



National
Research
Foundation

NRF DATA INSIGHTS

Unveiling the trends to shape tomorrow



NRF-Funded Postgraduate Students



science, technology
& innovation

Department:
Science, Technology and Innovation
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Introduction

In this edition of *NRF Data Insights*, we discuss the evolving landscape of postgraduate funding¹ in South Africa, with a particular focus on the cohort supported by the National Research Foundation (NRF). As the NRF continues to align its strategic priorities with national policy², this analysis offers a comprehensive overview of the trends shaping the future of research and innovation in the country. Postgraduate students are the cornerstone of the research enterprise, forming the next generation of scholars, innovators, and thought leaders. Recognising this, the NRF has implemented the [DSI-NRF Postgraduate Funding Policy](#), a transformative framework designed to address systemic challenges such as low throughput rates; limited progression to advanced degrees; and disparities in access for historically disadvantaged groups.

This volume presents key insights into the number, demographics, and fields of study of NRF-funded students from 2020 to 2024. It highlights the strategic shift towards full cost of study funding, aimed at improving access for financially needy and high-performing students, while also advancing equity targets³, with a focus on Black⁴ South African and women students.

Through cohort and graduation analyses, this edition of *NRF Data Insights* highlights the NRF's contribution to fostering excellence, sustainability, and the transformation of the research pipeline. As we unveil the trends that will shape tomorrow, this edition serves as both a reflection of progress and a call to action for continued investment in South Africa's future researchers.

Key findings noted in this edition of NRF Data Insights are:

- From 2020 to 2024, the proportion of Black South African NRF-funded students has increased from 79% to 86%; South African women from 58% to 60%; and Black South African women from 49% to 54%, highlighting transformation of the student cohort.
- The total number of funded students has declined to 5 932 despite increased funding. This is largely due to the strategic decision to increase grant values to improve diversity, success and throughput.
- 46% of NRF-funded postgraduate students enrolled at just six universities.
- Data suggests higher throughput for NRF-funded students, reflecting the efficiency gains possible should the NRF fund a greater proportion of the cohort.

Number and diversity of NRF-funded postgraduate students

Figure 1 shows both the number and demography of NRF-funded postgraduate students from 2020 to 2024. The NRF has funded fewer students each year over the past five-year period. The key reason for the decline in numbers is the strategic decision, as per the DSI-NRF Postgraduate Funding Policy, to offer full cost of study funding to ensure support for financially needy students, students living with a disability, and a more diverse cohort of students.

The DSI-NRF Postgraduate Funding Policy not only introduced full cost of study funding but also specified demographic targets and mechanisms to encourage throughput and continuation from one degree to the next. The policy decisions have led to greater transformation of the postgraduate student cohort. From 2020 to 2024, the proportion of Black South African NRF-funded students has increased from 79% to 86%. Similarly, the proportion of South African women has increased from 58% to 60% and, at the intersection of race and gender, the percentage of Black South African women grew from 49% to 54%.⁵

1. Postgraduate funding supports Honours, Master's and Doctoral students across various fields, including Science, Engineering, Technology, Social Sciences and Humanities at all public South African universities.

2. National Planning Commission, 2013. *National Development Plan 2030. Our future make it work*. Available from https://www.nationalplanningcommission.org.za/National_Development_Plan. Accessed 09 Sept 2025.

3. The policy targets 95% of scholarships for South African citizens and permanent residents, with 90% of these for Black students; 55% for women; and 1% for students living with a disability.

4. The South African Department of Labour defines Black people as: African, Coloured, and Indian as a collective group, while African refers to a single race group. The definition of 'Black people' also includes South African Chinese people as per the Pretoria High Court ruling on 18 June 2008.

5. The analysis of Black or women students only includes South African citizens and permanent residents.

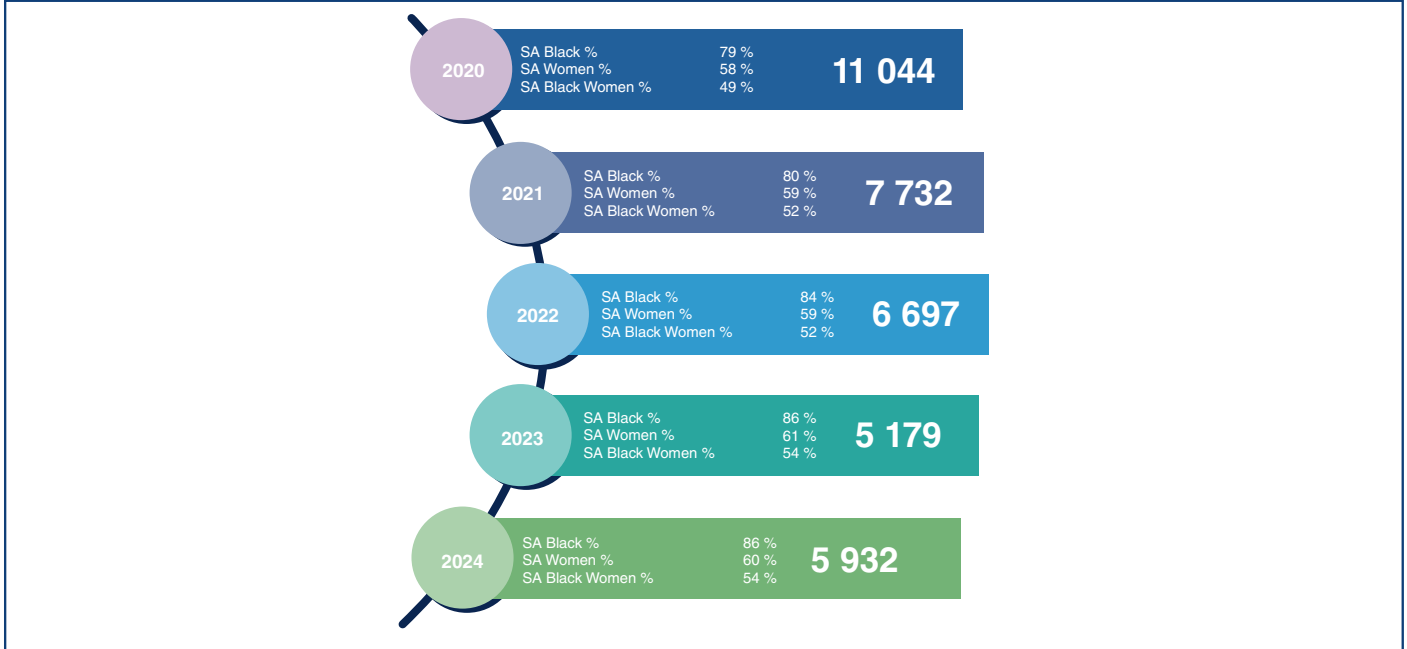


Figure 1: Support for South African Black and/or Women Postgraduate Students, 2020 to 2024

Figure 2 shows the NRF postgraduate students by citizenship. The data underscores the NRF’s prioritisation of South African citizens in this funding category. The vast majority of scholarships are awarded to South African students, aligning with national transformation goals and the NRF’s commitment to developing local research capacity in pursuit of sustainability. In 2020, 93% of NRF-funded students were South African citizens or permanent residents, compared to 96% in 2024. In line with the DSI-NRF Postgraduate Funding Policy, the proportion of funded students from the rest of Africa has declined from 6% to 4%, while those from the rest of the world has remained at approximately 1%.

In terms of the DSI-NRF Postgraduate Funding Policy demographic targets, the targets for South African citizens (95%) and for women (55%) have been achieved (and exceeded). In order to achieve the other targets, including support for Black South Africans (90%) and students living with disabilities (1%), directed interventions are being introduced. This includes revising the manner in which grant holder-linked scholarships are awarded and a focus on transformation at higher degree levels.

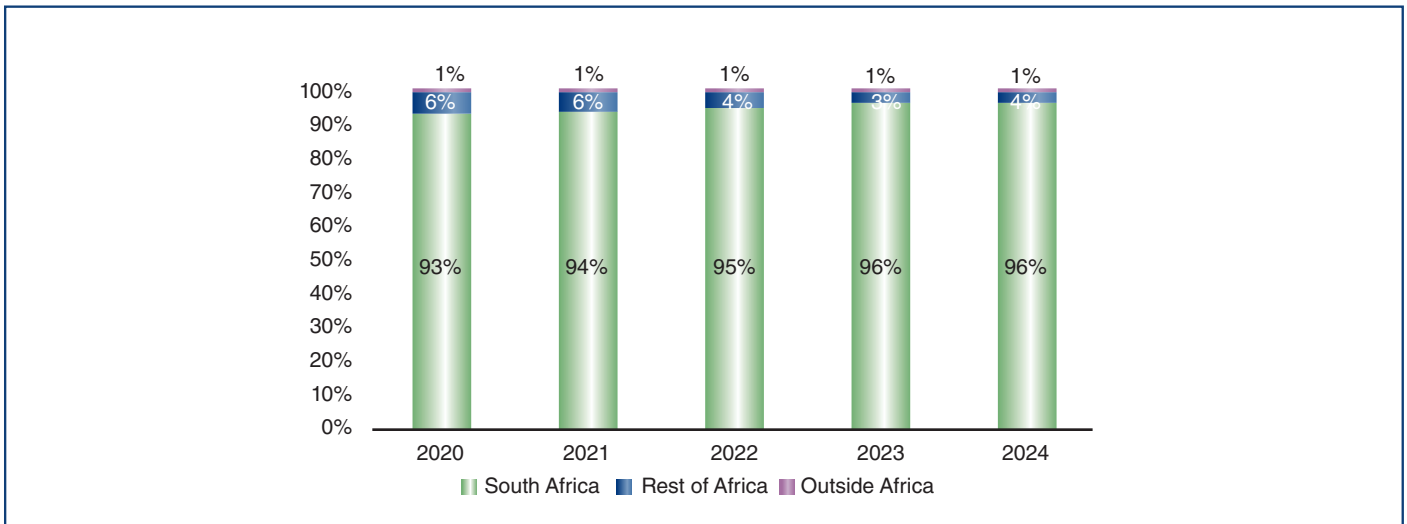


Figure 2: NRF Postgraduate Scholarships by Citizenship, 2020 to 2024⁶

6. Percentages are rounded-off and for this reason the total exceeds 100%.



Limited funding and increasing grant values

The decline in the number of NRF-funded postgraduate students is largely due to increased grant values with the introduction of full cost of study funding. Partial cost of study funding is still available based on funding criteria. The NRF made the strategic decision to introduce full cost of study funding to attract high-performing students; to ensure access for academically deserving financially needy students, especially those previously funded at full cost of study through the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) and students living with a disability; and to improve throughput rates. The average value of NRF Honours and Master's postgraduate scholarships has more than doubled since 2020, while the value of Doctoral grants has increased by 44%. The value per year and per degree level is shown in Table 1 below. In 2024, for the first time, all students were funded under the policy, with no remaining continuing students. Financially needy students accounted for 67% of grants.

Table 1: Postgraduate student support: Average scholarship value, 2020 to 2024

Year	Average Honours Scholarship	Average Master's Scholarship	Average Doctoral Scholarship
2020	R62 199	R75 664	R103 007
2021	R112 668	R85 095	R106 178
2022	R139 461	R130 582	R130 338
2023	R143 335	R150 128	R140 575
2024	R154 129	R159 915	R148 656

Over the five-year period, the NRF's total investment (Table 2) in postgraduate scholarships has grown despite limited growth in the NRF's overall budget. This demonstrates the NRF's dedication to the prioritisation of postgraduate students to expand access and advance sustainability of the researcher cohort. Since the formation of the NRF, the highest funding for postgraduate students was in 2017, when the NRF allocated R926 796 249 to postgraduate students. The value declined after 2017 but has increased annually since 2022. Postgraduate student funding has increased by 8% since 2020 but is still slightly lower than in 2017 (even without taking inflation into account). To increase available funding, the NRF is pursuing partnerships with local and international organisations, and these initiatives are bearing fruit.

Table 2: Postgraduate student support: Total amount spent, 2020 to 2024

Year	Honours Amount	Master's Amount	Doctoral Amount	Grand Total
2020	R268 013 523	R300 308 599	R284 917 455	R853 239 578
2021	R281 219 637	R244 563 630	R250 792 771	R776 576 038
2022	R285 615 742	R323 711 600	R282 833 226	R892 160 568
2023	R321 499 540	R316 019 318	R257 392 188	R894 911 046
2024	R307 641 843	R335 500 789	R273 824 447	R916 967 078

Postgraduate funding by level, field and institution

Limited funding means that the NRF must invest scarce resources in a directed manner in order to deliver maximum impact, advance transformation, and ensure sustainability of the South African research cohort. This informs funding by degree level and field. Figure 3 shows the number of students funded by degree level, along with their demographic breakdown. The highest number of NRF-funded students is at Honours level, but the number has declined more over the five-year period (54%) than for either Master's (47%) or Doctoral (33%) students. This highlights a growing focus on those students most likely to pursue research careers. In terms of spending, 34% of the budget was allocated to Honours, 37% to Master's, and 30% to Doctoral scholarships. In terms of transformation, the proportion of South African Black students, women, and Black women has grown across all three degree levels. This reflects the NRF's strategic intent to promote equity and inclusion. Regarding DSI-NRF Postgraduate Funding Policy demographic targets, the target for Black South Africans (95%) has only been met at Honours level, while that for women (55%) has been met or exceeded at all levels.

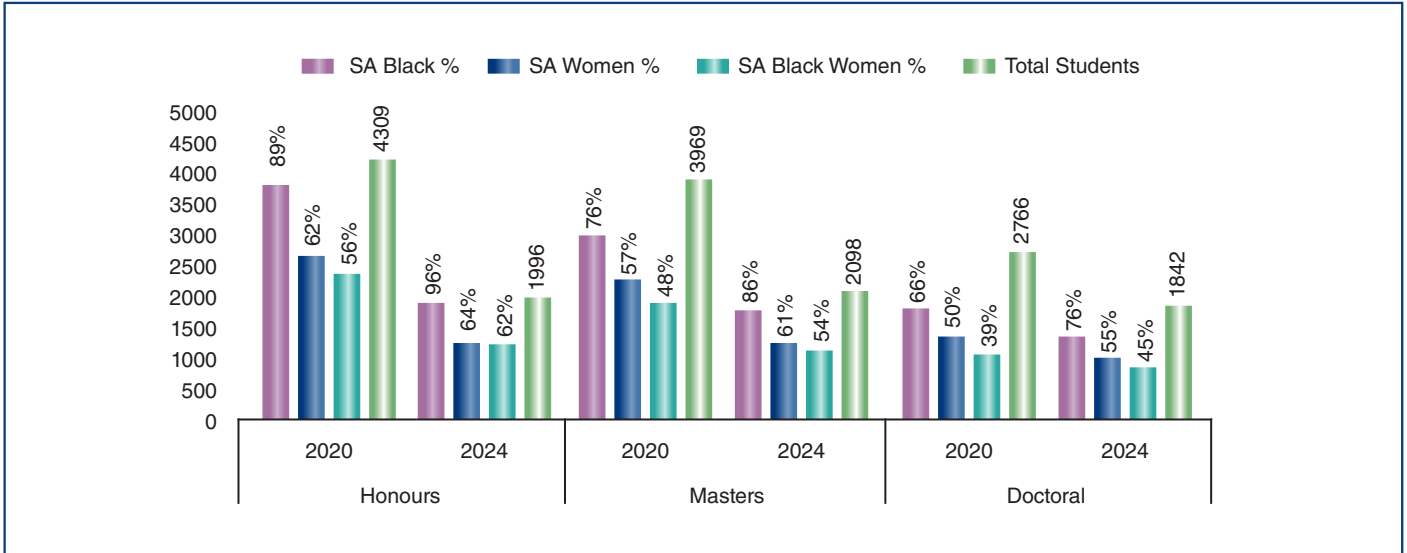


Figure 3: Support for South African Black and/or Women Postgraduate Students by Level of Study, 2020 and 2024

As per its mandate, the NRF supports postgraduate students across a diverse range of fields and disciplines. In 2024, and as in 2023, the highest proportion of students were in biological sciences (16%), followed by the humanities (15%) and health sciences (12%). The NRF is increasingly aligning funding with the national imperative to decrease poverty and inequality and in alignment with priority areas as outlined in the Department of Science, Technology and Innovation’s (DSTI) Decadal Plan. In this regard, from 2023 to 2024, support for the agricultural sciences and information and computer sciences increased by 1%, and for engineering sciences by 2%. Efforts are being made to further increase funding in scarce skills areas, also taking transformation in these areas into account. For a combined breakdown by field, race, and gender, please see the appendix (Figure 11).

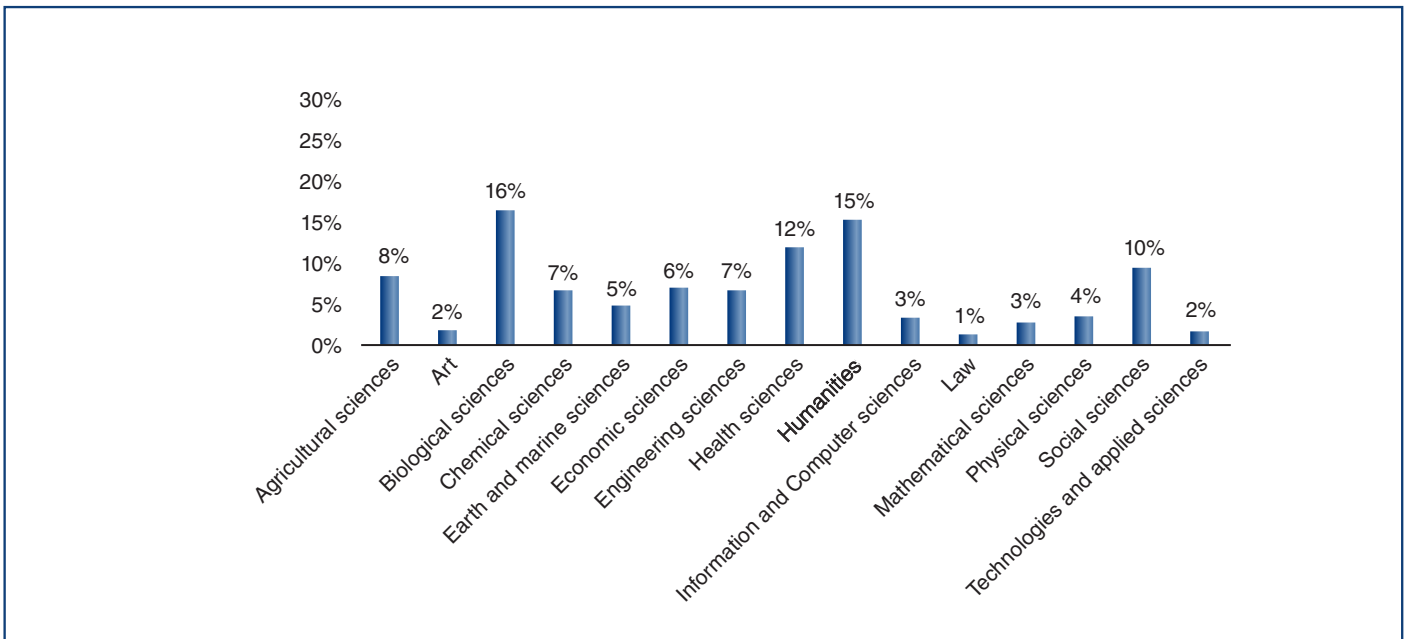


Figure 4: Postgraduate Students Supported by Field of Study, 2024⁷

7. The calculations do not include unclassified.



While institutional capacity development and diversification is an NRF priority, it must be balanced with research and supervisory capacity. For this reason, the NRF’s focus is on the development of research capacity across the university sector through the newly conceptualised university support programmes. The bespoke interventions target historically disadvantaged institutions (HDIs), universities of technology (UoTs), and new universities, with the aim of strengthening institutional research capacity and enhancing participation in open competitive programmes. Through this initiative, the NRF hopes to contribute to the advancement of institutional research development; the promotion of inclusive capacity building; and enabling the sustainable growth of research excellence.

Currently, 46% of NRF-funded postgraduate students are enrolled at just six universities (Table 3). These universities demonstrate strong capacity for postgraduate training and meet the NRF’s funding criteria. The NRF has also been intentional in supporting new universities such as the University of Mpumalanga (UMP) and Sol Plaatje University (SPU). The breakdown for all universities is shown in the Appendix (Table 8).

Table 3: Institutions with the greatest proportion of NRF-funded postgraduate students, 2024

Universities	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	Proportion in 2024
University of the Witwatersrand	970	669	590	539	533	9%
University of KwaZulu-Natal	1 019	707	582	576	478	8%
University of Johannesburg	886	725	673	569	466	8%
Stellenbosch University	901	628	471	421	427	7%
University of Cape Town	1 210	755	555	445	401	7%
University of Pretoria	655	473	427	445	396	7%

Cohort analysis of NRF-funded and national graduates⁸

This section presents the throughput trends for Honours, Master’s, and Doctoral levels from 2010 to 2022. The analysis highlights ongoing systemic challenges and comparative performance across study levels.

When analysing the NRF data, it is important to note that the date reflects when the NRF first funded that student, with progress shown up to and including completion in 2024. The student may have taken one or more years to complete, but reflected as completed in 2024 data. Other students may still complete after 2024. The different regulation times for different degrees must also be borne in mind. Time to complete accounts for lower numbers in more recent funding years.

For Honours students, the data show little change from 2010 to 2019. In 2020, there was a dip due to the impact of Covid-19. There is another dip in 2022, most likely due to a combination of students taking more than two years to complete and the latest data not yet being available as it takes time for the Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS) to reflect complete and audited data and universities do not report timeously to the NRF.

For both Master’s and Doctoral students, there is a gradual decline in the proportion that have graduated over the years, with a shift from 2015 to 2016. Further analysis over a longer period is required to determine whether this is due to slow throughput and data availability, or if there is an actual decline in throughput.

It is also not yet possible to determine whether the DSI-NRF Postgraduate Funding Policy and full cost of study funding are having a positive effect on throughput and it was only in 2024 that all continuing students were phased out.

8. The NRF has experienced ongoing challenges with regard to complete and up-to-date student completion data. First, due to the auditing process for HEMIS data, data is only available for two years prior to the current year. Second, there are challenges with identifying foreign students within the HEMIS dataset. Finally, requests to universities to provide this information are not responded to timeously.



Table 4: NRF throughput rates per study level, completed between 2011 and 2024

Year of Enrolment	Honours	Master's	Doctoral
2010	95%	85%	78%
2011	95%	84%	80%
2012	97%	82%	78%
2013	96%	84%	81%
2014	96%	81%	74%
2015	96%	81%	75%
2016	96%	79%	68%
2017	95%	77%	67%
2018	95%	76%	64%
2019	95%	77%	58%
2020	92%	74%	49%
2021	94%	70%	38%
2022	90%	63%	21%

The data in Tables 5 to 7 are drawn from the annual Council on Higher Education's (CHE) [VitalStats](#) publications, and show national cohort throughput for all public university postgraduate students, excluding those at the University of South Africa (UNISA).⁹

When comparing cohort throughput nationally from 2012 to 2017, the analysis shows fluctuations across the years, but an overall improvement at Honours and Master's level. Again, when reading the tables, it should be remembered that regulation time differs for the different degrees. The tables show enrolments starting in each 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017 and indicate what proportion of the cohort completed their degree after one year or more (up to six years). For each year, the numbers are cumulative, i.e. include those that completed in earlier years.

Table 5: Cumulative throughput rates for Honours national cohort (HEMIS), with first year of enrolment in 2012 to 2017 (excluding UNISA)

Graduation Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Year of enrolment	48%	51%	54%	56%	61%	61%
2nd year	64%	66%	69%	72%	78%	79%
3rd year	71%	73%	76%	78%	82%	83%
4th year	75%	77%	78%	80%	83%	84%
5th year	77%	78%	80%	82%	83%	85%
6th year	78%	79%	81%	82%	84%	85%

As with the NRF cohort, Honours students in the national cohort have highest throughput, with approximately 50% completing in their first year, and between 78% and 85% after six years. While direct comparisons with the NRF data are not possible given the different nature of the analysis, the data suggest that NRF throughput rates are slightly higher (5% to 10%) than national rates at Honours level.

Table 6: Cumulative throughput rates for Master's national cohort (HEMIS), with first year of enrolment in 2012 to 2017 (excluding UNISA)

Graduation Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Year of enrolment	6%	6%	5%	7%	7%	7%
2nd year	23%	20%	23%	24%	24%	28%
3rd year	40%	36%	40%	41%	43%	45%
4th year	50%	47%	51%	51%	53%	54%
5th year	55%	54%	56%	57%	58%	61%
6th year	58%	57%	59%	59%	61%	64%

9. Given the nature of study at UNISA (part-time and distance), longer completion times are expected. For this reason, these students are analysed separately in the national cohort studies.



Master’s students show slower progression, with between 20% and 30% completing after two years (regulation time). After six years, between 58% and 64% have completed. NRF-funded Master’s students also progress slower, but again completion rates are slightly higher (averaging between 70% and 80%).

Table 7: Cumulative throughput rates for Doctoral national cohort (HEMIS), with first year of enrolment in 2012 to 2017 (excluding UNISA)

Graduation Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Year of enrolment	2%	2%	1%	1%	2%	1%
2nd year	6%	6%	6%	5%	6%	5%
3rd year	18%	18%	18%	16%	17%	15%
4th year	32%	33%	33%	32%	31%	30%
5th year	44%	46%	45%	45%	43%	43%
6th year	52%	54%	54%	54%	51%	52%

As can be expected, Doctoral throughput is the slowest, with fewer than 20% completing after three years, and between 51% and 54% completing after six years. NRF completions are slightly higher, averaging between 58% (six years of study completed) and 81% for those who enrolled in 2019 or earlier. In response to challenges identified with Doctoral studies, the NRF approached the CHE to carry out a [Review of Doctoral Qualifications](#), which was completed in 2022. It raised concerns about the quality of the Doctoral programme at some institutions and identified areas for improvement at all institutions.

Conclusion

Postgraduate students are the cornerstone of the research enterprise, ensuring sustainability into the future. The NRF’s strategic funding initiatives are making measurable progress toward a more inclusive and equitable postgraduate research environment. By increasing scholarship values, prioritising transformation, and partnering with leading institutions, the NRF strengthens South Africa’s research pipeline and contributes to national development. This *NRF Data Insights* underscores the NRF’s commitment, highlighted in the [NRF Vision 2030](#) of fostering excellence, sustainability, and transformation in the postgraduate research pipeline, through investing scarce resources in a directed manner.

The analysis in this *NRF Data Insights* highlights how the NRF is funding a smaller, but more transformed, cohort of postgraduate students. Since 2020, there has been a decline in the number of funded students, mainly due to the strategic decision to increase funding to full cost of study. This decision was in line with the *Report of the Ministerial Task Team on the Recruitment, Retention and Progression of Black South African Academics* published in 2019, which recommended that “...Student funding for postgraduate studies must be enhanced to attract high-achieving students to continue to Doctoral and Postdoctoral programmes and into the academy. Recruitment strategies must take equity issues into account. This will require ‘fit-for-purpose’ financial packages that respond to the challenges that prevent students, especially South African Black and female students, from progressing effectively along this pathway”.¹⁰

Throughput data highlights systemic challenges with low and slow throughput, especially at Doctoral level. The higher and quicker throughput for NRF-funded students can be expected given the NRF’s selection processes as well as the availability of sufficient funding. Funding for a larger proportion of the cohort would, therefore, contribute to efficiency. It is too early to assess whether the DSI-NRF Postgraduate Funding Policy and full cost of study funding are having a positive impact on throughput and completion rates.

10. Department of Higher Education and Training (2019) *Report of the Ministerial Task Team on the Recruitment, Retention and Progression of Black South African Academics*. Available from www.dsti.gov.za/images/2020/02/Report_MTT_RRP_of_Black_Academics_web_final1.pdf. Accessed 29 October 2025.



Appendix

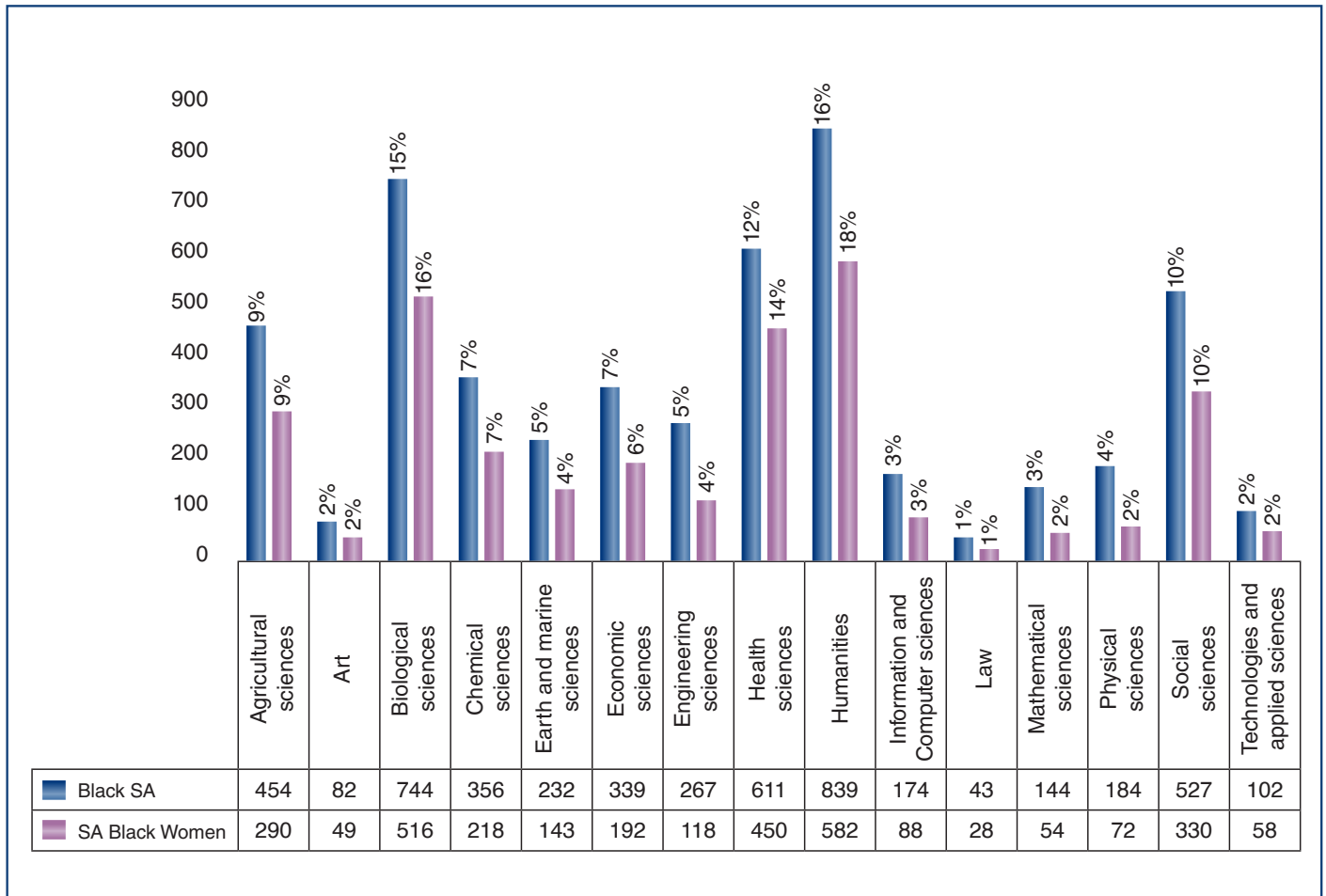


Figure 11: South African Postgraduate Students Supported by Field of Study, 2024



Table 8: NRF support for postgraduate students by university, 2020 to 2024

Universities	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	Proportion in 2024
University of the Witwatersrand	970	669	590	539	533	9%
University of KwaZulu-Natal	1 019	707	582	576	478	8%
University of Johannesburg	886	725	673	569	466	8%
Stellenbosch University	901	628	471	421	427	7%
University of Cape Town	1 210	755	555	445	401	7%
University of Pretoria	655	473	427	445	396	7%
University of the Western Cape	609	430	325	351	318	5%
University of Limpopo	336	278	290	349	310	5%
University of the Free State	432	274	242	293	309	5%
North-West University	431	395	351	349	289	5%
Nelson Mandela University	347	216	183	185	239	4%
Rhodes University	308	235	190	160	223	4%
University of Venda	267	229	265	250	207	3%
University of Mpumalanga	33	37	71	104	182	3%
Durban University of Technology	237	155	171	155	176	3%
University of Fort Hare	311	205	179	211	175	3%
University of Zululand	329	184	158	175	168	3%
University of South Africa	346	164	141	120	135	2%
Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University	154	148	192	139	121	2%
Tshwane University of Technology	263	132	106	80	87	1%
Walter Sisulu University	76	43	48	116	85	1%
Cape Peninsula University of Technology	153	76	33	45	66	1%
Sol Plaatje University	12	18	11	25	58	1%
Central University of Technology	167	72	43	32	52	1%
Vaal University of Technology	61	40	32	20	17	0%
Mangosuthu University of Technology	1	-	-	-	-	0%
Grand Total	10 514	7 288	6 329	6 154	5 918	