



Sabbatical Grants for Completion of Doctoral Degrees

Framework

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1. Introduction

The National Research Foundation (NRF) remains committed to identifying, attracting and supporting emerging researchers through its various funding instruments. This is to assist them to transition from emerging to established researchers. A major barrier for advancing research and postgraduate training at South African universities is the low proportion of academic staff with the appropriate qualifications to drive postgraduate research and to advance knowledge creation. In 2009, only one third of full-time permanent academic staff (PAS) held doctoral degrees (CHE, 2009). Furthermore, there was a net decline in the number of full-time university academic staff with doctoral degrees at the universities and universities of technology over the same period. The impact of the low proportion of suitably qualified academic staff increases the “*burden of supervision*” for supervisors (CHE, 2009). This burden of supervision, at both the masters and doctoral levels increased across all fields of science between 2000 and 2005. At the Masters level, the ratio increased from 3.8 to 5.2 students per supervisor; and at the doctoral level from 1.3 to 2.2 students per supervisor, over the six year period.

In 2010 the Department of Science and Technology (DST) and the National Research Foundation (NRF) piloted the “Improving Academic Qualifications of Academic Staff and Researchers” grant to accelerate the graduation rate of doctoral candidates, and since 2013 the DST renewed its funding commitment for this intervention. This funding instrument, in concert with other interventions, is gradually changing the academic profiles of university academic staff. The 2014 Medium Term Strategic Framework of Government has set a target to increase the percentage of university academic staff that hold doctoral degrees to 46 percent by the year 2019. The sabbatical grant for completion of doctoral degrees contributes directly towards the realisation of this target.

2. Rationale

This grant is a special intervention aimed at addressing the decline in the number of full-time university academic staff with doctoral degrees and the inadequate supervisory capacity that currently characterises the South African academic landscape. As a direct response, this grant seeks to accelerate the training of doctoral candidates with the view to improve the qualifications of employed academics and to enhance their research and supervisory capacity. In recognition of the inhibiting role that limited funds play in the creation of a vibrant academic milieu, this grant is an intervention, for individuals in the final stages of their doctoral studies, to address this problem.

3. Aims

In light of the above, aims of the grant are to:

- Accelerate the doctoral level training of full-time academic staff at public universities and research institutions;
- Improve the academic qualifications of employed academics to enhance research and supervisory capacity; and
- Effect a rapid transformation in the demographic composition of the emerging researcher community with respect to gender, race and persons with disabilities.

4. Allocation principles

The funding initiative supports well-structured research projects with achievable aims and sound methodologies that support the study objectives and demonstrate the prudent use of funds. The grant funding decisions will be guided by the following principles:

- **Equity and redress:** In keeping with the equity and redress objectives, the grant is based on a preferential funding model. In terms of this model, targets for supporting individuals from designated groups are as set in 6.2 of this document;
- **Developmental:** Even though the project has a developmental focus, only quality proposals that are scientifically sound will be considered for funding;
- **Achievability:** The research proposal must be realistic, i.e., achievable in terms of the research objectives, the resources required and the projected completion times; and

- **Persons with Disability:** Where an applicant applying for funding is considered to be a person with one or more disabilities he or she will be deemed eligible for preferential funding.

5. Application Process

5.1 Call for proposal: Sabbatical Grants for completion of doctoral degrees

The NRF process for call for proposals will apply with this grant. All documentation related to the call is obtainable from the NRF website. To apply, use the NRF Online Submission system. Please consult the 2016 Funding Guide for further instructions about the application process.

5.2 Eligibility

To qualify for the grant, individual applicants must comply with the following eligibility criteria:

- Applicants must be full-time academic employees, in public universities or research institutions in South Africa, engaged in research in any discipline and, registered in a doctoral program;
- Applicants must be South African citizens; and
- Applicants may not take on any teaching duties during the six- or twelve month period of the sabbatical.

5.3 Selection criteria

Applications will be assessed against the following criteria:

- The research project must be registered with an accredited institution;
- The application must include a project plan which outlines the following:
 - The Project Organisation (Project team members, roles and responsibilities of each member, tasks assigned to each member);
 - Project schedule/Work Breakdown Structure (WBS) with the work divided into manageable activities linked to specific time-bound outcomes; and
 - Project budget (listing activities, costs and motivation towards efficient use of resources).

- Applicants who are current doctoral candidates should be close to completion at the point of application; and
- Applicants must intend to complete the dissertation write-up during the six- or twelve month sabbatical period.

5.4 Screening of project plan

Screening of the project plan will happen on two levels - firstly at the institutional level where institutions are required to conduct initial screening in order to ensure that the project plan forwarded to the NRF carries their endorsement. A second round of screening happens when the project plans are received by the NRF and assessed against eligibility criteria. Applications with project plans that successfully pass this assessment will proceed to the panel review phase.

5.5 Review of the project plan

Project plans that meet the application requirements, following institutional and NRF screening, will be subjected to peer review to assess substantive issues such as technical merit and feasibility and any other pre-determined content criteria. Based on the outcomes of the review process, projects will either be eligible for funding or not.

6. Funding principles

Beyond the selection criteria applied to individual applications, and after the review process the following funding principles will be taken into account when making awards.

6.1 Funding principle: Institution

There are no limits to the number of nominations an institution may submit, bearing in mind the NRF's strategic objective of transforming the academic cohort with respect to the designated groups. Lack of nominations from a given institution, for individuals from designated groups as per the set equity targets, will result in grants being allocated to other institutions instead.

6.2 Funding principle: Demographics

Application selection will be informed by an overall target of awarding 60% of the grants to female applicants and 80% to black (African, Indian, Coloured, Asian) applicants. Institutions must ensure alignment of their nominations with these

demographic targets.

6.3 Types of financial supports

The grant is intended to fund two distinct cost drivers:

- lecturer replacement costs; and
- costs related to completing the dissertation write-up.

Eighty percent of the awarded amount may be spent on lecturer replacement and 20% on costs related to completing the write-up of the doctoral dissertation. Each application must be endorsed by the research office of the relevant institution. Applicants may request funding for a number of items ranging from submission of the dissertation and arrangement of the defence support. With regards to funding requirements, each applicant will indicate projected related costs for the following line items:

- Lecturer replacement;
- Technical support e.g. data analysis;
- Supervisory support;
- Travel and subsistence related to the completion of the doctoral degree;
- Dissertation preparation; and
- Manuscript preparation.

7. Awards and Period of Funding

Two types of awards will be provided based on the length of the sabbatical, namely:

- six-month award at a value of R100 000; and
- twelve-month award at a value of R200 000.

The project funding period will be linked to the applicant's progress. Carry-over of unspent funds will only be permitted under extenuating circumstances e.g. ill-health, and must be motivated in writing.

In all cases, funding will be provided to a single grantee to be used exclusively for the financing of a sabbatical allowing for the completion of a doctoral degree.

8. Reporting

With the view to continuously monitor project performance, the grantees are required to submit project reports. The NRF will use these reports to assess project performance against timeframes and deliverables as indicated in the project work plans. The purpose of reporting is to detect possible issues and to implement corrective measures timeously.

Two reporting periods are envisioned for this initiative so as to comply both with standard NRF reporting practices and the specific reporting expectation provided by DST:

- A report on achievements and expenditure is to be submitted to the NRF within one month from the end of the funding period, detailing the exact use that was made of grant monies provided as well as funds that remain unspent;
- Proof must be provided to the NRF of the submission of a doctoral thesis or dissertation to university authorities for examination, as well as proof of the publication of at least one article in an accredited academic or scientific journal, within one year from completion of the sabbatical leave.

Furthermore, proof of successful completion of the doctoral degree must be submitted to the NRF, upon approval by the degree granting university.