



**National
Research
Foundation**

PO Box 2600
Pretoria 0001
South Africa
Tel: (012) 481 4000
Int. Code: +27 12
info@nrf.ac.za
www.nrf.ac.za

Management Response to the Review of the NEPAD Flagships National Research Foundation

Introduction

In February 2022, the National Research Foundation (NRF) through the Knowledge Advancement and Support (KAS) Directorate commissioned a review of the NEPAD Flagships, namely the African Institute for Mathematical Sciences (AIMS); the Southern Africa Network for Biosciences (SANBio); and the Southern African Network of Water Centres of Excellence (SANWATCE). The purpose of the review was to assess how the three NEPAD Flagships have effectively used their NRF grants to achieve their objectives, but especially how aligned these objectives were with the mandate of the NRF. To this end, the review was expected to provide the NRF and the Department of Science and Innovation (DSI) with performance indicators for the first five years (end of contract) since inception. In addition, the evaluation was meant to provide prospective recommendations on whether the Flagships align with the NRF mandate, and the sustainability beyond the current contract. Based on the outcomes of the report, the NRF and DSI will be able to make decisions regarding the future of the individual Flagships beyond the initial five years of funding.

The main objective of NEPAD Flagships, now known as the African Union Development Agency (AUDA) Flagships is to strengthen cooperation in science, technology, and innovation in Africa, building capacities and supporting initiatives of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the African Union (AU). These Flagship programmes generate policy briefs, guidelines, and information that is informed by scientific research for the benefit of African governments and their people.

In 2016, the DSI requested the NRF to manage these AUDA Flagship programmes. The role of the NRF was to transfer funds to these programmes to ensure the sustainability of their operations. However, the Flagships report directly to the DSI and indirectly to SADC Ministers of Science and Technology and other AU-relevant structures such as AUDA. Since the Flagships themselves had to report to DSI due to their national strategic importance, the NRF had no substantive intellectual or strategic input to the programmes.

- The African Institute for Mathematical Sciences (AIMS) is a pan-African network of centres of excellence for postgraduate education, research, and outreach in mathematical sciences with the main aim of building capacity and promoting mathematical sciences on the African continent.
- The Southern African Network of Water Centres of Excellence (SANWATCE) is a network of Higher Education- and Research institutions that conduct high-end scientific research on water and related

sectors, to strengthen national and regional capacities for water resources management and consequently reduce the impacts of water-related disasters.

- The Southern Africa Network for Biosciences (SANBio) is a shared biosciences research, development, and innovation platform for working collaboratively to address some of Southern Africa's key biosciences issues in health, nutrition, and health-related intervention areas such as agriculture and the environment.

The review report was submitted to the NRF on 6 June 2022. This document contains the NRF's response to the Reviewers' observations and recommendations.

General Remarks to the Report

- One of the panel's key observations was that while there are operational differences between the Flagships, particularly between AIMS SA and the cluster of SANBio and SANWATCE, there are also significant strategic similarities between them. This is an accurate observation.
 - *The NRF believes that the main reason for the differences between AIMS and the other two Flagships is that AIMS places a greater emphasis on student training, particularly in its intense training programmes for Masters and Doctoral students, whereas SANBio and SANWATCE place less emphasis on capacity development.*
- The panel observed that the Flagships are not firmly anchored in any reliable national or international structure.
 - *The NRF would like to indicate that the Flagships are firmly positioned in a regional organisation like AUDA. The DSI and AUDA have created strategic plans over time for the Flagships, and the DSI has contributed funding to guarantee the longevity of these Flagships. The Flagships are currently being restructured under AUDA so that they can be operated using a centre of excellence model. The NRF, therefore, believes that this will guarantee the Flagships' long-term stability. It should be noted, however, that the component of AIMS bursaries for Masters students will continue to be managed by the NRF.*
- The NRF recognises the outstanding performance of SANBio and AIMS, as well as the operational challenges in running the SANWATCE Flagship as reflected in the report. The NRF also appreciates how the grants were used to effectively leverage more international funding to support activities within the three Flagships. As a result, the NRF is pleased with the return on investment in these Flagships.
- The NRF agrees with the panel's observation that the Flagships align with the NRF mandate in terms of research advancement and knowledge mobilisation, and that the NRF should be a complementary entity that works alongside the Flagships rather than acting as a management tool. The NRF also supports the principle of co-funding by all member states to ensure the initiative's long-term sustainability.

Response to Specific Recommendations

The tables below provide summaries of the NRF's responses to the respective recommendations:

Table 1: SANBio Panel’s Recommendations and NRF Responses

Recommendation	Response
<p><u>SANBio Governance</u> The SC must be composed of influential non-political appointees and their allowance to cover the cost of attending meetings.</p> <p>The CSIR satisfied its function in serving as a Hub for SANBio. It is recommended that they continue in their role but with the provision of dedicated human capital not seconded from its other core functions.</p>	<p>Recommendation noted</p> <p>Noted – to be forwarded to AUDA</p>
<p><u>Node Coordinators</u> The institutional arrangement between the Hub-node model worked well and should continue.</p>	<p>Noted</p>
<p>The HCD and commercialisation (workshop, mentoring, student support, registration of IP) aspects should continue.</p>	<p>Noted</p>
<p><u>SANBio Student Ambassadors</u> Recommend that the programme be fully integrated into the SANBio programme.</p>	<p>Noted – this recommendation will be forwarded to the SANBio management for implementation</p>

Table 2: SANWATCE Panel’s Recommendations and NRF Responses

Recommendation	Response
<p><u>Governance</u> The SC should be composed of non-political and influential appointees.</p> <p>SC members receive an allowance to cover the cost of attending meetings.</p>	<p>Noted</p> <p>The NRF does agree with this recommendation. In general, advisory roles for committees are supported with direct costs only.</p>
<p>In support of the sustainability of the programme, the SADC Water Division should adopt a framework of directly supporting the entity through advocacy and participation (e.g., fundraising).</p>	<p>Noted and will be submitted to DSI to table at the SADC Ministerial meetings</p>
<p>The SC be strengthened through (i) membership drawn from the member organisations; (ii) meeting specifically as an SC twice a year; (iii) improved focus through strategic discussions.</p>	<p>Noted. This will be forwarded to AUDA for action.</p>
<p>Stellenbosch University should continue to serve as a Hub for SANWATCE.</p>	<p>Noted. AUDA to consider and decide within its new framework of</p>

<p><u>SANWATCE Funding</u> Seed funding should be provided by all member states towards SANWATCE.</p> <p>The recommended amount is R2 million per annum.</p> <p>Further funding for research activities can also be obtained by leveraging other donor funding rather than just the EU.</p> <p><u>SANWATCE Node coordinators</u> The Hub-node model is overly dependent on the initiative of the network manager. Node coordinators were also overly dependent on South African research infrastructure. The Secretariat to be resourced appropriately to take the pressure off the manager.</p> <p>There should be a fairer and improved distribution of research infrastructure amongst the nodes.</p> <p>The SADC water research agenda should be informed by the needs of the region and addressed in SANWATCE activities.</p> <p>Research funding centred on postgraduate student projects, which is important; but research support for senior scholars is limited which (i) limits the capacity of SANWATCE to successfully carry out its mandated role in SADC; (ii) limits the ability to build a research network in SADC. A funding model should be developed for senior-level research collaboration.</p> <p><u>Industry Partners</u> The SADC water research agenda should be reviewed on a regular basis at the Waternet- WARFSA- SANWATCE symposium.</p> <p>The respective roles of SADC subsidiaries including GMI, Waternet, etc. should be clarified to prevent duplication of tasks.</p>	<p>the management of the Flagships.</p> <p>Noted. DSI to table at forthcoming SADC Ministerial meetings.</p> <p>The final amount will be agreed upon by member states and it might deviate from the R2 million per annum.</p> <p>Noted</p> <p>Noted</p> <p>Noted. However, an in-depth analysis of infrastructure distribution amongst nodes will need to be undertaken before the implementation of this recommendation.</p> <p>SANWATCE was designed to implement the needs of the region. However, weaknesses and challenges in doing this will be addressed.</p> <p>Noted. The recommendation will be forwarded to AUDA for implementation.</p> <p>Noted. This will be forwarded to relevant stakeholders for implementation.</p> <p>Noted</p>
---	--

<i>Student Ambassadors</i> The funding was important in HCD and complemented the teaching and training of the node coordinators.	Noted
Research support should be continued and augmented. SADC member states to contribute to WARFSA.	Noted
Student ambassador arrangements should be adopted and fully integrated into the programme. Post-graduate fellowships should be supported.	Noted

Table 3: AIMS Panel’s Recommendations and NRF Responses

General Recommendation	Response
The Panel strongly recommends the continuation of the support to AIMS SA in its current model and is of the opinion that it would be beneficial to South Africa and the continent if AIMS and, in particular, the AIMS Research Centre, was strengthened to become a National Centre of Mathematical Sciences whose establishment was recommended by the International Review of Mathematical Sciences Research at South African Higher Education Institutions, presented to the DST on 18/12/2008.	The recommendation has been noted and will necessitate further consultation with relevant stakeholders. A more appropriate response will be provided based on the outcome of further engagement.

Conclusion

The NRF would like to thank the panel for their thorough review. The NRF, DSI, and AUDA will use the report to guide their next steps. It should be noted that, at the time of the review, AUDA had already begun a restructuring process for the management of the Flagships. Previous reviews informed the restructuring of these Flagships, and this review will undoubtedly add to the input required to put together sustainable pan-African initiatives to serve the people of the continent.

Given the NRF mandate, selected grants can in future be facilitated by the NRF, but on a competitive basis.

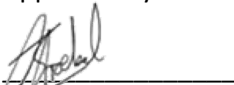
Prepared by



Michael Nxumalo

Director: KAS

Approved by



Dr Aldo Stroebe

Acting Executive Director: KAS

Date: 10 August 2022