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Department:  
Science and Technology  
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



National  
Research  
Foundation

## Framework Document

### Masters and Doctoral Scholarships for Full-time Studies

#### Directorate: Human and Infrastructure Capacity Development (HICD)

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higher education  
& training

Department:  
Higher Education and Training  
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

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## 1. Background and Rationale

The (National Research Foundation) NRF is mandated by an Act of Parliament, the NRF Act (Act No. 23 of 1998) to: *“Support and promote research through funding, human capacity development and the provision of the necessary research facilities, in order to facilitate the creation of knowledge, innovation and development in all fields of science and technology, including indigenous knowledge.*

The purpose of this document is to outline the funding principles and implementation of the Masters and Doctoral Scholarships for full-time studies. The NRF awards bursaries and scholarships through three modalities *viz.* (i) competitive scholarships awarded as free-standing scholarships following an NRF merit review process; (ii) block grants to universities that nominate students for the bursaries following an institutional selection process; and (iii) grantholder-linked bursaries in which the grant-holder nominates students linked to his/her research project. This document also presents a unique opportunity for Doctoral scholarships for research using systems analysis methodology, with specific capacity development interventions provided through the Southern African Systems Analysis Centre (SASAC), hereafter referred to as SASAC Doctoral scholarships. Systems analysis requires thinking in systems and the application of systems modelling tools and approaches to global challenges.

The Scholarships are funded by the NRF core grant allocation from National Treasury, the Department of Science and Technology (DST), the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), the British Council, the International Institution for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA) and the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) for Human Capital Development (HCD).

In addition, these scholarships also support **Persons with Disabilities** as defined by The Code of Good Practice on Employment of People with Disabilities and the Employment Equity Act, (Act No 55 of 1998). The act states that: only people who satisfy all the criteria in the definition: (i) long-term or recurring; (ii) having a physical or mental impairment; (iii) which substantially limits them, are considered as persons with disabilities.

**In an effort to address the high volume of applications received annually, duplication of applications submitted to different programmes and long turnaround time to informing successful applicants, the NRF has consolidated all the Masters and Doctoral scholarship programmes such as DAAD, Extension Support for Masters and**

**Doctoral studies, Innovation, NRF Freestanding, Scarce Skill Development Fund (SSDF), The World Academy of Sciences (TWAS) Doctoral and SASAC Doctoral scholarships into this framework document.**

## **2. Objectives**

- Support the development of a critical mass of globally competitive human resources in prioritised areas;
- Promote and advance science, research and innovation;
- Contribute towards increasing the number and quality of South African postgraduate students in all areas of (i) Science, (ii) Engineering and (iii) Technology and in the (iv) Social Sciences and (v) Humanities, at the Masters and Doctoral levels in South Africa;
- Build a pipeline of the next generation of skilled scientists and researchers in South Africa;
- Provide exposure to local, regional and international research programmes in order to build long-lasting collaborative contacts;
- Effect transformation in the percentage representation of postgraduate students from designated groups *viz.* black, female and persons with disabilities; and
- Support the development of postgraduate training to meet the specific needs of the country in collaboration with international partners, the higher education sector and industry.

## **3. Areas of Support**

Scholarships are intended to support Masters and Doctoral candidates to pursue research studies in all areas of Science, Engineering, Technology, Social Sciences, and Humanities, including Priority Research Areas\* at public universities. A breakdown of the broad disciplines supported by the NRF is presented in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Broad disciplines supported for Masters and Doctoral Scholarships**

Accounting	Actuarial Science	Agricultural Sciences	Astronomy
Auditing	Bioinformatics*	Biotechnology	Cellular and Molecular Biology
Chemistry	Climate Change*	Computer science	Demography
Drug Discovery and Development*	Earth Sciences	Earth Observation*	Ecology
Economic Sciences	Education	Engineering	Environmental Sciences
Financial Management	Functional Genomics*	Geology	Global Change, Society and Sustainability*
Health Sciences	Information Science	Information Systems	Indigenous Knowledge Systems*
Law	Mathematical Sciences	Marine Sciences*	Medicinal Plant *
Medical sciences	Nanotechnology*	Nuclear Technologies in Medicine and Biosciences*	Palaeosciences*
Polar Science*	Physics	Renewable Energy*	Social Science and Humanities
Space Science*	Statistics	Transportation Studies	Tourism

\*DST Priority Research Areas

#### 4. Eligibility Criteria

**The eligibility criteria listed below apply to all first time applicants for Masters and Doctoral scholarships:**

- Scholarships are open to South African citizens, South African permanent residents as well as a limited percentage of foreign nationals who will register at a South African public university in 2020 on a **full-time basis**.
- NRF Masters scholarship-holders who wish to register for Doctoral degrees in 2020 must apply for funding.

**The eligibility criteria for applicants seeking Extension Support are as follows:**

- Applicants must be NRF scholarship-holders in 2019. Extensions will only be granted under exceptional circumstances and will either be six (6) or twelve (12) months as the NRF expects all students to complete their qualifications within regulation time of the funding period.
- Applicants applying for extension support at the Masters level should have commenced their degree in 2018.
- Applicants applying for extension support at the Doctoral level should have commenced their degree in 2017.
- Only students pursuing **full-time** Masters or Doctoral studies in South Africa are eligible to apply.

**The eligibility criteria listed below apply to all NRF-TWAS Doctoral applicants:**

- Applicants must register at a South African public university in 2020 on a **full-time basis** and may be based at any South African public research institution including Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), Science Councils and National Research Facilities. Details of Recognised HEIs and other Public Research Institutions are available [here](#).
- The NRF-TWAS Doctoral Scholarships are only open to **citizens and permanent residents from developing countries on the African continent and elsewhere**. It is important to note that **South Africans are not eligible to apply**. Please refer to the list of [eligible developing countries](#) and the list of [66 priority countries](#) for TWAS funding.
- Applicants may not be living, studying or working in South Africa at the time of application.

- Applicants who were previously employed or studying towards a degree or undertaking research in South Africa, and have returned to their country of origin but have been in their country of origin for less than two (2) years are not eligible to apply.
- Applicants must be thirty five **(35) years of age or younger on the 31<sup>st</sup> of December** of the year of application for the Doctoral scholarship.
- Visa and immigration laws of the applicant's home country and South Africa must be met by the applicant. The applicant must secure his/her own Visa or study permit under the programme for study in South Africa. **Neither NRF nor TWAS will be responsible for assisting with visa requirements.**
- Upon completion of the studies, all successful applicants must return to their country of origin. **Students who fail to return to their home country will be liable to pay back the amount to the NRF equal to the number of years of study support they have received.**
- Applicants who wish to pursue research under Science, Engineering and Technology (SET) disciplines will be supported through the Scholarship.

## 5. Students not eligible for support

- Students who already hold NRF funding for Masters (in 1<sup>st</sup> year of funding) or Doctoral studies (in 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> year of funding) are not eligible to apply, but should submit a Progress Report (PR) to renew funding for the following year as per the Conditions of Grant.
- Individuals that already hold a degree at the level at which they intend studying, are not eligible to apply, e.g. individuals with a Master's qualification may not apply for a scholarship for Masters studies.
- Students in their pre-proposal year will not be supported. The proposal year should also not be counted as the first year of registration.
- Students who intend to register for or that are studying for a 100% Masters by Coursework-, Professional Masters- or Doctoral degrees, may not apply for any of these scholarships.
- Students pursuing Masters studies who commenced their degree before 2019.
- Students pursuing Doctoral studies who commenced their degree before 2018.
- Individuals that will be in full-time salaried, contractual or permanent employment while pursuing Masters or Doctoral studies may not apply.

- Individuals that are on Sabbatical leave from their employment (including those without paid sabbatical leave) may not apply.

## 6. Application Process

Applications for funding in 2020 must be submitted through the NRF Online Submission System <https://nrfsubmission.nrf.ac.za/>. Further instructions on the application process will be made available in the **Application and Funding Guide** for the Masters and Doctoral Scholarships for full-time studies.

**All continuing students that are eligible for a second or third year of funding must submit a Progress Report and not a new application.**

## 7. Attachments

**First time and extension support applicants** must attach the following documents in the Attachment section of the online application:

- i. Certified South African Identity Document or Passport in the case of foreign nationals;
- ii. Certified academic record;
- iii. Applicants with outstanding fees are required to attach an official letter from the university confirming their first year of registration for the degree and indicating that the student still has outstanding fees owed to the university;
- iv. Proof of prior funding by the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) or University Financial Aid; and
- v. Applicants with disabilities are kindly requested to upload proof of the disability.

**All NRF-TWAS Doctoral applicants** must attach the following documents on in the Attachment section of the online application:

- i. Certified copy of their Passport;
- ii. Proof of evaluation of all foreign qualifications (obtained from non-South African universities) evaluated by the South African Qualification Authority (SAQA) **or** proof that the applicant has submitted his/her qualifications to SAQA for evaluation. Failure to submit proof will result in the application being rejected. Further information on the process can be accessed by logging on to [www.saqa.org.za](http://www.saqa.org.za);
- iii. English language proficiency certificate (if available at the time of the application). If not available, this will be required before any NRF funds can be released to the



student. Applicants must meet the following requirements of the English Language Proficiency Academic test: IELTS 6.5 (no band less than 6.0); or TOEFL (paper) 575 (TWE 4.5); or TOEFL iBT (min. 20); or Cambridge minimum 58. Information on the IELTS tests can be obtained from the British Council in applicant's home country or accessed at: [www.ielts.org](http://www.ielts.org). Further information on the TOEFL test can be accessed at: [www.toefl.com](http://www.toefl.com). Applicants may consult the British Council in their home country for assistance;

- iv. Acceptance letter from the South African university: Applicants must provide an official acceptance letter from their South African institution, department or laboratory and a motivation from the prospective Doctoral supervisor. It is the responsibility of the applicant to contact the respective institution to apply for acceptance and to secure a supervisor for the study; and
- v. Certified academic record.

Applications without supporting documents will be rejected.

**It is the responsibility of the applicant to ensure that:**

- All attachments are translated into English as a medium of communication;
- A suitable supervisor and co-supervisor has been identified;
- In the case of first-time Masters applicants, ensure that letters of support from the identified Masters supervisor and referee are submitted via the NRF Online system;
- First-time Doctoral applicants submit letters of support from the Masters Supervisor, identified Doctoral supervisor and referee via the NRF Online system;
- The application is completed in full;
- They adhere to their institution's internal closing date; and
- The University has received the application.

## **8. Selection Criteria**

With the exception of NRF-TWAS scholarships, all awards will prioritise applicants who are financially needy, yet academically capable applicants and previously funded by the NSFAS, NRF and/or University Financial Aid. All other applicants will also be considered, but not prioritised.

**All first time applicants for Masters scholarships** will be assessed by universities using a **technical merit** review process based on the scorecard presented in Table 2.

**Table 2: Scorecard for the assessment of applications for Masters Scholarships (excluding Extension Support)**

<b>Review Criteria</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Weight %</b>
<b>1. Academic merit*</b>	Average percentage mark for the honours degree, if completed; OR Average percentage mark for major subjects in the final-year undergraduate courses for students currently registered for a honours degree; OR Average percentage mark for major subjects in the third-year undergraduate courses for students in the final year of a four-year undergraduate degree.	35
<b>2. Completion time for previous degree</b>	Time taken to complete the honours degree, if completed; OR Time taken to complete the undergraduate degree, if the honours degree is in progress; OR Time taken to complete third-year undergraduate courses for students in the final year of a four-year undergraduate degree.	15
<b>3. Priority Research Area</b>	Research aligned with one of the NRF listed research priority areas.	20
<b>4. Project Outline</b>	Issues that need to be addressed through research and the identified knowledge gaps.	30
<b>Total</b>		<b>100</b>

\*Students who received a “Pass” and have entered a percentage pass mark will be given a default score of 1.

All first time applicants for Doctoral scholarships including TWAS will be assessed by the NRF using a **scientific merit** review process based on the scorecard presented in Table 3.

**Table 3: Scorecard for the assessment of applications for Doctoral Scholarships (excluding Extension Support)**

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Weight %</b>
<b>1. Academic merit*</b>	Percentage mark for the masters degree, if completed; OR If the masters degree is in progress, average percentage mark for the honours degree; OR Average percentage mark for major subjects in the final year of a four-year undergraduate degree.	30
<b>2. Completion time for previous degree</b>	Time taken for completion of the masters degree, if completed; OR If the masters degree is in progress, time taken to complete the honours degree or four-year undergraduate degree.	15
<b>3. Track record or Research Outputs</b>	Evidence of research outputs in accredited peer-reviewed publications and, presentations at conferences/symposiums.	15
<b>4. Priority Research Area</b>	Research aligned with one of the NRF listed research priority areas.	10
<b>5. Originality of the Doctoral study</b>	Problem statement, Identified knowledge gaps, Aim and Objectives of the study.	20
<b>6. Potential Impact of the research</b>	Potential to contribute to national research strategies and the strategic goals of the knowledge economy.	10
<b>Total</b>		<b>100</b>

\*Students who received a “Pass” and have not entered a percentage pass mark will be given a default score of 1.

**All applications for Extension Support** will be assessed by the NRF using the scorecard presented in Table 4 and this review process will be conducted at the NRF.

Reviewers will consider the following information provided by applicants.

- A **completed supervisor’s report** that includes the following:
  - i. Reasons for extension request;
  - ii. Whether funding is required for either six (6) or twelve (12) months;
  - iii. Work plan to ensure that the student will finish in either six (6) or 12 months;
  - iv. Intended thesis submission date; and
  - v. Envisaged graduation date.

- A **completed student work plan** for either six (6) or twelve (12) months detailing the following:
  - i. Activities for completion of Masters and Doctoral degrees, including the start and completion dates for each activity;
  - ii. Proposed date for submission of the dissertation for examination;
  - iii. Timelines for making the necessary corrections after examination;
  - iv. Details of manuscripts to be drafted and submission timelines; and
  - v. Proposed graduation date.

**Table 4: Scorecard for the Assessment of applications for Extension Support at the Masters and Doctoral level**

Review Criteria	Description	Weight %
<b>1. Progress to date</b>	Report on research work completed in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree.	25
<b>2. Reasons why the study could not be completed in the NRF Maximum funding period*</b>	Explanation of why the study could not be completed within the NRF funding period time.	25
<b>3. Work plan to complete the degree within the indicated timeframes</b>	1. Work plan for six (6) or twelve (12) months, indicating activities for completion of masters and doctoral degrees, indicating the start and completion date of each activity; 2. Proposed date for submission of the dissertation for examination; 3. Timelines for corrections to dissertation from reviewers; 4. Details of manuscripts to be drafted and submission timelines; and 5. Proposed graduation date.	50
<b>Total</b>		<b>100</b>

\*NRF Maximum funding period for Masters and Doctoral degree is 2 and 3 years respectively.

All applicants considering Extension Support are strongly advised to consult their supervisors prior to applying in order to be certain that extension support is indeed desirable. The NRF expects all students to complete their qualifications within regulation time of maximum funding period, hence extension will only be provided under exceptional circumstances. **If the supporting report from the supervisor is not attached, applications for extension will be rejected.**

## 9. Equity and Redress

In line with the national imperative of enhancing equity of postgraduate student access, success and throughput using funding, all scholarships must prioritise support for appropriately qualified applicants from designated groups viz. black, female and persons with disabilities, while ensuring that only applications that meet the NRF merit review and selection criteria are supported.

All postgraduate bursaries across the NRF funding landscape will be allocated as follows:

- **87%** South African citizens and permanent residents; and
- **5%** students from the South African Development Community (SADC) region.
- **4%** students from the rest of Africa.
- **4%** students from non-African countries.

The **South African Citizens targets** are further disaggregated in terms of **race, gender and disability** as follows:

- **80%** Black (African, Coloured, and Indian);
- **55%** Women (African, Coloured, Indian and White); and
- **4%** Students living with a disability.

### **NRF-TWAS eligible countries**

NRF-TWAS Doctoral applicants' must note the following:

- The list of [eligible developing countries](#);
- Priority will be given to applicants from the [66 Science and Technology lagging countries](#) highlighted by TWAS as a priority in capacity development in Science and Technology; and
- Priority will also be given to female applicants and the target is to award at least 50% of scholarships to female scholars.

## 10. Value of support

**The period of support for all scholarships is calculated from the first year of registration for the study, regardless of the years of NRF funding.** Scholarship values for full-time postgraduate students are indicated in **Table 5** below.

**Table 5: Bursary and Scholarship values for full-time Masters and Doctoral studies**

Level of study	Lower-Value Scholarship (p.a)	Higher-Value Scholarship (p.a)	Maximum Funding period
Masters	R50 000	R90 000	2 years
Doctoral	R70 000	R120 000	3 years

**Assistive devices for students living with disabilities**

All Scholarship-holders with disabilities may apply for additional funding for an assistive technology device of up to **R20 000**. This is the maximum amount permitted during the tenure of the scholarship. As defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997 (IDEA), an assistive technology device is "*any piece of equipment, or product system, that is used to increase, maintain, or improve functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities*".

**Travel grants for Masters and Doctoral scholarship-holders**

In addition, Masters and Doctoral scholarship-holders may apply for a travel grant (Table 6) that may be used to (i) attend local conferences or workshops; (ii) visit a laboratory abroad; or (iii) any other activity that supports the current research progression. The maximum amount allowed during the tenure of the scholarship is presented in **Table 6**.

**Masters and Doctoral scholarship-holders under the NRF-DAAD and Extension support programme are not eligible for travel grants through the NRF. Students that are funded under the NRF-DAAD programme may apply directly for travel to DAAD for any travel to German institutions.**

**Table 6: Travel Grants values\* per study level.**

Category	Local		International		Mobility
	Masters	Doctoral	Masters	Doctoral	
<b>Lower-Value Scholarships</b>	R10 000	R10 000	n/a	n/a	n/a
<b>Higher-Value Scholarships</b>	R15 000	R15 000	n/a	R50 000	n/a
<b>TWAS Scholarships</b>	n/a	R25 000	n/a	R25 000	R30 000**

\* These values represent the maximum award during the tenure of the scholarship. Actual awarded values depend on the available budget and quotations submitted by the applicant.

\*\* NRF-TWAS Scholarships holders qualify for a Single economy airfare to South Africa and return to the home country upon completion of the degree; and visa cost, based on proof of expenditure.