



NRF Evaluation and Rating
Guidelines and Criteria for Appeals

13 February 2013

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 When a researcher applies for a National Research Foundation (NRF) rating, an Assessment Panel¹ considers a number of reviewers' reports on the applicant's research and research standing based upon the applicant's research output during the eight (8) years prior to the review, and thereafter assigns a rating to the applicant. The rating reflects the Assessment Panel's conclusion as to which rating category best represents the opinions that reviewers have expressed in their reports on that applicant. Where Assessment Panels cannot reach consensus, or where in their opinion an applicant might fall within the A or P categories, or should no longer fall within the A category, the application and the reviewers' reports are referred to the Executive Evaluation Committee (EEC)² for further consideration and final decision.
- 1.2 Although the process contains various checks and balances to ensure that rating decisions are consistent and fair, mistakes may nonetheless occur and a process has been established in terms of which applicants who are dissatisfied with the outcome of a rating decision are able to have the matter reviewed. This document sets out the criteria and processes for doing so.

2. APPEAL

- 2.1 Applicants may appeal against the outcome of an evaluation, with or without the support of the applicant's institution; but all appeals must be submitted via the *relevant authority*³ at the applicant's institution.
- 2.2 The relevant authority must lodge an appeal on behalf of the applicant in writing **within three (3) months** of the date of the letter providing the applicant with the evaluation outcome and/or feedback.
- 2.3 Appeals must be lodged with the NRF's Monitoring and Evaluation Unit, which acts as the secretariat for the Appeals Committee.⁴

3. GUIDELINES TO INSTITUTIONS

- 3.1 Although no restrictions are placed on the grounds upon which an applicant may appeal an evaluation decision, the appeal documentation must indicate the extent to which the particular evaluation outcome was seriously incongruent with the institution's assessment of the applicant or the applicant's own assessment and must substantiate why the institutional/applicant's assessment is considered to be more appropriate than that of the Assessment Panel.
- 3.2 Applicants should therefore first consider whether there is a ground for appeal that can be substantiated. The grounds, upon which an Assessment Panel's decision could be overruled,

¹ See Appendix A

² See Appendix A

³ An institution's Research Office or staff in the directorate responsible for coordinating research will be able to advise in this regard.

⁴ See Appendix A

set out in clause 6 below, could guide applicants regarding areas upon which to focus. The following questions may further assist:

3.2.1 *Was the result of the evaluation seriously incongruent with the applicant's or institution's assessment?*

The appeal documentation must allege and substantiate the view that a material difference exists between the evaluation outcome and the institutional expectation. A difference of one degree, i.e. adjacent sub-categories (C2 and C3 or C1 and B3), is normally not considered to be sufficiently material, but institutions are not precluded from proving otherwise in particular circumstances.

3.2.2 *What are the main reasons for the appeal and will they make a material difference to the outcome?*

Grounds for appeal are normally either procedural or substantive (relating to the merits of a decision). The reasons must also be sufficiently strong to make a material difference to the outcome. For example, some procedural irregularities might well be material, while others will not affect the outcome.

3.2.3 *How will the reasons for appeal be substantiated?*

Mere criticism of an outcome or allegation as to an irregularity is not sufficient. The documentation must provide a case as to why the original outcome was wrong and why it should be overruled. The reasons must also be sufficiently strong to indicate that a material difference in the outcome will result.

Most importantly, however, the evidence supporting the appeal must have been extant when the rating application was first submitted. An appeal should not be pursued if it is based on, for example, research outputs that were not published or in the public domain when the application was submitted; where there has been a change of status of research outputs e.g. a paper in preparation at the time of submission has in the meantime been accepted for publication; or where the applicant received honours or accolades subsequent to the submission of the rating application. *Information coming to light subsequent to submission of the application **will not** be taken into account.*

Under no circumstances should testimonials, additional referee reports or similar information be included.

3.2.4 *Are the NRF rating categories⁵ well understood?*

Institutional authorities and applicants should ensure that they understand the rating categories thoroughly before lodging an appeal. Institutions must not only consider whether or not the applicant should fall within a category as defined, but must also consider the nuances that are found in the wording of the various sub-categories. (Note that definitions are continuously refined and institutions must ensure that they base their motivations on the most current definitions of rating categories.)

3.2.5 *Have the NRF Key Research Areas and Types of Research Outputs⁶ been taken into consideration before lodging an appeal?*

⁵ See Appendix B

⁶ The document can be found at: <http://www.nrf.ac.za/projects.php?pid=115>

The NRF Key Research Areas and Types of Research Outputs document states the types of research and/or research outputs for the different disciplines dealt with by the Assessment Panels. These may differ according to the requirements of particular disciplines. Applicants must ensure that the types of research output listed in their applications conform with the categories of the disciplines dealt with by the relevant Assessment Panel, as well as their relative importance as specified in the document.

3.2.6 *Did the candidate submit his/her application to the correct panel?*

Applicants indicate which panels they consider appropriate for the evaluation of their applications. If a panel specified by, or agreed to by, the applicant considered the application that would normally not constitute an irregularity.

3.2.7 *Is it possible that the Assessment Panel might have been correct?*

In any evaluation process, and especially in borderline cases, persons are called upon to exercise judgment after considering the information presented to them. The mandate of Assessment Panels is to determine whether the selected peer reviewers have assessed an applicant's research and research standing appropriately and fairly, and to determine the collective peer opinion of the applicant's research and research standing. Assessment Panels base their judgments on particular criteria and clearly-circumscribed information: they assess the reviewer reports and resort to the application documents and some bibliometric material when assessing the reliability of the opinions expressed.

By the very nature of the process, applicants and institutions do not have the same information available to them. While this does not preclude them from having a valid opinion regarding an appropriate rating, applicants and institutions should consider seriously the possibility that peer reviewers could have pointed to issues of concern that were either not apparent before, or which the applicant might not have fully appreciated.

Before submitting an appeal, the applicant and the institution must consider the possibility that peers, in a fair process, might reasonably have reached a conclusion that differs from one's own opinion. That, after all, will be the crux of the Appeal Committee's enquiry.

4. FORMAT OF THE LETTER OF APPEAL

4.1 The letter of appeal should contain an introductory section (executive summary) indicating the applicant's personal details and institutional affiliation, the Assessment Panel that considered the matter, the rating outcome, the purpose of the appeal (i.e. the desired outcome) and a summary of the grounds of the appeal.

4.2 Thereafter the document should detail each ground of appeal with appropriate substantiation, which could include references to annexures. The grounds should be categorised as either procedural or substantive.

4.3 The letter of appeal must be signed by the relevant authority of the employing institution.

4.4 A letter of appeal will be returned to the employing institution without consideration of the merits of the appeal in the following circumstances:

4.4.1 Where it is unsigned

- 4.4.2 Where it is signed by someone other than an institution's relevant authority
 - 4.4.3 Where the letter refers to scholarly achievements postdating the original submission
 - 4.4.4 Where other reports received from reviewers, e.g. those solicited by the employing institution for promotion purposes, are included
 - 4.4.5 Where the letter does not conform to the requirements listed in clauses 4.1 and 4.2
- 4.5 Letters of appeal that have been returned may be revised and resubmitted within fourteen (14) days of the date upon which they were returned.

5. DOCUMENTS TO BE CONSIDERED BY THE APPEALS COMMITTEE

- 5.1 The Appeals Committee considers the following documents during the appeal process:
- 5.1.1 The letter of appeal
 - 5.1.2 The researcher's original rating application
 - 5.1.3 Reports by the reviewers
 - 5.1.4 Meeting records, as well as the decisions taken by the relevant Assessment Panel and, where appropriate, the EEC
 - 5.1.5 Relevant policy documents and/or decisions
- 5.2 The Appeals Committee may consider any other documentation that could assist in clarifying issues and/or reaching an appropriate decision.

6. GROUNDS FOR OVERRULING A DECISION

- 6.1 The Appeals Committee shall not consider the application afresh, without reference to the previous decision of the Assessing Panel and/or the EEC regarding the applicant's rating.
- 6.2 Although it is free to do so, the Appeals Committee will not overrule and substitute the decision of the body that made the previous rating decision unless the Appeals Committee is firmly convinced that, based upon the information that was before that body at the time that it made its decision, the previous decision was wrong.
- 6.3 A decision of the Appeals Committee may result in a rating remaining the same or being adjusted either upwards or downwards.
- 6.4 The Appeals Committee will consider the following when assessing whether or not an appeal should succeed:
- 6.4.1 *Substantive issues relating to the merit of the appeal*

Was the decision of the previous body:

 - (a) Congruent with the information before it?
 - (b) Congruent with the reasons that it provided for reaching that decision?
 - (c) Reached because irrelevant considerations were taken into account or because relevant considerations were not considered?
 - (d) Based on reports where the majority of reviewers were peers?
 - (e) So unreasonable that no reasonable person could have reached a similar decision based on the information that was presented to it?

6.4.2 *Procedural issues*

- (a) Did the previous body follow the prescribed procedures in reaching its decision?
- (b) Was the decision of the previous body tainted with bias, or can reasonably be suspected that some members involved in the decision were biased?
- (c) Was the decision taken by an inappropriate or incorrect panel; i.e. one that was not listed in the applicant's application or not accepted by the applicant when a panel not so listed was selected?
- (d) Was the panel decision based on a sufficient number of useful reviewers' reports?
- (e) Did the balance of reports by independent reviewers and reviewers nominated by the applicant possibly disadvantage the outcome of the rating?

6.4.3 *Materiality*

Is any identified irregularity sufficiently substantial to constitute a material deviation from a required norm to warrant the overruling of the previous decision?

7. CLOSURE

- 7.1 The NRF's Monitoring and Evaluation Unit shall convey the decision of the Appeals Committee to the relevant authority at the applicant's employing institution as well as to the EEC and the relevant Assessment Panel members.
- 7.2 The decision of the Appeals Committee shall constitute the final determination of an applicant's rating and no further appeals will be permitted.
- 7.3 There shall be no further correspondence regarding the merits of the Appeals Committee decision, the reasons therefor, or the procedures that it followed.

Appendix A: ADMINISTRATIVE AND DECISION-MAKING STRUCTURES FOR RATING

1. ASSESSMENT PANEL

1.1. Composition

- 1.1.1 A Chairperson appointed by the NRF who has a disciplinary background independent of the Specialist Committee members
- 1.1.2 An Assessor appointed by the NRF who has a disciplinary background independent of the Chairperson and the Specialist Committee members
- 1.1.3 Members of the Specialist Committee, appointed by the NRF
- 1.1.4 In attendance:
 - (a) Manager: NRF Monitoring and Evaluation
 - (b) Secretariat: Staff from NRF Monitoring and Evaluation Unit

1.2. Chairperson

A person appointed by the NRF who has a disciplinary background independent of the Specialist Committee members

1.3. Quorum

- 1.3.1. Chairperson and
- 1.3.2. Assessor and
- 1.3.3. At least 50% plus one (1) of the members of the Specialist Committee.

1.4. Appointment

- 1.4.1 Chairpersons of the Assessment Panels are appointed for a period of three (3) years (with the option of extending the appointment) by the NRF CEO
- 1.4.2 Assessors are appointed for a period of three (3) years (with the option of extending the appointment) by the NRF Deputy CEO
- 1.4.3 Specialist Committee members are appointed annually for a period of three years (with the option of extending the appointment) by the responsible NRF Executive Director after one or more of the following steps:
 - Consultation with the convener and/or members of the current Specialist Committee
 - Consultation with any suitable person in the South African research community
 - A call for nominations

1.5. Terms of Reference

- 1.5.1. To receive documentation from the NRF in respect of the evaluation and rating of individual researchers
- 1.5.2. To screen the applications for evaluation and rating for appropriateness of the primary panel and to select the most appropriate reviewers [done by the members of the Specialist Committees]
- 1.5.3. To ensure that a sufficient number of useful reports with a balance of reports by independent reviewers and reviewers nominated by the applicant is available for discussion at the panel meeting [done by the members of the Specialist Committees]
- 1.5.4. To assess the usability of the reports and to interpret the ratings proposed by the reviewers

- 1.5.5. To decide on an appropriate rating for applicants based on the reports of reviewers
- 1.5.6. To debate issues if there is no consensus on a particular rating and to try to reach consensus
- 1.5.7. To refer cases where consensus cannot be reached to the Executive Evaluation Committee (EEC)
- 1.5.8. To refer cases to the EEC where a principle decision is required
- 1.5.9. To forward nominations for the A and P categories to the EEC together with the Assessment Panel's recommendations
- 1.5.10. To refer all applications of researchers who previously fell in the A category, who are deemed to no longer fall into this category, to the EEC
- 1.5.11. To identify constructive feedback from the reports by reviewers that could be conveyed to applicants [done by the members of the Specialist Committees]
- 1.5.12. To recommend improvements to the evaluation and rating process and
- 1.5.13. To alert the NRF Executive to the needs and priorities of particular disciplines

2 EXECUTIVE EVALUATION COMMITTEE (EEC)

2.1 Composition

- 2.1.1 NRF Deputy CEO, Research and Innovation Support and Advancement (RISA)
- 2.1.2 NRF Executive Director with responsibility for evaluation and rating
- 2.1.3 Chairpersons of Assessment Panels
- 2.1.4 Relevant NRF Executive Director on a rotational basis
- 2.1.5 Two (2) conveners of the Specialist Committees (one representing the Natural Sciences and Engineering (NSET) panels and one representing the Social Sciences, Humanities and Law (SSH&L) panels) appointed by the NRF Deputy CEO (RISA) on a rotational basis annually
- 2.1.6 In attendance:
 - (a) Manager: NRF Monitoring and Evaluation
 - (b) Secretariat: Staff from NRF Monitoring and Evaluation Unit

2.2 Chairperson

NRF Deputy CEO (RISA)

2.3 Quorum

The quorum shall be a majority of all committee members (50% + 1) of whom at least three (3) shall be external members (i.e. not NRF staff) and at least two shall be NRF staff members

2.4 Appointment

- 2.4.1 The Chairpersons of the Assessment Panels are appointed for a period of three (3) years (with the option of extending the appointment) by the NRF CEO
- 2.4.2 The Conveners of the Specialist Committees on the EEC are appointed annually by the NRF Deputy CEO (RISA) from the currently serving conveners
- 2.4.3 The rotating NRF Executive member is appointed by the NRF Deputy CEO (RISA).

2.5 Terms of Reference

- 2.5.1 To consider cases where consensus could not be reached at the meetings of the Assessment Panels
- 2.5.2 To take decisions about applicants nominated for the A and P categories (except when they are the outcome of an appeal)
- 2.5.3 To validate decisions on all applicants who were previously in the A category and who are nominated for placement in another category by the Assessment Panels
- 2.5.4 To take decisions on all applications referred by the Assessment Panels where a principle decision is required
- 2.5.5 To identify issues for discussion/clarification at the annual EEC/Assessors/Conveners policy workshop
- 2.5.6 To refer amendments to policy issues to the NRF Executive for a decision
- 2.5.7 To make recommendations on any aspect of the evaluation and rating process to the NRF Executive
- 2.5.8 To commission investigations about the evaluation and rating process where necessary

3. APPEALS COMMITTEE

3.1 Composition

- 3.1.1 A senior researcher of repute who is thoroughly familiar with the NRF evaluation and rating system
- 3.1.2 One or more additional members who are or who have been researchers/scholars of stature
- 3.1.3 One or more members who have considerable experience with the NRF evaluation and rating process (e.g. previous NRF Assessor/member of the EEC);
- 3.1.4 The NRF CEO (ex officio)
- 3.1.5 In attendance:
 - (a) Manager: NRF Monitoring and Evaluation
 - (b) Secretariat: Staff from NRF Monitoring and Evaluation Unit

3.2 Chairperson

The Chairperson is a senior researcher of repute who is thoroughly familiar with the NRF rating system

3.3 Quorum

The quorum shall be a majority of all committee members (50% + 1)

3.4 Appointment

- 3.4.1 The Chairperson will be appointed by the NRF CEO for a period of three years with the possibility of reappointment for a further maximum period of three consecutive years
- 3.4.2 Other members will be appointed by the NRF CEO in consultation with the Chairperson of the Appeals Committee. A member may not be a current member of an Assessment Panel or EEC

3.5 Terms of Reference

- 3.5.1 To consider appeals lodged against evaluation and rating decisions

- 3.5.2 To ensure that the correct and complete process has been followed in specific applications against which an appeal has been lodged
- 3.5.3 To ensure that fairness and objectivity prevails in the interpretation of reviewers' reports
- 3.5.4 To ensure that NRF ratings are interpreted correctly
- 3.5.5 May refer matters back to the Specialist Committee for additional input and
- 3.5.6 To make a final and binding pronouncement on the outcome of the rating decision that is being appealed.

Appendix B:

| Cat | Definition | Sub-cat | Description |
|-----|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| A | Researchers who are unequivocally recognised by their peers as leading international scholars in their field for the high quality and impact of their recent research outputs. | A1 | A researcher in this group is recognised by all reviewers as a leading scholar in his/her field internationally for the high quality and wide impact (i.e. beyond a narrow field of specialisation) of his/her recent research outputs. |
| | | A2 | A researcher in this group is recognised by the overwhelming majority of reviewers as a leading scholar in his/her field internationally for the high quality and impact (either wide or confined) of his/her recent research outputs. |
| B | Researchers who enjoy considerable international recognition by their peers for the high quality and impact of their recent research outputs. | B1 | All reviewers are firmly convinced that the applicant enjoys considerable international recognition for the high quality and impact of his/her recent research outputs, with some of them indicating that he/she is a leading international scholar in the field. |
| | | B2 | All or the overwhelming majority of reviewers are firmly convinced that the applicant enjoys considerable international recognition for the high quality and impact of his/her recent research outputs. |
| | | B3 | Most of the reviewers are convinced that the applicant enjoys considerable international recognition for the high quality and impact of his/her recent research outputs. |
| C | Established researchers with a sustained recent record of productivity in the field who are recognised by their peers as having: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Produced a body of quality work, the core of which has coherence and attests to on-going engagement with the field Demonstrated the ability to conceptualise problems and apply research methods to investigating them. | C1 | All of the reviewers are firmly convinced that the applicant is an established researcher as described with some reviewers indicating that he/she already enjoys considerable international recognition on the basis of his/her high quality recent research outputs. |
| | | C2 | All of the reviewers are firmly convinced that the applicant is an established researcher as described. The applicant may, but need not, enjoy some international recognition for the quality and impact of his/her recent research outputs. |
| | | C3 | Most of the reviewers concur that the applicant is an established researcher as described. |
| P | Young researchers (normally younger than 35 years of age), who have held the doctorate or equivalent qualification for less than five years at the time of application and who, on the basis of exceptional potential demonstrated in their published doctoral work and/or their research outputs in their early post-doctoral careers, are considered likely to become future international leaders in their field. | | Researchers in this group are recognised by all or the overwhelming majority of reviewers as having demonstrated the potential of becoming future international leaders in their field on the basis of exceptional research performance and output from their doctoral and/or early post-doctoral research careers. |
| Y | Young researchers (40 years or younger), who have held the doctorate or equivalent qualification for less than five years at the time of application, and who are recognised as having the potential to establish themselves as researchers within a five-year period after evaluation, based on their performance and productivity of quality research outputs during their doctoral studies and/or early post-doctoral careers. | Y1 | A young researcher (within five years from PhD) who is recognised by all reviewers as having the potential (demonstrated by research products) to establish himself/herself as a researcher with some of them indicating that he/she has the potential to become a future leader in his/her field. OR A young researcher (within five years from PhD) who is recognised by all or the overriding majority of reviewers as having the potential to establish him/herself as a researcher of considerable international standing on the basis of the quality and impact of her/his recent research outputs. |
| | | Y2 | A researcher in this group is recognised by all or the overwhelming majority of reviewers as having the potential to establish himself/herself as a researcher (demonstrated by recent research products). |

DEFINITION OF RESEARCH

For purposes of the NRF, research is original investigation undertaken to gain knowledge and/or enhance understanding.

Research specifically includes:

- The creation and development of the intellectual infrastructure of subjects and disciplines (e.g. through dictionaries, scholarly editions, catalogues and contributions to major research databases);
- The invention or generation of ideas, images, performances and artefacts where these manifestly embody new or substantially developed insights;
- Building on existing knowledge to produce new or substantially improved materials, devices, products, policies or processes.

It specifically excludes:

- Routine testing and analysis of materials, components, instruments and processes, as distinct from the development of new analytical techniques;
- The development of teaching materials and teaching practices that do not embody substantial original enquiry.

DEFINITION OF RATING CATEGORIES

Appendix C:

ILLUSTRATION OF PROCESS OF APPEAL AGAINST RATING OUTCOMES

