

Call for Concept Notes

Thematic Research Programme

Deadline: 19 January 2026

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The National Research Foundation (NRF) has introduced a new [Thematic Research Programme](#) designed to advance knowledge and innovation in South Africa's priority areas of Health, ICT, and Energy. This strategic funding instrument aligns with the [NRF Strategy 2030](#) and the [Science, Technology and Innovation \(STI\) Decadal Plan \(2022–2032\)](#), aiming to foster interdisciplinary collaboration, strengthen human capital development, and deliver measurable societal impact. By replacing the previous Competitive Programme for Rated Researchers (CPRR) and Competitive Support for Unrated Researchers (CSUR), this programme offers a more integrated approach to supporting large-scale, collaborative research clusters that address national challenges and contribute to a knowledge-based economy.

FOCUS AREAS

The Thematic Research Programme will prioritise funding for research that develops knowledge to solve South Africa's key socio-economic challenges and facilitates the move towards a knowledge-based economy. This pilot call focuses on three priority areas included in the [STI Decadal Plan](#), namely ICT, Energy and Health:

1. **ICT:** The ICT Thematic Research Programme will prioritise support for projects that are in line with the following research themes:
 - AI, Data Intelligence & Decision Support
 - Next-Generation Connectivity & Advanced Networks
 - Intelligent & Secure IoT Ecosystems with Quantum-Enhanced Sensing
 - Smart, Sustainable Urban & Industrial Systems
 - Inclusive Digital Ecosystem & Sovereign Infrastructure
 - Digital Innovation & Entrepreneurship
 - Digital Trust, Ethics & Governance
 - Emerging Computing Paradigms
2. **Energy:** The Energy Thematic Research Programme will prioritise support for projects that are in line with the following research themes:
 - Integrated and decentralised energy systems for resilience, decarbonisation, and equitable access
 - Clean energy technology and advanced feedstocks
 - Energy efficiency, conservation, and demand management
3. **Health:** The Health Thematic Research Programme will prioritise support for projects that are in line with the following research themes:
 - Point-of-Care Diagnostics
 - Pharmaceutical development

ELIGIBILITY

Full-time UCT employees who are resident in South Africa and receive a salary from the institution can apply as Lead PIs or Co-PIs of a Thematic Research Cluster. Contract employees, retired researchers and postdoctoral fellows are not eligible to receive a grant from Thematic Research Programmes, however they may participate as collaborators.

Lead PI:

The Lead Principal Investigator must hold a PhD and be an established researcher with a track record of more than 10 years of research experience, as evidenced by their research outputs, student supervision, and leadership of research projects. The Lead PI should be an expert in the area under which the project will be submitted.

Co-PI:

The Co-PI must hold a PhD and should have experience as either a well-established researcher or a newly established researcher.

- Newly established researchers: These are researchers with a track record of at least 6 years, but less than 10 years of research experience, as evidenced by research publications and student graduation outputs.
- Well-established researchers: These are researchers with a track record of at least 10 years of research experience, as evidenced by research outputs, students graduated, and research project leadership.

Collaborators:

These individuals make a relatively small but meaningful contribution to the research endeavours outlined in the application and participate in the research design. They are considered a part of the core research team and are not eligible to independently hold a Thematic Research Cluster grant. However, they may benefit from the resources of the Thematic Research Cluster.

Thematic Research Cluster Composition Requirements

Each member of the Thematic Research Cluster (Lead PI + 3 Co-PIs) will receive funding directly from the NRF, based on their individual work packages as detailed in their full proposals. A Thematic Research Cluster must consist of at least **one Lead Principal Investigator** (Lead PI) and **three Co-Principal Investigators** (Co-PIs), making a minimum of four qualifying members. The cluster must be **interdisciplinary**, integrating knowledge from at least **two different academic disciplines**, and members should come from **more than one department** within UCT. Participation from one additional South African public university is permitted where specific expertise is not available at UCT.

Each cluster must include at least one newly established researcher and one well-established researcher among the Co-PIs and must also incorporate the capacity building and collaborative participation of emerging researchers, and/or postdoctoral fellows and postgraduate students. While non-academic collaborators such as industry, government, or NGOs are strongly encouraged to enhance societal impact, their inclusion is not compulsory. **Members of the cluster may not hold any alternative NRF research grants in 2026**, except for Incentive Funding for Rated Researchers, mobility and equipment grants.

The members of the Thematic Research Cluster should not submit more than one application to this call. The Lead PI and the Co-PIs may participate as collaborators in more than one Thematic Research Cluster, however they will not receive a direct grant in more than one Thematic Research Cluster.

FUNDING

A budget is NOT required for the Concept Note.

The overall budget submitted by the Thematic Research Cluster for the full proposal may not exceed R2,500,000.00 per annum.

The funding duration for the Thematic Research Programme is up to 10 years, structured in two phases:

- Phase 1: Initial 5-year cycle for approved clusters.
- Phase 2: An additional 5-year cycle, subject to successful peer review and availability of funds.

APPLICATION AND SUBMISSION PROCESS

The Concept Note must be submitted by the **Lead PI** on the NRF Connect System:

<https://nrfconnect.nrf.ac.za>

Lead PIs and Co-PIs must ensure that their Curriculum Vitae are updated on NRF Connect, as these will be used in the review of applications. Incomplete or outdated information could jeopardise the success of a Thematic Research Cluster application.

1. Register / Login using your ORCID and password.
2. Update your CV (These Curriculum Vitae are used in the assessment processes, and incomplete or outdated inputs will jeopardise the success of the application).
3. On the Menu, click on Applications under My Applications tab.
4. Click on the + sign next to **Concept Notes**.
5. Click on the *Create* button next to **Concept Note: Thematic Research**
6. Complete all compulsory sections and the relevant non-compulsory sections.
7. The Lead PI must identify the Co-PI's in the cluster from a drop-down menu. If the Co-PI's details are not found on the drop-down, this means that the Co-PI is not registered on the NRF Connect System.
8. Submit the application on completion.

IMPORTANT NOTE

The submission of a Concept Note is mandatory. Applicants who have not submitted concept notes will not be able to access the closed call for full proposals and will thus not be able to submit a full proposal. Each Thematic Research Cluster must submit a single consolidated Thematic Research Cluster Concept Note. The Concept Note must be submitted by the Lead PI on behalf of the proposed Thematic Research Cluster (Co-PI's).

The programme strongly encourages interdisciplinary collaboration that spans a broad range of fields, bringing together expertise from diverse domains and promoting co-supervision across these disciplines to strengthen capacity development and foster integrated solutions to complex societal challenges.

It is of utmost importance that applicants consult the [Framework Document](#) for more detailed information regarding the research themes and additional application guidelines, such as the capacity development plan and research impact.

For technical enquiries, please contact the NRF Support Desk: Supportdesk@risa.nrf.ac.za