

NATIONAL RESEARCH FOUNDATION AND EUROPEAN RESEARCH COUNCIL 2024 CALL

Research visits to ERC-funded teams

Consult the General Application Guide 2024 for the closing dates

*Researchers **must** consult their institutions for internal closing dates.*

Background on ERC

The European Research Council (ERC) is a public body responsible for funding scientific and technological research conducted within the European Union (EU). Established by the European Commission in 2007, the ERC forms part of the EU research and innovation Framework Programme, Horizon 2020. The ERC's mission is to encourage the highest quality research in Europe through competitive funding and to support investigator-driven frontier research across all fields, on the basis of scientific excellence. The ERC complements other funding activities in Europe such as those of the national research funding agencies, and is a flagship component of Horizon 2020.

Being 'investigator-driven' or 'bottom-up' in nature, the ERC approach allows researchers to identify new opportunities and directions in any field of research, rather than being led by priorities set by government departments. This ensures that funds are channeled into new and promising areas of research with a greater degree of flexibility. ERC grants are awarded through open competition to projects headed by starting and established researchers, irrespective of their origin, who are working in Europe. The sole criterion for selection is scientific excellence. The aim here is to recognise the best ideas and confer status and visibility on the best brains in Europe, while also attracting talent from abroad.

Background on the NRF/ERC Partnership and the Joint Funding Opportunity Offered

In 2012 the ERC, in line with its belief that increasing the international exposure of researchers can help develop their full research potential, made a decision to open their funded research teams to the rest of the world. Since this belief is aligned to the DSI/NRF mandate for human capacity development, the DSI and NRF decided to join forces with ERC and form part of the larger implementing arrangements developed by the ERC themed: "Opening ERC teams to the world". The overall aim of this partnership is to provide non-European researchers opportunities to pursue research collaboration with European colleagues already funded and supported through ERC grants. In October 2015, South Africa signed an agreement with ERC becoming one of the 11 countries who have joined this partnership. The other partners to this Programme includes Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, India, Japan, Korea, Mexico and the USA.

The NRF/ERC partnership is intended to enable South African early-mid career researchers to partner with and undertake research visits to ERC funded teams. For this reason, the ERC funded teams are expected to host, for an agreed period of time, South African early-mid career researchers in their research institutions and incorporate them into their research teams. It is therefore expected that collaborations will occur in similar areas of scientific pursuit and on topics of mutual interest.

The NRF is hereby pleased to announce this 8th call to interested South African researchers to foster research collaboration with ERC-funded researchers. Attached to this guideline is a list of the European projects that are interested in partnering with and hosting a South African researcher as part of their research team.

Specific Aims of the Programme

- To contribute to scientific advancement in both South Africa and the EU through the funding of research visits in thematic fields of mutual interest.
- To provide an opportunity for early-mid career researchers in South Africa to meet and interact with their European counterparts in order to develop their full research potential.
- To contribute meaningfully to research capacity development of South African early-mid career researchers by broadening and strengthening their research profile and vision in an internationally competitive research environment.
- To contribute to and ensure that South African researchers are internationally exposed and well-networked.

How this Programme works?

Step 1:

Once a year, the ERC launches a Call for Expression of Interest amongst ERC grantees to inquire about their interest to host South African early-mid career researchers in their research teams. This Expression of Interest Call is open to all ERC Principal Investigators (PIs) of Starting Grant, Consolidator Grant, Advance Grant and Synergy Grant who have at least 18 months until the end of their funded project. These Calls normally take place in October each year.

Step 2:

Once the ERC Expression of Interest Call closes (around the end of November each year), the ERC forwards to the NRF a list of interested European PIs or teams, with a publishable description of their funded ERC projects.

Step 3:

The NRF makes use of this ERC list to inform South African researchers of the collaborative opportunity through the launching of this Call.

Step 4:

Interested South African researchers check the published list and directly contact the ERC grantee to check compatibility and interest. If both the EU and South African researchers agree on all the details, the Host Institution of the ERC grantee issues a "*letter of intent*" or "*support letter*" to the South African researcher.

Step 5:

Once the South African researcher receives this "*support letter*", he/she applies for funding through the NRF Connect system and provides all the other required information as outlined in this guideline. Once this call closes, the NRF organises expert reviews and uses the outcomes thereof to select and fund South African researchers under this Programme.

Areas of Cooperation

Attached, as **Annexure A**, is a list of ERC Grantholders (i.e. ERC-funded projects) interested in partnering with South African researchers. This list also provides the fields of study and a detailed description of the

ERC projects. Therefore, those South African researchers working within the same fields are hereby encouraged to directly contact the ERC grantee and together work on an exchange/placement programme in order to apply for this call.

In terms of human capacity development, South African applications from previously disadvantaged individuals are encouraged, as is the involvement of historically disadvantaged higher education and research institutions.

Eligibility criteria

- Early-mid career researchers (i.e. researchers who are 40 years and younger and in possession of a doctoral degree) interested in undertaking research visits to ERC-supported teams as listed in **Annexure A**, are eligible to apply.
- The early-mid career researchers who are interested in applying for this opportunity should be South African citizens and/or permanent residents working in/or affiliated with a recognised South African higher education or research institution such as a university, university of technology, science council or any other research institution as declared by the DSI.
- Further to this, all the early-mid career researchers who are currently undertaking their postdoctoral studies supported through any of the NRF postdoc funding instruments (e.g. postdoctoral research fellowship and the Thuthuka post PhD track) interested in undertaking research visits to ERC-supported teams as listed in **Annexure A**, are also eligible to apply.
- Please note that researchers based at commercial institutions and private higher education institutions are not eligible to apply under this Programme.

Activities covered under the Programme

This Programme aims to provide opportunities to South African early-mid career researchers to pursue research collaboration with European colleagues already supported through EU-funded ERC grants. The research visits should be organised as follows:

- Single and long-term (e.g. 6-12 months) or
- Multiple short-term visits of not less than 10 days and not more than 6 months (e.g. for joint experiments).

The research visits should begin prior to the conclusion termination date of the ERC grant.

Funding modalities

Early-mid career researchers already funded by the NRF will continue to receive their NRF project funds during the period of the visit. Through this collaboration, these researchers are permitted to make use of their postdoctoral fellowship running and/or travel expenses to cover the travel costs (i.e. flights, accommodation and subsistence costs) associated with their visits to the ERC supported teams. The NRF will make some funds available to top-up the South African researchers' travel grants should their NRF postdoc grants be depleted by the time of application or not be sufficient to cover all related costs. The awarding of a top-up grant will be done on a case-by-case basis, depending on the strong motivation from the researchers.

Early-mid career researchers currently not funded by any of the NRF postdoctoral funding instruments may apply for a maximum amount of R150 000. Researchers are advised to look for other sources of funding in order to supplement this amount should the NRF grant be insufficient.

Visiting South African researchers will be incorporated into the research teams of the ERC-funded PI (at the Host Institution of the ERC project) for the duration of the visit. Any relevant expenses, over and above the travel expenses, can be claimed under the ERC grant by the ERC grantee.

Supporting documents to be submitted with all applications

- For NRF-funded postdocs - support letter from your supervisor to ensure synergy with your already funded South African project
- ERC team / Host Institution (HI) confirmation letter / letter of support
- Schedule / work plan with specific timelines

Application procedures

Applications must be submitted through an online application process to the NRF on the NRF Connect system at <https://nrfconnect.nrf.ac.za>. The NRF Connect system will open on the 2nd week of February 2022 for submission of proposals. You have 3 days to query from date of email receipt should your application be rejected in the screening phase.

Reporting

On completion of the visit, researchers should provide the NRF with a full report indicating the benefits of this collaboration. These reports must be submitted on the NRF Connect System at <https://nrfconnect.nrf.ac.za>.

Ethical Clearance

It is the responsibility of the grantholder, in conjunction with the institution, to ensure that all research activities carried out in or outside South Africa comply with the laws and regulations of South Africa and/or the foreign country in which the research activities are conducted. These include all human and animal subjects, copyright and intellectual property protection, and other regulations or laws, as appropriate. A research ethics committee must review and approve the ethical and academic rigor of all research prior to the commencement of the research and acceptance of the grant.

Please also refer to the “Statement on Ethical Research and Scholarly Publishing Practices” on the NRF website at <https://www.nrf.ac.za/statement-on-ethical-research-and-scholarly-publishing-practices/>.

Contact details for queries

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