

## CHAPTER 8

# Building a Next Generation of Scholars: The Approach of the South African Education Research Association

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### **Abstract**

This chapter discusses how the country's premier educational research organisation, the South African Education Research Association (SAERA), has approached building the next generation of scholars. The chapter briefly describes the inception of SAERA in 2013, with its specific aims of rupturing historical, racial and institutional divisions and promoting socially relevant research. In seeking to advance scholarly inquiry in South Africa, a key goal of SAERA has been to lead the next generation of scholars. Drawing on interviews with key informants, the chapter describes how early career researchers have experienced the strategies towards this end. Such strategies include doctoral awards, public seminars, mentorships, support for writing for publication and, most importantly, establishing a community which provides critical and supportive engagement. Through fostering a collaborative culture, the organisation has sought to challenge dominant discourses of performativity and competition in academia. The chapter reflects on the successes and challenges of this endeavour.

**Keywords:** Early career researchers, research capacity building, peer learning, pedagogical discourse, South African Education Research Association

## **1 Introduction and Background**

A focus on the advancement of research is a global phenomenon. The argument made is that knowledge plays a central role in economic growth, national welfare, and social development (Govender *et al.* 2022; Lee & Kuzhabekova 2019). Postgraduate education has also been closely linked to socioeconomic transformation in both developed and developing nations (Atibuni 2020). In Europe, doctorate-trained researchers are seen as essential to ‘smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth’ while in Southern Africa, East Asia, and Latin America, research students are considered central to the development of ‘knowledge societies’ (Brennan *et al.* 2014).

In South Africa, too, much attention has been paid to the promotion of research in general and research capacity-building in particular. For example, the White Paper on Science, Technology, and Innovation (2019) under the heading, ‘Increased human capabilities and an expanded knowledge enterprise’ indicates how knowledge from many disciplines interacts to deepen awareness of and assist in addressing South Africa’s serious and long-standing challenges. The White Paper goes further to argue that ‘research and the creation of knowledge have far more than just instrumental value’ (Department of Science and Technology 2019: 44), but also contribute to the development of an informed, empowered populace that functions efficiently, creatively, and ethically as a component of a democratic society.

Despite the interest in advancing research in the country, several investigations have also highlighted concerns about the number and demographics of active researchers. Universities South Africa (USAF), for example, noted that in 2019 just over a third of the teaching staff at universities were actively publishing, and 44% of senior lecturers and 82% of lecturers did not have a PhD. Statistics for countries like Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States have also indicated that the number of masters by research graduates is extremely low (Morgan 2014). The expansion of research is thus a global phenomenon that is not restricted to a particular country.

The South African Education Research Association (SAERA) is one of several organisations in the country that seeks to promote and advance research. Working in the field of education, SAERA’s broad goals are to promote research and academic collaboration, link research policy, theory and practice, encourage the promotion of research quality, and help develop the next generation of researchers. Each year, several initiatives and workshops are offered as part of a larger strategy to expand SAERA’s reach and support for the next generation.

ration of academics, encourage academic networks to affiliate with SAERA, and foster the growth of the SAERA community. Drawing on the comments of purposively selected early career researchers (ECRs), this chapter reflects on how these researchers have experienced the strategies used to achieve the set goals. Such strategies are designed mainly for research capacity building and establishing a community which provides critical and supportive engagement. The chapter reflects on the successes and challenges of this intention.

## **2 Early Career Representation within SAERA**

This section provides some background to SAERA's commitment to research capacity-building. After three years of extensive consultation among various educational organisations and interest groups, SAERA was established at a launch conference in the Northwest province of South Africa at the end of January 2013. The launch represented a historic attempt to bring together education academics and researchers from all over South Africa into a single educational research organisation, thereby unifying different research traditions with roots in the racialised academic structures of the pre-democracy era.

The aim of SAERA, as contained in its Constitution, is to contribute to the development and enhancement of education as a research field in South Africa by enhancing the capacity of South Africa's education scholars to do appropriate education research in various areas related to the country's educational development and progress. This objective is achieved by inter alia:

- providing a national home for all education researchers and scholars and a forum where the interests of South African education are critically engaged with for the public good;
- setting up and running workshops and training for new educational researchers;
- providing platforms such as conferences, public lectures and journals for the dissemination of research into education;
- engaging with policymakers to promote the utilisation of research for policy development, and securing support and funding for education research; and
- liaising with national and international bodies with similar objectives, with the aim to promote research in all fields of education globally (SAERA Constitution 2021).

To achieve the goal of promoting research and the commitment to supporting the next generation of scholars, SAERA established the early career researchers' portfolio on its executive committee in 2020. An expansive definition of an early career researcher was adopted, namely, a person who, within 5 years of completing a PhD, or during doctoral or master studies or a research career, is interested in working at a national, regional and international level to:

- broaden research training and professional development experiences;
- exchange experiences and ideas about research and research training;
- develop research projects in collaboration with researchers of different institutions and countries; and
- actively participate in a research community for emerging academics (SAERA Constitution 2021: 8).

Significantly, the focus on supporting early career researchers within SAERA was not only about research capacity building as an exercise in and of itself but, derived from a strong concern to democratise processes of research production. The formation of the ECR portfolio in SAERA took place against the background of a student movement that demanded real change. This was explained by Thomas Salmon, a key driver of the inclusion of ECRs in the SAERA Constitution. Salmon highlighted the disconnect between the reality of the conferences and what was happening on the universities' campuses around 2015-2016. As he put it:

There was a lot going on in higher education, protests from students, campuses shutdowns, etc. One of the students' concerns was that year after year, conferences would be held at 5-star hotels with discussions around transformation, decolonisation and other pertinent issues without tangible change and impact on students' lives. The students put forward ideas to enhance access and participation at the conference, including providing financial support for students to attend conferences, and more support for workshops to support students in developing papers for students from disadvantaged institutions (Thomas Salmon, interview, 3 March 2023).

As he explained, some of the suggestions that were put forward included changing the format of presentations to include more roundtables to en-

courage inclusive and transformative dialogues and adding an ECR representative on the SAERA executive. The position of ECR representative on the executive was then created in 2020, and an election process followed. Nominations were called for a representative who met the set criteria. The first incumbent, Dr. Mpho-Entle Modise, was elected in 2021, thus confirming the formalisation and institutionalisation of the initiative in terms of the organisational strategy.

### **3 Activities within the ECR Portfolio**

Activities geared towards ECRs predated the formalisation of the ECR representative position in 2021 within the SAERA executive committee. The first step in this process involved enhancing the association's ability to engage with the wider research community digitally with a series of online seminars led by Special Interest Groups (SIGs) and leading academics via SAERA's YouTube channel. 'SAERA News', social media and digital platforms were extensively used to extend and expand the reach of the activities. It is noteworthy that some of these activities have also been attended by ECRs from SADC countries, as well as from countries such as Turkey, Mauritius, Ethiopia, and Cyprus.

Other ongoing activities have included pre-conference workshops, online workshops and seminars, and roundtables at the conference focusing on the challenges faced by ECRs. These ECR activities are aligned to SAERA's strategies, such as doctoral awards, public seminars, mentorships, and support for writing for publication.

The underpinning philosophy of the work with ECRs is key to this chapter's argument. It is important to note that the principles of collaboration and peer support are central to the SAERA activities. In contrast to the individualised and competitive culture of many universities, the goal of the ECR portfolio is to create an infrastructure where younger researchers can be nurtured, away from the tensions of institutional power relations and performance appraisals. The intention has been to establish a community that cuts across institutions and research areas and shares experiences in a safe and non-judgemental environment, within, as Lee and Boud (2009: 99) put it, 'a distributed network of learning and practice'.

### **4 Context of Research Promotion**

The South African Education Research Association (SAERA)'s commitment

to supporting the next generation of scholars is significant when placed within the context of research promotion in South Africa and its associated challenges. These have been outlined in various writings. Frantz *et al.* (2014) argue the important role of strong capacity-building programmes and systems in higher education in advancing Africa's intellectual capital. At the same time, they identify various limiting factors, including an absence of research capacity, fewer staff with advanced degrees, inadequate research and publishing skills, poor research cultures, and inadequate resources. Govender *et al.* (2022) further highlight insufficient number of academics to replace many senior scholars about to retire and the vast discrepancies between historically advantaged and disadvantaged institutions. For Breetzke and Hedding (2020), limiting factors on early career researchers include the reduction in funding of the National Research Foundation incentive grants and the 'publish or perish' regime.

A report by USAF (2019) also identified many impediments to research. These included insufficient time for research, linked to enormous teaching loads, large numbers of undergraduate students, the demands of supervisory, administrative and other professional service-rendering tasks, bureaucratic red tape, and a compliance culture. Others reported challenges such as performance demands by management, working with academically under-prepared students, heavy supervisory workloads at the postgraduate level, the absence of a conducive research environment, limited research networks and insufficient mentors and role models in the system.

On a more positive note, Singh (2015) outlines key initiatives at her university to promote research. However, she sets this against several limiting factors, including the increased demand for experienced supervisors as universities enrol more postgraduate students in an attempt to increase subsidies for postgraduate throughput, as well as the rapidly ageing cohort of experienced supervisors and limited supervisory capacity at historically disadvantaged institutions.

Many of these challenges and limitations are echoed in the Council on Higher Education Doctoral Degrees National Report on doctoral programmes at universities in South Africa, of March 2022. The review identified a high demand for more academics with doctoral degrees and capacity for supervision, the burden of teaching and research workloads on academics and the lack of appropriately qualified supervisors to mentor an increasing number of doctoral students.

Interestingly, these policy pressures are not confined to South Africa but have been identified in other countries as well. In their work on doctoral supervision, Boud and Lee (2005), for example, highlight problems of ‘poor supervision, inadequate levels of departmental support and limited access to quality infrastructure’ and increasing calls for a ‘high quality of research learning environment’ (Boud & Lee 2005: 501 - 502). Low research productivity has been reported in Africa (Ezema & Onyanha 2017) as well as poor visibility and dissemination of postgraduate research reports (Ezema 2013).

Various strategies have been identified to address these challenges. Ezema and Onyanha (2017) strongly advise adopting open access for the great opportunities it provides for wider dissemination of research findings, particularly among the developing countries. International collaboration in research and education (Williams 2019), and university – industry collaborations and joint research (Chobphon & Wongpipit 2022) are also highly recommended.

## **5 Theoretical Framing**

SAERA’s approach to research capacity-building finds strong resonance with the conceptual work of Boud and Lee (2005). Their theory of ‘Peer learning as pedagogical discourse’ highlights the complexity of a conception of a research pedagogy and becoming a researcher and emphasises the role of peer relations and co-production. Although their focus is more on doctoral students, whom they refer to as research students, their key principles of peer learning, networks of learning relationships, and the social situatedness of learning, are concomitant with SAERA’s vision and philosophy. Participation in a community of research practice (Boud & Lee 2005: 504) is emphasised, as is the provision of a research environment and culture that involves interaction with multiple parties. They propose an expanded definition of pedagogy that attends to the entire research environment and use the term distributed learning to refer to networks of learning in which learners take advantage of opportunities in various ways without necessarily requiring the involvement of teachers or supervisors (Boud & Lee 2005: 503).

Boud and Lee (2005) argue that the peer is a defining figure in research practice and point out that the discourse of peer learning attends to the specificity of learning in relation to research. They outline some of the various research activities that research students as peers may participate in at different stages in their candidature, including the following:

In-house seminar presentations, reading and writing groups, conference presentations, publishing in peer-reviewed journals, reviewing journal articles and conference abstracts, writing research grant applications, undertaking re-search in teams (of colleagues, students, industry partners), co-authoring, jointly publishing, conference organisation and journal editing (Boud & Lee 2005: 510).

Interestingly, the CHE recommends a similar approach to research development within doctoral programmes, with recommendations for cohort models, peer support networks and student communities of practice (CHE 2022: 44).

Lee and Boud (2009) looked at ‘how do researchers become researchers’ and believe that the most common route is through a doctoral study, through which candidates learn how to do research ‘on the job’ and the training ground that supplies a credential for undertaking advanced scholarly research. While SAERA does target doctoral students in its understanding of ECRs, its approach includes ECRs from higher education institutions beyond the doctoral qualification.

## **6 Methodology**

The research reported on here followed a phenomenological qualitative approach to engage the early career researchers’ (ECRs) experiences of SAERA as a research organisation in South Africa. The inquiry centred on real-life experiences (Neubauer *et al.* 2019; Williams 2021) of ECRs affiliated with various higher education institutions who had interacted with or participated in SAERA activities. The aim was to gain deeper insights into SAERA’s identified strategies for research capacity-building, through exploring the experiences of those who had actively participated in the processes.

Data were collected from three sets of purposively selected participants, with a total of 21 participants. All three sets of participants were purposively selected based on their availability and because they had in recent times actively participated in SAERA workshops and conferences.

- 1) A semi-structured interview with Thomas Salmon, who had played a pivotal role in the inclusion of the ECR portfolio in the SAERA Constitution.
- 2) The ten candidates who were awarded funding subsidies by the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS) for attendance at



SAERA’s 2022 Conference (Table 1). Sixty-three applications were received for the funding, and through a strict screening process, ten deserving candidates were selected: seven South African citizens and three candidates originally from Zimbabwe, Lesotho and Nigeria who are/were studying at South African higher education institutions. The candidates were invited to give feedback on how the NIHSS funding impacted their research careers, by enabling them to attend and present their work at the SAERA 2022 Conference. Additionally, they were asked to share their overall experience of the conference.

- 3) A random selection of twenty-three ECRs from a database of those actively participating in SAERA’s ECR activities. An online survey was sent to these twenty-three participants (i.e., ECRs) which yielded ten responses (Table 2). The survey consisted of open-ended questions designed to elicit a detailed narrative of participants’ experiences (Cassol *et al.* 2018). This group included those who were part of the 2022 ECR online workshop entitled ‘From a long PhD to a short article’. At this workshop, three recent PhD graduates who had subsequently published at least one article from their thesis shared their journey towards this end, and a senior researcher provided suggestions as to how one PhD dissertation could generate multiple publishable articles.

**Table 1: NIHSS funding awardees**

Participant	Qualification	Institution	Position at this institution
1	M.Ed. (2018)	Nelson Mandela University	PhD Candidate, Associate Lecturer
2	PhD (2022)	Cape Peninsula University of Technology	Lecturer
3	PhD (2021)	University of KwaZulu-Natal	Senior lecturer
4	M.Ed.	University of South Africa	Lecturer, PhD candidate
5	PhD (2021)	Nelson Mandela University	Lecturer
6	PhD (2022)	University of the Free State	Lecturer
7	PhD (2019)	University of the Free State	Lecturer
8	PhD	University of Johannesburg	Postdoctoral Research Fellow

9	PhD (2018)	King Sebata Dalidyabo Public TVET College	Lecturer
10	M.Ed.	Rhodes University	PhD Scholar / Study permit

**Table 2: Participants in the online survey**

Participant	Currently registered for a qualification	Institution	Position at this institution	Years in the current institution	Years of teaching and/or researching in higher education	Publications in the last five years
1	No	Rhodes University	Doctoral Student	3	11	6 articles
2	PhD	University of South Africa	Lecturer	1	2	2 articles
3	No	University of Western Cape	Lecturer	10	10	4 articles
4	PhD	University of Lusaka	Lecturer	6	6	1 article
5	PhD	Stellenbosch University	Doctoral Student	5	0	None
6	PhD	University of Johannesburg	Doctoral Student	3	2	None
7	PhD	Namibia University of Science and Technology	Lecturer	8	8	1 article
8	PhD	Cape Peninsula University of Technology	Lecturer	7	7	1 article
9	No	University of Kwa-Zulu Natal	Senior Lecturer	10	10	1 book chapter 1 book 2 articles
10	PhD	National University of Lesotho	Lecturer	4	14	6 articles

As shown in Table 2, the participants in this group had experience in teaching and/or researching in a higher education environment of between zero

and fourteen years. The participants were affiliated with various higher education institutions in and outside South Africa, such as the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Rhodes University, University of South Africa, University of Lusaka, Stellenbosch University, Namibia University of Science and Technology, and the National University of Lesotho. Most participants were either doctoral students or lecturers, with publications between zero and six in the last five years.

Other than in the first interview, where permission was granted, all names have been anonymised to protect confidentiality. The study used the iterative step-by-step thematic analysis process to unpack the collected data across all the participants. By analysing the participants' accounts of their experiences in relation to the study questions, the thematic analysis seeks to identify patterns of meaning (Sundler *et al.* 2019). Following Sundler *et al.*'s (2019) phenomenological thematic analysis process, we sought to achieve familiarity with the data through open-minded reading, searching for meanings and themes and finally organising themes into a coherent whole. To uphold the trustworthiness of the data, we constantly met and discussed any emerging discrepancies and continually asked ourselves Sundler *et al.*'s (2019) reflexive questions about the credibility and transferability of the research process.

## **7 Findings**

This section documents the key findings of the research. It outlines participants' experiences of SAERA and identifies what participants indicated were the factors influencing these experiences. The section also highlights the organisation's impact on individuals' academic trajectories and reports on participants' views on SAERA's role in building the next generation of scholars.

### **7.1 Positive Experiences**

Participants in the online survey were asked to describe their involvement with SAERA and their positive and negative experiences of this involvement. Significantly, no negative experiences were cited. Most of their experiences derived from the annual conference and online workshops. It also came to light that many ECRs were attending and presenting at a conference for the first time:

*I participated in a conference that took place in 2022. It was a great experience as it was my first time to present at that conference.*

Participants were generally enthusiastic about the fact that SAERA offered them practical skills and many networking and collaboration opportunities as can be seen in the comments below:

*I was lucky to attend a SAERA conference in 2021 and 2022 and I presented the paper in my 2022 attendance, I received constructive feedback from fellow scholars and that improved my academic writing.*

*I enjoyed the ECR workshop, and the SAERA conference gave me the opportunity to showcase my PhD research.*

Others focused more on personal experiences, including inspiration and positive growth. One respondent was enthusiastic about her ‘*motivation and mental preparation for PhD study*’, while another said: ‘*Since I joined SAERA, I have been experiencing positive growth in my research*’. A further comment referred to the opportunity to give shape to a ‘*quest for collaboration, learning and development*’.

Participants in the online workshop on writing articles also provided very positive reactions, using words like insightful, interactive, relevant, interesting, informative, and eye-opening, and provided explicit guidelines. The workshop evoked some reflection and emotion in some participants, with one participant saying:

*I participated in a workshop on writing from your PhD - the experience was positive in terms of reflecting on my journey post PhD, but also frustrating in realising that I have not published much since I completed my PhD.*

## **7.2 Networking**

It was clear that networking at the conference was a major factor contributing to the positive experiences expressed. This was in the form of networking with more experienced researchers, as well as with peers. On the point of exposure to more experienced researchers, respondents spoke of meeting other researchers, making contacts towards writing for publication, engaging with journal

editors, and getting feedback from others: *'Feedback and listening to experienced academics helped'*.

One participant had the opportunity to meet his supervisor for the first time in a face-to-face manner, as they had previously only communicated online. Academic feedback from others was also valued through listening to different presentations and receiving comments from the audience.

Participants were particularly enthusiastic about the value of meeting other emerging researchers. As one respondent put it:

*I met the novice researchers like myself who were nervous about standing in front of the audience and sharing their work. We managed to motivate and support each other during the sessions.*

### **7.3 Funding**

One of the major themes highlighted in the data was the need for funding for early career researchers in Southern Africa. SAERA often collaborates with other organisations to help the ECRs struggling to find funding for conference attendance. An example here was where SAERA partnered in 2022 with the National Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS) to subsidise ten ECRs to attend the annual conference in Cape Town.

This funding played a major role in the participants' involvement. Some awardees attended the conference for the first time, while others presented their first academic paper. The participants mentioned that the funding also assisted and exposed them to networking and possible research collaborations. Two comments express this well:

*The NIHSS funding enabled me to present my work and get valuable feedback for my papers. Some colleagues expressed interest in my studies, and we exchanged contact details.*

*Attending the conference exposed me to new research undertaken by experienced colleagues and new scholars. The grant also helped to form new academic links and networks for future use.*

### **7.4 An Understanding of the ECR's Needs**

Another emerging theme was a sentiment that SAERA had a good understand-

ing of the ECRs' needs. Several ECRs reported the need to be understood and mentioned that SAERA had a better understanding of what they needed, as shown in the following comments:

*It is the eagerness to support emerging researchers as there is a great need to support us.*

*SAERA is so understanding and encouraging.*

The representation of the ECR constituency on the SAERA executive was noted as a particular strength:

*SAERA prioritises young and emerging scholars. Besides providing financial support to emerging scholars, it also creates a platform for young scholars to have a voice. For example, SAERA has a representative representing emerging scholars in the organisation's committee. During the conference, SAERA gives young scholars a chance to share their work (research) and get feedback from other scholars.*

A few participants mentioned the lack of relevant support from their institutions and the need for proper mentoring, such as that could be provided through SAERA: *'Inexperienced researchers at [my institution] cannot contribute to the professional and research development of novice researchers'*. Another participant revealed that he/she had an opportunity to network with fellows *'at least at my level while also learning from established scholars in several platforms'*.

Participants indicated an appreciation for SAERA's approach, highlighting the creation of an environment with a culture of collaboration and an openness to sharing resources and knowledge. This was contrasted with experiences in other conferences where they felt a lack of ECR involvement and inclusion, for example, one participant said *'many of the activities focused on established scholars (e.g., panel discussions/SARCHI. etc.)'*,

Another participant indicated that his/her institution follows many of the SAERA approaches in the faculty and workshops.

## **7.5 Impact of Involvement with SAERA**

Respondents were asked whether their participation in SAERA had impacted in

any way on their own academic writing and/or research involvement. Participants mentioned the development of presentation skills, as well as improved writing skills that led to the successful publishing of an article. Another participant acknowledged the opportunity to showcase his PhD research at the SAERA conference.

Feedback from other conference attendees was highlighted as the major benefit to their academic trajectories:

*The comments from the audience were so good and helped me improve my presentation skills.*

*I have gone on to publish my presentation papers after benefitting from feedback from colleagues at conferences.*

The opportunity to engage with established scholars was a further factor that was felt to have made a significant difference in research development.

*I was able to engage in conversation with established scholars in researchers both nationally and internationally.*

*I learnt new research skills from experienced scholars.*

## **7.6 SAERA's Role in Building the Next Generation of Scholars**

Respondents from the online workshop on writing articles from their PhD were asked to suggest further topics for SAERA workshops. Suggested topics included plagiarism and citation, supervision of postgraduate students, choosing a relevant research design, methodology, and a mentoring programme. Significantly, all these suggested topics were for practical assistance, or what the CHE calls 'skills attributes' (2022: 22), highlighting the key concerns of this sample.

Respondents in the survey requested more opportunities for novice researchers to engage and collaborate with seasoned academics, especially to help those in less active research institutions. This would include investing in research capacity development and the coaching and mentoring of new researchers. Greater international collaboration was suggested, especially among SADC countries. At a practical level, it was suggested that SAERA

consider creating avenues for funding and knowledge sharing among early researchers.

The context of research production in South Africa is heavily driven by an incentive scheme whereby institutions and individuals are rewarded in monetary terms for published outputs. Two different perspectives on the role of SAERA here were noted. The first was from the perspective of working within the system:

*Allow papers to be submitted and reviewed before the conference so that ECRs can get conference proceedings' accreditation and incentives. The issue is that submitting and having an article published by the journal is extremely difficult, and this defeats the aim of SAERA, that of building a next layer of scholars who have published.*

This position was challenged from an alternative perspective, with the plea that SAERA:

*Become a champion for innovative and challenging research that addresses the real challenges of education in the global south rather than promoting publication for publication's sake. Research with real impact for beneficiaries.*

In broader terms, one respondent made a special plea for SAERA to play a role in advancing the values of society as a whole:

*We need competent future professors with an ethic of care and humility. SAERA is the perfect organisation to provide this kind of learning to beginner researchers.*

## **8 Discussion**

Our interest in this chapter has been to explore how early career researchers experience the work of SAERA, particularly those activities aimed at building research capacity. Underlying this is the broader aim of establishing a scholarly community based on critical and supportive engagement that can resist dominant practices of performativity and competition in academia. Based on the findings as outlined above, this section of the chapter reflects on the successes



and challenges of this endeavour, from the perspective of a group of ECRs.

The data reveal that SAERA has indeed had much success in promoting a culture of support and growth. The ECRs who were part of this study spoke consistently about how exposure to the organisation had motivated them in their scholarly work. This included feeling part of a broader community that included both experienced and novice researchers, participating in workshops, listening to and getting feedback on conference presentations and engaging in dialogue with others about their work. A contribution to funding was of particular significance to the ten ECRs who received it for the 2022 conference, in that it provided the opportunity to present their work and meet others that would otherwise not have been possible.

It would appear then that SAERA is being relatively successful in creating a space where research students and ‘experts’/ professors/ experienced researchers and academics can engage in a mutual dialogue. The organisation’s annual conference has been designed to transcend the much-spoken-about power relationships in academia by bringing participants at different levels of development and expertise from various contexts, research and education institutions together to share, present and discuss pertinent issues and to a certain extent, critique and improve each other’s research ideas and products. Such an approach has the potential to attain, what Thomas Salmon refers to as a ‘duty of care and fairness and responsibility for scientists and researchers of the future’ (interview, 3 March 2023).

As indicated earlier, SAERA makes extensive use of social media in promoting its activities. This approach ensures that resources are not privatised within institutions but are broadly accessible to a wide audience. Better marketing of such features could, however, probably be done if one notes that one respondent, clearly unaware of the many resources on the SAERA website, suggested that SAERA should ‘*consider creating avenues for funding and knowledge sharing among early researchers*’.

Boud and Lee (2005: 511) argue that a necessary feature of peer learning is that it is reciprocal. Within this symbiotic and co-productive relationship, the differential relations of power and authority and expertise are necessarily flattened out (Boud & Lee 2005). While power relations and hierarchies will always exist, some success in addressing this seems to be present in the work of SAERA. SAERA provides the framework to move out of the political and policy pressures existing in many institutions and creatively ushers both the early career researchers and experienced academics and researchers into a

space of positive critical engagement, inter-generational dialogue, and possible collaborations. Some of the activities that SAERA designs to build the next generation of scholars are indeed similar to those outlined by Boud and Lee (2005), in their call for networks of learning relationships.

The earlier part of this chapter outlined several barriers that exist to research promotion in South Africa, particularly of early career researchers. Clearly, SAERA's existence cannot wish these away, and all researchers are faced with systemic and institutional challenges. Structural restrictions cited in the literature include limitations on funding, the expense of in-person conferences, high teaching loads, and the expense of travel, while cultural challenges exist where there is a climate of individualism and performativity as the measure of success. However, it is noteworthy that, despite these challenges, the ECRs in this study remained enthusiastic, optimistic, and forward-looking, seeing the research opportunities provided to them as empowering and energising.

Arising from these findings, it is possible to identify some opportunities for SAERA in the future. It is clear that becoming a researcher is a collaborative, dynamic, developmental process which participants consider as worth holding on to. In this respect, it remains a priority to establish and maintain patterns of peer learning and collaboration and to advance the notion of networks of learning relationships between individuals and institutions. Further priorities are the insertion of ECR activities and orientation into the SAERA Special Interest Groups, to seek linkages with other organisations with similar goals and strategies, such as the National Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences, and to build on the vast existing national network of research capacity building activities.

## **9 Concluding Thoughts**

This chapter is located within a policy imperative to advance research in South Africa, even as several systemic barriers to research promotion, especially of emerging researchers, are acknowledged. SAERA's commitment to research capacity-building and various strategies towards this end are outlined. The chapter describes the experiences of a sample of early career researchers who have participated in the activities of SAERA and presents the key roles of networking and funding as enabling factors in their development. A culture of collaboration within a supportive research environment is a further identified as

an enabling factor. The impact of participation in SAERA activities on these ECRs' research trajectories is presented, as well as their views on SAERA's role in building the next generation of researchers. Notions of peer learning and networked and distributed learning communities, as put forward by Boud and Lee (2005) form the theoretical framing of the paper. The lessons captured in this chapter and the recommendations drawn from the data significantly support the objective of this book, which is to foster a productive dialogue about effective approaches to fundamentally reform the postgraduate education sector on the African continent.

The framework for capacity building developed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), as cited by Lee and Kuzhabekova (2019), forms a useful way of summarising the conclusions of this study. The UNDP distinguishes between three levels of capacity building: 1) individual; 2) entity; and 3) system (UNDP 1998 2008). According to Lee and Kuzhabekova (2019) research capacity building at the individual level is the most common one in practice because many projects focus on training individuals. In their own study, participants identified infrastructure and funding as key strategies of capacity building. In a similar vein, they are critical of a deficit view of research development where 'practitioners and scholars conceive research capacity building mainly as a one-way process whereby experts impart knowledge to recipients' (Mark & Nakabugo 2011, cited in Lee and Kuzhabekova 2019: 346).

The findings of our study have shown the limitations of a narrow conception of capacity-building. Our argument that 'an accounting of publications, patents and doctorates does not fully capture the complexity of capacity building' (Lee & Kuzhabekova 2019: 343) resonates with extant literature. While not denying the essential role of resources and infrastructure, we would argue for greater attention to building cultures of collaboration and support that allow for the flourishing of peer networks and reciprocal learning. In this way, the emphasis moves from seeing the purpose of research capacity-building as shifting from 'what is produced [outputs] to the production of the person who produces' (Lee & Boud 2009: 97).

It is encouraging to note that this approach is in line with some of the recommendations made by the CHE in its review of doctoral programmes. These recommendations include mentoring, where experienced individuals (who are not the main supervisors but are academically qualified) offer the student advice, informal support, and wisdom (complementary to formal

supervision). A second priority is what the CHE calls engaged scholarship, where programmes ‘have, as their purpose, ways of enabling students to engage with a wide range of stakeholders and communities outside of their immediate research group’ (CHE 2022: 48).

Such an approach is, in our view, a more sustainable and embedded way to approach SAERA’s goal of establishing vigorous and responsive epistemic communities. In terms of the three levels of capacity-building of the UNDP, we believe that individual growth will flourish within such an environment, thus impacting the entity (the institution) as well as the system. As more young researchers advance in their careers, it will add to the pool of experienced researchers in the country. Such strategies, we believe, can make a meaningful contribution to postgraduate education within the African context.

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