

Strengths and Limitations of Mixed Methods Research in Examining Knowledge Management within Private Higher Education in South Africa

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Abstract: Mixed methods research (MMR) approach is commonly employed to address the limitations associated with the use of a single methodological approach. However, mixed methods research examining knowledge management within private higher education institutions in South Africa remains limited, despite the sector's highly competitive operating environment, rapid technological advancements, and recently amended governance and quality assurance requirements. Generally, diverse methodological approaches have been adopted within the field, yet insufficient attention has been given to evaluating the methodological rigour and limitations of these approaches, particularly in relation to their ability to capture the complexity of KM and its influence on operational excellence. This paper addresses this gap through a systematic literature review (SLR). Based on literature sourced from Google Scholar, Taylor and Francis, Emerald, EBSCOhost, ScienceDirect, Sabinet and Journal of International Business and Management up to April 2026, and applying the PRISMA framework, 13 articles were selected for analysis. The findings provide a critical synthesis of methodological trends and contribute to strengthening the rigour of future research, focusing on the use of MMR approach in the context of researching knowledge management and operational excellence within private higher education in South Africa. Key findings reveal that current literature within this scope are constrained by methodological homogeneity and limited contextual depth. The study emphasizes the importance of adopting integrated, mixed-method and longitudinal approaches, as well as expanding research within underexplored contexts such as private higher education institutions in developing countries such as South Africa.

Keywords: Mixed Method Research, Knowledge Management, Private Higher Education, Operational Excellence, PRISMA

1. Introduction

Knowledge has long been recognised as a critical source of power and competitive advantage, a notion captured as early as 1597 by Sir Francis Bacon. In contemporary organisations, knowledge is seen as an organisational resource of strategic significance that underpins performance, innovation, and sustainability (Laihonen, Kork and Sinervo, 2024). Within this context, knowledge management (KM) has emerged as a key organisational capability, encompassing the processes, technologies, and structural mechanisms through which knowledge is created, shared, and utilised (Ogunbanwo et al., 2021). As global competition intensifies, organisations are compelled to leverage KM to optimise operational outcomes and sustain competitive positioning (Kumaravel and Vikkraman, 2018).

In higher education institutions (HEIs), the strategic importance of KM is amplified by the knowledge-intensive nature of academic environments. In South Africa, this is further complicated by historical inequalities, institutional diversity, and socio-economic pressures that continue to shape curriculum delivery, access, and operational performance (Boughey and McKenna, 2021). Private higher education (PHE) institutions, in particular, face dual pressures to expand access while maintaining financial sustainability and service quality in an increasingly competitive landscape (Tamrat and Fetene, 2020). Within such contexts, KM represents a critical enabler of operational excellence and institutional effectiveness.

Despite the growing body of research on KM in higher education across both developed and developing contexts, several gaps persist. Existing studies often focus on isolated institutional settings, overlook managerial perspectives, and provide limited engagement with KM in rapidly evolving technological environments (Lam et al., 2021; Nakash et al., 2022; Nawaz et al., 2020). More critically, while diverse methodological approaches have been adopted, insufficient attention has been given to evaluating the methodological rigour and limitations of these approaches, particularly in relation to their ability to capture the complexity of KM and its influence on operational excellence.

This study addresses this gap through a systematic literature review (SLR) guided by the following research questions:

1. What research methods are commonly used in KM studies within higher education?

2. What strengths and weaknesses characterise these methods in examining operational excellence?

Drawing on literature sourced from Google Scholar, Taylor and Francis, Emerald, EBSCOhost, ScienceDirect, and Sabinet up to April 2026, and applying the PRISMA framework, 13 articles were selected for analysis. The findings provide a critical synthesis of methodological trends and contribute to strengthening the rigour of future KM research in higher education.

The paper proceeds with a review of relevant literature, followed by the research methodology and PRISMA process. Thereafter, the findings are presented and discussed, and concluding remarks and recommendations for future research are provided.

2. Literature Review

Knowledge management (KM) is conceptualised as a holistic organisational capability that encompasses the identification, selection, sharing, and utilisation of knowledge to support operational requirements (Di Vaio et al., 2021). As a strategic resource, knowledge extends beyond information to include insights related to processes, markets, and organisational experience, thereby contributing to long-term sustainability and competitiveness (Nuaimi and Jabeen, 2020; Obermayer et al., 2020). Within higher education institutions (HEIs), KM plays a critical role in facilitating the systematic generation, dissemination, and application of both explicit and tacit knowledge, ultimately enhancing teaching, learning, and administrative effectiveness (Ngoc-Tan and Gregar, 2018).

Operational excellence, broadly defined as the continuous improvement of organisational processes and performance mechanisms (Niedlich et al., 2020), is increasingly positioned as a key outcome of effective KM. In the higher education context, operational excellence is reflected in the quality of teaching and learning, administrative support, and service delivery, all of which are essential for meeting regulatory requirements and stakeholder expectations (Kumar et al., 2021). As HEIs face intensifying competition, technological disruption, and rising student demand, the integration of KM practices has become central to achieving institutional efficiency and adaptability (Acharya et al., 2022; Haider, 2019).

Contemporary literature further highlights the growing convergence between KM and digital transformation. The emergence of Industry 4.0 has necessitated the integration of technological capabilities with knowledge processes to enhance organisational responsiveness and service delivery (Cabeza-Pullés et al., 2020). While studies have begun to explore this relationship, particularly in relation to artificial intelligence and data-driven systems, there remains limited empirical clarity regarding how these dynamics influence operational excellence within HEIs, especially in the South African and private higher education (PHE) context.

Empirical research across diverse contexts generally supports a positive association between KM practices and organisational performance outcomes. Quantitative studies consistently demonstrate that factors such as knowledge sharing, process capabilities, leadership, and organisational infrastructure contribute to improved institutional effectiveness, innovation, and competitive advantage (Valarmathi and Kumar, 2020; Mahdi et al, 2019; Budur et al, 2023; Ogunbanwo et al, 2021). However, these findings are often derived from structured survey-based approaches, which, while enabling generalisation, provide limited insight into the contextual and experiential dimensions of KM.

Qualitative research offers complementary insights by highlighting the influence of organisational culture, governance, and leadership on KM practices (Ngoc-Tan, 2023; Haryani and Suryasari, 2020). Such studies reveal that KM is frequently embedded within routine institutional processes and may be under-recognised despite its strategic importance. Nevertheless, qualitative studies remain limited in scope and scale, restricting their broader applicability.

Mixed-method approaches, although less frequently employed, have the potential to bridge these limitations by integrating statistical analysis with contextual depth. However, existing studies often demonstrate methodological constraints, including low response rates (Kaira and Phiri, 2022), limited qualitative depth, and reliance on questionnaire-based data collection (Ogunbanwo et al., 2021), thereby reducing the effectiveness of methodological integration.

Overall, the literature reveals a methodological imbalance, with a strong emphasis on quantitative approaches and insufficient exploitation of methodological pluralism. Furthermore, many studies adopt fragmented perspectives, focusing on individual KM processes rather than an integrated view of KM as a dynamic, socio-technical system influencing operational excellence. These limitations are particularly evident within the PHE

sector and developing contexts, where research remains underdeveloped. Accordingly, there is a need for a systematic synthesis of existing research to critically evaluate the methodological approaches employed in studying KM and its influence on operational excellence in HEIs. Addressing this gap will contribute to enhancing research rigour and informing more comprehensive and contextually sensitive future studies.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a systematic literature review (SLR) guided by the PRISMA framework to synthesise existing knowledge on knowledge management (KM) in higher education. PRISMA was selected to ensure a transparent, rigorous, and replicable review process (Mishra and Mishra, 2023). A comprehensive search was conducted across Google Scholar, Taylor and Francis, Emerald, EBSCOhost, ScienceDirect, Sabinet and Journal of International Business and Management for peer-reviewed journal articles published in English until April 2026 using combinations of keywords including "operational excellence" AND "knowledge management" AND "higher education" AND "South Africa" expanded to "knowledge management" OR "knowledge sharing" OR "information management" OR "intellectual capital management" OR "operational excellence" OR "process optimization" OR "performance enhancement" OR "continuous improvement" OR streamlining OR "private higher education" OR "higher education" OR "tertiary education". Studies were included if they focused on KM within higher education institutions with a particular focus on operational excellence, and excluded if they addressed other sectors, book chapters, inaccessible full text, used a desktop method or non-English publications. Although the study focuses on South Africa, a broader geographical scope was utilised in the SLR for richer data. The search yielded 1558 records. Following the removal of duplicates and the application of inclusion and exclusion criteria, 216 studies were retained for full-text review. After assessing full text accessibility, relevance and methodological quality, 13 studies were included in the final analysis. The study selection process is presented through a PRISMA flow diagram.

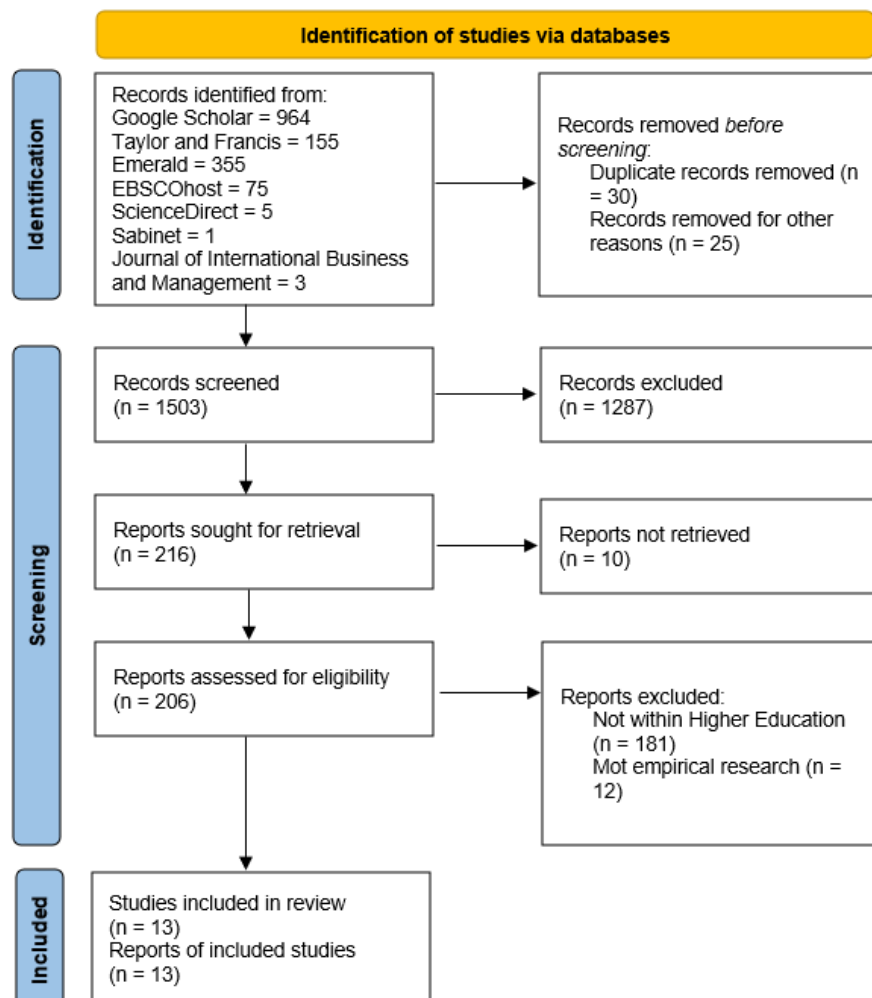


Figure 1: PRISMA Framework application for article selection

Data were extracted from each eligible study using a structured review matrix developed for this study enabling systematic comparison for subsequent thematic analysis. The matrix captured key study characteristics, including author(s), year of publication, country of study, methodological approach, sample characteristics, data collection methods, key focus and principal findings. For purposes of this paper, the below summary table reveals the frequency of methods used across the selected papers.

Table 1: Summary of key characteristics

Characteristic	Frequency
Quantitative	8
Qualitative	2
Mixed Methods	3
Questionnaires	12
Interviews	2
Purposive Sampling	4
Probability Sampling	8

The extracted data were analysed manually using thematic analysis according to the following steps. Post data extraction, iterative reviews were done to identify recurring methodological patterns. These categories according to methodological characteristics were grouped and synthesized into themes aligned within the study context. Particular attention was given to the methodological rigour, strengths, and weaknesses associated with the approaches employed. The themes were continuously reviewed and compared across studies to ensure consistency and relevance. This process facilitated the identification of dominant methodological trends and gaps within knowledge management research in higher education with respect to its influence on operational excellence, providing a basis for recommendations regarding future empirical investigations.

4. Results and Findings

The key results of the manual thematic analysis are presented in this section under 6 themes with a synthesized overarching theme addressing the main aim of the paper regarding the strengths and weaknesses of research methods utilised in KM research addressing operational excellence in higher education.

4.1 Theme 1: Predominance of Quantitative Positivist Designs

A strong reliance on quantitative survey-based methodologies characterises the field (8 out of 13 studies), typically employing cross-sectional structured questionnaires administered online or in-person with statistical analysis completed. Quantitative positivist designs enable hypothesis testing and generalisability, which is evident in studies targeting larger samples (e.g. 319 respondents in Zambia; 372 respondents in Nigeria) (Mulomba and Mpofu; 2026; Saadiq, 2014). Furthermore, it supports the measurement of relationships between KM constructs and performance outcomes, such as operational excellence, institutional effectiveness, and organisational agility with evidence of significance (e.g., p-values in Govender et al. 2018), which inherently strengthens claims of association. A notable weakness of this design is reductionism where complex KM processes (e.g. tacit knowledge, organisational culture) are inadequately unpacked subjectively and are instead simplified into measurable variables. Within the private HE landscape, these contextual nuances are crucial to consider as these institutions operate in diverse environments across multiple countries, catering to the changing needs of industry, staff and students as well as operating under environmental, regulatory and financial pressures (Tamrat and Fetene, 2020). Additionally, the quantitative approach relies heavily on self-reported data which introduces the possibility of bias such as respondents seeking social desirability or answering under perceptual distortion. The dominance of positivist paradigms constrains epistemological diversity, limiting deeper theoretical development of KM as a socially embedded and context-dependent phenomenon.

4.2 Theme 2: Heavy Dependence on Questionnaires as Primary Data Collection Instruments

Almost every study, regardless of utilising a qualitative or mixed method approach, relied on the use of questionnaires for data collection (12 out of 13 studies), often self-administered or online. Questionnaires boast the ability to reach a larger audience across geographically dispersed HEIs, it enables comparability of responses across participants and contexts through standardisation and supports statistical modelling and cross-

institutional analysis (Adiele and Gbekee-Kalagbor, 2025). Although the strengths are impressive, questionnaires are inadequate for capturing nuances and deeper understanding of knowledge management in practice (e.g. tacit knowledge dynamics) which requires interpretive exploration (Murumba et al., 2020). These studies described instrument validity; however, the constructs pertaining to KM are complex and multidimensional which leaves its exploration limited in a questionnaire. Last but not least is the inability to probe for further insight, reasoning or clarification which reduces the depth and richness of the findings. The methodological over-reliance on questionnaires reflects an instrument-driven research culture, rather than one aligned with the ontological complexity of KM systems.

4.3 Theme 3: Underutilisation of Qualitative and Interpretivist Approaches

Superficially, 2 qualitative studies and 3 mixed-method studies are reported, yet closer engagement reveals that of these, there was only 1 purely qualitative study and 1 mixed method study utilising interviews for rich data were conducted, indicating limited engagement with interpretivist paradigms. Qualitative approaches (e.g. semi-structured interviews) provide rich, contextually embedded insights into KM practices, organisational culture, and barriers (Maphangwa, 2022). A major strength in using qualitative approaches is the ability to explore and understand lived experiences of knowledge workers which is particularly beneficial for unpacking topics such as tacit knowledge or culture. The mixed method approach therefore enhances methodological triangulation which improves the validity of the data and findings (Malekano, 2016). A key limitation of qualitative studies is the narrowed focus which utilises smaller samples subsequently limiting transferability. In mixed method studies, the inclusion of a qualitative component has been surface-level through the inclusion of open-ended questions in a self-administered or online questionnaire and in the reporting of findings, the integration of this has been limited. The limited use of qualitative and mixed approaches restricts the field's ability to sufficiently theorise KM as a socio-technical system, particularly in relation to operational excellence.

4.4 Theme 4: Sampling Strategies and Representativeness

A mix of probability (8 studies) and non-probability sampling (purposive, convenience) is evident and in some cases, with the use independent of the approach (e.g. convenience sampling utilised in a quantitative study) (Madbouly et al., 2021). Each sampling method has its own strength when well-aligned to the aim of the study. Probability sampling enhances representativeness and generalisability, particularly in large-scale quantitative studies. Purposive sampling is appropriate for targeting knowledge-rich participants (e.g., HR practitioners, managers, academics, KM workers) (Saunders et al., 2019). Half of the studies relied on convenience or purposive sampling which thus introduces selection bias. Several studies which collected data across HEIs, or cross-countries lacked description of sampling equivalence which blurred the validity of findings between being true differences in variables measured or disparities in the sample structures themselves, subsequently affecting comparability. In the field of KM, this is especially important to consider noting that it involves heavy reliance on technology adoption, culture and diverse people. Sampling limitations undermine the external validity of findings and restrict the ability to generalise KM–operational excellence relationships across diverse HEI contexts.

4.5 Theme 5: Cross-Sectional Designs and Temporal Limitations

Most studies employ cross-sectional designs which captured data at a single point in time. Besides its feasibility, this design is efficient and practical for exploratory and relational research seeking to understand the relationship between KM and performance (Enakrire and Smuts, 2022; Adiele and Gbekee-Kalagbor, 2025). A critical weakness is the inability to establish causality, especially when seeking to understand barriers and mitigation strategies or to track longitudinal effects of practices and strategies (Jemal and Zewdie, 2021). The design also fails to effectively showcase the active nature of KM and the subsequent transformation of the HEI, especially when digital transformation is involved. The lack of longitudinal or experimental designs weakens causal inference and limits understanding of KM as a dynamic capability influencing sustained operational excellence.

4.6 Theme 6: Contextual and Geographic Diversity vs. Contextual Fragmentation

Studies span multiple regions (Africa, Middle East, Europe, Asia), as well as a focus on public HEIs with private HEIs targeted in a combined manner, thus revealing a geographical and contextual target often with differing institutional and socio-economic conditions (Alkaabi, 2025; van Reijssen et al., 2015). Although this strategy

enhances contextual richness and comparative insights, in some cases, the contextual diversity is not theoretically integrated which results in fragmented findings or a lack of methodological harmonisation. While geographically diverse, the literature lacks a coherent contextualisation strategy, weakening cumulative knowledge development.

The findings reveal a clear predominance of quantitative, cross-sectional survey designs and a strong reliance on questionnaire-based data collection within KM research focusing on operational excellence in higher education. While these approaches offer strengths in terms of statistical validation, they limit the exploration of contextual and tacit knowledge processes. There is also limited use of qualitative and mixed-method approaches, reducing insight into socio-cultural dynamics, with mixed-method applications often lacking depth. In addition, sampling limitations and cross-sectional designs constrain generalisability and causal interpretation. Overall, the literature provides valuable empirical evidence but remains methodologically constrained, underscoring the need for greater methodological diversity and integration.

5. Discussion

The findings of this SLR reinforce the view that KM in higher education is largely examined through a positivist lens (Budur et al., 2023; Bashir et al., 2017), privileging measurement and association over contextual understanding. This methodological orientation partly explains the strong evidence base linking KM to organisational performance but also accounts for the limited theorisation of KM as a dynamic, socio-technical capability.

The underutilisation of qualitative and mixed-method approaches suggests that critical dimensions of KM—particularly tacit knowledge, organisational culture, and knowledge flows—remain insufficiently explored (Ngoc-Tan and Gregar, 2018; Ngoc-Tan, 2023). This is especially significant in higher education, where knowledge is inherently embedded in human interaction and institutional practices (Kumar et al., 2021). Furthermore, the lack of longitudinal and multi-level research designs constrains the ability to understand how KM contributes to sustained operational excellence over time, particularly within rapidly evolving, technology-driven environments (Jemal and Zewdie, 2021). The limited focus on private higher education and developing contexts further exacerbates this gap, reducing the contextual relevance of existing knowledge (Kaira and Phiri, 2022). Taken together, these insights point to the necessity for methodological pluralism, combining quantitative rigour with qualitative depth and contextual sensitivity (Collis and Hussey, 2021). Such an approach is essential for advancing both the theoretical and practical understanding of KM and operational excellence in higher education.

6. Concluding Remarks

This study set out to critically evaluate the methodological approaches used in KM research focusing on operational excellence in higher education. Through a SLR, it is evident that while existing research, albeit minimal, provides an empirical foundation, it is constrained by methodological homogeneity and limited contextual depth. The study contributes by ascertaining methodological strengths and weaknesses, thereby informing the design of more robust future research. It underscores the importance of adopting integrated, mixed-method and longitudinal approaches, as well as expanding research within underexplored contexts such as private higher education institutions in developing countries such as South Africa.

Future research should seek to develop contextually grounded and methodologically diverse frameworks that better capture the complexity of KM as a strategic capability influencing operational excellence. In doing so, scholars can generate more nuanced, transferable, and practically relevant insights that support the evolving needs of higher education institutions.

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AI Declaration

Generative AI – Copilot – was utilised to edit and condense the article.

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