



ANNEXURE 7

The National Research Foundation and its contribution to the transformation of Higher Education: Prospects and Challenges

Briefing paper prepared for the second national Higher Education Transformation Summit, 2015

The National Research Foundation

The National Research Foundation (NRF) receives its mandate from the NRF Act (No. 23 of 1998), which came into effect on 1 April 1999 and established the NRF as an autonomous statutory body. Section 3 of the Act states that the object of the NRF is to:

“Support and promote research through funding, human resources 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 and thereby contribute to the improvement of the quality of life of all the people of the Republic of South Africa”.

The NRF fills a dual role. Primarily, it fulfils an agency role where it interprets national policy and contributes to the National System of Innovation (NSI) by supporting fundamental research or knowledge generation and the concomitant human capacity development through its grant-making, and science advancement activities. In addition, the NRF also provides cutting edge, state-of-the-art research platforms through its National Research Facilities (NFs).

In contributing to the Higher Education (HE) Summit, this brief discussion paper focuses on the central theme of Research and Engagement. It highlights some of the challenges/issues of transformation, the current status with regard to transformation, and the gains and actions or interventions the NRF instituted to support and enhance transformation in HE to contribute to the nation-wide transformation agenda. In executing its mandate the NRF primarily works in partnership with and through the HE institutions,

science council sectors, and to a lesser extent, directly with the public. The NRF interfaces with national policies, plans and strategies within the HE and NSI landscapes. Therefore, it takes into account the HE Act (No. 10 of 1997), the White Paper on Post-Secondary Education and Training of South Africa and the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) 2014-2019 Enrolment Plan.

Within the National Science, Technology and Innovation landscape the NRF also takes into account SA's National Research and Development Strategy (NRDS), the DST's Ten Year Innovation Plan, the SA Strategy for Paleosciences, the National Space Strategy, the Bio-economy Strategy, the Nanoscience and Nanotechnology Strategy, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, and the National Development Plan 2030.

The implications of these frameworks are that the NRF views the challenges of HE in South Africa (such as those associated with transformation, the challenges of access to higher education, the quality of higher education activities and its outputs, representivity in terms of race, gender, physical and mental abilities, etc.) as its own challenges in meeting its mandate. The NRF continuously considers HE policies and strategies as critical inputs that guide the design and implementation of some of its interventions and programmes. For instance, in the early days of its existence, the NRF took on board some of the key aspects of the *White Paper on Education* and the HE Act such as the recognition of the different modes of knowledge production, the need for quality control at both institutional and programme levels (working closely with the CHE – HEQC), the need for and role of HE in national development, and the demographic transformation to achieve human resource equity to design its programmes.

In developing a holistic approach to HE transformation in SA, the entire education pipeline needs to be considered. The challenges of low school pass rates, higher education enrollments and access, a low number of qualified supervisors and an inadequate rate of doctoral production are challenges that directly affect the NRF and which it has a responsibility to address or contribute towards addressing. Similarly, the challenges of under-representation of women and black academics and researchers is a challenge that affects the NRF.

The NRF views itself as a critical player in addressing these challenges. It believes that without a representative, inclusive and truly transformed HE sector, improving the quality of lives of all people of the Republic of South Africa is virtually impossible. The nature, form and type of knowledge generated and by whom are as critical as to who accesses this knowledge and utilizes such knowledge, and for what purpose. Furthermore, it would be safe to argue that the larger the size of and the broader the population of the nation that is involved in generation of knowledge, the larger the numbers of quality outputs to address human challenges required for use by the broader community.

One of the key NRF cross-cutting strategic goals is that of transformation. Transformation also acts as and is considered a key guiding principle for NRF research investments. How does the NRF view and reflect transformation as a strategic goal? Following NRF *Vision 2015* in which the focus was on “World-class research, a transformed society and a sustainable environment”, a new strategy called *NRF Strategy 2020* was developed and presented to the NRF Board for approval. One of the primary foci of the new strategy is transformation of the research workforce funded by the NRF over the next five years.

The previous strategy, viz., NRF *Vision 2015*, advanced five strategic goals. Key amongst these was the attainment and/or contribution towards the attainment of a *Representative Science System [NSI]* - in effect a transformed society that is representative. To address this strategic goal the NRF presented specific key performance indicators that relate to transformation and data collected over the period. The NRF created a Human Capacity Development Excellence Pipeline which catalyzed the transition of the next generation/new researchers to early career researchers and then to established researchers. Embedded within this pipeline was the HCD transformation imperative driven by different funding instruments. The NRF firmly places Excellence and Quality at the centre of its decision-making processes. The NRF also believes that Excellence and Transformation are not mutually exclusive and that it requires all system role

players to think differently and innovatively to achieve a common good. Within the NRF processes, excellence and quality cannot be compromised. But it is also recognized that our science community comprises persons at different levels of their development as researchers. Robust support systems are available to guide grant applicants to produce quality research proposals that can be funded. Various funding instruments are available to cater for applicants across the researcher development spectrum.

Following on from the *NRF Strategy 2020*, the organisation is in the process of developing “*An Integrated NRF Strategy for Transformation*”. The primary focus of this strategy is on the grant-making side of the NRF business with the objective of addressing the transformation of the research workforce funded by the NRF. Integrated with, and aligned to this strategy is the transformation of the NRF workforce. Regarding the former, numerous innovative and directed interventionist strategies have been/are being developed which will be discussed. An updated “*NRF Employment Equity Plan 2016-2020*” has been developed to address the latter.

In conclusion, transformation of HE cannot be achieved in a vacuum. University transformation has to be re-imagined. It is critical that all parties linked to HE function as a collective and foster sustainable partnerships that will deliver a transformed workforce within the HE landscape and NSI of South Africa.