



NRF AWARDS 2026

AWARDS CATEGORIES

NOMINATIONS PROCESS - A GUIDE FOR NOMINATORS

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1. Background

The mandate of the National Research Foundation (NRF), as set out in the NRF Act (Act No. 23 of 1998), is to promote and support research, human capacity development, and the provision of research facilities. Its core mission is to fund scientific research, enhance public engagement with science, and support national development priorities across all scientific fields, including the humanities and indigenous knowledge. These interventions are key to the growth, sustainability, and societal impact of the knowledge enterprise. The NRF has identified five key pillars that are critical to its success. These are Transformation, Innovation, Excellence, and Sustainability for Impact (TIES4I). Impact is fundamental to the NRF's mandate and provides direction and focus for the TIES and NRF policies. In recognition of the excellent research carried out by the research community, the NRF awards individuals or groups who have demonstrated extraordinary investment and achievements related to these pillars. The areas of recognition include knowledge generation; human capacity development; public engagement with research; and scientists who are considered by their peers to be leading international scholars in their fields/disciplines.

The NRF Awards are an annual event where South Africa's best researchers and scientists are recognised for their excellence across a spectrum of disciplines. The awards honour individuals whose work demonstrates outstanding scholarly achievement, innovation, and leadership, while advancing transformation within the national research system. At this event, awardees selected through the process defined herein, as well as scientists who have just attained their A and P ratings through the separate NRF Rating process, are celebrated.

The NRF Awards Event for 2026 is scheduled for September 2026. The following categories will be recognised in the NRF Awards in 2026:

- i. Lifetime Achievement Award;
- ii. Public Engagement with Research Award;
- iii. Hamilton Naki Award;
- iv. Research Excellence Award for Next Generation Researchers;
- v. Research Excellence Award for Early Career / Emerging Researchers;
- vi. Champion of Research Capacity Development and Transformation Award; and
- vii. Science Team Award.

This document outlines the NRF Special Awards categories, the qualification criteria, and the processes for identifying and selecting awardees. Please note that this document does not include the rating process.

In addition to the specific criteria for nominations, applicable to the different categories, the following applies across all categories:

- i. Only NRF-recognised research institutions (Higher Education Institutions, National Research Facilities, and Science Councils) may submit nominations for the awards;
- ii. An NRF rating is not mandatory for any of the awards presented in this document.
- iii. Nominated individuals should be from the following research areas: all fields of Science and Technology; Social Sciences and Humanities; and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS); and

- iv. All Nominees should be registered on the NRF Connect system with updated Curriculum Vitae (CVs).

2. Award Categories

2.1 Lifetime Achievement

The Lifetime Achievement award honours a deserving South African individual who is recognised nationally and internationally for his/her outstanding or extraordinary contribution(s) to the development of science in and for South Africa, for what he/she stands for as a South African, and for the extent to which his/her work has positively touched and shaped the lives and views of many South Africans.

Criteria for nomination and assessment

A candidate nominated for the Lifetime Achievement award must satisfy the following criteria:

- i. Be a South African citizen or permanent resident;
- ii. His/her Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics-related contribution and/or achievements in and for South Africa must be of international standard and have been recognised internationally;
- iii. Must have contributed to the lives of South Africans through his/her science/innovation-related work and achievements that can be categorized as significant, recognizably developmental, and beneficial, and have made a significant impact; and
- iv. Need to be associated with NRF-recognised institutions at the point of being recognised for this award.

2.2 Public Engagement with Research Award

This award recognizes researchers and scientists who have made outstanding contributions to public engagement with science over a sustained period. The aim of the award is to encourage academics, while teaching and conducting research in their fields of expertise, to commit to enhancing the public's engagement with science and to contribute substantially to the public's understanding of the sciences and their applications in society (including the natural sciences, engineering, technology, innovation, the social sciences, the humanities, and indigenous knowledge systems).

For the purpose of this award, public engagement refers to the various interactions that provide opportunities for mutual learning. Public engagement with research refers to the many ways in which different publics can be involved in the design, performance, or dissemination of the research process and its outputs or products. It is recognized that researchers often communicate to inform and inspire the public about their research, consult and listen to the public through two-way conversations, and collaborate with the public in processes of co-creation and co-production (including citizen science), as well as sharing of knowledge for positive societal change. High-quality engagement is therefore defined as engagement that involves mutual, beneficial interactions between researchers and relevant public audiences or participants, ultimately shaping or enhancing the quality and impact of the research. Engagement can often be achieved in partnership with other organizations and networks.

The Award is thus looking to recognise researchers and scientists who:

- i. Can demonstrate meaningful, active collaboration and engagement across the stages of the research life cycle, including incorporating 'public user' insights into production, design, and technology for maximum impact.
- ii. Make exceptional efforts to communicate their science in ways that engage, inform, and inspire the public;
- iii. Make extra efforts to engage with audiences outside their research domain and prioritize the rural and marginalized communities; and
- iv. Find innovative ways to integrate engagement activities with research programs.

Criteria for nomination and assessment:

- i. Open to researchers and scientists employed at all NRF-recognised public research institutions.
- ii. Applications must refer to public engagement through research projects that are either currently funded by the NRF, or whose funding from the NRF may have ended within 3 years of the 2026 NRF Award application deadline.
- iii. Physical implementation of funded project outcomes should be progressed enough to demonstrate achievement of objectives. Priority will be given to sustained engagement approaches through the research lifecycle, as opposed to once-off activities.

Additional guidelines to assist with nomination:

- i. Former recipients of the NRF Excellence in Science Engagement Award are not eligible.
- ii. Nominators must clearly indicate all public engagement activities including strategy for the public engagement, nature of partnerships and quality of materials or resources used. Activities should demonstrate new approaches, creativity of tools and use of resources or the development of significantly improved ways to engage or communicate research with public audiences.
- iii. Nominators must motivate and explain how the researcher, while working in her/his field, has also contributed substantially to public engagement with, as well as public understanding of STEM and/or SSH over the past three years. In doing this, she/he should indicate the broad audience categories reached by the nominee's contributions and provide examples of where these contributions have especially included the girl child, women and persons from the designated groups.
- iv. With reference to science communication as part of the research programme, only materials produced over the past three years for general audiences, as opposed to professional audiences, ought to be considered. This could include works intended for children. Creative activities to be considered include: books, collections of poems, magazine and newspaper articles including commentary and opinion pieces; broadcasting; public lectures; exhibit design; TV programmes, films, online videos, radio segments, podcasts and works of new media; theatre productions, and other public outreach activities (local, national, and/or international).
- v. Nominators must assess the impact of the work undertaken and provide direct supporting evidence or proxies that attest to the impact. This should include benefits to the researcher, their research programme and any other researchers involved; benefits to public audiences/communities/business etc., as well as any other benefits, outcomes or impacts that occurred as a result of the engagement.
- vi. Priority will be given to candidates whose contributions reach broad audiences, especially women and poor communities and/or demonstrate considerations of their impact on society.

- vii. Submissions will be evaluated based on the innovative character of the engagement activities or programme; the quality and relevance of the scientific content, influence, innovation, as well as feedback and assessment of their impact on society.

2.3 Hamilton Naki Award

This award was named after Mr Hamilton Naki, a self-taught Black¹ surgeon who developed his career against all odds. The category honours the challenge of attracting more Black scientists to advance towards world-class research performance by providing recognition for their efforts to advance their careers in science, despite considerable challenges. The award is also focused on transforming the science cohort to be more representative of South African demographics.

Criteria for nomination and assessment

The nominee for the Hamilton Naki award must:

- i. Be a Black South African citizen or permanent resident;
- ii. Be an active researcher at an NRF-recognized institution in any area of research;
- iii. Possess an impressive record of research achievements, demonstrated by high-quality scholarly research outputs and acknowledged by peers as a leading contributor in their field.
- iv. Demonstrate evidence of achieving international research achievements despite encountering substantial barriers that typically hinder academic advancement.

Key Components “Severe Challenges”

These should be **substantial, structural, or systemic barriers** - not ordinary career difficulties.

They typically fall into the following categories:

a. Physical or Health-Related Barriers

- Living with a **disability**
- Conditions that directly affect the ability to conduct research

b. Structural / Institutional Barriers

- Limited access to research infrastructure, funding opportunities, and/or mentorship or networks
- Working in historically disadvantaged institutions or environments with limited resources.

c. Socio-Economic Barriers

- Coming from **under-resourced or disadvantaged backgrounds**
- Financial hardship affecting academic progression

d. Historical or Systemic Inequalities

- Barriers linked to **race, gender, or past exclusionary systems**
- Delayed academic progression due to systemic constraints

¹ Black people' is defined in line with the **Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Act 53 of 2003**, referring to Africans, Coloureds and Indians, and includes Chinese South Africans as recognised through the Chinese Association of South Africa v Minister of Labour.

2.4 Research Excellence Award for Next-Generation Researchers

The NRF provides funding to postgraduate students for scientific research, enhances public science engagement, and supports national development priorities across all science fields, including humanities and indigenous knowledge. One of the objectives of supporting Next Generation researchers is to increase the prospect of retaining suitably qualified young researchers and thus increasing the pool of researchers and knowledge workers in the National System of Innovation (NSI). This award recognises excellence in research performance by doctoral students from any discipline who are currently funded by the NRF.

A maximum of eight awards will be made in this category, including female doctoral candidates and male doctoral candidates in each of the following knowledge fields:

- i. Science & Technology
- ii. Social Sciences & Humanities
- iii. Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS)

Criteria for nomination and assessment:

The nominee for the Next Generation Researchers award must:

- i. Be a South African citizen or permanent resident and be currently funded by the NRF;
- ii. Be registered for full-time doctoral studies at a public university in South Africa. Students pursuing split-site doctoral studies and registered at a public university in South Africa and at an institution abroad are also eligible for nomination;
- iii. Have an impressive research performance record, as indicated by the standard research performance indicators (number, quality, and impact);
- iv. Have evidence of peer-reviewed publications outputs, with clear articulation of the nominee's contribution;
- v. Be judged on the novelty/innovativeness, and national or global relevance of her/his research topic; and
- vi. Have the potential to make a contribution to research in their field.

Required supporting document for nomination:

The nomination must include:

- i. Summary of the nominee's research project, written for a wider audience (maximum of 200 words); and
- ii. Two letters of recommendation attesting to the nominee's research capabilities and achievements.

2.5 Research Excellence Award for Early Career / Emerging Researchers

The NRF aspires to develop and enhance the research standing of Early Career / Emerging Researchers, prioritising Black, female, and people with disabilities as part of its transformation agenda, which, among other goals, aims to redress historical imbalances in the South African researcher cohort. This award recognizes outstanding research performance by current Early Career / Emerging Researchers in any discipline who are NRF grant holders at the time of submitting the application.

A maximum of eight awards will be made in this category, with female and male candidates in each of the following knowledge fields:

- i. Science & Technology
- ii. Social Sciences & Humanities
- iii. Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS)

Criteria for nomination and assessment:

The nominee for the award for Early Career / Emerging Researchers must:

- i. Be a South African citizen or a permanent resident;
- ii. Have completed a PhD degree within eight (8) years of the time of nomination;
- iii. Be a current NRF grant holder;
- iv. Be a current NRF-funded postdoctoral research fellow or currently employed in an academic or research position in South Africa;
- v. Have an impressive research performance record as indicated by standard research performance indicators (number, quality and impact), of national and/or global relevance;
- vi. Be judged on a synopsis of their career path and research performance over the past six years, with evidence of: emerging independence (e.g. publications not authored with doctoral supervisor); first/single-authored publications; and/or student supervision (emphasis on master's degree level students);
- vii. Have demonstrable achievements of research excellence, through research outputs, clearly indicating the specific contributions of the nominee; and
- viii. Be judged on outcome and/or impact of the research.

Required Supporting Documents for nomination:

The nomination must include:

- i. Summary of the nominee's research project, written for a wider audience (maximum of 200 words); and
- ii. Two letters of recommendation attesting to the nominee's research and scholarly capabilities and achievements.

2.6 Champion of Research Capacity Development and Transformation Award

This category recognises individuals within the research community who contribute to the transformation and thus diversity of South Africa's science cohort through the research students they supervise. The aim of the award is to encourage and promote those researchers who have identified and are mentoring young scientists to become highly productive academics of the future and even international leaders in their areas of scientific expertise. The focus is on Black, especially Black female, and preferably South African postgraduate students who have been trained and graduated by the nominee. It should be noted that the award depends on the number of students from these groups who have been trained and graduated by the nominee, as well as the quality and impact of the students' research outputs.

Criteria for nomination and assessment:

The nominee for the Champion of Research Capacity Development and Transformation award must:

- i. Have supervised a large number of South African Black, preferably Black female, master's and doctoral students over the last three years;
- ii. Present quality research outputs by students under her/his supervision, published in peer-reviewed journals, over the last three years;

- iii. Be a permanent or contracted employee at the public research institution that makes the nomination;
- iv. Be characterised by her/his peers as an active researcher, in any discipline;
- v. Be acknowledged to have made, or to be making, a significant contribution to:
 - the identification of research talent within Black and especially Black female students;
 - the nurturing of this talent;
 - the moulding and developing of research excellence; and
- vi. Have a track record of success in achieving the applicable transformation for at least the past three years.

Required Supporting Documents for nomination:

The nomination must include:

- i. Two letters of recommendation from peers attesting to the nominee's research and scholarly capabilities and achievements, aligned with the above criteria.

2.7 Science Team Award

In recognition of the contributions, creativity, and achievements of a science team toward extending the boundaries of scientific research in Africa, producing scientific outcomes that have positively impacted society, and the role they played in raising South Africa's international stature as a world-class research destination.

Criteria for nomination and assessment:

The team nominated for the Science Team Award must:

- i. Be comprised of a number of researchers providing complementary interdisciplinary expertise, each of whom has made separate, substantive, and quantifiable contributions to the research being recognised. The majority of the team members must be based at South African public research institutions.
- ii. Have achieved exceptional scientific accomplishment, breakthrough(s), or contribution(s) to research, as a team, which are acknowledged at national and international levels.
- iii. Have earned respect and recognition as a team from their peers for the work for which they are nominated.
- iv. Have produced scientific research outcomes that have already had demonstrable uptake and/or impact in society.
- v. Have contributed to extending the boundaries of scientific research in Africa and achieved a breakthrough that played a role in our country being recognised as an international research destination; and
- vi. Have reached a broad audience, including especially the girl child, women, and persons from the designated groups.

2.8 NRF Societal Impact Award

Over the past twenty-five years, the National Research Foundation (NRF) has invested in supporting, promoting, and advancing research, human capacity development, research infrastructure development, and science engagement across our national system of innovation. These investments

are expected to generate impact within the research enterprise, and ultimately for the benefit of society. As part of advancing the impact agenda, the NRF has identified the need for incentives and recognition, especially to encourage the new element of societal research impact (knowledge impact is already recognised and rewarded). For this reason, the NRF is introducing an NRF Societal Impact Award to incentivise a focus on societal research impact, and to assist in the collection of ex-post impact case studies.

The NRF's Societal Impact Award is a prestigious award that recognises significant societal benefit arising from NRF-funded or co-funded research, supported by verifiable evidence of impact already achieved.

In line with its Vision 2030, the NRF adopted a Research Impact Framework that defines research impact as: a beneficial change in society or an advancement in knowledge, brought about as the direct or indirect result of the NRF's research support interventions, whether planned or unintended, and immediate or long-term. The Framework explains that **societal impact** refers to the value that research adds to society across various spheres (including social, economic, or environmental). Societal impact reflects the direct or indirect relationship between research and improvement in the quality of people's lives, including innovation, technological advancements, improved sustainability, and policy developments.

The Societal Impact Award is made based on the submission of a narrative impact case study (with verifiable evidence) by a collaborative research team (formal or informal), research centre, or research unit, hereafter referred to as the research team. Case studies are assessed (qualitative and quantitative) using two key criteria:

- i. 'Significance' considers the extent of change or degree to which the impact has enabled, enriched, or changed performance, policies, or well-being of the beneficiaries.
- ii. 'Reach' considers how wide the impact has been in terms reaching potential constituencies or beneficiaries. It is not assessed in purely geographic terms, nor in terms of absolute numbers of beneficiaries.

Research Team responsible for research and impact

- The impact claimed must have arisen as a result of academic work conducted by a research centre or unit that has received NRF-funding.
- Attribution in terms of the extent of NRF-funding is not required as long as the NRF has funded the team or researchers in the team. Indicate when NRF funding was received and the type of grant/s awarded.
- Provide the name and contact details of two individuals from the team who can be contacted for further information if necessary.

Short title/ summary for impact case study:

- Indicate briefly the societal impact achieved.
- Note that only case studies where societal impact is already evident will be considered.
- Please do not exceed **100 words** in this section.

Impact case study:

- Case studies must be of impact that has already occurred.
- The impact case study must discuss:
 - i. The NRF-funded research underpinning the societal impact that has been achieved, showing a causal link between the academic work conducted and the resulting societal impact. It is understood that the original academic work on which the impact is based may have been conducted much earlier than the impact itself. Links to relevant research may be provided.

- II. The nature and extent of the impact achieved, including what challenge the impact responded to; who benefitted from the research impact (community, department and policy, industry etc.); and the nature and reach of the impact (how they have benefitted).
- The case study can include an explanation of the process which led to the societal impact, for example how research was disseminated and how it came to influence users or beneficiaries, or how the researcher/s worked with stakeholder/s outside of the institution to ensure impact.
 - The impact must be societal impact (impact outside of academia).
 - An activity is not by itself an impact, but rather there must be evidence that something has changed for the better as a result of that activity. Societal or community engagement, or science communication, is not by itself an impact.
 - Impact can be planned or unplanned.
 - Impact can be in any sector of society and without any geographical limitations.
 - Examples of case studies can be found here: <https://www.nrf.ac.za/research-impact/>; <https://impact.ref.ac.uk/casestudies/>.
 - The 7 Cs of Context, Communities, Constituencies, Challenge, Channels, Communication and Capture may be useful when writing your impact case study: [https://www.researchgate.net/figure/The-7Cs-for-planning-impact-into-research-projects_fig1_337843086#:~:text=Here%2C%20we%20introduce%20our%20key,Figure%201\).%20...&text=...,-7Cs%20framework%20is.](https://www.researchgate.net/figure/The-7Cs-for-planning-impact-into-research-projects_fig1_337843086#:~:text=Here%2C%20we%20introduce%20our%20key,Figure%201).%20...&text=...,-7Cs%20framework%20is.)
 - Please do not exceed **1000 words** in this section.

Verifiable evidence of societal impact:

- Impact case studies must be supported by verifiable evidence. Those without evidence will not be considered. Any relevant evidence can be provided, as long as it is objective and verifiable.
- Evidence will differ based on the sector of society where impact is evident.
- Evidence could include:
 - Quantitative indicators such as:
 - Data from independent surveys.
 - Measures of improved performance.
 - Public health data or national statistics.
 - Documentary evidence such as:
 - Evidence of changes to policies, legislation etc.
 - New professional codes and standards.
 - Commercial adoption of new technology, process, knowledge, or concept.
 - Licences awarded or products brought to market.
 - Independent testimony, acknowledgments, testimonials and/or evaluations by relevant beneficiaries, bodies and organisations.

Reviews and citations from outside of academia.

Criteria for nomination and assessment

A candidate nominated for the NRF Impact Award must satisfy the following criteria:

- i. Be a South African citizen or permanent resident,
- ii. His/her science/innovation-related contribution and/or achievements in and for South Africa must be of international standard and have been recognised internationally;
- iii. Must have contributed to the lives of South Africans, through his/her science/innovation-related work and achievements that can be categorised as being significant, recognisably developmental, beneficial and have made a significant impact; and
- iv. Need to be associated with a research or higher education institution at the point of being recognised for this award.

Respective applicants must note that the assessment will focus on:

- Societal Impact (Social, environmental, economic, or innovation).

- Impact achieved, not outcome, or potential or future impact.

3 Financial Value of Awards

Awardees will be granted funds as detailed in the table below and must submit a report to the NRF in February of the following year outlining how the funds were utilised.

Table 1: Grant values for the NRF awardees

No.	Award	Financial Value
(i)	Lifetime Achievement Award	R500 000 grant for research-related activities (equipment, conferences, students)
(ii)	Public Engagement with Research Award	R75 000 grant for research-related activities of the awardee.
(iii)	Hamilton Naki Award	R200 000 grant for research-related activities of the awardee.
(iv)	Research Excellence Award for Next Generation Researchers	R75 000 grant for research-related activities of the awardee.
(v)	Research Excellence Award for Early Career / Emerging Researchers	R75 000 grant for research-related activities of the awardee.
(vi)	Champion of Research Capacity Development and Transformation Award	R300 000 grant for research-related activities of the awardee.
(vii)	Science Team Award	R500 000 research grant. The distribution, terms and conditions for this award will be defined by the NRF and will depend on the nature of the Team and their research.
(viii)	NRF Impact Award	R500 000 grant for research-related activities of the awardee.

4. Call for Nominations

The process for the identification of nominees comprises the following steps:

- The NRF will issue a call for nominations through various platforms and institutional contact points. This call will specify opening and closing dates.
- An appropriate internal nomination and screening process should be employed by the institution. Institutions are urged to conduct thorough screening of nominations and not submit any nomination that does not fully satisfy the relevant criteria.
- To be eligible as a Nominator or a Nominee, all participants must be registered on the NRF Connect System and have a fully updated CV. Follow the link below to register on the NRF Connect System and/or update your CV: <https://nrfconnect.nrf.ac.za>. All nominations must be completed on the NRF Connect System and submitted through the research offices of an NRF-recognized research institution by the NRF Approved Designated Authorities.
- Written motivations, the nominee's CV, and, in the case of the Science Team category, the team members' CVs should be included with each nomination and submitted at <https://nrfconnect.nrf.ac.za>.

5. Outcome

Once nominations are reviewed and final decisions are made, the results will be communicated to all nominators, nominees, and their institutions. The official announcement of awardees will be made at the annual NRF Awards ceremony. If you have not received any communication from the NRF team by the end of September 2026, please consider your nomination unsuccessful.

REFER QUERIES TO	
For Submissions/Eligibility	
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