NRF Evaluation and Rating of Researchers ("Rating")

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Outline of presentation

- What is a NRF rating?
- Who can apply for a rating?
- Why should you apply for a rating?
- NRF rating categories – where do you fit in?
- Role players
- Timeframes
- The rating process
- Information / support sources
What is a NRF rating?

• **Started in 1984**
  • CSIR – FRD (agency function) / SSH&L joined in 2002
  • Criteria for funding – recent (research) track record as assessed by peers

• **Assessment of your recent research track record**
  • Quality and impact of research outputs
  • Relative standing to peers based on above
  • Scientometrics / Bibliometrics – supportive

• **Based on international peer review**
  • 5 000 reports (60% peers outside SA) used in 2015 to rate 800 applicants

• **System run by SA scholars for SA scholars**
  • ±3 400 researchers rated currently
    • 30% of all HEI academics with a doctorate
  • ±7 200 rated since 1984
  • 8% per annum average (organic) growth in first time applicants
  • Annual policy workshop to discuss changes in research environment
Why should you apply for a rating?

NB: Applying for rating is voluntary

• **Benchmarking**
  - Emerging researchers: career planning / feedback
  - Established researchers: maintaining / improving levels of research excellence (“time to pause”)
  - Use of ratings in HEI (recruitment / promotions / marketing / training of PG students by acknowledged researchers)

• **Funding re-linked to rating from 2008** (recommendation from review of rating system in 2007)

• **RE mandate:** intention to grow value-recognition of rating in NRF funding decisions
Who can apply for a rating?

- Link to incentive funding – eligibility important

- **Types of applicants:**
  - New / Re-evaluation (lapsed) / Re-evaluation by invitation (in fifth year)

- **Affiliation with a NRF recognised institution:**
  - Permanently employed researchers/academics
  - Fixed term contract* researchers, e.g.
    - Dual appointees (local/international institutions)
    - Retired academics/honorary appointees/research associates/fellows

*Institutional benefit in terms of capacity building and p/g student supervision (“make the case”) & commitment to maintain association

- Researchers to be appointed

Eligibility criteria available at [http://www.nrf.ac.za/rating](http://www.nrf.ac.za/rating)
NRF rating categories – where do you fit in?

**Established researcher categories:**
- C - established researcher
- B - established researcher with CIR*
- A - leading international scholar

**Emerging researcher category:** Y
- Must have a doctorate obtained no more than 5 yrs ago (e.g. 2011)
- Must be 40 years of age or younger at closing date (28 Feb)

**Prestigious category (P)**
- Must have a doctorate obtained no more than 5 yrs ago
- Must be ± 35 years of age or younger at closing date

* Considerable International Recognition (CIR)
Role players

- Applicants
- Designated authorities (DA’s) at employing HEI
- NRF staff (Reviews and Evaluation) (10)
- Peer reviewers (60% from outside SA)
- Assessment Panels:
  - Specialist Committees (SC) (26 committees – 125 members)
  - Assessors (6)
  - Chairpersons (6)
- Higher level Committees
  - Executive Evaluation Committee (EEC) (*only decision making body on which NRF is represented*)
  - Appeals Committee
Role players: Applicants, DA’s & NRF

- Apply at: [http://nrfsubmission.nrf.ac.za/NrfMkII/](http://nrfsubmission.nrf.ac.za/NrfMkII/)
- Important things when completing application:
  - Take care when selecting:
    - Primary panel
      - May select up to 3 panels (priority order)
      - Interdisciplinary / Multi-disciplinary / Change in focus (last 8 yrs)
    - “Best five” research outputs
    - Nominated reviewers (no close collaborators / same dept / reason for nomination)
    - Research fields and specialisations
  - Ensure that outputs are correctly categorised (e.g. peer reviewed – “predatory journals” / [https://scholarlyoa.com/publishers/](https://scholarlyoa.com/publishers/) /conference proceedings / presentations)
  - Ensure that outputs are correctly referenced (author sequence NB)
  - Ensure that contribution field for outputs are informative (not just %)
  - Use opportunity provided by narratives to contextualise research profile
- Applicants and DA’s – institutional partnership
- DA’s submit with a proposed institutional rating (C, B, A, Y, P)
- DA’s internal closing dates – screening
- NRF - closing date for applicants – mid Feb
- NRF - closing date for DA’s – end Feb
Role players: Peer reviewers

NB Peer review is the foundation of the rating system

- Applicants nominate six reviewers in application
  - Applicants may indicate excluded reviewers (Conflict of interest / Ideological differences within disciplines (SSH&L))
- Important that applicant nominate appropriate peers (opportunity)
- Specialist Committee nominate six reviewers (“independent”)
  - Guidelines for selection of reviewers – used by SC to select and prioritise these 12 reviewers
  - Goal - an appropriate mix of national and international peers
- Six are prioritised by SC as “approach first” – invited by RE (reviewer fatigue)
- Reports are assessed for
  - Usability (good & satisfactory vs unusable (e.g. biased / uninformative) reports)
  - Rating category in which reviewer place applicant (established etc)
- Aim: six reports (3 x nom / 3 x indep) – “four reports of acceptable quality expressing a consistent opinion is the benchmark”
Role players: Specialist Committees

Backbone of the system – all active rated researchers

- 26 Specialist Committees – disciplinary based
- Convener – main contact for NRF staff

Tasks:
- Reading applications (contextualise)
- Screening for right panel
- Screening for “prematurity”
- Nominating, prioritising, ratifying (convener) reviewers
- Assess reviewer reports (**NB** – members of SC does not evaluate/review the applicant – only the reports)
- Feedback
- Advising NRF
- Consultation between SC’s
Role players: Assessment Panel

- Three voices:
  - Specialist Committee members
  - Assessors
  - Chairpersons

All members of Panel have to read every report for every applicant (5 – 8 set of independent “eyes” for each applicant)

- Assessors and Chairs - may not be from the same discipline as the SC
- Assessors and Chairs – attend 4-5 panel meetings each
- Assessor’s role: benchmark standards and ensure fairness and consistency in applying criteria
- Chair’s role: Facilitate decision making and act as second assessor
Timeframes

- Rating valid for 6 yrs
  (e.g. 1 Jan 2016 – 31 Dec 2021)
- Invited to re-apply in 5th yr (2020)
- The period under review is the past 8 yrs
  (e.g. 1 January 2009 to 31 Dec 2016)
- Results available: Sept – Feb
  (within a week of meeting)
- Call open normally Sept – can update CV section all the time (90% of application)
- Meeting dates and panel members’ names posted on website http://www.nrf.ac.za/rating
The rating process – 1

Submission of applications – NRF Online Submission System

Screening by Designated Authorities (DAs) at institutions, submission to NRF with proposed rating

Screening of application and nomination of peer reviewers by members of SC’s

RE staff approach reviewers and coordinate (with Convener of SC) the process to obtain six reviewer reports

Meeting docs made available to members of Assessment Panels

SC (incl Convener) Chairperson Assessor

Independent preparations

Referred back via RE as “premature”

Referred to another SC
The rating process – 2

Independent preparations

Joint meeting of Assessment Panel

Allocation of a rating – communicated by RE to institution

No consensus

Executive Evaluation Committee

Nominations: A & P

More reports

Virtual meeting

Outcome letter with feedback (compiled by SC/feedback writer) sent by RE staff

Appeals process
Key criteria – established researchers

• C category and up

Researchers with a **sustained recent** record of productivity in the **field** (focus/depth) who are recognised by their **peers** as having:
  • produced a **body** of **quality** work, the core of which has **coherence** and attests to ongoing engagement with the field (focus/depth/theme in topics)
  • demonstrated the ability to **conceptualise** problems and apply research methods to investigating them.

• Evidence of Research independence and leadership
  • Senior/first authored papers (discipline specific)
  • Own group/students
  • How many outputs?
    • weigh not count
    • discipline specific – types of outputs

See *Key Research Areas and Types of Research Outputs* for each specialist committee
## Key criteria – How is it used to determine an outcome

| C1  | All of the reviewers are **firmly convinced** that the applicant is an established researcher as described and who, on the basis of the high quality and impact of his/her recent research is regarded by:  
|     | **Some** reviewers as already enjoying considerable international recognition;  
|     | OR  
|     | The **overriding** of reviewers as being a scholar who has attained a sound/solid international standing in their field, but **not yet considerable international recognition**;  
|     | OR  
|     | The overriding majority of reviewers as being a scholar whose work focuses mainly on local and/or regional issues and who as a scholar at a nationally leading level has substantially advanced knowledge and understanding in the field by contributing to new thinking, a new direction and/or a new paradigm. |

| C2  | All of the reviewers are **firmly convinced** that the applicant is an established researcher as described. The applicant may, but need not, enjoy **some international recognition** for the quality and impact of his/her recent research outputs. |

| C3  | **Most** of the reviewers **concur** that the applicant is an established researcher as described. |
Key criteria
Example of it’s use to decide an outcome

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Key criteria – emerging researchers

Potential to become established (see five criteria of C) in 5 years time

- Quality and impact of publications from mostly post-doctoral work:
  - make sure doctorate is fully published;
  - make sure there is enough post-doctoral work to assess potential
  - Use narratives to explain future vision
- Ensure that outputs is published in good journals
- Do not apply too early
Information / support sources

- DA’s in Research Offices
- NRF Support Desk / PO’s in Rating Team
- NRF Website:
  - http://www.nrf.ac.za/rating