



## GRANTS MANAGEMENT DIVISION

### CALL FOR APPLICATIONS/PROPOSALS 2015 SELF-INITIATED RESEARCH GRANTS

The South African Medical Research Council (MRC) is pleased to announce the 2015 call for applications for funding under the Self-Initiated Research (SIR) Grants Programme. The SIR Programme is designed to support original research initiated by a researcher at a recognized research institution in various areas of health.

#### Eligibility

In order to increase the reach of the SIR Programme, the 2015 call has been divided into two categories aimed at different levels of researcher. Details of the categories and the eligibility criteria are provided in the table below. Applications are limited to South African citizens and permanent residents.

<b>Category 1: Early stage investigators</b>	<b>Category 2: Mid-level and established researchers</b>
Minimum MBChB, PhD or MSc	Minimum MBChB or PhD
1-5 years (conducting research) since completion of post-graduate degree or MBChB	>5 years (conducting research) since completion of post-graduate degree or MBChB – PI or study coordinator on at least 3 studies
Must have secured a salary at the university or research institution for the length of the grant	Must be in an established academic post, i.e. permanently employed, or in a long-term contract of employment (at least for the duration of the project) salaried by the university or research institution

For the purposes of the SIR Programme, a research institution is defined as a legally constituted institution or organization wherein research is one of the primary purposes for its existence, including the training of postgraduate students. The broad thrust of the organisation's research, basic or applied, should be towards the advancement of knowledge. Research institutions include universities, science councils and other

organisations whose core business is conducting research and/or training postgraduate students.

Only one research proposal will be considered for funding per individual applicant and once granted, only one such grant may be held by an individual until the project has been completed. Individuals working within MRC intra- and extra-mural research units are not eligible to apply for an SIR grant. Research grant applications that are proposing work on behalf of commercial entities will also not be considered. Preference will be given to individuals who have not previously been a recipient of an SIR grant.

### **SIR Grant Details**

SIR grants are in the amount of up to **R200 000** per year for a maximum period of **three years**. These funds provide support for research expenses (materials and consumables; support to attend scientific meetings; small items of equipment, etc.). See ***Terms and Conditions for the Acceptance, Utilization and Management of MRC Self-initiated Research Grants*** for details. It is expected that the researchers/applicants already have in place the necessary equipment and facilities required for the proposed research.

### **Research Priority Areas**

Research priority areas that will be considered in the 2015 SIR call are as follows:

- Non-communicable diseases
- Nutrition
- Proteomics, genomics and bioinformatics
- Health biotechnology
- Brain /mental health/ disorders
- HIV and TB co-morbidities
- Vaccinology and immunisation
- Prevention medicine
- Health systems
- Health economics (cost, value and impact of interventions)
- Maternal, infant and child health

The research should ideally be geared towards generating high quality new knowledge, new medical products, improved or enhanced medical/health practice, effective health promotion strategies or improved health policy and/or functioning of the national health systems.

### **Application Process**

The MRC has introduced an online grants management system, which allows easy tracking, analysis, and reporting on applications. All eligible applications must be submitted using this SIR Grants online system (see appendix A) and must:

- Be signed off online by the applicant

- Be approved or validated online by an authorized person in the research administration office of the institution
- Reach the MRC by midnight on 23 September 2015. **Late applications will NOT be accepted.**

It is the responsibility of host institutions to verify and certify the appropriateness, completeness and correctness of all information submitted by their researchers to the MRC as part of their applications for SIR funding. By co-signing applications institutions commit themselves to administering the allocated funding according to the ***Terms and Conditions for the Acceptance, Utilization and Management of MRC Self-initiated Research Grants.***

Timelines for the application and review process are as follows:

Steps or actions	Timeline
Call/Request for proposals	8 July 2015
Closing date for applications	23 September 2015
Peer review process	September – November 2015
Grants Committee meeting(s)	November-December 2015
Approval by the MRC's EMC	December 2015
Communication of outcomes to applicants	January-February 2016
Acceptance of SIR grants conditions by awardees	March 2016
<b>Payment of grants to institutions</b>	<b>April 2016 onwards</b>

#### Application Checklist

- Completed SIR Grant Online application
- Completed and signed SIR Grant Approval Form
- Applicant's Curriculum Vitae – *maximum length of 5 pages, including a biographical sketch (professional work experience, qualifications, research activities) and publications in the last 3 years of active research*
- Ethics Clearance Certificate or a letter indicating that the proposal has been submitted to the institution's Ethics Committee. Where ethics approval is not required, please submit a letter from the Institutional Research Office stating why it is not required.
- Completed SIR Grant Reviewer Nomination Form
- Completed SIR Grant Budget Form
- Completed SIR Milestone Table

*Applications will not be processed until authorization by the institution has been completed. Incomplete applications and applications without an Ethics Clearance Certificate, or a letter from the Institution's Research Office stating why it is not required, will not be considered.*

The MRC's Grants Management Division will provide technical support to applicants and respond to all queries during the application process (see Appendix A for contact details).

## Review of Proposals and Selection of Awardees

The SIR Grants Programme is highly competitive and has limited funds available. The primary consideration in determining the success of a funding application is the quality of the research proposal. However, equally important to the MRC is transformation and building the capacity of, particularly, black and women scientists as well as resource-limited institutions. Thus proposals that are from principal investigators or institutions meeting these criteria and/or involve a component of capacity building of or partnership with such individuals and/or institutions will be preferred. These factors are taken into consideration in the review and selection process.

### 1.) Eligibility screen

After the closing date, all proposals received will be screened for eligibility and compliance with the grant and submission criteria. Proposals that do not meet the criteria will not be processed further.

### 2.) Peer review

All eligible proposals will be submitted for peer review. Peer reviewers are asked to review proposals according to the criteria listed below. In submitting a research proposal for funding, researchers should therefore make every effort to ensure that the proposals address these aspects comprehensively.

Criterion	What the reviewer is asked to comment on
<b>Overall Merit</b>	<i>What field, health issue or policy, medical care or treatment is addressed by the application? What is the relative importance of the scientific issue(s) raised? How and to what degree will the application generate advancements in science or evidence-based clinical practices? Is the research likely to succeed with respect to the qualifications of the research team, the design of the research, the general feasibility of the techniques employed and the environment including the availability of equipment and infrastructure?</i>
<b>Research Design and Methods</b>	<i>Is the design and experimental plan sound, feasible, and relevant to the questions being asked? Is the approach proposed appropriate and likely to accomplish the goals of the project? Are potential problems recognized and addressed with alternative approaches? If the project involves clinical research, are the plans for 1) protection of human subjects from research risks, and 2) inclusion of minorities and members of both sexes/genders, as well as the inclusion of children, justified in terms of the scientific goals and research strategy proposed?</i>
<b>Significance of Proposed Research</b>	<i>How important is the science to improve scientific knowledge, technical capability, and/or clinical practice in one or more broad</i>

*fields? Will the research advance basic biomedical concepts, unmet needs in human health, improve or enhance the health care system of South Africa, or contribute to health care policy or towards the development of important new products such as medicines, devices, or therapies? Does the application challenge and seek to shift current research or clinical practice paradigms by utilizing novel theoretical concepts, approaches, methodologies, instrumentation, or interventions. To what extent will the results of the project contribute to health advancements or to solving barriers to progress in the field?*

<b>Investigator (s)</b>	<i>Is the training and research experience of the project leader and collaborators appropriate for the project? Is there sufficient expertise and level of accomplishments within the research team to generate confidence in success? Is the project leader capable of leading the team to conduct the research efficiently and effectively?</i>
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**Ethical considerations** *Will human subjects be utilized in the project? If so, will they be appropriately protected from potential research risk? Is there a plan for inclusion of multiple races and ethnicities, members of both sexes/genders, and/or children? Is the inclusion/exclusion of each of these groups appropriate in terms of the scientific goals and research strategy? Will vertebrate animals be utilized in the project? If so, will they be appropriately and ethically treated?*

Based on the above criteria, peer reviewers will score the quality of the proposals according to the categories below and make recommendations on fundability.

<b>Proposal quality description</b>	<b>Quality score</b>
Exceptionally high quality research that is pushing the boundaries in its field internationally while addressing highly significant scientific/health questions or challenges.	10
Research of excellent quality at the forefront in its field internationally and likely to result in high impact outcomes for science, medical practice, and the health system or health policy.	9
Research of very good quality that is at the forefront nationally (and possibly internationally), addresses an important health research question and is likely to result in tangible outcomes for science, medical practice, the health system or health policy.	8
Research of average to good quality and is likely to have a modest impact in addressing an important health research question.	5 – 7
Poor quality research with major flaws in its conceptual frameworks, research methods and design and unlikely to be successful OR research which is technically flawless, but of minimal significance, innovation, or interest could fit in this score band.	1- 4

Proposals submitted in categories 1 and 2 will be reviewed according to the same criteria; however, ranking of proposals by score will be done against proposals within the same category only. Further, a lower cut-off score will be used for evaluation and selection of proposals in category 1.

### 3.) Grants Committee review

Top scoring proposals in each of the categories from the peer review process will be submitted to one or more Grants Committees for assessment. The role of the Grants Committee(s) is to assess the overall quality of the proposals, based on their expert opinion and the peer review reports, as well as to take into consideration transformation imperatives and the spread of priority areas supported. The Grants Committee(s) will include at least one expert in each of the research priority areas. Criteria used by the Grants Committee members are described in the table below.

Assessment criterion	Questions to be considered
Scientific merit of proposal	<i>Based on your own reading of the proposal and the comments of the peer reviewers (on scientific merit, significance of the proposal, design and methods, as well as ethical considerations), please indicate your overall assessment of the quality of the proposed research.</i>
Significance of research for health in South Africa	<i>How important are the research questions being asked in the proposal in the context of South Africa's health challenges? To what extent does the proposed research hold potential to advance knowledge and/or contribute to improvements in either health or health outcomes?</i>
Alignment with MRC Research Strategy framework	<i>Please comment on how well the proposed research aligns with the research priority areas of the MRC as per the MRC Strategic Plan (2012-2017)?</i>
Institutional research environment	<i>Taking into account the institutional environment, the resources available, the research team and collaborations or partnerships, what is the likelihood that the proposed research will be carried out successfully?</i>
Ethical considerations	<i>Where relevant, outline any ethical issues and/or implications that arise from the proposed research and comment on whether these have been adequately addressed in the proposal.</i>
Research capacity development and transformation	<i>Based on the information contained in the proposal, comment on the potential for the proposed project to build research capacity and assist with transformation in terms of (i) development of junior, black and women staff members, (ii) training of postgraduate research students, other staff and/or community members and (iii) capacitation of resource-limited institutions.</i>

The Grants Committee members will score and categorize the applications according to the categories below.

<b>Recommendation</b>	<b>Score range</b>	<b>Rating*</b>
Highly fundable, worth prioritizing	8 -10	A
Fundable on condition that funds are available	6-7	B
Not fundable	1-5	C

#### 4.) Executive Management Committee approval

The outcome of the Grants Committee meeting(s) will be a ranked list of proposals for each category (1 and 2), which will be submitted to the MRC's Executive Management Committee (EMC) for final approval. The spread of awards between category 1 (early stage investigators) and category 2 (mid-level and established researchers) and the final approved list of awardees will be at the discretion of the EMC, taking into consideration the recommendations of the Grants Committee(s).

## APPENDIX A: SELF-INITIATED RESEARCH GRANTS 2015 ONLINE REGISTRATION AND APPLICATION PROCESS

Institutions and researchers will need to register online in order to maintain profiles, apply, and send and receive documents and other communication related to applications and funded grants online. The service for the online grants management system is provided by the US-based company Altum Inc. with which the MRC has a service level agreement.

Here is what applicants need to do:

- Make sure your institution (the institution that will be administering your grant) is registered on the online system.
- Register online and complete Your Details (this will include your personal details that will be used on submitted application forms).

Institutions and applicants are requested to follow the procedure as set out below:

### To Register and apply:

1. Go to <http://www.mrc.ac.za/funding/university.htm>
2. Click the “[Online registration and application](#)” link
3. Click the **Register** button on the far left-hand side of the page under the ‘First Time Users’ label.
4. Complete the account information and read and agree to the terms before hitting the **Save** button.
5. The system will then send a confirmation email to the email address you provided. Once you have received that email, copy the confirmation number to enter after initial login.
6. Return to the [Online registration and application](#) page. Then enter in the established Username and Password in the ‘Applicant Login’ located in the middle of the page.
7. Enter the confirmation number. This prompt will only occur on your initial login.

### Getting Started:

- Once you have logged in for the first time, you will be taken to the green Professional Profile tab and prompted to select an Institution Profile to affiliate yourself with before proceeding. To start, click the ‘[here](#)’ link in the text that reads: “**You do not have any primary institution. Primary Institution is required, please click [here](#) to add one.**”



- You will then be taken to a page with search fields. Start by entering a keyword from your institution name in the 'Institution Name (partial)' field. This will keep your search broad. While you can enter in the City, State, and/or Country, your search will include more results if you simply search by a key word. Then hit **Display Results**.
- In the results below, if you find your institution, select the radio option in that listing and hit **Select**.
  - NOTE: Confirmed institutions are those which have been confirmed by your Grants Office. If your profile is not confirmed, it will not keep you from successfully submitting.
  - NOTE: If your institution is NOT registered, you should contact an official in your Grants Office to register, and create a profile at [Online registration and application](#).
- Once you have selected your Institution Profile, you will be taken back to your Professional Profile where you can complete the rest of your profile information. You can navigate through each page using the 'Next' option or by utilizing the different links available in the grey menu on the left-hand side of the page. Be sure to **Save**.
  - NOTE: While you can complete as much of the profile as you would like, normally it is only essential to complete at least the 'Institution & Contact Info' section, as well as the 'Degrees' section.
- Once you have completed your profile and saved all information, navigate to the grey Grant Opportunities tab. Here you will find your grant opportunity listing. Once there, hit 'Apply Now'.
- This will pull up the application in a new window. Enter a title and **Save**. This will create the application record. You can return to it at any time by logging in and accessing the blue Manage Proposals tab.

**Contact details:** (Questions and clarifications)

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