

Historical Development of Eswatini Educational Research Association

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Abstract

In an effort to promote educational research and professional growth among educators in Eswatini, the Swaziland Education Research Association (SERA) has undertaken various initiatives aimed at enhancing research capacity and academic engagement. Therefore, this study sought to explore the activities, challenges, and future prospects of SERA, with a view to strengthening its operational and strategic effectiveness. The study adopted a qualitative approach using a case study research design. The target population comprised members; and executive leaders (past and present) of the association. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Trustworthiness of the findings was ensured through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability measures. Ethical considerations such as informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation were also ensured. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data. Findings revealed that SERA has made notable strides through workshops, seminars, mentoring, and participation in regional conferences to foster a research culture amongst her members. However, the association faces challenges including low membership, financial constraints, limited leadership engagement, and irregular participation by members. Based on these findings, the study concluded that while SERA is playing a crucial role in advancing educational research, its sustainability depends on structural reforms, increased visibility, and expanded membership. It is therefore recommended that SERA strengthens its governance, establishes regional branches, enhances fundraising, and institutionalises member engagement activities for long-term growth and impact.

Introduction

The Swaziland Educational Research Association (SERA) is a non-profit, voluntary organization dedicated to the development and promotion of educational research in the Kingdom of Eswatini. The association is in a transition to change its name to Eswatini Education Research Association (EERA or ESWERA) due to the change of the name from Swaziland to Eswatini. SERA operates as a national body under the auspices of the University of Eswatini, Faculty of Education. Its membership includes a diverse range of stakeholders in the education sector, such as educators from tertiary institutions, teachers from primary and secondary schools, officials from the Ministry of Education and Training, trainers from other government ministries, and representatives from the private sector. The Association offers four categories of membership: (i) Full Members, (ii) Student Members, (iii) Associate Members, and (iv) Honorary Members.

EERA is also an active member of the Southern Africa Educational Research Network (SAERN)—a regional umbrella body comprising of educational research associations from five Southern African countries: Botswana, Lesotho, Eswatini, Namibia, and South Africa. The primary aims of EERA are to: (i) encourage, coordinate, and facilitate educational research; (ii)

identify and prioritize research areas, particularly those addressing practical educational challenges in Eswatini; (iii) support the publication of research that advances education at both theoretical and practical levels; (iv) organize conferences, seminars, and workshops focused on educational research; (v) collaborate with organizations that share similar research objectives; and (vi) promote and enhance the research capabilities and skills of its members. Therefore, the study sought to explore the activities, challenges, and future prospects of SERA, with a view to strengthening its operational and strategic effectiveness.

Approach of the study

The study employed a multimethod qualitative approach using a case study research design to document the history of the Swaziland Educational Research Association (SERA). Specifically, a triangulation of interviews and desk review was used to collect data. Interviews were arranged with six past chairpersons and two former executive committee members of the association, all of whom were purposefully selected for their direct involvement in the leadership and operations of SERA. In addition, historical documents were gleaned from past and present SERA members to complement and corroborate the interview findings. The combination of these data sources enabled a comprehensive understanding of the association's development over the past. As the current chairperson, the researcher benefits from direct insight and access to key stakeholders. To manage bias, I ensured transparent processes by having findings reviewed or validated by independent peers and committee members.

An interview guide was developed to solicit information related to the activities, challenges, and future prospects of SERA. Data were collected between September 2024 to May 2025. To ensure trustworthiness, several strategies were employed: credibility was enhanced through triangulation of sources and member checking with selected participants; transferability was supported by providing detailed descriptions of the context and participants; dependability was achieved by maintaining an audit trail of the research process; and confirmability was addressed by ensuring that findings were grounded in the data through reflective journaling and documentation of decision-making processes.

Ethical considerations were also carefully observed. Informed consent was obtained from all participants verbally. Autonomy and privacy were respected by allowing participants the freedom to withdraw at any time and by conducting interviews in settings chosen by them. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing participant identities and securely storing all research data. Together, these measures ensured the integrity and ethical soundness of the research process. Data from both interviews and documents were analysed using narrative analysis, allowing the researcher to construct a coherent and context-rich account of the association's evolution.

Formation of the Association

The Swaziland Educational Research Association (SERA) emerged as a result of the formation of the BOLESWA Regional Educational Association, a collaborative initiative of the respective academic staff members from the Faculty of Education in the University of Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland (UBLS) from each country. This was a resolution taken at the First International Seminar on Educational Research held at the University College of Botswana on the 4th – 7th May 198. The formation of the regional body was driven by a collective recognition of the need for evidence-based solutions to national educational challenges. A key focus was placed on recognising the limited research output in these countries, identifying potential researchers and users of research, and developing strategies for institutionalizing educational research across the region. To operationalize this vision, each country's national university was assigned the responsibility of establishing a national research association in the three countries.

In Swaziland, Dr. B. Putsoa, the then Dean of the Faculty of Education in the University Campus in Swaziland, was appointed as the convener responsible for spearheading the formation of SERA. Each national association was tasked with formulating a clear set of objectives, with conveners required to complete the process within three months of the seminar. Several other resolutions with implications for national associations such as SERA were adopted, including:

1. Collaboration with Government - local institutions were encouraged to regularly inform governments about their research activities, and governments were urged to engage local researchers to address national education problems.
2. Stakeholder Engagement - professionals, such as school headteachers, should play a role in identifying pressing educational issues for research.
3. Dissemination of Research - research findings should be communicated through regular seminars and meetings involving universities, government agencies, and other stakeholders such as teachers, students, civil servants, and policymakers.
4. Regional Publication - a journal dedicated to publishing educational research from Southern Africa should be established to promote scholarly dissemination.
5. Inclusive Participation - local seminars should involve a broad cross-section of stakeholders—including planners, university students, and educators—with pre-announced themes to allow for focused contributions.
6. Accessibility and Capacity Building - research should be made more open and inclusive to cultivate research skills, especially by sharing university and teacher-led research with schools.
7. Annual Research Digests - Faculties of Education were encouraged to produce annual digests summarizing completed research, with clear references to full reports. These digests could be distributed widely, particularly in schools, in the form of newsletters.

These resolutions laid the foundation for the formal establishment and on-going development of SERA, which continues to play a crucial role in advancing educational research in Eswatini.

Developmental stages of the Association

In 1987, the BOLESWA regional cooperation—comprising Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland—resolved to establish a biennial symposium to further strengthen collaboration and knowledge exchange among the member countries. It was agreed that the hosting of these symposia would rotate biannually among the member states, ensuring shared responsibility and equitable participation. The three-member regional body expanded after joined by Namibia in 2003 thus the name changed to BLESTWANA. Over time, it became evident that the activities of national associations, such as the Swaziland Educational Research Association (SERA), were closely aligned with those of the regional body—BOLESWANA. Since this regional body has joined by South Africa the name changed to Southern Africa Educational Research Network (SAERN). Consequently, the pace and nature of SERA's activities, as well as membership subscription trends, were often influenced by the developments and initiatives taking place at the regional level. This orientation highlighted the association's dependence on regional momentum for local engagement and activity.

Leadership and its historical succession for the Association

This section provides a comprehensive overview of the historical succession of leadership within the association, with a particular focus on the tenure and contributions of each Chairperson. It presents key demographic details—such as gender, educational qualifications,

and professional background—while also highlighting the distinctive characteristics and priorities that defined each leadership period. The objective is to document the evolution of leadership over time and to acknowledge the diverse individuals who have significantly influenced the association's direction, growth, and impact. While this article highlights the role of the Chairperson as the symbolic representative of each executive term, it is important to recognize that the achievements of each tenure are the result of collective efforts by all members of the executive committees. Their contributions have been instrumental in shaping the historical trajectory and success of the association.

Table 1:

Historical succession of leadership in the Swaziland Education Research Association

Tenure	Chairperson	Sex	Educational Professional Background	Significant contributions
1982 - 1987	Dr Bongile Putsoa	F	Doctor of Philosophy –UNISWA, Department of Curriculum and Teaching	Founding member of the Association; first chairperson; Editor of BOLESWA Research Journal, Swaziland Educational Research Bulletin.
1988 - 1992	Dr Walter Sukati	M	Doctor of Education – UNISWA, Institute of Distance education	Key person upon the formation of the association, Accommodated the association when moved from the Faculty of Education
1995 - 1998	Dr C. M. Magagula	M	Doctor of Philosophy – UNISWA, Department of Curriculum and Teaching	Introduced the Swaziland Educational Research Bulletin, was editor of Swaziland Educational Research Bulletin
1996 - 1998	Dr A. B. Shongwe	M	Doctor of Education – UNISWA, Department of Educational Foundations and Management	Managed the association and the Research Bulletin
1999 - 2000	Dr Marrieta Dlamini	F	Doctor of Philosophy in Agricultural Education – UNISWA, Department of Agricultural Education and Extension	Workshops on writing conference papers; Seminars by experts on writing journal articles as capacity building; Mentoring in research
2000- 2008	Dr Edmund Mazibuko	M	Doctor of Philosophy – UNISWA, Department of	Strengthening ties with Ministry of Education; regional sister associations, training novice researchers;

				Curriculum and Teaching	hosted regional association conference, editor of national and regional publications, solicited research funding for the association
2008 - 2009	Dr Eliot M Mkhathjwa			Doctor of Education – UNISWA, Department of Murial and Community Service	Managed the association and the Research Bulletin,
2009 - 2011	Dr Sihle M Zwane			Doctor of Education – UNISWA, Department of Curriculum and Teaching	Managed the association and the Research Bulletin
2011 - 2013	Dr Musa M Dube			Doctor of Philosophy in Agricultural Extension	Initiated the preconference presentation; hosted the regional Boleswana Conference
2014 - 2016	Dr Sipho M Shongwe			Doctor of Philosophy – UNISWA, Department of Curriculum and Teaching	Reviewed the SERA constitution; introduced concept of having an office administrator
2016 - 2018	Dr Silungile F Tfwala			Doctor of Education – UNESWA, Department of Educational Foundations and Management	Implemented the resolutions: Inkhosikati as the patron of the Association
2019 -2023	Prof Marriera F Dlamini			Doctor of Philosophy in Agricultural Education – UNESWA, Department of Agricultural Education and Extension	Implemented the resolutions having past chairperson as ex-officio member of the executive committee; proposal of the transition from BOLESWANA to SAERN
2023 present	Dr Alfred M Tsikati			Doctor of Philosophy in Agricultural Education – UNESWA, Department of Agricultural Education and Extension	Increase visibility by having workshops, website and social media platforms, etc. Establish SERA Research Journal, Introduced SERA International Conferences, forged collaboration with other institutions in the country, wrote the history of the association, implementing the transition

of the regional association to SAERN, awarded past excelling SERA Members.

On another note, the association has made important strides in enhancing its leadership and network. In 2016, the association requested *Inkhosikati LaMatsebula* to be the patron. The association appointed the patron to enhance its credibility and visibility. As Patron, the *Inkhosikati* was a guest speaker in (Swaziland Education Research Association – Eswatini Higher Education Council [SERA – ESHEC]) inaugural conference hosted in 2023. She was again invited to be the guest speaker for the association for planned SERA-DEASA Conference in 2025. In same year, the association also resolved to create a post for an administrator. The post is deemed essential for managing the day-to-day operations, coordinating activities, and ensuring effective communication and implementation of the association's goals and policies. The first administrator [up-to now] was Dr Siphon Shongwe, the past Vice [2011-2013] and Chairperson of the Association [2014-201]. The association is grateful for his service and loyalty. Also, in 2023 the association resolved to use the past chair of the association as an ex-officio member of each new executive committee. This was meant to provide continuity, institutional memory, and guidance based on prior leadership experience. More to maintain contact with University of Eswatini and the Faculty of Education, the association maintained that the Chairperson and Vice Chairperson would come from the University of Eswatini. Therefore, there should be Faculty of Education representative to link the SERA executive, the Faculty Board and Faculty Dean. The first representative appointed representative was Dr Liphie Pereira in 2023. The association has strived to have representation from the other institutions in the executive committee to promote inclusivity, diverse perspectives, and broader collaboration within the education sector. Finally, the Ministry of Education, Director of Education and the Principal Secretary are also key in providing leadership of the association as national research in the education sector.

Networks forged by the Association

The association has established valuable partnerships both within Eswatini and beyond its borders. From its inception, the association was rooted in collaboration among academic staff members from Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland who were University of Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland (UBLS) and the Ministry of Education from each country. Each national research association was strongly encouraged to maintain close cooperation with the Ministry of Education in its respective country to align efforts with national education priorities.

SERA has also built relationships with the private sector to support its activities, particularly in hosting the biennial BOLESWANA conferences. Among its key international partners is the Educational Research Network in Eastern and Southern Africa (ERNESA), which promotes the generation and application of quality educational research in the region. ERNESA supports participatory research approaches and helps identify regional research priorities, echoing the goals laid out in the foundational BOLESWANA seminar of 1981. SERA has benefited immensely from its membership in ERNESA, notably through the Training of Young Researchers Project and the appointment of a Regional Coordinator—a rotating position among member countries—to ensure closer alignment with national needs.

Other international organisations have also played critical roles in SERA's historical development, particularly through the regional body BOLESWANA. For example, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) of Canada funded the pivotal seminar that

led to the formation of the regional association. As a Canadian Federal Crown corporation, IDRC supports research and innovation in developing regions to address global challenges.

Locally, SERA continues to promote academic collaboration through regular research seminars and systematic recruitment of new members. These activities not only expand its membership base but also reinforce its mission to foster a vibrant, engaged research community dedicated to advancing education in Eswatini.

Publications of the Association

In 1988, the association established the Swaziland Education Research Bulletin through the Faculty of education at the University of Eswatini with aim to disseminate research findings, promote scholarly dialogue, and support evidence-based practices in education. Unfortunately, this initiative died when the association lost the office space in the University of Eswatini. Some of the editors for this bulletin were Professor Barnabas Dlamini, Professor Cisco Magagula, Dr Bongile Putsoa, Dr Edmund Mazibuko, Dr Sihle Zwane, among others. The association was also indirectly involved in the research activity organised by the regional association. This included the post-symposium proceedings book. This publication comprises a carefully selected set of papers that represent all the symposium's sub-themes, based on criteria established by the organisers. Also, the association through its members making contribution through the BOLESWA Educational Research Journal (BERJ), a professional, peer-reviewed journal adhering to international standards of academic rigour. The inaugural issue of BERJ was published in 1988, immediately following the first international symposium. It is important to note that these publication efforts were regional initiatives in which SERA participated as a member of the wider BOLESWA network. Additional noteworthy publications emerging from BOLESWA and ERNESA collaborations include the Educational Research Abstracts of Eastern and Southern African Countries (1999) and Empirical Research in Basic Education in Southern Africa (2001). This two-year training initiative produced collaborative and scientifically rigorous studies addressing educational challenges in member countries including Swaziland.

Symposia and conferences

Until the recent conference hosted in December 2023, the Swaziland Educational Research Association (SERA) had not organised any national conference for its members. However, it has previously hosted three symposia on behalf of the regional association—initially known as BOLESWA, later BOLESWANA and now SAERN. These symposia serve as platforms where delegates from member associations across the region gathered to share their research findings. They bring together scholars from various fields and levels of expertise to reflect on the status of their disciplines, present new ideas, report on empirical studies, or introduce innovative research methods. The primary emphasis of these gatherings was on originality and relevance to teaching, learning, and assessment, rather than on restating established knowledge.

SERA's first opportunity to host the regional symposium came in 1991, under the theme "*Networking in Educational Research*." The second hosting occurred in 1997 with the theme "*Educational Research for Quality of Life*." In 2003, SERA again hosted the symposium with the theme "*Educational Research and Knowledge Systems*." The most recent BOLESWANA symposium hosted by SERA was in 2011, under the theme "*Educational Research and National Development: Opportunities and Challenges*." Although SERA was scheduled to host another symposium in 2020 on the theme "*Promoting Sustainable Education Development in the Southern African Region*," the event did not materialize because of the advent of COVID 19

and the political instability that prevailed at that time in the country. The hosting rights were then moved to South Africa Education Research Association (SAERA).

In a significant milestone, the current SERA Executive Committee organized the first SERA International Conference in collaboration with the Eswatini Higher Education Council (ESHEC) in December 2023. The theme of the conference was "*Transforming Education for the Emerging Context*." This marked a new chapter for SERA, as the Executive resolved to institutionalise the SERA International Conference as a regular event, strategically scheduled to alternate with the biennial SAERN conferences.

Capacity building and mentorship

The Swaziland Educational Research Association (SERA) has made significant strides in building research capacity and fostering mentorship among educators, researchers, and students across Eswatini. From its inception, SERA has recognized the importance of empowering researchers with the knowledge, skills, and support systems needed to conduct high-quality educational research and contribute meaningfully to national and regional academic discourse.

One of the landmark efforts in capacity building was SERA's participation in the ERNESA/DSE Training of Young Researchers project, a regional initiative aimed at developing research competencies among emerging scholars. Over a two-year period, 20 young researchers from Eswatini, Namibia, Botswana, and Lesotho—five from each country—were mentored in designing and conducting empirical studies. The project culminated in the publication of *Empirical Research in Basic Education in Southern Africa*, a collection of twelve research reports reflecting real educational challenges in the region. This project not only enhanced participants' technical skills; but also instilled confidence and professionalism in young researchers, many of whom had limited exposure to formal research practices before.

In support of scholarly output, SERA introduced several initiatives to enhance the publication and presentation skills of its members. These include writing seminars and practical workshops that guide participants from the initial development of research questions to the final stages of manuscript submission. Led by seasoned researchers, these initiatives emphasise critical components such as structuring academic papers, applying rigorous referencing techniques, understanding editorial expectations, and preparing for peer review. The association also supports researchers in developing high-quality presentations for academic symposia and conferences.

A core component of SERA's capacity-building strategy is mentorship. The association actively promotes mentoring relationships between experienced academics and early-career researchers, including postgraduate students and young lecturers. Through these relationships, mentees receive personalised guidance, constructive feedback, and professional advice to help them navigate the challenges of academic research and publishing. This mentorship approach has contributed to the cultivation of a new generation of competent, confident researchers in Eswatini.

SERA's long-standing participation in regional forums—particularly the BOLESWANA symposia and ERNESA conferences—has provided its members with exposure to broader scholarly communities and opportunities for cross-border research collaboration. These platforms serve as fertile ground for sharing best practices, discussing methodological innovations, and exploring comparative research on education systems in the Southern African

region. In these spaces, Eswatini researchers not only learn from their counterparts but also contribute insights from their local contexts, helping to shape regional discourse on education.

Additionally, the association's history of involvement in regional publications, such as the BOLESWA Educational Research Journal (BERJ) and biennial post-symposium proceedings, has created valuable platforms for SERA members to publish their work. These publications, although regional in nature, were instrumental in building the confidence and visibility of Eswatini researchers. The BERJ, for instance, adhered to international academic standards and played a crucial role in disseminating research from the region between 1988 and 2002, thanks to funding from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC).

Locally, SERA continues to promote capacity building by organizing research seminars and professional development sessions, often in partnership with institutions such as the Eswatini Higher Education Council (ESHEC). These events bring together academics from universities, colleges, schools, and government departments to share on-going studies, receive peer feedback, and explore ways to translate research findings into policy and practice.

In line with its strategic goals, SERA also recognizes the need to expand and sustain its network of researchers. Efforts to systematically recruit new members—including early-career educators and students—are intended not only to grow the association but also to ensure that its mission of advancing educational research is carried forward by future generations. Through its sustained focus on skill-building, mentorship, scholarly publishing, and regional collaboration, SERA has positioned itself as a key driver of educational research capacity in Eswatini. These initiatives reflect a deep commitment to nurturing local talent, fostering a vibrant academic community, and promoting evidence-based solutions to educational challenges.

Current Status of the Association

In an effort to reposition SERA as a vibrant and scholarly body, the current executive undertook a series of strategic reforms aimed at revitalizing the Association's activities and identity. Historically, SERA's operational rhythm had been largely influenced by its affiliation with the regional body, the Southern Africa Education Research Network (SAERN), previously known as BOLESWANA / BOLRESWA. While regional collaboration had been beneficial, it inadvertently led to periods of inactivity when regional events were absent, thus creating a dependency model.

Guided by its constitutional aims and informed by reflective leadership, the Executive Committee introduced a turnaround strategy designed to foster local ownership, active engagement, and sustained visibility. This strategy emphasized decoupling the Association's functionality from regional cycles while still maintaining collaborative relationships. Six key initiatives were introduced to operationalize this vision: the hosting of a national education research conference, the establishment of a peer-reviewed journal, the implementation of visibility and communication strategies, the provision of developmental workshops for the broader membership, forging collaboration with local and international organisations, recognition of individuals in the education sector, and restructuring the organisational structure of the association.

The inaugural national conference, co-hosted with the Eswatini Higher Education Council (ESHEC), marked a significant milestone in the institutional renewal of SERA. Held from 6th to 8th December 2023 at Esibayeni Lodge under the theme “*Transforming Education for the*

Emerging Contexts,” the conference drew participation from both local and regional scholars. Distinguished keynote addresses were delivered by Professor Alfred Henry B. Makura (Central University of Technology, South Africa) and Professor Marissa Rollnick (University of the Witwatersrand). Her Royal Highness Inkhosikati LaMatsebula, Patron of the Association, officiated the opening ceremony, underscoring the event’s national significance. The conference also succeeded in attracting financial and institutional support from public and private stakeholders, including sponsorship from Umsebe Publishers, Macmillan, and Van Schaik.

Building on the momentum of the conference, the Association established the Eswatini Educational Research Journal (ESWERJ) to serve as a platform for both novice and experienced scholars. The Journal, led by an editorial team comprised Prof. M. P. Dlamini (Editor-in-Chief), Prof. K. Ferreira-Meyers (Managing Editor), and Dr. V. C. Asogwa (Assistant Editor), was tasked with curating high-quality research that reflects national educational concerns. The first issue featured selected peer-reviewed papers from the 2023 conference, with its lead article documenting the history and evolution of SERA. The Journal is accessible via the Association’s website (<https://www.eswera.org>), which also serves as a digital repository and communication hub.

To complement these academic endeavours, a visibility strategy was launched to strengthen the Association’s national profile. The Visibility Committee, chaired by Dr. V. C. Asogwa, was instrumental in establishing a professional web presence (website) and engaging with audiences across digital platforms including Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, Twitter (X), and YouTube. Plans are underway to register the journal and other Association outputs on academic indexing platforms such as Google Scholar and Research Gate. Furthermore, the committee aims to extend its outreach to universities and teacher training colleges across Eswatini to boost membership and encourage scholarly collaboration.

It is exciting to register that the association was able to recognize some of the founding and long serving members of the association during the inaugural conference in 2023. These members have contributed outstanding services to both the association and the education sector, global and national agenda in the country and beyond. These members were Dr Bongile Putsoa a founding member and first chairperson, Dr Edmund Mazibuko a long serving chairperson, Prof Musa Dube who served as chairperson and in various subcommittees, and Ms Makhosazana Madondo for the longest serving Secretary of the association. These are some of the specific contributions to SERA the awardees made within the association. Capacity-building efforts have also been initiated through workshops, for instance, one was on “*Online data collection methods*”.

Finally, the formalization of a strategic partnership with ESHEC signifies a pivotal development in SERA’s institutional trajectory. This collaboration, anchored in co-hosting responsibilities and mutual capacity sharing, is anticipated to enhance the sustainability and influence of the Association’s future activities. The association was preparing yet another locally organized international dyad conference to be hosted in collaboration with the Distance Education of Southern Africa [SERA- DEASA Conference]. In the Annual General Meet held in 2023, members resolved to amend the constitution of the association to align itself with the latest developments and growth such as the move towards the establishment of regional research units, institutional research units and standing committees. For instance, the names of the office bearers were changed to President, Vice President, Secretary General, Treasurer

General, among other things. The committee members of the constitution review were Mr Mzenzi Sibusiso Masuku (chair), Dr Rachael Mafubate and Mr Sabelo Dlamini.

Taken together, these initiatives demonstrate a deliberate and structured approach to organizational revitalization. The SERA case illustrates how national research associations in Sub-Saharan African countries can reclaim autonomy, build local relevance, and contribute meaningfully to scholarly discourse, while remaining connected to broader regional and global networks.

Challenges faced by the Association

The Eswatini Educational Research Association (formerly SERA) has encountered several challenges over the years that have hindered its growth and operational efficiency. While these challenges are surmountable, they continue to impede the full realization of the association's potential. A long-standing and pressing challenge has been the absence of a permanent office space. Initially, the association was housed in the Faculty of Education at the Kwaluseni Campus of the University of Eswatini. During this period, operations were stable, and membership steadily increased. The association, along with a sister body from the Social Science Research Unit in the Faculty of Social Sciences, benefited from institutional support, including access to office space and partial logistical assistance. However, institutional expansion at the university created pressure on resources, leading to the relocation and proposal to merge these associations. The then Vice Chancellor, Professor Lydia Makhubu resolved that SERA should merge with the Social Sciences Research Unit (SSRU) from the Faculty of Social Sciences as they were both affiliated to the University of Eswatini. As a result, SERA's office belongings were moved first to University library. However, some of the belongings that could not be moved to the Library were temporarily kept in the Institution of Distance Education (IDE) under the auspice of the Dr Walter Sukati – the then Director of the Centre. Then, the belongings were moved to the National Curriculum Centre (NCC) with courtesy of the then Director of the Centre, Ms Makhosazane Madondo in the early 2000s. In 2019, NCC required the space for its growing administrative needs. The association's materials were temporarily stored at the Institute of Distance Education in Dr. Mzomba Dlodlu's office, the then Coordinator of Education and later transferred to Dr. Sipho Shongwe, who was the SERA administrator and Director at the Centre of Excellence for Learning and Teaching (CELT). These repeated relocations have resulted in the loss of documents and materials, impeding institutional memory and creating challenges in documenting the historical development of the association. There is an urgent need for a dedicated and secure office to ensure continuity, improve administrative operations, and preserve valuable archival records.

The change in the country's name from Swaziland to Eswatini has necessitated a corresponding rebranding of the association—from Swaziland Educational Research Association (SERA) to Eswatini Educational Research Association (EERA). However, this transition has not been without complications. The acronym EERA was already adopted by the Eswatini Energy Regulatory Authority, creating a potential conflict and identity confusion. To address this, a new acronym—ESWERRA—has been proposed. While this option appears more distinctive and appropriate, the renaming process has been delayed by outstanding administrative issues, particularly around association registration and potential renewal fees. Resolving this challenge is essential for aligning the association's identity with national changes and establishing a unique brand that resonates with stakeholders.

Another persistent issue was the low membership and payment of annual subscriptions. This has significantly affected the association's financial health and limited its capacity to carry out

planned activities. A notable challenge had also been the inconsistent attendance at meetings and events, which undermines the sense of community and shared purpose within the association. To address this, the then executive committee implemented a turnaround strategy that introduced professional development workshops as both a value-added service and a recruitment tool. These workshops, designed to appeal to a wide audience, included a flagship series titled “Research Baptism.” The initiative drew nearly 100 participants and covered key academic writing topics such as: *The Introductory Chapter of a Thesis/Dissertation* presented by Dr. Ishmael Dhenba (Southern Africa Nazarene University), *Theoretical Framework and Literature Review* by Dr. Mlungisi Dlamini (William Pitcher Teacher Training College), and *Research Methodology as Key Player in Research* by Dr. Alfred Tsikati (University of Eswatini). These sessions were successful in attracting both members and non-members, offering a practical entry point into research while simultaneously encouraging participants to subscribe to the association. Despite such efforts, subscription levels remain low. Sustained member engagement and consistent subscription payments are critical for supporting the association’s core functions and expanding its reach.

EERA has also struggled with limited engagement from some members, particularly in relation to leadership roles. Some individuals within the academic community perceived leadership positions not as opportunities for collaborative service but as competitive or intrusive. This at times, created an unwelcoming environment for progressive leadership and hindered effective succession planning. Moreover, there was a recurring reluctance among members to personally fund their participation in association activities, reflecting a broader issue of weak commitment and ownership. While the association had capable individuals within its ranks, a lack of willingness to assume leadership responsibilities continues to be a barrier to continuity and innovation.

Underlying many of the association’s challenges, was a shortage of financial resources. Low subscription rates, modest fundraising efforts, and limited institutional support constrained the association’s ability to host events, maintain infrastructure, and support research initiatives. Although the association saw improvements in workshop attendance and visibility, consistent financial contributions from members remain vital to sustaining momentum and achieving long-term goals.

Success Stories and Achievements of the Association

The Swaziland Educational Research Association (SERA), now known as the Eswatini Educational Research Association (EERA), has a legacy of impactful initiatives and notable milestones that have significantly shaped the educational research landscape in Eswatini and beyond. Over the years, the Association demonstrated remarkable resilience and innovation, translating its objectives into meaningful action and influence. From its early days, SERA members played a role in the formation of the BOLESWA regional network, which later evolved into BOLESWANA and is now known as SAERN. Through this regional affiliation, the Association gained access to broader research platforms and collaborative opportunities, strengthening the visibility and voice of Eswatini in Southern African Educational Research Dialogues. Its consistent participation and hosting of biennial symposia provided vital spaces for scholarly exchange and cross-border academic cooperation.

In the realm of scholarly publishing, SERA made substantial contributions. It was actively involved in the publication of the BOLESWA Educational Research Journal (BERJ) from 1988 until 2002, maintaining international standards of academic rigour. Additionally, SERA contributed to symposium proceedings and important regional publications such as the

Educational Research Abstracts of Eastern and Southern African Countries and Empirical Research in Basic Education in Southern Africa, reflecting the depth and scope of research within the region. SERA has also prioritized the development of research capacity and mentorship. Through workshops and mentorship programmes, the Association has built a vibrant research culture among educators in Eswatini. It trained numerous novice researchers, notably through participation in the ENERSA/DSE training initiatives. Most recently, initiatives such as the "Research Baptism" workshop series have attracted substantial participation and helped re-energize interest in educational research, offering practical guidance on thesis writing, literature reviews, and research methodologies.

A major achievement in recent history was the successful hosting of the first-ever SERA International Conference in December 2023, in partnership with the Eswatini Higher Education Council (ESHEC). This event, themed "*Transforming Education for the Emerging Contexts*," attracted regional scholars and key stakeholders and secured sponsorship from several organisations. The conference not only marked SERA's renewed autonomy and ambition but also reinforced its standing as a leader in academic discourse. Further cementing its academic legacy, the Association established the Eswatini Educational Research Journal (ESWERJ), a peer-reviewed platform for disseminating high-quality research addressing national educational concerns. Led by an editorial team of seasoned scholars, the journal serves both novice and experienced researchers and features selected peer-reviewed papers from the 2023 conference. This development reflects SERA's on-going commitment to knowledge generation and scholarly engagement. The Association also embraced modern communication strategies by establishing a strong digital presence. A professional website and active social media platforms now support the dissemination of information and engagement with members, while plans to index its publications on platforms like Google Scholar and Research Gate are underway.

In recognition of service and leadership, the Association honoured some key figures during its 2023 conference. These included Dr. Bongile Putsoa (founding Chairperson), Dr. Edmund Mazibuko (long-serving Chairperson), Prof. Musa Dube (outstanding service), and Ms. Makhosazana Madondo (longest-serving Secretary). This gesture highlighted the Association's appreciation for those who have shaped its vision and strengthened its institutional identity. Institutionally, SERA has built important partnerships with national bodies such as the Ministry of Education and Training and ESHEC, while also benefiting from collaborations with international organizations like ERNESA and IDRC. These alliances supported training, funding, and the continued relevance of SERA's mission. These achievements collectively underscored the Association's success in promoting educational research, nurturing academic communities, and influencing both national and regional educational development. The story of SERA is one of purposeful evolution and sustained impact.

Future Projections of the Association

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, several initiatives were proposed to strengthen the Swaziland Education Research Association (SERA) and ensure its sustainability and impact. Firstly, there is a clear need to establish regional or institutional research associations that align with SERA's goals. These would not only extend the association's reach but also enhance the visibility and membership of the Eswatini Education Research Association (EERA) nationally and regionally. Additionally, the review of the constitution of the Association should be completed to reflect its growth and new structural needs—this includes recognizing regional bodies, establishing standing committees, and revising the titles of office bearers to more standardized ones such as President, Vice President, Secretary General, and Treasurer General. Furthermore, the constitution should incorporate provisions for visibility

strategies, journal development, and strategic collaborations, ensuring that these elements are formally supported. Moving forward, the association must invest significantly in capacity-building by training members to contribute to their own professional development. A stronger focus on fundraising is essential to secure resources for sustained activities, alongside a push to actively include postgraduate students, with the support and sponsorship of existing members. To instil structure and accountability, a calendar of executive meetings and member activities should be developed and institutionalized. Exploring the option of investing a portion of SERA funds in high-yield opportunities can also help stabilize finances over the long term.

Central to the sustainability of SERA is the dual focus on capacity building and financial stability. Regular recruitment of new members and encouragement of consistent subscriptions must be driven by engaging and meaningful association activities. For future development, it is recommended that SERA establishes a permanent physical office or headquarters and positions itself as a professional body offering paid services to the public, such as training, research consultancy, and publishing. The association should define short-term, medium-term, and long-term goals to guide its strategic planning. Additionally, rigorous fundraising campaigns and member recruitment efforts targeting various sectors—including schools, tertiary institutions, and the Ministry of Education—should be prioritized. Importantly, newly recruited members must be given responsibilities to foster commitment and long-term engagement, while students currently pursuing studies should be supported, reinforcing the association's role as a nurturing and empowering academic community.

Recommendations of the Study

The following recommendations were made emanating from the study.

1. Strengthen Organizational Structure and Governance: The association should finalize the establishment of regional or institutional research associations to extend its reach, improve visibility, and grow its membership. This effort must be supported by amending the SERA constitution to accommodate new developments—such as recognizing regional bodies and standing committees, renaming office bearers to standard titles, and formally integrating strategies for visibility, journal development, and collaborative initiatives. Furthermore, there is a need to consider opening top leadership positions, such as chairperson or vice-chair, to individuals from institutions beyond the University of Eswatini which will enhance the ownership of the association.

2. Prioritize Capacity Building and Professional Development: SERA should continue to invest in structured capacity-building programmes that equip members with essential research and leadership skills. Members should be trained and encouraged to take ownership of their own professional development to build a self-sustaining and empowered academic community.

3. Expand Membership and Student Engagement: Targeted recruitment efforts are needed to attract new members, particularly from schools, tertiary institutions, and the Ministry of Education. Postgraduate students should be actively involved in SERA activities, with current members sponsoring their participation. Supporting students currently pursuing their studies will help integrate them into the research community and secure future leadership for the association.

4. Ensure Financial Sustainability: SERA must engage in regular fundraising efforts and explore opportunities to invest a portion of its funds in high-yield financial instruments to build long-term sustainability. Additionally, consistent collection of membership subscriptions and encouraging timely payments should be emphasized to support core operations.

5. Institutionalize Operations and Strategic Planning: The association should establish a consistent calendar of executive meetings and member activities to foster engagement and continuity. Defining clear short-term, medium-term, and long-term goals is essential for focused growth and long-lasting impact.

6. Establish a Permanent Presence and Service-Oriented Model: To enhance credibility and operational efficiency, SERA should secure a permanent office location. Moreover, it should evolve into a professional body that offers paid services such as training, consultancy, and research support to the public, thereby increasing relevance and generating revenue.

7. Institutional Support and Strategic Role: The Ministry of Education and Training should allocate space for the association within its management structures, recognizing its unique role in educational research across all sectors. As the only body dedicated to this mandate in Eswatini, the association can support national studies, validate research findings, and serve on steering committees. Institutional backing would enhance its capacity and promote evidence-based policy-making in education.

8. Develop a national education research agenda – The association needs develop a national educational research agenda essential for guiding evidence-based policies and practices by aligning research efforts with national education priorities, promoting equity, and driving continuous improvement across the education system

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interests regarding the publication of the paper or otherwise.

Authors' Contributions

Tsikati Alfred: The author confirms sole responsibility for the following: study conception and design, data generation, analysis and interpretation of findings, and manuscript preparation (100%)

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