

2026 NRF Awards

Building an Inclusive, Impactful and Transformed Research Future

3 September 2026
Gqeberha

science, technology & innovation

Department:
Science, Technology and Innovation
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

NRF National Research Foundation



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Message from the NRF Acting CEO

Dr Angus Paterson, PhD



South Africa's research and innovation system is at a pivotal moment. As we work to expand participation, strengthen excellence, and ensure that research delivers meaningful benefits to society, the importance of building a more inclusive and responsive research ecosystem has never been greater. Against this backdrop, ***Building an Inclusive, Impactful and Transformed Research Future***, the theme of this year's National Research Foundation (NRF) Awards, speaks directly to the collective responsibility of the research community to advance knowledge while creating opportunities, addressing inequality, and contributing to sustainable national development. This aspiration is reflected in the NRF Vision 2030 and its five strategic pillars of Transformation, Innovation, Sustainability, Excellence and Impact (TIES4I), which continue to guide our efforts to strengthen South Africa's research enterprise for future generations.

Since its inception, the NRF has worked to advance transformation across the National System of Innovation (NSI). We recognise that transforming the research cohort is essential to building an inclusive research ecosystem and that society rightly expects research to improve quality of life. This reality explains our commitment to fostering research that is both transformative and societally impactful. The Societal Impact Award, introduced as a category in the NRF Awards in 2024 in alignment with the NRF Impact Framework, celebrates research projects that demonstrate evidence of the impact they have made on society over the past year. It is encouraging that the category attracted a strong number of entries this year, demonstrating that many of our researchers and innovators are embracing the call to engage more in research that has a direct impact on local communities, the country, and the continent.

For its part, the NRF continues to support transformation and inclusion across the NSI through a range of targeted funding instruments and capacity-development initiatives. For the 2025 academic year, the NRF funded 3 355 researchers, including postdoctoral fellows. Of these, 57% were South African Black researchers and 47% were South African women. This marks significant progress since the NRF's inception in the 1999 academic year, when South African Black researchers accounted for 15% of funded researchers and South African women accounted for 17%. Despite ongoing financial constraints, the NRF also funded 5 951 postgraduate students, of whom 86% were South African Black and 60% were South African women. It is worth noting that these NRF-funded postgraduate students provide the pipeline for future researchers and the workforce for the NSI. The proportion of funded postgraduate students in 1999 was 47% for South African Black and 40% for South African women.

The NRF rating system remains an important measure of our progress in developing a research cohort that is both excellent and transformed. There were 4 728 NRF-rated researchers in 2025, an increase of 13% from 4 262 in 2020. The representation of Black South African and Black women rated researchers also increased significantly, reaching 41% and 13% of the rated researcher cohort, respectively. Further analysis of the figures shows that our 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, representing a 25% growth. Transformation is progressing across the B, C, P and Y rating categories, with 55% of first-time rated researchers being Black, and 19% being Black women.

Beyond transforming the researcher cohort, the NRF has intensified efforts to advance transformation at

the institutional level through established initiatives such as the DSTI-NRF South African Research Chairs Initiative (SARChI), as well as newer interventions such as the University Programmes and Collaboration (UPC) initiative. In April this year, the NRF launched forty-one (41) Decadal Plan-Aligned Research Chairs, all of which are hosted at Historically Disadvantaged Institutions (HDIs), Universities of Technology (UoTs) and emerging universities. Aligned with the objectives of the DSTI Decadal Plan 2022-2032, this initiative lays a strong foundation for a more inclusive, resilient and dynamic national research system. Importantly, it reinforces the understanding that transformation within the research enterprise does not occur by chance but is driven by deliberate choices, sustained commitment, and coordinated action across government, funding agencies, and higher education institutions. It further recognises that a capable, competitive, and globally relevant research system must draw on the strengths and potential of the entire higher education sector, rather than being concentrated within a limited number of institutions.

Similarly, the UPC initiative is a strategic intervention designed to strengthen research capacity at HDIs, UoTs, and newly established universities. It forms part of the NRF's broader efforts to address persistent disparities in research and human capital development across the higher education landscape, while supporting the priorities articulated in the Science, Technology and Innovation Decadal Plan. Through the initiative, institutions are supported to establish and strengthen research teams in university-approved research niche areas, thereby enhancing their ability to generate high-quality research outputs and improve their competitiveness in accessing other NRF funding opportunities. The Research Teams Support component complements the NRF's ongoing engagement with institutions to develop comprehensive research development plans. It also integrates key cross-cutting elements, including collaboration with National Facilities, international partnerships, and science engagement activities, to support sustainable and context-responsive research development. Through this bespoke approach, the initiative seeks to build enduring institutional capacity and enable long-term research excellence.

The NRF transformation journey shows that science infrastructure is not only a platform for discovery; it is also a platform for changing lives, institutions, and society. Through NRF-SARAO, NRF-SAAO, NRF-iThemba LABS, NRF-SAIAB, NRF-SAEON, NRF-SAASTA and the Research Advancement (RA) Business Unit, South Africa has built internationally recognised research capability while widening participation in science and strengthening the National System of Innovation. The journey has moved from access to excellence, from individual opportunity to institutional capability and from knowledge generation to societal value.

The next phase will require continued investment in people, data, infrastructure, partnerships, and public engagement, with sustained attention to inclusion, sustainability and the translation of research into visible benefits for communities, the economy and future generations. Evidence across the facilities is clear: when knowledge is deliberately connected to people, platforms, and purpose, it becomes a powerful instrument for societal transformation.

The achievements celebrated today reflect the strength, talent, and dedication that continue to drive South Africa's research and innovation ecosystem forward. The NRF remains committed to building an inclusive, impactful and transformed national research and innovation system. Through our continued collaboration with universities, science councils and the broader research community, I am confident that we will achieve even greater milestones in advancing South Africa's research and innovation agenda.

Congratulations to all our award recipients, and thank you for your unwavering commitment to excellence, innovation and impact.

Acknowledgements

The NRF extends its sincere appreciation to all those whose contributions continue to uphold the quality, credibility, and integrity of its recognition processes. In particular, the NRF thanks:

- the chairpersons of the respective subject rating panels, for their crucial role in maintaining the robustness of the NRF rating system;
- the nine chairpersons who led the eleven NRF Awards subpanels, for their dedicated service; and
- the universities and facilities represented at the event, whose researchers serve as rating reviewers and provide essential assessments of rating applicants.

Their expertise and commitment make a significant contribution to the integrity of the NRF Awards and Rating systems.

Dr Angus Paterson
Acting Chief Executive Officer

About the Awards

Research Excellence Award for Next Generation Researchers

The NRF provides funding to postgraduate students to address the skills shortages in the fields of science, engineering, technology, humanities and social sciences by increasing the possibility of retaining suitably qualified young scientists, thereby increasing the pool of researchers and knowledge workers in the National System of Innovation.

This award recognises outstanding academic performance by final-year doctoral students.

Research Excellence Award for Early Career/ Emerging Researchers

The NRF aspires to develop and enhance the research stature of Early Career/Emerging Researchers, prioritising black, female and people with disabilities, as part of its transformation agenda which, among others, aims to redress historical imbalances in the South African researcher cohort.

This award recognises outstanding research performance by current Early Career/Emerging Researchers in any discipline, who are NRF grant holders.

Public Engagement with Research Award

The Public Engagement with Research Award recognises outstanding contributions to public engagement with science and encourages academics to make their work, and science and technology in general, more accessible to the public.

Science Team Award

This award recognises the contributions, creativity and achievements of a science team in extending the boundaries of scientific research in Africa, producing scientific outcomes that have positively impacted society, and contributing to South Africa's international stature as a world-class research destination.

Focussed Research Advancement Award

This award recognises Universities of Technology and Historically Disadvantaged Universities that have shown the most growth in research productivity and research support, as evaluated over a period of five years.

Hamilton Naki Award

Named after the self-taught surgeon who trained generations of medical students in surgical techniques, the Hamilton Naki Award honours individuals for achieving world-class research performance despite considerable challenges.

Champion of Research Capacity Development and Transformation at South African Higher Education Institutions

This category recognises individuals within the research community who contribute to the transformation, and thus diversity, of South Africa's science cohort through the research students they supervise.

Societal Impact Award

This award recognises research with impact that has resulted in improvements in people's quality of life.

A-Rated Researchers

A-rated researchers are unequivocally recognised by their peers as leading international scholars in their respective fields, for the high quality and impact of their recent research outputs. They play a significant role in developing the next generation of researchers.

Acquiring an NRF rating generates considerable acknowledgement and respect for the individual researchers as well as their institutions.

Lifetime Achievement Award

This accolade is awarded to individuals considered to have made extraordinary contributions, of international standard and impact, to the development of science in and for South Africa over an extended period of time, and for the manner in which their work has touched and shaped the lives and views of many South Africans.



Special Awards

Research Excellence Award for Next Generation Researchers



Mr Lwandile Gwebushe
Centre for Radio Astronomy Techniques & Technologies (RATT)
Rhodes University

Mr Lwandile Gwebushe is a PhD candidate in Radio Astronomy at the Centre for Radio Astronomy Techniques & Technologies (RATT) at Rhodes University and has been continuously funded by the National Research Foundation (NRF) and the South African Radio Astronomy Observatory (NRF-SARAO) from his undergraduate studies to the present. He is also an Associate Researcher at the Istituto di Radioastronomia of the National Institute for Astrophysics (INAF) in Bologna, Italy.

His research uses MeerKAT observations to investigate neutral hydrogen and galaxy evolution within the Shapley Supercluster. Mr Gwebushe graduated *cum laude* with a BSc and MSc from the University of the Western Cape and holds a BSc Honours degree from the University of Cape Town.

A MeerKAT Open Time Principal Investigator and lead author of a paper published in Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society (MNRAS), he has developed an international research profile through research visits to INAF, presentations in Botswana, and participation in space science initiatives in the United States and Brazil.



Mr Takalani Isaac Khorombi
Department of Agricultural Economics and Agribusiness
University of Venda

Mr Takalani Isaac Khorombi is a PhD candidate in Agricultural Economics at the University of Venda. He obtained a Master of Science in Agricultural Economics *cum laude* from the University of Venda. His research focuses on agricultural marketing, commercialisation, and climate change adaptation, with particular emphasis on empowering emerging farmers to improve market participation and livelihoods.

He has authored five peer-reviewed journal articles, three conference proceedings, and one book chapter. He has also presented his research at national and international conferences and is a recipient of the Best Postgraduate Paper Award at the International Conference on Business and Management Dynamics.

Through his teaching, research, and community engagement, Mr Khorombi continues to contribute to agricultural development by empowering farmers and students.

Research Excellence Award for Next Generation Researchers



Ms Nthabiseng Mabale
Digital Media Design
University of Johannesburg

Ms Nthabiseng Mabale is a Lecturer in Digital Media Design at the University of Johannesburg and a PhD candidate at the University of the Witwatersrand. Her research advances digital storytelling as a participatory methodology for exploring social impact, African epistemologies, Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), design education, and the empowerment of women and marginalised communities in the Global South.

Her doctoral research informs her research and classroom practice, connecting scholarship, curriculum development, and community engagement. Her interdisciplinary *Arrival of Myth* project explores Johannesburg's urban folklore across Architecture, Graphic Design, and Digital Media Design and received the University of Johannesburg's 2026 Teaching Innovation Fund Award. Ms Mabale is part of the GES 4.0 SI award team working with the African Reclaimers Organisation and leads Digital Media Design in the GES 4.0 SI Catalytic Initiative: Eldorado Park Green Infrastructure and SDG Living Lab. She has published one journal article, four book chapters, and three conference proceedings, with five additional research outputs under review



Mr Luthando Molefe
Discipline of Teacher Education and Professional Development
University of KwaZulu-Natal

Mr Luthando Molefe is a PhD candidate in the Discipline of Teacher Education and Professional Development in the School of Education at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). He recently served as a Visiting Student Researcher at the College of Education at the University of Northern Iowa in the United States of America. He holds a Master of Education *cum laude*, a Bachelor of Education Honours *summa cum laude*, and a Bachelor of Education, all from UKZN.

His research interests include self-reflexive scholarship, professional learning, teacher professional development, rurality and rural education, and community-engaged scholarship. Mr Molefe has presented his research at 71 national and international conferences in more than 15 countries worldwide, including as a keynote and plenary speaker and through invited guest lectures.

He has (co-)authored 12 peer-reviewed articles and book chapters, comprising four published, four in press, and four under review. He has also successfully supervised 23 postgraduate students at Honours level, demonstrating his commitment to academic mentorship and human capacity development.

Research Excellence Award for Next Generation Researchers



Ms Anathi Msobo
Department of Biochemistry
University of Johannesburg

Ms Anathi Msobo is a PhD candidate in Biochemistry at the University of Johannesburg, where her research integrates machine learning and metabolomics to accelerate antiviral drug discovery from medicinal plants. She holds an MSc in Biochemistry from the University of Johannesburg, as well as a BSc Honours degree in Biochemistry and a BSc degree in Biochemistry and Microbiology from the University of Fort Hare.

Alongside her doctoral research, Ms Msobo serves as a Practical Instructor in the Department of Biochemistry, contributing to undergraduate teaching and laboratory training. Her research has resulted in four peer-reviewed publications and presentations at national and international conferences, including the Metabolomics Society Conference and the African Metabolomics Conference, where she received the Second-Best Poster Presentation Award.

Her research advances AI-driven natural product drug discovery by integrating computational and metabolomics approaches to identify novel antiviral compounds and strengthen data-driven strategies for combating emerging viral diseases.



Ms Zurika Murray
Department of Genetics
University of the Free State

Ms Zurika Murray is a researcher in Behavioural Genetics with a special interest in the genetics and genomics of neurotransmitter systems that contribute to variation in human behaviour. She is currently pursuing a multidisciplinary PhD investigating changes in the expression of genes involved in monoamine neurotransmitter systems following exposure to synthetic and naturally occurring indole alkaloids, using cerebral organoids derived from human-induced pluripotent stem cells. Her research explores the potential of these compounds as alternative treatment options for specific mental health conditions.

Since joining the Department of Genetics in 2009, Ms Murray has established the discipline of Behavioural Genetics within the department, generating interest among current and prospective students from diverse backgrounds. To date, she has successfully supervised five MSc students as a main supervisor, co-supervised three MSc students, and supervised more than 60 BSc Honours students.

Ms Murray is passionate about research mentorship and promoting positive academic collaboration in multidisciplinary research.

Research Excellence Award for Next Generation Researchers



Ms Philadelphia Vutivi Ngobeni
Water Research Group, Department of Civil Engineering
University of Cape Town

Ms Philadelphia Vutivi Ngobeni is a PhD candidate in Civil Engineering in the Water Research Group at the University of Cape Town. Her research focuses on the predictive modelling of nitrogen removal in microalgal-bacterial systems treating tannery wastewater, contributing to sustainable industrial wastewater treatment and resource recovery. With more than 10 years of experience in the water sector, her industry expertise enables her to bridge scientific knowledge and practical application.

Ms Ngobeni has published six peer-reviewed journal articles and serves on the executive committees of the Organisation for Women in Science for the Developing World (OWSD) South African National Chapter and Young Water Professionals South Africa (YWP-SA).

Her accolades include recognition among the 100 South African Shining Stars (2026) and the Mail & Guardian Top 200 Young South Africans (2025). She is also a recipient of the South African Women in Science Awards Esther Mahlangu Doctoral Fellowship (2024), Womandla Women in STEAM Award (2024), Black Women in Science Fellowship (2024), and BRICS Young Scientist recognition (2023).



Ms Zikhona Ngqula
Anthropology
University of Cape Town

Ms Zikhona Ngqula is a PhD candidate in Environmental Humanities at the University of Cape Town. Her research examines how water governance, ecological degradation, and urban development shape habitability in the Diep River Estuary in Cape Town, focusing on multispecies coexistence, environmental justice, and lived experiences of pollution.

In 2025, she received a Wenner-Gren Foundation Dissertation Fieldwork Grant and the African Studies PhD Support Grant. She has published in DHET-accredited journals and contributes to public-facing media, connecting academic scholarship with environmental advocacy. She was recently named one of the Mail & Guardian 200 Young South Africans in the Climate, Environment, and Energy category.

A long-term WaterCAN water tester and citizen scientist, Ms Ngqula monitors water quality in the Diep River catchment and supports environmental stewardship through a local Friends group and community-led conservation initiatives in Cape Town. Her work combines rigorous research with community engagement to promote sustainable water futures.

Research Excellence Award for Next Generation Researchers



Ms Soligah Solomons
School of Communication
North-West University

Ms Soligah Solomons is a Lecturer in the School of Communication at North-West University (NWU), where she teaches and supervises students in journalism and media studies at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. She is a PhD candidate in the Centre for Film and Media Studies at the University of Cape Town (UCT) and is affiliated with the Digital Media Sociology Lab, which forms part of the NRF SARChI Chair in Digital Media Sociology.

Her research focuses on artificial intelligence in South African newsrooms, with broader interests in journalism studies, media sustainability, and journalism education. Ms Solomons serves as Co-Convener of the Emerging Scholars Stream at the South African Communications Association (SACOMM), supporting the development of emerging communication scholars.

She has published in peer-reviewed journals and scholarly books and has presented her research at national and international conferences, including those organised by the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR). Her work contributes to strengthening journalism and media scholarship across the Global South.

Research Excellence Award for Early Career/ Emerging Researchers



Dr Edwin Makhado
Department of Chemistry
University of Limpopo

Dr Edwin Makhado is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Chemistry at the University of Limpopo. His research focuses on the design and development of sustainable functional nanomaterials, including conductive hydrogels, cellulose-based materials, and metal–organic framework composites, for applications in water purification, electrochemical sensing, catalysis, clean energy, vegetable seedling production, and postharvest coating technologies.

Dr Makhado has authored more than 50 peer-reviewed journal articles, 10 book chapters, and three conference proceedings. His research has attracted more than 2,100 citations and has an H-index of 23. He has also filed three patents, reflecting his commitment to translating fundamental research into innovative technologies with societal impact.

He has contributed to human capacity development by supervising 10 Honours, four Master's, and one doctoral student. His research is supported by the National Research Foundation (NRF) and aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly those focused on clean water, affordable and clean energy, and sustainable innovation. In recognition of his research excellence, he received the Vice-Chancellor's Research Award for Best Researcher in 2024.



Professor Samkelo Malgas
Department of Biochemistry, Genetics and Microbiology
University of Pretoria

Professor Samkelo Malgas is an internationally recognised biochemist and NRF Y-rated scientist at the University of Pretoria. His pioneering research in green catalysis and the valorisation of agricultural residues is contributing to the sustainable production of fine chemicals, environmental remediation, and advances in food chemistry.

Throughout his career, Prof Malgas has published more than 40 peer-reviewed articles, contributed five book chapters, and presented his research at numerous international conferences. He is committed to developing the next generation of scientists, having supervised and mentored more than nine Master's students, three PhD students, and three postdoctoral fellows in biotechnology and engineering.

A recipient of several prestigious awards and fellowships, including the Department of Higher Education and Training's Future Professors' Programme (2026–2027) and the Fulbright Scholar Programme (2025–2026), Prof Malgas continues to advance innovative approaches that harness enzymes and green catalysts to transform agricultural residues into high-value fine chemicals, contributing to a more sustainable future.

Research Excellence Award for Early Career/ Emerging Researchers



Associate Professor Muthumuni Managa
Department of Chemistry
University of South Africa

Associate Professor Muthumuni Managa is an NRF Y2-rated researcher, a Member of the Royal Society of Chemistry (MRSC), and a member of the South African Young Academy of Science (SAYAS). Since joining the University of South Africa, she has secured approximately R4.6 million in competitive national and international research funding.

Prof Managa is a Fellow of the Science by Women programme, a TWAS–UNESCO Associateship recipient, a University of Michigan African Presidential Scholar, and a participant in Cohort 2 of the Future Professors' Programme. She has also served on the Executive Committee of the Association of South African Women in Science and Engineering (SA WISE).

Her internationally recognised research focuses on the development of sustainable and cost-effective water disinfection technologies to combat antimicrobial resistance. Her research has resulted in a UK patent application currently under review and an intellectual property disclosure in 2026. She has published more than 80 peer-reviewed publications, has an H-index of 24, and has successfully supervised 14 postgraduate students to graduation, reflecting her commitment to research excellence and human capacity development.



Professor Tlou Grace Manyelo
Department of Agricultural Economics and Animal Production
University of Limpopo

Professor Tlou Grace Manyelo is an Associate Professor in Animal Production and an NRF Y2-rated researcher at the University of Limpopo. Her research focuses on animal nutrition, with particular emphasis on poultry nutrition, as well as small-ruminant nutrition and production, environmental sustainability, and sustainable livestock and crop production systems in Southern Africa.

Throughout her career, Prof Manyelo has published more than 40 research articles, contributed three book chapters, and presented 25 posters and oral presentations at national and international conferences. She serves as Sub-Editor of the *South African Journal of Animal Sciences* (SAJAS) and has peer-reviewed articles for international and local journals.

Prof Manyelo has contributed significantly to human capacity development in Animal Science, having supervised or co-supervised 15 MSc students and more than 40 Honours students to completion. She currently supervises, co-supervises, and mentors eight Honours, eight MSc, seven PhD students, and one postdoctoral fellow. She is a participant in Phase 2, Cohort 3 of the Future Professors' Programme (FPP) and has received several awards recognising her excellence in teaching and research.

Research Excellence Award for Early Career/ Emerging Researchers



Dr Isaac Nape
School of Physics
University of the Witwatersrand

Dr Isaac Nape is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Physics at the University of the Witwatersrand and a researcher in the Structured Light Laboratory. His research is advancing next-generation quantum technologies through the development of innovative imaging, secure communication, and computing techniques powered by quantum science.

Dr Nape has published approximately 75 peer-reviewed journal articles, including papers in leading international journals such as *Nature Photonics, Nature Communications, Light: Science & Applications, Science Advances*, and *Optica*. Over the past four years, he has graduated five MSc students, four of whom received their degrees with distinction, while mentoring the next generation of quantum scientists.

Dr Nape is a South African Quantum Technology Initiative Emerging Leader Fellow, a Friedel Sellschop Fellow, and a MIND Institute Fellow. His achievements have been recognised through numerous honours, including the South African Institute of Physics Silver Jubilee Medal, the Royal Society of South Africa Meiring Naudé Medal, the Optica Emerging Leader in Optics Award, and recognition as one of the 2025 Rising Stars in Optics by IOP Publishing's *Journal of Optics*.



Dr Yeshona Sukai
Department of Biotechnology
University of the Western Cape

Dr Yeshona Sukai is a Senior Lecturer and Deputy Head of the Department of Biotechnology at the University of the Western Cape and an NRF Y-rated researcher. She holds a PhD in Microbiology from the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Her research focuses on sustainable industrial biotechnology, particularly lignocellulosic biorefineries, waste valorisation, green pretreatment technologies, biofuels, biochemicals, and the circular bioeconomy.

Dr Sukai has co-authored more than 35 peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters, attracting over 1,500 citations, and has secured more than R2 million in competitive research funding. She has contributed to human capacity development through supervising and mentoring postgraduate students and researchers at Honours, Master's, Doctoral, and postdoctoral levels.

Dr Sukai completed the Department of Higher Education and Training's Future Professors' Programme (2024–2025) and has received several accolades, including the University of Fort Hare Vice-Chancellor's Excellence Award (2023) and Emerging Researcher Medal (2022).

Through innovative research, mentorship, and strategic collaborations, Dr Sukai is committed to advancing sustainable biotechnology and the circular bioeconomy.

Research Excellence Award for Early Career/ Emerging Researchers



Dr Sesethu Charmaine Tshangana
Institute for Nanotechnology and Water Sustainability (iNanoWS)
University of South Africa

Dr Sesethu Charmaine Tshangana is a Senior Lecturer and NRF Y-rated researcher at the Institute for Nanotechnology and Water Sustainability (iNanoWS) at the University of South Africa (UNISA). Her research addresses a critical challenge in South Africa and a global priority: access to clean and safe drinking water. Aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 6, her research focuses on developing multifunctional membranes that improve water quality through the removal of emerging contaminants, inactivation of microorganisms, and simultaneous self-cleaning.

Dr Tshangana has published more than 30 peer-reviewed publications and contributed to a book chapter. She has secured more than R1.2 million in competitive research funding as a principal investigator and has supervised two Master's students to completion. She currently co-supervises seven PhD and five Master's students and serves on the Editorial Board of Processes.

Dr Tshangana is a recipient of the prestigious Catalyst Grant from the University of Oxford, underscoring her growing international standing and the significance of her research.



Professor Monray Williams
Neurometabolism Research Group
North-West University

Professor Monray Williams is an Associate Professor and Co-Head of the Neurometabolism Research Group at North-West University. His research focuses on understanding how HIV genetic diversity influences HIV-associated brain injury, contributing to a deeper understanding of the neurological complications associated with HIV infection.

Prof Williams obtained his BSc (Honours) and MSc in Biotechnology from the University of the Western Cape before completing his PhD in Neuroscience at the University of Cape Town in 2021. He has published 37 peer-reviewed journal articles and three book chapters, including invited articles in leading international journals such as *Nature Reviews Microbiology* and *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*. He has also contributed to more than 20 scientific conferences and supervised one PhD and four MSc graduates.

Prof Williams serves on the Editorial Board of the *Journal of Inflammation Research*, is Secretary of the South African Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology, and serves as a Council Member of the Southern African Neuroscience Society. His achievements have been recognised through several prestigious honours, including the Fulbright Visiting Research Scholar Award and recognition as one of the Mail & Guardian's 200 Young South Africans.

Public Engagement with Research Award



Associate Professor Tim Forssman
School of Social Sciences
University of Mpumalanga

Tim Forssman is an Associate Professor in Culture and Heritage Studies and Archaeology at the University of Mpumalanga. He specialises in the archaeology of southern Africa's late Holocene, focusing on the relationships between forager and farmer communities and the emergence of regional political formations.

Prof Forssman has demonstrated exceptional leadership and innovation in public engagement through his ability to translate archaeological research and heritage science into accessible, meaningful, and transformative public experiences. His work has significantly enhanced public understanding of science, archaeology, and cultural heritage through sustained engagement with schools, communities, universities, conservation areas, policymakers, and the broader public.

A flagship achievement is the Travelling Museum initiative, which has transformed access to archaeological heritage and public understanding of science. By taking interactive heritage and science experiences directly to communities, schools, universities, and conservation areas, the initiative successfully removes traditional barriers to museum access and creates opportunities for diverse audiences to engage with scientific research and Africa's rich archaeological heritage.

Through this innovative model, Prof Forssman has expanded the reach of heritage education, fostered public curiosity and scientific literacy, and promoted inclusive participation in knowledge sharing.

His public engagement activities have successfully translated complex scientific findings into engaging narratives that resonate with diverse audiences, strengthening the connection between science and society. Through educational outreach, science communication, heritage promotion, and stakeholder engagement, he has contributed to a deeper appreciation of South Africa's archaeological record and its relevance to contemporary society.

Between 2009 and 2025, Prof Forssman produced 55 research outputs, including 51 peer-reviewed articles and chapters, and four books. He is also a permit holder for archaeological research at Thulamela, one of South Africa's most important archaeological sites.

His book *Archaeology in Africa: Why the past matters* was published in 2026, and will be followed in 2027 by *Ivory, Gold and Power: Southern Africa and the Indian Ocean World, c. 600 BC to AD 1900*.

Public Engagement with Research Award



Professor Sarojini Nadar
Desmond Tutu SARChI Research Chair in Religion and Social Justice
University of the Western Cape

Sarojini Nadar is Distinguished Professor and Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research and Innovation at the University of the Western Cape. As the Desmond Tutu (LMS-NRF) SARChI chair in Religion and Social Justice, she has led an internationally recognised research programme examining how religion shapes and responds to the world's most pressing social and political challenges, including gender justice, violence, and human rights.

She has significantly advanced public understanding of the intersections between religion, gender, sexuality, and social justice. Her work has reshaped public discourse on gender-based violence by highlighting how religious teachings and institutional cultures can perpetuate abuse, while also influencing policy, faith communities, and broader societal conversations.

Through public lectures, media engagement, podcasts, community partnerships, advocacy initiatives, mentorship, and international collaborations, she has reached diverse audiences, including women, girls, LGBTQIA+ communities, faith leaders, activists, students, and historically marginalised groups. Her meaningful work towards public engagement extends beyond research dissemination to create lasting social transformation and public benefit.

An NRF B-rated scholar of religion, Prof Nadar has published over 100 scholarly works, supervised more than 40 master's and doctoral graduates, and mentored several postdoctoral fellows.

She is an elected member of the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) and serves on the President's Advisory Council on National Orders.

She is also a two-time South African Women in Science awardee in the distinguished researcher category.

Science Team Award



CAPTIONS *(TOP)*: Professor Rebecca Ackermann; Dr Wendy Black; Dr Palesa Madupe.
***(BOTTOM)*:** Dr Precious Chiwara-Maenzanise; A/Prof Robyn Pickering; A/Prof Lauren Schroeder.

The Human Evolution Research Institute (HERI)

Department of Archaeology
University of Cape Town

The Human Evolution Research Institute (HERI) is an internationally recognised, multidisciplinary research team advancing human origins research through field discoveries, methodological innovation, laboratory development, and African-centred scientific leadership.

HERI has published influential research in journals including *Nature*, *Science*, and *Cell*; established a world-class geochronology facility and is currently establishing Africa's first palaeoproteomics preparation laboratory; and trained a diverse new generation of African researchers through initiatives including the Pan-African Consortium for Human Evolution (PANACHE) and their all-womxn field camps. HERI has also transformed public engagement with human origins through the award-winning *HUMANITY* museum exhibition and other initiatives, promoting decolonised, African-centred narratives that foreground diverse histories, challenge colonial legacies, and broaden participation in science.

The HERI Team includes Prof Rebecca Ackermann, who is an evolutionary anthropologist advancing research on human evolution, transformation, and African scientific leadership. Dr Wendy Black specialises in bioarchaeology, Khoesan population history, indigenous heritage, and socially responsive museum practice. Dr Precious Chiwara-Maenzanise investigates Early/Middle Stone Age archaeology and adaptation in the southern Kalahari. Dr Palesa Madupe pioneers African palaeoproteomics and molecular analyses of ancient hominins. A/Prof Robyn Pickering and Dr Tara Edwards are geologists specialising in the geochronology and palaeoenvironmental reconstructions of human evolution. A/Prof Lauren Schroeder investigates skeletal variation and evolutionary processes shaping the human fossil record.

HERI represents one of South Africa's flagship research teams. Distinguished by its exceptional scientific excellence and pioneering research, international influence and leadership, and sustained contribution to knowledge production, HERI has firmly cemented South Africa's position as one of the world's leading hubs for palaeoanthropological and human origins research.

Science Team Award



CAPTIONS *(TOP)*: *Back Row from Left:* Professor Mershen Govender; Dr Gillian Mahumane; Professor Pradeep Kumar; Dr Hillary Mndlovu. ***(BOTTOM)****:* Dr Poornima Ramburrn; Professor Yahya E. Choonara; Professor Lisa C. du Toit; Professor Thashree Marimuthu.

Wits Advanced Drug Delivery Platform (WADDP)

Department of Pharmacy and Pharmacology
University of the Witwatersrand

One Purpose. Many Disciplines. Better Medicines. At the Wits Advanced Drug Delivery Platform (WADDP), innovation happens where minds and disciplines converge.

Since its establishment in 2007, WADDP has produced over 450 peer-reviewed publications, built Africa's largest patent portfolio in advanced drug delivery (52 patents), and trained more than 130 postgraduate students and postdoctoral fellows, many of whom have received prestigious national and international awards.

The multidisciplinary team integrates expertise in pharmaceutical sciences, chemistry, biomaterials, engineering, biology, and clinical translation to develop advanced therapeutic technologies that address Africa's and the world's most pressing healthcare challenges.

Home to a DSTI-NRF SARChI Chair, four NRF-rated researchers, and internationally recognised scientific leaders, WADDP has strengthened South Africa's global research standing through high-impact innovation, strategic international collaborations, technology translation, and the development of the next generation of pharmaceutical scientists dedicated to improving health outcomes.

WADDP is led by Prof Yahya E. Choonara and consists of Prof Mershen Govender, Dr Gillian Mahumane, Prof Pradeep Kumar, Dr Hillary Mndlovu, Dr Poornima Ramburrn, Prof Lisa C. du Toit and Prof Thashree Marimuthu.

The team's achievements have translated into measurable societal and economic benefits, reinforcing their position as a leading research enterprise within South Africa and internationally. Their work reflects strong research leadership, academic distinction, and meaningful contributions to advancing knowledge and addressing societal challenges through pharmaceutical and health-related innovation.

Overall, the team exemplifies the qualities of a globally competitive research group that combines scientific excellence with innovation, capacity building, translation of research into practice, and substantial societal impact.

Focussed Research Advancement Award

DUT DURBAN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

iYunivesithi Walter Sisulu
In pursuit of excellence

Hamilton Naki Award



Professor Motlalepula Matsabisa
Department of Pharmacology
University of the Free State

Professor Motlalepula Matsabisa is an internationally recognised Pharmacologist and the Director of the African Medicines Innovations and Technologies Development Platform at the University of the Free State. With a Doctoral degree, specialising in Medicine from the University of Cape Town, his research focuses on the pharmacology of medicinal plant drug discovery, development and formulation studies.

His impactful research influences policy, the economy and quality of life.

Prof Matsabisa's services and experience are utilised in many statutory bodies such as the South African Health Products Regulatory Authority (SAHPRA); the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), and the World Health Organization (WHO), where he serves in strategic, technical and advisory capacities.

To date, he has published over 150 scientific articles, two books and seven book chapters. He has been an invited keynote speaker and plenary speaker at more than 20 international conferences. Prof Matsabisa is also a recipient of the prestigious British Fellowship and has raised millions of rands in research funding.

He has made a notable contribution to developing human capacity in the field of Pharmacology by building a strong pipeline of postgraduate researchers while advancing research excellence in traditional medicine and Indigenous Knowledge Systems.

He has supervised and mentored a substantial cohort of postgraduate students, including over 20 Honours, 25 Master's and 15 PhD students, as well as 30 postdoctoral fellows.

By creating opportunities for students and early-career researchers to engage in scientifically rigorous research within a historically underrepresented field, Prof Matsabisa has contributed to the development of a new generation of scholars capable of bridging indigenous knowledge and modern scientific approaches. His work has broadened participation within the research system and enabled young researchers to establish careers in academia, research institutions and related sectors.

Champion of Research Capacity Development and Transformation at South African Higher Education Institutions



Professor Alvaro Viljoen
Department of Pharmaceutical Sciences
Tshwane University of Technology

Professor Alvaro Viljoen is an internationally recognised natural products scientist at the Tshwane University of Technology, where he holds the DSTI-NRF Research Chair in Phytomedicine and directs the South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC) Herbal Drugs Research Unit.

In 2005, he made a deliberate decision to build research capacity at a newly established, under-resourced University of Technology, founding a phytomedicine programme that has grown into a flagship research hub. Since then, he has made an extensive contribution to the supervision and development of postgraduate students, particularly Black South Africans and Black women, over many years.

He has supervised more than 105 postgraduate students; 73 African, 74 female and 46 African women. His students have consistently produced quality research outputs, including approximately 29 student-led publications in reputable journals in the period under review, demonstrating the highly productive research training environment he has established.

Professor Viljoen's contribution extends beyond supervision and publication outcomes to the creation of a sustainable pipeline of future academics and research leaders. Many of the students and researchers trained under his guidance are now NRF-rated professors and academic staff.

The impact of his mentorship across the South African research landscape has been substantial. His ability to develop highly productive scholars and future supervisors represents an important investment in the long-term sustainability of the national research system. His efforts have been recognised through prestigious awards, including the SAMRC Research Capacity Development and Transformation Award (2025) and the SFE-Zandu Award (2023) from the International Society for Ethnopharmacology.

He has authored over 330 peer-reviewed papers, holds a Scopus h-index of 60, ranks among the world's top 2% of scientists (Stanford/Elsevier), and for the past decade, has served as Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Ethnopharmacology*.

Societal Impact Award



Professor Tulio de Oliveira
Centre for Epidemic Response and Innovation (CERI);
School for Data Science and Computational Thinking
Stellenbosch University

Professor Tulio de Oliveira played a leading role in the response to COVID-19 in South Africa through his visionary application of genomics and bioinformatics. His research informed national, continental, and global COVID-19 responses, including the rapid identification and reporting of major SARS-CoV-2 variants, especially Beta and Omicron, and strengthened African genomic surveillance capacity.

He is the Director of the Centre for Epidemic Response and Innovation (CERI) at Stellenbosch University and the KwaZulu-Natal Research Innovation and Sequencing Platform (KRISP) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal; and the Pro-Vice Chancellor: Industry, Business and Foundation Partnerships at Stellenbosch University. In addition, he is a Professor of Bioinformatics at the School for Data Science and Computational Thinking, Stellenbosch University and at the College of Health Sciences at UKZN.

He has worked for over 20 years with viral outbreaks, including HIV, Hepatitis B and C, Chikungunya, Dengue, SARS-CoV-2, Zika, and Yellow Fever Virus.

A highly cited researcher, he has more than 300 publications, with many of them in high-impact scientific journals. These contributions have significantly advanced our understanding of these pathogens and their impact on public health.

Prof de Oliveira has received numerous awards and accolades. This includes the Gold Medal Award from the South African Medical Research Council; the Batho Pele Award; the German Africa Prize; the Discovery Health Lifetime Achievement Award; and the EDCTP Scientific Leadership Prize.

The President of Portugal awarded him the Order of Merit Medal for his groundbreaking work in genomics and bioinformatics, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, and President Cyril Ramaphosa bestowed him the Order of Mapungubwe (Gold) for his contribution to genomic surveillance and public health.

Prof de Oliveira's work demonstrates how research excellence can lead to significant societal benefits through timely scientific discoveries, efficient dissemination, and widespread public value.

Societal Impact Award



Dr Cobus van Breda
Faculty of Education
University of the Free State

Dr Cobus van Breda is the Director of the Science-for-the-Future (S4F) unit and Manager of the Sci-Ed Science Education Centre at the University of the Free State (UFS). His work is aimed at strengthening mathematics and science education in South African schools.

His initial research investigated effective ICT-integrated approaches to Physical Sciences curriculum implementation. This led to a focus on innovative and effective mathematics and science teaching and learning in the context of Teacher Professional Development (TPD).

The subsequent establishment of a Physical Sciences ICT Laboratory, the development of Family Math and Key Concepts in Science TPD initiatives, as well as the conceptualisation and establishment of the Sci-Ed Science Education Centre are cited as career-defining achievements and examples of research-led approaches in TPD.

These initiatives create societal impact in the rural South African context through inclusion of teachers, learners and parents. It goes beyond academic activity by improving learner performance, strengthening teacher confidence, involving parents in children's education and providing practical learning resources to under-resourced schools. The programme also follows a multi-year mentoring and support model, which makes the impact sustainable rather than one-off.

The initiatives were extended to nine other South African universities and, during 2026, impacted more than 120 000 project participants across all provinces.

Apart from publishing and supervising PhD and Master's students, Dr van Breda also contributed to national radio, television and keynote addresses at conferences.

His commendable work extends beyond academic achievements, contributing to long-term human capital development.

Societal Impact Award

FINALIST



The South African Centre for Epidemiological Modelling and Analysis

Centre for Epidemic Response and Innovation, School for Data Science and Computational Thinking
Stellenbosch University

The South African Centre for Epidemiological Modelling and Analysis (SACEMA), directed by Professor Frank Tanser, is an internationally recognised research centre based at Stellenbosch University.

Established in 2006 as a DSTI-NRF Centre of Excellence, SACEMA conducts world-leading research in mathematical and statistical modelling to inform evidence-based public health policy. Its research focuses on HIV, tuberculosis, cervical cancer, antimicrobial resistance, and emerging infectious diseases.

SACEMA has made a significant contribution to strengthening public health and informing policy through its evidence-based research. The work has had a tangible impact on public health policy development and implementation, supporting more effective health interventions and outcomes both nationally and internationally.

SACEMA's work has directly informed South Africa's HIV Test and Treat policy, the National COVID-19 Epi Model, national tuberculosis strategies, and global HIV surveillance methods adopted by the World Health Organization (WHO), UNAIDS, and the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

SACEMA has made a significant contribution to capacity development by supporting nearly 200 postgraduate students; training more than 850 participants through international modelling clinics, and establishing the Policy Modelling Fellowship, which equips African scientists to provide policy-relevant decision support to Ministries of Health across the continent.

Furthermore, Prof Tanser's leadership as Director of SACEMA reflects his role in guiding and enabling research that has delivered substantial public value.

Through its research excellence and policy engagement, SACEMA continues to improve public health outcomes in South Africa and globally. Its work provides a compelling example of how scientific evidence can shape policy and practice, resulting in meaningful societal benefit.



A-Rated Researchers Awards

A-Rated Researchers

A-RATED FOR THE 1ST TIME



Professor Yahya Choonara
School of Pharmacy and Pharmacology / Wits Advanced Drug Delivery Platform (WADDP)
University of the Witwatersrand (Wits)

Professor Yahya Choonara is an internationally recognised pharmaceutical scientist and Director of the Wits Advanced Drug Delivery Platform (WADDP), which he co-founded to develop safer, smarter medicines.

As a pharmacist and NRF SARChI Chair, he leads research integrating pharmaceutical product design, nanomedicine, and translational science to address unmet needs in infectious diseases, cancer, neurotherapeutics, and lifestyle-related illnesses.

Prof Choonara's research has produced first-in-the-world technologies that enable precise drug and bioactive delivery, reduce side effects, and improve patient usability. He holds Africa's largest pharmaceutical patent portfolio, comprising 51 patents, 38 granted internationally. He has published 453 research articles and supervised and mentored 94 Master's students, 69 PhD students, and 26 postdoctoral fellows and early-career researchers.

His contributions have earned him the FIP Distinguished Pharmaceutical Science Award, the Olusegun Obasanjo Prize, and NSTF and SAMRC Gold Awards. Through WADDP, he strengthens Africa's capacity to develop medicines and trains future pharmaceutical scientists.



Professor Bruce Mellado
School of Physics
University of the Witwatersrand

Professor Bruce Mellado, who obtained his PhD from Columbia University, is an internationally recognised particle physicist with an h-index of 225 and publications in leading journals, including the *Nature* portfolio. He serves in senior leadership roles at the European Laboratory for Particle Physics (CERN), having chaired the Institutional Board and currently serving as Deputy Project Leader of the Tile Calorimeter of the ATLAS experiment.

Prof Mellado was a leading contributor to the discovery of the Higgs boson, which culminated in the 2013 Nobel Prize in Physics, and now leads research into the prediction and search for new bosons.

His achievements include the TW Kambule–NSTF Awards for Research (2021) and Innovation (2026), the Wits Vice-Chancellor's Award for Research (2022), the inaugural Wits Vice-Chancellor's Prize for Innovation (2025), and the ODESS 2025 Award. He is a Fellow of the African Academy of Sciences and the Academy of Science of South Africa.

A-Rated Researchers

A-RATED FOR THE 1ST TIME



Professor Mario Santos
Centre for Radio Astronomy
University of the Western Cape

Professor Mario Santos is an A1 NRF-rated researcher and holder of the SARChI Chair in Cosmology with Multi-Wavelength Data at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), where he also serves as Director of the Centre for Radio Astronomy. He obtained a Master's degree in Physics and Mathematics from the University of Cambridge and a PhD in Physics from the University of Oxford.

His A1-rating recognises his world-leading contributions to cosmology using radio telescopes. He is the Principal Investigator of the MeerKLASS project, currently the largest observing project on MeerKAT, a leading radio telescope and precursor instrument for the international Square Kilometre Array (SKA).

Since 2013, Prof Santos has developed the science and research team underpinning MeerKAT cosmology. Under his leadership, MeerKLASS has developed the first data pipeline for radio cosmology, enabling the first detections of the cosmological signal. This groundbreaking work is essential for cosmology with the SKA and supports South Africa's leadership in this field.

A-RATED FOR THE 2ND TIME



Professor Emmanuel Iwuoha, HonFRSC
Department of Chemistry
University of the Western Cape

Professor Emmanuel Iwuoha is an NRF A1-rated scientist and the Tier 1 South African Research Chair in NanoElectrochemistry and Sensor Technology at the University of the Western Cape. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Chemistry (FRSC), the African Academy of Sciences (FAAS), and the Royal Society of South Africa (FRSSAf).

His research advances electro-photovoltaic energy materials and point-of-care diagnostic technologies, with a focus on aptamer- and antibody/nanobody-based detection of tuberculosis and cancer biomarkers.

Throughout his distinguished career, Prof Iwuoha has authored more than 440 publications, delivered over 75 plenary and keynote addresses, and mentored more than 85 PhD graduates.

His outstanding contributions have been recognised through numerous prestigious honours, including the UWC Vice-Chancellor's Distinguished Researcher Award (2015), Honorary Fellowship of the Royal Society of Chemistry (HonFRSC, 2020), the NRF Champion of Research Capacity Development and Transformation Award (2020), and the NSTF Engineering Research Capacity Development Award (2024).

A-Rated Researchers

A-RATED FOR THE 3RD TIME



Distinguished Professor Tebello Nyokong
Department of Chemistry
Rhodes University

Distinguished Professor Tebello Nyokong is an internationally recognised chemist and NRF A-rated scientist based at Rhodes University. Her research focuses on the development of photodynamic therapy drugs for cancer diagnosis and treatment using a combination of oxygen, laser light, and photosensitisers.

Throughout her distinguished career, Professor Nyokong has published more than 1,010 peer-reviewed publications, including four books, 15 book chapters, and three patents. She has also delivered keynote addresses at numerous international conferences.

Prof Nyokong has made a significant contribution to human capacity development by supervising more than 71 Master's students, 75 PhD students, and 43 postdoctoral research fellows. She has also been awarded seven honorary doctorates by universities in Canada, the United Kingdom, and South Africa.

She has received numerous national and international awards, including the L'Oréal–UNESCO For Women in Science International Award for Africa and the Arab States. In 2023, she was appointed a member of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences by Pope Francis and was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society (UK).



Professor Brenda D. Wingfield
Department of Biochemistry, Genetics and Microbiology
University of Pretoria

Professor Brenda D. Wingfield is an internationally recognised leader in forest pathology, fungal genomics, and evolutionary biology. She holds the DSTI-NRF South African Research Chair in Fungal Genomics at the University of Pretoria.

Her research focuses on the genomics, evolution, and biology of fungal pathogens affecting forest and plantation trees, contributing to improved forest health, strengthened biosecurity, and sustainable forestry worldwide.

Throughout her distinguished career, Prof Wingfield has published extensively in leading international journals, supervised and mentored numerous postgraduate students and postdoctoral fellows, and played a pivotal role in establishing South Africa as a global centre of excellence in fungal genomics and forest pathology.

She is a Fellow of the Academy of Science of South Africa, The World Academy of Sciences, the American Phytopathological Society, the American Society for Microbiology, and the Royal Society of South Africa. She has received numerous national and international awards recognising her research excellence, scientific leadership, and contributions to fungal genomics and forest pathology.

A-Rated Researchers

A-RATED FOR THE 4TH TIME



Professor Bert Klumperman
Department of Chemistry and Polymer Science
Stellenbosch University

Professor Bert Klumperman is an internationally recognised polymer chemist and an NRF A-rated scientist based at Stellenbosch University.

His research focuses on synthetic polymers for biomedical applications, with amphiphilic copolymers for the isolation of membrane proteins and on-demand reversible hydrogels based on poly(styrene-co-maleic anhydride) being central to his research.

Throughout his distinguished career, Professor Klumperman has published over 220 peer-reviewed journal articles, filed 17 patent applications, and has an H-index of 54. He has made a significant contribution to human capacity development in polymer science by supervising more than 110 postgraduate students and over 10 postdoctoral fellows.

Prof Klumperman is a recipient of the National Science and Technology Forum (NSTF) Lifetime Award, the John F.W. Herschel Medal of the Royal Society of South Africa, the South African Chemical Institute's Gold Medal, and the Sasol Chemistry Innovator of the Year Award.

His academic research forms the foundation for Nanosene (Pty) Ltd, a spin-out company originating from Stellenbosch University.



Professor John N. Maina
Department of Zoology
University of Johannesburg

Professor John N. Maina is an internationally recognised comparative respiratory morphologist and NRF A-rated scientist at the University of Johannesburg. His research focuses on the evolutionary and adaptive design of gas-exchange systems and their structural and functional characteristics across diverse animal species.

Prof Maina obtained his Bachelor of Veterinary Medicine from the University of Nairobi in 1979, followed by a PhD (1982) and Doctor of Veterinary Science (DVSc) (1999) from the University of Liverpool. He has held academic and research positions at the universities of Nairobi, the Witwatersrand, and Johannesburg, where he currently serves as Research Professor in the Department of Zoology.

He has published more than 200 scientific works, including six books and numerous book chapters, and delivered keynote and invited lectures internationally.

His pioneering research has advanced stereological and morphometric methods in comparative respiratory morphology. He has supervised and mentored more than 22 MSc students, 14 PhD students, and eight postdoctoral research fellows and serves as Associate Editor for several international journals.



Lifetime Achievement Awards

Lifetime Achievement Award



Professor Jonathan Jansen
Department of Education
Stellenbosch University

Professor Jonathan Jansen is an NRF A1-rated researcher and is currently a Distinguished Professor of Education at Stellenbosch University. As one of the world's leading curriculum theorists, he has achieved the rare feat of having a lifetime of scholarship recognised on both sides of the Atlantic by elected peers in two of the most prestigious learned societies in the world – the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the British Academy for the Social Sciences and Humanities.

He has made an exceptional and enduring contribution to South African higher education, scholarship, and society throughout a distinguished career spanning several decades. Beyond his substantial scholarly record, Prof Jansen has demonstrated outstanding leadership as a Distinguished Professor, Dean, and Vice-Chancellor, while also making significant contributions through national research, advisory, and policy-development initiatives.

Prof Jansen's extensive national and international standing is evidenced by numerous prestigious honours, fellowships, and lifetime achievement recognitions from leading academic and professional bodies. He has received prestigious international fellowships such as the Chin Yidan Fellowship at Harvard University, a Fellowship at the Centre for Advanced Study in the Behavioural Sciences at Stanford University, and election to the International Academy of Education, a small fellowship of leading education scholars around the world.

The intellectual thread that runs through all his major book publications is a concern with the politics, poetics, purposes and production of knowledge represented in books such as *Knowledge in the Blood* (Stanford), followed by *The politics of knowledge in the biomedical sciences* (Springer, with Auerbach), *The decolonization of knowledge* (Cambridge, with Walters) and *On discovery: how knowledge is discovered across the disciplines* (Cambridge). His journal publications have appeared in all the major education research outlets around the world, including the *Cambridge Journal of Education, the Harvard Educational Review, the Oxford Review of Education, Comparative Education, Comparative Education Review, Research Policy* and more.

A theorist and practitioner in equal measure, there is an urgency to his work in both schools and universities. Between 2023 and 2025, for example, Prof Jansen immersed himself in a high school with the worst NSC results in two roles – a social scientist trying to understand the problem and a turnaround specialist trying to change it. He not only co-led the change with the principal and her team from the top down but also taught science classes in that school to understand the problem from the bottom up. This intervention dramatically increased school performance, and the results of the study appear in a new book called *Worth the fight: fixing failure in South African schools* (Jonathan Ball) and will be distributed "free of charge" to every high school in South Africa.

Lifetime Achievement Award



Professor Helen Rees
Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology
University of the Witwatersrand

Professor Helen Rees is an internationally acclaimed global health leader whose career has advanced health across Africa in vaccine-preventable diseases, HIV, reproductive health, and regulatory science. After training as a doctor in London, she worked in Zimbabwe and South Africa, where she was active in the anti-apartheid struggle. In 1994, she founded Wits RHI at the University of the Witwatersrand, now one of Africa's largest health research institutions. Prof Rees is also the founder and Co-Director of the Wits African Leadership in Vaccinology Expertise; a Personal Professor at the University of the Witwatersrand; an Honorary Professor in the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine; an Honorary Fellow at Murray Edwards College, Cambridge University and holds a Doctor of Science (Medicine) *honoris causa* from the University of London and a Doctor of Law *honoris causa* from Rhodes University.

Over three decades Prof Rees has dedicated herself to closing the gap between what science knows and what public health does — using research, policy engagement, and science diplomacy to protect the health of the most vulnerable people in Africa and beyond. As the Executive Director of Wits RHI at the University of the Witwatersrand, Prof Rees has shaped national and international health policy and research. Prof Rees has made exceptional and sustained contributions to public health at national and global levels. Her work has directly influenced healthcare policies and programmes that have improved health outcomes for millions of people worldwide. Her research and leadership have had a profound impact on HIV prevention, immunisation programmes, maternal and child health, and the development and implementation of evidence-based health policies. Under her leadership, Wits RHI has driven the development, evaluation, and large-scale implementation of medicines, vaccines, therapeutics, diagnostics, and prevention technologies that have shaped national, regional and global policy.

Prof Rees is recognised for her outstanding international standing and scientific leadership. Her extensive engagement in international health governance includes service on more than 350 regional and global advisory groups, over 150 South African ministerial advisory boards and expert committees contributing to national and global responses to major public health challenges such as the Ebola outbreak, polio, COVID-19 and mpox. She has served as Chair of the WHO Strategic Advisory Group of Experts on Immunisation (SAGE) and was a founding member and Scientific Advisory Committee Chair of the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI). Prof Rees was Chair of the Board of the South African Health Products Regulatory Authority (SAHPRA), where she steered its transformation into a modern, post-apartheid regulatory institution aligned with South Africa's constitutional health imperatives. Currently Prof Rees Chairs the WHO African Regional Immunisation Technical Advisory Group (RITAG) and is Board Chair of MedAccess and International Vaccine Institute (IVI), the latter two being not for profit global entities aimed at increasing access to vaccines and to health products for LMICs.

Her substantial scholarly contribution is reflected in more than 280 peer-reviewed academic publications and a research portfolio that has shaped both scientific knowledge and public health practice.

Prof Rees has received many awards and accolades for her contributions to global health and science, including South Africa's National Order of the Baobab, the Platinum Batho Pele Award, and the NSTF Lifetime Achievement Award. She was made an Officer of the British Empire (OBE) in 2001 by Queen Elizabeth II, and an Officer of the French National Order of Merit in 2022 by President Macron for her contribution to global health and the COVID-19 response. In 2025, she received the prestigious Dr Lee Jong Wook Memorial Prize for Public Health from the WHO – one of the highest global honours in the field of public health.

Prof Rees has dedicated much of her career to strengthening African scientific leadership, research excellence, and regulatory capacity. Over three decades, she has established and supported programmes that have trained researchers, clinicians, policymakers, regulators, and public health leaders across the continent, creating a lasting legacy of capacity development that continues to shape health systems in Africa today.

NRF Transformation Journey:

Transforming Knowledge into Societal Value

Transformation at the NRF is a journey from access, through excellence, to impact. Since commencing operations in 1999, the National Research Foundation has carried a national mandate to develop research and human capacity, sustain research infrastructure, strengthen the science system and deepen public engagement with science. Today, that mandate is expressed through the NRF's Vision 2030 ambition of "Research for a Better Society", underpinned by Transformation, Innovation, Excellence and Sustainability for Impact (TIES4I).

The transformation story is most visible in the people entering the research system. Longitudinal NRF data show that the representation of Black South Africans among NRF-funded postgraduate students rising from 46% in 1999 to 86% in 2025, while the representation of South African women increased from 40% to 60%, and that of Black South African women from 13% to 54% (Figure 1).

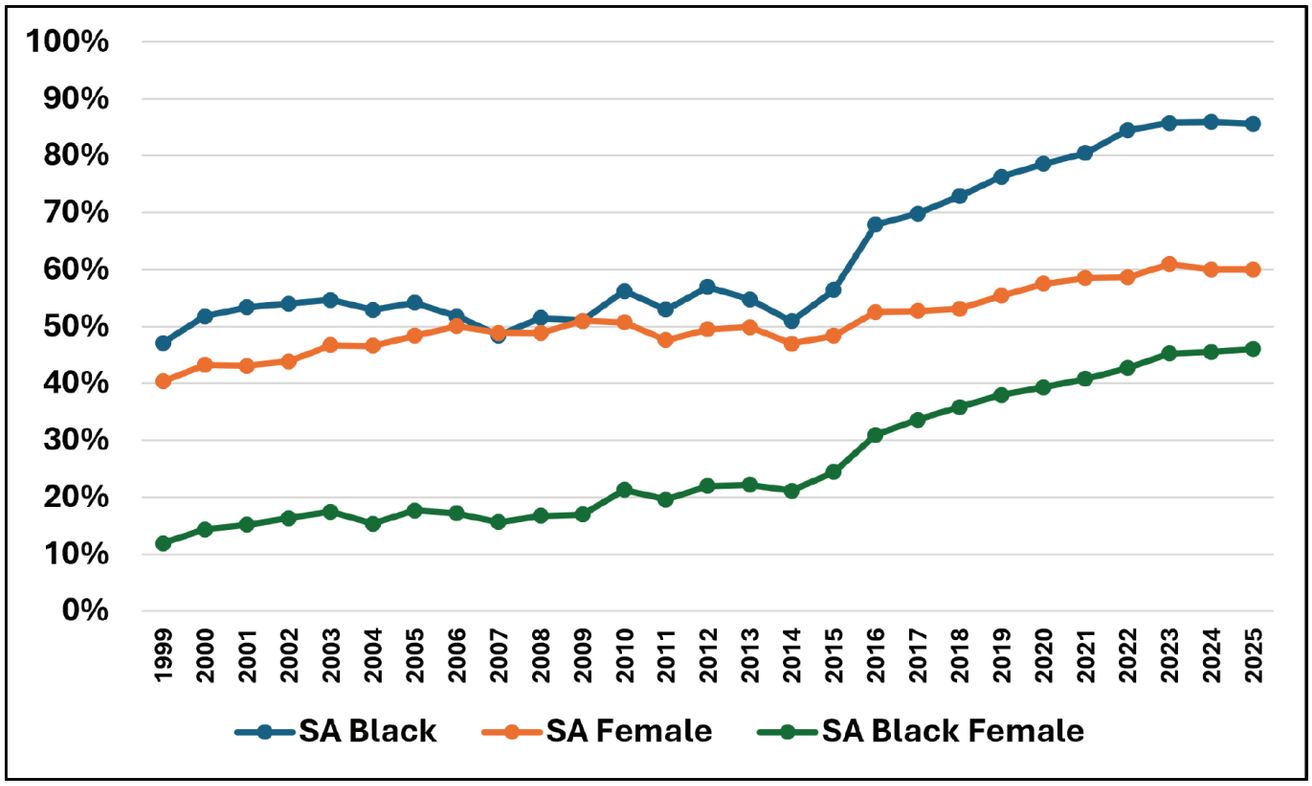


Figure 1. Proportion of NRF-Funded Postgraduate Students, from 1999 to 2025.

These shifts reflect a deliberate pipeline approach: inspiring learners, supporting postgraduate study, mentoring emerging researchers, developing early-career academics and creating pathways to global scientific leadership. The principle is simple but profound: transformation requires moving beyond merely selecting talent towards creating the conditions in which talent can emerge. That pipeline begins before university. Established in 1964, the National Science Olympiad was designed to identify talent, encourage excellence and stimulate young people's interest in science and technology. The aforementioned data records 649 250 Olympiad participants between 2005 and 2025, with a peak of 74 514 in 2024 (Figure 2). Through SAASTA and the NRF's National Facilities, schools, community programmes, seasonal schools and science-engagement activities extend the horizon of possibility to learners who might otherwise never imagine a career in research.

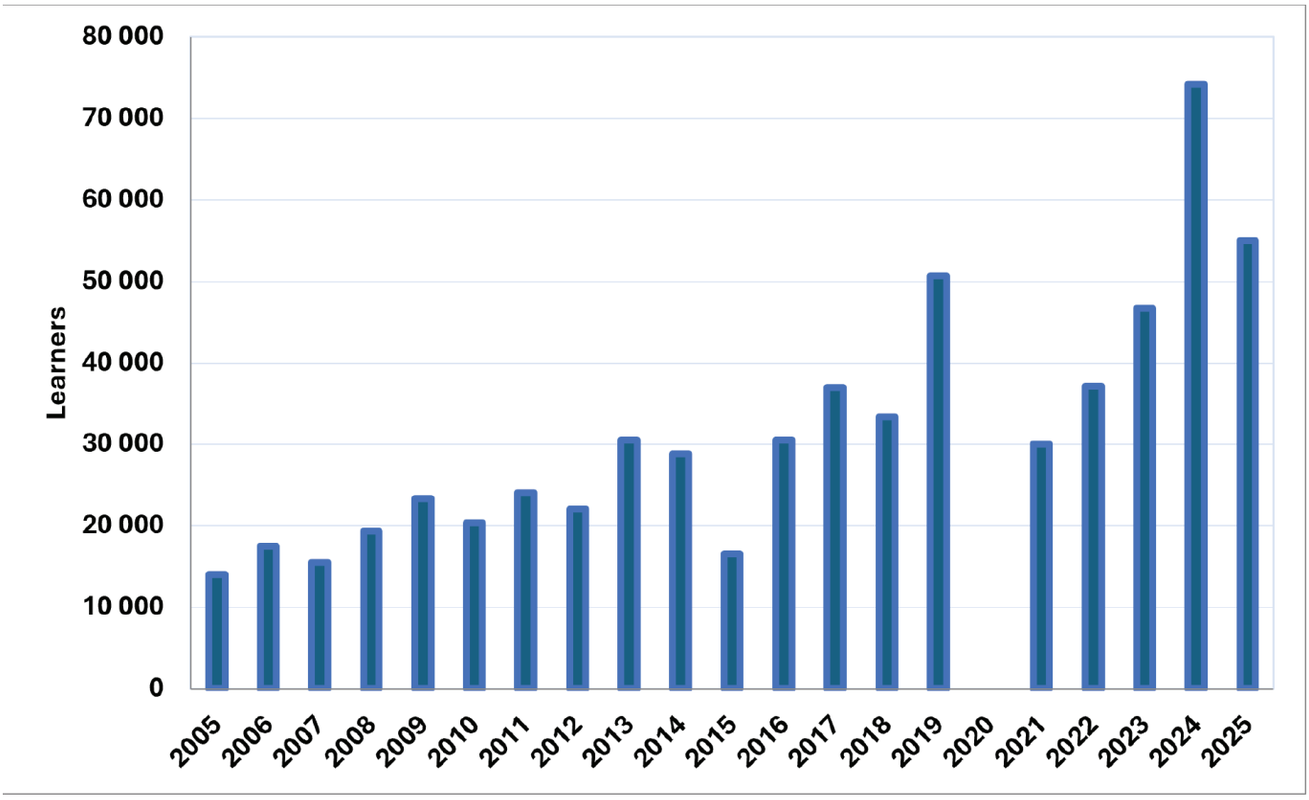


Figure 2. Number of learners participating in National Science and Natural Science Olympiads.

World-class infrastructure has been another instrument of transformation. MeerKAT and the SKA programme, SALT, iThemba LABS, SAIAB and SAEON give students and researchers access to scientific capabilities that few institutions could build alone, linking astronomy, nuclear science, biodiversity and long-term environmental observation to national skills and research priorities. SARAO recalls that South Africa had no more than ten radio astronomers when the SKA expression of interest was submitted in 2003; its sustained HCD programme was explicitly designed to create a skilled and demographically transformed community capable of building and using such facilities.

Investment and partnership have allowed transformation to be scaled up. Investment in the South African Research Chairs Initiative (SARChI) and Centres of Excellence (CoEs) investment increased from R237 million in 2011 to R727 million in 2025, human-capacity investment in seven (7) Historically Disadvantage Institutions (HDIs) increased from R91 million to R413 million, and total NRF investment across all institutions in Public universities from R1.1 billion to R2.4 billion (Figure 3). Partnerships extend beyond public investment. The NRF–FirstRand Black Academics

Advancement Programme (BAAP), established in 2018, has supported approximately 347 academics at 26 universities and has been extended until 2028. In addition, the NRF–Sasol Foundation partnership has supported more than 400 postgraduate students and committed about R52 million for co-funding through 2027.

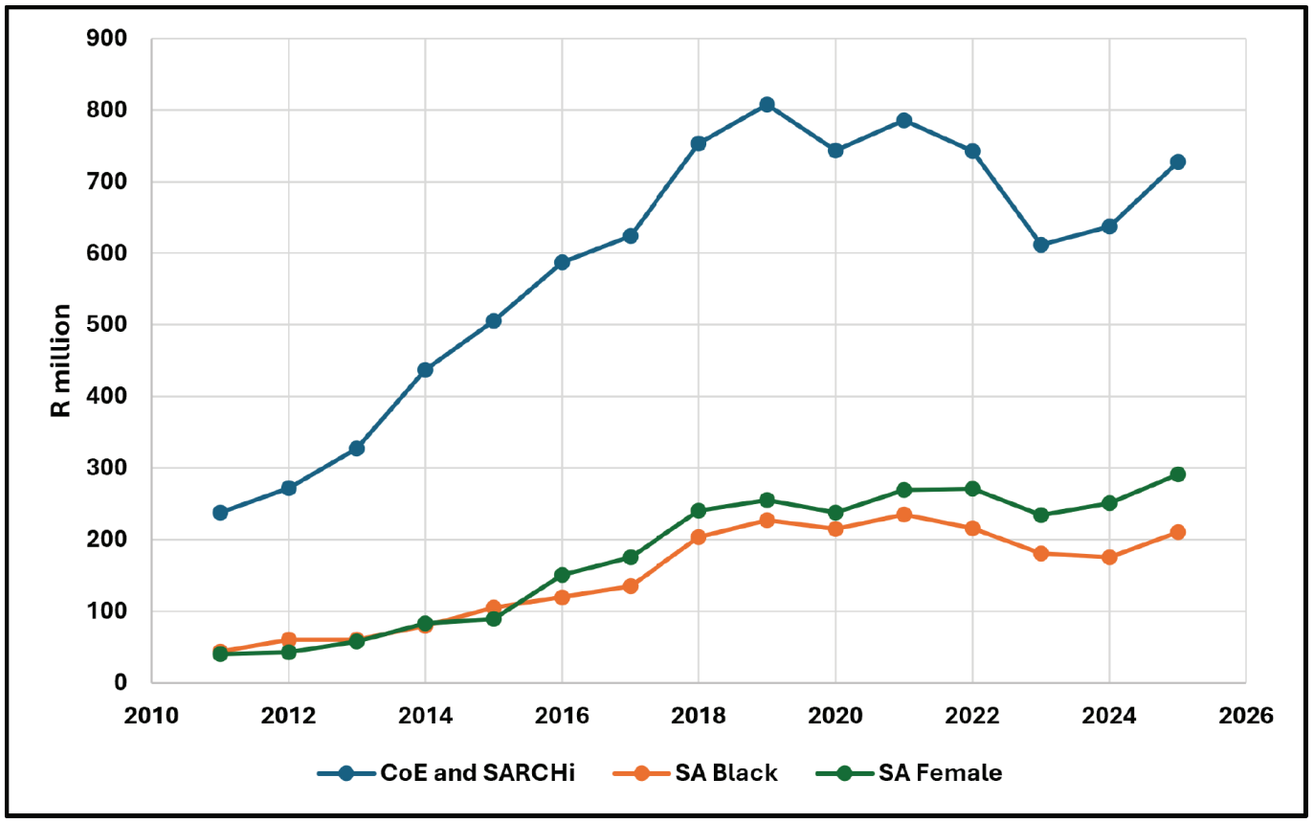


Figure 3. NRF Investment in the South African Research Chairs Initiative (SARChI) and Centres of Excellence (CoEs), from 2011 to 2025.

Ultimately, transformation matters when knowledge changes lives. The DSTI-NRF Centre of Excellence for Biomedical TB Research, the inaugural winner of the NRF Societal Impact Award in 2024, translated scientific discoveries into diagnostic-control technologies used for TB and COVID-19 testing. NRF evidence indicates that its TB products supported diagnostic access across dozens of countries, while its COVID-19 controls helped enable mass testing in South Africa and internationally. Individual journeys also make the system-level story tangible too: NRF-supported mathematician, Dr Siphokazi Gatyeni, who became the first Black South African woman to earn a PhD from the Department of Applied Mathematics at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) in May 2023, describes NRF support as having played “a significant role in shaping my academic journey”.

It must be noted that diversity is advancing fastest among students and younger researchers, while progression into established and leading research categories remains a challenge. The lesson is clear however, widening entry must be matched by sustained funding, mentorship, institutional strengthening, progression and opportunities to lead. The NRF’s next phase therefore builds logically on the transformation already achieved: sustaining investment, deepening inclusion, and supporting the translation of knowledge into visible public value.


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