



National
Research
Foundation

NRF DATA INSIGHTS

Unveiling the trends to shape tomorrow



NRF-Rated Researchers



science, technology
& innovation

Department:
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Introduction

This volume of *NRF Data Insights* provides data-driven analysis of South Africa's research landscape, with a particular focus on National Research Foundation (NRF) rated researchers. These researchers represent the backbone of the country's scientific and scholarly workforce, and their recognition through the NRF rating system is testament to their sustained contribution to innovation, knowledge production, and transformation. The NRF rating system is a benchmarking tool that recognises researchers who meet high standards of research excellence. There are five [rating categories](#): A (leading international researcher); B (internationally acclaimed researcher) and C (established researcher); and for young researchers: P (prestigious award) and Y (promising young researcher).

Application for a rating is open to all researchers. The rating system has shown continuous growth despite limited financial incentives and some stakeholder concerns about the processes. The rating system has been reviewed and revised over the years to respond to criticisms, challenges, and changing priorities and another review of the system is currently underway. The system is a valuable tool to assess the NRF's impact in the development of an excellent and transformed cohort of researchers. In 2024, there were 4 728 rated researchers (an increase of 11% from 2020) with 134 A-rated, 731 B-rated, 2 948 C-rated, 17 P-rated and 898 Y-rated researchers.

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

- NRF-rated researchers increased by 11% from 4 262 in 2020 to 4 728 in 2024, showing continued value in rating despite minimal financial incentive.
- Black South African and Black women rated researchers grew significantly to 41% and 13% of the rated-researchers cohort respectively in 2024.
- Targeted support for emerging researchers is bearing fruit, with researchers under the age of 40 making up 15% of the cohort and Y-rated researchers increasing from 721 to 898 (25% growth).
- Transformation is progressing in B, C, P and Y rating categories. 55% of first-time rated researchers were Black, and 19% were Black women.
- While the vast majority of rated researchers are located at traditional universities, there is evidence of growing institutional diversity. The proportion located at traditional universities decreased from 73% in 2020 to 68% in 2024.

Number and Diversity of NRF-Rated Researchers

The NRF's two key priorities in terms of rated researchers are to grow the number of NRF-rated researchers and to improve their diversity, e.g. race, gender, age, institution. During the period under review, the total number of rated researchers grew steadily from 4 262 in 2020 to 4 728 in 2024 (11% growth). Similarly, the number and proportion of each South African Black, South African women, and South African Black women NRF-rated researchers has grown.

The proportion of Black South African rated researchers increased from 26% of the cohort in 2020 (or 1 329 individuals) to 41% of the cohort in 2024 (1 960 individuals). The number of Black South African rated researchers grew by 47%. The proportion of South African women grew from 32% of the cohort in 2020 (1 432 individuals) to 35% in 2024 (1 678 individuals), an increase of 17%. Black South African women increased from 9% of the cohort in 2020 (366 individuals) to 13% of the cohort in 2024 (618 individuals), with the number of Black South African women rated researchers growing by an impressive 69%, albeit from a low number.

This growth reflects a significant improvement in both gender and racial inclusivity, suggesting that the inclusivity that has been evident for some years at Honours and Master's levels of study, and more recently at Doctoral level, has become more apparent within the rated researcher cohort. This highlights the impact of the NRF's targeted interventions at postgraduate student and researcher levels, although the pace of change remains slow given the time it takes to develop an established researcher.

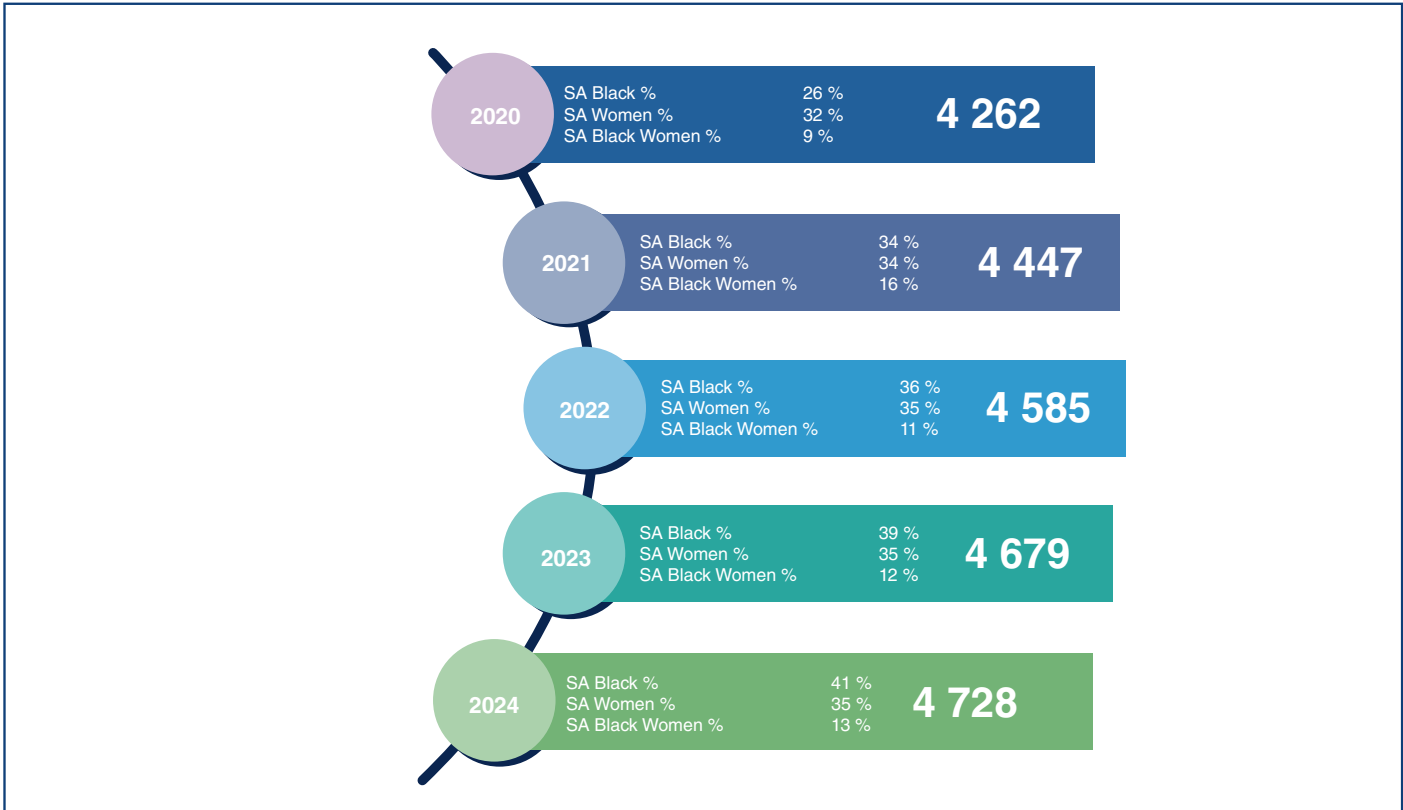


Figure 1: Black and/or Women Rated Researchers in all Rating Categories (2020 to 2024)

First-time NRF-Rated Researchers

Of the 4 728 rated researchers in 2024, 428 (just under 10%) were rated for the first time in 2024. The number of first-time rated researchers in 2023 was very similar at 424. The majority of first-time rated researchers received a C rating (240), followed by 178 Y-rated, eight B-rated and two P-rated researchers (Figure 2). It is not surprising that no first-time rated applicants received an A rating as the majority would have applied for a rating earlier in their career and worked their way towards an A rating.

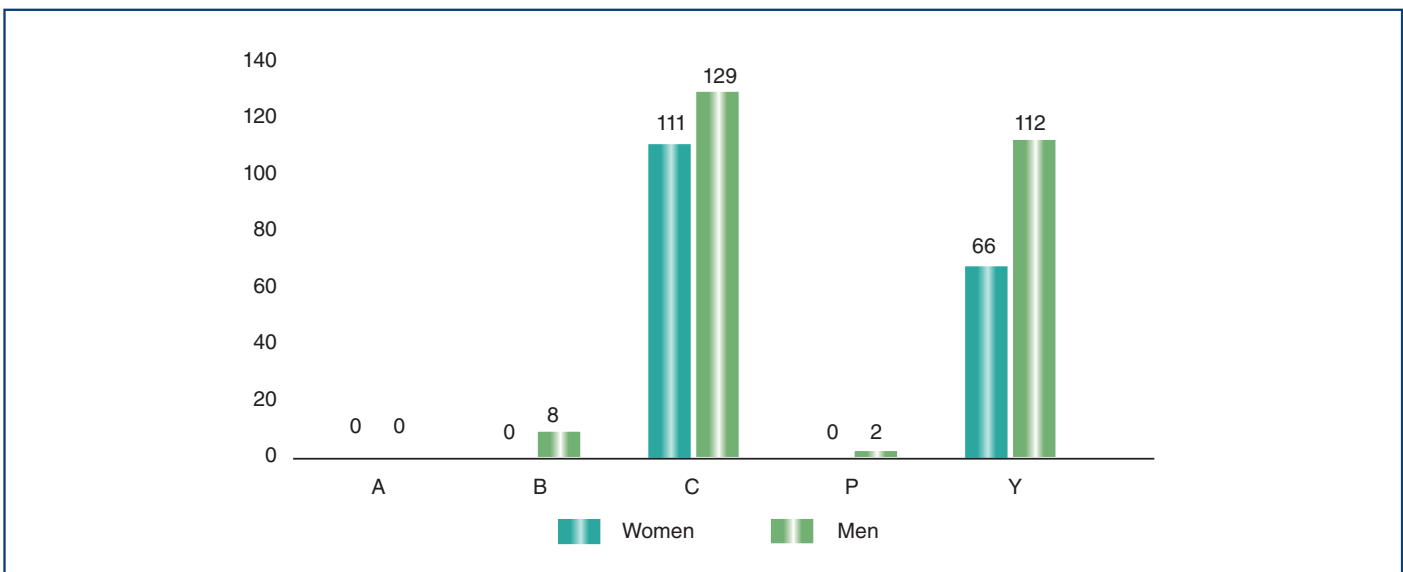


Figure 2: First-time Rated Researchers by Rating Category (2024)

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Of first-time rated researchers, 55% were Black South African researchers; 38% were South African women; and 19% were Black South African women (Figure 3). Since 2020, the data have shown an increasing proportion of Black South Africans and Black women applying for rating for the first time, while the overall number of women has remained fairly constant. This suggests that efforts to transform the research system are effective.

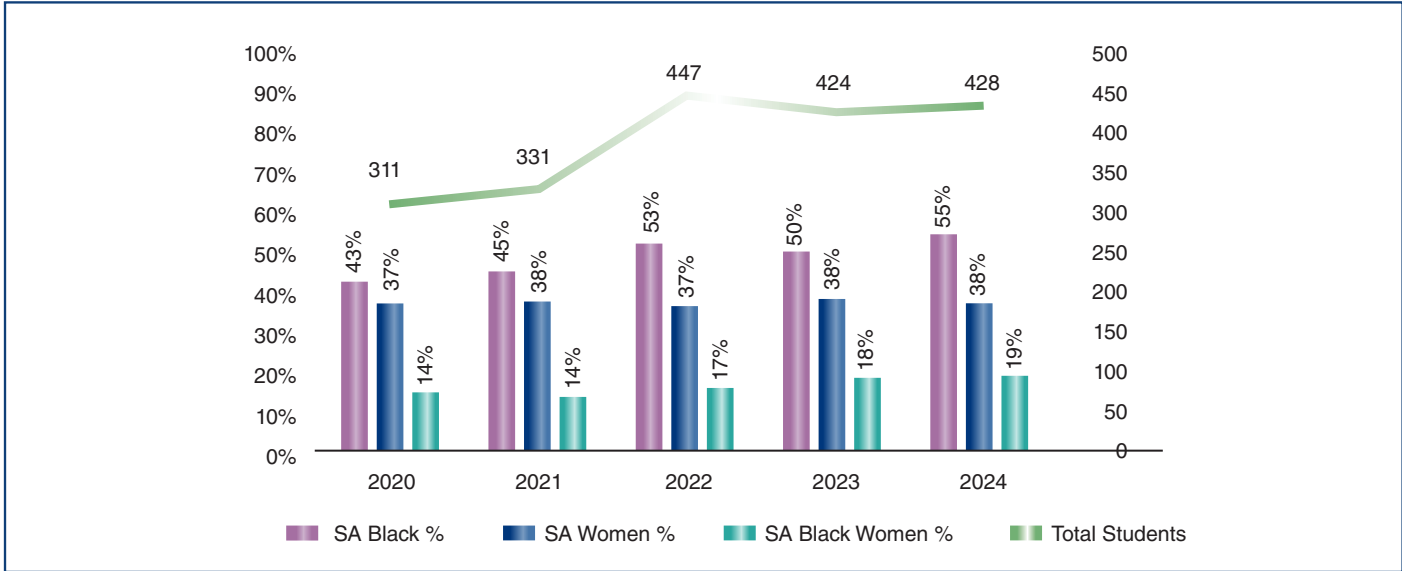


Figure 3: Black and/or Women First-time Rated Researchers in all Rating Categories (2020 to 2024)

In terms of the age of first-time rated researchers, 144, or 34%, were under the age of 40 (Figure 4), highlighting interventions to develop emerging researchers and encourage applications early on in a researcher’s career. The NRF expects further growth in this category in response to the alleviation of identified obstacles for Thuthuka students applying for rating. There has been significant, if fluctuating, growth in the number of first-time rate researchers in the 30-39, 40-49 and 50-59 age cohorts since 2020, although the number has begun to decline in more recent years in the 30-39 and 50-59 age cohorts. There are no clear trends in the 20-29 and 60+ age cohorts.

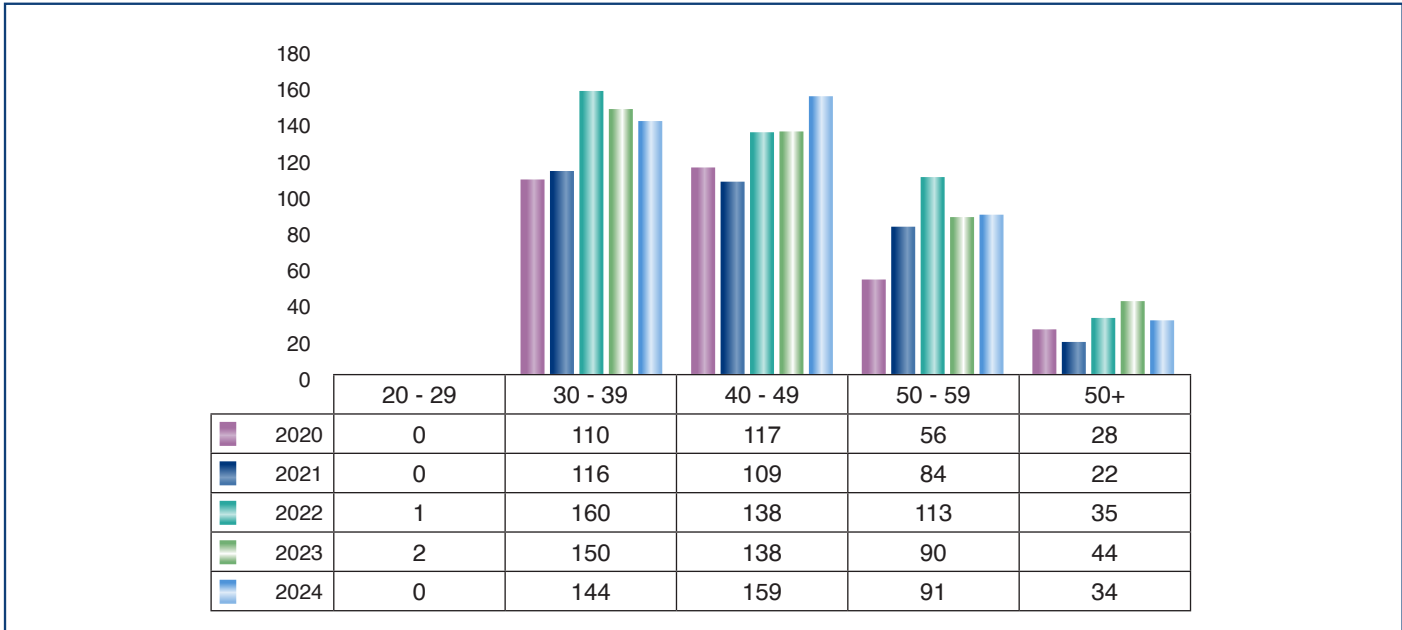


Figure 4: First-time Rated Researchers by Age (2020 to 2024)



Diversity of NRF-Rated Researchers

While the size and diversity of the rated researcher cohort has improved when all rating categories are considered together, change is not evident across all rating categories individually. A-rated researchers are the most productive and established cohort of researchers, and this category remains the least representative in terms of race, gender, and institution. Transformation in the B and C categories provides an indication of anticipated future transformation, while the trends in P and Y-rated researchers highlight transformation of young researchers and the sustainability of the researcher cohort. Considering the rating categories individually is, therefore, relevant when analysing change.

From 2020 to 2024, both the proportion (Table 1) and number of South African Black and Black women A-rated researchers have declined slightly, while the proportion and number of women rated researchers increased and the proportion of South Africans remained constant. The proportion of Black A-rated researchers declined from 13% to 10% (16 to 14 individuals). The proportion of Black women A-rated researchers declined from 3% to 2% (four to three individuals). The number of SA women increased from 21 to 26 (23% to 31%) over this same period, while the total number of A-rated researchers grew from 124 to 134 and South Africans from 100 to 108.

In terms of B-rated researchers, the total number declined during the period 2020 to 2024 from 798 to 731, with the number of South Africans declining from 697 to 634 (the proportion remained 87%). In terms of overall numbers and proportion, there was growth for South African Black (108 to 135, or 14% to 18%), women (185 to 223, or 23% to 31%), and Black women (22 to 35, or 3% to 5%) B-rated researchers.

C-rated researchers grew from 2 596 to 2 948, with the proportion of South Africans remaining constant (93%) and the number increasing from 2 422 to 2 728. There was significant growth in both the number and proportion of South African Black (894 to 1349, or 34% to 46%) and Black women (253 to 422, 10% to 14%) C-rated researchers, while the number of women grew, but the proportion remained constant (37%). P-rated researchers are exceptional researchers under the age of 35 with the potential to become future leaders in their field. While the number of P-rated researchers is small, a growing proportion of them are South African (74% to 82%), Black South African (13% to 18%) and South African women (13% to 24%). However, there were no Black South African women P-rated researchers during the period under review, highlighting the need for a continued focus on targeted support at the intersection of race and gender.

Y-rated researchers are promising young researchers under the age of 40 who have held a Doctorate for less than five years. The number of these researchers has grown from 721 to 898, and while the proportion of South Africans has declined, the number increased from 645 to 772. Black South Africans form a significant and growing proportion of Y-rated researchers, increasing from 43% to 51%, or 308 to 459 individuals. While the proportion of South African women has declined slightly (38% to 36%), the number grew from 273 to 327 as has the number (87 to 158) and proportion (12% to 18%) of Black women.

To further promote diversity, the NRF will continue to encourage researchers to apply for rating or re-rating when their rating expires, and to identify interventions to support researcher development from postgraduate studies through to emerging researchers and established researchers.

Table 1: Black and/or Women NRF-Rated Researchers by Rating Category (2020 and 2024)

Year		A-Rated	B-Rated	C-Rated	P-Rated	Y-Rated
2020	Total number of rated researchers	124	798	2 596	23	721
	Proportion South African	81%	87%	93%	74%	89%
	Percentage of SA Black	13%	14%	34%	13	43%
	Percentage of SA women	17%	23%	37%	13	38%
	Percentage of SA Black women	3%	3%	10%	0%	12%
2024	Total number of rated researchers	134	731	2 948	17	898
	Proportion South African	81%	87%	93%	82%	86%
	Percentage of SA Black	10%	18%	46%	18%	51%
	Percentage of SA women	19%	31%	37%	24%	36%
	Percentage of SA Black women	2%	5%	14%	0%	18%



Along with analysis by rating category, analysis at the intersection of race and gender highlights both achievements and challenges and is shown in Figures 5 and 6 for women and men respectively.

Overall, the number of women rated researchers has grown steadily from 1 514 in 2020 to 1 773 in 2024 (17% growth; higher than the 11% for all rated researchers). In terms of the proportion that women rated researchers contribute to the entire rated researchers cohort, the proportion of South African women has increased from 34% to 35% from 2020 to 2024, while the proportion of foreign women remained at 2%. The proportion of South African African women grew from 4% in 2020 to 7% in 2024, with the number growing by an impressive 104% from 162 to 331. South African Coloured women remained constant at 2%, but the number increased from 83 to 111 (34% growth). South African Indian women increased from 3% to 4%, or 121 to 176 individuals, or 45%. The only group to decline was South African White women, from 1 066 in 2020 to 1 060 in 2024, with a proportional decline from 25% to 22%. This mirrors the trend observed among White men researchers discussed below.

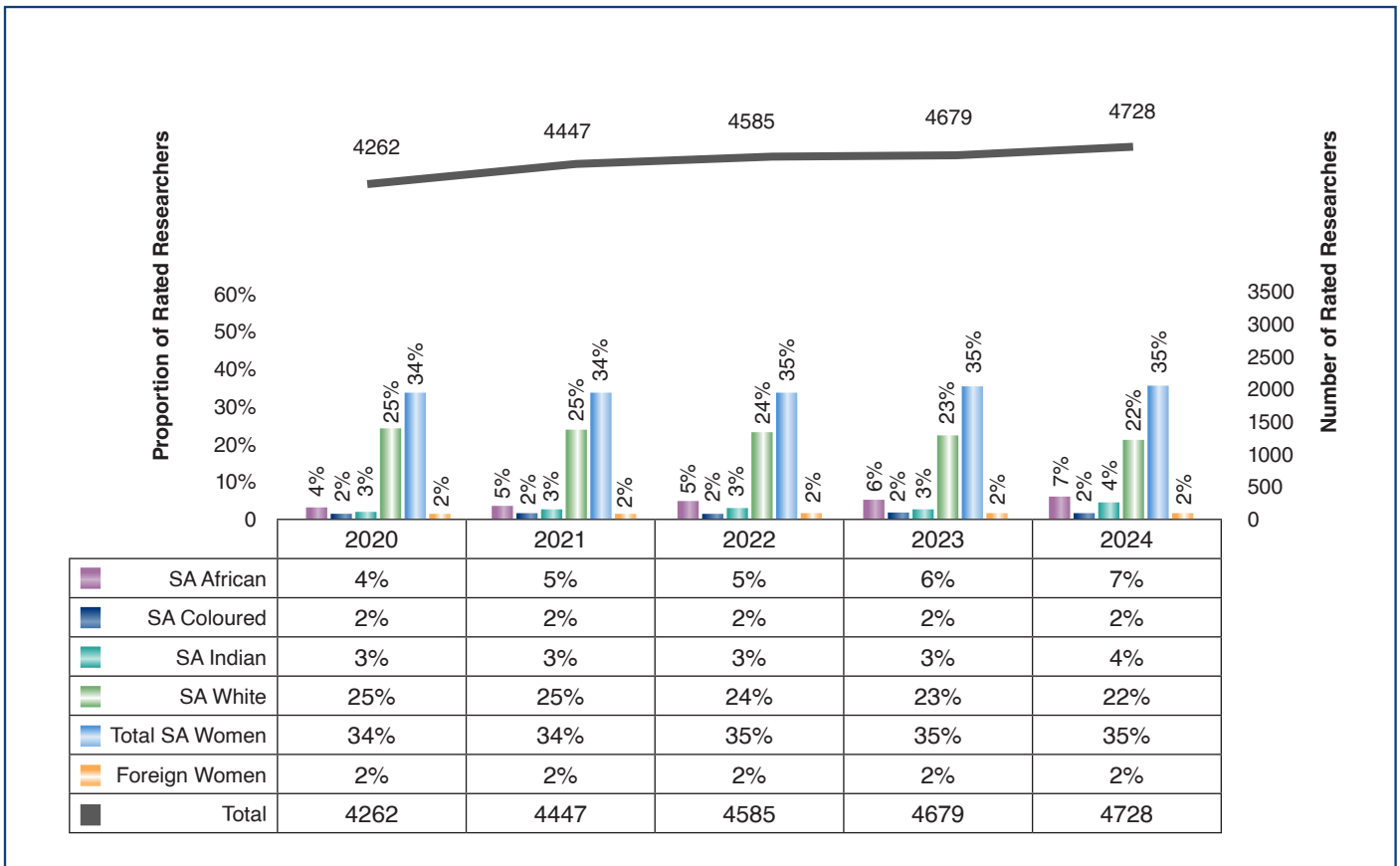


Figure 5: Rated Women Researchers by Race and Gender (2020 to 2024)

The number of NRF-rated men has also grown steadily, albeit more slowly, during this period from 2 748 to 2 955 (8% growth). South African African men have seen the most substantial growth, increasing from 15% of all rated researchers in 2020 to 22% in 2024. The number of African men grew from 658 to 1 017, increasing by a significant 55%. The proportion of South African Coloured and Indian men remained stable 3% and 4% respectively, although their numbers grew. The number of Coloured men increased from 119 to 125 (5% growth), and Indian men from 186 to 200 (8% growth). As with White women, the proportion and number of rated White men declined from 2020 to 2024, from 35% to 26% of the cohort and from 1 486 to 1 236 (17% decline) individuals. The proportion of South African men also decreased from 57% to 55%, although the number grew from 2 449 to 2 578.

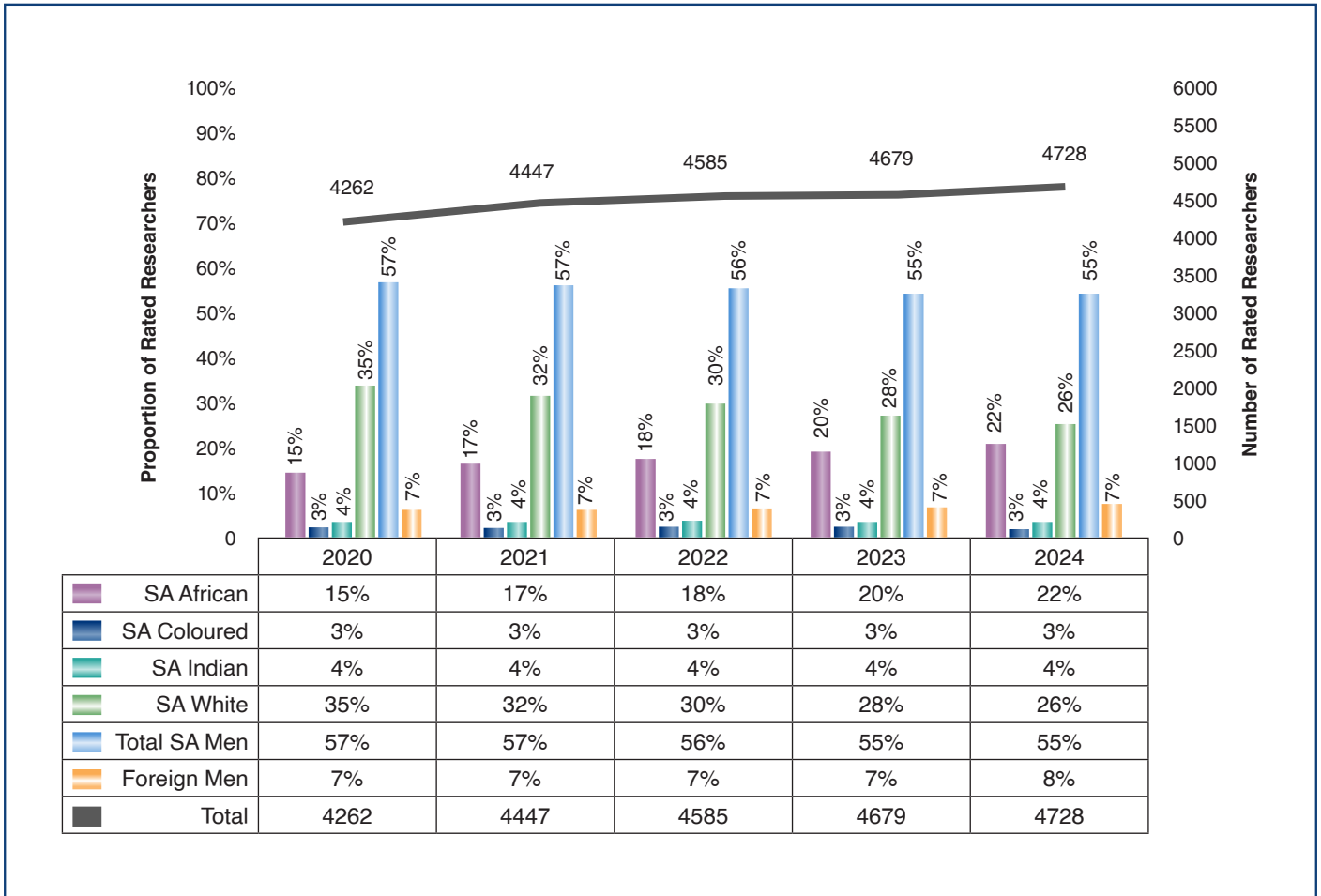


Figure 6: Rated Men Researchers by Race and Gender (2020 to 2024)

A few years back, it was noted that a risk to our productive research cohort is the high proportion of researchers who are over 60 years of age and are thus close to retirement. In response, the NRF introduced a strategic focus on younger and emerging research, as was discussed in *NRF Data Insights 4*. The impact or effect of the strategic focus is partly assessed through the tracking of changes in the age of NRF-rated researchers. The data show a gradual shift toward a greater proportion of younger rated researchers, suggesting the positive impact of the NRF’s interventions. The number of rated researchers younger than 30 years old remains very small, which aligns with the average age when students complete Doctoral studies. There was, however, growth in the 30 to 39 years old cohort from 525 in 2020 to 685 in 2024 (30% growth), suggesting successful onboarding of early-career researchers and the impact of encouraging full time study to lower the age when a Doctorate is awarded. Overall, those younger than 40 years old account for 15% of rated researchers, while those over 60 account for 24%. The 40 to 49 and 50 to 59 years old cohorts remain the largest, with 1 496 (32%) and 1 417 (30%) researchers respectively in 2024. The 60+ group declined from 1 167 to 1 127 (3% decline).

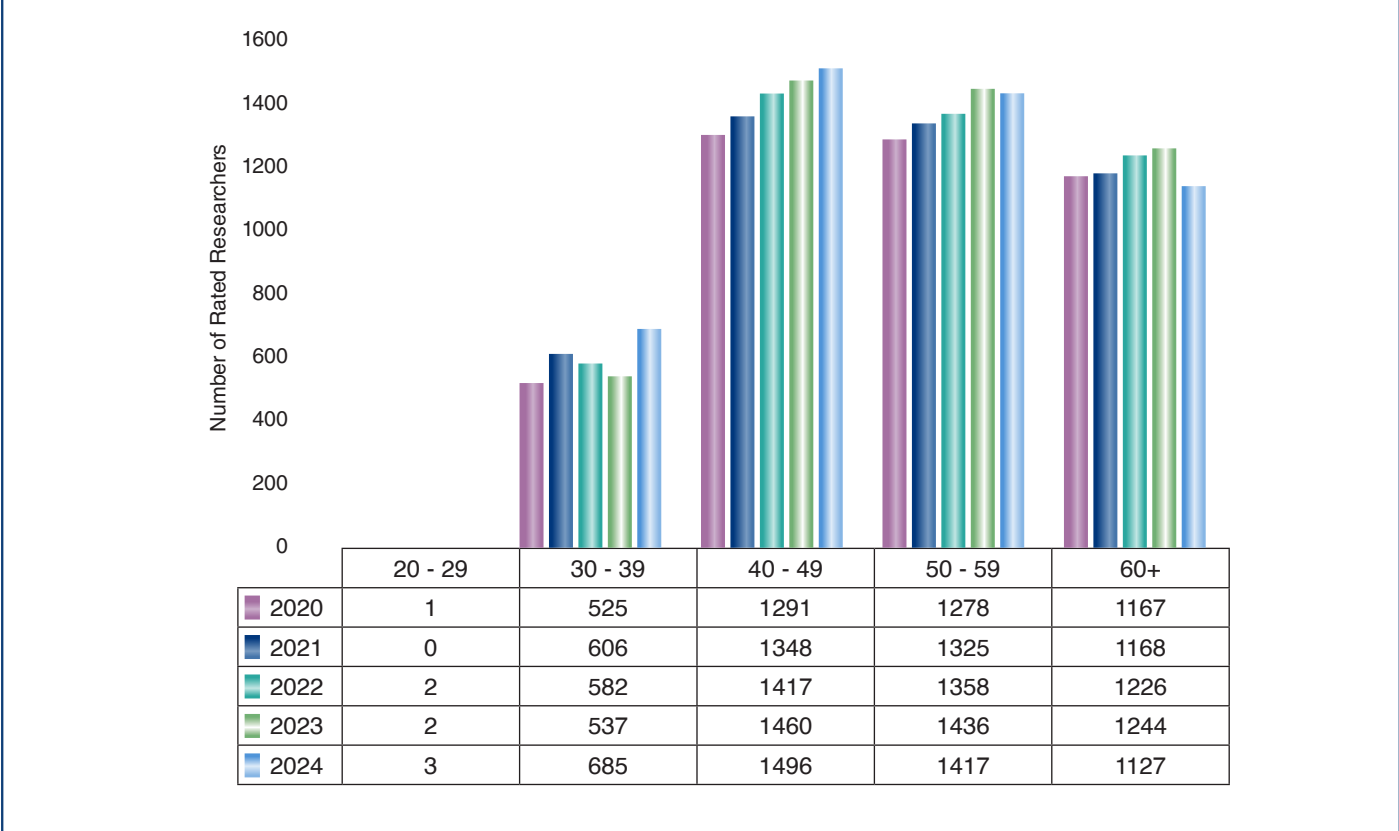


Figure 7: Age Profile of Rated Researcher (2020 to 2024)

Diversity of Institutions: NRF-Rated Researchers

Transformation of the institutional landscape is also an NRF priority to develop research cultures and capacity at comprehensive universities, universities of technology (UoT), historically disadvantaged institutions (HDI) and rural universities. This is reflected in the growth in the number of rated researchers at these universities (Table 2). Establishing a research culture takes time but efforts have demonstrated impact, and further targeted interventions are being introduced through the NRF’s new University Partnerships and Collaboration.

Figure 8 shows the distribution of NRF-rated researchers across the institutional landscape. Caution must be used when interpreting this figure as each category ¹ consists of a different number of institutions; there is an overlap in the representation of some institutions in different categories; and science councils do not have the same emphasis on rating as universities.

1. **Traditional Universities:** North-West University, Rhodes University, Stellenbosch University, University of Cape Town, University of Fort Hare, University of KwaZulu-Natal, University of Limpopo, University of Pretoria, University of the Free State, University of the Western Cape, and University of the Witwatersrand; **Comprehensive Universities:** Nelson Mandela University, Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University, Sol Plaatje University, University of Johannesburg, University of Mpumalanga, University of South Africa, University of Venda, University of Zululand, and Walter Sisulu University. **Universities of Technologies (UoTs):** Cape Peninsula UoT, Central UoT, Durban UoT, Mangosuthu UoT, Tshwane UoT and Vaal UoT; **Historically disadvantaged/rural institutions:** University of Limpopo, University of Fort Hare, University of Venda, Walter Sisulu University, University of the Western Cape, University of Zululand, Mangosuthu UoT and Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University.

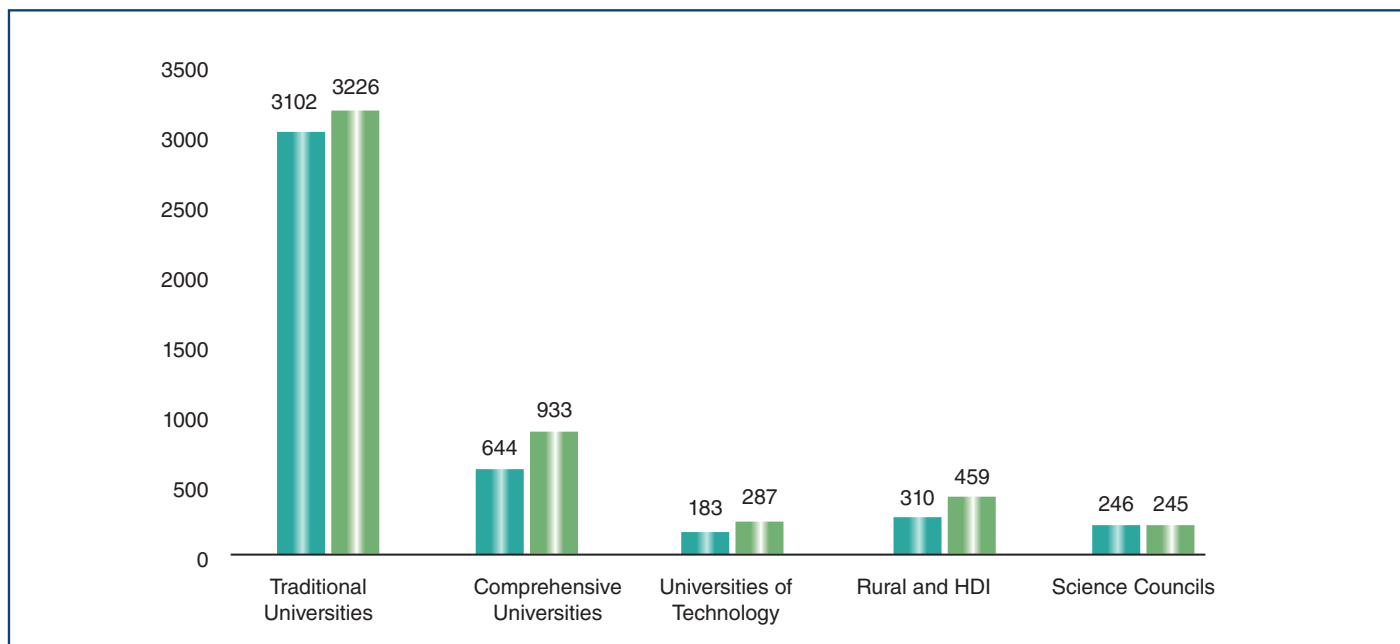


Figure 8: Distribution of Rated Researchers by Institutional Type (2020 and 2024)

The vast majority of rated researchers continue to be located at the 11 traditional universities, with the number increasing slightly by 4% from 3 102 to 3 226 rated researchers. Overall, 68% of rated researchers were located at traditional universities in 2024, compared to 73% in 2020 — a sign of growing institutional diversity. Rated researchers located at the nine comprehensive universities grew from 644 to 933, a 45% increase, while the number at the six UoTs saw the highest growth of 57% from 183 to 287. The number of rated researchers located at the 8 HDI and Rural institutions grew from 310 to 459, or by 48%, reflecting enhanced support for HDIs. Science councils saw a slight decrease in the number of rated researchers from 246 to 245, possibly reflecting declining interest at councils due to the small financial incentives, compared to universities where it is often used to motivate for promotion.

Table 2 shows a breakdown by institutional type and rating category with an overall trend that aligns well with the above analysis. Throughout the period, the vast majority of A-rated researchers were located at traditional universities (85% in 2024). There were none at UoTs and a small and fluctuating number at other institutions, suggesting a lack of institutional research cultures to both develop and retain A-rated researchers.

The number of B-rated researchers fluctuated across all institutions, with the most significant cohort at traditional universities and steady and significant growth at comprehensive universities from 82 in 2020 to 104 in 2024 (27% increase).

Within the cohort of C-rated researchers, there has been significant and growth at comprehensive universities from 433 researchers in 2020 to 620 in 2024 (43% growth), at rural universities and HDIs from 216 to 313 and at UoTs from 138 to 210. If institutional research cultures shift, and C-rated researchers are retained, this would lead to significant institutional transformation. Steady growth also continued at traditional universities while there was a slight decline at science councils in line with the general decline at these institutions.

P-rated researchers are only found at traditional universities with only one or two at other institutions in selected years. The trend for Y-rated researchers is very different with steady and significant growth at comprehensive universities (115 to 198, 72% growth), rural universities and HDIs (46 to 100, 117% growth) and UoTs (36 to 70, 94% growth). The traditional university cohort remains steady (496 to 560, 13% growth), while the science council cohort has fluctuated with little change. As with C-rated researchers, if retained, these researchers could significantly shift the future institutional landscape.



Table 2: Distribution of Rated Researchers by Institutional Type/Rating Category (2020 to 2024)

		Traditional Universities	Comprehensive Universities	Universities of Technology	Rural and HDI	Science Councils
2020	A	106	13	0	7	2
	B	641	82	9	40	42
	C	1 839	433	138	216	143
	P	20	1	0	1	2
	Y	496	115	36	46	57
2021	A	112	12	0	6	2
	B	637	87	9	41	40
	C	1 905	483	155	240	157
	P	20	1	0	1	1
	Y	513	128	48	53	62
2022	A	111	15	0	5	1
	B	630	104	12	39	35
	C	1 928	547	176	266	122
	P	18	1	0	1	1
	Y	535	159	58	72	57
2023	A	113	11	0	6	3
	B	598	109	10	38	47
	C	1 955	577	193	292	141
	P	16	1	0	1	1
	Y	567	166	67	81	68
2024	A	117	11	0	6	4
	B	573	104	7	39	41
	C	1 959	620	210	313	135
	P	17	0	0	1	0
	Y	560	198	70	100	65

Conclusion

The analysis in this volume of *NRF Data Insights* underscores the continued relevance and impact of the NRF rating system in assessing the state of South Africa’s research landscape. The steady growth in the number of rated researchers, particularly among younger researchers under the age of 40 (from 526 in 2020 to 688 in 2024), suggests that interventions to grow the emerging researcher cohort and support them in their applications are having an impact. In addition, the growth in the number of South African Black (from 1 329 in 2020 to 1 960 in 2024) and South African Black women rated researchers (from 366 in 2020 to 618 in 2024) indicates the effectiveness of targeted transformation interventions across the South African research ecosystem, although further support for Black women is required. The slow pace of change in terms of institutional transformation highlights the need for dedicated interventions to grow research capacity and support the development of research cultures across the system, and the NRF is in the process of developing such an intervention. The willingness of these institutions to work with the NRF is encouraging. In conclusion, it is evident that the NRF’s commitment to excellence and equity is yielding measurable outcomes, which will become more evident as B and C-rated researchers progress to the level of A-rating.