

Knowledge Management Maturity in Public Administration: A Case Study of a Higher Education Institution

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Abstract: Knowledge Management (KM) is increasingly recognised as a strategic capability for improving organisational learning, innovation and public service performance. In Public Administration (PA), where demands for efficiency, transparency and accountability are growing, assessing KM maturity can help institutions identify existing practices, diagnose barriers and define improvement actions. However, empirical evidence on KM maturity in Portuguese public organisations, particularly in public higher education institutions, remains limited. This paper examines how assessing KM maturity can enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of public service delivery. The study adopts a qualitative case study approach in a Portuguese public higher education institution. Data were collected through 30 semi-structured interviews with middle managers and quality management staff, complemented by documentary analysis of the institution's Integrated Quality Management System (IQMS). The analysis was structured around the seven criteria of the Knowledge Management Assessment Instrument for Public Administration (IAGCAP): KM leadership, processes, people, technology, knowledge processes, learning and innovation, and KM results. Findings indicate that the institution has reached an overall KM maturity level 4, "refinement", as several KM-related practices are implemented, monitored and improved. These include strategic planning mechanisms, quality management processes, institutional repositories, document management systems, internal manuals and collaborative digital tools. The results also reveal that KM is supported by an organisational culture that values learning, collaboration and continuous improvement. Nevertheless, relevant barriers remain, including limited interoperability between information systems, an outdated intranet, insufficient formal and informal knowledge-sharing spaces, weak institutional communication, and the absence of specific indicators to measure the impact of KM initiatives. The paper highlights that KM maturity assessment not only classifies an organisation's KM level but also fosters its improvement. The case study demonstrates that the assessment enhances effectiveness by making KM practices visible, identifying barriers to knowledge flows, linking improvement opportunities to the IQMS, and emphasising KM-specific performance indicators. This study expands the use of KM maturity models in knowledge-intensive public organisations, illustrating their role in quality management, organisational learning, and innovation in public higher education.

Keywords: Knowledge management, Maturity models, Public administration, Higher education, Organisational learning, Quality management

1. Introduction

In a democratic and constantly evolving society, shaped by a global, competitive and digital context, the functions of Public Administration (PA) are increasingly complex and demanding. The need to manage massive amounts of data and information, along with growing demands for effectiveness, efficiency, transparency and accountability, requires public institutions to maintain a continuous capacity for adaptation. Therefore, Knowledge Management (KM) is particularly relevant, as it can support development and efficiency in PA and improve the quality of services provided to citizens (Araújo, 2000; Kassa and Ning, 2023; Luise and Coccozza, 2025).

KM is understood as a strategic instrument for supporting the creation, organisation, sharing, preservation and application of institutional knowledge. Public institutions should invest in KM processes by valuing employees' knowledge, reorganising and improving organisational, learning, and innovation processes, and supporting them with technology and leadership that recognises the strategic value of knowledge. This is particularly relevant in public Higher Education Institutions (HEI), whose mission of teaching, research and knowledge dissemination supports their role in the social, economic and scientific development of communities (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Davenport and Grover, 2001; Wiig, 1997).

Despite the growing relevance of KM, the Portuguese Public Administration continues to face challenges in formalising, monitoring, and evaluating organisational knowledge practices. This research is therefore guided by the following question: how can the assessment of KM maturity contribute to the effectiveness and efficiency

of public service delivery? The question is addressed through a case study conducted in a Portuguese public HEI, with the main objective of assessing the institution's KM maturity level. The specific objectives are to identify practices, barriers and facilitators of organisational knowledge, to recognise improvement opportunities and actions that can be integrated into the Integrated Quality Management System (IQMS), and to contribute to institutional performance improvement and innovation (Batista, 2016; Jääskeläinen et al., 2022; Santos and Bastos, 2019).

The paper contributes to KM maturity research by showing how a maturity assessment model can be operationalised qualitatively in a public HEI and linked to an existing quality management system. This contributes to broader KM debates by connecting maturity assessment, knowledge flows, quality management and organisational performance in a knowledge-intensive public-sector context (Batista, 2012; Batista, 2016; Jääskeläinen et al., 2022).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Knowledge Management in Public Administration

Public Administration (PA) faces increasing demands for efficiency, effectiveness, transparency, accountability, digital transformation and adaptive capacity. In this context, Knowledge Management (KM) is an important organisational capability for supporting the improvement of public services, by promoting the creation, organisation, sharing, preservation and application of knowledge in internal processes, organisational learning, innovation and decision-making (Araújo, 2000; Alvarenga et al., 2020; Kassa and Ning, 2023).

KM goes beyond the mere management of information, since knowledge results from individuals' interpretation and application of information, incorporating experience, skills, routines and organisational practices. The distinction between tacit and explicit knowledge is central to this process: the former is associated with individual experience and is difficult to formalise, while the latter is codified in documents, standards, manuals, databases and information systems. The interaction between the two types of knowledge supports organisational knowledge creation, particularly through the SECI (Socialisation, Externalisation, Combination, and Internalisation) model, which outlines four ways of converting knowledge (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Davenport and Prusak, 2000; Wiig, 1997).

In the public sector, KM has specific characteristics arising from legal constraints, public scrutiny and the need to uphold principles such as legality, equity, transparency and efficiency. However, its implementation faces challenges such as bureaucratic rigidity, resistance to change, fragmentation of information systems, difficulty in measuring results and a scarcity of formal knowledge-sharing practices. These challenges reinforce the need to articulate technology, leadership, organisational culture, processes and people to ensure effective KM (Pee and Kankanhalli, 2016; Aiello, Bisogno and Nota, 2018; Antonucci et al., 2022; Kassa and Ning, 2023).

This articulation is particularly relevant in public Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), which are knowledge-intensive organisations whose mission is to create, disseminate and transfer knowledge through teaching, research, innovation and engagement with society. Digital transformation reinforces this context, as technologies facilitate access to, dissemination, sharing and preservation of knowledge. Nonetheless, they do not ensure efficient management on their own (Alvarenga et al., 2020; Di Vaio et al., 2021; Pérez-Gamboa, Cano and Sánchez Castillo, 2023).

In a preliminary Scopus search for the term "Knowledge Management" in the Social Sciences for 2020–2025, 3,001 documents were found, highlighting the ongoing significance of KM in areas like organisational learning, innovation, knowledge sharing, technology, and performance. This analysis helped identify prevalent themes in recent literature, affirming KM's relevance to enhancing organisational learning and institutional performance.

2.2 KM Maturity Models

KM maturity models enable the assessment of an organisation's level of knowledge and practice development, the diagnosis of current skills, the identification of strengths and areas for improvement, the guidance of intervention priorities, and the support of continuous improvement processes. These models are especially pertinent in the public sector because KM practices are often not fully developed in terms of formalisation, monitoring, and evaluation (Batista, 2016; Santos and Bastos, 2019; Jääskeläinen et al., 2022).

A maturity model can be understood as a pathway for developing an organisation's KM capabilities, organised into progressive levels, assessment criteria and associated practices. These models carry out comparison-based activities by facilitating internal or external benchmarking, prescriptive functions by outlining improvement

pathways, and descriptive functions by characterising the organisation's existing status. The literature identifies similar dimensions including leadership, people, processes, technology, learning, innovation, and results despite the variety of models now in use (Júnior and Marinho, 2018; Jääskeläinen et al., 2022).

This study adopts the Knowledge Management Assessment Instrument for Public Administration (IAGCAP), developed by Batista for the Brazilian Public Administration. Its selection is justified by its direct connection to the public sector, theoretical robustness and applicability to public organisations in Portuguese-speaking contexts. Although originally designed for quantitative application, the IAGCAP was adapted to guide a qualitative analysis of KM practices in a Portuguese public HEI (Batista, 2012; Batista, 2016; Santos and Bastos, 2019).

The IAGCAP is structured around seven interdependent criteria: KM leadership, process, people, technology, knowledge processes, learning and innovation, and KM results. The model comprises five maturity levels: reaction, initiation, introduction, refinement and maturity, enabling assessment not only of the existence of KM practices, but also of their degree of formalisation, evaluation and continuous improvement (Batista, 2012; Batista, 2016).

2.3 KM Maturity, Quality Management and Organisational Performance

The relationship between KM maturity and quality management is particularly relevant in public organisations that already have formal planning, monitoring, evaluation and continuous improvement systems. KM contributes to quality by supporting process documentation, the preservation of critical knowledge, the sharing of best practices, institutional learning, and decision-making based on information and knowledge. Thus, KM maturity assessment can complement quality systems and transform organisational knowledge into a strategic resource for performance improvement (ISO, 2015; Batista, 2016; Pérez-Gamboa, Cano and Sánchez Castillo, 2023).

ISO 9001:2015 recognises organisational knowledge as a necessary resource for ensuring the conformity of products and services and supporting continuous improvement. This perspective brings KM closer to quality management, as both seek to ensure coherence, learning, process improvement and the creation of organisational value (ISO, 2015).

In the case of a public HEI, the articulation between KM and the IQMS enables the integration of improvement actions into institutional macro-processes related to governance, strategic planning, monitoring, evaluation, teaching, research, internationalisation, and support services. By linking the maturity diagnosis to the IQMS, the organisation can transform the results of the assessment into action plans, indicators, communities of practice, recognition mechanisms and institutional learning processes, thereby strengthening a culture of sharing, continuous improvement and innovation (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Batista, 2016; Jääskeläinen et al., 2022).

3. Methodology

The research adopts a qualitative approach, based on a case study conducted in a Portuguese public Higher Education Institution (HEI). This methodological option is justified by the exploratory nature of the study and the need to thoroughly analyse the KM practices that have been or are being used in their actual organisational setting (Yin, 2018; Campenhoudt et al., 2023). The unit of analysis is the institution's level of maturity in terms of knowledge management, understood as the set of organisational practices, processes, technologies, behaviours and outcomes through which knowledge is created, shared, preserved and applied. The IQMS is analysed as an institutional mechanism through which opportunities for improvement relating to knowledge management can be integrated. Participants' perceptions constitute the main empirical source, supplemented by a documentary analysis to triangulate and contextualise the results.

Data collection combined two main sources of evidence: semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis, allowing data triangulation and strengthening the robustness of the analysis (Yin, 2018; Javed and Alenezi, 2023). Participants selected included those directly involved in coordination, process management, decision support, and quality activities. Middle managers were emphasised for their roles in formalising procedures, developing manuals, utilising technology, disseminating knowledge, and monitoring performance indicators. Additionally, two quality and sustainability staff members were included for their institutional support.

The interview guide was developed based on the Knowledge Management Assessment Instrument for Public Administration (IAGCAP), originally designed for the Brazilian Public Administration, and was adapted to the Portuguese context and to the qualitative nature of the research. This adaptation proved appropriate given the scarcity of studies on KM maturity in Portuguese Public Administration, as it guided the collection and analysis

of participants' perceptions around the model's seven criteria: KM leadership, process, people, technology, knowledge processes, learning and innovation, and KM results (Batista, 2012; Batista, 2016; Santos and Bastos, 2019).

In this study, the IAGCAP was adapted from a quantitative questionnaire using a Likert scale into a semi-structured interview guide to better fit the qualitative case study framework. This change was necessary to align with the sample characteristics and the exploratory nature of the research. Open-ended questions were prioritized to elicit participants' perceptions and experiences, while some original items were excluded due to their technicality or lack of suitability for qualitative interviews.

Data were analysed using thematic content analysis with MAXQDA 24, employing both deductive and inductive coding. The seven IAGCAP criteria: KM leadership, process, people, technology, knowledge processes, learning and innovation, and KM results, served as deductive categories based on literature and Batista's maturity model. Additionally, inductive themes emerged, including barriers, facilitators, improvement opportunities, and dissemination. This approach allowed for assessment of maturity and the identification of mechanisms linking KM practices to organizational effectiveness and efficiency (Bardin, 2016; Batista, 2016; Pimentel et al., 2025).

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Overall KM Maturity Assessment

Data analysis was organised according to the seven IAGCAP criteria, enabling the assessment of the institution's KM maturity level and the identification of practices, barriers, facilitators and improvement opportunities. Thematic content analysis, supported by MAXQDA 24, resulted in the coding of 1,713 segments, distributed across the criteria of KM leadership, process, people, technology, knowledge processes, learning and innovation, and KM results. The criteria with the highest frequency were knowledge processes and technology, revealing the salience of these domains in participants' perceptions, as shown in Table 1 (Bardin, 2016; Batista, 2016; Pimentel et al., 2025).

Table 1: Frequency and percentage of segments with code

Criteria	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Knowledge processes	318	18.56
Technology	304	17.75
KM leadership	290	16.93
KM results	279	16.29
People	201	11.73
Learning and Innovation	165	9.63
Process	156	9.11
TOTAL	1713	100.00

Source: Author's elaboration using MAXQDA 24.

Using a qualitative case study approach and the IAGCAP instrument, data were collected through semi-structured interviews to assess the institution's maturity level. The analysis revealed an overall maturity level of 4, or "refinement," indicating established knowledge management (KM) practices that are being monitored and improved. However, inconsistencies across criteria were noted, particularly in KM results, highlighting a lack of specific impact measurement indicators (Batista, 2016; Jääskeläinen et al., 2022; Santos and Bastos, 2019).

The inferred maturity level is supported by consolidated institutional practices, including strategic planning, quality processes, internal and external audits, certifications, information systems, institutional repositories, internal manuals and collaborative tools. These elements demonstrate that KM is present in several organisational practices, although it is not always recognised or formalised as an autonomous institutional KM policy (ISO, 2015; Batista, 2016; Alvarenga et al., 2020).

The maturity level was not inferred from coding frequency alone. Frequencies were used to identify the salience of each criterion in participants' perceptions, while maturity levels were assigned through qualitative interpretation of the evidence against the maturity matrix adapted from Batista's model (Batista, 2012). This matrix defined level 4, "refinement", as the stage in which KM practices are implemented, evaluated and

continuously improved. Based on this interpretation, six of the seven IAGCAP criteria were assessed at level 4, while KM results were assessed at level 3 due to the absence, or lack of awareness, of specific indicators for measuring KM impact.

The overall assessment therefore reveals a tension between the effective maturity of existing practices and the explicit institutional recognition of KM. Although the institution presents consistent practices for creating, recording, sharing and reusing knowledge, participants do not always identify these practices as part of a formal KM strategy. This situation may be associated with the absence of an explicit institutional policy, weaknesses in internal communication and the lack of specific indicators for measuring KM impact (Batista, 2016; Melo and Mota, 2020; Jääskeläinen et al., 2022).

4.2 Findings by IAGCAP Criteria

The analysis by IAGCAP criteria shows that the institution has consolidated KM practices, although with different levels of formalisation. In the KM leadership criterion, the results reveal active leadership oriented towards strategic planning, objective monitoring and continuous improvement. The existence of regulations, codes, plans and manuals reinforces the formalisation of practices relevant to KM; however, the institution could benefit from a more explicit KM policy and from formal mechanisms for recognising collaboration and knowledge sharing (Batista, 2016; Júnior and Marinho, 2018; Marinho and Couto, 2022).

In the context of process and people criteria, the Integrated Quality Management System (IQMS) is pivotal for process management, audits, improvement plans, and periodic monitoring. These activities enhance organizational efficiency and effectiveness by identifying weaknesses and facilitating corrective actions. The institution also encourages continuous training and knowledge sharing, although this often relies on the initiative of teams and managers, indicating a need for more systematic practices and formal recognition mechanisms (ISO, 2015; Batista, 2016; Kassa and Ning, 2023).

Technology and knowledge processes are key in analysis. The institution employs document management systems, collaborative platforms, and other digital tools to support knowledge creation, sharing, and preservation. However, there are limitations, including poor interoperability, multiple platforms, an outdated intranet, and challenges in retaining critical tacit knowledge when employees depart (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Alvarenga et al., 2020; Di Vaio et al., 2021; Marinho and Couto, 2022).

In the learning and innovation criterion, participants recognise an open institutional culture that promotes autonomy, initiative and learning. The value placed on professional and academic training contributes to skills development and to the application of knowledge in the workplace. However, mechanisms for collecting, recognising and implementing innovative ideas remain understructured, indicating potential to strengthen collaborative innovation and organisational learning processes (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Antonucci et al., 2022; Kassa and Ning, 2023).

The KM results criterion reveals the main weakness of the study. Although the institution has external evaluation mechanisms, certifications, audits and quality-related indicators, participants do not recognise specific metrics for measuring KM impacts. This absence limits the institutionalisation of KM evaluation and makes it difficult to demonstrate its contribution to efficiency, effectiveness, innovation and service quality. Documentary analysis of the Quality Manual nevertheless reinforces the articulation between the IAGCAP and the IQMS, creating conditions for integrating the identified improvement opportunities into institutional quality and continuous improvement processes (ISO, 2015; Batista, 2016; Melo and Mota, 2020; Jääskeläinen et al., 2022).

4.3 Barriers, Facilitators and Improvement Opportunities

The analysis identified relevant barriers to the KM's development and to the efficiency of institutional processes. These include the lack of interoperability between systems, the outdated intranet, the multiplicity of platforms, the scarcity of formal and informal knowledge-sharing opportunities, lack of time for reflection and knowledge formalisation, weak institutional communication and the absence of specific indicators for measuring KM impact. These barriers limit the transformation of dispersed knowledge into shared institutional knowledge and reduce KM's potential as a tool for organisational improvement (Pee and Kankanhalli, 2016; Alvarenga et al., 2020; Kassa and Ning, 2023).

Despite these limitations, important facilitators were also identified, namely active leadership, strategic planning, regulations and manuals, collaborative digital tools, institutional repositories, the document management system, continuous improvement processes, an informal culture of belonging and the valuing of knowledge sharing. These elements show that the institution has relevant organisational and technological

foundations for consolidating a more formal and integrated KM strategy aligned with the IQMS (Batista, 2016; Júnior and Marinho, 2018; Marinho and Couto, 2022).

Improvement opportunities may be integrated into the IQMS, strengthening the articulation between KM, quality and institutional performance. Recommended actions include formalising an institutional KM policy, systematically identifying essential competencies, creating mechanisms to preserve critical knowledge, strengthening communities of practice, promoting interdepartmental meetings, and establishing formal mechanisms for recognising collaboration and knowledge sharing (Batista, 2016; ISO, 2015; Santos and Bastos, 2019).

In the technological domain, it is important to modernise the intranet, adopt it as the preferred institutional communication channel and improve interoperability between platforms. Rather than investing only in new technologies, the institution should optimise existing systems, ensuring that they effectively support the creation, storage, sharing and reuse of knowledge, supported by training, clear communication and user involvement (Alvarenga et al., 2020; Di Vaio et al., 2021; Marinho and Couto, 2022).

These proposals can also be operationalised through the SECI model, by promoting socialisation through formal and informal sharing spaces, externalisation through the recording of good practices and lessons learned, combination through the integration of explicit knowledge in interoperable systems and internalisation through practical training and the incorporation of knowledge into institutional routines (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Batista, 2016; Wiig, 1997).

4.4 Discussion

The results show that KM maturity assessment contributes to the effectiveness and efficiency of public services by transforming dispersed practices into a structured diagnosis. Through the IAGCAP, it was possible to identify the level of KM development, recognise implemented practices, highlight weaknesses and propose improvement actions, showing that KM maturity is not merely a descriptive measure but a management tool oriented towards decision-making, continuous improvement and strategic alignment (Batista, 2016; Jääskeläinen et al., 2022; Santos and Bastos, 2019).

The main contribution of the study lies in the qualitative application of the IAGCAP to a Portuguese public HEI, addressing the scarcity of studies on KM maturity in Portuguese Public Administration. This adaptation demonstrates the usefulness of the model in knowledge-intensive institutional contexts, provided that its application considers organisational culture, available resources, existing systems and the institution's strategic objectives (Batista, 2016; Santos and Bastos, 2019; Marques et al., 2019).

The study highlights that KM maturity models act as both assessment tools and links to quality management. In knowledge-intensive public organisations, such as HEIs, KM practices often occur within quality frameworks but remain unacknowledged. This indicates that KM maturity can be operational before being formally recognised, emphasising the importance of distinguishing between operational KM maturity and governance.

From a practical perspective, the results show that the institution has relevant KM practices, namely repositories, document management systems, manuals, audits, certifications, collaborative tools and quality processes. However, the absence of specific KM indicators, weaknesses in internal communication and interoperability problems reveal priority areas for intervention. The articulation with the IQMS is therefore central, as it allows the identified opportunities to be integrated into existing quality processes, avoiding the creation of a parallel KM structure (ISO, 2015; Batista, 2016; Alvarenga et al., 2020; Melo and Mota, 2020).

The results also confirm the importance of the human dimension of KM. Although technology is an essential support, knowledge creation and sharing depend on trust, collaboration, leadership, motivation and recognition. Informal sharing practices may foster proximity and belonging, but they become insufficient when they limit the systematic preservation, dissemination and reuse of knowledge. Therefore, the institution should balance informal practices with formal mechanisms for sharing, recognition and organisational learning (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Pee and Kankanhalli, 2016; Kassa and Ning, 2023).

The findings indicate that KM maturity assessment enhances effectiveness and efficiency through four mechanisms: it reveals the visibility of current KM practices, identifies barriers to knowledge flow, links these barriers to actionable improvement routines in IQMS, and highlights the necessity for KM-specific indicators for evaluating service quality. Thus, maturity assessment improves performance by strengthening organizational conditions for better service delivery rather than directly measuring outcomes (Batista, 2016; Alvarenga et al., 2020; Pérez-Gamboa, Cano and Sánchez Castillo, 2023).

5. Conclusion

This paper analysed how KM maturity assessment can support the organisational conditions for more effective and efficient service delivery in the public HEI analysed. The results show that maturity assessment is a relevant diagnostic and continuous improvement tool, as it enables the identification of existing practices, barriers and facilitators, and the definition of improvement actions that can be integrated into the Integrated Quality Management System (IQMS) (Batista, 2016; Jääskeläinen et al., 2022; Santos and Bastos, 2019).

The study identified an overall maturity level 4, “refinement”, for most IAGCAP criteria, revealing KM practices that are implemented, monitored and improved in the areas of leadership, processes, technology, knowledge processes and organisational learning. However, the KM results criterion showed a relevant weakness, associated with the absence, or lack of awareness, of specific indicators for measuring the impact of KM initiatives (Batista, 2016; Melo and Mota, 2020).

The main barriers identified were the lack of interoperability between systems, the outdated intranet, the scarcity of formal and informal sharing opportunities, the lack of time for reflection and knowledge formalisation, and weak institutional communication. Addressing these barriers may strengthen knowledge processes, promoting strategic alignment, organisational learning and continuous improvement (Marques et al., 2019; Pérez-Gamboa et al., 2023; Kassa and Ning, 2023).

The theoretical contribution lies in showing how the IAGCAP can be qualitatively adapted to a knowledge-intensive public organisation, distinguishing between operational KM maturity and the limited formal institutionalisation of KM (Batista, 2016; Alvarenga et al., 2020; Jääskeläinen et al., 2022).

The study identifies four key limitations: reliance on a single case study, the qualitative adaptation of a originally quantitative tool for a different context, potential bias in perceptions from middle managers and quality staff, and limited participation which could lead to non-response bias. Future research should involve multiple public higher education institutions, include diverse stakeholders, and develop specific indicators for measuring the impact of knowledge management practices on institutional performance. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted analytically rather than statistically generalised (Yin, 2018; Batista, 2016; Campenhoudt et al., 2023).

Data Availability Statement: The interview guide may be made available upon request. Interview transcripts are not publicly available due to confidentiality and anonymity commitments.

Ethics Declaration: No formal ethical approval was required under the applicable institutional procedures. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, anonymity and confidentiality were ensured, and informed consent was obtained before the interviews.

Declaration of AI Tools: In this article, the authors utilised an AI tool to assist with language refinement and grammar checks. The authors reviewed and verified all AI-generated content to ensure its accuracy and integrity and take full responsibility for the final manuscript.

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