

# Transformation and the NRF

*An interview with Dr Beverley Damonse, Group Director: Science Engagement and Corporate Relations*

**t**ransformation is at the heart of the South African agenda, covering almost all aspects of society, and science, technology and innovation are no exception.

The NRF's own mandate is linked to that of higher education where issues such as knowledge production, who produces what knowledge and access to knowledge all form part of the transformation agenda. We recognise that the organisation has played a key role in supporting many programmes and interventions that have supported change in the research landscape over time. However, up until recently, we did not take an overarching, holistic approach.

In 2016, the NRF realised the need to articulate a transformation framework through which their work of change with the country's research community would take place in a way that addressed key identified areas in line with the NRF mandate.

## **A Framework for Transformation**

After an 18 month process, the management presented the NRF Board with an evidence-based framework document which frames and informs the NRF's role in and contributions to the transformation agenda of the National System of Innovation (NSI) and for the NRF itself. The framework is based on four key areas in which the NRF commits to an agenda of change;

- The transformation of the equity profiles of students and researchers supported, i.e. do they reflect the demography of South African society?
- The transformation of the knowledge enterprise, e.g. who produces knowledge, who is able to access knowledge, etc.
- The transformation of the relationship between knowledge and society; and
- The transformation of the NRF itself, i.e. while the NRF imposes targets and requirements for funding, is the organisation itself practicing what it preaches in terms of the transformation agenda?

The framework has its roots in social justice, covering areas of equity and redress across the research community. For example, our first steps were to look at the postgraduate funding space and continue to monitor and implement what needs to be driven in this area; driving research excellence and looking at how young researchers develop into established researchers.

It was also designed to be a living document of strategic intent capable of responding to changes in the internal and external environment in which the NRF functions.

## **Achieving our Transformation Goals**

Are we achieving transformation in the four areas we have identified?

The answer is not definitive. Despite 24 years of democracy and some notable changes in the higher education and research and innovation landscapes, South Africa still has a long way to go in terms of addressing the imbalances that still exist with regards to race, gender, access to resources, etc. We cannot set a short-term timeline for transformation in all areas identified and success depends on factors such as our partnerships in the transformation process, available resources and what is happening in South Africa politically, economically or socially at any given time. However, through this first transformation framework, we have identified our NRF responsibilities and are committed to implementing and monitoring the required changes that drive transformation both outside of and within the NRF. In this regard, the NRF has already drafted a revised policy position on enhancing equity of postgraduate student access; success and throughput using funding; and is in ongoing discussion with major role players in the postgraduate space. In parallel, teams are working on a Framework for Resourcing the Mandate of the NRF as well as exploring a more enabling context for early career researchers to become leading international scholars. [SM](#)