



## **Research Development Grants for Y-Rated Researchers**

### **Framework Document**

### **Next Generation and Emerging Researchers**

**February 2026**

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## List of Acronyms

DCC	Digital Curation Centre
DSTI	Department of Science, Technology and Innovation
DMP	Data Management Plan
NRF	National Research Foundation
PI	Principal Investigator
PR	Progress Report
RISA	Research, Innovation and Impact Support and Advancement

## **1. Overview**

Research Development Grants for Y-Rated Researchers instrument links to the strategic intent of the National Research Foundation (NRF), which seeks to promote and support the establishment of a transformed, internationally competitive and sustainable research workforce. This Framework document is intended to inform potential applicants of the objectives and requirements for participation in this funding instrument. It provides a brief overview of the Research Development Grants for Y-Rated Researchers funding instrument, eligibility criteria, application principles, funding guidelines and review procedures. The Research Development Grants for Y-Rated Researchers Framework does not, however, constitute a complete set of the NRF funding policies and procedures and must therefore be read in conjunction with the Application Guide which provides additional information.

## **2. Context**

### **2.1. NRF Rating System**

The NRF rating system is a key driver in the NRF's aim to build a globally competitive science system in South Africa and is a valuable tool for benchmarking the quality of the South African researchers against the best in the world. The rating system has five (5) categories and amongst this is the Y-category which comprises of Y-rated researchers. These are young researchers (40 years or younger), who have held the doctorate or equivalent qualification for less than five years and who are recognised as having the potential to establish themselves as researchers. The Department of Science, Technology and Innovation (DSTI) and the NRF recognise the need to deliberately provide dedicated support to this cohort of emerging and promising researchers to hasten their process of establishing themselves as established researchers. Therefore, both the DSTI and the NRF, have established the Research Development Grants for Y-Rated Researchers which is a funding instrument that is dedicated for the development of Y-Rated Researchers and is a key enabler for a transformed and highly skilled science and technology community.

### **2.2. NRF Perspective**

Research Development Grants for Y-Rated Researchers is an instrument to support ring-fenced, once-off grants that is competitive and discipline-based in nature. The instrument is aimed at enhancing the efficiency of the NRF to drive transformation consistently and strategically through supporting primarily basic research as the foundation of knowledge production in the disciplines of the Humanities, Social and Natural Sciences. The NRF continues to support self-initiated bottom-up

research ideas and research that address national strategic initiatives as reflected in national strategies like the National Development Plan, and those that are embedded in geographic advantage areas.

As a competitive funding instrument, the chief eligibility criteria are:

- i. **A valid NRF Y-rating of the principal applicant;**
- ii. **Scientific merit and quality of the research proposal; and**
- iii. **Project management and Feasibility of the proposed study.**

In conclusion, the NRF funding must also respond to three strategic priorities of the 7th democratic administration. The NRF grantees must be mindful of these priorities which are – a commitment to drive inclusive growth and job creation. A clear focus to reduce poverty and to tackle the high cost of living. A resolve to build a capable, ethical and developmental state. By aligning their research agendas and thematic areas with these priorities, NRF grantees will play a pivotal role in supporting the government's objectives and driving positive societal change.

### **2.3. Objectives**

The objectives of the Research Development Grants for Y-Rated Researchers funding instrument are to:

- Contribute to the development of a sound fundamental basis to scientific and scholarly endeavour in South Africa, in the Humanities, Natural and Social Science disciplines;
- Contribute to knowledge production across the research spectrum;
- Achieve world-class research and to develop the associated human capacity;
- Provide dedicated support to emerging and promising researchers to strengthen their research portfolio and contribute towards their achievement of established researcher status; and
- Advance or develop paradigms, theories and methodological innovation across the research spectrum.

### **3. Allocation Principles**

The Research Development Grants for Y-Rated Researchers funding instrument supports well-structured research projects with achievable aims and sound methodologies, which support the study objectives and demonstrate the prudent use of funds. The funding decisions will be guided mainly by the following principles:

- Scientific merit and quality of the research proposal;
- Project Management and Feasibility

## 4. Eligibility Criteria

### 4.1. General Eligibility Criteria

- **A valid NRF Y-rating** of the principal applicant;
- Each new Principal Investigator **may only submit ONE** application to this call.
- Full-time employees at an NRF recognized research institution in South Africa, **who are eligible to apply and who hold a valid NRF Y-rating at the time of application**, may submit an application.
- NRF-rated part-time employees on contract at an NRF recognized research institution (as defined above) in South Africa who hold a valid Y-Rating may apply, on condition their appointment at the South African institution is for (at least) the duration of the project applied for in the submission. The length of the contract should be stated in the application form. The primary employment of the individual concerned must be at that institution. A contract researcher appointed at a research institution on behalf of a third party to fulfil a very specific function for the latter does not qualify for support.
- Successful Y-rated applicants will be eligible for funding **for the duration of their awarded grant**, to a maximum of 3 years. The grant allocation will be allowed to run for the duration of the award, even if the principal investigator loses his / her rating status during this period.

### 4.2. Exclusions

Research Development Grants for Y-Rated Researchers grant holders may only hold ONE Y-Rated research grant. Previous Y-rated grant holders are not eligible to apply again.

### 4.3. Rules of Participation

#### ***Principal Investigator***

Only Y-rated researchers based at the NRF recognized research institutions in South Africa (as defined above) are eligible to apply as principal investigators (PI) in this funding instrument.

The principal investigator (that is, the applicant) must be an active researcher who takes intellectual responsibility for the project, its conception, any strategic decisions required in its pursuit, and the communication of results. The PI must have the capacity to make a

commitment to the project and cannot assume the role of a supplier of resources for work that will largely be placed in the hands of others. The PI will take responsibility for the management and administration of resources allocated to the grant award, and for the meeting of reporting requirements.

***Co-investigators/partner principal investigator***

A co-investigator/partner principal investigator is an active researcher who provides significant commitment, intellectual input and relevant expertise into the design and implementation of the research application. The co-investigator/partner principal investigator will be involved in all or at least some well-defined research activities within the scope of the application.

**It is important to note that postdoctoral fellows, students, technical and support staff DO NOT qualify as co-investigators.**

***Research Associates / Collaborators***

These individuals or groups make a relatively small, but meaningful contribution to the research endeavours outlined in the application, but do not participate in the research design. They are not considered a part of the core research team and are not eligible to receive NRF funds from the grant if the team's application is successful.

**4.4. Data Management and Use**

A Data Management Plan (DMP) is a formal document that describes the data expected to be acquired or generated during the course of a research project, how the data will be managed, described, analysed, and stored, and what mechanisms (including digital data storage) will be used at the end of the project to share and preserve the data. Research data sharing that underlies the findings reported in a journal article/ conference paper/thesis as set out in the NRF Open Access Statement.

The findings reported in a journal article or conference paper should be deposited in accordance with the NRF Open Access Statement. It is acknowledged that some of the data generated is more sensitive than others. Before initiating the research, it is the grant holder's responsibility to consider the following: confidentiality, ethics, security and copyright. Possible data sharing challenges should be considered in the DMP with solutions to optimise data sharing.

Researchers should note that publicly funded research data should be in the public domain, with free and open access, by default. Collaborators and co-investigators in the research project should be informed by the applicant that due to public funding and funder mandate, one is expected to share research data as openly as possible. The Data Management Plan should indicate which data will be shared. If (some) research data is to be restricted, an appropriate statement in the DMP and subsequent publication should explain why access to data is restricted. The NRF has adopted and is given permission to use the DCC Checklist for Data Management Plan, and this can be used as a guide for developing the DMP. Access this document here: [http://www.dcc.ac.uk/sites/default/files/documents/resource/DMP/DMP\\_Checklist\\_2013.pdf](http://www.dcc.ac.uk/sites/default/files/documents/resource/DMP/DMP_Checklist_2013.pdf)

#### **4.5. Science Engagement**

The NRF supports science engagement through its coordination and implementation of the Department of Science Technology and Innovation's Science Engagement Strategy. The strategy embraces a broad understanding of science, encompassing systematic knowledge spanning natural and physical sciences, engineering sciences, medical sciences, agricultural sciences, mathematics, social sciences and humanities, technology, all aspects of the innovation chain and indigenous knowledge. Within this context, science engagement refers to activities, events, or interactions characterised by mutual learning and dialogue among people of varied backgrounds, scientific expertise and life experiences, who articulate and discuss their perspectives, ideas, knowledge and values. Science engagement is an overarching term for all aspects of public engagement with science, including science awareness, science education, science communication and science outreach, which aims to develop and benefit individuals and society. Researchers funded through the NRF programmes are required to contribute to science engagement and report the related outputs in their project's Progress Report.

### **5. Application Process**

#### **5.1. Call for Applications**

The NRF issues an annual Call for applications for the Research Development Grants for Y-Rated Researchers funding instrument and applications should be completed and submitted *via* the NRF Connect System at <https://nrconnect.nrf.ac.za>. An Application and Funding Guide, which provides step-by-step instructions for completing the application template, will be available on the NRF website at <https://www.nrf.ac.za/funding/>.

## **5.2. Application Requirements**

It is important to complete all the compulsory sections as well as the non-compulsory sections relevant to you. Any information submitted as attachments that should have been completed in the Research Development Grants for Y-Rated Researchers online application form, will render the application incomplete, resulting in a rejection of the application.

## **6. Overview of the Review Process**

All applications validated by institutions and submitted to the NRF are screened by the NRF for compliance with the requirements of the Framework, the stipulations set out in the Application and Funding Guide, and the content requirements indicated in the online application screens. Applications that fail to meet the requirements and stipulations will be rejected without review. All eligible and appropriately completed applications are subjected to a competitive one-stage merit review process. The reviewers are selected by the NRF from existing reviewer databases and other sources and may include reviewers suggested by the applicant. In assessing the proposals, the reviewers' reports are referred to and, agreed assessment criteria are applied in the form of a scorecard (Table 1) during the panel review process. Based on the outcomes of the review process, projects will either be eligible for funding or not hence the panel provides recommendations to the NRF. The final funding decision is made by the NRF.

**Table 1: NRF Scorecard for the Assessment of Proposals for Research Development Grants for Y-Rated Researchers**

Review Criteria	Review Dimensions	% Weighting
Track Record of the Applicant	Past research outputs that outline the candidate's research experience and contributions to knowledge production. Outputs could be from the past 5 years (or from a longer period in the past). This could include journal articles/peer reviewed publications, conference presentations and proceedings, book chapters, patents and awards, designs, performances, student supervision and/or expertise in a specified knowledge area that will enable the applicant to successfully undertake the proposed research.	10%
Human Capital Development	Diversity, including sex and gender. This could include: (i) the involvement of postgraduate students (i.e., at Masters' and Doctoral 'level) from designated/under- represented groups in the proposed project, and/or (ii) the number of students that have completed their degrees/graduated in the past 5 years with considerations of race, gender and representation from designated/under-represented groups.	10%
Scientific Merit	<p>The proposal is comprehensive and well-constructed.</p> <p>Research novelty refers to whether project idea is novel and will contribute to the generation of both new methodologies and new knowledge in the field.</p> <p>The study is well conceptualized: i.e., the problem statement; research question aligns with methodology; the rationale of the study, research approach and methodology are clearly articulated, the aim is clear and objectives that align with a problem statement.</p> <p>Alignment of the overall research proposal with the (i) objectives of the funding programme - proposal fit within the scope of the Call, (ii) the applicant's institutional research strategy &amp; (iii) specified national research strategies.</p> <p>Literature is thoroughly reviewed, relevant, cited in text and well referenced, and addresses the existing gaps in extant literature.</p> <p>Pluri-disciplinarity: The multi-, inter, and trans - disciplinary aspects of the proposed study; The project addresses one or more aspects of pluri-disciplinarity attributes.</p>	30%
Project Management and Feasibility	Project organisation detailing the composition of project teams, roles & responsibilities and contributions of all identified roles; research activities and supervision.	20%

Review Criteria	Review Dimensions	% Weighting
	<p>Project scheduling/work plan detailing the project work breakdown structure comprising the project tasks, activities, timelines (in line with the funding period) and outputs.</p> <p>Project budget plan defined by effective planning of the budget, listing the line items and related costs in consideration of project objectives, activities, outputs and additional services required to produce outputs (such as DNA sequencing services possibly rendered abroad).</p>	
Collaboration	<p>This includes: a description of collaborations between institutions with limited infrastructure &amp; research activity, and research-intensive institutions with varied capabilities.</p> <p>The proposal should clearly indicate that team members possess complementary skills sets that can be leveraged for the success of the project.</p> <p>The proposal should clearly state research collaborations to meet the study objectives and clearly identify the roles and responsibilities of each collaborator.</p>	10%
Outputs	<p>Proposed outputs should be aligned to instrument objectives and the Professional development of the applicant.</p> <p>Outputs should include Journal articles, conference presentations and proceedings, books, patents, and other relevant outputs.</p> <p>The achievability of the proposed outputs within the given timeframe.</p>	5%
Knowledge Production Impact	<p>This could include detailing the potential/contribution of the study outcomes to the strategic goals of the knowledge economy and advancement of discovery and understanding of the field; and/or demonstrated high return on investment and embedding of specified realistic societal benefits (e.g., social, economic, environmental) ex-ante (potential) ex-nunc (during) and ex-post (after) the implementation of study in the proposal; e.g., the project could have the potential to resolve taxonomic problems to unlock knowledge critical to other projects related to the bioeconomy or global change; Identifying the end-users of both the knowledge/information produced; dissemination format of generated knowledge/information, the extent to which the project will contribute to the funding opportunity deliverables. The return on investment (quantifying records of generated/mobilised, species pages compiled, or species/specimens barcoded).</p> <p>Align assessment to clear articulation of scientific merit.</p>	5%

Review Criteria	Review Dimensions	% Weighting
Broader Societal Impact <sup>1</sup>	<p>Demonstrated high return on investment and embedding of specified realistic societal benefits (e.g., social, economic, environmental):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-the defined impact could be ex-ante (potential); ex-nunc (during); and/or ex-post (after) the implementation of the proposed study</li> <li>-e.g., explain the project potential to resolve taxonomic problems to unlock knowledge critical to other projects related to the bioeconomy or global change.</li> <li>-Identify the end-users of both the knowledge/information produced.</li> <li>-Describe the dissemination format of generated knowledge/information,</li> <li>-Describe the extent to which the project will contribute to the funding opportunity deliverables.</li> <li>-The return on investment (quantifying records of generated/mobilised, species pages compiled, or species/specimens barcoded).</li> <li>-Align assessment of impact to articulation the Scientific Merit content in the proposal. High scores for impact cannot be given to a poorly articulated scientific merit.</li> </ul>	5%
Ethical considerations, Data Management and Use	<p><b>Ethical considerations:</b> Ethical issues including data sharing and collecting/import/export permits, specimen repository has been considered.</p> <p><b>Data management and use:</b> The proposal should clearly indicate how expected findings and outputs will be disseminated including the use of science communication strategies, and open access.</p>	5%
<b>Total</b>		<b>100%</b>

<sup>1</sup> Access the 'NRF Framework to Advance the Societal and Knowledge Impact of Research' document on the NRF website

## 7. Ethical Clearance

It is the responsibility of the grant holder, in conjunction with the institution, to ensure that all research activities carried out in or outside South Africa comply with the laws and regulations of South Africa and/or the foreign country in which the research activities are conducted. These include all human and animal subjects, copyright and intellectual property protection, and other regulations or laws, as appropriate. A research ethics committee must review and approve the ethical and academic rigor of all research in accordance with institutional ethical policies and procedures. The ethical clearance approval should be held by the institution and the grantholder and accessible on request, if necessary.

Please also refer to the “Statement on Ethical Research and Scholarly Publishing Practices” on the NRF website at <https://www.nrf.ac.za/statement-on-ethical-research-and-scholarly-publishing-practices/>.

## 8. Granting Rules

### 8.1. Funding Model

The grants of this funding instrument are to be primarily used for research purposes and for the development of associated human resources under the auspices of the NRF standard grant and finance policies. The funds are released upon acceptance of the conditions of grant, both by the applicant and their employing institution. These grants will fall under the NRF audit requirements of beneficiary institutions.

### 8.2. Funding Support

The Research Development Grants for Y-Rated Researchers is made possible through contract funding from the DSTI. **Each application may request funding of not more than R300 000 for a period of 3 years.** Therefore, applicants should budget over a three-year period and each year should be a maximum of R100 000 per annum. Financial requests need to be in line with requirements and accurately reflect the financial needs of the proposed work.

### 8.3. Awards and Period of Funding

The allocation of funds is capped at R300 000 per application. Successful applications will receive funding that accommodates research-related operating costs, including:

- Materials and Supplies

- Travel and subsistence
- Research / Technical / *Ad hoc* Assistants
- Research Equipment

The application assessment process will consider proposed budget items in terms of cost, risk and reward ratios. Decisions relating to budget items will also be governed by the overall funding instrument funds available for the period. **Applications must adhere to set budget limits presented in these guidelines; exceeding these limits may result in the approval of a reduced budget by the NRF.**

### **Research-related operating costs**

These costs include materials and supplies, travel (including conferences) and subsistence, equipment and research/technical/*ad hoc* assistance and sabbaticals to other research organisations and institutions of higher learning may be included within the context of the project applications. These costs should be justified and be commensurate with the planned outputs, as they will be assessed on this basis. The amount awarded within this framework can be used at the discretion of the applicant.

### **General guidelines**

#### Materials and Supplies

Generally, the NRF does not provide financial support for:

- Basic office equipment including computers and consumables unless the computer is required for the research itself.
- Basic office stationery, photocopying costs, and printing costs unless these items form part of the research tools.
- Journal publication costs, journal subscription costs and book costs.
- Telephone, fax and internet costs.

#### Travel and subsistence

- International conference attendance: Generally, the NRF restricts this amount to R25 000 per person to a maximum of R50 000 per application per year for a team application i.e. for principal investigators and co-investigators (local only) and local postgraduate students.
- International visits: These will be considered on a case-by-case basis. Such visits must be integral to the research plan and strong motivations should accompany these requests. Realistic funding allocations will be based on the requested activities. Only outgoing visits will be considered depending on the availability of funding.

- Local conference attendance: Generally, the NRF restricts expenditure against this item to R5 000 per person (all costs). Support for local conference attendance could be requested for all listed co-investigators and postgraduate students. The applicant should clearly motivate for the benefit to attend more than one local conference per annum, and the number of people attending each local conference.
- Local travel: The NRF does not stipulate any rate for mileage as this will depend on the rate which varies per institution/organization. Applicants are requested to provide details of this rate as well as the estimated distance to be travelled within the given year.
- Local accommodation costs should not exceed a 3-star establishment
- Science engagement activities: A budget of up to R30 000 may be allocated for science communication/awareness/education activities, if there are no funds for these from other sources. Specific motivation for these additional funds must be made in the proposal.

#### Research / Technical / Ad hoc Assistants

This instrument **does not provide funding for salaries**. Requests for research/technical/*ad hoc* assistance should be treated with caution. Generally, the NRF would encourage applicants to engage students to undertake the research rather than employing research consultants. The NRF will not pay for students to undertake research. This guideline however does not apply when specific and/or highly specialised research/technical expertise is required. This should be **CLEARLY** motivated for in the application.

**Administrative assistance DOES NOT qualify as technical assistance.**

#### Research Equipment

Funding for small equipment will be limited to R50 000 which can be used over the duration of the project.

#### **Funding to cater for disabilities**

Additional funding support to cater for disability will be allocated to people with disabilities as specified in the Code of Good Practice on Employment of People with Disabilities as in the Employment Equity Act No 55 of 1998.

#### **8.4. Human Capacity Development Support**

Postgraduate students to be supervised by Research Development Grants for Y-Rated Researchers a grantholders must apply for NRF postgraduate funding independently in the open competitive call for

applications for NRF Postgraduate Scholarships. Only students intending to pursue full-time postgraduate studies will be eligible for NRF postgraduate student funding. **All postgraduate students will be expected to apply on the NRF Connect by accessing the link: <https://nrfconnect.nrf.ac.za>.**

For further details on the NRF Postgraduate Funding policy, kindly refer to the framework document which will be available on [www.nrf.ac.za](http://www.nrf.ac.za) when the call for applications for NRF Postgraduate Scholarships opens in April 2025. In order for the NRF to identify students applying for postgraduate funding that will be supervised by Research Development Grants for Y-Rated Researchers grantholders please ensure the following:

- Postgraduate students who have been recruited by a supervisor to be part of a research project that is **currently funded by the NRF** should provide the NRF with the supervisor's five- or six-digit grant UID (unique identification number) or the supervisor's application reference number.
- Alternatively, postgraduate students who have been recruited by a supervisor to be part of a research project application that has been **submitted to the NRF for review** should provide the supervisor's NRF application reference number.
- The NRF will fund up to a maximum of **three students** in line with the NRF Postgraduate Funding policy, for the students that have been recruited by a grantholder or applicant. This does not include the postdoctoral fellows.

## 8.5. Reporting

Continued funding beyond the first year of funding will be released based on satisfactory progress achieved by the grant holder. The grant holder will be required to submit a detailed Progress Report (PR) to the NRF by 15 February of each subsequent year. The PR will be used to assess project performance against timeframes and deliverables as indicated in the project work plans, institutional financial contribution and expenditure of project funding. Approved funding for continuing grant holders will only be released upon submission of the Designated Authority (DA) and Finance Officer (FO) approved PR to the NRF. Requests to carry forward grants that were brought forward will not be granted. At the end of the three-year funding period, a PR must be submitted detailing the outputs and expenditure of the previous years, as well as containing a final assessment of progress made in relation to the project objectives.

## 9. Financial Control

Research Development Grants for Y-Rated Researchers grants will be managed in terms of standard NRF financial policies and procedures. The payment of the grant by the NRF to successful applicants

will be administered by the Next Generation and Emerging Researchers (NGER) department. The institution will in turn, administer the funds on behalf of the successful grant holder to the value of the full sum awarded by the NRF.

## 10. Mentorship

The NRF recognises mentorship as an important mechanism for the professional development and guidance of emerging researchers including postdoctoral fellows. The DSTI and Universities South Africa (USAf) has established an online platform (Thuso Connect and Thuso Resources) to support emerging researchers and academics through the provision of tools, information and mentorship to everyone seeking to grow their research career. Thuso Connect is a national online platform designed to give South African researchers and scholars an opportunity to participate in an online, interactive mentorship programme. All the grantholders are encouraged to visit the Thuso Resources website on the following link <https://thusoresources.usaf.ac.za/> and enrol on the Thuso Connect national online platform for the mentorship programme

## 11. Enquiries

**For funding instrument-related enquiries, please contact:**

### **Sello Moloji**

Professional Officer: Next Generation and Emerging Researchers (NGER)

Tel: 012 481 4249

Email: [SP.Moloji@risa.nrf.ac.za](mailto:SP.Moloji@risa.nrf.ac.za)

**For technical NRF online submission enquiries, please contact the NRF Support Desk during office hours from 08:00 to 16:30 from Monday to Friday.**

E-mail: [supportdesk@nrf.ac.za](mailto:supportdesk@nrf.ac.za)

**Note:** The applicants are advised to inquire well in advance before the call closes since the requests or inquiries made one week before the call closes may not be attended to due to an influx of queries.