

DST/NRF-related interventions to support human capital development for universities

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Guiding documents: In 2014, the Department developed the “Strategy for Human Capital Development (HCD) for Research, Innovation and Scholarship (RIS)”. The thrust of the strategy is on the development of postgraduate research training (i.e., PhD-level skills), and research and knowledge output, as well as related challenges that lie within the remit of the Department of Science and Technology (DST) (such as transformation of the researcher base).

In 2013, the DST issued “Ministerial Guidelines on improving equity in the distribution of Bursaries and Fellowships awarded through the National Research Foundation (NRF) and funded by the DST”. The purpose of the guidelines is to:

- Harmonise and align bursary, scholarship, and fellowship funding from the DST to the NRF;
- Enhance HCD support effectiveness, efficiency and impact, and increased public accountability; and
- Facilitate equitable access to postgraduate studies.

Supporting evidence based decision making: On the next generation of researchers (postgraduate level), a trend of declining proportions of black students as one goes to higher postgraduate studies has been observed, and the DST has completed a study to establish the reasons for this trend. The study commissioned by the DST on the retention and conversion of postgraduate students (Mouton study) presents a number of findings on the factors contributing to low retention and conversion rates in the postgraduate study pipeline. These factors pertain to financial challenges, work, and family/personal obligations, among others.

Informed by the Higher Education Management Information System data, the DST and the NRF have uncovered that there is a large number of black and women emerging researchers in the university system who are not active in applying for NRF research grants. This challenge has been dubbed the ‘silent majority’ challenge. The DST and the DHET have presented this problem to the DVCs of research so as to be better informed about the ‘silent majority’. Subsequently, a consensus was reached that Universities South Africa (USA) is best placed to commission the ‘silent majority’ study. Meanwhile, the NRF has collected data for about 1 000 black women with PhDs and who are not rated. This group would be key informants for the study.

Programmes: In 2014/15, 4064 researchers were awarded research grants through NRF-managed programmes. This number and quantum is expected to grow by approximately 500 in 2015/16 due to an injection of R100 million from National Treasury. In 2014/15, 11 335 postgraduate students and postdoctoral fellows were

awarded bursaries through NRF-managed programmes. This number and quantum is expected to grow by approximately 3 000 in 2015/16 due to an injection of R300 million from National Treasury.

Alignment between the DST and DHET programmes has found further traction in initiatives aimed at bringing in new blood to the existing academics and researchers in universities. With the launch of the new Generation of Academics Programme (nGAP) by the DHET, the NRF/DST decided to stop further intakes into the Research Career Advancement Fellowship (RCAF) programme which had a similar purpose. Instead of continuing the RCAF programme, the DST/NRF will provide modest research grant support to nGAP postholders (restricting this support to the nGAP postholders with master's and doctoral qualifications), while the DHET funds their core employment costs. The nGAP has a target of 150 intakes per year, of whom 80% should be black and 60% women.

The DST has recently awarded 42 women-only research chairs under SARChI, which brought to 39% the percentage of women of the 198 research chairs. The Centres of Excellence (CoE) Programme continues to grow with 15 CoEs, which are currently operational 