A social constructivist view of research and innovation in transforming higher education in Eswatini

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The purpose of this study was to explore the influence of research and innovation on higher education in Eswatini, with a focus on the perspectives and experiences of key stakeholders. We used a qualitative approach with narrative inquiry as the research design to analyse the social constructions of research and innovation in three higher education institutions. A purposive sample of 48 individuals was selected, consisting of 18 students, 12 administrators, and 18 lecturers. Data were collected through focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews, which produced rich, contextual narratives. The findings indicate that stakeholders see research and innovation as critical to institutional credibility, global relevance, and societal impact, but systemic challenges such as limited financing, institutional support, and policy gaps impede progress. The social constructivist framework highlighted how perceptions are influenced by social interactions, institutional norms, and external discourses. Based on these findings, recommendations include adopting clear policies to integrate research and innovation into institutional culture, increasing the allocation of funds, expanding industry collaborations, and promoting research-focused courses and extracurricular activities for students. Enhancing support and awareness could change perceptions, boosting research participation and innovation in Eswatini's higher education. Our study highlights how perceptions influence research practices and institutional growth.

Introduction

Research and innovation have emerged as critical drivers of higher education development globally, with substantial implications for educational quality, relevance, institutional reputation, and national development (Teferra, 2025; Shenkoya, 2025). Higher education institutions in Eswatini seek to enhance their contribution to national development while also improving their competitiveness within an increasingly interconnected global higher education landscape. Understanding the perspectives and experiences of key stakeholders, including lecturers, administrators, and students, is therefore critical for developing policies and practices that promote meaningful research engagement and innovation. However, the role of research and innovation in higher education cannot be understood solely through models developed in affluent and research-intensive higher education systems. Much of the international discourse privileges research as the production of new knowledge for specialist academic and professional communities, publication in high-impact journals, international visibility, and competitive research rankings. While these dimensions are important, their applicability to small and resource-constrained higher education systems such as Eswatini requires careful consideration. In such contexts, research and innovation may need to be understood more broadly in terms of the production, adaptation, dissemination, and application of knowledge to address locally and regionally relevant educational, social, economic, and developmental challenges. This perspective is particularly important for junior and emerging researchers who may

experience constraints related to research funding, mentorship, publication opportunities, institutional support, access to international research networks, and the pressures associated with publication-orientated research cultures (Indrayadi, 2024; Phuong, 2025; Dio et al., 2025).

Accordingly, our study approaches research and innovation not simply as activities measured through publications, patents, rankings, or international recognition, but as socially situated practices whose value and meaning are constructed within particular institutional and sociocultural contexts. This is especially relevant to Eswatini, where the country's relatively small size and resource constraints of the higher education sector may shape how stakeholders understand research priorities, innovation, institutional support, and the practical value of knowledge. A locally responsive research culture may therefore place considerable value on applying existing knowledge, sharing research findings with communities, strengthening teaching and learning, informing institutional and national policy, and developing innovations that respond to local and regional needs, alongside the generation of new scholarly knowledge. Building on prior work, this study distinguishes itself by employing a social constructionist lens to explore how perceptions of research and innovation are socially constructed within Eswatini's higher education system. Unlike existing literature that predominantly emphasises quantitative data, policy frameworks, institutional performance indicators, or broader regional analyses, this research offers a nuanced qualitative exploration of stakeholder narratives. It captures how social interactions, institutional norms, cultural discourses, resource conditions, and societal expectations shape attitudes toward research and innovation at the institutional level (Galleli & Amaral, 2025).

This approach provides greater insight into the social processes and collective meanings that influence research culture, addressing a significant gap in understanding how perceptions of research and innovation are actively created, negotiated, and maintained within a specific sociocultural and resource-constrained context. It also provides an opportunity to question whether dominant international conceptions of research excellence adequately reflect the priorities and realities of smaller higher education systems. By highlighting these social constructions, our study identifies pathways for fostering a positive and locally relevant research culture in Eswatini. Such a culture values new knowledge alongside the dissemination, adaptation, and application of existing knowledge for institutional, community, and national development, while remaining aligned with global standards.

Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in social constructionist theory, which posits that knowledge, meanings, identities, and social realities are produced and negotiated through social interaction, language, shared practices, and collective understandings (Berger & Luckmann, 2023). Research and innovation are socially situated practices shaped by institutional, cultural, economic, and societal contexts. Organisational meanings influence institutional priorities and resource allocation (Damaschin, 2023), while perceptions of

research value are socially negotiated among higher education stakeholders (Lehtonen & Yang, 2025). Teferra (2025) and Shenkoya (2025) emphasised the importance of interpreting research and innovation within the socio-economic and institutional realities of African higher education, suggesting that models of research excellence developed in affluent, research-intensive systems should not be applied uncritically to small and relatively resource-constrained contexts such as Eswatini. Although international publications, new knowledge production, research income, rankings, and global visibility are important, research in Eswatini may also be valued for improving teaching and learning, informing policy, addressing community challenges, and contributing to national development.

Indrayadi (2024) and Phuong (2025) highlighted challenges and inequalities in international publication systems, including limited resources, mentorship, networks, and recognition of knowledge from peripheral contexts. Espinosa (2025) emphasised knowledge accessibility, ownership, and dissemination, while Dio et al. (2025) showed how research priorities and ranking metrics shape perceptions of valuable research. These perspectives are particularly relevant to Eswatini, where researchers and institutions may face limited funding, infrastructure, research networks, and institutional capacity. The framework therefore views research excellence as encompassing new knowledge production, dissemination, adaptation, and application for local and national benefit, while recognising the challenges faced by junior and emerging researchers (Indrayadi, 2024; Phuong, 2025). A positive social construction of research occurs when stakeholders collectively recognise research and innovation as integral to teaching, institutional development, community engagement, policy, and national transformation. This is reflected in institutional policies, leadership practices, resource allocation, promotion criteria, and everyday interactions.

The framework views research and innovation as emerging from individual experiences, institutional practices, social meanings, cultural expectations, policy discourses, and global academic structures, with stakeholders actively interpreting, negotiating, accepting, or challenging dominant understandings of valuable research and innovation. This theoretical position enables our study to examine how stakeholders in Eswatini construct the meaning, value, challenges, and possibilities of research and innovation beyond measuring productivity. It supports a contextually responsive understanding of research excellence that connects global standards with local realities, knowledge application, community needs, institutional development, and national transformation.

Method

Research approach

This study used a qualitative research approach to explore the subjective experiences, attitudes, and meanings that participants attributed to research and innovation in their higher education settings (Braun & Clarke, 2025). Qualitative research is well-suited to exploring complex social phenomena in which context, personal narratives, and individual

characteristics all play an important role in influencing perceptions (Lim, 2025). This method allowed the researchers to collect rich, detailed data that provided valuable insights into how stakeholders perceived and interpreted research activity, institutional support, and innovation practices.

Research design

We employed a narrative inquiry design to explore how lecturers, administrators, and students understand and experience research and innovation within Eswatini's higher education system (Braun & Clarke, 2025; Lim, 2025). Narrative inquiry was appropriate because it focuses on how individuals make sense of their social worlds, identities, and professional experiences through their stories (Clandinin, 2022). It enabled participants to describe research and innovation in their own words while revealing how institutional and contextual factors shape their understandings. The study was informed by a social constructionist perspective, which views meanings and realities as constructed through social interaction, language, shared practices, and institutional relationships (Berger & Luckmann, 2023). It therefore examined how stakeholders in Eswatini construct the meaning and value of research and innovation rather than assuming universal definitions of research excellence.

Dominant international conceptions of research often emphasise new knowledge production, high-impact publications, rankings, and global visibility. However, smaller and resource-constrained systems may also value knowledge dissemination, application, community engagement, teaching and learning, policy development, and national transformation (Teferra, 2025; Shenkoya, 2025). The design also recognised inequalities experienced by junior and emerging researchers regarding funding, mentorship, research networks, publication opportunities, and institutional support (Indrayadi, 2024; Phuong, 2025), alongside issues of knowledge ownership, accessibility, dissemination, application, research priorities, and ranking metrics (Espinosa, 2025; Dio et al., 2025). These perspectives ensured that research and innovation were examined within Eswatini's specific institutional and socio-economic context rather than through assumptions derived solely from affluent and research-intensive higher education systems.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select 48 participants comprising academic staff, university administrators, and students from three higher education sites in Eswatini, ensuring participants had relevant experience and providing variation in academic disciplines, professional positions, and institutional roles (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025).

Data generation methods

Data were collected using two primary qualitative methods. Focus group discussions were used to collect data through group interactions, with members encouraged to share and respond to each other's perspectives on research and innovation. These discussions revealed collective perceptions, social norms, and shared sentiments, which frequently resulted in dominant themes and group consensus (Geampana & Perrotta, 2025). Individual interviews enhanced this process by offering a private space in which

participants could openly share personal experiences, observations, and impressions that might be sensitive or difficult to express in a group context (Geampana & Perrotta, 2025).

Data analysis

Data analysis employed an integrated thematic and narrative analysis approach to develop a deeper understanding of participants' perceptions and experiences of research and innovation. Following Braun and Clarke's (2023) guidelines, interview and focus group transcripts were repeatedly read, coded, and categorised to identify patterns relating to research engagement, institutional support, innovation, barriers, and perceptions of research value. Related codes were grouped into broader themes reflecting commonalities and differences across stakeholder groups. Narrative analysis was used alongside thematic analysis to examine participants' personal accounts and how they constructed meaning, identity, and social reality through their stories (Clandinin, 2022; Braun et al., 2025). Particular attention was given to participants' experiences of institutional support, resource constraints, research expectations, and opportunities for innovation. Thematic analysis identified recurring patterns across participants, while narrative analysis preserved the contextual and experiential dimensions of individual accounts. This integration was consistent with the social constructionist framework, which views meanings surrounding research and innovation as socially produced and negotiated through interaction and discourse (Berger & Luckmann, 2023). The findings were interpreted in relation to the study objectives and theoretical framework, with attention to both dominant understandings of research excellence and locally relevant perspectives concerning knowledge application, community engagement, teaching and learning, and national development.

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the study. Prior to data collection, ethical approval was sought and granted by the relevant institutional authorities. Due to the nature of the study and the participant profile, the researchers conducted data collection directly, as the research did not involve minors or life-threatening issues, thus minimising ethical risks. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants, clearly explaining the purpose of the study, procedures, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality was maintained through anonymisation of data, secure storage of recordings and transcripts, and restricted access to the data. The researchers prioritised ethical standards to ensure the dignity and rights of participants were protected throughout the research process (Subedi, 2025).

Findings and discussions

The primary findings drawn from the data gathered are presented in this section, along with perspectives from various stakeholders in Eswatini's higher education system. Three groups of participants are identified: administrators (represented by ADM 1-12), students (represented by SP 1-18), and lecturers (represented by LP 1-18). Their responses have

been analysed to find recurring themes and divergent perspectives on the contribution of innovation and research to institutional growth.

Three major themes that capture the administrators and lecturers' perceptions and overall understanding of how research and innovation impact higher education institutions were identified from the data collected. The following discussion elaborates on each theme, integrating participant insights with relevant theoretical frameworks to deepen the understanding of their implications for higher education in Eswatini.

Theme 1: The strategic role of research and innovation in institutional development

This theme captures perceptions of how research and innovation help higher education institutions thrive, gain credibility, and become more globally relevant. It emphasises that research provides knowledge and solutions, while innovation transforms findings into practical implementations that promote institutional advancement and competitiveness.

LP1 (Site A) commented

> Research can help by generating knowledge on issues that buffer the development of the institution and brings about solutions while innovation introduces new things that can result to changes being implemented for its development.

The response from LP1 emphasises the dual role of research and innovation in shaping institutional development through knowledge creation and practical change (AlQhtani, 2025). From a social constructionist perspective, this perception is socially constructed through shared institutional discourses that value research as a tool for problem-solving and progress. The participant's view reflects an understanding that the institution's identity and development are shaped collectively by its capacity to generate and apply knowledge, aligning with the idea that knowledge is constructed through social interactions and institutional norms (Berger & Luckmann, 2023). The emphasis on solutions and change indicates that the social reality of the institution is seen as mutable through research and innovation, reinforcing collective beliefs about their importance.

LP18 (Site C) said

> Research and innovation are fundamental to the growth and sustainability of our institution. They not only generate new knowledge but also strengthen our capacity to address real-life challenges. Through research, the institution builds credibility, contributes to national and global development agendas, and enhances its academic reputation.

This statement by LP18 highlights the socially constructed nature of institutional credibility and reputation through research and innovation, emphasising their role in aligning the institution with broader societal and global discourses. The participant perceives research as a means of constructing the institution's identity as credible and relevant, which is reinforced through its contributions to development agendas—an understanding shaped by collective narratives within the academic community and societal expectations (Nkambule et al, 2025). The social constructionist framework suggests that

these perceptions are maintained and reproduced through language, policies, and shared practices that legitimise research as central to institutional success (Vygotsky, 1999). The reference to global agendas also indicates the influence of international discourses shaping local perceptions.

LP10 (Site B) averred

> Innovation ensures that findings are translated into practical solutions, or policies that can directly impact communities. Ultimately, research and innovation drive continuous improvement in teaching, and institutional competitiveness.

According to LP10, innovation is socially constructed as a bridge between theoretical knowledge and societal impact, reinforcing the collective understanding that research must lead to tangible benefits (Chauke, 2025). This perspective aligns with the social constructionist view that meanings are shaped through social processes—here, the process of translating research into practice. The focus on community impact and competitiveness reflects shared values within the academic and societal context, constructing the institution's identity as responsive and socially engaged (Ul Hassan et al., 2025). The emphasis on continuous improvement underscores the dynamic, socially negotiated nature of institutional development driven by research and innovation.

ADM9 (Site 3) stated

> Research is the second pillar after lecturing and teaching. And there is no institution that can do well without research because research uncovers new knowledge that is needed for the institution to progress and find its way on the world map. When academics go into research, definitely they promote the university.

This response from ADM9 positions research as a core component of the institution's identity and global positioning, constructed through shared institutional narratives that elevate research as essential for progress and recognition. The view reflects socially constructed hierarchies within academia, where research is valued alongside teaching, forming a collective understanding of what contributes to institutional prestige (Kandiko Howson & Kingsbury, 2025). The emphasis on promoting the university further illustrates how social representations of success and progress are constructed collectively through language, policies, and academic culture, positioning research as a vital means of social mobility and reputation building.

Each participant response reflects a socially constructed understanding of the role of research and innovation in higher education, shaped by shared discourses, institutional norms, and societal expectations.

Theme 2: Challenges and barriers to promoting research and innovation

This theme highlights the common obstacles faced by institutions, including limited funding, resources, institutional support, mentorship, and workload constraints. It reflects the systemic and contextual difficulties impeding active engagement in research activities.

Table 1: Exploring the influence of research and innovation in higher education in Eswatini

Aspect	Key insights	Stakeholder perspectives	Social constructionist view
Role and impact	Research and innovation are vital for institutional credibility, global relevance, and societal impact.	Lecturers see research as core to growth; administrators emphasise institutional reputation.	Perceptions are socially constructed through shared discourses that value research for progress and recognition.
Perception of identity	Research builds institutional identity as credible and globally connected.	Participants associate research with national and international development.	Collective narratives reinforce research as central to institutional identity, shaped by societal expectations.
Transformation and practicality	Innovation translates findings into practical solutions impacting communities.	Stakeholders view innovation as a bridge between theory and societal benefit.	The meanings of innovation are socially negotiated, emphasising their societal relevance.

LP17 (Site C) shared that

> There is no funding. If you want to attend a research conference, the university puts no funding because the people in leadership do not understand the importance of research.

The response from LP17 highlights the systemic challenge of limited financial resources, compounded by a perceived lack of understanding among institutional leadership regarding the value of research. From a social constructionist perspective, the perceptions and meanings ascribed to research by institutional leaders can shape organisational priorities and influence resource allocation (Damaschin, 2023). The perceived undervaluation of research reflects a constructed understanding of what is considered essential to institutional success, thereby contributing to the marginalisation of research activities (Lehtonen & Yang, 2025). In this context, institutional meanings and beliefs about research influence tangible support mechanisms, potentially creating a cycle in which limited investment reinforces the perception that research is a lower institutional priority.

LP9 (Site B) observed that

> We have challenges of inadequate resources, especially finances to support research activities and innovation. As a government institution, we have limited financing. The fees that students pay are very low, and they have been low for a very long time, so focus is on teaching and learning and less on research.

The response from LP9 highlights how persistent financial constraints and low student fees influence institutional priorities and limit investment in research and innovation. From a social constructionist perspective, institutional priorities are shaped by shared understandings of what is considered essential, valuable, and achievable within a particular context (Berger & Luckmann, 2023). Damaschin (2023) demonstrated that organisational meanings influence strategic priorities and resource allocation, while Lehtonen and Yang

(2025) showed that perceptions of research value are socially negotiated among higher education stakeholders. In the context of Eswatini, Teferra (2025) and Shenkoya (2025) emphasised the importance of understanding research capacity within broader socio-economic and institutional realities.

ADM5 (Site B) stated that

> This is a government run institution, and we do not do as we wish. College fees are controlled by the government and are low to meet the ever-increasing student and institution demands. We have limited resources to channel towards research and innovation.

The response given by ADM5 reflects the structural and contextual barriers rooted in governmental policies and economic constraints. The social constructionist framework emphasises how institutional realities are shaped by shared meanings and societal discourses—here, the discourse on government control and resource limitations constrains institutional autonomy (Berger & Luckmann, 2023). The perception that research is deprioritised due to external controls illustrates how societal structures and policies construct a reality where resource allocation for research is limited. The institution's inability to act independently in promoting research is a socially constructed outcome of broader societal and political discourses on resource management and educational priorities.

ADM1 (Site A) commented that:

> There is also a lack of support. I recall an instance when I had to attend a local conference; despite the institution financing my participation, I was undermined by the authorities. They had to assign someone with higher qualifications to accompany me during my presentation, even though this individual was not involved in any way with the research.

ADM1's response reveals challenges related to institutional support, recognition, and power dynamics. From a social constructionist perspective, the meanings attached to authority, expertise, and support influence institutional culture and behaviours (Berger & Luckmann, 2023). The act of undermining the participant's research participation reflects a constructed reality where authority figures define what is valued, often based on social hierarchies and perceptions of competence. The assignment of someone with higher qualifications as a form of symbolic capital indicates how social constructs around expertise and legitimacy influence behaviour within institutions. This dynamic discourages innovation and active engagement in research, reinforcing existing power structures.

Theme 3: Policies, strategies, and their impact on enhancing research and innovation

This theme focuses on the existing or emerging policies and strategies aimed at fostering a research culture. It also considers the perceived effectiveness and gaps in these policies, along with how research and innovation influence teaching quality and student outcomes.

Table 2: Barriers and challenges to promoting research and innovation in Eswatini higher education

Challenge/ barrier	Detailed description	Participants/ source	Theoretical insights
Lack of funding	Institutions lack financial resources to support research activities, attend conferences, or fund innovation projects. Leadership's limited understanding of research's importance further exacerbates funding shortages	LP17 (Site C)	Reflects systemic under-valuation of research; social constructionist perspective suggests leadership's perceptions shape resource allocation, marginalising research efforts (Damaschin, 2023).
Inadequate resources	Limited infrastructure, laboratory facilities, and financial means hinder research development. The low and stagnant student fees restrict the institution's capacity to generate additional research funding.	LP9 (Site B)	Socio-economic constructs around education funding influence institutional priorities; social narratives focus on teaching rather than research (Demuth & Gergen, 2025).
Lack of institutional support and recognition	Researchers experience a lack of support and recognition, including bureaucratic hurdles and hierarchical undermining. An example includes an individual being undermined despite institutional funding for conference participation.	ADM1 (Site A	Power dynamics and social hierarchies influence institutional culture; social constructs around authority and expertise impact support for research (Berger & Luckmann, 2023).
Workload and capacity constraints	Heavy teaching loads and administrative duties limit faculty members' time and energy for research activities, reducing research output and engagement.	Implied across responses	Institutional focus on immediate teaching needs creates a social construction that research is secondary to teaching obligations
Structural and policy barriers	Government policies control fees and funding, limiting institutional autonomy and prioritisation of research. Resources are allocated based on political and societal discourses that favour teaching over research	ADM5 (Site B)	Institutional realities are shaped by societal discourses; policies reflect broader societal discourses about resource management and role of higher education (Berger & Luckmann, 2023).

ADM4 (Site A) observed that:

> No strategies nor policies currently in place to encourage research and innovation among faculty and staff.

The response from ADM4 reveals that the institutional environment at Site A lacks formal mechanisms—such as policies, strategies, or frameworks—to foster a culture of research and innovation among faculty and staff. From a social constructionist perspective, this absence indicates that the shared social understanding of research's value within this institution has not yet been fully developed or institutionalised. The social reality here is still in formation, possibly characterised by a dominant narrative that prioritises teaching or administrative duties over research activities (Nkambule et al.,

2025). This lack of policy suggests that research and innovation are not yet socially constructed as core institutional values, which influences faculty perceptions, motivation, and behaviours related to scholarly activities. Furthermore, this situation may perpetuate a cycle where the absence of formal recognition or support discourages faculty from engaging in research, thereby reinforcing the social reality of research being peripheral rather than central (Menard, 2025). The construction of institutional priorities, therefore, remains centred around other domains, perhaps due to historical, cultural, or resource-related factors that are shared beliefs shaping the collective understanding of what constitutes institutional success.

ADM9 (Site C) highlighted that:

> I have not heard of any strategies or policies the institution has in place to encourage research and innovation. But I know of a colleague who makes sure that they collaborate and publish with the students that they supervise.

ADM9 emphasises the absence of formal policies supporting research but notes active informal practices—such as collaboration and publishing with students—that foster research activities. From a social constructionist framework, these informal practices serve as micro-level social constructs that contribute to building a research culture within the institution. These shared norms and routines help construct a social reality where research is valued, even without institutional mandates. Such practices can gradually influence perceptions about the importance of research, leading to the social construction of a research-orientated identity among faculty and students. The participant's awareness of these informal collaborations suggests that social interactions among faculty and students are critical sites where shared meanings around scholarly work are negotiated and reinforced. These interactions serve as agents of socialisation, shaping the collective understanding and gradually constructing an institutional culture that may evolve to include formal policies in the future.

ADM6 (Site B) explained that:

> We are starting to put in a strategic policy because of ESHEC (body that ensures that universities and colleges meet national standards for quality) demands that policy so that we start offering degrees. Currently there is no policy that encourages research and innovation among faculty and staff.

The response from ADM6 reflects an evolving social reality, where external standards, the Eswatini Higher Education Council (ESHEC), are catalysing institutional change. The institution's move toward developing a strategic policy signifies an active process of social construction, where external discourses and demands are being integrated into internal norms and practices. This process involves negotiation among stakeholders, which leads to the construction of a new institutional identity that recognises research and innovation as essential components. The mention of external standards also highlights the role of social influences—such as accreditation bodies—in shaping institutional realities (Kayyali, 2024). The institution is in a transitional phase where shared understandings are being negotiated and constructed through policy development, which will influence faculty perceptions, behaviours, and the overall research culture. This external-internal dynamic

demonstrates how social realities are constructed through interactions between external expectations and internal institutional responses.

LP3 (Site A) commented that:

> Research and innovation significantly enhance education quality by ensuring that teaching is grounded in the latest knowledge and practices. You find that students involved in research gain practical experience, which boosts their employability, and readiness for postgraduate studies.

Participant LP3 articulates a shared social understanding that research and innovation are integral to educational excellence and student outcomes. The emphasis on practical experience, employability, and quality reflects a collective belief system that constructs research as central to the identity and purpose of higher education. Such shared narratives influence institutional priorities, resource allocation, and individual motivations, thus actively shaping the social reality of what constitutes quality education. From a social constructionist perspective, these beliefs are reinforced through discourse, institutional policies, and everyday practices, creating a cultural environment where research is valued and seen as essential for societal and economic development. This shared understanding influences both the social identity of the institution and individual faculty members' perceptions of their roles.

ADM10 (Site C) remarked that:

> Since research involves generation of new knowledge, this makes lecturers to be competent in delivering lectures and improves the content they offer to students. It makes the content being delivered relevant.

ADM10's response underscores a social construction of professional identity where research is integral to teaching effectiveness (Geletu & Adige, 2023). The shared belief that research improves lecturer competence and relevance constructs an institutional reality where scholarly activity is not optional but central to effective teaching. This understanding influences how faculty perceive their roles, responsibilities, and professional development, actively constructing a culture that values research as part of academic excellence. From a social constructionist perspective, such shared beliefs are reinforced through interactions, peer recognition, and institutional expectations, which collectively shape the social reality of what it means to be an effective lecturer. Over time, these shared understandings can influence policy, resource distribution, and individual motivation to engage in research.

The presence or absence of formal policies, as well as informal practices, all contribute to shaping the institutional reality regarding research and innovation. External standards and discourses play a crucial role in influencing internal constructions, while shared meanings around quality, competence, and relevance reinforce the cultural fabric of higher education institutions in Eswatini.

Building on the insights from administrators and lecturers, it is equally important to consider students' perspectives, as their awareness, engagement, and perceptions of research and innovation significantly influence the overall research culture within higher

education institutions. The following themes derived from students' experiences shed light on their level of involvement, understanding, and the potential opportunities for fostering a more inclusive and active research environment.

Themes that emanated from students

Theme 1: Awareness and engagement in research and innovation activities

SP6 (Focus group A) averred that:

> We only appear to learn about research as part of our final research project. My knowledge is restricted to what is required for our graduation requirements because we haven't participated in any research projects or innovation contests.

SP6 highlights a limited awareness and engagement with research and innovation activities, primarily viewing research as a requirement for graduation rather than an integral part of their academic journey. This suggests that the curriculum may emphasise research as a procedural task rather than fostering active participation or promoting a culture of innovation (Isabirye et al., 2025). The participant's perception indicates a need for more integrated research experiences throughout the academic program to cultivate deeper understanding and interest. The lack of participation in extra-curricular research or innovation contests can hinder the development of research skills and innovative thinking among students, which are crucial for higher education's role in societal development (Villanueva-Paredes et al., 2024).

SP10 (Focus group B) explained that:

> To be honest, I know very little. Unless I actively seek out information, I don't hear much about research or innovation projects at the college, which mostly focus on coursework and practical skills.

SP10 underscores a significant gap in awareness and engagement, attributing to a lack of proactive communication and exposure. The focus on coursework and practical skills suggests a possibly traditional or skill-centric curriculum that does not sufficiently emphasise research and innovation as integral components. The participant's statement reflects the importance of institutional efforts to raise awareness and foster a culture of research by proactively disseminating information and creating opportunities for student involvement (AlQhtani, 2025). This gap may also hinder students from recognising the importance of research in their academic and professional development.

SP14 (Individual interview) highlighted that:

> I'm aware. The university provides regular updates on ongoing research projects, conferences, and innovation competitions via emails, seminars, and our student site. However, I believe I could be more involved if I understood more about the unique opportunities.

SP14 demonstrates a moderate level of awareness, recognising the efforts of the university in disseminating information about research and innovation activities. However, the participant perceives a gap in understanding the opportunities available, which affects

their willingness or ability to participate actively. This suggests that while information dissemination is happening, there may be a need for more targeted engagement strategies, such as workshops, mentorship programmes, or clearer communication about how students can participate. Enhancing understanding of these opportunities could significantly boost student involvement and foster a stronger research culture.

Theme 2: Impact of research and innovation on learning and future careers

SP24 (Focus group C) stated that:

> Research and innovation make my studies more relevant and interesting. They assist me [to] grasp real-world challenges and improve my problem-solving skills. I believe that participating in these activities will offer me an advantage in the job market by demonstrating that I am proactive and imaginative.

The response given by SP24 emphasises the transformative role of research and innovation in making higher education more practical and engaging. By engaging with real-world problems, students can develop critical thinking and analytical skills that are vital in modern workplaces (O'Neill & Short, 2025). The proactive involvement in research activities also demonstrates a students' initiative and innovative capacity, qualities highly valued by employers. This aligns with the concept that experiential learning through research can bridge the gap between academic knowledge and real-world application, ultimately improving employability and career readiness.

SP7 (Individual interview) shared that:

> I believe they could make learning more engaging and relevant. If I had more opportunities to work on projects, I believe it would enhance my confidence and better prepare me for the job, particularly in hands-on trades and technical areas.

SP7's response underscores the significance of project-based and experiential learning in fostering confidence and practical skills. For students in trade and technical areas, direct involvement in research projects or hands-on activities can deepen understanding, improve technical competencies, and foster a sense of ownership over their learning (Safitri et al., 2024). Engaged learning through innovation not only motivates students but also equips them with skills directly applicable to their future careers, making education more aligned with industry needs. The participant demonstrates that experiential learning increases self-confidence and readiness for employment in technical fields.

SP4 (Focus group A) commented that:

> Research and innovation are critical for expanding knowledge and staying current, but inadequate institutional investment reduces exposure to new ideas, thereby affecting future career competitiveness.

The response from SP4 highlights the importance of institutional support in fostering a research-rich environment. Adequate investment in research infrastructure, funding, and faculty expertise is crucial for exposing students to cutting-edge knowledge and innovative practices (Kazim et al., 2024). Without sufficient institutional backing, students may miss out on opportunities that could enhance their competitiveness in the job market. The

statement underscores the need for higher education institutions to prioritise research and innovation to ensure students are well-prepared for evolving industry demands.

Theme 3: Strategies to foster a culture of research and innovation

SP12 (Focus group B) suggested that:

> Increasing industrial collaborations, providing research-focused internships, and setting up innovation hubs on campus could encourage students to get more involved.

This response from SP12 emphasises the importance of establishing stronger links between academia and industry to foster a culture of research and innovation among students. Industrial collaborations can provide practical insight, real-world problems, and opportunities for applied research, which can motivate students to participate actively in research activities (Naseer et al., 2025). Internships focused on research enable students to gain hands-on experience, bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. Innovation hubs serve as creative spaces that foster collaboration, experimentation, and entrepreneurship, providing students with resources and mentoring to develop innovative ideas.

SP17 (Individual interview) observed that:

> Organising more competitions, granting research funding, and creating forums for students to display their ideas would inspire us. Encouraging lecturers to incorporate research projects into their courses may also help to develop a research culture.

Participant SP17 highlights the role of incentives and platforms in motivating students to engage in research and innovation. Competitions serve as a stimulating environment that encourages creativity, healthy competition, and practical application of ideas. Providing research funding alleviates financial barriers, enabling students to undertake meaningful projects (Russell et al., 2025). Forums for idea presentation foster a community of shared knowledge, networking, and peer learning, which can further inspire student involvement. Additionally, integrating research projects into coursework by lecturers embeds research culture into everyday academic activities, making research a routine part of students' academic experience (Matjašič & Vogrinc, 2025). This approach aligns with experiential learning theories, emphasising active participation and practical engagement.

SP2 (Focus group A) said that:

> It could be beneficial to hold frequent innovation fairs, give small grants for student initiatives, and include research assignments into classes.

SP2's response advocates for creating an environment that encourages continuous engagement with innovation through regular events and incentives. Innovation fairs act as platforms for showcasing student ideas, fostering peer recognition, and stimulating entrepreneurial spirit (Suryawanshi et al., 2024). Small grants for student initiatives lower financial barriers and motivate students to pursue innovative projects, promoting a proactive research culture. Incorporating research assignments into coursework ensures that research becomes an integral part of the learning process, helping students develop critical thinking, problem-solving, and research skills (Ajiga et al., 2025). This holistic

approach aligns with active learning strategies, emphasising experiential and participatory education that can cultivate a sustained culture of research and innovation. Table 3 summarises the themes that emerged from students regarding research and innovation in Eswatini's higher education institutions.

Table 3: Summary of themes from students regarding research and innovation

Theme	Findings from students	Implications
Awareness and engagement in research and innovation activities	- Limited awareness; research seen mainly as a graduation requirement (SP6). - Little proactive communication; focus on coursework and practical skills (SP10). - Some awareness of university updates, but a need for better understanding of opportunities (SP14).	- Curriculum emphasises procedural research rather than active participation. - Need for integrated research experiences and proactive dissemination of opportunities to foster a research culture.
Impact of research and innovation on learning and future careers	- Research makes studies more relevant and improves problem-solving skills (SP24). - Opportunities to work on projects could enhance confidence and employability (SP7). - Limited institutional investment affects exposure and future competitiveness (SP4).	Experiential learning bridges academic knowledge with practical skills. - Institutional support is crucial for providing research opportunities and infrastructure to boost career readiness.
Strategies to foster a culture of research and innovation	- Suggestions include industrial collaborations, research internships, innovation hubs, competitions, research funding, and forums for idea sharing (SP12, SP17, SP2).	- Building partnerships with industry, incentivising participation, and embedding research into coursework can promote a vibrant research culture. - Practical platforms and financial support motivate student engagement and creativity.

Recommendations

To foster a robust research and innovation culture, higher education institutions in Eswatini should develop and implement clear policies that embed research as a core institutional value. Increasing resource allocation, including funding, infrastructure, and human capital, is essential. Establishing industry collaborations and creating innovation hubs can stimulate practical engagement and entrepreneurship among students. Incorporating research and innovation components into curricula and extracurricular activities will promote active participation. Building capacity through training, mentorship, and awareness campaigns can shift perceptions and motivate staff and students. Policymakers should also review funding models and provide targeted support for research initiatives.

Conclusion

Our study reveals that perceptions of research and innovation in Eswatini's higher education are socially constructed through shared discourses, norms, and societal influences. These perceptions are shaped and reinforced by social interactions, policies, and external discourses, which influence research engagement and resource allocation. Despite acknowledging their importance for institutional credibility and development, systemic challenges like limited funding and policy gaps hinder progress, rooted in complex social and structural factors. Addressing these barriers requires comprehensive strategies, including policy development, resource investment, industry collaborations, and curriculum integration. Ultimately, cultivating a positive social understanding of research and innovation is crucial for transforming higher education into a more relevant, competitive, and impactful sector for national growth.

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