

NATIONAL RESEARCH FOUNDATION GETS R250 MILLION BOOST FROM GOVERNMENT WHILE PHD NUMBERS FALL

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On 21 October 2010, the Minister of Science and Technology, Naledi Pandor, announced an additional allocation of over R250 million from the current (2010/2011) budget to the National Research Foundation (NRF). The funds are ring-fenced for specified human resources development initiatives (R100 million), scientific equipment under the national equipment programme (R50 million), emergency repairs and renewal of infrastructure and equipment at the national research facilities (R50 million) and the provision of broadband connectivity to rural universities under the South African National Research Network (R55 million).

The human resources allocation will be used for providing additional and higher value honours bursaries (R42 million), postdoctoral fellowships (R11 million), the extension of bursary support to increase master's and doctoral graduation rates (R10 million), dedicated research support for women and young researchers (R25 million) and improving the qualifications of academics and researchers (R12 million).

The provision of additional honours bursaries for next year will be welcomed by researchers, as a recent report (www.assaf.org.za/?p=2813) by the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) has found that only 42% of honours graduates nationally enroll for master's degrees. The reason that the NRF will use the new funds for honours and postdoctoral students – rather than for master's or doctoral students – is that as they are for a single year only they cannot be used to support additional candidates for longer degree programmes, according to Robin Drennan, executive director for corporate governance at the NRF. Drennan adds that the foundation has recognised that honours is a major funding bottleneck for many potential candidates, and accordingly has increased not only the number of awards, but also the value of an honours to needy students bursary by 50% to R30 000 for 2011.

According to the ASSAf report, the NRF intends to increase the ratio of freestanding: grantholder bursaries to 1:1 by 2013. (Freestanding bursaries are awarded to students by the foundation in an individual capacity, whereas grantholder ones are awarded to supervisors who can then appoint students of their choice). But the latest figures released by the foundation (Table 1) show that this ratio actually declined between 2007 and 2009 (no figures for 2010 are available).

In 2005, the year the PhD project was initiated, the number of NRF-supported PhD students increased by over 60% – from 1360 the previous year to 2186. But momentum was soon lost – the following year (2006) it increased only marginally, and it has declined since then. Last year the total number of bursaries fell below 2000 for the first time since 2005, declining in all three major categories (freestanding, grantholder and the Technology and Human Resources for Industry Programme). By contrast, there was an increase in the number of awards to students working on projects at the national facilities, the Square Kilometre Array and the South African Nuclear Human Asset and Research and Technology Programme, where the numbers involved are all relatively small (Table 1). In particular, instead of the number of grantholder bursaries increasing as a result of the research chairs scheme being implemented in 2008 and 2009, the decline in numbers associated with the phasing out of the focus area programmes has not even been offset by the scheme.

PhD registrations nationally have continued to rise, reaching 10 499 last year. As a consequence, the proportion of doctoral students in South Africa funded by the NRF has declined to only 19% in 2009. But it is these students, together with candidates funded full time through other doctoral scholarships, mostly administered by the universities, who are most likely to complete their degrees within three to four years. The ASSAf study reports that almost 70% of doctoral candidates are employed at the time of registration, and that a third of students who are not employed at the time of registration start working before they have completed their doctorates. ■

TABLE 1
Doctoral candidates supported by the National Research Foundation, 2005–2009

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Square Kilometre Array	2	6	10	6	38
South African Nuclear Human Asset and Research and Technology Programme	0	7	10	11	13
Centres of Excellence	93	125	117	173	130
Technology and Human Resources for Industry Programme	760	665	534	548	487
National facilities	5	7	12	16	50
Freestanding	389	460	462	449	370
Grant-holder linked (including research chairs)	937	951	947	966	895
Total	2186	2221	2092	2169	1983

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