



DSTI-NRF Policy Fellowship Programme

Call for Expressions of Interest (EoI) for Host Institutions, Cohort 2 (24-month placements)

The National Research Foundation (NRF), in collaboration with the Department of Science, Technology, and Innovation (DSTI), is inviting NRF-recognised institutions to submit Expressions of Interest (EOI) to host Policy Fellows for Cohort 2. The fellowship is open to postdoctoral, early, and mid-career researchers working within institutions to strengthen the research-policy interface, accelerate evidence-based decision-making, and advance the priorities outlined in the STI Decadal Plan (2022-2033). This EoI is the first step in a two-stage process that will include host institution selection, fellow recruitment, and placement through NRF Connect.

1 INTRODUCTION

South Africa continues to face complex and interconnected socioeconomic and developmental challenges that necessitate timely, adaptive, and well-informed policy responses. In recent years, there has been a growing emphasis, both globally and nationally, on the value of evidence-based policymaking in improving the quality, effectiveness, and sustainability of public policy. This shift reflects a recognition that strong research, data, and analytical capabilities are required to support decision-making processes that address societal needs. Despite the country's strong research base, there is still a significant gap between knowledge production and application in policy environments. This disparity is not necessarily due to a lack of research output, but rather to the need for more structured and sustained collaboration between researchers and policymakers. As a result, the research's potential to inform policy and contribute meaningfully to national development is not fully realised.

The DSTI-NRF Policy Fellowship Programme is purposefully designed to address this issue by improving the link between research and policymaking. At its core, the programme creates a dynamic platform in which fellows are embedded within policy environments, allowing them to actively participate in policy development, analysis, and implementation processes. This approach not only encourages evidence-based decision-making within host institutions, but it also fosters mutual learning among the research and policy communities. The programme advances the NRF and DSTI's strategic priorities by encouraging transdisciplinary collaboration, capacity building, and socioeconomic development. It aims to create a cohort of skilled researchers who can work effectively at the science-policy interface, contributing to evidence-based solutions to South Africa's pressing challenges while furthering their professional careers.

The Postdoctoral Policy Fellowship pilot programme, which began in 2024, laid a solid foundation in this regard. It demonstrated the importance of embedding researchers within host institutions, allowing them to contribute to policy discussions, analytical processes, and institutional activities. At the same time, the pilot phase revealed opportunities to improve the programme.

These include the need for:

- Greater clarity in the definition of roles and expectations;
- Stronger alignment between fellows' expertise and institutional priorities;
- More consistent approaches to supervision and mentorship; and
- Enhanced coordination and monitoring across placements.

The second cohort builds on the pilot launched in 2024, with a more integrated and coordinated programme model. One distinguishing feature of this programme is its emphasis on coordinated capacity development and international exposure as integral components of the fellowship experience. Fellows will be supported in developing the competencies needed to navigate complex policy environments through a structured approach to training and global engagement, as well as exposure to international best practices and comparative policy approaches. This component is intended to supplement the local placement experience, providing fellows with both context-specific insights and a broader global perspective. In addition, the NRF will facilitate a centrally coordinated internationalisation and capacity development component to ensure that all fellows have access to global best practices and learning opportunities.

2 PROGRAMME OBJECTIVES

- To place highly capable early-, emerging- and mid-career researchers within policy environments so they contribute directly to policy formulation, implementation and evaluation while gaining applied policy experience.
- To improve uptake of research evidence in policy processes across priority sectors: energy, climate resilience, health, digital technologies, agriculture/food security, and social development.
- To build institutional capacity for evidence synthesis, policy analysis, and data-driven decision making.
- To develop a cohort of researchers skilled to operate at the science-policy interface, with professional development, international exposure and cross-sectoral networks.
- To promote transdisciplinary collaboration between government, research organisations, industry and civil society.

3 WHO SHOULD APPLY

Eligible host institutions include the following:

- National, provincial and municipal government departments and agencies (Policy and planning / strategy divisions).
- Public entities and state-owned enterprises (Policy and planning / strategy divisions).
- NRF/DSTI recognised research institutions.

4 HOST ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Host institutions must commit to providing the following:

4.1 STRATEGIC COMMITMENT AND INTEGRATION

- Provide an institutional letter of commitment from senior leadership confirming the placement, access to decision-making forums, and commitment to implement outputs where relevant.
- Clearly state how the Fellow's work aligns with the host's strategic priorities and national development objectives.

4.2 SUPERVISION, MENTORSHIP AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- Nominate a primary mentor/supervisor with relevant policy/research experience and decision-making influence; include an alternate contact.
- Provide a supervision plan outlining: regular one-on-one meetings, performance milestones, mentoring on stakeholder engagement, and progress review mechanisms.
- Support the Fellow to access NRF-coordinated training, internationalisation activities, and professional development opportunities.

4.3 WORK ENVIRONMENT AND RESOURCES

- Provide a dedicated workspace, IT access, relevant datasets and documentation, and administrative support.
- Facilitate access to meetings, internal processes and stakeholders relevant to the Fellow's remit.

4.4 PROJECT CODESIGN AND DELIVERABLES

- Co-develop, with the Fellow and the NRF, an inception plan within the first 6–8 weeks that includes objectives, work plan, milestones, stakeholder map and risk mitigation.
- Support the Fellow to produce required milestones: inception plan, midterm progress report, final report, and a follow-on project/action plan enabling uptake or scale-up of outputs.

4.5 COMMUNITY AND STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

- Provide opportunities for the Fellow to participate in stakeholder engagements, public consultations, and/or interagency collaboration.

4.6 ROTATION AND EXPOSURE (ENCOURAGED)

- Where feasible, enable short rotations across units, departments, or partner institutions to broaden exposure to the policy cycle (research, formulation, implementation, monitoring/evaluation).

5 EXPECTED FELLOW OUTPUTS AND REPORTING

Minimum expected deliverables (tailor to placement):

- Inception plan and work plan (within the first 6-8 weeks).
- Mid-term progress report (month 12).
- Final report with recommendations, implementation options and a follow-on action plan (end of placement).
- Policy-relevant outputs: policy briefs, analytical reports, evidence syntheses, data visualisations, stakeholder engagement summaries, contributions to policy/strategy documents, and training or capacity-building materials for staff.
- Participation in NRF-facilitated cohort activities, training modules and international exposure programmes.

6 HOST ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA AND REQUIRED EOI CONTENTS

EOIs must address the following and include the specified documentation:

6.1 MANDATORY INFORMATION

- Institutional/departmental profile (mission, structure, mandate, key programmes).
- Letter of institutional commitment signed by a senior official (e.g., DVC/DG/VC/CEO).
- Contact details for the institutional lead for the fellowship and the proposed mentor/supervisor.
- Description of how hosting a Fellow aligns with institutional priorities and DSTI Decadal Plan objectives.

6.2 SUPERVISION AND CAPACITY STATEMENTS

- Mentor's CV or short bio (3 pages max) and evidence of relevant experience in policy or research translation.
- Supervision plan (frequency of meetings, performance management approach, professional development commitments).
- Description of institutional capacity to integrate and act on Fellow output.

6.3 CROSS-SECTORAL ENGAGEMENT AND IMPACT PLAN

- Plans for stakeholder engagement, co-production with stakeholders, and potential for uptake/scale-up of outputs.
- Any proposed interunit rotation or partner placements and rationale.

6.4 ADMINISTRATIVE AND LOGISTICAL COMMITMENTS

- Evidence of workspace availability, IT and data access, and administrative support.
- Any constraints or conditions (e.g., security clearance timelines, restricted data access).

6.5 OPTIONAL ATTACHMENTS

- Letters of support from partner organisations, other departments, or stakeholders (where relevant).
- Examples of prior policy research collaborations or knowledge-to-policy initiatives.

7 ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

EOIs will be evaluated against the following weighted criteria:

- Alignment with programme goals and STI Decadal Plan priorities (25%).
- Clarity and feasibility of the proposed work plan and deliverables (20%).
- Strength and experience of the proposed mentorship and supervision (15%).
- Institutional commitment and readiness to host (workspace, data access, senior buy-in) (15%).
- Potential for policy impact, stakeholder engagement and uptake of outputs (15%).
- Evidence of transdisciplinary and collaborative approach (10%).

8 SELECTION PROCESS

Stage 1: Review of EOIs by an NRF/DSTI panel; shortlisted hosts invited to Stage 2.

Stage 2: NRF conducts recruitment and placement of Fellows via NRF Connect; final matching of Fellows to hosts based on alignment, skills and mutual agreement.

Hosts may be contacted for clarification or to present a short briefing on proposed placements.

9 FUNDING AND COSTS

- Fellowship funding (stipend/salary and NRF coordinated training/internationalisation budget) will be provided to Fellows through NRF mechanisms.
- Host institutions are expected to cover in-kind support (workspace, supervision time, data access and administrative facilitation). Any additional host contributions should be described in the EOI.
- If a host proposes cost-sharing or additional funded components (e.g., local allowances, project funds), specify amounts, purpose and approval processes.

10 TIMELINE (INDICATIVE)

- EOI publication date: **7 August 2026**.
- EOI submission window: **15 September 2026**. Late or incomplete submissions will not be considered.
- Stage 1 evaluation and notifications to shortlisted hosts: **25 September 2026**.
- Stage 2 recruitment and fellow placement via **NRF Connect**: following Stage 1, timeline to be confirmed with shortlisted hosts. Estimated launch date: **07 October 2026**.
- Fellowship start date for placed Fellows: to be agreed upon between hosts and NRF.

11 SUBMISSION INSTRUCTIONS

- Use the prescribed EOI template available on the programme webpage. EOIs submitted in other formats will not be accepted.
- Complete all sections of the template and attach required documents (letter of commitment, mentor bio/CV, institutional profile).

- Submit the EOI and attachments via the specified submission portal/email address on the programme webpage by the deadline.
- Include a single point of contact for queries and provide daytime telephone and email details.

12 POST-SELECTION OBLIGATIONS

- Shortlisted hosts will enter into a formal hosting agreement with NRF detailing responsibilities, reporting requirements, data sharing, IP and confidentiality arrangements where relevant.
- The hosts must participate in induction and coordination meetings organised by the NRF and support Fellows' participation in the cohort activities and central training.

13 MONITORING, REPORTING AND EVALUATION

- Hosts and Fellows will be required to follow NRF reporting templates and schedules: inception plan, mid-term report, final report, and any ad hoc progress updates requested by NRF.
- NRF will coordinate monitoring and evaluation to capture programme outcomes and lessons for continuous improvement.

14 ETHICS, DATA PROTECTION AND CONFLICT OF INTEREST

- Hosts must ensure Fellows have access only to data consistent with legal, ethical and security requirements. Any required approvals (data sharing agreements, ethics clearances) must be anticipated and facilitated by the host.
- Hosts must declare any conflicts of interest related to the placement.

15 CONTACT AND ENQUIRIES

- All technical queries, administration or submission clarifications and requests for the EOI template should be directed to ScienceNetworks@nrf.ac.za.

16 SUBMISSION CHECKLIST (MINIMUM)

- Completed EOI template.
- Letter of institutional commitment (signed).
- Mentor/supervisor bio or CV (max 2 pages).
- Institutional profile.
- Proposed work plan and timeline.
- Contact details for institutional lead.

Important note that Incomplete or late Eois will not be considered. Shortlisted hosts will be notified and provided with further guidance for Stage 2 (Fellow recruitment and match via NRF Connect).