with students mainly in their third or fourth year of study, and lecturers involved in curriculum delivery and development. Twelve HEIs with variable accreditation statuses were considered (SACPCMP, 2023; SACQSP, 2023), where eight institutions were identified after the first round of elimination, of which five hold international accreditation (CIOB, 2024; RICS, 2024). Ethical clearance was obtained from five institutions to access students and lecturers for the research, with the overarching ethical clearance obtained from the University of the Free State (UFS-HSD2022/0241/22).

Using a placement of theory approach (Naoum, 2007:39), quantitative data were analysed descriptively using means, percentages, and actual amounts, focusing on consensus and divergence regarding nine proposed GAs (Johnson & Christensen, 2014:527-533). Qualitative data were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase method, which involved coding participant reflections on the relevance, implementation, and contextual alignment of GAs. The triangulated analysis enabled a three-dimensional comparison of stakeholder views (Edwards & Holt, 2010), thereby enhancing the credibility, validity, and contextual richness of the findings. As a limitation, the methodological focus on nine Graduate Attributes, derived from the UFS Teaching and Learning Strategy (UFS, 2019:10), may not capture all attributes relevant across other institutional or international contexts.

Results

This section presents the findings from the convergent mixed-methods investigation, comprising quantitative and qualitative data collected from students, lecturers, and industry professionals. The analysis is structured around three key datasets: (1) evaluating nine proposed GAs across groups, (2) stakeholder views on potential additions or removals of GAs, followed by (3) thematic insights (qualitative data) from open-ended responses. Together, these results offer a triangulated view of how GAs are currently understood, valued, and proposed for future refinement in the South African built environment education landscape.

Quantitative data

Data Set 1

The first dataset focused on the perceived relevance and applicability of nine proposed Graduate Attributes (GAs), as evaluated by students, lecturers, and industry professionals. A Likert scale of 1 to 5 was used (1 = Not relevant at all; 2 = Somewhat relevant; 3 = Relevant; 4 = Very relevant & 5 =

Cannot go without - Vital). As shown in Table 1, all nine attributes received high average scores (≥3.6), indicating strong overall endorsement from all three stakeholder groups.

Table 1 Comparative Perceptions of Students, Lecturers, and Industry Professionals on the Relevance of Nine Graduate Attributes

Graduate Attribute	Student		Lecturers		Industry	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Academic Competence	3.76	0.82	4.04	0.80	3.73	0.74
Critical Thinking	4.00	0.73	4.36	0.67	3.97	0.73
Problem-Solving	4.13	0.71	4.43	0.63	3.87	0.75
Oral Communication	3.78	0.83	3.96	0.80	3.79	0.72
Written Communication	3.86	0.83	4.07	0.84	3.76	0.80
Community Engagement	3.61	0.94	3.43	0.82	3.64	0.89
Ethical Reasoning	3.87	0.89	3.82	0.89	3.81	0.90
Entrepreneurial Mindset	3.69	0.93	3.82	0.78	3.66	0.90
Digital Literacy	3.92	0.80	4.15	0.78	3.93	0.78

Problem-solving was ranked highest across all groups (Students: M = 4.13; Lecturers: M = 4.43; Industry: M = 3.87), followed closely by critical thinking and digital literacy, attributes central to C4.0-readiness. Communication skills (written and oral) and academic competence were consistently rated above 3.7, reaffirming their foundational role in professional practice. Ethical reasoning also received strong support, reflecting a shared emphasis on values-based decision-making. Entrepreneurial mindset and community engagement scored slightly lower, particularly from lecturers (M = 3.43), suggesting these may require clearer curricular integration. The alignment across stakeholder groups reinforces these attributes' professional and pedagogical legitimacy and underscores the importance of embedding them systematically into curriculum design.

The standard deviation values offer insight into stakeholder agreement, with lower SDs (e.g., for problem-solving and critical thinking) indicating strong consensus. In comparison, higher SDs (notably for community engagement and entrepreneurial mindset) reflect more varied perceptions, suggesting areas that may benefit from clearer curricular emphasis or contextual framing. These findings reaffirm the prominence of cognitive and digital competencies (problem-solving, critical thinking, digital literacy) identified in the literature as key indicators of Construction 4.0 readiness (Barrie, 2007; Newman et al., 2021).

Data Set 2

This dataset (Figure 3) explored whether stakeholders found the current nine Graduate Attributes (GAs) sufficient or in need of revision. While most respondents affirmed the relevance of the existing attributes, many, especially students (57%) and industry participants (48%), suggested that additional GAs should be incorporated. Fewer lecturers (38%) supported expansion.

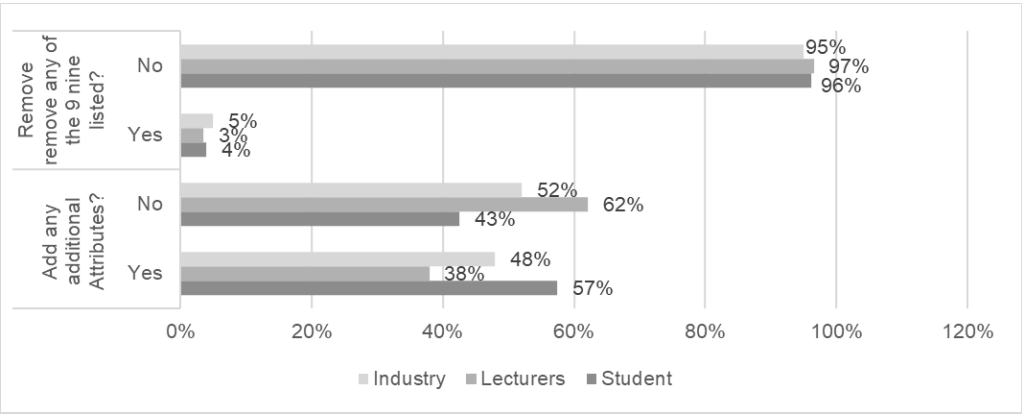

Figure 3: Stakeholder Responses on the Inclusion or Removal of Graduate Attributes

Notably, over 95% of all stakeholders opposed removing any current GAs, reflecting strong endorsement of their continued inclusion. The few removal suggestions received were minimal and most commonly mentioned oral communication, community engagement, and ethical reasoning, each below 4% per group. These results underscore the earlier consensus around the importance of GAs and highlight stakeholder appetite, particularly from students and practitioners, for incorporating attributes related to adaptability, leadership, and well-being. Rather than streamlining the list, the findings point to the need for curriculum expansion and responsiveness in the C4.0 and C5.0 context. The data in this section reinforces the need for curricular responsiveness rather than expansion. Stakeholders perceive GAs as vital for professional readiness but also recognise that current formulations may be incomplete in addressing the evolving demands of C4.0 and C5.0. These findings reaffirm the prominence of cognitive and digital competencies (problem-solving, critical thinking, digital literacy) identified in the literature as key indicators of Construction 4.0 readiness (Barrie, 2007; Newman et al., 2021).

Qualitative results

In addition to rating and ranking predefined Graduate Attributes (GAs), respondents were invited to elaborate on whether additional GAs should be considered and what these might be. The qualitative data revealed reinforcements of existing attributes and calls for new or expanded focus areas, reflecting the changing dynamics of graduate readiness in the QS and CM programmes. Table 2 summarises the responses that could be categorised within the generic GAs, while Table 3 summarises new suggestions by respondents.

Table 2 Thematic Categorisation of Suggested Additions Aligned to Existing Graduate Attributes

	Theme	Industry	Lecturers	Students	Total
Additions that could be grouped under existing GAs	**Practical Experience**	11	0	11	22
	Problem-solving	11	0	6	17
	Digital Literacy	7	1	8	16
	Academic Competence	8	0	7	15
	Entrepreneurial Mindset	0	4	0	4
	Written/Oral Communication	0	1	0	1
	Yes (but no suggestion)	16	0	4	20

From Table 3, the reinforcement of existing GAs could be made with 20 respondents, indicating that providing practical exposure related to the existing GAs would be beneficial.

These open-ended responses supported the continued relevance of the current nine GAs. Participants echoed the need for attributes such as problem-solving, digital literacy, academic competence, entrepreneurial mindset and communication, reinforcing findings from the quantitative data. Table 3, in particular, was very relevant for further insight into how QS & CM programmes' focus may be shifted towards deepening existing attributes.

Table 3 Emerging Themes Suggested by Stakeholders Beyond the Existing Graduate Attributes

	Theme	Ind	Lec	Stu	Tot	Suggested Additional Attributes
New Suggested Categories	Professional Practice Readiness	12	0	20	32	Site experience, mentorship, contracts, industry exposure
	Soft Skills and Emotional Intelligence	5	4	13	22	Leadership, teamwork, emotional regulation, and collaboration
	Technological Adaptability	8	3	4	15	AI, BIM, 3D printing, digital tech, software agility
	Resilience, Wellness, and Attitude	2	3	8	13	Grit, wellness, stress management, positive attitude, lifelong learning
				Tot	**82**	

Elaborating on the summarised data from Table 3, respondents advocated for increased focus on AI, BIM, and digital tools already covered under digital literacy. Similarly, several industry practitioners emphasised the practical application of problem-solving: *"Graduates should be able to draw conclusions from complex data and respond to disruptions with innovation and logic."* This alignment reinforces the continued need to strengthen the implementation and assessment of the current GAs, rather than replace them. Further analysis of the open-text responses revealed four dominant new themes proposed for inclusion in curriculum frameworks:

1. **Professional Practice Readiness** (n = 32) - The most frequent theme centred around calls for practical industry exposure. Students and industry repeatedly cited the importance of workplace learning through mentorship, site visits, and hands-on projects. Comments included:

- *"Expose students to production environments so that the transfer from theory to practice happens earlier."*
- *"Integrated work experience from the second year of study is essential to prepare students for professional expectations."*

2. **Soft Skills and Emotional Intelligence** (n = 22) - Respondents from all three stakeholder groups expressed the need for interpersonal competencies, including emotional regulation, conflict management, teamwork, and self-awareness. Industry professionals stated:

- *"Students need emotional intelligence; industrial psychology doesn't cover it, but it's crucial for surviving project dynamics."*
- *"Construction is a people business. You need to know how to lead, engage and manage different personalities."*

3. **Technological Adaptability** (n = 13) - Beyond general digital literacy, participants called for agility in adopting and navigating new technologies, including AI, 3D printing, and modular construction systems. One comment summarised this sentiment:

- *"Technological aptitude is critical; graduates must stay up to date with new systems and apply data fluency in the field."*

4. **Resilience, Wellness, and Attitude** (n = 13) - This theme captured responses related to personal development, mental health, and adaptability when faced with pressure. Participants noted that graduates must be equipped to manage stress, maintain a growth mindset, and navigate volatile work environments. Examples include:

- *"Grit, wellness, and stress management need to be taught, not just assumed."*
- *"A good attitude and willingness to learn matter just as much as technical competence."*

Beyond the dominant four, smaller yet important sub-themes included

- **Leadership and Ethics:** *"Leadership, creativity, and ethical reasoning must be embedded early in construction education."*
- **Cultural and Global Awareness:** *"Students must develop a global mindset to adapt to different work cultures and environments."*
- **Entrepreneurship and Innovation:** *"We need to shape HEI curricula to empower graduates to create work, not just seek employment."*

These themes, while diverse, collectively emphasise that graduate preparedness in the CBE is no longer just about technical competence only; it requires human-centred, tech-enabled, and ethically grounded individuals. Collectively, these emergent themes align with international calls for integrating emotional intelligence, adaptability, and resilience into Construction 4.0 and 5.0 curricula (van Heerden et al., 2023; Sawhney et al., 2020), underscoring the need for responsive, human-centric education reform.

Discussions and Triangulation

The findings of this study demonstrate that Graduate Attributes (GAs) remain relevant, valid, and valued constructs across all stakeholder groups involved in Construction Built Environment (CBE) education. However, the data also reveal a growing need to revisit how these attributes are

conceptualised, assessed, and aligned with academic intent and industry application, particularly in light of Construction 4.0 (C4.0) and emerging Construction 5.0 (C5.0) demands.

Triangulated Alignment on GA Relevance - The convergence of quantitative results from students, lecturers, and industry confirms that all groups consider GAs essential, such as problem-solving, critical thinking, and digital literacy, with an emphasis on career orientation. Mean ratings for these attributes exceeded 3.7 across all stakeholders, reinforcing their foundational role in curriculum design. This triangulated endorsement aligns with the Expansive Learning principle that educational contradictions, such as the gap between theoretical content and practical application, must be addressed through the collaborative modelling of new practices. Stakeholders appear ready to move from passive critique of GAs to active co-construction of context-specific learning outcomes.

Gaps in Curriculum Responsiveness - Despite high levels of agreement on the relevance of the nine proposed GAs, nearly half of the industry (48%) and 57% of students recommended incorporating additional attributes. The qualitative responses support this with recurring calls for Professional Practice Readiness (n = 32), Emotional Intelligence and Soft Skills (n = 22), Technological Adaptability and Wellness, Resilience, and Attitude. These themes resonate strongly with the C4.0 competency shift outlined by Newman et al. (2021), emphasising adaptability, collaborative learning, and digital competency.

Vertical Curriculum Mapping and the Activity System - By incorporating student and lecturer perspectives alongside industry feedback, this study captures the vertical alignment of the curriculum experience, from academic formulation to real-world application. This vertical triangulation enables a system-wide view of tensions within the current curriculum framework, aligning with CHAT's call to analyse contradictions across multiple activity systems (Engeström, 2015). The contradiction between institutional GA frameworks and workplace expectations appears not to stem from the irrelevance of the GAs themselves but from insufficient mechanisms to implement, assess, and revise them responsively. For instance, attributes such as community engagement and entrepreneurial mindset received lower ratings, not because they are unimportant, but possibly due to weak integration and limited experiential scaffolding within formal module structures.

A Platform for Change Laboratories – Observation through the CHAT lens provided in Figure 2, a linear process of the practical implementation of change laboratories with the "community" (1) as the primary interaction point between academia and industry to establish the "object" or outcome (2) of the specific degree under investigation. From this foundation, the "rules" (3) for the "subject" (4) may be established to enable the "division of labour" (5) to be planned, before the design of the necessary "tools" (6) can take place to cause an improved mediation of "artifacts" (7). Change laboratories can subsequently actively and practically assist in the practical observation of the implementation of change within the QS curricula.

Conclusion & Recommendations

This study aimed to evaluate stakeholder perceptions of nine Graduate Attributes, assess their relevance to the transitions from Construction 4.0 to 5.0, and propose strategies for curriculum transformation within the South African built environment context. It confirmed that Graduate Attributes (GAs) are widely supported by students, lecturers, and industry practitioners as critical to preparing future-ready graduates in the Construction Built Environment (CBE). There was clear alignment on the relevance of nine core attributes, especially problem-solving, critical thinking, and digital literacy, underscoring the demand for technical and human-centric competencies in Construction 4.0 and emerging 5.0 contexts. While stakeholders validated the existing GAs, many, particularly students and practitioners, called for expansion to include adaptability, leadership, and well-being. These insights suggest that GAs must evolve in tandem with industry needs, rather than being treated as static or generic. It is recommended that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in South Africa:

- Regularly review and refinement of GAs in collaboration with industry partners to ensure alignment with technological and societal shifts (e.g., through the use of change laboratories as recommended by Garraway (2021)).
- Embed GAs explicitly in curriculum design, learning outcomes, and assessment criteria across QS and CM programmes.
- Foster inter-stakeholder dialogue and use practice-based approaches (e.g., Change Laboratories) to address curriculum misalignments and promote transformative learning.

Ultimately, integrating a dynamic and responsive GA framework is essential to bridging the gap between education and practice, ensuring that graduates are not only competent but also adaptable, ethical, and innovative contributors to the built environment. Furthermore, the findings carry policy-level significance, suggesting that professional accreditation bodies such as SACQSP and SACPCMP may benefit from periodically reviewing graduate attribute frameworks to ensure alignment with evolving Construction 4.0 and 5.0 competencies.

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SACQSP2025-91

An Exploratory Study on the Impact of Fifth Dimension Building Information Modelling (5D BIM) on Project Cost Overruns in the South Africa

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Abstract

This paper explores the potential impact of Fifth Dimension Building Information Modelling (5D BIM) on reducing project cost overruns in the South African construction industry. It focuses on identifying the key barriers to its adoption, the causes of cost overruns, and the perceived benefits of adopting 5D BIM. The study underscores 5D BIM potential to provide real-time cost data, more accurate estimation, quicker and more efficient quantity take-offs, and easier tracking of project progress payments through the integration of cost data with a 3D building model. While the findings provide indicative insights, further research with larger and more diverse samples is recommended. This exploratory study uses a quantitative approach targeting South African Quantity Surveyors (QSs), who are primarily responsible for project cost control. Data was collected using a close-ended survey questionnaire disseminated through non-probability sampling methods such as convenience and snowball sampling. A total of 52 valid responses were received, analysed and presented descriptively. Descriptive statistics were used to summarise the data, and basic inferential analyses were conducted to explore potential relationships, though findings should be interpreted cautiously given the sample size. Despite these limitations, several notable patterns emerged. Key findings suggest that design-related issues, ineffective communication and poor planning are primary causes of cost overruns. Barriers to adoption of 5D BIM appear to include lack of 5D BIM skills and expertise, lack of investment in 5D BIM, and resistance to change, despite new insights into the awareness of BIM. Respondents widely agree that 5D BIM can play a role in improving quantity take-offs, controlling costs better, improving decision making and improving cost management processes. Given these insights, the study tentatively recommends that the adoption of 5D BIM be encouraged through government initiatives, integration into education and regulatory frameworks, and trial implementation in pilot projects.

Keywords: Cost overruns, Cost Management, 5D BIM, South Africa, Construction.

Introduction

The construction industry makes a significant contribution to national economic development through infrastructure projects such as buildings, roads, and schools (Morena & Amoah, 2021; Morad, 2023). However, in South Africa the sector faces persistent challenges, particularly cost overruns, which have serious implications for the economy and for stakeholders such as clients, consultants, and contractors (Morena et al., 2021). Cost overruns are defined as actual project costs exceeding the initial estimated cost (Khatleli & Tshivadu, 2020). The upgrade of the Johannesburg Soccer City stadium illustrates this problem: the project's budget rose from R2.2 billion to R3.7 billion, largely due to material price fluctuations (Dlamini & Cumberlege, 2021).

The cost function in a project is the QS' responsibility. To be considered as a qualified QS in South Africa, one must be registered either as a Candidate or Professional QS with the South African Council for the Quantity Surveying Profession (SACQSP) and will be responsible for managing project costs from inception to completion (Morena et al., 2021) which consists of the following processes: cost planning, budgeting, estimating, monitoring and control (Morad, 2023). Traditional cost management practices, however, rely heavily on manual processes that are time-consuming, prone to error, and

often provide inaccurate data. This paper explores the potential of 5D BIM as a solution to these limitations.

Although there is an extensive body of work on Building Information Modelling (BIM) and, more recently, 5D BIM, much of the scholarship remains broad in scope and does not explicitly interrogate how 5D BIM can be utilised to mitigate project cost overruns in South Africa. Local studies such as Musonda (2021) and Ikuabe et al. (2020) have contributed valuable insights into the adoption of digital technologies in the construction sector, yet their focus remains general. These studies discuss digital transformation and innovation at a high level without providing a detailed analysis of the distinct functions of 5D BIM—particularly its integration of cost data with design and scheduling information—as a mechanism for improving cost control.

By contrast, international literature, such as Arago, Hernando, Saez and Bertran (2021), provides evidence of how 5D BIM can be implemented to support project management and reduce financial risks. However, these insights are situated in contexts such as Spain and other developed economies, which operate under different institutional, regulatory, and technological conditions than those in South Africa. Directly transferring these findings risks overlooking context-specific barriers such as resource constraints, fragmented industry practices, and limited policy support that shape adoption locally. This divergence underscores a clear gap: while international research demonstrates the potential of 5D BIM to improve cost performance, South African scholarship has not yet examined its application specifically for Quantity Surveyors in relation to project cost overruns. Accordingly, this exploratory study seeks to (i) identify the main causes of cost overruns in South African construction projects, (ii) examine the perceived benefits of 5D BIM for improving cost management practices and (iii) assess barriers to 5D BIM adoption within the QS context.

Literature review

The success of a construction project is typically measured by its ability to be delivered on time, within budget (Gomez-Cabrera, Gutierrez-Bucheli & Munoz, 2023), and in line with contractual design specifications (Gbahabo and Ajuwon, 2017). However, cost overruns in construction projects are experienced worldwide, including South Africa. This highlights the need for practical solutions to be adopted and implemented to address this issue. To identify effective solutions, it is important to identify the causes of cost overruns and the limitations of traditional cost management practices.

Causal Factors of Construction Cost Overruns

Numerous studies across different contexts - including location, project type, and project timelines - have examined the causes of cost overruns. These studies consistently highlight the growing prevalence of cost overruns worldwide, underscoring their severity and the urgent need for effective solutions.

Morena et al. (2021) conducted a quantitative study identifying the most common causes of cost overruns in the South African construction industry: scope changes, decision-making, planning, material price fluctuations, late design and lack of coordination. These findings are particularly valuable as they are both recent and situated within a South African context, thereby offering insights that can inform locally tailored solutions. These findings are corroborated by Gomez-Cabrera et al. (2023) in which a scoping review was conducted for projects in Africa and Asia. Gbahabo et al. (2017) and Khatleli et al. (2020) state that the primary cause of cost overruns in construction projects is an inefficiency in cost estimation, planning and forecasting. These findings are also perceived to be useful to the study in that the studies were conducted by Gbahabo et al. (2017) within a sub-Saharan context and Khatleli et al. (2020) conducted their study from a South African context and therefore adds value to this research.

Oftentimes, time overruns are a result of cost overruns (Dlamini et al., 2021; Morena et al., 2021), causing infrastructure not being ready for use at the initial completion date and in turn, this affects economic development and service delivery (Guijarro & Povates, 2018). Delays often place contractors under pressure to accelerate delivery, which can compromise the quality of the work (Morena et al., 2021). In addition to this, Morad (2023) and Morena et al. (2021) mention that this could lead to additional costs for the contractor and reduce their profit margins. Issues such as this effect contractors' and project stakeholders' reputations and cause a loss of confidence in investors (Khabisi, 2023) to fund and pursue work for future projects.

5D BIM and Effective Project Cost Management

Quantity Surveyors (QSs) are responsible for cost management practices, which encompass planning, budgeting, estimation, monitoring, and control (Miri & Khaksefidi, 2015), to ensure that projects are completed within budget (Morena et al., 2021). The premise of cost management is to ensure that accurate information is provided and the process by which cost data is collected is organised to avoid potential project risks (Miri et al., 2015). Although various studies have explored ways to improve cost management methods (Gomez-Cabrera et al., 2023; Malkanthi et al., 2017; Miri et al., 2015; Morena et al., 2021), their recommendations remain limited in scope. This study explores the use of 5D BIM as a more comprehensive solution to address these shortcomings and reduce project cost overruns within the South African construction industry.

Cost planning involves determining the resources needed to execute the project and their associated costs (Miri et al., 2015). Despite the benefits of traditional methods, it is limited in that the cost projections made early in the project lifecycle are done inaccurately and in isolation and can be subject to optimism bias (Morad, 2023). 5D BIM addresses this issue by providing real-time cost data and automatically integrating with the project scheduling function (4D) and the 3D model, therefore allowing for quicker and more efficient processes (Sepasgozar et al., 2022).

Estimation refers to the measuring and costing of resources used to complete the project's activities (Malkanthi et al., 2017; Miri et al., 2015). The takeoffs are done from a 2D model (Vigneault, Boton, Chong & Cooper-Cooke, 2019). Various cost alternatives are considered through this process through value engineering (Sepasgozar et al., 2022) and life cycle cost analysis (Vigneault et al., 2019). This process is not only time-consuming but also highly vulnerable to human error and data inaccuracies. 5D BIM addresses this by automatically assigning costs to quantities quickly and exploring alternatives (Smith, 2016) in real-time and decisions can be made quicker (Vigneault et al., 2019).

Budgeting involves consolidating the estimated costs to reach a total project budget (Miri et al., 2015). This then becomes the cost baseline moving forward in the project. Taking into consideration the complex and dynamic nature of construction projects (Morena et al., 2021), it is likely that the project budget will change as the project progresses. Traditionally, the budget will be updated when necessary and can be time-consuming (Amoah, 2024) and lead to inaccurate estimations, which can be too high or too low. 5D BIM assists with this process being done quicker and more efficiently through cashflow forecasting, managing variations and accurately tracking payments through the integrated 3D model.

Control and monitoring involve tracking the effectiveness of the project and how to get back within budget if cost overruns occur (Malsam, 2023). The limitation is that the overruns tend to be picked up too late and have significant cost and time implications. 5D BIM enhances this process by providing real-time cost data and provides real-time feedback in time to implement corrective action. This will prevent potential project delays and cost overruns.

Based on the abovementioned role that 5D BIM has on cost management practices, it can be concluded that it addresses the significant causes of cost overruns in the South African building industry and allows for streamlining processes more quickly and efficiently and ultimately reducing cost overruns.

Barriers to the adoption of 5D BIM in Construction Projects

Although the adoption of 5D BIM has accelerated internationally, progress in South Africa has been comparatively slow (Babatunde et al., 2020). The literature consistently highlights several interconnected factors—technological, financial, regulatory, cultural, and educational—that shape this trajectory.

A primary barrier is the availability and cost of compatible software. While access to advanced ICT infrastructure exists locally (Kekana et al., 2015), 5D BIM software remains expensive and not uniformly accessible, limiting its sustainability in practice (Babatunde et al., 2020). Even when software is available, interoperability between different systems is weak, undermining collaboration and efficient data exchange (Emmanuel et al., 2018; Arago et al., 2021). This contrasts with more advanced contexts where cross-platform integration is driving uptake.

Investment capacity further differentiates adoption patterns. Larger firms, particularly those with international clients, are more willing and able to bear the costs of software acquisition and staff

training, thereby gaining a competitive advantage (Arago et al., 2021; Babatunde et al., 2020). Smaller firms, by contrast, tend to rely on traditional approaches, perceiving BIM as financially risky given South Africa's volatile economy (Venter et al., 2021). This structural divide risks reinforcing inequalities within the profession.

Policy and regulation remain another limiting factor. Evidence from countries such as the UK and New Zealand shows that government mandates requiring BIM on public projects have been pivotal to widespread adoption (Babatunde et al., 2020; Venter et al., 2021). In South Africa, however, no comparable framework exists (Akintola et al., 2017). While some argue that industry bodies should drive implementation independently of the state (Van den Heever, 2017), others stress that government standards are essential to ensure consistency and collaboration across the sector (Akintola et al., 2017). Despite the coordinating potential of bodies such as the Council for the Built Environment (CBE) and the Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB), little progress has been made to establish a unified strategy.

Cultural resistance and entrenched professional practices also hinder uptake. The industry remains heavily reliant on traditional 2D CAD, with only limited use of 3D modelling for presentation purposes (Akintola et al., 2017; Babatunde et al., 2020). This resistance is reinforced by hierarchical adoption, where exposure to BIM is often confined to senior designers and managers, leaving other professionals disconnected (Kekana et al., 2015). Even where the benefits of 5D BIM are acknowledged, a lack of flexibility and familiarity discourages practitioners from abandoning established workflows.

Education and training compound these challenges. Although awareness of BIM is growing, technical expertise remains insufficient (Babatunde et al., 2020; Emmanuel et al., 2018). Graduates often lack both BIM proficiency and robust training in traditional methods, limiting their ability to critically interrogate BIM outputs (Smith, 2016). Moreover, persistent misconceptions that BIM is merely a visualisation tool obscure its broader functions in cost estimation and project management. Addressing these deficiencies requires coordinated investment in university curricula, workplace training, pilot projects, and certification schemes (Smith, 2016; Sepasgozar et al., 2022).

Taken together, these studies converge on six interrelated factors: software availability, interoperability, investment capacity, regulatory frameworks, resistance to change, and skills development. Importantly, these are mutually reinforcing: inadequate training lowers firms' willingness to invest, weak regulation amplifies resistance, and poor interoperability reduces the value of software investment. International evidence suggests that adoption is most successful when government mandates are combined with industry training and technological integration. Without similar coordination, South Africa risks fragmented and uneven implementation, with large firms advancing while smaller firms fall behind. A systemic response involving government, professional bodies, and universities is therefore critical to unlock the full potential of 5D BIM in reducing cost overruns.

Research methodology and method

This study employed a quantitative, mono-method design using a structured close-ended questionnaire to examine the potential of 5D BIM in reducing cost overruns in the South African building industry. Similar studies like Baloyi & Bekker (2011), Mukuka, Aigbavboa & Tswala (2015), Tshidavhu & Khatleli (2020), Olugboyega & Windapo (2021), Windapo, Omopariola, Albert & Idachaba (2023) and Otasowie, Aigbavboa, Ikuabe, Adekunle, Oke & Adekunle (2023) utilised quantitative questionnaire/survey methodologies for their respective studies. A quantitative approach was deemed appropriate as it enables the collection of measurable data, supports statistical analysis, and provides objective insights into trends and relationships.

The target population consisted of Quantity Surveyors (QSs), as their primary responsibility lies in cost planning, control, and management throughout the project lifecycle. Their participation was therefore regarded as essential for assessing how 5D BIM may influence cost management practices.

The questionnaire was distributed to QS professionals via email and via cell phone to WhatsApp construction groups. Email contacts were sourced from a university supplier database, while WhatsApp groups facilitated wider distribution through peer networks. A combination of convenience sampling, self-selection, and snowball sampling was adopted, enabling the survey to reach a broader pool of

QSs across South Africa. While these non-probability sampling methods limit representativeness, they were suitable for this exploratory study.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of the Free State, and all participants received an ethics approval letter and informed consent form prior to participation. The questionnaire was administered through Google Forms, using primarily Likert-scale and categorical questions to capture perceptions and experiences. A total of 52 valid responses were returned and used for analysis.

Data were analysed using SPSS software. Descriptive statistics were used to summarise respondent characteristics and general response patterns. Basic inferential analyses were applied to explore whether perceptions varied significantly across groups based on experience and qualifications. Given the modest sample size (n = 52), inferential findings should be interpreted as exploratory and indicative rather than fully generalisable. Despite the modest sample size of the study, similar studies such as Obubiyi et al. (2019), Windapo et al. (2023) and Otasowie et al. (2023) all employed samples sizes of roughly 50 to 100 respondents and results were consistent and statistically significant, justifying the sample size of this exploratory study.

Research results

Introduction

A total of 52 valid responses were obtained from Quantity Surveyors (QSs) practicing in South Africa, which formed the sample size for this study. These responses were collected through non-probability sampling methods, as outlined in the methodology, and provide exploratory insights into the research problem. Both descriptive and basic inferential statistical analyses were applied to the data. Descriptive statistics were used to summarise respondent demographics and general response patterns, while inferential tests were conducted to identify relationships and variations across groups based on experience and qualifications. The findings presented in this chapter are structured around the study's objectives. They provide empirical evidence to address the research questions and contribute to the overarching aim of evaluating the potential role of 5D BIM in mitigating cost overruns within the South African construction industry.

Demographic Information

The demographic distribution of respondents (Figure 1) revealed that the majority were concentrated in Gauteng, which accounted for just over half of the sample (28 out of 52 participants). This is unsurprising given Gauteng's dominance as South Africa's primary economic hub and center of construction activity. By contrast, provinces such as the Western Cape and Free State contributed only 4–5 respondents each, while the North West, Limpopo, and KwaZulu-Natal had between 3 and 4 participants. The Eastern Cape and Mpumalanga showed very limited representation, with only 2 and 1 respondents respectively. In terms of gender, the sample was male dominated overall, although certain provinces, such as the Free State, reflected a higher female participation compared to others. This uneven geographical distribution highlights the centralisation of construction expertise in metropolitan hubs, which may influence the pace and extent of 5D BIM adoption across South Africa.

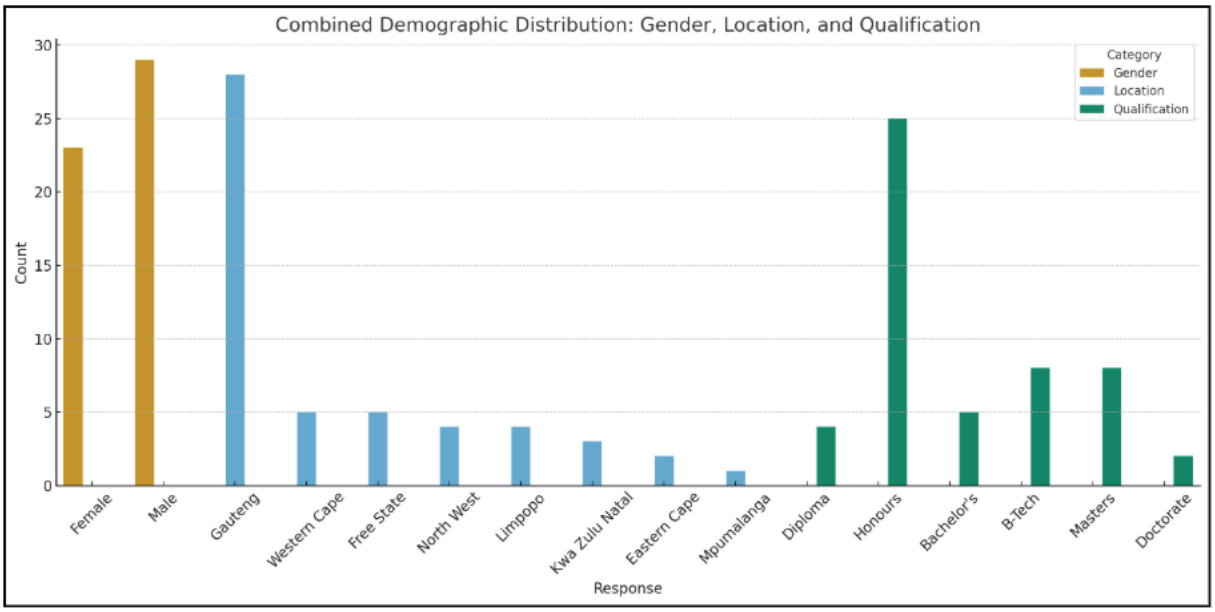

Figure 1 Gender, Qualifications and Geographical distrubution

The qualifications of the respondents reflect a highly skilled professional cohort, with the majority holding postgraduate credentials. As illustrated in Figure 2, the most common qualification was an Honours degree (47%), followed by B-Tech and Masters' qualifications (15% each). Smaller proportions of respondents held Bachelors' degrees (11%), Diplomas (8%), and Doctorates (4%), suggesting that while entry-level qualifications are present, there is a strong concentration of advanced academic training within the sample. In terms of professional exposure, respondents reported diverse involvement across project types, highlighting the multi-disciplinary application of quantity surveying expertise. While a notable share specialised in single sectors such as infrastructure only (17%) or residential only (11%), many participants indicated broader engagement across combinations of sectors. These included infrastructure and commercial (11%), residential with industrial, infrastructure, and commercial (9%), residential with infrastructure (8%), and industrial with commercial or infrastructure (15%). A further 28% indicated participation in mixed project categories such as residential and commercial, industrial, and other combinations. This distribution reflects the versatility of the QS profession in South Africa, where practitioners are not confined to a single project type but often contribute across multiple sectors of the built environment.

Cost Overruns in Construction Projects

One of the research aims was to identify the causes of cost overruns in South African construction projects. In this section of the questionnaire, the participants were asked how often they experience cost overruns to determine if their answers align with the findings in existing literature. The findings in the questionnaire revealed that 48.1% believe it occurs regularly, which aligns with the literature stating that only approximately 35% of construction projects in South Africa are completed within budget. The alignment of the findings from the literature review and the questionnaire reveals that cost overruns remain a key challenge in the South African building industry.

This study further compared whether younger professionals (0–5 years' experience) perceive project cost overruns differently than those with 11–15 years' experience. Respondents with 0–5 years' experience reported an average frequency of cost overruns of 3.17, while those with 11–15 years' experience reported a higher average of 4.13, on project involved. An independent samples t-test ($t = -2.04$, $p = 0.063$) suggests that while this difference is not statistically significant at the 95% level, it does approach significance at the 90% confidence level. This implies that more experienced professionals perceive cost overruns as occurring more frequently, potentially due to their greater exposure to complex projects and risks.

Moreover, to develop effective and practical solutions tailored to reducing cost overruns in South Africa, it is crucial first to identify their underlying causes. To identify the underlining causes of cost overruns respondents had to select the causes of cost overruns from a predetermined list, and more than one response could be selected. According to Figure 2, the respondents explicitly revealed that

the primary drivers were design-related, with changes in design (41 mentions) and design errors (30 mentions) ranking as the most significant. Digital technologies such as Building Information Modelling (BIM) provide a potential solution by enabling improved visualization, clash detection, and better design coordination through 3D modelling, thereby reducing the likelihood of costly revisions. In addition to design-related causes, respondents also frequently cited ineffective communication (27 mentions), poor planning (25 mentions), scope creep (24 mentions), and inaccuracies in cost estimates (19 mentions) as significant contributors. While these issues appear secondary to design deficiencies, they further underscore the need for stronger project management practices and improved collaboration among stakeholders.

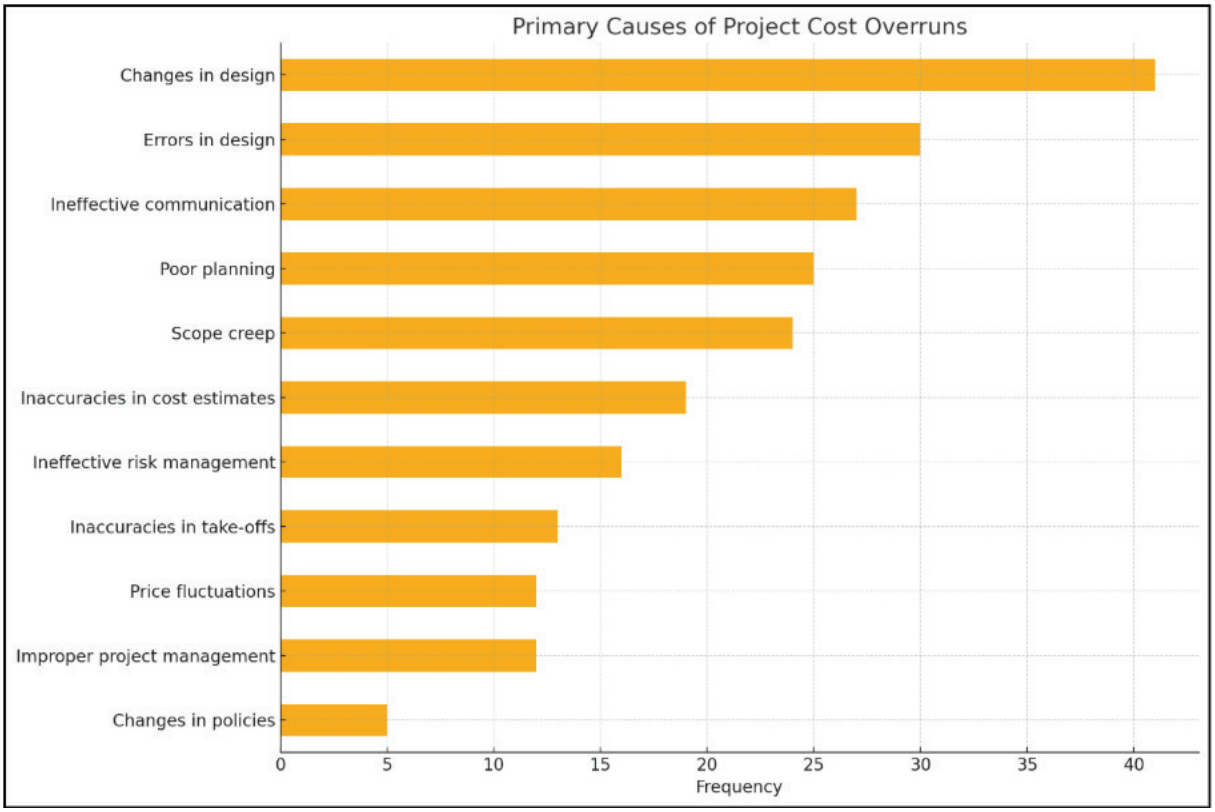

Figure 2 The primary causes of cost overruns in South Africa.

Benefits of 5D BIM Adoption in South Africa

In terms of the benefits of 5D BIM adoption, respondents expressed consistently high levels of agreement regarding the benefits of 5D BIM (see Table 1). The highest-rated benefit was improved quantity take-offs (mean = 4.50, CI = 90.00%), reflecting strong confidence in BIM's ability to enhance measurement accuracy. Improved decision-making (mean = 4.33, CI = 86.67%) and better cost management processes (mean = 4.17, CI = 83.46%) also received strong endorsement, highlighting the perceived strategic advantages of the technology. Slightly lower, though still high, were agreement levels for better budget control (mean = 4.10, CI = 81.92%) and reduction of project cost overruns (mean = 4.00, CI = 80.00%). Importantly, all confidence intervals remain well above the neutral midpoint of the scale, reinforcing that professionals overwhelmingly perceive 5D BIM to deliver tangible improvements across both technical and managerial dimensions. Respondents strongly endorsed the potential benefits of 5D BIM across multiple dimensions, with mean scores for all benefit items falling above 4.0 on the five-point Likert scale.

Table 1 Perceived benefits of 5D BIM Adoption in South Africa

	Mean	SD	CI (%)	t	p	Significant	Rank
Improved quantity take-offs	4,50	0,70	90,00	15,45	0,00000	Yes	1
Improved decision-making	4,33	0,79	86,67	12,03	0,00000	Yes	2

Improved cost management processes	4,17	0,92	83,46	9,17	0,00000	Yes	3
Better control on project budgets	4,10	1,01	81,92	7,79	0,00000	Yes	4
Reduction in project cost overruns	4,00	0,99	80,00	7,28	0,00000	Yes	5

Factors affecting 5D BIM adoption and implementation in South Africa

The next research question was to identify the factors affecting 5D BIM adoption and implementation in South Africa. The purpose is to come up with solutions to address these challenges to ensure the successful adoption of 5D BIM.

The questionnaire findings revealed that 96.2% of respondents are familiar with the term “BIM” and 67.9% are familiar with the term “5D BIM”. Awareness of digital technology and its benefits to project outcomes can further encourage its adoption in the South African construction industry. Respondents’ preference to have 5D BIM software in their organisation was unanimous (100%). This is itself a strong message: the bottleneck is not interest.

Table 2 Perceived Barriers to 5D BIM Adoption in South Africa

	Mean	SD	CI (%)	t	p	Rank
Lack of skills and expertise to use 5D BIM	4,35	0,79	86,92	12,30	0,0000	1
Resistance to change from to 5D BIM	4,04	0,97	80,77	7,73	0,0000	2
High cost of 5D BIM implementation	3,74	1,26	74,72	4,26	0,0001	3
Regulatory framework supporting 5D BIM adoption	3,62	1,30	72,31	3,41	0,0013	4
Market demand for software such as 5D BIM	3,13	1,09	62,69	0,89	0,3752	5
IT infrastructure readiness for 5D BIM	2,54	1,28	50,77	-2,61	0,0119	6

The survey results reveal that professionals in the South African construction industry view skills shortages as the most pressing barrier to 5D BIM adoption (see Table 2). On a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree), respondents rated the lack of skills and expertise at a mean score of 4.35, confidence interval (CI) of 86.92%. This indicates strong consensus that insufficient trained personnel are the primary challenge. Resistance to change was identified as the second major barrier (mean = 4.04, CI = 80.77%), suggesting that entrenched traditional practices continue to slow down technological transition. High implementation costs, while still acknowledged, were rated slightly lower (mean = 3.74, CI = 74.72%), implying that financial considerations, though important, are not perceived to be as severe as skills and cultural challenges. The narrow confidence intervals across all three items suggest that these findings are reliable and not the product of random variation.

To evaluate the internal consistency of the results, Cronbach’s alpha was also calculated. A value of

$\alpha\alpha$ = 0.68 shows an acceptable level of reliability for an exploratory study.

Discussion

This section discusses the results of this study in exploring the impact of 5D BIM on project cost overruns in South Africa. The findings on the drivers of cost overruns are consistent with existing literature (Morena et al., 2021; Khabisi, Aigbavboa & Thwala, 2017), which also identified design changes and errors as leading contributors to project cost overruns. These results highlight the critical importance of design stability and accuracy, as frequent modifications and flaws in initial designs typically lead to rework, delays, and unforeseen expenditures.

The widespread belief that 5D BIM enhances cost management processes and decision-making is echoed in the literature. Khatleli et al. (2020) identify slow decision-making as a key driver of cost overruns, while Smith (2016) and Vigneault et al. (2019) highlight how 5D BIM supports transparent decision frameworks and facilitates the exploration of design and cost alternatives. Similarly, Sepasgozar et al. (2022) emphasise BIM's ability to improve visualization, aiding both clients and professionals in making timely, informed decisions. Finally, the perception that 5D BIM can contribute to reducing cost overruns is consistent with these broader findings, suggesting that by addressing weaknesses in traditional cost management, 5D BIM can play a meaningful role in mitigating the chronic issue of overruns in the South African construction industry.

The study uncovered an exceptionally high level of BIM awareness and interest among South African Qs's, indicating a possible drive towards adopting newer digital technology. Further, the fact that 100% of respondents indicated an interest in using 5D BIM software is striking. In essence, the industry is ready for adoption, which signals a new stage of readiness in the South African market.

On the perceived benefits of adopting 5D BIM, the respondents indicated that 5D BIM improves quantity take-offs is the most important benefit, which aligns with findings by Sepasgozar et al. (2020) who note that digital take-offs are not only quicker but also more efficient, ultimately supporting more accurate cost estimation. Similarly, the view that 5D BIM can better control project budgets is consistent with the findings of Vigneault, Boton, Chong and Cooke (2019), who argue that cost control and monitoring through BIM are faster and more proactive than traditional cost management approaches, thereby reducing the likelihood of late detection of overruns. It must be observed that these studies focused on BIM in general in contrast with this study focusing on 5D BIM specifically.

Findings on the barriers to adoption of 5D BIM, the study found that the lack of skills and expertise is overwhelmingly ranked No.1 by respondents (mean agreement of 4.35 with a reliability of 87%). The findings are partially supported by Kekana, Aigbavboa and Thwala (2015), who emphasise that one of the main barriers to BIM adoption in South Africa is the lack of education and skills within the workforce. More broadly, South Africa continues to face significant skills shortages across many sectors, making this finding consistent with wider national challenges. To address this, it is essential to integrate BIM and 5D BIM education into the university curriculum through the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). By collaborating with South African universities, a structured framework can be developed to prepare built environment students for professional practice in a digitalised construction environment. Additionally, professional bodies such as the Association of South African Quantity Surveyors (ASAQS) and the South African Council for the Quantity Surveying Profession (SACQSP) can play a pivotal role by offering webinars, seminars, and workshops to practising quantity surveyors. Providing training on BIM and 5D BIM, coupled with incentives such as CPD points or certifications, would not only build capacity but also encourage workplace adoption. The fact that the main overwhelming factor identified by the study implies that skills and expertise shortages are the main adoption barrier highlights the fact that the challenge is an internal issue rather than an external issue is novel.

Taken together, the results indicate that the South African construction industry sees 5D BIM as highly beneficial, particularly for improving the accuracy of quantity take-offs and enhancing decision-making capacity. However, its implementation is constrained primarily by skills shortages and cultural resistance to change, with financial investment concerns ranking somewhat lower. In contrast, both the questionnaire findings and existing literature (Babatunde, Udeaja, and Adekunle, 2020) suggest that the availability of IT infrastructure in South Africa does not constitute a barrier. This indicates that integrating 5D BIM into organisational IT systems is unlikely to pose significant challenges. Accordingly, policy and industry interventions should prioritise capacity building and change management strategies, as these represent the critical bottlenecks to widespread adoption and the realisation of 5D BIM's potential to mitigate project cost overruns. Overall, the study not only validates and reinforces prior findings, but also provides some new insights into the possible readiness of South African professionals.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that although awareness of 5D BIM among Quantity Surveyors (QSs) in South Africa is relatively high, the actual adoption and implementation of the technology remains limited. The findings confirm that 5D BIM has significant potential to reduce cost overruns and add measurable value to the QS profession by enhancing accuracy, efficiency, and collaboration in cost

management practices. To address the barriers identified and optimise the adoption of 5D BIM in the South African construction industry, several recommendations are proposed.

First, to address the lack of BIM knowledge and skills, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) should engage South African universities to integrate BIM, and specifically 5D BIM, into QS curricula. This can be achieved through coursework, practical assignments, and simulated projects, ensuring that graduates enter the workplace with a foundational understanding of the technology. This would not only reduce the adjustment period for entry-level QSs but also minimise the training costs borne by firms.

Second, for professionals already in practice, it is recommended that professional bodies such as the South African Council for the Quantity Surveying Profession (SACQSP) and the Association of South African Quantity Surveyors (ASAQS) lead training interventions. These may include workshops, webinars, and seminars focused on practical 5D BIM applications. Awarding Continuous Professional Development (CPD) points for participation can incentivise attendance. Increased education and exposure will also help overcome resistance to change, one of the key barriers to adoption.

Third, pilot projects should be undertaken to test 5D BIM in South African conditions, particularly in large-scale infrastructure developments where coordination and efficiency are critical. Pilot initiatives would allow stakeholders to assess tangible benefits, identify challenges, and share lessons learned, thereby encouraging wider adoption across the industry

Fourth, government involvement is essential to drive standardisation and regulatory frameworks for BIM adoption. The Council for the Built Environment (CBE), in partnership with the Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB), could play a pivotal role in advising the Department of Public Works (DPW) on establishing national BIM standards and implementation frameworks. This would enhance collaboration, interoperability, and uniformity across projects.

Fifth, the financial barrier to adoption can be addressed through support mechanisms. Construction bodies, government agencies, and financial institutions could provide targeted funding or incentives to encourage firms to integrate BIM systems into their operations.

While this research provides valuable insights, it is not without limitations. The study focused geographically on South African QS professionals, and the sample size of 52, although sufficient for exploratory analysis, may not fully capture the diversity of perspectives within the broader QS population. This limitation affects the generalisability of the findings.

Despite these constraints, the study has achieved its aim by showing that 5D BIM has the potential to play a significant role in addressing cost overruns in South Africa. Its adoption could provide QS firms with a competitive advantage, while resistance to change risks delaying industry-wide progress. Beyond improving project outcomes, wider adoption of BIM and 5D BIM could strengthen infrastructure delivery, promote economic development, and enhance public trust in construction projects. In a period of rapid digital transformation, the South African construction industry faces the risk of falling behind if it does not embrace digital technologies such as 5D BIM.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this exploratory study, several recommendations can be made to enhance the adoption and effective implementation of 5D BIM within the South African construction industry. Firstly, professional bodies such as ASAQS and SACQSP should prioritise capacity building through continuous professional development programmes that focus on 5D BIM applications for cost management. These initiatives should target both experienced and early-career quantity surveyors, ensuring that knowledge transfer keeps pace with international best practices. Secondly, construction firms should invest in tailored training and pilot projects that demonstrate the tangible benefits of 5D BIM in reducing cost overruns, thereby creating practical case studies to build industry confidence. In addition, collaboration between universities, industry practitioners, and software providers should be strengthened to close the skills gap and foster research-driven innovation.

For policymakers, it is recommended that guidelines or frameworks be developed to encourage BIM adoption across all project phases, with a specific emphasis on the integration of cost management functions. Financial institutions and public-sector clients could also play a pivotal role by requiring BIM-

enabled cost planning as part of procurement and funding conditions, thereby creating demand-driven momentum for implementation.

In terms of further research, this study highlights the need for larger-scale empirical studies with more representative sampling to validate and extend the findings presented here. Future research should explore comparative analyses between projects that have implemented 5D BIM and those that have not, measuring cost performance outcomes in real-world settings. Additionally, longitudinal studies would provide valuable insights into how the adoption of 5D BIM evolves over time and its sustained impact on cost control. There is also scope to investigate the behavioral and organisational factors that influence adoption, such as resistance to change, leadership commitment, and inter-disciplinary collaboration. Finally, future studies could expand the focus beyond the South African context to examine regional differences across sub-Saharan Africa, providing a broader perspective on the challenges and opportunities of BIM adoption in emerging markets.

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SACQSP2025-93

Evolving Quantity Surveyor competencies and their implications for higher education in South Africa: A systematic literature review

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Abstract

The construction industry is undergoing significant transformation driven by global sustainability imperatives, digital innovation, and the pursuit of long-term value creation. These developments have prompted a redefinition of professional roles within the built environment, particularly that of the Quantity Surveyor (QS). Traditionally focused on cost estimation, measurement, and financial control, the QS role is evolving toward a more strategic function encompassing value management, life-cycle costing, and sustainability appraisal. This study explores the changing skillset of QS professionals, with particular emphasis on how these shifts influence teaching and learning in higher education within the South African context. Using a systematic literature review (SLR) grounded in the PRISMA methodology, the research synthesised peer-reviewed literature from academic databases such as Scopus, ScienceDirect, and Web of Science. The review focused on studies published between 2015 and 2025 related to QS professional competencies, construction education, and value-based project delivery. In addition, bibliometric mapping was conducted to visualise publication trends, co-authorship networks, and emerging research themes shaping the QS competency discourse. A total of 48 relevant sources were analysed after applying strict inclusion and exclusion criteria. Findings indicate a clear progression from cost control to value management as a core QS function. Emerging competencies include strategic financial planning, whole-life cost analysis, sustainability reporting, and risk-based value decision-making. These findings reveal a widening gap between current educational offerings and industry expectations in South Africa. Universities and other higher education institutions must therefore adapt their curricula to integrate interdisciplinary knowledge, digital tools such as Building Information Modelling (BIM), and experiential learning approaches that promote critical thinking and professional adaptability. This study contributes valuable insights by aligning the evolving QS skillset with pedagogical strategies for future-ready construction education. Its value lies in offering evidence-based and bibliometrically supported recommendations for academic institutions, policymakers, and industry stakeholders seeking to produce graduates equipped for a dynamic and sustainability-driven built environment sector.

Keywords: Construction Industry, Higher Education, Quantity Surveying, Value Management.

Introduction

The construction industry is undergoing a significant transformation driven by sustainability imperatives, technological disruption, and the need for long-term value creation. Digital transformation is expected to address climate challenges and improve productivity, but the industry's fragmented structure poses barriers to implementation (Samuelson & Stehn, 2023). The sector faces pressure from evolving sustainability policies, economic challenges, and technological innovations, necessitating a more futures-oriented approach to create a sustainable built environment (Goodier, 2013). Megatrends and structural change drivers are reshaping business models, with occupiers demanding more flexible spaces and holistic solutions (Pfnür & Wagner, 2020). The industry's substantial environmental footprint requires urgent action and coordination across stakeholders throughout the value chain to achieve sustainability goals (De Wolf et al., 2023). These changes present both challenges and opportunities for the construction sector to adapt and evolve its practices and business models.

Moreover, professionals are being called upon to transcend traditional roles and adopt broader competencies that respond to the complexities of a sustainability-driven built environment (Abraham, 2023). As Olaniyan and Olaniyan (2025) note, the pressure to balance cost, time, quality, and environmental stewardship has never been greater, particularly in emerging economies where infrastructure development remains both a necessity and a challenge. Within this evolving landscape, the role of the Quantity Surveyor (QS) is undergoing a profound redefinition, shifting from a narrow focus on cost control to a more strategic orientation that integrates value management, life-cycle costing, and sustainability assessment (Oke et al., 2024; Omotayo et al., 2022).

Recent scholarship highlights both the opportunities and limitations within this shift. Studies such as those by Victar et al. (2024) and Kavukutu et al. (2021) confirm the growing emphasis on sustainability reporting, digital tools, and whole-life costing in QS practice. However, while global literature has begun to explore these competencies, South African research has been relatively limited in examining how QS education is adapting to these changes. For example, Siriwardhana et al. (2024) argue that higher education institutions often lag in aligning curricula with industry needs, leading to a skills gap between graduate output and professional demand. This gap is compounded by slow adoption of digital innovations such as Building Information Modelling (BIM) and limited integration of interdisciplinary, value-driven approaches in local QS training programmes (Wijekoon & Kawmudi, 2024).

On the other hand, leaving this gap unaddressed risks producing graduates who are ill-equipped to navigate the demands of a rapidly evolving profession, thereby constraining the competitiveness and sustainability of South Africa's built environment sector. This paper seeks to address this critical omission by systematically reviewing literature QS professional competencies, construction education, and value-based project delivery. The study aims to align the evolving QS skillset with pedagogical strategies for higher education, with particular emphasis on the South African context. Specifically, it outlines how universities can integrate digital innovation, experiential learning, and sustainability-focused approaches to cultivate future-ready QS professionals. The paper is structured as follows: first, it presents the literature review, methodological approach and scope of the systematic review; second, it discusses the thematic findings on evolving QS competencies; third, it critically reflects on the implications for South African higher education; and finally, it concludes with recommendations for academia, industry, and policymakers.

Literature review

Global shifts in quantity surveyor competencies

The redefinition of Quantity Surveyor (QS) roles has been a recurring theme in international research, reflecting the broader transformation of the construction industry. Traditionally framed around cost estimation and financial control, the QS profession is now being positioned as a strategic partner in project delivery. Ashworth and Perera (2019) argue that competencies such as value management, sustainability appraisal, and whole-life costing are becoming central to QS practice, aligning with global imperatives for sustainable development. Zhang et al. (2024) further emphasise that the transition towards value-driven roles requires professionals who are adept at balancing financial outcomes with social and environmental considerations. However, while these studies highlight an emerging professional identity, they often assume contexts with advanced institutional support, raising questions about their applicability in regions such as South Africa where systemic challenges persist.

Digital innovation and professional transformation

A prominent strand of the literature focuses on digital transformation, particularly the integration of Building Information Modelling (BIM), artificial intelligence (AI), and data analytics into QS practice. According to Oyediran et al. (2021), BIM has revolutionised cost modelling and project visualisation, enabling real-time collaboration and life-cycle cost assessment. Similarly, Olanrewaju et al. (2022) highlight how digital platforms have expanded QS responsibilities to include risk-based financial planning and scenario modelling. Yet, critiques note that adoption remains uneven, especially in developing economies, where digital infrastructure, training, and policy support are lacking (Wanigasinghe et al., 2024). For South Africa, this digital lag poses a risk of widening the competency gap between local graduates and global industry expectations, underscoring the need for higher education curricula to embed digital literacy as a foundational QS skill (Ndibalema, 2025).

Sustainability and value-based project delivery

Alongside digital innovation, sustainability has emerged as a central competency area for QS professionals. Global research positions the QS as a key player in integrating environmental and social criteria into project evaluation (Ginigaddara et al., 2025). For example, Perera et al. (2017) argue that value-based project delivery increasingly requires QSs to engage with carbon accounting, resource efficiency, and sustainability reporting. This reorientation moves beyond narrow cost control, framing QSs as facilitators of long-term value creation across project life cycles (Jadhav & Deshpande, 2025). However, South African research has been limited in critically assessing how these sustainability-focused competencies are being incorporated into professional training. While policy documents advocate for greener construction practices, there is little evidence that QS education is keeping pace with these imperatives, leaving graduates underprepared for globalised industry standards (Nazif et al., 2020).

Higher education gaps and pedagogical challenges

Despite the growing international body of research, there is widespread concern that higher education institutions (HEIs) are lagging behind in aligning curricula with evolving QS competencies (Peera et al., 2017). Naoum and Egbu (2016) highlight a persistent gap between industry expectations and academic training, where QS education remains anchored in traditional cost management. South African HEIs face compounded challenges of limited resources, slow adoption of experiential learning models, and inadequate integration of interdisciplinary knowledge (Mutongoza, 2025). The lack of critical engagement with digital tools, sustainability frameworks, and value-based competencies in QS curricula risks perpetuating a cycle of skills mismatch (MacNeil & Khare, 2025). Addressing this gap is essential not only to prepare graduates for the changing professional landscape but also to ensure the competitiveness and sustainability of South Africa's built environment sector. This study therefore builds on international research while addressing the specific omission of localised, evidence-based strategies for curriculum transformation in QS education.

Figure 1 below demonstrates a conceptual framework showing how global drivers influence evolving QS competencies, which expose challenges in South African higher education, and how this research bridges the gap with targeted contributions.

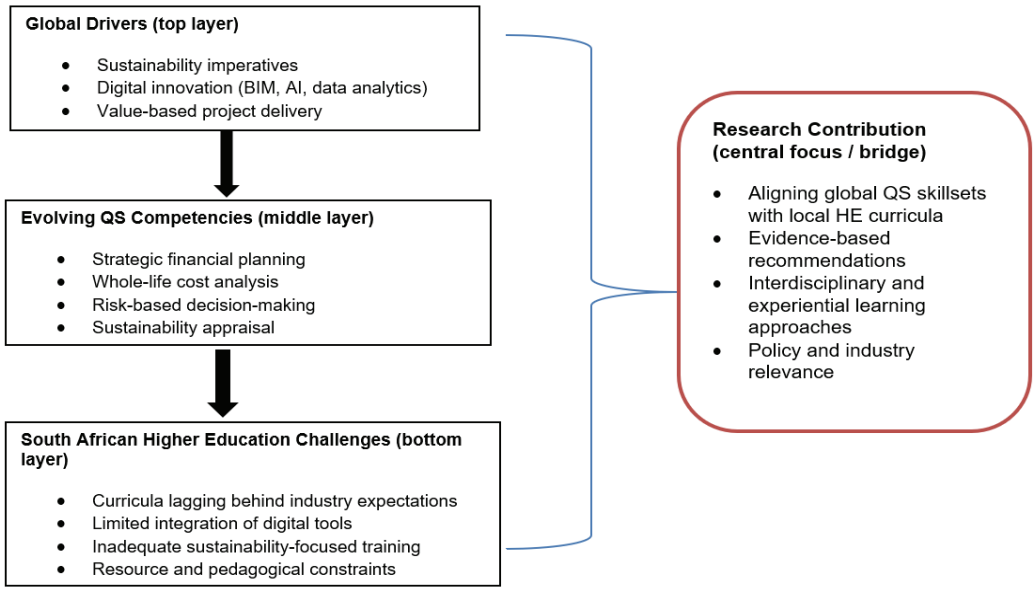

Figure 1 Conceptual framework of global drivers, QS competencies, and HE challenges in South Africa (Source: Authors depiction)

Research methodology and method

This study adopted an integrated methodological approach combining bibliometric analysis and a systematic literature review (SLR) to investigate the evolving competencies of Quantity Surveyors (QS) as the profession transitions from traditional cost control towards value management, and to examine

the implications of this shift for higher education in South Africa. The bibliometric analysis was first employed to map publication trends, thematic clusters, and influential authors within the global QS discourse, thereby establishing a quantitative overview of research developments in the field. Insights derived from this stage subsequently informed the SLR, which provided a qualitative synthesis and critical interpretation of the most relevant studies to identify competency gaps, pedagogical implications, and emerging directions for curriculum transformation.The SLR approach was selected for its ability to synthesise and critically appraise existing scholarship in a transparent and replicable manner, in line with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff & Altman, 2009). This combination of qualitative synthesis and quantitative mapping was intended to provide a comprehensive understanding of both the thematic developments and the structural characteristics of the field.

The data was sourced from three multidisciplinary and subject-specialised databases: Web of Science (WoS), Scopus, and ScienceDirect. These platforms were chosen for their broad coverage of peer-reviewed literature in construction management, built environment studies, and higher education. WoS was prioritised for its rigorous indexing of high-impact journals (Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016), Scopus for its expansive disciplinary scope (Burnham, 2006), and ScienceDirect for its depth of full-text publications in engineering, construction, and education (Zhu & Liu, 2020).

A targeted search strategy was employed to capture literature addressing QS competencies, value management, and higher education. The Web of Science Core Collection was queried using a combination of keywords and Boolean operators: TS = ("quantity surveyor*" OR "quantity surveying" OR "cost consultant*" OR "construction economics") AND TS = ("value management" OR "life cycle costing" OR "whole life cost*" OR "sustainability appraisal" OR "strategic cost planning") AND TS = ("higher education" OR "university curriculum" OR "construction education" OR "built environment education") AND PY = (2015-2025).

The search was restricted to peer-reviewed articles and reviews, published in English, and classified under the subject areas of Construction Building Technology, Education Educational Research, and Engineering Civil. Equivalent search terms were adapted for Scopus and ScienceDirect to ensure consistency.

Inclusion criteria were defined to capture publications from 2015 to 2025 that directly addressed QS competencies, construction education, or value-based project delivery. Studies had to be published in peer-reviewed journals, in English, and present empirical or theoretical contributions relevant to the research objectives. Exclusion criteria removed non-academic literature such as conference abstracts, reports, and opinion pieces, as well as studies not directly linked to QS skills or higher education, and duplicate records.

The search retrieved 412 records, of which 53 duplicates were removed. The remaining 359 titles, abstracts, and keywords were screened against the inclusion criteria, resulting in 117 studies for full-text review. Of these, 69 were excluded for reasons including insufficient focus on QS competencies (n = 41), lack of relevance to higher education (n = 18), or inadequate methodological detail (n = 10). This left 48 publications (refer to figure 2) that met the final inclusion criteria and were incorporated into the analysis.

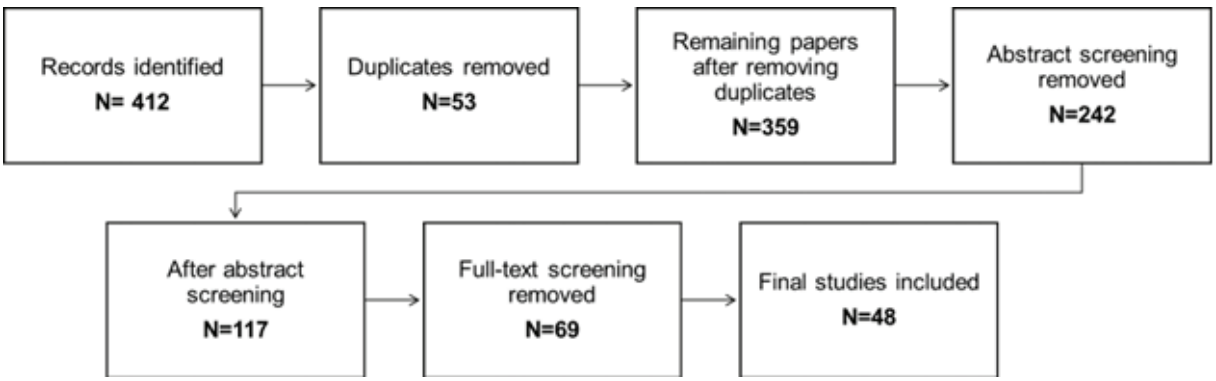

Figure 2 PRISMA Flow diagram (Source: Authors depiction)

Data extraction for the SLR was conducted using a structured form that captured bibliographic details, year of publication, country of origin, research focus, QS competencies addressed, educational implications, and methodological approaches. For the bibliometric analysis, records from WoS were exported in plain text format and processed using VOSviewer and Bibliometrix (R package) (Aria and Cuccurullo, 2017) to map publication trends, identify influential authors, journals, and countries, and visualise co-authorship networks, keyword co-occurrence patterns, and thematic evolution over time.

To ensure the reliability and quality of the included studies, the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) was applied. This tool facilitated consistent assessment across qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods designs, ensuring that the review was grounded in robust and credible evidence (Hong et al., 2018).

By combining systematic qualitative synthesis with bibliometric mapping, this methodology provided both depth and breadth of analysis, offering an empirically grounded foundation for interpreting the evolving QS competencies and their educational implications. The next stage of the study involved a bibliometric analysis of the included publications, enabling the identification of productivity patterns, influential contributors, and thematic developments that frame the evolving discourse on Quantity Surveyor competencies.

Research results

Bibliometric analysis

The bibliometric analysis was undertaken to map the intellectual and collaborative landscape of research on evolving Quantity Surveyor competencies from cost control to value management. Using data derived from the final 48 studies included in the review, the analysis identifies key publication trends, prolific authors, influential journals, active countries, and thematic concentrations within the field. This quantitative mapping complements the systematic review by highlighting patterns of scholarly productivity, international collaboration, and conceptual focus, providing a clearer understanding of how research in this area has developed and where future contributions may be directed.

Main information

The dataset spans publications from 2015 to 2025, comprising 48 documents sourced from 28 scholarly outlets. Research activity in this field has grown at an annual rate of 24.57 per cent, reflecting increasing interest in evolving QS competencies. The documents have an average age of 2.69 years, indicating that most contributions are recent and highly relevant. Each paper, on average, has received 30.88 citations, suggesting strong academic engagement with the topic. Collaboration is evident, with an average of 3.44 co-authors per paper and 20.83 per cent involving international partnerships. The majority of outputs are review articles (n = 46), supplemented by two early-access reviews, underscoring the focus on synthesising and consolidating existing knowledge.

Table 1 Descriptive data

Description	Results
Main information about data	
Timespan	2015:2025
Sources (Journals, Books, etc)	28
Documents	48
Annual Growth Rate %	24,57
Document Average Age	2,69
Average citations per doc	30,88
References	4563
Document contents	
Keywords Plus (ID)	209
Author's Keywords (DE)	253

Authors	
Authors	159
Authors of single-authored docs	3
Authors collaboration	
Single-authored docs	3
Co-Authors per Doc	3,44
International co-authorships %	20,83
Document types	
Review	46
Review; early access	2

Authors

The authorship landscape is led by Frangopol D.M., who has contributed three publications, reflecting sustained engagement in advancing QS competencies and value management research. Several scholars, including Alam M.S., Alasmari E., Martinez-Vazquez P., and Ruparathna R., follow with two publications each, indicating consistent but more focused contributions. A broader group of authors, such as Abbasian E., Ahmad Z., Ahmed H.A., and Aigbavboa C.O., have each produced a single paper, often in collaboration with others, as reflected by their fractionalised authorship scores. This distribution suggests that while a small number of researchers anchor the field, many contributors are involved, creating opportunities for diverse perspectives and potential cross-institutional collaboration.

Table 2 Most relevant authors

Authors	Articles	Articles fractionalised
Frangopol DM	3	1,33
Alam MS	2	0,50
Alasmari E	2	0,50
Martinez-Vazquez P	2	0,50
Ruparathna R	2	0,50
Abbasian E	1	0,17
Ahmad Z	1	0,20
Ahmed HA	1	0,20
Aigbavboa CO	1	0,50
Al Hawarneh A	1	0,25

Sources

The journal Buildings emerges as the most prolific outlet, publishing nine articles on QS competencies and value management, signalling its strong alignment with the field's themes. Automation in Construction and Structure and Infrastructure Engineering each contribute four publications, reflecting the growing intersection between digital innovation, engineering, and cost–value practices. Other journals such as Frontiers in Built Environment and Construction Innovation play important roles in showcasing applied research and pedagogical advancements. Contributions also appear in broader education-focused outlets like Frontiers in Education, indicating that QS-related scholarship is engaging with interdisciplinary audiences. This diverse journal presence highlights the cross-cutting nature of the topic, linking construction, engineering, and educational research.

Table 3 Most influential journals

Sources	Articles
Buildings	9

Automation in construction	4
Structure and infrastructure engineering	4
Frontiers in built environment	3
Construction innovation-england	2
Frontiers in education	2
Innovative infrastructure solutions	2
Journal of building engineering	2
Bmc medical education	1
Building and environment	1

Countries

The collaboration data reveals Australia as a key hub, partnering with China, Iran, Malaysia, and the USA, reflecting strong academic links across Asia and North America. China demonstrates a similarly broad network, engaging with Egypt, Pakistan, and the USA, while Malaysia collaborates with Bangladesh, China, and the United Kingdom. These patterns indicate that research on QS competencies and value management is shaped by multi-country partnerships, with Australia and China acting as central connectors. However, the network also shows relatively few collaborations involving African countries, suggesting untapped potential for strengthening global engagement and knowledge exchange with underrepresented regions.

Table 4 Most relevant countries

From	To	Frequency
Australia	China	2
Australia	Iran	2
Australia	Malaysia	1
Australia	Usa	1
China	Egypt	1
China	Pakistan	1
China	Usa	1
Malaysia	Bangladesh	1
Malaysia	China	1
Malaysia	United Kingdom	2

Keywords

The keyword analysis shows “design” as the most frequently used term (9 occurrences), underscoring its centrality in discussions on QS competencies and value management. Close behind are “construction” and “management” (8 each), reflecting the profession’s operational and strategic dimensions. Terms like “optimisation” (7) and “framework” (6) highlight methodological approaches, while “BIM,” “education,” and “energy” (4 each) point to the integration of digital tools, teaching strategies, and sustainability concerns. As illustrated in Figure 3, these keywords cluster into thematic areas that bridge technical expertise, pedagogical innovation, and sustainable practices, signalling a holistic shift in the QS role from cost-focused to value-driven decision-making.

Table 5 Most frequent keywords

Words	Occurrences
Design	9
Construction	8
Management	8

Optimization	7
Framework	6
Model	5
Barriers	4
Bim	4
Education	4
Energy	4

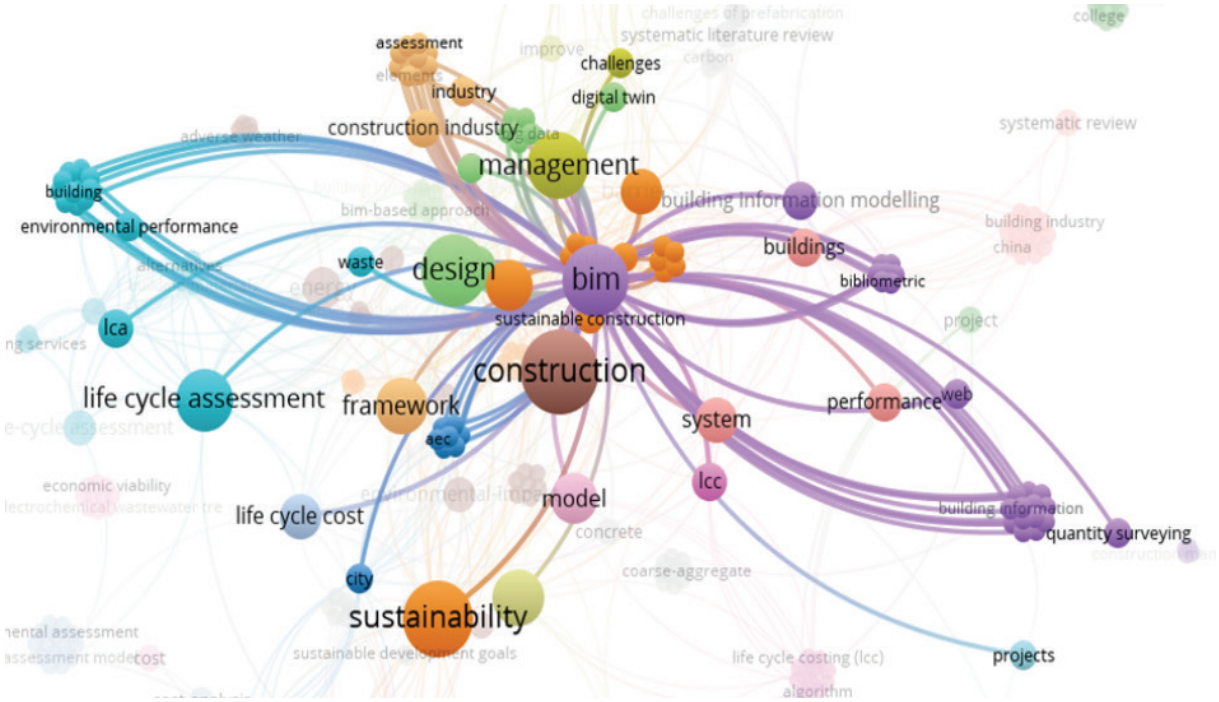

Figure 3 Keywords occurrences

Discussion

The thematic analysis derived from the 48 reviewed publications confirms that the Quantity Surveying (QS) profession is in the midst of a significant transformation, moving beyond its traditional roots in cost estimation, measurement, and budget control towards a broader, value-oriented role. This evolution is shaped by the convergence of sustainability imperatives, the adoption of advanced digital tools, shifting client expectations, and a changing higher education landscape. The bibliometric mapping shows that this shift is not isolated to one geographic region but is reflected in multiple contexts, with Australia and China emerging as collaboration hubs, although Africa remains underrepresented in cross-national research partnerships. The thematic synthesis reveals four interconnected themes that collectively explain the emerging competencies and their implications for higher education in South Africa.

Transition from cost control to value management

One of the most prominent themes is the clear transition from cost control to value management as a core QS function. Traditional skills in measurement and cost estimation are still essential, but they are increasingly being complemented by strategic whole-life costing, performance evaluation, and optimisation of value throughout the project life cycle (Oke and Ogunsemi, 2013). This shift is driven by industry-wide recognition that cost efficiency alone is insufficient to meet contemporary demands for sustainable, resilient, and high-performing assets. The literature illustrates that in countries such as Nigeria, QSs already possess the capabilities to participate in value management exercises, even though this specialism is not explicitly defined in their formal competency frameworks (Oke and Ogunsemi, 2013). This signals that professional identity is expanding from that of a financial controller

to a strategic partner in decision-making, able to advise on the balance between economic efficiency, environmental stewardship, and social impact.

Integration of digital technologies and data-led decision-making

The analysis also highlights the growing significance of digital technologies in shaping QS practice. Tools such as Building Information Modelling (BIM), data analytics platforms, and digital optimisation frameworks are enabling QS professionals to provide faster, more precise cost forecasting, run alternative design scenarios, and integrate value considerations early in the design process (Smith, 2017). This integration of digital capability is particularly transformative in enabling QSs to assess whole-life performance and sustainability metrics before major cost commitments are made. However, there remains a notable skills gap, particularly in developing contexts such as South Africa, where access to training, technology infrastructure, and industry-wide digital adoption is uneven (DQS Consulting, 2025). The literature also suggests that digital fluency is no longer an optional skill but a fundamental requirement for QS graduates entering the profession (Saka, 2020).

Sustainability and risk-based value decision-making

Another recurring theme is the increasing centrality of sustainability considerations and risk-based value decisions in QS roles. Contemporary QS practice extends well beyond conventional cost metrics to include evaluation of carbon footprints, lifecycle energy performance, resource efficiency, and the social value of projects (Chamikara et al., as cited in Oke & Ogunsemi, 2013). In this context, QSs are required to navigate complex trade-offs between financial objectives and environmental and societal outcomes. Risk-based value decision-making enables them to address uncertainties relating to cost, time, environmental impacts, and stakeholder priorities in a structured and evidence-driven way (Saka, 2020). The combination of sustainability expertise with robust risk analysis positions QSs as key enablers of resilient, sustainable, and economically viable built environments.

Educational implications and skills gaps

The findings expose a widening gap between the skills taught in South African higher education institutions and the competencies demanded by industry. QS curricula continue to emphasise cost-focused competencies, with less attention given to interdisciplinary knowledge, digital literacy, sustainability integration, and advanced value management techniques (Yapa et al., 2021). Similar patterns are observed in other developing contexts, where QS graduates often enter the profession without adequate exposure to tools such as BIM or to frameworks for sustainability appraisal (Oke & Ogunsemi, 2013). The literature strongly advocates curriculum reform that embeds experiential learning, live project work, and industry placements, while also fostering adaptability, critical thinking, and collaborative skills. Furthermore, there is a growing recognition that ethics, communication, and negotiation skills are as important as technical proficiency, particularly in managing the complex stakeholder relationships that characterise modern construction projects (Yapa et al., 2021).

These thematic trends collectively point to a profession in transition, responding to the broader transformation of the construction industry towards sustainable, technology-driven, and value-centred project delivery. The movement from cost control to value management aligns with global calls for construction professionals to contribute to long-term asset performance rather than focusing narrowly on immediate cost containment (Oke & Ogunsemi, 2013). The integration of BIM and other digital tools reflects a parallel trend towards more collaborative, data-rich project environments, where QS input is required much earlier in the decision-making process (Smith, 2017).

The South African QS profession faces the dual challenge of catching up with these global trends while addressing structural barriers such as uneven access to technology and resistance to curricular change. The bibliometric findings, which show limited African participation in international research networks, suggest that knowledge transfer and collaborative research could be critical enablers in bridging this gap. Countries like Malaysia have begun to address similar challenges by identifying and embedding key future competencies into professional education, including life-cycle costing, value management, and ethical practice (Yapa et al., 2021).

In essence, the transformation of the QS role is both a challenge and an opportunity. It requires higher education providers, industry bodies, and policymakers to work together to align educational outputs with market demands. This is not merely a matter of adding new modules to curricula; it involves rethinking pedagogical approaches to promote interdisciplinary collaboration, integrating digital tools into core teaching, and fostering the adaptability needed to operate in a rapidly evolving built environment sector. If this alignment is achieved, QS professionals in South Africa can position themselves not only as cost experts but as strategic partners in delivering sustainable and value-driven outcomes for clients and communities alike.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the role of the Quantity Surveyor is shifting from cost-focused functions to a broader strategic orientation that integrates value management, sustainability, and digital innovation. Findings from the systematic literature review and bibliometric analysis reveal a widening gap between global advances in QS competencies and the current orientation of South African higher education curricula. However, this gap should not be interpreted as a call for uncritical adoption of global standards. Rather, it underscores the need for a contextually responsive curriculum that balances international best practice with localised professional realities.

South African QS graduates must be globally competent yet locally grounded, equipped not only with digital and sustainability-driven skills, but also with knowledge of national construction policies, socio-economic transformation objectives, and community-oriented project delivery models. Beyond global pedagogical trends, higher education institutions should cultivate understanding of local construction economies, regulatory frameworks, and indigenous sustainability practices.

The key takeaway is that QS education in South Africa must evolve urgently, embedding interdisciplinary knowledge, experiential learning, and appropriate technology adoption, while maintaining sensitivity to the country's developmental priorities and unique built environment challenges. Only through such dual alignment can higher education produce professionals capable of advancing both global competitiveness and local impact in the built environment.

Recommendations

To address the identified gaps, universities and professional bodies should collaboratively reform QS curricula to integrate digital tools such as BIM, sustainability appraisal frameworks, and value-based project delivery principles. Industry stakeholders should strengthen partnerships with higher education institutions to provide practical, work-integrated learning opportunities that foster adaptability and critical thinking. Policymakers must prioritise resource allocation and accreditation standards that reflect the evolving competency requirements of the profession. Further research is recommended to explore context-specific strategies for embedding these global competencies in South Africa, ensuring that local graduates are competitive and aligned with international best practices.

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SACQSP2025-94

Bridging the QS Skills Gap in the Digital Era: A TPACK-guided Systematic and Bibliometric Review of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

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Abstract

The accelerating digital transformation of the construction industry has created an urgent need for a parallel evolution in the education and training of Quantity Surveyors (QS). Traditional QS curricula, which remain heavily focused on technical content and cost management, must now integrate digital competencies and innovative pedagogical strategies to meet the demands of a technology-driven built environment. Anchored in the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework, this study examines global and regional research trends on the integration of technology and pedagogy in QS education, rather than direct application. Unlike previous studies that focused mainly on curriculum content or digital tools in isolation, this research applies the TPACK framework to evaluate how technological, pedagogical, and content knowledge intersect in QS teaching and learning. A Systematic Literature Review (SLR) complemented by Bibliometric analysis was conducted using peer-reviewed publications from 2015 to 2025 indexed in Scopus, ScienceDirect, and Web of Science. A total of 52 studies met the inclusion criteria and were analysed thematically and quantitatively. The findings reveal that QS education continues to be dominated by content-driven teaching with limited pedagogical and technological innovation. However, where TPACK-aligned strategies are evident, they are linked to enhanced learner engagement, critical thinking, and digital readiness. Persistent barriers include insufficient lecturer training in technology-enhanced teaching, rigid curriculum structures, and infrastructural challenges, particularly in developing contexts such as South Africa. This study consolidates existing evidence and provides conceptual insights to inform curriculum renewal, staff capacity-building, and digital pedagogy integration in QS programmes. This study contributes a dual methodological and conceptual advancement by offering the first integrated SLR–Bibliometric analysis of QS education through a TPACK lens, establishing a foundation for future digital pedagogy and curriculum transformation in the field.

Keywords: Curriculum Innovation, Digital Pedagogy, Higher Education, TPACK Framework, Quantity Surveying.

Introduction

The construction industry is undergoing rapid digital transformation, reshaping professional practices, workflows, and competencies required of graduates entering the sector (Bolpaagni et al., 2021). Quantity Surveyors (QS), traditionally positioned as cost managers and contract administrators, are increasingly expected to operate in technology-driven environments where Building Information Modelling (BIM), digital costing platforms, and data analytics are integral to project success (Aleke et al., 2025). As a result, higher education institutions face mounting pressure to adapt their pedagogical approaches to align QS training with the realities of the modern built environment (Gomis et al., 2022). QS education is at risk of failing to adequately prepare graduates for the digital, collaborative, and value-oriented roles that industry now demands unless pedagogical transformation keeps pace with technological change.

Scholars in construction education argue that while QS curricula have historically prioritised technical content mastery, such as cost planning, measurement, and procurement, less attention has been given to pedagogy and digital integration (Ebekozien & Aigbavboa, 2024; Els, 2024). International studies

have shown that digital tools, when meaningfully integrated into teaching, enhance engagement, collaboration, and critical thinking among students (Lionenko & Huzar, 2023; Ferreira, 2024). However, in contexts such as South Africa, these innovations are unevenly implemented, largely due to resource constraints, curriculum rigidity, and limited lecturer readiness in educational technology (de Souza & Patrick, 2013; Van Eck, 2024). While the South African experience provides a useful lens through which to interpret global findings, the primary focus of this paper is not a local empirical analysis but a synthesis of worldwide evidence from which lessons relevant to South African higher education can be drawn. Previous literature on digitalisation in QS education highlights isolated successes, but it lacks a holistic framework to guide systematic integration of pedagogy, technology, and content knowledge (Crafford & Frick, 2023). This conceptual gap underscores the need for an evidence-based model capable of aligning technological, pedagogical, and content knowledge in QS education.

This study explores how the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework can be applied to enhance QS education, particularly within the context of South African higher education institutions providing a structured model for integrating technology into teaching without displacing disciplinary knowledge, in light of this context. By conducting a systematic literature review (2015–2025), the paper identifies global trends, barriers, and opportunities for QS education reform. Rather than testing the framework's application, the study analyses how TPACK has been conceptualised and discussed in existing scholarship to inform future curriculum development. this paper argues that adopting a TPACK lens not only enhances learner engagement and higher-order thinking but also provides a roadmap for institutions seeking to future-proof QS graduates for digitally mediated practice. Ultimately, the paper contributes to both scholarship and practice by consolidating global insights that can inform curriculum renewal, faculty development, and institutional support strategies, offering implications for South Africa and other developing contexts seeking to bridge the QS digital skills gap.

Literature review

Rethinking quantity surveying education in a digital era

International research has increasingly highlighted the inadequacies of traditional QS education, which remains heavily content-oriented and dominated by conventional cost management pedagogy. Studies across the United Kingdom, Australia, and Asia show that while QS graduates possess sound technical knowledge, they often lack the digital literacy and critical problem-solving skills required in a data-driven construction sector (Ginigaddara et al., 2025; Ekundayo, 2020; Shafie et al., 2014). South African scholarship echoes this concern, with researchers pointing to rigid curricula, outdated teaching methods, and infrastructural limitations that hinder digital adoption (Samuels & Singh, 2025). Although initiatives such as Building Information Modelling (BIM) integration and blended learning have been piloted, these attempts remain fragmented, lacking a coherent pedagogical framework to sustain innovation (Taban et al., 2021; Abdirad & Dossick, 2016). This suggests that QS education is struggling to keep pace with global industry shifts, exposing a serious gap between academic training and professional practice.

Pedagogy, technology, and content in construction education

The integration of digital tools in professional education, especially Building Information Modelling (BIM), necessitates meticulous attention to both technical and pedagogical dimensions. Despite the increased popularity of BIM in the architecture, engineering, and construction sectors, its integration into higher education curricula is still restricted (Abdirad & Dossick, 2016). Educators have difficulties in developing successful BIM curriculum, reconciling diverse educational approaches with industrial requirements (Hjelseth, 2017). The early introduction of BIM concepts, especially in the absence of specialised tools, can facilitate the development of essential cognitive patterns in students (Guo et al., 2023). It is essential to transcend assumptions regarding kids' innate digital skills and concentrate on cultivating digital literacies across procedural, cognitive, and sociocultural domains (Smith et al., 2020). This method facilitates more efficient technology integration in professional education, harmonising with industry requirements and improving students' capacity to absorb and employ emerging technologies in their potential careers.

On the contrary, research that foregrounds teaching methods tends to neglect how content-specific challenges in QS can be addressed through technology. Mishra and Koehler's (2006) Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework (depicted in figure 1) provides a holistic response to these shortcomings. TPACK highlights that effective technology integration is not simply

about mastering tools, but about strategically combining technological knowledge (TK), pedagogical knowledge (PK), and content knowledge (CK) in ways that reinforce each other (Kadluba & Obersteiner, 2024). The model's intersections, such as Technological Content Knowledge (TCK) and Technological Pedagogical Knowledge (TPK) offer nuanced pathways to design curricula that are both technologically current and pedagogically sound. Yet, despite its international traction in teacher education and STEM fields, the application of TPACK to QS education remains underexplored, particularly in African higher education contexts.

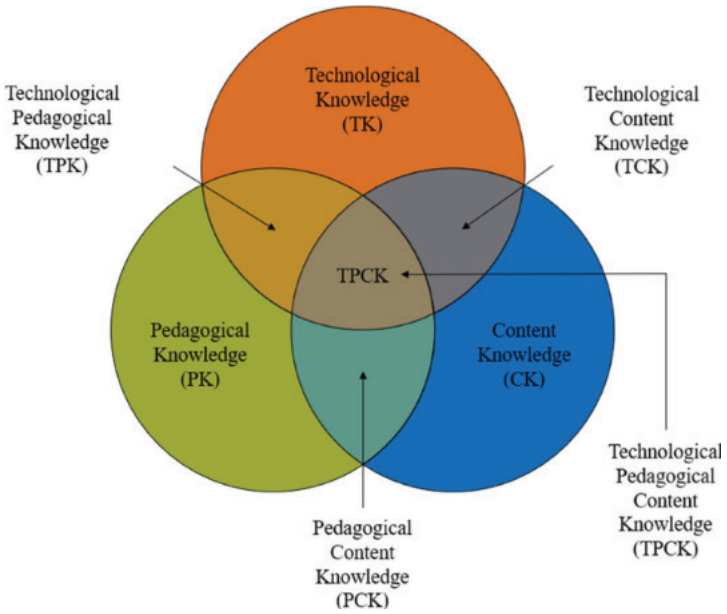

Figure 1: The TPACK framework adapted from Mishra and Koehler (2006)

Identifying the research gap

Although global scholarship demonstrates the benefits of adopting integrated frameworks for digital pedagogy, QS education literature reveals significant oversights. Most research continues to treat pedagogy, technology, and content as separate concerns, resulting in piecemeal interventions with limited impact on graduate readiness (Perera et al., 2023). Few studies adopt a holistic perspective such as TPACK to reimagine how QS students can develop higher-order thinking and adaptability within technology-mediated environments. While international studies demonstrate significant advances in digital pedagogy and QS education, few have examined these developments through the TPACK framework. Moreover, there is a notable absence of research applying TPACK within South African or Global South contexts, signalling a gap that this study seeks to address. This gap is even more pronounced in South Africa, where infrastructural inequalities and limited staff development create barriers to innovation. Without a coherent approach, QS graduates risk lagging behind international counterparts in responding to the digital transformation of construction practice. This paper therefore positions TPACK as both a theoretical and practical roadmap for reengineering QS curricula, addressing not only the "what" of digital tools but also the "how" and "why" of their pedagogical application in preparing future professionals.

Research methodology and method

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) combined with bibliometric analysis to examine global and regional scholarly trends relating to Quantity Surveying (QS) education, digital pedagogy, and the application of the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework. The SLR approach was selected for its capacity to synthesise and critically evaluate existing research in a structured and transparent manner, thereby identifying knowledge gaps and informing future research directions (Kitchenham & Charters, 2007; Snyder, 2019).

The review was conducted in line with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines, which provide a standardised framework for ensuring methodological transparency, reproducibility, and rigour (Moher et al., 2009). This involved four main stages: identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion of studies that met the defined

criteria. The PRISMA framework was applied specifically to guide the systematic literature review (SLR) process, ensuring transparent screening and inclusion of relevant studies. The Bibliometric analysis was conducted as a complementary quantitative phase using the final SLR dataset to map publication trends and research networks.

Bibliometric analysis was integrated into the review process to quantitatively map the intellectual structure of the field and identify influential publications, authors, keywords, and collaborative networks (Donthu et al., 2021). This dual approach allowed the study not only to synthesise the qualitative insights from the literature but also to visualise publication trends and research clusters within QS education and digital pedagogy, particularly those applying or engaging with the TPACK framework. This methodological integration ensured both depth and breadth in the analysis, enabling the study to provide a comprehensive and empirically grounded overview of the state of research in this emerging area.

Data sources

Three multidisciplinary and subject-specialised databases were selected to ensure comprehensive coverage of peer-reviewed literature relevant to Quantity Surveying (QS) education, digital pedagogy, and the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework. The Web of Science Core Collection was chosen for its rigorous journal selection criteria and extensive indexing of high-quality international research (Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016). Scopus, as one of the largest abstract and citation databases, provides broad subject coverage and robust bibliometric analysis capabilities (Burnham, 2006). ScienceDirect, hosted by Elsevier, offers extensive full-text access to journals in engineering, construction, and educational technology, making it highly relevant for QS and digital pedagogy studies (Zhu & Liu, 2020). Together, these databases capture both global scholarship and region-specific research, ensuring a balanced and representative evidence base for the review.

Search strategy

A targeted search of the Web of Science Core Collection was carried out using a combination of keywords, Boolean operators, and field tags to ensure a comprehensive retrieval of relevant literature. The search string applied was: TS = ("quantity surveyor*" OR "quantity surveying" OR "construction economics" OR "cost consultant*") AND TS = ("TPACK" OR "technological pedagogical content knowledge" OR "digital pedagogy" OR "educational technology" OR "technology enhanced learning").

AND TS = ("higher education" OR "university curriculum" OR "construction education" OR "built environment education") AND PY = (2015-2025).

Search results were refined using the following filters:

- Document types: Articles and reviews
- Language: English
- Subject categories: Construction building technology, education educational research, engineering civil

To ensure comparability, equivalent searches were tailored for Scopus and ScienceDirect, with syntax adjustments specific to each database. These platforms were chosen for their complementary coverage and strengths ranging from the rigorous indexing of Web of Science to Scopus' broad disciplinary scope and ScienceDirect's extensive full-text access to engineering, construction, and educational technology publications. This combined approach maximised the breadth and depth of the review's evidence base.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

A set of inclusion and exclusion criteria guided the selection of studies. Eligible publications were peer-reviewed journal articles or reviews, published between 2015 and 2025, written in English, and explicitly addressing Quantity Surveying (QS) education, digital pedagogy, or the integration of the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework, with a clear discussion of competencies, pedagogy, or curriculum development. Conference abstracts, editorials, non-peer-reviewed material, studies unrelated to QS education or lacking a digital/TPACK component, and duplicate records were excluded. The search across Web of Science, Scopus, and ScienceDirect

yielded 436 records, of which 58 duplicates were removed in EndNote. The remaining 378 records underwent title, abstract, and keyword screening, resulting in 121 studies for full-text review. Following eligibility assessment, 69 articles were excluded for reasons such as insufficient focus on QS education, lack of a digital/TPACK element, or methodological limitations. This process, documented in accordance with PRISMA 2020 guidelines, resulted in a final sample of 52 studies for analysis (as depicted in Figure 2). Data from each study were extracted using a structured form capturing bibliographic details, research focus and objectives, educational frameworks and technologies applied, reported impacts on QS education, and identified barriers and recommendations.

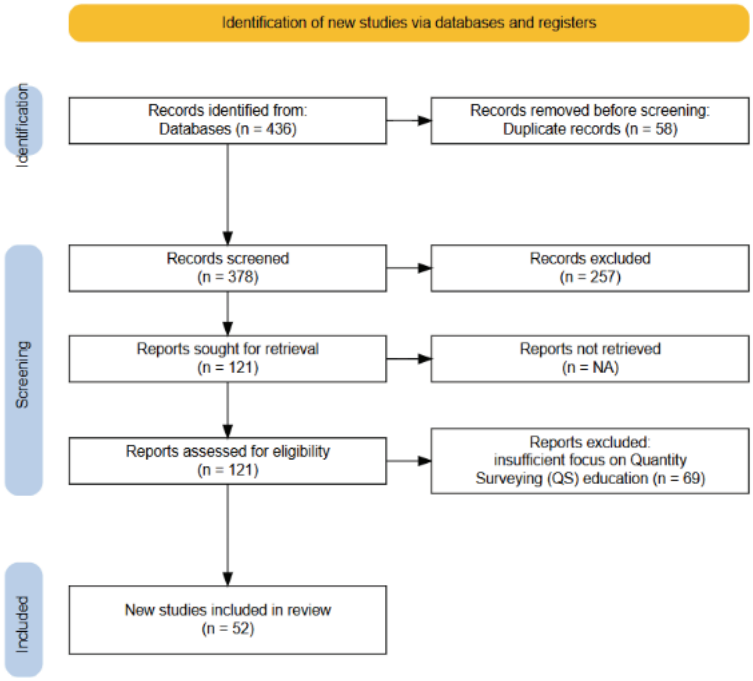

Figure 2 PRISMA Flow diagram

Findings

Bibliometric analysis

Productivity and Impact

The bibliometric analysis revealed that scholarly contributions to QS–TPACK research are dispersed across a range of authors and journals. As shown in Table 1, Bond M. emerged as the most prolific author, contributing two publications, while several others, including Abd Rauf and Alam, produced notable single studies. Table 2 indicates that Frontiers in Education led journal output, followed by Interactive Learning Environments and the International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education. Publication activity has increased steadily over the past decade (Figure 3), reflecting growing academic interest in integrating TPACK into QS education. These trends suggest that while the field remains relatively niche, its visibility and scholarly impact are expanding, supported by a core set of productive authors and reputable journals.

Tables 1 Most Relevant Authors

Authors	Articles	Articles fractionalised
Bond M	2	1,20
Abd Rauf MF	1	0,17
Abdullahi Mo	1	0,50
Adnan M	1	0,11
Ait Ali D	1	0,17
Alam A	1	0,50

Almusharraf N	1	0,50
Alshibani A	1	0,33
Amalia R	1	0,20
Amanollahi A	1	0,14

Table 2 Most Influential Journals

Sources	Articles
Frontiers in education	5
Interactive learning environments	4
International journal of educational technology in higher education	4
BMC medical education	3
Buildings	3
Cogent education	3
Contemporary educational technology	3
Australasian journal of educational technology	2
British journal of educational technology	2
Educational technology \& society	2

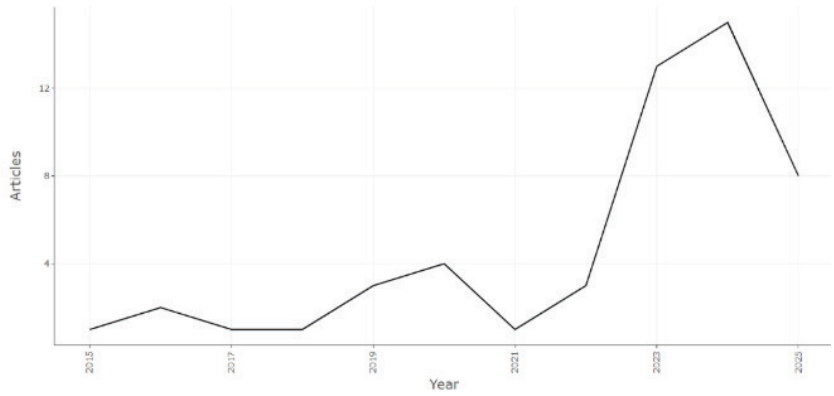

Figure 3 Annual Publication Trend

Geographical distribution and collaboration

The analysis reveals a broad international spread of QS–TPACK research, with China producing the most publications (29), followed by Iran (16) and Australia (15), while South Africa contributed 13 studies (Table 3). Collaboration patterns illustrated in the Country Collaboration Map (Figure 4) highlight strong cross-regional partnerships, particularly between Asian and Western institutions. This global distribution reflects a growing, interconnected scholarly community that is progressively advancing the integration of TPACK into Quantity Surveying education, with contributions spanning diverse educational and technological contexts. The map further reveals emerging participation from developing regions such as Africa, indicating increasing global interest in digital pedagogies for construction education. These patterns suggest a gradual diffusion of TPACK-informed research and collaboration from established research hubs toward new and developing contexts.

Tables 3 Most relevant countries

Country	Freq
China	29
Iran	16
Australia	15
South Africa	13

USA	10
Germany	8
Saudi Arabia	8
Indonesia	7
Malaysia	7
Belgium	6

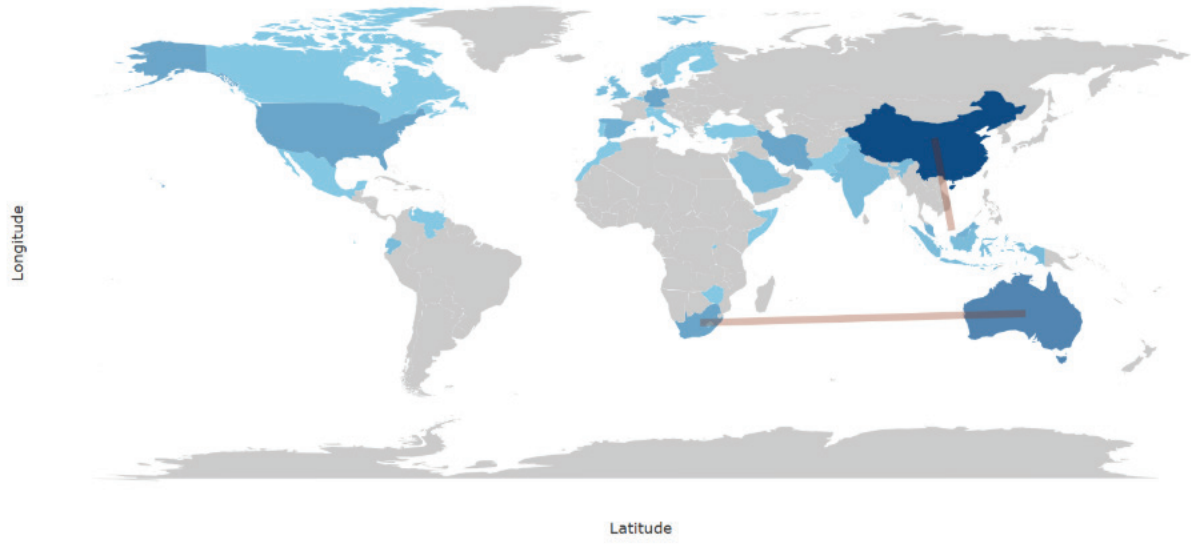

Figure 4 Country Collaboration Map

Thematic and Conceptual Structure

Keyword analysis shows that research on QS–TPACK frequently engages with themes such as students, design, education, knowledge, and science, reflecting a balance between pedagogical focus and technological integration (Table 4). The Keyword Co-occurrence Map (Figure 5) illustrates the interconnection of these concepts, while the Author Co-Authorship Network (Figure 6) highlights the collaborative nature of the field, with clusters of researchers forming around shared interests. The Thematic Evolution Map (Figure 7) indicates a shift from foundational studies on educational frameworks towards applied research exploring tools such as augmented reality and online learning. Together, these patterns reveal a maturing research landscape that is diversifying in scope and methodology.

Tables 4 Most frequent keywords

Words	**Occurrences**
Students	12
Design	6
Education	6
Knowledge	6
Science	6
Online	5
Augmented reality	4
Higher-education	4
Challenges	3
Framework	3

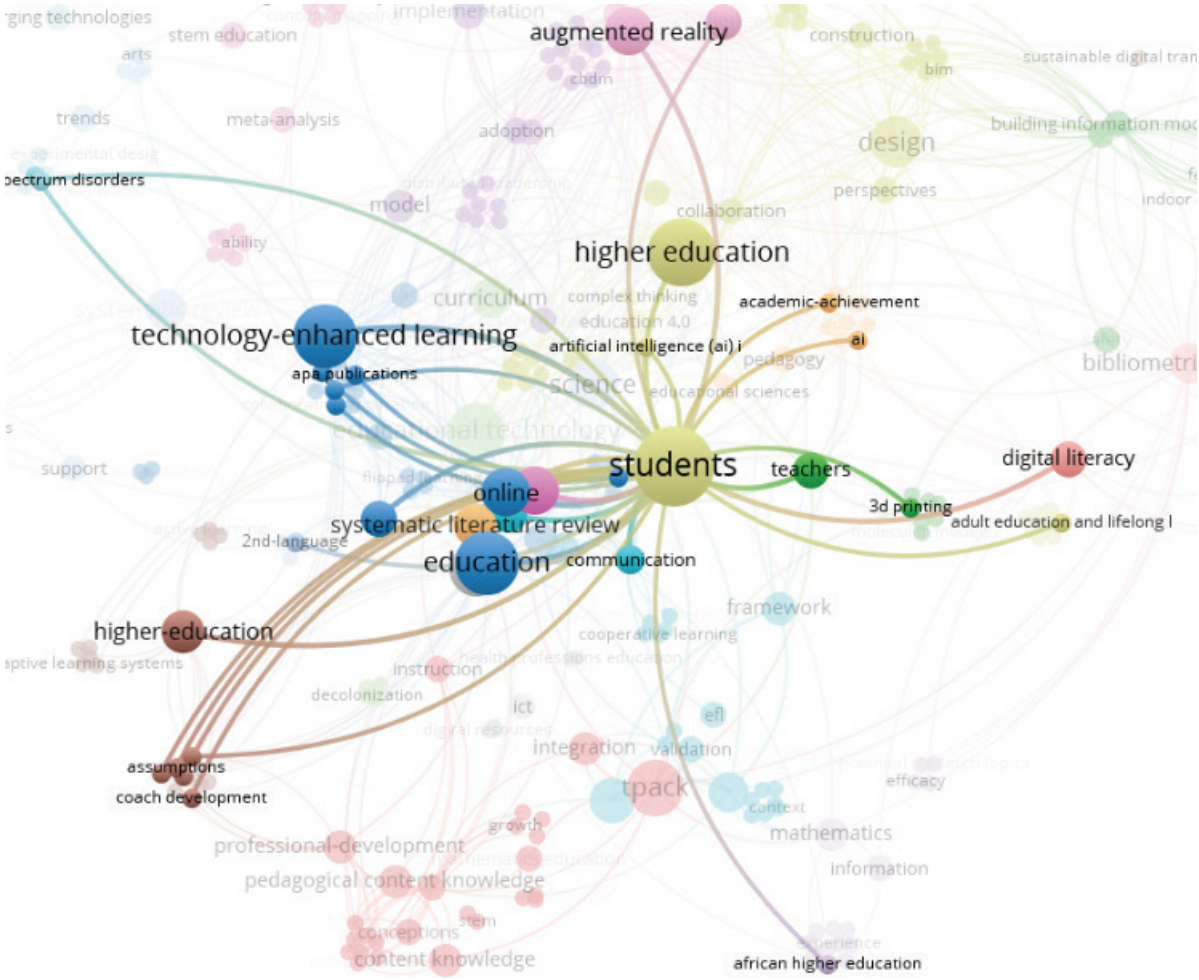

Figure 5 Keyword co-occurrence map

Figure 6 Author co-authorship network

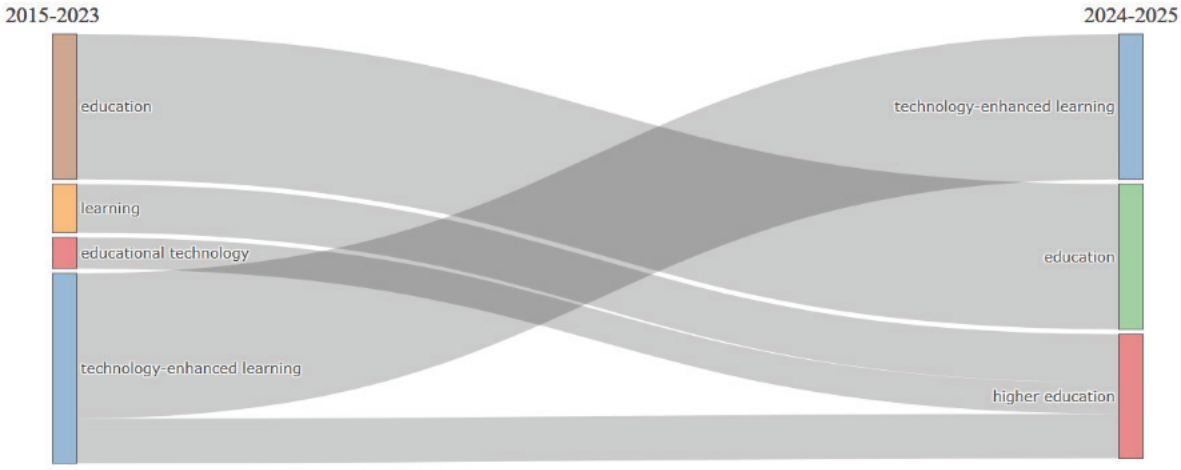

Figure 7 Thematic evolution map

Quality appraisal

The methodological quality of all included studies was evaluated using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT). This provided a consistent and transparent framework for assessing qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods research designs, thereby ensuring that only robust and credible evidence informed the review's conclusions.

Synthesis approach

Thematic analysis findings were integrated with bibliometric patterns to combine in-depth qualitative insights with quantitative mapping of the QS–TPACK research landscape. This dual approach offered a comprehensive perspective on the field, highlighting key thematic areas, influential contributions, and emerging trends in research.

Discussion

This section interprets and discusses the results/findings of the bibliometric and thematic analyses, linking them to existing scholarship on the integration of the TPACK framework into Quantity Surveying education. The discussion is structured around key themes that emerged from the data, including the extent of TPACK adoption, the role of technological tools in pedagogical innovation, global research patterns, collaboration networks, and future directions for QS curriculum reform. By examining these themes, the section aims to contextualise the findings within broader debates on digital pedagogy and professional competency development, while identifying practical and policy implications for higher education institutions, industry stakeholders, and researchers.

Reframing QS education through a TPACK lens

The review confirms that Quantity Surveying education remains largely content focused with technology most often added as a peripheral element rather than woven into pedagogical design particularly in developing countries such as South Africa (Table 3). This pattern is consistent with the long period of low publication activity followed by a steep rise from 2023 onward in Figure 3, which suggests a field that is moving from experimentation to wider interest. Where the TPACK framework is explicitly adopted, studies report stronger student engagement, more consistent evidence of higher order thinking, and clearer readiness for technology intensive roles. These effects appear in modules that connect digital tools to QS concepts through purposeful instructional strategies and aligned assessment rather than in tool led add ons. This aligns with research by Mishra and Koehler (2006), which emphasises TPACK's ability to bridge the gap between technology and pedagogy in professional education. Barriers to adoption, however, include limited lecturer training in educational technology, rigid curriculum structures, and infrastructural constraints, corroborating the challenges identified by Koehler, Mishra and Cain (2013).

Pedagogical use of digital tools and learning outcomes

The thematic analysis (Table 4, Figure 5) reveals a gradual pedagogical shift from theory-driven instruction to technology-mediated approaches using augmented reality, online platforms, and interactive design tools. Such innovations enable authentic, real-world learning scenarios, consistent with Geng, Chai and Tsai (2019), who found that immersive tools increase student motivation and skill acquisition in construction education. However, the sustainability of these innovations is contingent on institutional investment in infrastructure and staff development, echoing the concerns of Bond et al. (2021) on digital equity in higher education. Across the corpus, the most effective interventions integrate platforms and tools such as simulations, augmented and virtual reality, and collaborative online environments into authentic QS tasks including measurement, cost modelling, and design coordination. The keyword co-occurrence network in Figure 5 shows strong clustering around students, technology enhanced learning, online, and digital literacy, which aligns with the outcome gains reported when TPACK informs learning design. Constructive alignment is a distinguishing feature in these studies, with learning activities, tool affordances, and assessments mapped to higher order outcomes. By contrast, modules that keep a content heavy orientation and simply incorporate tools demonstrate only incremental improvements. This divergence explains the mixed performance reported in the literature and supports the view that meaningful technology use is primarily a pedagogical challenge.

Geography, collaboration, and knowledge flows

Bibliometric mapping (Table 3, Figure 4) shows that QS–TPACK research is concentrated in China (29 publications), Iran (16), and Australia (15), with South Africa contributing 13 studies as the leading African country. This distribution mirrors broader patterns in educational technology research, where Global North and select Asian nations dominate output (Wang & Wong, 2020). The limited representation from other African regions underscores the need for targeted research funding and capacity-building initiatives. The global distribution maps reveal a concentrated footprint in East Asia and the Asia Pacific, with China and Australia particularly prominent, and a smaller but visible cluster in South Africa. These patterns are evident in the choropleth in Figure 5 and the intensity heatmap in Figure 6. Table 3 similarly shows the concentration of publications in these regions. Such concentration shapes which infrastructures, pedagogical models, and evaluation designs dominate the evidence base. Collaboration networks appear stronger across Asia and Western systems than within Africa, which constrains the diffusion of context appropriate designs and shared capacity building mechanisms. Strengthening South to South partnerships and practice-based consortia would diversify exemplars and accelerate the localisation of TPACK informed approaches in resource constrained settings.

Structural barriers to meaningful integration

Three systemic constraints recur across studies and are frequently noted in developing contexts such as South Africa. First, limited lecturer development in educational technology reduces confidence with learning design and assessment using digital tools. Second, curriculum rigidity restricts the adoption of studio and problem-based sequences and slows iterative improvement as tools evolve. Third, infrastructural constraints including software licensing, connectivity, device access, and technical support make sustained implementation difficult. These factors create incentives for bolt on technology use and perpetuate the content dominant status quo identified in the abstract and reflected in the broad pre 2024 themes in Figure 7.

Implications for curriculum and policy

The evidence from Tables 3 and 4 and Figures 3 to 7 points to a coordinated response that links capacity, curriculum, and institutional policy.

1. Lecturer capacity building. Provide targeted professional development on TPACK informed learning design, mentorship from instructional designers, and micro credential pathways tied to demonstrable classroom innovations.
2. Curriculum re-engineering. Shift from content accumulation toward studio style and problem-based sequences where digital tools are selected for pedagogical fit. Embed constructive alignment so that assessments capture analysis, evaluation, and problem solving.

3. Enabling infrastructures and governance. Guarantee baseline access to software, devices, and technical support. Introduce flexible curriculum approval processes for iterative change. Fund cross institutional collaborations that co-develop open resources and shared evaluation rubrics suited to QS competencies.
4. Quality assurance. Require module level evidence of TPACK alignment linking intended outcomes, activities, tool affordances, and assessments as a condition of programme review and accreditation.

Future directions

Given the surge in outputs in Figure 3 and the consolidation toward technology enhanced learning in Figure 7, future studies should move beyond single module pilots to longitudinal and comparative designs at programme scale. Priority areas include the evaluation of learning gains and employability outcomes in TPACK designed modules, cost effectiveness analyses in low resource settings, and tests of professional development models that reliably shift practice. Comparative studies across underrepresented African contexts are particularly important to balance the current geographic concentration visible in Figures 4 and 6 and documented in Table 3.

Conclusion

This study highlights that although the digital revolution of the construction sector is progressing rapidly, the incorporation of the TPACK framework into Quantity Surveying (QS) education remains limited, particularly in developing regions such as South Africa. The systematic review revealed that, when implemented, TPACK enhances student engagement, higher-order thinking, and professional readiness for technology-oriented QS roles. However, persistent challenges including rigid curricula, limited faculty capacity in educational technology, inadequate infrastructure, and weak regional collaboration continue to constrain its full potential. By framing digital competency development through a TPACK lens, this research extends pedagogical theory into the construction education domain and offers a conceptual foundation for curriculum innovation. The overarching conclusion is that future-ready QS graduates cannot be developed solely through content-driven curricula; a theoretically grounded, digitally integrated pedagogical approach is essential to bridge the global QS skills gap and prepare graduates for the evolving demands of industry.

Recommendations

Building upon these conclusions, future research should focus on the context-specific adoption and localisation of the TPACK framework in South African Quantity Surveying (QS) education, drawing lessons from global models of digital pedagogy. Comparative studies between South Africa and other regions could provide evidence of scalable and adaptable strategies for integrating technology into QS teaching and learning. Higher education institutions should prioritise lecturer capacity-building in educational technology, embed TPACK principles into curriculum reform, and strengthen partnerships with industry to co-develop digitally enhanced learning experiences aligned with professional practice. Policymakers and professional councils should create enabling environments through targeted funding, infrastructure support, and accreditation standards that reward pedagogical innovation. Finally, strengthening international and regional research collaborations will be vital to ensure QS education in South Africa remains locally relevant, globally informed, and responsive to the evolving demands of digital transformation in the built environment.

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SACQSP2025-102

Exploratory Study of Quantity Surveyors' Influence on Effective Cost Management in Small-Scale Construction Projects in Bloemfontein

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Abstract

Small-scale construction projects in South Africa frequently encounter cost overruns, inefficiencies, and financial mismanagement, largely due to limited professional oversight and fragmented cost control practices. While Quantity Surveyors (QSs) are recognized for their strategic role in large-scale developments, their contribution to small-scale projects remains underexplored and undervalued. This study assesses the influence that quantity surveyors have on cost management in small-scale construction projects, focusing on professionally registered QSs operating in Bloemfontein. Invitations were given to 20 Quantity Surveying Professionals in Bloemfontein, but only 7 Professionally registered quantity surveyors were interviewed. Using qualitative methods through semi-structured interviews, the research uncovers a shared understanding of cost management as a strategic tool for maintaining budgetary discipline and enhancing project efficiency. Participants emphasised the need for early QS involvement, interdisciplinary collaboration, and proactive planning to mitigate financial risks – particularly in small-scale projects often overlooked due to assumptions of simplicity. The findings reveal that while QSs are well-positioned to influence cost outcomes, their roles are frequently underutilized during the planning and design stages. The study advocates for a shift in industry norms toward integrated cost oversight, formalized advisory roles, and tailored frameworks for small-scale project delivery. These insights contribute to the advancement of cost management practices and support the development of inclusive, efficient, and financially resilient construction methodologies.

Keywords: Cost Management, Project Efficiency, Quantity Surveyors, Small-Scale Construction Projects.

Introduction

Construction cost management is one of the key factors that contributes to the project success globally. In the construction sector around the world, cost overruns are very common which compromises the project objectives and profitability of the projects which in turn also affects the overall quality of the project. Accroding to Abdelalim et al. (2025) construction sector is the main contributor to the Global economy, yet they struggle with to avoid cost overruns. Abdelalim et al. (20250 further emphasize that approximately 85% of the construction projects are subjected to cost overruns due to poor planning, inaccurate cost estimation and weak financial systems. Similarly, Salem et al. (2025) assert that nine out of ten projects fail to be completed with the original budget, which shows a global trend for the need for more precise cost oversight. Effective cost management is a cornerstone of successful construction project delivery, regardless of scale. In the context of small-scale construction projects, which dominate the built environment in developing economies like South Africa, financial oversight is often informal or under-resourced, leading to frequent cost overruns, resource misallocation, and project delays. According to Elserougy et al. (2024), up to 40% of global construction projects experience substandard cost performance, with an estimated 86% likelihood of cost overruns in international building projects. These statistics underscore the urgent need for structured cost control mechanisms, particularly in small-scale contractor environments where

technical and financial constraints often hinder project success (Dhliwayo et al., 2024). Quantity Surveyors (QSs) are uniquely positioned to address these challenges (Aghimien & Adegbembo, 2023). As construction economists, their expertise encompasses cost estimation, budgeting, procurement, contract administration, and financial reporting (Olaniyan & Olaniyan, 2025). Their involvement ensures that projects remain financially viable, risks are mitigated early, and resources are allocated efficiently (Ashworth et al., 2013). In South Africa, the role of QSs is evolving rapidly, driven by digitalisation, sustainability imperatives, and the increasing complexity of construction projects (Mudaly, 2025).

Despite their critical function, QSs are often underutilized in small-scale projects. Mulaudzi (2021) found that 96% of small, medium, and micro enterprises (SMMEs) in Gauteng did not apply formal cost-estimating tools, resulting in uncontrolled expenditures and reduced profitability. This gap in professional engagement is compounded by stakeholder misconceptions that QSs are only necessary for large-scale developments. Such perceptions limit the potential for proactive cost planning and strategic financial oversight in smaller projects. Moreover, the sustainability and competitiveness of SMME contractors in South Africa are closely tied to their ability to manage costs effectively. Sogaxa et al. (2024) emphasize that cost estimating skills, record keeping, and financial control are among the most critical factors influencing project success and business sustainability for SMMEs. In this regard, QSs serve not only as financial custodians but also as strategic partners in enhancing project outcomes and long-term viability. This study explores the influence of Quantity Surveyors on cost management in small-scale construction projects, with a focus on Bloemfontein, Free State, South Africa. This research aims to illuminate the value of QS engagement in enhancing financial control, reducing risks, and promoting successful project delivery. The originality of this study lies in its focused exploration of an often under-researched domain – how QSs contribute to cost efficiency in small-scale construction projects, a sector vital to South Africa's socio-economic development.

Literature Review

Cost Management in Construction Projects

In construction projects, cost management is a vital knowledge area in construction project management which consist of planning, estimating, budgeting and controlling costs to ensure that the project can be completed within the allocated budget (Hanioglu, 2022). Precision in the cost management quaranteess the project success, since cost is the critical factor in construction projects (Ghallab & Hosain 2020). Yismalet and Patel (2018) assert that construction project performance is mostly measured by the cost outcomes through the comparison between the actual costs and the budgeted costs. Construction management is a continuous excescise which consist of upfront cost control planning and estimation, setting a realistic budget, and the deligennt cost control and monitoring and evaluation throughout the project execution (Aguocha, 2023). Regardeless of various cost control strategies, cost overruns remain a persistent global challenge in the construction industry whereby its rare for the construction project to be completed within the stipulated time frame (Abdelalim et al. 2024).This necessitates the need for rigorous cost management since uncontrolled cost can jeopardize a project viability and stakeholders objectives outlined in the project charter (Nemakhavhani & Khafiso, 2024). Cost management in construction involves several functions which consists of cost estimation, cost planning and budgeting and cost controlling. Igwe and Mohamad (2019) define cost managementas an integrated process where all functions are blended to achieve financial control of the construction projects especially in small scale projects.

Cost management is a critical determinant of project success, particularly in small-scale construction where financial margins are tight and oversight is often informal. Numerous studies have highlighted the prevalence of cost overruns in such projects, often attributed to inadequate planning, poor financial control, and lack of professional involvement (Dharshithaa et al., 2025). In South Africa, small, medium, and micro enterprises (SMMEs) dominate the construction landscape, yet many lack structured cost control mechanisms. Mulaudzi (2021) conducted a seminal study on cost management practices among SMMEs in Gauteng, revealing that 96% of respondents did not apply formal cost-estimating tools. This absence of structured financial planning led to uncontrolled expenditures and reduced profitability. The study emphasized the need for widespread adoption of cost management tools such as elemental cost planning, cash flow forecasting, and tender budgeting to mitigate overruns and improve project outcomes (Mulaudzi, 2021). Globally, cost optimization strategies have evolved to include activity-based costing, variance analysis, and value engineering. Dharshithaa et al. (2025) argue that while these techniques are effective, their implementation in small-scale projects is limited

due to resource constraints and lack of technical expertise. Moreover, the integration of digital tools such as big data analytics and cloud-based platforms has shown promise in enhancing cost control, yet uptake remains low in developing economies (Akinshipe et al., 2021; Llale & Root, 2023).

The Role of Quantity Surveyors in Cost Management

Quantity Surveyors (QSs) are central to effective cost management, offering expertise in budgeting, procurement, contract administration, and financial reporting. Ashworth et al. (2013) define QSs as construction economists whose involvement ensures financial viability and risk mitigation across project phases. Their role is especially vital in small-scale projects, where informal practices often lead to inefficiencies. Cruywagen and Llale (2017) explored the role of QSs in South Africa's public-private partnerships (PPPs), noting that QSs involvement in smaller projects is limited although they possess the necessary skills. This underutilization stems from misconceptions about the scope of QS services and a lack of awareness among stakeholders (Cruywagen & Llale, 2017). The study advocates for greater integration of QSs in all project scopes to enhance cost performance and contractual compliance (Seboka & Gidebo, 2025).

Mbachu (2016) conducted a comprehensive review of QS contributions to project delivery, identifying over 25 strengths including negotiation skills, cost estimation accuracy, and industry knowledge. However, the study also highlighted weaknesses such as limited business acumen and inconsistencies in cost forecasts. These findings underscore the need for continuous professional development and diversification of QS services. Llale and Root (2023) emphasized the transformative impact of the Fourth Industrial Revolution on the QS profession in South Africa. Technologies such as Building Information Modelling (BIM), AI-driven forecasting, and scenario planning are reshaping QS roles, enabling real-time cost tracking and predictive analytics (Llale & Root, 2023). Yet the adoption of these innovations in small-scale projects remains slow, necessitating targeted capacity building and policy support. Despite the proven value of QSs influence in construction undertakings, several challenges hinder their full integration into small-scale construction projects. These challenges include limited awareness of QS functions among SMME contractors, resource constraints and informal project management structures, as well as resistance to digital transformation and innovation uptake (Girma, 2018; Mulaudzi, 2021; Llale & Root, 2023). Nevertheless, opportunities exist to enhance QS engagement through professional education and stakeholder sensitization, policy frameworks that mandate QS involvement in public-funded projects, and development of cost management tools tailored to small-scale contexts (Llale & Root, 2023). By leveraging these opportunities, the construction industry can improve cost efficiency, reduce financial risks, and promote sustainable project delivery.

Research methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach, using semi-structured interviews to gather insights from practicing QSs in Bloemfontein, Free State, South Africa who were registered as professionals with South African Council for the Quantity Surveying Profession (SACQSP). The interpretivist paradigm was adopted to explore subjective experiences and contextual nuances of QSs. A purposive sampling technique was used to target professionally registered QSs with experience in small-scale construction projects. Invitations were given to 20 Quantity Surveying Professionals in Bloemfontein, Free State, but only 7 Professionally eregistered quantity surveyors were interviewed. Seven (7) professional QSs were interviewed to respond to the central research question on how QSs contribute to cost efficiency in small-scale construction projects. The rationale for choosing professionally registered QSs with relevant experience in small-scale projects, was influenced by the research objective which required interviewees with expertise and practical exposure necessary to respond meaningfully to the research question. Furthermore, interviewing 7 QSs allowed the researcher to easily manage the data collection process while enabling detailed exploration of individual perspectives, patterns, and nuances. The semi-structured interview questions focused on the role of QSs during different project lifecycle phases, their perceptions of cost management, and interdisciplinary stakeholder collaboration. The research data were transcribed during the interview process and analysed thematically. The thematic analysis identified recurring themes related to QSs' perception of cost management, integration of cost management in planning, and the impact of interdisciplinary stakeholder collaboration. The study adhered to ethical considerations by obtaining informed consent from participants, maintaining the confidentiality of their data, and securing ethics approval from ethics review board prior to conducting fieldwork.

Research results

This section presents the findings derived from semi-structured interviews conducted with professionally registered QSs involved in small-scale construction projects within the Free State province of South Africa. The aim was to explore their perception of cost management, and the role of professional collaboration during the design stage. The responses were analyzed thematically and the key themes that emerged include the QSs perception of cost management, integration of cost management in planning, and the impact of interdisciplinary stakeholder collaboration. Due to ethical reasons, the interviewees names were kept confidential, and the code "TP" was used to distinguish QSs' contribution to this study. Since only 7 Quantity surveying Professionals were interviewed the codes are from TP1 to TP7.

Theme 1: QSs Perception of Cost Management

The majority of interviewees demonstrated a clear understanding of cost management, aligning closely with definitions found in the literature. The interviewees consistently emphasized the role of cost management in maintaining budgetary discipline and maximizing project efficiency. All participants agreed that cost management is essential across all project stages and should be driven by collaborative efforts among construction professionals. TP1 and TP4 noted that cost management is often perceived as the sole responsibility of the QS, given their direct involvement with financial aspects of construction. "Instead, it should be a team effort that involving QSs, architects, engineers, and other relevant professionals", remarked TP4.

Consequently, all the interviewees expressed concern that small-scale projects often receive less rigorous cost oversight due to assumptions about their simplicity and lower financial stakes. They further advocated for equal attention to cost management regardless of project size, citing its importance for overall project success. TP1 highlighted the QS's role in contract administration, noting that the selection and understanding of contracts such as JBCC Minor Works directly influence project costs. This reinforces the QS's responsibility not only in estimating but also in managing contractual cost implications. TP2 added that QSs possess site-specific knowledge of construction activities, which allows them to anticipate projects' cost implications more than designers. Therefore, QSs should be included in the planning stages of the project for proactive cost control.

Theme 2: Integration of Cost Management in Planning

Most interviewees stressed the importance of initiating cost management during the planning phase. TP2 argued that cost management should be integrated from project inception through execution. This view aligns with literature suggesting that QS involvement throughout the project lifecycle enhances profitability. TP5 proposed that early QS engagement could prevent costly design revisions and ensure alignment with client's budgets from the outset. TP6 noted that "Small-scale projects are prone to cost overruns due to insufficient attention to detail and a prevailing mindset that such projects are inherently manageable". "This underestimation often results in inadequate planning and oversight, exacerbating financial inefficiencies", said TP6. "The QS's early involvement enables proactive budgeting and avoids reactive design alterations", echored TP3. In a nutshell, all interviewees suggested that cost management should be embedded in the planning ethos rather than treated as a corrective measure.

Theme 3: Interdisciplinary Collaboration at the Design Stage

Professional collaboration at the design stage emerged as a critical factor for effective cost management. TP3 emphasized the importance of early coordination between the architects and QSs, while TP1 advocated for collaboration at the briefing stage to avoid costly redesigns. All interviewees agreed that a multidisciplinary team comprising a QS, architect, and engineer; should be involved from the outset to ensure comprehensive planning and cost control. "Design changes are one of the major contributors to cost overruns. These changes are often caused by late-stage feasibility issues and directly influence project costs", stated TP7. The interviewees collectively suggested that advisory roles of QSs should be formalized early, enabling the project team to make informed decisions that align with both design intent and financial constraints. This underscores the importance of early-stage collaboration and thorough planning to mitigate financial risks.

Discussion

Theme 1: QSs' Perception of Cost Management

The concern raised by all 7 interviewees regarding the neglect of cost management in small-scale projects is particularly prominent in the South African context, where SMMEs dominate the construction landscape (CIDB, 2021). The assumption that smaller projects are inherently less complex often leads to inadequate cost oversight, which contradicts findings by Bowen et al. (2007), who argue that project scale does not diminish the need for rigorous financial control. TP1's emphasis on the QSs influence in contract selection including JBCC Minor Works on cost outcomes reinforces the QS's multifaceted role. This aligns with the work of Maritz and Hattingh (2015), who highlighted the QS's responsibility for interpreting contractual provisions to mitigate financial risk (Manyanyi, 2019). TP2's assertion that QSs possess site-specific knowledge further supports the argument for their early involvement in planning. This view was also echoed by Love et al. (2013), who found that early QS engagement improves cost predictability and reduces downstream inefficiencies.

Theme 2: Integration of Cost Management in Planning

The consensus among all 7 interviewees that cost management should begin at the planning phase of the project reflects a paradigm shift from reactive to proactive financial control. TP2 and TP5's views on lifecycle cost management are supported by Perera et al. (2010), where QSs contribute from project inception to completion. Early QS involvement has proven to reduce design revisions and improve project scope alignment with client's budget, as emphasized by TP5 and TP6. This is consistent with findings by Olawale and Sun (2010), who identified poor planning and late-stage design changes as key drivers of cost overruns. TP6's observation that small-scale projects suffer from underestimation and insufficient planning resonates with the work of Windapo and Cattell (2013), who argue that informal practices in small projects often lead to inefficiencies. The interviewees' collective recommendation to embed cost management into the planning ethos rather than treat it as a corrective tool aligns with the principles of value management and front-end loading (Kelly et al., 2014).

Theme 3: Interdisciplinary Collaboration at the Design Stage

The importance of interdisciplinary professional collaboration at the design stage was strongly emphasized across all interviews. TP3 and TP1's advocacy for early coordination between QSs, architects, and engineers reflects best practices in integrated project delivery (IPD), which promotes shared responsibility and transparency (Kent & Becerik-Gerber, 2010). The interviewees' concern about design changes contributing to cost overruns is supported by Love et al. (2002), who identified that late-stage design modifications are a primary source of budget escalation. TP7's remark on feasibility issues triggering redesigns underscores the need for early advisory roles for QSs. Formalizing these roles can ensure that design intent aligns with financial constraints. Nkado (2000) supported this notion through his study by promoting a strategic QS input during briefing and schematic design stages. Therefore, the findings suggest that collaborative planning not only enhances cost control but also fosters accountability and informed decision-making across disciplines (Nkado & Meyer, 2001).

Conclusion

This study has illuminated the critical role of QSs in driving effective cost management across all phases of construction projects, particularly in small-scale projects. The findings reveal that while QSs possess a deep understanding of cost control principles, their contributions are often underutilized or delayed. The perception that cost management is solely the QS's responsibility persists, despite growing recognition of the need for collaborative, interdisciplinary approaches. The interviewees in this study advocated for the integration of cost management from project inception, highlighting its potential to prevent cost overruns and enhance financial efficiency. The study also highlighted the vulnerability of small-scale projects to poor planning and oversight due to misconceptions about their simplicity. Furthermore, early-stage collaboration between QSs, architects, and engineers emerged as a decisive factor in mitigating design-related cost escalations and aligning project outcomes with budgetary constraints. Ultimately, the study reinforces the imperative for proactive, inclusive, and strategic cost management practices, particularly in the context of South Africa's evolving construction landscape

and the prominence of SMMEs. Studys [*sic*] limitations lies on the small sample size and limited availability of the quantity surveying professionals.

Recommendations

To maximize the influence of QSs in small-scale construction projects, the study proposes the following strategic recommendations:

- QSs should be engaged from the briefing and conceptual design stages to ensure proactive budgeting and cost alignment.
- Industry guidelines and client briefing protocols should be revised to mandate early QS participation.
- Establish integrated project teams comprising QSs, architects, engineers, and contractors from the outset.
- Develop tailored cost management frameworks for small-scale projects, recognizing their unique risks and constraints.
- Educate clients and stakeholders on the financial implications of underestimating small-scale projects.
- Incorporate cost management principles into architectural and engineering curricula to foster cross-disciplinary awareness.
- Advocate for national policy updates that recognize the strategic role of QSs in project planning and execution.

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SACQSP2025-121

Professionalism in the South African Built Environment: An Exploratory Literature Review

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Abstract

Professionalism in South Africa's built environment sector is crucial for developing infrastructure that is sustainable, ethical, and of superior quality, meeting the socio-economic needs of the nation. Considering South Africa's unique historical context, shaped by the legacy of apartheid and ongoing initiatives like Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment, this study explores the definition, application, and challenges of professionalism within the industry. The main aim of this study is to gain a comprehensive understanding of professionalism within the South African built environment, emphasizing the socio-political factors and regulatory context that influence its practice. To achieve this goal, an exploratory qualitative literature review was conducted, analysing scholarly articles, policy documents, and reports published from 2020 to 2024. Thematic analysis was utilized to uncover key themes related to professional behaviour, the roles of regulatory organizations, and the systemic obstacles affecting ethical standards. The findings suggest that professionalism within the built environment is characterized by specialized knowledge, skilfulness, ethical behaviour, responsibility, and a fluid professional identity shaped by individual traits and socioeconomic factors. However, the built environment industry in South Africa faces considerable obstacles. These challenges include fragmented and overlapping regulatory frameworks involving from various professional, resulting in confusion and inefficiencies in enforcing standards. Furthermore, unethical practices such as bribery, fraud, and fronting persist with minimal disciplinary measures, undermining trust and accountability. The study suggests a comprehensive approach to enhancing professionalism, incorporating social responsibility, inclusivity, and ethical reliability, within a streamlined regulatory framework. It emphasizes collaboration, enforcement of ethical norms, and professional development. This paper provides vital insights into the complexities surrounding professionalism in South Africa's built environment and lays the groundwork for policy evolution and prospective empirical research aimed at cultivating a more ethical, accountable, and inclusive professional culture.

Keywords: Professionalism, Built Environment, Construction, Professional Bodies.

Introduction

The built environment forms the essential foundation of modern societies, encompassing human-made spaces and systems such as buildings, transport networks, utilities, and public parks that facilitate economic, social, and cultural activities. In South Africa, a country facing significant socio-economic challenges and an urgent need for sustainable development, the built environment sector serves as a crucial driver of growth, employment, and social advancement (Bahr & Laszig, 2021; Ofori, 2022). The quality, safety, and sustainability of national infrastructure are closely tied to the professionalism of the individuals and organizations responsible for its development and management. Ideally, professionalism in this sector involves specialized knowledge, formal qualifications, advanced technical competence, strong ethical standards, and a commitment to social responsibility (Philips, 2020; Nilsson & Hertzberg, 2022).

The expression of professionalism is shaped by historical, political, and institutional contexts rather than being a neutral or universally consistent phenomenon. In South Africa, the legacy of apartheid has significantly influenced the professional landscape. Apartheid policies enforced segregated spatial development and created unequal access to education, training, and professional opportunities

(Ramabodu & Nena, 2024). This resulted in a persistent skills deficit and the systemic exclusion of the Black majority from meaningful participation in built environment professions. The effects of these policies remain evident today. In response, the post-apartheid era has prioritized redress and transformation. Policy measures such as Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) were implemented to address historical inequities and promote a more inclusive and representative industry (Vilakazi & Bosiu, 2021).

The interaction between transformative policies and the existing professional ecosystem has created a complex and contested environment for professionalism. The sector's regulatory framework is fragmented, with multiple professional bodies such as the South African Council for the Project and Construction Management Professions (SACPCMP), the South African Council for the Quantity Surveying Profession (SACQSP), and the Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB), each holding overlapping or conflicting mandates (Monama et al., 2022; Hughes, 2013). This fragmentation, partly resulting from efforts to establish inclusive structures, contributes to confusion, enforcement inefficiencies, and reduced accountability. As a result, the ideals of professionalism are often compromised in practice. The sector is frequently associated with project delays, excessive costs, and entrenched unethical practices, such as bribery, fraud, and "fronting," which undermine the transformative objectives of BBBEE (Kuoribo et al., 2023; Amoah & Steyn, 2023).

A significant gap in the scholarly literature intensifies these challenges. Although policy documents and theoretical critiques have identified systemic issues within the sector, there is a notable lack of empirical research examining the lived experiences of built environment professionals (Zhanbayev et al., 2023). Limited knowledge exists regarding how architects, engineers, project managers, and quantity surveyors address daily ethical dilemmas, regulatory ambiguities, and transformation pressures in the South African context. This gap restricts understanding of how professionalism is enacted and perceived in practice, and it hinders the development of evidence-based, context-sensitive interventions by policymakers and professional bodies.

The paper seeks to advance beyond theoretical critique by providing a comprehensive, literature-based analysis of professionalism in the South African built environment. The primary objective is to elucidate and synthesize the socio-political influences and regulatory conditions that shape professional practice. Through systematic review and thematic analysis of contemporary literature, the research aims to develop a nuanced understanding of the factors that constrain and enable professionalism. This conceptual foundation is intended to inform future empirical research and support the development of a more robust, ethical, and inclusive professional culture in a sector critical to South Africa's future.

Problem Statement

The South African built environment is severely hindered by a significant disparity between policy and practice, highlighted by a profound lack of empirical research regarding the lived experiences of professionals (Amoah & Steyn, 2023). Given that policy recognises challenges, research remains highly on theoretical and provides little insight into how regulations affect daily work or the long-term effects of regulations (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2022). This gap directly impacts key stakeholders: professionals are faced with ethical issues on their own, regulatory bodies lack the data necessary to make prudent choices, and clients face risks associated with delays and cost overruns (Latif et al., 2022). In the long run, the public endures the price through bad infrastructure, lost trust, and lower value of public investments, which slows down national development (Amoah & Steyn, 2023). This study addresses the gaps by looking at the complicated nature of professionalism to set the stage for important real-world research and system improvements.

Literature review

Defining the Built Environment

The built environment is a profession that pertains to the artificial surroundings designed for human activities, encompassing a range from expansive urban constructions to individual living areas (Cetin et al., 2021). Where a profession is defined as a paid occupation that is obtained through a formal training and through a formal qualification. For a profession to be recognized it needs to consist of specialized knowledge, training and necessary skill (O'Reilly et al., 2020).

Built environment encompasses tangible structures like buildings and infrastructure, social frameworks, certain products like consumer goods, as well as the media landscape (Cetin et al., 2021). The built environment represents an intricate industry that includes several sectors and a wide range of professionals. A professional is someone who has acquired a distinct set of knowledge and skills through formal educational training (Decker, 2023). Furthermore, a professional is characterized by several traits, including vision and foresight, dedication and ongoing improvement, specialized expertise, and a sense of responsibility and accountability, ethical standards and integrity, interpersonal and communication skills, altruism and service, self-realisation and personal development (Philips, 2020). Professionals in the built environment are responsible for designing, reviewing the design from serviceability and maintenance perspective, improving the built environment, professionalism and ensuring the delivery of cost efficient and environmentally friendly environments (Ofori, 2022).

The built environment plays a crucial role in the functioning of society, promoting economic growth, public health, and environmental sustainability. Its design and management greatly impact human welfare and ecological harmony, requiring a comprehensive and sustainable strategy (Lazar & Chithra, 2022). The built environment consists of various industries, such as construction, civil engineering, architecture, quantity surveying, urban planning, and more (Hürlimann et al., 2022). The construction industry is a complex field that is essential for bringing the built environment to life, as it is responsible for developing the infrastructure that underpins many aspects of everyday life, such as residential, industrial, and commercial structures, along with roads and bridges (Ofori, 2022).

Professionalism in the built environment

Based on the basic definitions of 'profession' and 'professional,' professionalism can be defined as the behavior, overarching goals, and shared qualities that define and uphold a profession (Nilsson & Hertzberg, 2022). It is the practical realization of the characteristics described in section 2.1, turning specialized knowledge and ethical principles into everyday practices and identity. While fundamental traits such as integrity, accountability, and competence are widely recognized as the cornerstones of professionalism (Philips, 2020), the interpretation and emphasis of these traits are not fixed. The idea of professionalism has been examined in various international contexts, suggesting that although essential values are generally consistent, each nation adapts and highlights these values differently in response to its distinct socio-economic, historical, and regulatory circumstances (Tatto, 2021).

In the context of the built environment, professionalism entails a thorough and integrated assessment of these elements (Koko & Bello, 2020). The emphasis shifts from mere technical capabilities to also include the behavior and professional identity of the individuals involved, which are constantly influenced by their experiences, developed abilities, and personal characteristics. Key participants in the built environment are therefore expected not only to have expertise but also to ensure that their knowledge and the technologies they use align with the current trends and sustainability requirements of the sector (Koko & Bello, 2020; Ofori, 2022). This illustrates a dynamic framework where professionalism is enacted and negotiated, rather than simply held.

In South Africa, however, the understanding and application of professionalism are deeply influenced by broader, often more pronounced socio-political factors, including the lasting impact of historical inequalities, ongoing transformation requirements, and the rapidly changing landscape of the built environment sector itself (Ramabodu & Nena, 2024). The nation's unresolved challenges originating from apartheid's designed disparities in educational access, unrepresentative leadership, and unequal training and resource opportunities create a unique context in which professionalism must be perceived. Therefore, discussing professionalism in the South African context cannot be confined to just technical skills and adherence to regulations. It requires the proactive incorporation of social responsibility, signifying a sincere commitment to inclusivity, meaningful transformation, moral integrity, and the comprehensive development of both professionals and the industry within a fragmented sector that remains in the early stages of post-apartheid restructuring (Zhanbayev et al., 2023).

As a result, professionalism within South Africa's construction industry, which physically shapes the built environment, functions as a broad and flexible system. It represents a concept that is continually negotiated, balanced between global standards and local socio-political demands. It includes the challenge of maintaining ethical standards amidst systemic pressures, navigating a complex regulatory environment aimed at promoting redress, and fulfilling the dual roles of technical experts and agents of social transformation. Thus, professionalism here is not merely a collection of personal qualities but

rather a collective, institutional, and political endeavor that is vital for achieving a built environment that is equitable, sustainable, and deserving of public trust (Lustialo et al., 2024).

Roles of Professional bodies within the Built Environment

The built environment industry consists professional bodies, which are considered as qualifying and/or certifying bodies, furthermore providers of training courses and developers of published standardized methodologies for professionalism (Hughes, 2013). In order to maintain professional standards in the built environment, South Africa has a number of regulatory organizations such as South African Council for the Quantity Surveying Profession (SACQSP), South African Council for the Architectural Profession (SACAP), South African Council for the Project and Construction Management Professions (SACPCMP), and others. Furthermore, professional identity is influenced by factors such as obtaining education from higher institutions, gaining experience in specific fields, and becoming registered with professional governing bodies (Ramabodu, 2023). These professional bodies in the built environment professionals are mainly responsible for the registration of professionals, monitoring ongoing professional growth, and upholding ethical standards.

Nonetheless with this requirement, a number of studies have stated that the South African regulatory framework consists of overlapping and fragmentation (Monama et al., 2022). Confusion and inefficiencies in enforcement are caused by the influence of other organizations, such as the National Home Builders Registration Council (NHBRC), the Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB), and other various professional associations (PMG, 2022). The consistent application of professional standards is weakened by the frequent lack of cooperation between these organizations. Additionally, the enforcement of moral behaviour and disciplinary measures are often inadequate. Bribery, fraud, and fronting are examples of unethical practices that are commonly reported, but they hardly ever result in substantial fines or systemic changes (Kuoribo et al., 2023). As a result, professional accountability loses value, and systemic trust is destroyed.

Challenges in the Built Environment Professionalism

The built environment continues to experience transformation issues, which have an impact on industry professionalism since, while Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) attempts to encourage inclusion, implementation has been inconsistent. Many Black-owned enterprises continue to confront structural obstacles, including limited access to contracts and mentorship (Vilakazi & Bosiu, 2021). The industry faces challenges when comes to transparency, there is lack of transparency which further leads to corruption and contribution to unethical practices (Amoah & Steyn, 2023). There is also shortage of skilled people within the industry, many people within the industry joined through connections and therefore lack formal qualifications and supervision, therefore impacts the quality and increases the risks of misconduct and negligence (Latif et al., 2022).

Research methodology and method

This study employed an exploratory literature review as its primary methodological framework. An exploratory literature review is a research methodology used to investigate complex or emerging fields that lack a well-established body of knowledge. Its primary objectives are to map the conceptual landscape, synthesize diverse sources, and identify key themes and research gaps, thereby establishing a foundational understanding (Snyder, 2019). This approach was deliberately selected in response to the fragmented and emergent nature of the scholarly discourse on professionalism within the South African built environment, which is characterized by a notable scarcity of consolidated empirical evidence on the lived experiences of professionals. Given this context, the method's inherent flexibility was indispensable for mapping the complex, interwoven socio-political and regulatory landscape that defines the sector.

Data Sources and Databases

The literature was sourced from the following academic and professional databases:

- Google Scholar
- Scopus
- ScienceDirect
- Taylor & Francis Online

- SpringerLink
- SA ePublications (Sabinet)
- Government portals (e.g., Parliamentary Monitoring Group)
- Professional body websites (e.g., SACQSP, SACAP, SACPCMP)

These databases were selected for their relevance to built environment research, access to peer-reviewed publications, and inclusion of South African policy and industry-specific documents.

Search Strategy

The search was conducted using Boolean operators and combinations of keywords such as:

- "professionalism" AND "built environment" AND "South Africa"
- "professional bodies" AND "construction industry"
- "ethics" AND "regulatory framework" AND "South African construction"
- "BBBEE" AND "professional standards"
- "fragmentation" AND "regulation" AND "built environment"

The search was limited to publications from 2020 to 2024 to ensure contemporary relevance.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

- Included: Peer-reviewed journal articles, government policy documents, professional body reports, and conference papers relevant to professionalism in the South African built environment.
- Excluded: Non-English sources, articles unrelated to the built environment, and publications prior to 2020.

Data Extraction and Cleaning

An initial pool of 75 publications was identified. After removing 8 duplicates, 17 irrelevant studies, and 15 inaccessible full texts, 30 articles were retained for full review. Each article was screened for relevance to the research aim and categorized based on its focus area (e.g., ethics, regulation, transformation, professional identity) (Decker, 2023; Kuoribo et al., 2023; Latif et al., 2022; Lazar & Chithra, 2022; Nilsson & Hertzberg, 2022; Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2022; Phillips, 2020a; Ramabodu, 2023; Ramabodu & Nena, 2024; Zhanbayev et al., 2023).

Thematic Analysis

A reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021) was employed to identify recurring patterns and themes within the literature. The process adhered to the following phases:

i. Familiarization with the data: This stage included thorough and engaged reading of the complete text of all 30 articles to attain a profound understanding of the material.
ii. Generating initial codes: The initial codes were created systematically by pinpointing and labelling significant features throughout the entire dataset. This natural process entailed assigning brief, descriptive tags to pertinent segments of text (such as sentences or paragraphs) to convey their essential meaning. For example, text that addresses the "overlapping mandates of SACPCMP and CIDB" was labelled as regulatory-overlap, while sections that discuss "bribery and fraud with minimal consequences" were designated as unethical-practices.
iii. Searching for themes: The produced codes were collected and examined for possible patterns, resulting in their categorization into initial themes. For instance, codes such as regulatory-overlap, fragmented-frameworks, and confusing-enforcement were combined to create the potential theme "Regulatory Fragmentation and Overlap."
iv. Reviewing and refining themes: The candidate themes were systematically evaluated against the coded extracts and the complete dataset. This iterative process facilitated the development of themes that accurately reflected the data, requiring the consolidation, division, or elimination of themes as appropriate.
v. Defining and naming themes: In the final stage, each theme was clearly defined and named to articulate its essence and scope, resulting in the five themes presented in this study.

The final themes extracted were:

- Defining Professionalism in the Built Environment
- Roles and Limitations of Professional Bodies
- Regulatory Fragmentation and Overlap
- Ethical Challenges and Corruption
- Transformation and Inclusivity (BBBEE)

Justification of Methodology

This study employed an exploratory literature review as its primary methodological framework. This approach was deliberately selected in response to the fragmented and emergent nature of the scholarly discourse on professionalism within the South African built environment, which is characterized by a notable scarcity of consolidated empirical evidence on the lived experiences of professionals (Snyder, 2019). Given this context, the method's inherent flexibility was indispensable for mapping the complex, interwoven socio-political and regulatory landscape that defines the sector. Unlike a systematic review, which is designed to aggregate findings from a homogenous body of empirical studies to answer a specific quantitative question, the exploratory review is suited for synthesising diverse forms of evidence to construct a foundational understanding of a complex issue (Xiao & Watson, 2019). This was essential for achieving the study's aim of gaining a comprehensive insight, as it allowed for the iterative identification of key themes such as regulatory fragmentation and ethical challenges and critical research gaps. Consequently, this review provides a necessary conceptual scaffold for future empirical inquiry, a task for which a more rigid systematic review would have been premature and ill-suited (Jesson et al., 2011).

To analyse the collected literature, a reflexive thematic analysis approach, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021), was applied. This method was particularly appropriate for uncovering the nuanced socio-political and institutional influences on professionalism, as it allows for the identification of recurring patterns of meaning across a diverse dataset, moving beyond mere summary to interpretation.

Research results

This section presents results of the exploratory analysis of existing literature. The results are presented in two parts. An integrative discussion of literature references is presented according to emergent themes. Then key findings are presented in list form, using a table. This is followed by a brief discussion and conclusion.

Overview of Emergent Themes and Socio-Political Context

The five final themes identified in the literature are: (1) Defining Professionalism, (2) Roles and Limitations of Professional Bodies, (3) Regulatory Fragmentation and Overlap, (4) Ethical Challenges and Corruption, and (5) Transformation and Inclusivity (BBBEE). In alignment with the study's objectives, the analysis highlights Regulatory Fragmentation and Overlap, Ethical Challenges and Corruption, and Transformation and Inclusivity (BBBEE) as the themes that most clearly reflect the socio-political influences on professionalism in the South African built environment. These themes are closely connected to the country's historical context and ongoing political transformation initiatives. The following sections examine these themes, focusing on their socio-political aspects.

Defining Professionalism in the Built Environment

The analysis of existing literature indicates that defining professionalism in the South African built environment necessitates a twofold comprehension: one that recognizes universal characteristics and another that is distinctly attuned to the local context. The results affirm that professionalism is generally defined by specialized knowledge, skill, honesty, integrity, and accountability (Nilsson and Hertzberg, 2022). This perspective is consistent with viewing the built environment as a multifaceted professional ecosystem, wherein these traits are vital for achieving sustainable and high-quality results (Cetin et al., 2021; Ofori, 2022).

Nevertheless, a significant conclusion from this review is that, in the South African context, this universal framework falls short. Professionalism should not be regarded as a fixed list of criteria but rather as a fluid and contested notion that is actively influenced by the country's socio-political situation (Ramabodu & Nena, 2024). The literature synthesis reveals that the historical injustices of apartheid

and the ongoing calls for transformation fundamentally affect its understanding. As a result, a notable finding is that professionalism in this setting is evolving to incorporate social responsibility and transformation as essential, non-negotiable elements (Zhanbayev et al., 2023). This broadened definition transcends mere technical proficiency and regulatory adherence, positioning professionals as catalysts for ethical change within a fractured industry.

Thus, the primary insight of this theme is the rise of a context-specific model of professionalism. It represents a concept that lies between global standards and local necessities, wherein professional identity is developed not only through education and expertise but also through navigating the intricate demands of inclusivity, redress, and moral integrity. This redefinition is vital for comprehending the ensuing challenges associated with regulation and ethics, as it raises a demanding and intricate standard for professional behavior that existing systems find difficult to accommodate.

Roles and Limitations of Professional Bodies

The analysis highlights that professional organizations such as the SACQSP, SACAP, and SACPCMP play a crucial role in governing the sector, responsible for essential tasks like professional registration, overseeing continuous development, and maintaining ethical standards (Hughes, 2013; Ramabodu, 2023). However, a key finding that arises from reviewing the literature is that these institutions face significant limitations in their effectiveness. The review points out that their individual responsibilities, instead of forming a unified regulatory framework, often lead to a fragmented system of oversight.

This fragmentation, as noted by Monama et al. (2022), is not simply an administrative hassle but a profound vulnerability that diminishes professional accountability. The findings indicate strongly that the absence of a cohesive strategy and the overlap of responsibilities with organizations such as the CIDB and NHBRC create confusion and weaken enforcement efforts (PMG, 2022). This systemic issue is directly associated with the occurrence of unethical behavior; as documented by Kuoribo et al. (2023), incidents of bribery, fraud, and fronting continue to exist because the disjointed regulatory framework results in inconsistent disciplinary measures and negligible penalties. As a result, the very organizations meant to foster trust are, paradoxically, undermining it, illustrating a significant gap between their intended functions and their real-world effectiveness.

Regulatory Fragmentation and Overlap

The issue of regulatory fragmentation has surfaced as a significant obstacle to ensuring professionalism. Research consistently demonstrates that the various professional organizations and development boards, including the SACPCMP, CIDB, and NHBRC, do not create a safety net for accountability but instead present a complex web of conflicting jurisdictions (Monama et al., 2022; PMG, 2022). This suggests that the challenge goes beyond just the quantity of bodies involved to a deeper problem of poor coordination and unclear mandates. The consolidated evidence indicates that this fragmentation leads to uneven application of standards and ambiguous enforcement, creating openings that can be misused. This context of regulatory uncertainty undermines the collective authority of these institutions and cultivates an environment where compliance with professional standards is viewed as optional rather than required. The systemic nature of this fragmentation highlights an urgent need for structural alignment to restore the credibility of the professional oversight framework.

Ethical Challenges and Corruption

The analysis reveals a widespread culture of ethical violations, with bribery, fraud, and fronting frequently highlighted in the literature (Kuoribo et al., 2023; Amoah & Steyn, 2023). A significant discovery is that these actions are not mere exceptions but are upheld by a framework of limited accountability. The literature aligns on the notion that such behaviours seldom result in meaningful consequences, which undermines trust and perpetuates unethical conduct. This issue is exacerbated by inadequate ethical training and a deficiency in effective supervisory practices (Zhanbayev et al., 2023). The findings indicate that tackling these issues necessitates moving beyond individual punishment to implement systemic reforms, including enhanced enforcement from professional organizations and the integration of comprehensive moral education into ongoing professional development.

Transformation and Inclusivity (BBBEE)

The analysis shows that Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) is an essential policy for addressing imbalances, yet it has produced complex and often conflicting results concerning professionalism. The review of literature points out that the execution of the policy has been uneven, failing to eliminate the structural barriers faced by Black-owned businesses, which continue to encounter significant challenges in obtaining contracts and gaining access to mentorship (Vilakazi & Bosiu, 2021). A significant observation is that this erratic implementation creates a setting where tokenism and fronting can flourish, ultimately undermining the policy's intended transformative effect and damaging ethical standards (Amoah & Steyn, 2023). Additionally, the lack of qualified professionals, worsened by practices of hiring based on connections rather than formal credentials, heightens these dangers (Latif et al., 2022). This indicates that, in the absence of more effective, transparent, and supportive implementation strategies, BBBEE might unintentionally sustain the very disparities it aims to eliminate, underscoring a vital area for policy enhancement.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that professionalism in South Africa's built environment is a multifaceted and evolving concept, deeply embedded in historical, socio-economic, and regulatory contexts. As Cetin et al. (2021) and Ofori (2022) describe, the built environment is not only a physical space but a complex professional ecosystem requiring specialized knowledge, ethical conduct, and social responsibility. Professionalism, as defined by Nilsson and Hertzberg (2022), encompasses attributes such as integrity, accountability, and competency, yet in South Africa, these ideals are often challenged by systemic fragmentation and uneven transformation. The literature highlights that professional identity is shaped by formal education, registration with professional bodies, and personal traits (Decker, 2023; Ramabodu, 2023), but the effectiveness of these bodies SACQSP, SACAP, SACPCMP is undermined by overlapping mandates and limited enforcement capacity (Monama et al., 2022; PMG, 2022). This regulatory fragmentation leads to inconsistent disciplinary actions and weakens the collective impact of these institutions.

Ethical challenges such as bribery, fraud, and fronting are prevalent, with Kuoribo et al. (2023) noting that these practices rarely result in meaningful penalties, eroding trust and accountability. Furthermore, the transformation agenda driven by BBBEE, while well-intentioned, faces implementation barriers. Vilakazi and Bosiu (2021) and Amoah and Steyn (2023) emphasize that Black-owned enterprises often struggle with access to contracts and mentorship, and that tokenism undermines genuine inclusivity. The shortage of formally qualified professionals, as Latif et al. (2022) point out, further exacerbates risks of misconduct and poor-quality outcomes.

The findings of this study have significant implications for key stakeholders. Policymakers and regulatory bodies are required to address regulatory fragmentation by pursuing harmonization and establish clearer mandates to enforce standards (Monama et al., 2022; Hughes, 2013). Built environment professionals encounter ethical dilution and role ambiguity, which indicates a need for clearer guidance and stronger institutional support systems (Kuoribo et al., 2023; Ramabodu, 2023). Clients and the construction industry face direct financial and operational risks, including cost overruns and project failures, stemming from these systemic issues (Latif et al., 2022; Amoah & Steyn, 2023). The South African public is ultimately impacted through the delivery of substandard infrastructure and diminished trust in essential services (Vilakazi & Bosiu, 2021). These failures in professionalism extend beyond administrative concerns and result in substantial societal costs. Addressing these challenges is essential for sustainable national development.

Overall, the literature suggests that professionalism in the built environment must be reimagined as a socially responsive and ethically grounded practice. Addressing these challenges requires harmonized regulation, stronger ethical enforcement, and targeted support for transformation. Future research should explore the lived experiences of professionals to better understand how professionalism is enacted in practice, bridging the gap between policy and reality.

Conclusion

This research has compiled the complexities of professionalism within South Africa's built environment, exposing it as a concept that is heavily debated between global standards and local socio-political realities. The results highlight that the sector's issues including regulatory fragmentation, ethical

violations, and uneven transformation are not standalone failures but interlinked indicators of a system that struggles to align its transformative goals with effective governance.

The implications arising from this are significant and call for focused action. In terms of policy and regulation, our results emphasize a pressing need to consolidate the disjointed regulatory framework. Policymakers should advocate for the harmonization of responsibilities among organizations such as the SACPCMP, CIDB, and SACQSP, and create independent oversight bodies to ensure consistent ethical application and significant penalties for corruption and unethical practices.

Regarding professional practice, this review indicates that professional organizations need to evolve from being mainly administrative bodies to becoming proactive guardians of ethical culture. This means implementing compulsory, practical ethics training within continuing professional development, establishing transparent public records of disciplinary actions, and creating strong mentorship programs to assist emerging professionals from previously disadvantaged backgrounds beyond mere adherence to compliance.

For future studies, this research points out a key necessity to shift from theoretical analysis to empirical research. Emphasis should be placed on qualitative investigations that examine the lived experiences of professionals facing these systemic issues, alongside quantitative studies assessing the direct effects of regulatory fragmentation on project outcomes, costs, and safety.

Ultimately, cultivating a professional culture that is genuinely inclusive, accountable, and ethically sound is not merely an abstract concept but an essential requirement for constructing a South Africa that is sustainable, fair, and just. This paper offers a foundational framework; the path ahead necessitates a collaborative effort from all stakeholders to convert these insights into actual reform.

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