

# Enhancing Public Sector Performance: A Systematic Review of the Common Assessment Framework

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## Abstract

This paper investigates the Common Assessment Framework (CAF), a total quality management (TQM) model specifically developed for the public sector. Despite its widespread adoption at both national and European levels, there is a notable lack of detailed examination of CAF's effectiveness in academic discourse. This study aims to bridge this gap by systematically reviewing the scientific literature on CAF and highlighting the broader implications for total quality management in the public sector. European cross-sector experiences emphasize the importance of comprehensive organizational performance assessments, collaborative development and implementation of improvement initiatives, and fostering a culture of continuous improvement, benchmarking, and bench learning. Additionally, this study underscores the necessity for rigorous investigation into the role of national governments in promoting quality management and its potential seamless integration into public sector operations. By synthesizing insights from both CAF practitioners and the academic community, this research provides a robust framework for enhancing public sector total quality management and achieving excellence.

**Keywords:** Total Quality Management, Excellence, Common Assessment Framework, Literature Review.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the evolving landscape of public sector governance, the pursuit of performance improvement and organizational excellence has become a central concern. Since the 1980s, international and European public management reforms have increasingly embraced quality-oriented approaches, notably Total Quality Management (TQM), to enhance efficiency, transparency, and citizen-oriented service delivery (Bernhart & Promberger, 2011). Originally developed in the private sector, TQM emerged as a comprehensive management philosophy aimed at continuous improvement, customer satisfaction, and participatory leadership (Powell, 1995; Dahlgaard-Park, 2008). Over time, its principles have been adapted to the specific needs of public administration (Dahlgaard-Park *et al.*, 2001; Fryer *et al.*, 2007).

Within this context, the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) was introduced in the early 2000s as the first European total quality management tool specifically designed for the public sector. Developed under the auspices of the European Union, CAF translates TQM principles into a practical, self-assessment model tailored to the unique challenges of public institutions (EUPAN, 2019). CAF has become a predominant tool for promoting quality and performance in European public administrations. Its evolution and implementation across Member States reflect a growing institutional commitment to embedding quality management in public governance.

Despite its practical relevance, the academic literature on TQM in the public sector – and particularly on CAF – remains limited. Research on TQM has traditionally focused on private organizations (Pimentel & Major, 2016), with comparatively little attention to the public sector, especially regarding its theoretical development and interdisciplinary integration (Nasim *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, the role of voluntary quality standards remains underexplored in management

research (Tuczek *et al.*, 2018). For instance, a review of the top 20 international and European public administration journals (SCImago Journal Rank, 2022) reveals a notable absence of recent studies on CAF, highlighting a relevant gap between academic inquiry and administrative practice (Asensio *et al.*, 2021).

To address this gap, the present study conducts a systematic literature review of the Common Assessment Framework. It aims to synthesize existing research and identify areas for future inquiry (Snyder, 2023) in TQM in the public sector. The review is guided by the following research questions:

- **RQ1:** How has the understanding of TQM in the public sector evolved over time through the lens of the Common Assessment Framework?
- **RQ2:** What are the main insights for practitioners, policymakers and the academic community to enhance the practical application and scientific development of total quality management in public sector organizations?

By systematically reviewing 72 research studies published on CAF from its inception in 2000 through 2023, this study contributes to both theory and practice. Theoretically, it advances the understanding of CAF as a public sector quality management tool and situates it within the broader TQM discourse. Practically, it offers insights for policymakers and practitioners seeking to implement or refine CAF-based strategies. By mapping the existing research and identifying gaps, the review supports evidence-based improvements in public sector performance and fosters alignment between academic inquiry and administrative practice.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Over time, the concept of quality in organizational context has undergone a significant evolution – from early practices of inspection and quality control to more integrated approaches such as quality assurance and, ultimately, business excellence (Dahlgaard-Park, 2008). Within this trajectory, Total Quality Management emerged in the private sector as a comprehensive and strategic approach to improving organizational performance. Rooted in the quality movements of the 1980s, TQM was shaped by influential thinkers such as Deming (1986), Feigenbaum (1983) and Ishikawa (1986), who emphasized the importance of management commitment, customer satisfaction, and continuous improvement. Powell (1995) defined TQM as “an integrated management philosophy and set of practices that emphasizes, among other things, continuous improvement and meeting customers’ requirements” (p. 169), highlighting its dual nature as both a philosophy and a practical framework.

TQM is grounded in a set of core principles that include strong leadership, a focus on customers and processes, employee involvement, teamwork, data-driven decision-making, and a culture of continuous learning and innovation (Dahlgaard-Park *et al.*, 2001). Over time, the scope of TQM has expanded to incorporate elements of process management, human resource development, and strategic alignment (Dahlgaard-Park *et al.*, 2018). The TQM theory has been supported in practice by structured business excellence models such as the EFQM Model (European Foundation for Quality Management), offering organizations a systematic approach to implementing and sustaining quality practices.

### 2.1 TQM in the Public Sector

Since the 1980s, public administration reforms across Europe have increasingly drawn on Total Quality Management (TQM) principles to address the complex and evolving challenges faced by public sector organizations (Bernhart & Promberger, 2011). These reforms, often aligned with the broader New Public Management (NPM) agenda, emphasized values such as accountability, transparency, and citizen-oriented service delivery. In this context, TQM has been adopted not merely as a technical tool but as a strategic management philosophy aimed at embedding quality into all dimensions of public service. It promotes leadership-driven change, stakeholder

engagement, and evidence-based decision-making, while also fostering a culture of continuous improvement and responsiveness to public needs.

However, the application of TQM in the public sector requires significant adaptation (Swiss, 1992). Unlike private enterprises, public institutions operate under political oversight, serve diverse stakeholder groups, and function in non-market environments. These characteristics necessitate a more flexible and context-sensitive approach to quality management. While most TQM models were originally developed for the manufacturing sector, their principles have gradually been extended to service-oriented and public organizations (Fryer *et al.*, 2007). Notable examples include applications in healthcare (Ajmal *et al.*, 2016) and government agencies (Swiss, 1992), demonstrating the model's versatility and relevance beyond its industrial origins. While the EFQM Model (European Foundation for Quality Management) remains the most widely used business excellence framework in the private sector, the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) has become the predominant TQM model tailored to the specific needs of public administration in Europe. CAF adapts TQM principles to the public context, offering a structured and participatory approach to self-assessment and continuous improvement in public service delivery (EUPAN, 2019).

## 2.2 The Common Assessment Framework (CAF)

The Common Assessment Framework (CAF) was developed in the early 2000s as a European response to the need for a tailored quality management tool for public sector organizations. Designed by the European Public Administration Network (EUPAN), CAF integrates TQM principles into a model that reflects the specific characteristics of public institutions. It provides a structured, participatory self-assessment framework that enables organizations to evaluate their performance across nine criteria - five enablers and four results (EUPAN, 2019). CAF's holistic approach encourages organizations to examine leadership, strategy, people, partnerships, resources, and processes, while also assessing outcomes for citizens, employees, and society. According to EUPAN (2019, p. 5), CAF serves as "a compass to help managers find the paths to excellence," reinforcing its role as both a diagnostic and developmental tool.

Over the years, the model has gained significance at both the European and global levels, primarily through various activities conducted during the European Council Presidencies and at national level. The journey towards quality in the Member States is marked by annual conferences, events, model developments, and related publications, with key milestones highlighting the commitment at both the EU and national levels summarized below (Table 1).

Year	EU Presidencies	CAF Milestones
1998	United Kingdom Austria	Agreement on the development of CAF (EUPAN Network)
2000	Portugal France	1st European Quality Conference for Public Administration
2001	Sweden Belgium	European CAF Resource Centre at EIPA
2002	Spain Denmark	2nd European Quality Conference for Public Administration
2003	Greece Italy	1st European CAF Users Event 1st European study on CAF
2004	Ireland The Netherlands	3rd European Quality Conference for Public Administration
2005	Luxembourg United Kingdom	2nd European CAF Users Event, Luxembourg 2nd European study on CAF
2006	Austria Finland	4th European Quality Conference for Public Administration Launch of CAF 2006
2007	Germany Portugal	3rd European CAF Users Event
2008	Slovenia France	5th European Quality Conference for Public Administration

2009	Czech Republic Sweden	Procedure for CAF External Feedback Effective CAF User Label
2010	Spain Belgium	4th European CAF Users Event CAF Education 2000 CAF Users
2011	Hungary Poland	6th European Quality Conference for Public Administration 3rd European study on CAF
2012	Denmark Cyprus	5th European CAF Users Event
2013	Ireland Lithuania	7th European Quality Conference for Public Administration
2014	Greece Italy	6th European CAF Users Event
2015	Latvia Luxembourg	8th European Quality Conference for Public Administration
2016	The Netherlands Slovakia	7th European CAF Users Events
2017	Malta Estonia	9th European Quality Conference for Public Administration
2018	Bulgaria Austria	8th European CAF Users Event
2019	Romania Finland	10th European Quality Conference for Public Administration
2020	Croatia Germany	CAF Guidelines for implementing CAF
2021	Portugal Slovenia	Digital Network Forum
2022	France Czech Republic	9th European CAF Users Event
2023	Sweden Spain	Study and publication: "More resilient public administrations after COVID-19", OECD
2024	Belgium Hungary	CAF Education, International CAF Trainers' Event
2025	Poland Denmark	CAF Impact Study, 10 <sup>th</sup> European CAF Users Event

**TABLE 1:** CAF Milestones 1998-2025 (Source: adapted from Asensio *et al.*, 2021).

Despite its widespread promotion, CAF adoption varies significantly across countries. Table 2 presents the distribution of registered CAF users across EU Member States as of 2023, illustrating both the geographic spread and intensity of implementation.

Country	CAF Users	CAF Effective Users	Total				
Austria	104	5	109	Latvia	8	0	8
Belgium	339	6	345	Lithuania	34	2	36
Bulgaria	55	0	55	Luxembourg	16	0	16
Croatia	7	0	7	Malta	12	4	16
Cyprus	20	0	20	Poland	424	0	424
Czech Republic	76	1	77	Portugal	240	10	250
Denmark	249	1	250	Romania	80	0	80
Estonia	20	0	20	Slovak Republic	52	31	83
Finland	147	0	147	Slovenia	0	0	0
France	34	0	34	Spain	59	0	59
Germany	362	4	366	Sweden	5	0	5
Greece	75	0	75	The Netherlands	7	0	7

Hungary	316	0	316	European Commission	6	0	6
Ireland	6	0	6	European Institution	1	11	12
Italy	575	38	613	<b>Total</b>	<b>3329</b>	<b>113</b>	<b>3442</b>

**TABLE 2:** CAF Users at 2023 (Source: adapted from EIPA database).

Countries such as Italy, Poland, Germany, Hungary, and Portugal show high levels of engagement, while others remain underrepresented. This uneven adoption underscores the importance of systematically reviewing academic literature to understand how the model has been interpreted, implemented, and studied across different national contexts.

### 3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a systematic literature review to synthesize existing research on the Common Assessment Framework in the public sector. The goal is to map the current state of knowledge, identify gaps, and support future research and practice (Snyder, 2019; Heß, 2021) in total quality management. The review follows a structured and replicable process across four phases: review design, search process, analysis, and reporting (Snyder, 2019), ensuring methodological rigor and transparency (Dresch *et al.*, 2015).

#### 3.1 Sample Selection

The review includes peer-reviewed journal articles, dissertations, academic conference proceedings, and books that address CAF in the context of public sector total quality management. Studies were selected based on the following inclusion criteria (see Table 3).

Category	Criteria
<i>Study field</i>	Common Assessment Framework
<i>Timeframe</i>	2000 - 2023
<i>Language of abstract</i>	English, German, Italian
<i>Countries</i>	All countries
<i>Publication type</i>	Peer-reviewed articles in academic journals, dissertations, academic conference proceedings, books
<i>Methodology</i>	No restrictions
<i>Keywords</i>	Common Assessment Framework, CAF, (total) quality management, excellence in the public sector

**TABLE 3:** Inclusion / exclusion criteria (Source: author own creation).

A comprehensive review was conducted of all scientific contributions published from the inception of the CAF model in 2000 through 2023. This time frame was deliberately selected to align with the formal launch of the model and to capture its full evolution over nearly two and a half decades, up to the most recent complete year of available academic publications. Articles were included if they contained at least an abstract in English. Publications in German or Italian without an English abstract were also included in the original language, given the author's proficiency in those languages and the significant role these countries played in the model's development. The selection criteria were kept broad to encompass all relevant studies, ensuring a comprehensive foundation for the analysis.

To further reinforce the relevance and scientific quality of the selected publications, each study was then assessed using a set of qualitative criteria adapted from Snyder (2019) and Dresch *et al.* (2015). These included: clarity and transparency of the research methodology; depth of engagement with the CAF model; alignment with the research objectives; and contribution to the discourse on public sector quality management. The peer-review status of publications was used as an indicator of academic rigor, whereas dissertations, books and conference proceedings were evaluated based on their structural coherence and contextual relevance.

### 3.2 Data Collection

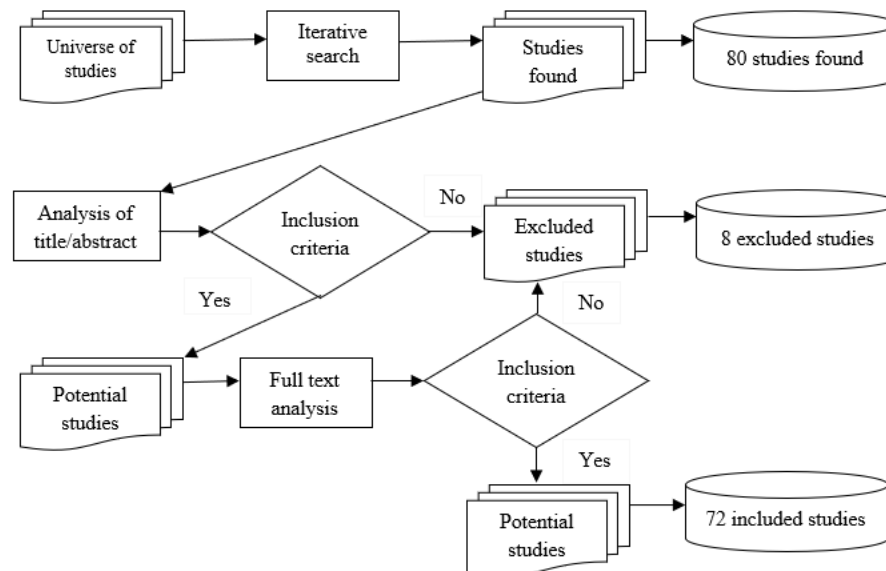
The data collection process began with three global bibliographic databases: ScienceDirect, Scopus, and Web of Science. The primary search term was “Common Assessment Framework (CAF)”, which was refined after an initial search by adding “quality management”. This refinement excluded publications related to the more commonly discussed “Common Assessment Framework for children and young people” in the United Kingdom. Research articles were assessed and filtered according to inclusion and exclusion criteria aligned with the formulated research question and consistently applied throughout the search process (Dresch *et al.*, 2015) and stored in the Zotero reference manager.

An iterative search strategy was used to expand the initial limited dataset. This included reviewing citations within available articles to identify additional relevant contributions (Webster & Watson, 2002). Backward and forward citation tracking using Google Scholar and digital library databases allowed the inclusion of books and publications from the early 21<sup>st</sup> century that were primarily published in print.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

The analysis of the 80 collected studies followed a structured two-step process, as outlined by Snyder (2019). First, abstracts were screened to identify studies with potential relevance to the research objectives. Second, full-text reviews were conducted to confirm inclusion and extract key information. Each selected study was examined through descriptive analysis, focusing on the following dimensions: (a) authorship, publication venue and year, (b) methodological approach and stated objectives, and (c) thematic alignment with the CAF.

During the review process, eight studies were excluded due to insufficient engagement with the CAF model. These publications referenced CAF only in passing, typically as a generic example of a quality management tool and did not contribute substantively to the analysis (see Appendix 1 for details). The final dataset comprised 72 studies, which served as the basis for constructing a contextualized overview of the scholarly landscape. A visual summary of the search and selection process is presented in Figure 1.



**FIGURE 1:** Search and selection process (Source: adapted from Dresch *et al.*, 2015).



## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1 Characteristics of the Selected Literature

In the selected body of theoretical and empirical literature on CAF, over half of the articles (55.5%) were published between 2011 and 2019. In contrast, fewer than one-third (29.2%) appeared during the first decade following its introduction at the European level. In the past three years, ten articles have focused on the latest version of the model (CAF2020), suggesting a modest increase in scholarly attention compared to the early 2000s, but a decline relative to the 2010-2019 period, which averaged 2.5 publications per year.

Despite its widespread use and discussion among practitioners, CAF has received limited attention in top-tier European and international public administration journals. Instead, the analyzed studies were predominantly published in economics and management journals at national and local levels. These include contributions from Western European regions, particularly German-speaking countries, as well as Eastern European nations such as Romania, Slovenia, Lithuania, and Greece. Organization-specific journals at both European and international levels played a crucial role in advancing knowledge of CAF.

In terms of authorship, a few scholars, such as Staes and Thijs, Žurga, Prorok, and Kalfa, have contributed multiple publications on CAF. However, the majority of articles were authored by different individuals. While most contributions were published in English or included English abstracts, 19.4% of the selected studies were in German and 4.2% in Italian.

From a methodological perspective, the 72 selected studies were categorized into nine different groups based on their research approach (see Appendix 2 for details). The most frequently employed methodologies were case studies and evaluative research, reflecting the nature of the CAF model and the topics under study, as well as its application in the empirical literature. These evaluations were primarily conducted in countries such as Italy, Romania, the Slovak Republic, Germany, Lithuania, and Greece. Additional studies offered descriptive overviews of CAF-related data, quantitative research, and qualitative cross-sectional research. Comparative studies of the model's implementation across different European countries and institutions have significantly shaped the scientific discourse on CAF over the past two decades.

### 4.2 Thematic Analysis

The scientific literature on CAF requires a thematic and systematic classification to capture key insights and perspectives that shaped the academic discourse on the model. Such classification also helps to highlight the potential benefits and applications of CAF within the public sector. To this end, the 72 selected studies were first summarized according to their research objectives and guiding questions and subsequently categorized based on their primary thematic focus. The categorization process followed an inductive approach, whereby themes were derived directly from the data. These initial categories were then iteratively refined and consolidated into a set of common thematic areas, following the methodological guidance of Mayring (2022). This process resulted in the identification of eleven core topics that currently define the scholarly conversation surrounding CAF (see Table 4).

	Topic	Papers
1	State of the art of CAF in a specific country	Asensio <i>et al.</i> , 2021; Bacala & Bibu, 2013; Bajramovic & Gram, 2018; Kovac & Tomazevic, 2009; Prorok & Kallinger, 2011; Špaček, 2007; Staes <i>et al.</i> , 2019; Thijs, 2005; Tsimboukidou <i>et al.</i> , 2013; Vrabkova, 2013, Žurga, 2008
2	CAF application in a specific public sector organization	Adamonieneet <i>et al.</i> , 2013; Barresi <i>et al.</i> , 2013; Bunday, 2014; Dearing <i>et al.</i> , 2006; Erdossy <i>et al.</i> , 2022; Giannakopoulou, 2015; Giylameti & Dollani, 2014; Korouliet <i>et al.</i> , 2020; Matei & Balaceanu, 2014; Nogueiro & Saraiva, 2008; Prorok & Parzer, 2021; Stile, 2014

3	CAF as a Total Quality Management tool	Bernhart & Promberger, 2011; Etscheid, 2010; Gavrilesco, 2011; Girmanova <i>et al.</i> , 2022; Marin, 2019
4	Quality management and its tools	Cipolletta, 2015; Dragomir, 2019; Löffler, 2018; Matei & Lazar, 2011; Raboca <i>et al.</i> , 2017; Staes & Thijs, 2005; Tropper-Malz & Sejrek-Tunke, 2021; van Dooren & van de Walle, 2004; Žurga, 2016
5	Description of CAF: structure, principles and goals	Bauer, 2002; Engel, 2002; Hartmann, 2005; Hill & Klages, 2002; Oechsler, 2002; Staatweber, 2004; Stein, 2007; Stein, 2013; Stromsnes, 2002; Thijs & Staes, 2010
6	Effects of CAF and its criteria	Bugdol & Jarzebinski, 2010; Kalfa, 2018; Oikonomidou & Konstantinidis, 2019; Popescu <i>et al.</i> , 2017; Prorok <i>et al.</i> , 2021; Tomazevic <i>et al.</i> , 2014
7	The role of CAF in other fields and measures for the public sector	Belfiore <i>et al.</i> , 2021; Mikalauskas <i>et al.</i> , 2019; OECD, 2023; Ortansa, 2012; Saranto <i>et al.</i> , 2019; Tropp, 2004; Tuljak-Suban, 2013
8	Integrated CAF frameworks	Astrauskaite & Ruzevicius, 2016; Kalfa, 2018; Maslov <i>et al.</i> , 2018; Nova, 2019; Rickards & Ritsert, 2013; Tomazevic <i>et al.</i> , 2016
9	Critical insights and improvements for CAF	Boenigk, 2012; Cappelli <i>et al.</i> , 2011; Macur & Radej, 2017; Spacek, 2010

**TABLE 4:** Thematic analysis (Source: author own creation).

The analysis illustrates the state of CAF implementation across national public sectors, with empirical examples drawn primarily from Eastern European countries such as Romania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia, and the Czech Republic. Research papers examine the model's application at various government levels, including both local and central administrations. Case studies span a range of public sector domains, including security (e.g., police departments), economic development (e.g., chambers of commerce), education (e.g., universities), and regional administrations (e.g., town halls).

Several publications focus on the criteria and objectives of CAF, emphasizing its role in promoting quality management in the public sector. Comparative analyses with other quality management tools such as the EFQM Excellence Model and ISO 9001 underscore CAF's potential for fostering continuous improvement and supporting Total Quality Management principles.

Recent contributions have explored the impact of CAF and its criteria on organizational dimensions such as human resource management and job satisfaction. These studies also address broader public sector challenges, including modernization and institutional resilience. Given the centrality of self-assessment in CAF's framework, research has examined its integration with sector-specific approaches within comprehensive management systems. In addition, critical perspectives have emerged, offering suggestions for improving the model and proposing future directions for its application across European public sector institutions.

## 5. DISCUSSION

At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the public sector began adopting the CAF as a strategic instrument to unify and advance quality management practices across European administrations (Staes & Thijs, 2005). Initially conceived as a self-assessment tool, CAF rapidly gained traction: by 2006 it had become the leading evaluation framework in countries such as the Czech Republic, where it contributed to notable improvements in public management practices (Špaček, 2007). Over its first decade, CAF evolved into a more comprehensive quality management system, integrating



principles of Total Quality Management and aligning with broader public sector reform agendas (Prorok & Kallinger, 2011).

Several countries demonstrated proactive engagement with the model. For instance, Romania established dedicated CAF teams to support implementation in the country (Bacala & Bibu, 2013), while Greece institutionalized TQM tools through national legislation (Tsimboukidou *et al.*, 2013). At the European level, supporting instruments were developed to facilitate knowledge exchange and peer learning among users (Staes *et al.*, 2010). However, implementation patterns varied significantly. Larger countries such as Spain and France reported lower adoption rates compared to smaller nations like Poland and Denmark (Vrabkova, 2013). By 2021, most national CAF correspondents indicated stable or declining implementation levels since 2011, underscoring the need for renewed efforts to sustain and expand the model's use (Asensio *et al.*, 2021).

This uneven implementation trajectory suggests that, despite institutional promotion, the practical uptake of CAF remains highly dependent on contextual factors such as administrative culture, leadership commitment, and the availability of support structures. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated efforts across disciplines, bringing together insights from practices, policymaking and academic research. Such integration is essential to bridge the gap between theory and application and to develop a holistic understanding of how quality management frameworks like CAF can be effectively adapted to the complex realities of public sector governance.

### 5.1 Academic Implications

The review highlights several gaps and opportunities for academic engagement with CAF, whose conceptual treatment remains fragmented and theoretically underdeveloped. The first implication concerns the need for a more robust academic understanding of CAF within TQM theory. This includes the examination of its conceptual foundations and design logic. While some studies (e.g., Bernhart & Promberger, 2011; Gavrilesco, 2011) link CAF to ethical standards and service quality, its alignment with broader public administration and public management theories, such as performance management, organizational learning and governance, remains underdeveloped. Macur and Radej (2017), for example, propose a network-based model that views organizations as interconnected processes, offering a more dynamic understanding of performance. Boenigk (2012) advocates for combining service research with CAF to better capture citizen satisfaction and trust in public administration. Clarifying CAF's theoretical positioning would contribute to a more coherent understanding of its role in public sector reform.

Second, the review highlights the importance of integrating CAF into emerging paradigms such as digital governance, agile administration and citizen co-production. Doing so would enhance its relevance in contemporary public management and support its adaptation to evolving administrative contexts.

Third, the review underscores the potential of combining CAF with established performance management tools to improve measurement and evaluation. Kalfa (2018) developed the CAF-OQS using a five-point Likert scale for more reliable assessment. Sector-specific adaptations—such as CAF with DEA for police performance (Tomazevic *et al.*, 2016), CAF(E) for the German Police Academy (Rickards & Ritsert, 2013), and Nova's (2019) framework for non-profit sports organizations—demonstrate the model's flexibility. CAF has also been proposed as a complement to the Social Responsibility Assessment Framework (Maslov *et al.*, 2018).

Fourth, the review identifies a need for a deeper exploration of causal relationships between CAF criteria, particularly between enablers and results. Studies such as Bugdol & Jarzebinski (2010) and Kalfa (2018) provide initial evidence of these dynamics, showing, for example, how leadership influences strategy and planning, and how HR management affects process management. Following the lines of inquiry developed for the EFQM model (Heras-Saizarbitoria *et al.*, 2012; Raharjo *et al.*, 2015), similar empirical approaches could strengthen the theoretical foundation of CAF and validate its internal logic across diverse public sector contexts.

Finally, methodological limitations persist. Most existing studies rely on cross-sectional case analyses, which constrain insights into long-term organizational change. There is a clear need for longitudinal research to track CAF's sustained impact over time, as well as comparative studies across countries and sectors to assess how contextual factors influence its effectiveness.

## 5.2 Practical Implications

The systematic review highlights that quality management tools, particularly CAF, play a pivotal role in enhancing communication and fostering quality awareness within public sector organizations. By embedding TQM principles, CAF contributes to service quality and upholds ethical standards in public services (Gavrilescu, 2011) as well as supports the effective allocation of organizational resources (Etscheid, 2010). Moreover, CAF promotes transparency and participatory decision-making. Its structured and inclusive approach encourages ownership and engagement across all organizational levels, which is critical for sustaining long-term change (Adamoniene *et al.*, 2013). The model's emphasis on continuous improvement and regular self-assessment fosters a mindset oriented toward resilience and adaptability, enabling organizations to respond effectively to unforeseen challenges (Asensio *et al.*, 2021; Girmanova *et al.*, 2022; OECD, 2023).

From a practitioner's perspective, the adoption of CAF yields tangible benefits across various organizational domains. These include improved human resource management practices, strengthened internal communication and the cultivation of collaborative work environments. Empirical studies across European public administrations confirm CAF's positive influence on staff competencies and teamwork (Prorok *et al.*, 2021) as well as overall employee satisfaction and motivation – factors that are essential for embedding a sustainable quality culture (Tomazevic *et al.*, 2014; Stile, 2014; Ortansa, 2012).

CAF also facilitates benchmarking and knowledge exchange both within and outside the organization (Asensio *et al.*, 2021; Dearing *et al.*, 2006). Its common language and diagnostic structure support bench learning and cross-national comparisons, promoting both short-term corrective actions and long-term strategic excellence (Kessopoulou, 2023; Bunday, 2014; Staes *et al.*, 2016).

These practitioner-level insights are further substantiated by empirical evidence from real-world implementations. Case studies from Slovenian and Romanian public administrations demonstrate that CAF facilitates the identification of performance gaps and drives organizational improvements (Giylameti & Dollani, 2014; Erdosy *et al.*, 2022). These examples highlight the model's capacity to translate diagnostic insights into actionable strategies, reinforcing its value as a tool for public sector transformation.

However, successful implementation requires careful preparation. This includes developing robust inter- and intra-institutional communication strategies, increasing institutional visibility (Matei & Balaceanu, 2014) and ensuring the formation of well-trained self-assessment teams (Popescu *et al.*, 2017). Strong managerial commitment and active involvement across all organizational levels are essential to maximize the benefits of CAF and to strengthen risk management capacities (Marin, 2019). To ensure the effectiveness of these tools, organizations must prioritize timely and actionable improvement processes following each self-assessment cycle (Prorok & Kallinger, 2011).

## 5.3 Policy Recommendations

To support the effective and sustainable implementation of quality management tools such as CAF, national governments should adopt a more proactive and structured approach. The following policy recommendations are based on empirical evidence and observed implementation challenges across European public administrations:

1. Integrate quality management into broader reform programs  
Quality initiatives should be embedded within wider administrative reform efforts to promote coherence and long-term sustainability (Matei & Lazar, 2011).

2. Institutionalize support for total quality management tools  
Governments should formally endorse frameworks like CAF as part of their strategic public sector development agendas, ensuring consistent application and visibility.
3. Provide clear guidelines and targeted training  
Effective implementation depends on well-prepared self-assessment teams. Standardized guidance and capacity building initiatives are essential to overcome barriers such as unclear procedures and excessive workloads, as observed in Romania and Greece (Dragomir, 2019; Raboca *et al.*, 2017; Giannakopoulou & Koufopoulos, 2015).
4. Promote benchlearning and cross-country learning  
Facilitating comparative analysis and knowledge exchange among public administrations can accelerate innovation and foster a culture of continuous improvement (Kessopoulou, 2023).
5. Support digital integration  
Linking TQM tools like CAF with digital platforms can streamline the self-assessment process, enhance data management, and improve accessibility.

At the EU level, coordination efforts should aim to harmonize CAF practices across member states, which currently remain fragmented. This could include funding pilot projects, establishing communities of practice, and developing shared implementation guidelines.

Finally, collaboration with academic research is recommended to strengthen the institutional relevance of CAF and determine its optimal policy positioning. This includes evaluating whether CAF should be mandated or only recommended at the national level, based on empirical evidence and legal analysis (Žurga, 2016).

#### **5.4 Limitations of the Study**

This study presents several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the literature review was restricted to sources published in English, German, and Italian. As a result, potentially relevant studies in other languages may have been excluded, limiting the breadth of international perspectives.

Second, the analysis focused predominantly on the European context. While this aligns with the available scientific literature up to date, the lack of empirical studies and insights from non-European public administration constraints the generalizability of the findings.

Third, the study examined only one quality management tool, the CAF, without comparing it to other established frameworks such as EFQM or ISO. This narrow focus may overlook complementary insights and alternative approaches to public sector quality management.

Future research could address these limitations by incorporating multilingual literature, expanding the geographical scope beyond Europe, and exploring the relationships between CAF and other quality management models to provide a comparative understanding.

#### **5.5 Conclusion and Future Research Perspectives**

This study explores the evolution and practical application of Total Quality Management in the public sector through the lens of the Common Assessment Framework (RQ1). The analysis shows that research on CAF has gradually shifted from descriptive implementation studies to more critical and strategic evaluations. CAF has emerged as a tool that not only supports continuous improvement and adaptability but also enables public organizations to measure performance systematically, implement targeted improvements and benchmark effectively.

Addressing RQ2, the findings highlight several key insights for practitioners, policymakers, and the academic community. The effectiveness of quality management tools like CAF depends on their integration into broader reform agendas, strong institutional support, and alignment with digital and participatory practices. Enhancing CAF's utility may require revising its framework to

incorporate service research, citizen satisfaction metrics, and complementary tools such as the Balanced Scorecard. Moreover, national governments play a pivotal role in facilitating adoption through clear guidelines, training, and legal frameworks.

Looking ahead, future research should further investigate the theoretical foundations of CAF, particularly its internal structure and the causal relationships between enablers and results. Clarifying these mechanisms would strengthen the conceptual robustness of the model and support its strategic application. Comparative studies are also needed to assess the effectiveness of sector-specific model adaptations, helping determine whether contextual tailoring enhances performance outcomes.

In addition, integrating CAF with other management dimensions such as human resource practices, leadership models and performance measurement tools should be empirically tested to evaluate whether a more holistic approach improves the usability of the model. Research should also examine the institutional conditions required for embedding CAF within public sector reforms, including the legal and administrative frameworks that support its formal adoption. These efforts will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of CAF and its role in advancing total quality management across diverse public sector contexts.

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## 7. APPENDIX

### a. Excluded articles

Research Approach	Topic
1 Dinu, V. (2017). Quality Management and Business Excellence. <i>Amfiteatru Economic Journal</i> , 19(44), 5-7. <a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10419/169053">http://hdl.handle.net/10419/169053</a> .	Review of a CAF-related article
2 Dionysopoulou, P., Svarnias, G., & Papailias, T. (2021). Total quality management in public sector, case study: customs service. <i>Regional Science Inquiry</i> , 8(1), 153-68.	Total quality management in the public sector – customs service case study
3 Dzinic, J. (2017). Effective Implementation of a Quality Management Policy in Public Administration: Experiences from Spain and Lessons from Croatia. <i>Hrvatska i komparativnajauprava</i> , 17(4), 639-64. <a href="https://doi.org/10.31297/hkju.17.4.6">https://doi.org/10.31297/hkju.17.4.6</a> .	Quality management in the public sector (CAF as an example of QM model)
4 Hrciar, M (2014, September). Gap analysis of approaches to implementation of management systems. Paper presented at the scientific conference quality and leading innovation, Kosice, Czech Republic. <a href="https://www.researchgate.net/publication/287213428_GAP_ANALYSIS_OF_APPROACHES_TO_IMPLEMENTATION_OF_MANAGEMENT_SYSTEMS">https://www.researchgate.net/publication/287213428_GAP_ANALYSIS_OF_APPROACHES_TO_IMPLEMENTATION_OF_MANAGEMENT_SYSTEMS</a> .	Gap analysis of management approaches based on ISO9001
5 Jehangiri, R. (2017). Identification of Critical Success Factors for Total Quality Management Implementation in Organizations. <i>International Journal of Economics &amp; Management Sciences</i> , 6(3). <a href="https://doi.org/10.4172/2162-6359.1000420">https://doi.org/10.4172/2162-6359.1000420</a> .	Evaluation of TQM management practices and organisational performance and customer satisfaction
6 Kunze, A. (2010). Qualitätsmanagement in der Bundesverwaltung – ein Kennzeichen guter Verwaltung. <i>Verwaltung und Management</i> , 16(1), 51-5. <a href="https://doi.org/10.5771/0947-9856-2010-1-51">https://doi.org/10.5771/0947-9856-2010-1-51</a> .	TQM for public sector organisations (CAF as an example of excellence)
7 Mina-Raiu, L., Bucura, I., & Raiu. C.V. (2021). Transposing good practices in the Field of Quality Management in Japan, with Romanian Public Administration. <i>Romanian Statistical Review</i> , 2.	Identifying the importance and implementation possibilities of TQM instruments
8 Nová, J. (2013). Current Concepts of the Quality in Sport and their Utilization in the Czech Republic. <i>Prague University of Economics and Business</i> , 4.	Quality and QM in the sports environment in the Czech Republic and motivational tools

**TABLE 5:** Excluded articles (Source: author own creation).

## b. Methodological review

Research Approach		Description	Papers
1	Case Study	In-depth study of a specific phenomenon (i.e., person or event)	Adamoniene <i>et al.</i> , 2013; Barresi <i>et al.</i> , 2013; Cipolletta, 2015; Erdossy <i>et al.</i> , 2022; Girmanova <i>et al.</i> , 2022; Gjylameti & Dollani, 2014; Matei & Balaceanu, 2014; Nogueiro & Saraiva, 2008; Prorok & Parzer, 2021; Rickards & Ritsert, 2013; Saranto <i>et al.</i> , 2019; Staes <i>et al.</i> , 2016; Stile, 2014; Tsimboukudou, 2013
2	Evaluative Research	Used to determine how well a specific measure or product meets its goals	Bernhart & Promberger, 2011; Dearing <i>et al.</i> , 2006; Dragomir, 2019; Etscheid, 2010; Gavrilesu, 2011; Löffler, 2018; Macur & Radej, 2017; Marin, 2019; Maslov <i>et al.</i> , 2018; Ortansa, 2012; Raboca <i>et al.</i> , 2017; Staes & Thijs, 2005; Tropp, 2004; Vrabkova, 2017
3	Qualitative Research	Explores problems based on quantifiable data and statistical analysis	Belfiore <i>et al.</i> , 2021; Buday, 2012; Bugdol & Jarzebinski, 2010; Kalfa, 2018a; Kalfa, 2018; Korouli <i>et al.</i> , 2020, Mikalauskas <i>et al.</i> , 2019; Prorok <i>et al.</i> , 2021; Tuliak-Suban, 2013; Tomazevic <i>et al.</i> , 2018; Tomazevic <i>et al.</i> , 2014
4	Thematic Content Analysis	Descriptive presentation of qualitative data	Bauer, 2022; Engel, 2002; Hartmann, 2005; Hill & Klages, 2002; Nova, 2019; Oechsler, 2002; Saatweber, 2004; Stein, 2007; Stein, 2013; Stromsnes, 2002; Thijs & Staes, 2010
5	Qualitative Cross-sectional Research	Focuses on analysing different individuals or units at a single point in time	Asensio <i>et al.</i> , 2021; Astrauskaite & Ruzevicius, 2016; Bajramovic & Gram, 2018; Boenigk, 2012; Giannakopoulou, 2015; Kessopoulou <i>et al.</i> , 2023; OECD, 2023; Oikonomidou & Konstantinidis, 2019; Popescu <i>et al.</i> , 2017
6	Comparative Analysis	Focusing on the comparison of two or more datasets, processes or objects	Bacala & Bibu, 2013; Kovac & Tomazevic, 2009; Matei & Lazar, 2011; Spacek, 2007; Tropper-Malz <i>et al.</i> , 2021; Žurga, 2008; Žurga, 2016
7	Qualitative Longitudinal Research	Qualitative studies with a focus on the change in time of a specific phenomenon	Prorok & Kallinger, 2011; Staes & Thijs, 2005; Staes <i>et al.</i> , 2010
8	Empirical Research	Based on real-life observations that might be compared against a theory	Cappelli <i>et al.</i> , 2011; van Dooren & van de Walle, 2004
9	Secondary Analysis	Based on the use of existing research data to provide answers to a different research question	Spacek, 2010

TABLE 6: Methodological review (Source: author own creation).