

Research Article

A Qualitative Analysis of the Professionalisation of Public Procurement in the Kingdom of Eswatini

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Abstract

State-Owned Enterprises incur losses that run into millions of dollars through financial leakages, the majority of which occur in procurement departments. In public procurement, these leakages attract attention from multiple stakeholders because procurement entities use taxpayers' money which they must account for. Therefore, the professionalisation of public procurement is gaining momentum because organisations are searching for effective ways of utilising public funds. This qualitative investigation into procurement professionalisation focused on three key elements; the status of public procurement, procurement professionalisation challenges, and recommendations for improvement. Utilising the qualitative multi-methods approach data was gathered through in-depth interviews with eight officials in charge of procurement departments in purposely selected public enterprises, one focus group discussion with six procurement staff members from local government entities, and a review of newspaper articles published in the Eswatini Observer and Times of Eswatini. Findings from literature and the collected data indicate that professionalisation of public procurement staff in the country has not been given the serious consideration it deserves because procurement is not yet represented at the strategic apex of procurement entities in the country. Major procurement activities are still treated as tactical and operational activities, while procurement departments are still under the mucky waters of finance, corporate affairs, operations or any other departments considered more strategic than procurement. Relegating procurement activities to non-strategic roles is one of the major causes of financial leakages through procurement malfeasance and unethical practices. Research has linked this to the lack of professionalism in procurement. The study concludes that policy on procurement professionalisation needs to be prioritized and staff that handle strategic procurement decisions need to be recognized and rewarded accordingly. Only staff holding appropriate procurement qualifications and relevant experience must be appointed to positions responsible for utilising public funds. The above proposal on its own may not be enough to attract and retain qualified procurement professionals hence strategies to attract and retain quality staff must be implemented and supported through appropriated policy and legislation. The methodological simplicity of the study was limited to exploring the issues raised in the study yet procurement has complex activities and processes that require more time, more funding, and deeper and comprehensive engagements with key stakeholders. Superior research approaches that tend to be more pragmatic such as the mixed methods approach is recommended for further studies. Such an approach can lead to more comprehensive analysis and findings having considered both qualitative and quantitative aspects of procurement professionalisation.

Keywords

Public Procurement, Procuring Entity, Corruption, Procurement Performance, Professionalisation of Public Procurement, State-Owned Enterprises

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1. Introduction

The procurement profession is generally eclectic, diverse, dynamic, and multidisciplinary because it heavily borrows from other disciplines like management, marketing, operations management, economics, finance, accounting, and law. Public procurement has been defined as the government's activity of purchasing goods and services needed to perform its functions, including procurement planning, contract placement, and contract administration [1]. The dynamic global trend driven by developments in technology, transportation, and communication innovation show that public procurement is a more complex function than ever, requiring a more complex skillset for public procurement officials [2, 3]. The above definition presumes a public procurement workforce with the capacity to achieve the main objectives of public procurement which include efficiency, transparency, economy and accountability [4]. These values are crucial elements of a sound public procurement system that delivers the procurement goals of an organisation. Thus, professionalising the public procurement workforce has become a priority and a hot topic in public procurement reforms across the globe [5].

Defining professionalism in the public sector [6] states that, professionalism is the overall value which encompasses all other values that guide the public service. This refers to values such as loyalty, transparency, diligence, impartiality, effectiveness and others as specified by individual countries. Accordingly, in the South African context, a profession emerges when work becomes systematised, and people acquire relevant education and training to perform the work to satisfactory standards and adhering to specific codes of conduct [7]. In that case, recruitment of procurement personnel must be transparent, there must be a clear career path for people in procurement, pathways for promotion into strategic positions and incentivisation of procurement personnel [8, 9]. In a study on professionalising communal procurement in the Dutch public sector, [10] concluded that the more professional the procurement is, the more funds municipalities save. Therefore, public procurement professionalisation ought to save costs through transparency, integrity, access, balance, participation, efficiency, e-procurement, capacity, evaluation, risk management, accountability and integration [11-13]. Additionally, [14] opines that, the evolution of professionalism in procurement is influenced by the establishment of institutions concerned with promoting professional procurement (universities) and the creation of various associations of specified procurement knowledge and techniques. Professionalising public procurement is gaining momentum because it allows for functionality, transparency, and significant savings in public expenditure [15]. Research that looked at developments in public procurement professionalisation revealed that in 2020, only 38% of the 38 OECD countries recognised public procurement as a standalone profession, marking an increase from 32% in 2018 [16].

Public procurement in Eswatini is still marred by malpractice and non-compliance to legal and regulatory frameworks, resulting in shoddy works, poor quality services, and loss of goods [17, 18]. According to the Auditor General [18], about six government departments accounted for 48% of the total funds lost through procurement malpractices. Showing determination to address the said challenges, the government of Eswatini committed to reforming public procurement through initiatives such as legislative reviews which culminated in the Procurement Act (2011), Procurement Regulations (2020), and the implementation of the electronic government procurement strategy which was allocated E20 million in the 2024/2025 financial year. Although professionalisation of the public procurement system is one of the core functions of the Eswatini Public Procurement Regulatory Agency (ESPPRA), not much action has been taken towards achieving the goal of procurement professionalisation. There is no evidence to suggest that employees with procurement responsibilities are strategically positioned nor recognized for their responsibilities. The role of procurement in state owned enterprises was not given the recognition it deserves. As a result, appointment of people to procurement positions does not require any specific qualifications or accreditation. This evokes the notion that anyone can perform procurement tasks [19]. Additionally, stories abound in newspapers and on social media about public procurement mismanagement, fraud and corruption. This prevails, notwithstanding the fact that public procurement is regulated by a clear and binding legal and regulatory framework. There are a number of irregularities in the processes of procuring goods, works, and services [19]. To date, no serious action has been taken to professionalise public procurement in Eswatini.

The study sought to undertake an analysis of the professionalisation of public procurement as a step towards improving service delivery and ensuring the nation has procurement professionals who are effective, accountable, and transparent. The study sought to investigate the status of public procurement as a profession, challenges in professionalising public procurement, and identifying ways to professionalise procurement systems in the public sector. This research could benefit the government of Eswatini and other governments that are pursuing the public procurement professionalisation trajectory. Insights from this study could feed into national and institutional policy development processes because the study advocates for the professionalisation of public procurement as a key driver of economic development. Procurement managers and practitioners get to understand knowledge and practice requirements for effective public procurement as a strategic component in the national economic development agenda. Practitioners, also benefit from the professionalisation of their strategic roles in the organisation, allowing them to be recognised and rewarded accordingly. The study fills the contextual knowledge gap. juxta-

posing what has happened in the global world and Africa in general with the Eswatini context. Therefore, academics and researchers can learn more about existing challenges, conduct further research, and seek more relevant solutions to resolve the dilemma of professionalising public procurement.

2. Literature Review

The following section looks at evidence from previous studies by analysing the status of public procurement, professionalisation, implementation challenges, and recommendations for achieving the professionalisation goal.

According to [20] the pillars of public procurement include value for money, transparency, ethics and fair dealings, accountability, reporting and equity. Government departments and State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) must spend taxpayers' money diligently, guided by these principles and in the interest of providing reliable services to stakeholders. In Kazakhstan, [21] observed that public procurement processes were being transformed from routine administrative tasks to a dedicated strategic profession that lead to cost effectiveness. This status is validated by the country's constitution, public procurement laws and regulations, and other complimentary statutes.

Performing public procurement activities requires staff with skills to understand the strategic role of procurement, knowledge to execute the procurement strategy with competence, and the experience to leverage the continuous attainment of the overall procurement goal of value for money. [22], notes that promoting strategic procurement can be done through professionalisation. To do this, procurement personnel must behave professionally and operate within the precincts of public procurement law at all times. Focus must shift from procedures and the system should be empowered to recognize the employees in public procurement. Therefore, public procurement professionalisation must focus more on people in procurement rather than the procurement system itself and regulation [22].

Purchasing goods, services, and works account for 12% of a country's gross domestic product (GDP) and 29% general government expenditure in most Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries [23, 22]. In less developed countries the activity of purchasing goods, services and works account for, up to, 20% of GDP and the high rate is attributed to procurement inefficiencies through financial leakages and corruption [4, 5, 23-25]. The heavy spend associated with public procurement has attracted interest and attention from many stakeholders who expect government departments and SOEs to account for the high procurement expenditure because they utilise taxpayers' money. Underperformance which results in high public procurement expenditure is associated with corruption, fruitless expenditure, non-compliance, and political interference in procurement [26, 27]. The elevation of public procurement to strategic levels of the organisation means there is increased

expectations for accounting officers to account for their actions which in turn requires personnel in procurement to be highly skilled, knowledgeable, and experienced given the strategic responsibility they have in the organisation [14, 22].

The demand for accountability usually comes from different stakeholders such as civil society organisations (CSOs), politicians, government, international financiers, vendors, and the general public [19]. Thus, in a study about issues and challenges in public procurement in Zimbabwe, [28] argued that public and political expectations for effective service delivery put public procurement under pressure because the aforementioned diversity of stakeholders complicates the role of public procurement, yet procurement is expected to satisfy the stakeholders' often-conflicting goals. Therefore, to survive the dynamic nature of the public procurement environment with its endless challenges, people who work in procurement must be skilled, knowledgeable, and experienced to navigate the demanding public procurement terrain. To be more effective, people in procurement must have authority to execute their role with minimum interference [31]. Researchers concur that this can be achieved through the professionalisation of public procurement [12, 25, 29, 30]. On the contrary, [27] advanced an interesting argument that professionalisation efforts in organisations plagued by systematic corruption will only achieve more sophisticated corruption strategies.

2.1. Strategies for Professionalising Public Procurement Staff

Professionalising the procurement function is driven by the organisation that deliberately takes the initiative to include procurement in its corporate strategy. Professionalisation allows resources to be provided to all strategic elements of the organisation. Additionally, professionalisation is embarked upon to fulfill some statutory requirements, such as the procurement laws and the procurement regulations. The goal of procurement professionalisation can be achieved when procurement is part of the corporate strategy that receives resources to operationalise procurement plans. Many procurement practitioners do not have the skills, knowledge, experience, and motivation needed to perform their duties. Therefore, emphasizing the need to ensure procurement professionalisation is a means to contribute towards the organisation's bottom line and ending the rot prevailing in both, private companies and public institutions [16, 24, 30].

Because the professionalisation of public procurement is now considered strategic, many countries have adopted a variety of approaches to strengthen the capacity of staff who carry out the procurement duties [12, 16]. Some common strategies for procurement professionalisation include ethics and codes of conduct, knowledge centers, certification, incentives, capacity building, and lifelong learning [16]. Internally, the adoption of a procurement code of ethics for procurement entities can help procurement staff to comply with

procurement regulations and other supporting legislative requirements [5]. A procurement code guides and regulates the conduct and behaviour of public procurement staff at both organisation and national level. According to [15] any behaviour that raises questions is unethical and requires to be corrected. [20] opines that ethics help professionals to learn and understand the pillars of behaviour that seek to eliminate irregularities such as corruption and unconscionability, because professionals are expected to understand value for money, transparency, fair dealings, accountability and equity.

Externally, the existence of codes of ethics can strengthen stakeholders' confidence in the integrity of procurement entities. The code of ethics ensures the existence of consistency in the application of rules and upholding of good governance throughout the public procurement processes [23]. Among other things, procurement entities are expected to be ethical, and have policies on how they manage confidential information such as financial position of vendors, policies regarding the handling of gifts and hospitality, policies on selecting suppliers and awarding tenders, and how to report concerns about corruption [31].

Knowledge of both theory and the practice of procurement is disseminated through learning institutions. There are strategic procurement issues which an ordinary cadre may struggle to manage hence the need for developing academic programmes to teach issues like regulatory frameworks, institutional frameworks, strategy, capacity building, as well as monitoring and risk management [25, 27]. Universities are now incorporating public procurement modules in their programmes and on their research agenda. It has already been highlighted that procurement is multidisciplinary, hence the need to develop modules of a multi-disciplinary nature for inclusion in procurement programmes taught at tertiary institutions. Module presenters must be recruited from all the disciplines that build up a robust public procurement programme. Procurement must be taught at different levels of the learning process, undergraduate, honours, post graduate diploma, and higher qualifications. The procurement programmes should be properly accredited, certificated, and supported through the various structures of government, employment agents, and professional bodies [12, 13, 16].

In a study on professionalisation of public procurement it emerged that only 39% of the 33 EU countries recognised public procurement as a profession [2]. A study by [15] revealed that to shape professional development of staff there was an increasing trend in the use of certification, accreditation with professional institutions, and a call for organisations to employ certified procurement experts in their procurement units. In a study conducted on professional qualification and its impact on procurement reforms in Tanzania, it was found that professionalism in public procurement allows for functionality, transparency, and significant savings in public expenditure [32]. Furthermore, professionalism depends on the staffing, knowledge, skills, and capabilities of human resources and system controls that influence human behaviour

[32]. Therefore, effective procurement systems require the procuring entities to employ procurement professionals that are trained and recognised by the respective procurement professional bodies. This is in line with the observation made by [33], who argued that, by enhancing procurement skills, procurement professionals aim to improve the efficiency of procurement processes, ensuring timely availability of goods and services and providing public services as planned by government. Procurement requires professionals with qualifications and expertise in the tasks they carry out. Expertise is gained through training and experience, where the trainees are taught to adhere to a professional code of ethics [34]. Therefore, procurement experts are expected to have in-depth knowledge of their responsibilities and public procurement role and expectations regarding best practices, execution, and techniques for different processes [15].

Setting up incentive mechanisms to attract and retain public procurement officials and motivating them is crucial not only for maintaining high performance and productivity in public procurement, but also for attracting talented professionals. According to [29] staff incentive mechanisms play an important role in motivating public officers, and can be classified as financial incentives such as salaries and non-financial incentives such as professional development including training courses, certification, and performance management. This is supported by [33] who contends that to attract and retain talented professionals within strict fiscal constraints, countries could establish a clear career path, launch an awareness programme about public procurement as a potential career option, develop further non-financial incentives such as a certification framework, capability-building systems, performance management systems, work-life balance, excellence award systems, professional networks to foster professionalism in the field of public procurement, and collaboration with knowledge centers [14, 35].

Recently, an increasing number of countries has recognised the role that knowledge centers can play in the professionalisation of procurement. In 2020, 79% of the OECD countries adopted a collaborative approach with knowledge centers. This collaboration takes many forms across OECD countries including collaboration for developing training courses (62% in 2020), joint research (44% in 2020), and joint seminars or workshops (62% in 2020). Some countries have also collaborated with universities to cultivate future procurement specialists. This includes offering courses or degree programmes in public procurement, thesis contests, and internship programmes [21]. In addition, [35] reported that the Ghanaian government through its Public Procurement Authority (PPA), introduced an approach of mainstreaming procurement training into the tertiary system with new qualifications at Higher National Diploma (HND) and Bachelors' degree level. The curricula for these programmes were developed in collaboration with the PPA [35]. Furthermore, the Ghana institute of Management and Public Administration (GIMPA) offers short-term training sessions in procurement for internationally

financed projects to government officials. Based on the empirical evidence above, it is evident that professionalising the procurement workforce is essential for an effective modern public procurement system to ensure capacity building and development.

Attaining the identified principles and the overall public procurement goals is often compromised by the lack of skills, capacity, knowledge, and capabilities, on the part of procurement personnel [20, 36]. [33] contends that lack of knowledge and skills among procurement personnel affects quality and procurement efficiency. This notion is supported by [3] who advanced an argument that losses through inefficiencies and corruption are key procurement challenges. From another angle, [29] talks about passive waste in public procurement, arguing that some losses are not associated with employee corruption (active waste); it is incompetence driven waste. The authors contend that active waste and passive waste are strategic components that reinforce each other and need to be reduced through public procurement professionalisation and training [29]. In a related study which assessed electronic procurement at SOEs in South Africa, it was discovered that government expenditure was at risk because of corruption in the form of nepotism, conflict of interest, fraud, collusion, and undue political influence [37]. The same study concluded that the said risk compounded in small closely knit and tribalised societies hence the need for people to unite against procurement corruption and adopting strategies to eliminate procurement irregularities [37].

Capability-building systems can consist of methodological assistance tools which include guidelines, manuals, standardised templates, a help desk, more direct support, advice to implementing actual procurement procedures, and practical training (on-the-job training, mentoring, and job swapping) [12, 29]. [15] suggests that the capability-building system should be aligned with competency models and certification frameworks. When developing a capability-building system, countries may want to focus on advanced topics such as contract awarding criteria and sustainable public procurement. They can also avoid a traditional focus on the legal aspects by developing an introductory procurement programme to senior-level officials and decision makers to raise their awareness of the strategic role of public procurement [27, 34].

According to [30], the EU acknowledged in its directive 24 of 2014, the presence of a strong trend emerging across EU public procurement markets towards the aggregation of demand by public purchasers, with a view to obtaining economies of scale, including lower prices and transaction costs, and to improving and professionalising procurement management. Further, development partners such as the World Bank and United Nations [12] provide capacity building backing to European countries and the African continent's African Public Procurement Network (APPN). Many European countries have been assisted in restructuring their public procurement and professionalising staff through the establishment of the ProcurCompEU. The ProcurCompEU is the

European competency framework for public procurement professionals designed to support public procurement as a strategic function used to achieve sustainable national economic growth. It defines key competencies for public procurement professionals in the EU and beyond. The tool can also be used for self-assessment at national and institutional level.

The APPN at its meeting in Mbabane in November 2022, agreed to establish focus groups to advance the public procurement specialisation agenda [3]. Some of the approaches taken include specialised training on public procurement, establishment of dedicated competence, specialised skills in procurement, and professionalisation of the procurement workforce as a whole. However, there has not been evidence of follow ups to the above promises. The EU recommends the creation of clearly defined career paths that allow not only for continuous training and improvement in skills and experience but also for incentives linked to the level of responsibility of the procurement personnel [30]. The EU also advocates for the creation of fora and social networks to facilitate information sharing [30]. In a study of procurement professionalisation in Dutch municipalities, it was discovered that the more professional the procurement was, the more funds could be saved [10]. In light of this observation, the researchers recommended organisations to be more business-like, managing their procurement functions as they increasingly become aware of the role of strategic procurement [10]. In a related finding, [9] suggested that to improve service delivery in public procurement, there was need to benchmark with the private sector and to adapt private sector operational processes that are considered more effective than the public sector.

2.2. Public Procurement Professionalisation and Implementation Challenges

The South African National Treasury carried out a survey between 2015 and 2017 with the results showing that most of the procurement shortcomings often lead to challenges driven by lack of relevant procurement or supply chain management qualifications, inadequate procurement structures, insufficient capacity in procurement to execute procurement functions, inadequate opportunities to attend procurement training courses, and low awareness of professional bodies and associations that deal with procurement matters. The survey concluded that there was a need for appropriately qualified professionals to achieve the objective of a capable and developmental state. In an earlier study on procurement, tendering, and corruption it was concluded that the most critical element in combating corruption in South Africa is political will [13, 20, 31]. This implies that even those in power needed procurement training.

The lack of relevant procurement qualifications lead to the recruitment of people into procurement from different fields and backgrounds, most of these people do not have basic

procurement skills. Mentoring and developing such people to become procurement specialists is problematic because such people do not have grounded knowledge in the field they are expected to operate. Research has noted that despite the existence of universities and professional bodies that are now teaching procurement curricula, these institutions offer generic modules which do not recognise the unique requirements of individual country procurement systems [38]. This lack of standardized procurement programmes makes it difficult for people trained in one country to go and practice across borders.

When there are no adequate procurement structures you normally find that procurement roles are scattered all over the organisation. In such a situation, everybody's responsibility becomes nobody's responsibility hence chaos prevails. Sometimes you find the corporate services manager, or the finance manager or even the human resources manager heading procurement [34, 41]. The [25, 38] reported that in a Romanian case study it was discovered that, in Europe, there was a shift from a narrow focus on legal compliance to a situation where legal compliance becomes a pre-requisite for strategic procurement. Because the performance of public procurement systems is frequently used to measure the integrity of government it is imperative to develop flexible procurement systems while managing accountability and control [25]. This limits opportunities for maladministration while reducing operational constraints, adopting procurement best practices and achieving value for money [39]. Managing these diverse procurement variables, requires procurement managers who can create a balance between dilemmas, weighing costs and benefits to stakeholders.

When procurement is not recognised as a strategic element of the organisation its budget and support suffers. The department is under resourced and under capacitated to the extent that effective execution of procurement activities is mired in irregularities which no-one can account for. Staff will be transferred into and out of the department without any plan and this breeds good grounds for rampant looting and embezzlement of resources [39, 40, 46]. While examining the challenges of procurement professionals in Ghana, [40] discovered that inadequate capacity can lead to long and cumbersome procurement procedures, lack of representation of procurement managers in entity tender committees, and political interference. In a related study on State Corporations in Kenya, it was concluded that political interference, ineffective use of information technology, and the poor quality of procurement affected accountability and transparency [41]. Overall, the economic development of any country significantly depends on the effectiveness of its public expenditure and the performance of its public procurement, which therefore speaks to capacity issues [3, 5, 11].

Understaffing in procurement often prevents procurement staff from going on leave and attending training. This has toll effect on staff mental health and may lead to errors of fatigue such as miscalculations, misjudgements, boredom, and lack of

motivation resulting in misdemeanours such as embezzlement and pilfering which are difficult to notice instantly but grow into millions of dollars over time [40]. Lack of incentives implies that people in procurement are not motivated to join professional bodies or associations because they do not realise the importance of such bodies and do not reclaim any benefits from being members of such bodies or associations owing to lack of incentives [39, 40]. As a result there is lack of professionally trained cadre in the public sector procurement market [42]. It is also argued that the eclectic nature of public procurement and its diversity entail that training programmes must target different stakeholders such as procurement practitioners, policy makers, regulators, suppliers and civic society, among others [42]. The training curriculum must be aligned with the role played by the different stakeholders along the procurement process.

3. Materials and Methods

The study employed a qualitative approach which triangulated in-depth interviews, focus group discussion and a review of newspaper articles. Triangulation is a research method that combines a number of qualitative research strategies or quantitative research strategies in one study [43]. Therefore, this strategy provides both depth and ensuring participation by experts in the area of procurement. Using different research strategies in a single study ensure validation and complementarity among the selected strategies [44]. In-depth interviews were held with eight purposively selected procurement officers responsible for procurement in their organisations. They were expected to have hands-on, current, and rich information about the subject matter. The data collected also included insights from one focus group discussion with six participants from local government, which ranks among the top three spenders of public funds through works contracts. The researchers also conveniently sampled nine local newspaper articles on public sector procurement related matters. These conveniently selected articles were published in Eswatini's two main stream publications, the Times of Eswatini and the Observer, between May and July 2024 when the study was under-taken. All the results were analysed under three themes the status of professionalizing the procurement system, challenges faced and recommendations on way forward.

4. Results and Discussion

Literature is abound with examples and testimonies of the lack of professionalisation in public procurement [28, 40, 41]. There is also evidence that there are efforts towards professionalising public procurement such as the Pro CureComp EU framework developed to assist European countries in their quest for professionalising public procurement [5-7] and the African Public Procurement Network (APPN) which seeks to expand the role of public procurement in economic devel-

opment [5]. Overall, developing countries are lagging behind in professionalising procurement staff, hence the pillars of procurement such as value for money, transparency and accountability are no longer easy to achieve [20, 28]. It is further revealed that, the risk of lack of professionalism in procurement is severe in closely knit tribalised societies in countries like Eswatini [37, 39].

The demographic characteristics of participants in the in-depth interviews showed that 50% of the respondents were female and all respondents were aged between 31- 40 years. This is a gender- balanced group of youthful people who can still be trained to become more effective professionals. The length of service of these employees ranges from 11 to 20 years, only one participant has over 20 years of experience hence moving out of the procurement profession was not an issue. More than 80% of the respondents had a professional qualification from the Chartered Institute of Procurement and Supply (CIPS), in addition to other qualifications such as Bachelor of Commerce and Bachelor of Social Science. There is no evidence of affiliation to a professional body with a specific code of ethics, hence the issue of lifelong learning is non-existent. The ‘Any one can buy’ mantra has not worked, and it will not work. As alluded by [15, 38, 45], competent procurement professionals must have both, the relevant pro-

urement qualification and procurement work experience. The strengthening of staff capacity to carry out procurement activities efficiently and effectively is critical. It is not an option.

The in-depth interview results are summarised in Table 1 below based on three themes; the status of the procurement profession, challenges faced in the public procurement sector, and strategies towards professionalising public procurement. The results show that professionalising the procurement system is still at its infancy stage. As alluded to by [33, 40, 41, 45], public procurement professionalisation has faced challenges like corruption, political interference, increased state owned enterprise expenditure, and a professionalisation process that is moving slowly. However, the case of Khazakstan is outstanding because procurement corruption caused instability in the country [21]. To address professionalisation challenges, some countries have introduced policies that promote public procurement as a strategic component of their supply chains [22] and [38] suggested a competence framework to manage the Romanian case. Therefore, the finding that suggests ESPPRA to be overwhelmed with the compliance tasks is an indicator that the regulator requires to be supported and empowered to meet its strategic goal of public procurement specialisation.

Table 1. Summary of findings from in-depth interviews.

Theme	Results	Comment
1. Status of the procurement profession	Procurement is merely a newly recognised profession [it is still at infancy stage].	ESPPRA is encouraged to develop guidelines that compel procuring entities to employ procurement professionals. Professionalisation will not work when the education system does not produce adequate procurement graduates.
	Procurement practitioners have experience. Although the majority of people in procurement have done CIPS courses their degree and diploma qualifications are not procurement qualifications.	Procurement certification and standardisation can bring sanity when it comes to recruitment, promotion, and building confidence in the profession. ESPPRA is encouraged to partner with higher education institutions to capacitate the existing procurement practitioners so that they acquire the necessary procurement skills and knowledge.
2. Challenges affecting the public procurement profession.	Procurement officer reports to Chief Finance Officer or Finance manager who have limited understanding of procurement issues, implying, procurement is treated like an administrative rather than a strategic function. Sharp procurement practices and interference cases were also reported	It is high time that national policies address structures and governance issues ensuring procurement is given a strategic role in the organisation, empowering procurement professionals to make procurement decisions, reducing administrative bureaucracy, and political interference. That is one way of making procurement professionals accountable for procurement decisions.
	The regulator (ESPPRA) does not have capacity to enforce total compliance. This leaves room for financial leakages through corrupt procurement and financial losses as a result of poor decisions made by influential people who lack procurement knowledge. The watch-dog mentality of ESPPRA hinders feedback from procuring entities.	ESPPRA should continuously benchmark with other regulators and embark on continuous innovative initiatives to keep up with the everyday changes in procurement. To do this effectively, the regulator requires more support in terms of both resources and capacity building
3. Strategies and way forward	State Owned Entities prioritise core business functions, neglecting investment in developing pro-	ESPPRA should establish a Research and Development Department that will be proactive in creating awareness about

Theme	Results	Comment
towards professionalising public procurement	<p>procurement staff skills.</p> <p>There is no standardisation of the procurement qualifications. This is necessary for developing a salary guide for procurement professionals. Employers do not seem to be ready to remunerate personnel undertaking such a core business function in line with the responsibilities they have.</p> <p>There is no clear policy on professionalisation and certification of procurement professionals.</p> <p>Prioritisation of training and development programs for procurement professionals and life-long capacity building and development.</p>	<p>trends and developments in the procurement profession and advise on fit-for purpose training, informed by surveys at periodic intervals.</p> <p>Collaboration between ESPPRA and procuring entities can create and forge synergies that will enable capacity building necessary for change.</p> <p>It is necessary to have a statutory requirement for all people in procurement to be certified professionals of some sort. The different qualification levels must allow staff access to senior positions and promotion to higher ranks which have more decision making powers. The said rankings must be incentivised accordingly.</p> <p>Professionals could be given renewable licenses to allow them to be vetted on a regular basis. So, the license to practice procurement should be valid for a specific time period and renewed based on passing of ethical tests. Additionally, members of recognised independent professional bodies which provide specialised life-long learning to members must be recognised for licensing purposes.</p>

The researchers successfully organised one focus group discussion with six local government procurement staff who all have over five years’ experience in SOEs. It emerged from the discussions that although the public procurement profession exists, it is weak and not effective due to rigid procurement regulations, unnecessary red tape, unqualified procurement staff, political interference, and procurement staff

being relegated to administrative roles instead of specialised strategic roles. These issues have already been highlighted in existing literature [9, 10, 28]. Results from the discussions were summarised based on three themes: the status of the procurement profession, challenges faced in the public procurement sector, and strategies towards professionalising public procurement.

Table 2. Findings from the Focus Group Discussion.

Theme	Results	Comment
1. Status of the procurement profession	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) There is no alignment between the Public Procurement Act and Local Government Act. There is overlapping roles between ESPPRA and the National Tender Board 2) People occupying procurement positions have experience and qualifications which are not necessarily procurement qualifications. 3) Some of the qualifications staff have become obsolete and need to be upgraded. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Lack of coordination among different legislation governing local government staff creates room for corruption and interference. 2) Procurement certification and standardisation can bring in sanity when it comes to recruitment, promotion and building confidence in the profession. 3) Update procurement curricula and recognise qualifications offered through approved institutions. 4) Address reporting relationships ensuring procurement is given a strategic role in the organisation. Avoid structures which do not adhere to the principle of accountability. 5) ESPPRA needs to be strengthened and capacitated so that it can effectively deliver on its mandate of oversight over all procurement processes in the public sector.
2. Challenges affecting the pub-	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Procurement officer reports to Chief Finance Officer/Finance Manager with lim- 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) In procurement entities that recognize the procurement profession a staff member who has the relevant qualifications and procure-

Theme	Results	Comment
lic procurement profession.	<p>ited understanding of procurement issues</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2) The regulator ESPPRA is understaffed and cannot control all procurement entities alone. 3) Councilors that are involved in procurement do not have relevant knowledge and skills. 4) Procurement staff are excluded from procurement decisions. 	<p>ment experience must lead the procurement function</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2) ESPPRA must be adequately resourced to effectively to play its procurement oversight role 3) Procurement training should be provided to all stakeholders involved in procurement in one way or the other (tender board decisions must be guided by recommendations from staff who have knowledge and technical expertise. 4) Procurement staff must participate in procurement decisions, particularly high value purchases. 5) Educational campaigns should be undertaken to educate stakeholders about public procurement and the relevant statutes that govern procurement
3. Strategies and way forward towards professionalising public procurement	<p>There is non-compliance with procurement regulations.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) ESPPRA must enforce the procurement laws effectively. People who break procurement laws must be punished 2) Motivate people in procurement by appointing them to strategic positions in the organisation. 3) Develop a code of ethics and conduct that is sensitive to the local context. The law must be allowed to take its own course where and when it is the right thing to do. 4) Learning never ends and professions do not remain the same and static. Therefore, it is important that those dealing with procurement be issued renewable licenses and encouraged to upgrade their skills on a continual basis.

The newspaper extracts in [Table 3](#) below were informed by the Auditor General’s reports and they all reported about some form of non-compliance and financial losses resulting from irregular procurements. The reports helped to shed light on information shared with the public about what was happening in public procurement, giving stakeholders an opportunity to take up issues with relevant authorities. The reports were collected over a short period between May and July 2024, but they align with findings from reviewed literature, in-depth interviews and the focus group discussion. The fact that there is so much information reported within three months paints a

gloomy picture about procurement professionalism in the country. All the nine cases correspond with literature findings that public procurement is plagued with scenes of corruption, collusion, and other uncompetitive practices that lead to financial leakages [46]. For example, cases one and two reflect lack of political will to correct procurement irregularities in the procurement system [1, 31]. Case five confirms [41]’s argument that organisations suffer losses as a result of poor-quality staff, inadequate regulatory compliance, and exposure to potential loss because procurement staff are excluded from strategic procurement processes and decisions.

Table 3. Summary of Findings from Newspaper Articles.

Case Number, Date & page	Reported Challenge or Infraction	Comment
Times of Eswatini Case 1. 28/05/24 pp. 4-5	<p>“Controversy over E316,000.00 furniture at the Ministry of Labour”</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Furniture valued at E316,000 bought by the Ministry was not accounted for during physical verification by auditors. 2) There were no delivery notes for the received items. 3) Explanation given was that during Covid-19 prices were inflated hence the procurement entity could not receive full order. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) A qualified procurement professional should ensure that all deliveries are accompanied by delivery documents (purchase order, delivery note, goods received note and invoice). All these must match. 2) Procurement entities have authorisation processes that regularise price variations (paying an invoice whose value differs from the one on purchase order is

	Case Number, Date & page	Reported Challenge or Infraction	Comment
Times of Eswatini	Case 2. 30/05/24 pp. 2-3	<p><i>"Health Ministry Evasive Over Recalled Drugs"</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Drugs valued at E11.8 million for four Government hospitals unaccounted for between 2021 and 2022. 2) Four people were arrested for medicine theft. 	<p>irregular and unacceptable).</p> <p>All stock that was not accounted was paid for in advance. Such monies are difficult to recover and a loss to government. Advance payments should not be normalised. Where they are allowed, a more legally binding agreement (contract) must be used instead of using the purchase order.</p>
Times of Eswatini	Case 3. 30/05/24 page 17	<p><i>"More delays for new government vehicles"</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Vehicles were expected in February 2024 2) One reason for the delay is bureaucratic red tape in the procurement process 3) There is alleged corruption in the department and it is in the form of fuel theft (E10 m worth of fuel was stolen), and stealing of parts from grounded fleet. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Delays can create room for unnecessary emergency purchases, a breeding ground for corruption, which turn out to be expensive than normal purchases 2) Professionalising procurement must aim to eliminate bad practices like corruption.
Times of Eswatini-Sunday	Case 4. 23/06/24 Add page number	<p><i>"PAC'Call in line with Drugs Report Recommendations"</i></p> <p>It was discovered that the drugs procurement process was mired with:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Wastage (E517 million worth of orders not fulfilled); 2) Poor internal control (manually driven processes); 3) Poor governance of medicines and drug administration; 4) Poor supply chain management; 5) Inadequate systems that lead to duplication of orders and payments; 6) Officials changing labels for suppliers; and 7) Stores receiving expired drugs. 	<p>Procurement sharp practices and unprofessional procurement practices are always problematic in one way or the other. The affected organisations lose money, credibility and will not meet their procurement goals</p>
Times of Eswatini-Sunday	Case 5. 23/06/24 page 12	<p><i>"Central Bank Agreement with Taiwanese Engineers"</i></p> <p>The delegation that went to Taiwan to discuss the agreement to construct the ERB head office included Chief Operations Officer, Chief Legal Officer, and Ambassador of Eswatini in Taiwan.</p>	<p>The exclusion of the Procurement Executive raises eyebrows or it means there is no procurement representative at Executive level of the bank.</p>
Times of Eswatini-Sunday	Case 6. 23/06/24 page 16	<p><i>"Government Won't go Bankrup, Safest to Supply But..."</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) The Minister of Finance was warning suppliers that they may experience delayed payments, and that there will be piling of backlog of payments for suppliers. 2) At that time the government owed suppliers around E1.4 billion. 3) Meanwhile, suppliers lamented that delayed payments by government were killing their businesses. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Not paying suppliers on time is unprofessional procurement practice. 2) Ironically, when suppliers are bidding tenders from poor payers, like the government, they overcharge and inflate prices. Government ends up paying more for less 3) Suppliers must be paid on time, it is good practice to do so
Times of Eswatini	Case 7. 8/7/24 page12	<p><i>"No more pay for undelivered goods"</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) The Ministry of Agriculture was caught offside for paying suppliers in advance, flouting procedures and putting the government at risk of losing money to suppliers. 2) Payment upfront entails that suppliers are paid in advance before they deliver the goods. 3) Four upfront payments of above E500,000 0 each were recorded by auditors. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Advance payments should not be the norm and only tolerated in dire situations where suppliers demand it. 2) The risk of receiving poor quality goods and incomplete orders is high when one has already paid 3) The risk of goods or orders not being delivered is high hence upfront payments must be accepted in exceptional cases as long as they will be covered by a contract

	Case Number, Date & page	Reported Challenge or Infraction	Comment
Sunday Observer	Case 8. 17/07/24 page 3	<p><i>"We know nothing about that tender"</i> says ESPPRA.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) ESPPRA is responsible for overseeing the country's procurement activities. 2) In this instance ESPPRA expressed ignorance about a number of high value tenders processed through the Auditor General's office without ESPPRA's approval. 3) One of the tenders resulted in an extra payment of E1 million. 4) This discredits the accountability of both ESPPRA and the AG's office and tarnishes the integrity of the procurement processes in the country. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Effective communication and coordination is critical in public procurement. 2) Significant changes to original purchase agreements are special cases that must be authorized by the National Tender Board [The role overlap between ESPPRA and the National Tender Board is a serious issues that government must address] 3) It is important to ensure good inter-organizational relationships between ESPPRA and all procurement entities
Eswatini Observer	Case 9. 15/07/24 page 3	<p><i>"Global Fund Concerned with Drugs Procurement Process in Eswatini"</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Between 2021 and 2024 the Fund pumped E1billion into Eswatini for drug procurement. 2) Because of reported bad procurement behaviour the Fund wants the Eswatini government to expedite the privatisation of the Central Medical Store (CMS). 3) The Fund prefers direct procurement to curb unscrupulous procurement practices e.g. Donated medication being sold, relabelling of expired drugs, incomplete deliveries, etc. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) The risk of undelivered orders is high and is more serious where upfront payments have occurred. 2) It is generally believed that private sector operations are more transparent hence the call for privatising CMS (the donors do not need to tell governments how to manage their affairs-doing that is tantamount to interference). 3) Direct procurement may sound good for the fund but not for promoting investment and economic development. The solution could be in professionalising the procurement system not privatising procuring entities.

5. Conclusions

The study established that the road to procurement professionalisation is bumpy, full of road blocks and challenges affecting procurement entities' ability to effectively account for public funds. All this points to the need for strengthening public procurement practices and professionalising the procurement system to enhance the attainment of public procurement objectives of value for money and cost effectiveness. Policy makers must leverage the powers they have to create and strengthen legislation governing procurement policies that effectively deal with challenges faced in implementing and enforcing procurement laws at national, institutional and individual level. The benefits of good laws cannot be realised when the same laws are silent about effectively implementing them through effective professionalisation. Thus, the need to professionalise public procurement is a phenomenon that needs to be given the attention it deserves. It is no longer an option but the way to go. Therefore, it is recommended that the government capacitate and support ESPPRA in professionalising public procurement, giving ESPPRA the necessary resources and empowering it to become more effective.

The country requires specific guidelines on qualifications to be held by people employed in government procurement departments while the regulator and procurement entities must enforce such regulations. Related policies must empower government to financially support educational institutions offering procurement curricula and certification. Relevant procurement qualifications and experience must be prescribed as part of the criteria for recruiting individuals into procurement departments, particularly procurement management positions.

Non-compliance with procurement laws is a drain to the treasury. Cases of procurement malpractices must be punishable and penalties should be spelt out in the relevant regulations. Accounting officers must be empowered to deal with unethical procurement practices, notwithstanding the action and judgement of the court process. Findings in the study abound with cases of unethical practices and by extension procurement corruption, but there have been no reports of cases that were referred for prosecution.

There might be a very small percentage of people in procurement who are corrupt but the impact of graft is huge. Professionalisation implies the empowerment of procurement systems to take mitigation action to soften the impact of real and potential loss through unprofessional procurement prac-

tices. Therefore, paying a few extra thousand dollars as incentives to motivate and retain procurement professionals will never be equal and close to millions of dollars lost through procurement corruption and unethical procurement behaviour. Corruption is mostly perpetrated by gullible, untrained, unqualified, and unprofessional buyers who can easily fall prey to unscrupulous bidders who are determined to push the brown envelope, even for the smallest purchase order. To minimize the risk, it is better to pay incentives to qualified and experienced procurement professionals because when they are effective they can save money and the image of procurement entities and government.

While the qualitative research approach allowed the researchers to directly engage with key informants and review relevant media articles, findings from qualitative studies tend to be exploratory in nature. Insights from the few key informants that were interviewed under in-depth and focus group discussions, and newspaper articles covering three months did not cover the entire public sector hence they are inadequate to form a generalisable conclusion about the lack of a professionalised public procurement system and its subsequent effects. The methodological simplicity of the study was limited to exploring the issues raised in the study yet procurement has complex activities and processes that require more time, more funding, and deeper and comprehensive engagements with key stakeholders. Superior research approaches that tend to be more pragmatic such as the mixed methods approach is recommended for further studies. Such an approach can lead to more comprehensive analysis and findings having considered both qualitative and quantitative aspects of procurement professionalisation. Further research that involves more participants and looks at the expectations of specific market segments is recommended. Such research would improve coverage of more stakeholders, gather additional insights, and collate solutions that are more practical and solicit buy-in from various relevant stakeholders.

Abbreviations

AG	Attorney General
APPN	African Public Procurement Network
CIPS	Chartered Institute of Procurement and Supply
CMS	Central Medical Stores
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
E	Emalangenzi (Eswatini Currency)
EU	European Union
ERB	Eswatini Reserve Bank
ESPPRA	Eswatini Public Procurement Authority
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GIMPA	Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration
HND	Higher National Diploma
OECD	Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development
PAC	Public Accounts Committee (Eswatini)

PPA	Public Procurement Authority (Ghana)
SOEs	State Owned Enterprises

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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