

Research and Innovation insights

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RESEARCH, POSTGRADUATE STUDIES, INNOVATION AND COMMERCIALISATION PORTFOLIO

New CNA position paper guides research, partnerships and policy influence

For the next five years, Unisa's research, partnerships and policy influence will be guided by the university's newly released position paper on the catalytic niche areas.

Unisa's 10 Catalytic Niche Areas:



1. Marine Studies, 2. Aviation and Aeronautical Studies, 3. Automotive, 4. Energy, 5. Space Study and Square Kilometer Array, 6. Fourth Industrial Revolution and Digitalisation, 7. Natural Sciences (Biotechnological studies), 8. Health Studies/Medicine, 9. Feminist, Womanist, Bosadi Theorizations, 10. Student Support and Co-Curricular activities.

This document, consisting of 11 concisely written pages and released in October 2025, stems from the Unisa CNA Research Symposium held on 30 and 31 July 2025. The symposium convened more than 80 leaders from academia, industry, government and civil society to align Unisa's research outputs with the needs of the broader ecosystem.

The position paper consolidates these discussions into an integrated institutional strategy that emphasises interdisciplinary research, industry partnerships and community-centred solutions.

Below follow some of the highlights from the position paper, which is titled "Unisa Catalytic Niche Areas (CNA) Position Paper – Innovating for the future: Integrating technology, sustainability and humanity".

AI and indigenous knowledge systems are among six cross-cutting themes

The position paper identifies six cross-cutting themes from the research symposium. Where possible, these should be considered in the university's research, partnerships and policy influence efforts:

- Innovation and technological transformation: Artificial intelligence (AI), smart grids, drone technologies and digital platforms are enablers of progress in sectors from health to marine science.
- Integration of indigenous knowledge systems (IKS): The blending of traditional and scientific knowledge is key to sustainable innovation. IKS-based approaches were highlighted in two CNAs in particular, namely Marine Studies and Biotechnology.
- Research-industry-government partnerships: Research should be co-created with stakeholders for real-world impact. Collaborative frameworks involving municipalities, state-owned enterprises and the private sector are essential for the success of CNAs.
- Policy and governance reform: Legislative barriers often impede innovation in CNAs such as Energy, Aviation and Aeronautical, and Automotive. This calls for advocacy and evidence-based research to inform regulatory reform.
- Inclusion, gender and equity: Gender equity, social inclusion and the democratisation of knowledge are prerequisites for transformative development. This clearly places the Feminist, Womanist and Bosadi Theorisations CNA at the foreground.
- Youth development and capacity building: Many CNAs highlight the importance of student participation and youth empowerment. Initiatives in 4IR, Energy and the Automotive sector emphasised the need to develop new competencies through curriculum reform and mentorship.

Alignment with 11 sustainable development goals

The CNA framework directly supports 11 of the 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs), establishing Unisa as a key national contributor to global sustainability efforts. The connections between the CNAs and these SDGs are shown in the table below.

Catalytic Niche Areas (CNAs)	Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)
1. Marine Studies	Goal 13: Climate Action Goal 14: Life Below Water
2. Aviation and Aeronautical studies	Goal 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure
3. Automotive	Goal 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure Goal 13: Climate Action
4. Energy	Goal 7: Affordable and Clean Energy Goal 13: Climate Action
5. Space Study and Square Kilometre Array	Goal 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure
6. Fourth Industrial Revolution and Digitalisation	Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth Goal 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure
7. Natural Sciences (Biotechnological studies)	Goal 2: Zero Hunger Goal 3: Good Health and Well-being Goal 12: Responsible Consumption and Production
8. Health Studies/Medicine	Goal 3: Good Health and Well-being
9. Feminist, Womanist, Bosadi Theorisations	Goal 5: Gender Equality Goal 10: Reduced Inequality
10. Student Support and Co-Curricular Activities	Goal 4: Quality Education Goal 10: Reduced Inequality

Key priorities for each CNA

The position paper assigns a theme and key priorities to each and every CNA.

For example, the theme for Marine Studies harnesses technology and IKS for sustainable ocean observation and coastal resilience. The four key priorities linked to this CNA are to integrate AI, drones and low-cost sensors into ocean monitoring; document and embed IKS in coastal management; support inclusive blue economy projects for vulnerable coastal communities; and strengthen multi-sector collaboration for climate adaptation.

The other nine CNAs are also approached in this way, singling out a theme and associated priorities.

University-wide effort required

The CNA position paper has policy and institutional implications for Unisa, especially for governance, funding, the curriculum, partnership development and knowledge transformation (meaning commercialisation and innovation).

For instance, a coordinated governance structure will be needed to conduct governance, do reporting and ensure alignment with Unisa's overall strategic planning. This structure will take the form of a CNA Steering Committee. The Department of Research, Innovation and Commercialisation (DRIC) has been tasked with leading the establishment of the steering committee, which should be in place by the end of 2025.

Next, in early 2026, CNA leads and College representatives will develop research roadmaps for each CNA. Parallel to this, the Teaching and Learning Portfolio will lead the drive to integrate CNA themes into curricula, and the Research Office will launch multi-sector CNA partnerships.

Last but not least, the CNA Research Symposium will continue as an annual event for stakeholder engagement and to keep Unisa at the forefront of innovative research, partnership development and policy influence.

Click [here](#) to read the full text of the position paper on the Unisa CNAs.

If you have any comments on any of our stories – or would like to contribute an article to the next edition of Research & Innovation Insights – please contact the Editor:

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Harnessing generative AI to amplify research

Earlier this year I attended the 2025 conference of the International Network of Research Management Societies (INORMS) in Spain. What struck me was how one topic seemed to dominate the conference programme – generative AI.

This trend is not confined to national and international conferences. Even at Unisa, there are abundant workshops, training sessions and symposia on the topic. There is no doubt that generative AI is developing at an accelerated pace. In order to keep up, researchers need to familiarise themselves with the tools available and how to use them effectively. Those who are unwilling to do so, will not be able to keep up with their colleagues who are embracing the new technologies. It is clear that many of our students are early converts and have already embraced AI tools. The biggest risk is that our academic staff are unable to prepare our students for the future and continue teaching them to live in the past.

Powerful collaborators in the research life cycle

Generative AI, the class of artificial intelligence models capable of producing text, images, code and more, is rapidly reshaping the global research landscape. Tools like ChatGPT, Microsoft Copilot, Gemini, DALL-E and others are now part of everyday academic conversations, not merely as curiosities but as powerful collaborators in the research life cycle. Whether used to brainstorm ideas, summarise literature, refine writing or simulate code, generative AI holds immense promise for accelerating research productivity and broadening creative horizons.

However, as with any powerful new tool, ethical and responsible use is paramount. Generative AI can support but should not substitute scholarly rigour. Researchers must maintain transparency when AI is used in writing or data generation, clearly distinguishing between human and machine contributions. Proper attribution, respect for intellectual property and safeguarding against plagiarism or misinformation are vital. Institutions are increasingly developing guidelines to help navigate these new frontiers, and researchers are encouraged to familiarise themselves with emerging norms.

Clearly, the use of generative AI is not without risks. These systems can reflect bias present in their training data, produce convincing but false outputs (known as hallucinations), or oversimplify complex concepts. Over-reliance on AI-generated content can also erode critical thinking, creativity and disciplinary depth.

On the other side, not engaging with generative AI carries its own risks. Researchers who ignore these tools may fall behind in methodological innovation, miss efficiency gains, or fail to prepare students for AI-integrated academic and professional environments.



Starting points towards AI literacy

To harness the potential of generative AI responsibly, researchers should actively develop AI literacy. This includes understanding how models work, recognising their limitations and critically evaluating outputs. Participating in workshops, enrolling in short learning programmes, collaborating with data scientists and experimenting with tools in low-stakes tasks are all good starting points. Just as statistical software, plagiarism checkers or reference managers became essential skills, so too will competency in using generative AI tools.

Ultimately, generative AI is neither a threat nor a saviour – it is a research accelerator, contingent on the wisdom and integrity of its users. The challenge now is to shape a research culture at Unisa where these tools are used creatively, ethically and inclusively to advance knowledge for the greater good.

Unisa has the best research management department in the SADC for 2025

It's official. Unisa's Department of Research, Innovation and Commercialisation is the best department of its kind in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) for 2025.

This is the significance of the highly prized Organisational Excellence Research Management Award that the university received in September 2025 from the Southern African Research & Innovation Management Association (SARIMA).

"Through innovation, mentorship and integrity-driven initiatives, DRIC continues to elevate Unisa's research ecosystem to new heights," said SARIMA in a LinkedIn post congratulating Unisa on this achievement.

Explaining why DRIC was chosen for the award – one of two prizes awarded to Unisa at SARIMA's 2025 annual conference – the body listed some examples of the "exceptional leadership" the department has shown in advancing research, innovation and researcher development.

These include establishing the Unisa Researcher Development Academy in 2024 as a dynamic digital platform providing mentorship, training and funding support to more than 600 Unisa researchers.

SARIMA praised Unisa's initiatives to empower women researchers, notably the Researcher Development Academy's Chrysalis initiative and the 2025 "She Speaks" women mentorship programme.



Prof Les Labuschagne receiving the Organisational Excellence in Research Management Award.

Unisa was also the only African institution to facilitate the Virtual International Convention for Research Administrators (VICRA) course.

Other noteworthy achievements that earned Unisa the award were the institution's strong increases in the number of NRF-rated researchers, increasing from 253 to 278 in 2025, and the launch of the Research Integrity Ambassadors Programme in 2022.



Leonie Louw receiving the Early Career Excellence award.

Leonie scoops Early Career Excellence award

The second award that SARIMA presented to Unisa in September was the Early Career Excellence in Research Management Award, which went to Leonie Louw, Research Ethics Officer in the Research Integrity Office.

Acknowledging the award as both humbling and inspiring, Leonie said it affirmed the importance of embedding ethics and integrity in research management.

"The award reminds me of our shared responsibility to safeguard the credibility of scholarship," she said. "I look forward to continue supporting Unisa's researchers and students in building a transparent and ethical research culture that can inspire future generations."

Research professor hones his research skills and opens doors for emerging researchers

Step by methodical step, learning everything he could along the way, Research Professor Elijah Baloyi climbed the academic ladder to where he is today.

He began as a Unisa contract lecturer in 2009 for the then Practical Theology Department and, by 2015, became a full professor. Two years later, Prof Baloyi was seconded as a Chair of Department.

"All the steps I have been going through put me in a space to learn and interact with different people, different views, different cultures and different research methods and focus areas," says Prof Baloyi, Research Professor in Practical Theology at the Research Institute for Theology and Religion (RITR).

A C2-rated National Research Foundation researcher, he has published over 70 journal articles and book chapters and is supervising four postdoctoral fellows.

Merging practical theology and gender

His research is on understanding the problems caused by the patriarchal set-up and that have become obstacles to the rights of women in the church and society. He is one of the first researchers to merge practical theology and gender at Unisa.

"There was nothing like that before my arrival, especially with the history of theology having been part of a discipline that is accused of promoting gender disparities due to its conservativeness," says Prof Baloyi, who is also an ordained minister.

Although not limited to it, his research contributes substantively to the Feminist/Womanist/Bosadi Theorisations Catalytic Niche Area (CNA), which provides an African-centred perspective on gender and social justice.

"It has been long that gender-based violence has been a thorn in South African communities, but for me, without seeking traditional ways from indigenous knowledge, it remains difficult to identify and uproot the pandemic. This CNA must not look at things as they appear to be, but instead our precolonial, colonial and apartheid history, which cannot be

separated from what we see today," reflects Prof Baloyi.

Tackling societal issues from an African context through theology

Grateful to God for the research professorship, which he says taught him discipline and versatility in research, Prof Baloyi says it also offers him an opportunity to take a leading role in research, while opening up possibilities for other emerging or upcoming scholars.

"I dislike doing research that only responds to the elite or educated few because problems involving culture are better solved at the grassroots level," he says, adding that this means "getting out where people are".

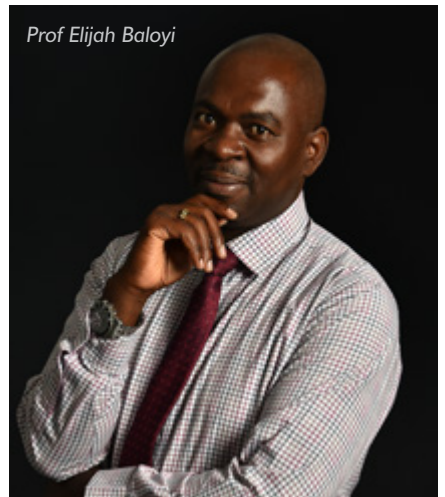
Prof Baloyi has secured an official three-year partnership for Unisa with the Congress of Traditional Leaders in South Africa (CONTRALES), a national organisation that unites traditional leaders across South Africa. Unisa and CONTRALES, through collective community engagement, have arranged webinars, seminars and various other forms of in-person interaction.

"Being a research professor helped me to initiate a team of researchers, the Erosion Research Team, through which I lead 15 emerging members from five African countries to write and publish from my research data."

Blazing trails for black African academics

It was a dream come true when Dr Baloyi simultaneously received his research professorship and a R1 million grant from the John Tempelton Foundation (USA), as well as membership of the Center of Theological Inquiry (CTI), an independent institution at Princeton University. He was the first black African to become a member since the CTI's inception in 1978.

"I was selected with nine other scholars from around the world for this membership, and we were all sponsored to gather and stay at CTI House in Princeton to explore ways to collaborate in theology and psychology for more than six months. This was a great experience for me," he reflects, noting that his six-month stay added to his research



Prof Elijah Baloyi

skill in two ways. First, he experienced interdisciplinarity by working with non-theological disciplines such as sciences, psychology and philosophy. Second, he was part of international collaborations with non-theological mentors and enhanced his knowledge of how to succeed in grant applications.

"In short, I was built by learning from others, as well as by reading and seeking more to understand than to be understood. I think through this experience I can work anywhere in any discipline in the world. Adjusting is the key word."

An enabling support system

Prof Baloyi's research professorship journey has been supported through the Research Professor programme, facilitated by the Directorate Research Support (DRS). This provides targeted support to top-performing Unisa researchers who have demonstrated coherence and focus in their research activities. The DRS has been crucial in assisting Prof Baloyi to increase his research outputs and to build both the university's and his own profile at an international level.

"I cannot imagine where I would have been without the Research Support Directorate, especially Mr Harry Bopape, Dr Retha Visagie and Mrs Carin Niemand and their team. They manage our funding and also listen to my cries whenever I need assistance."

Assessment adviser is the first in her department to obtain a PhD

Education is at the heart of the Unisa experience, not only for students but also for all staff members. Meet Dr Dakalo Monyai, a trendsetter who not only completed her PhD at 35 but also became the first in her department to obtain a doctorate.

"I am hopeful that now, as a PhD graduate, new doors will open, allowing me to contribute more meaningfully, particularly to academic or research-focused spaces where I can apply my skills, passion and qualifications to their full potential," says Dr Dakalo Monyai, a Professional Research Group researcher.

The ever-enthusiastic Dr Monyai, an assessment adviser in the Directorate of Student Assessment Administration, recently received a DPhil in Industrial Psychology and People Management at the University of Johannesburg.

Practical insights for transforming organisations

Dr Monyai's PhD research aimed to develop a behavioural and contextual model of organisational change. The study addressed the under-researched relationship between behavioural variables (such as attitudes, readiness and commitment to change) and contextual variables (such as responsible leadership and organisational culture).

The study offers practical insights for organisations undergoing transformation, especially in technologically evolving environments. By understanding the behavioural and contextual drivers of change commitment, leaders and policymakers can design better change initiatives that engage employees meaningfully, reduce resistance and improve overall organisational performance.

She has already published two academic articles from her doctoral research in an international journal.

"I am currently engaged in exciting research activities under the guidance of my promoter, Professor Jeremy Mitonga-Monga, a former Unisa lecturer whose support and mentorship have been invaluable," she says.

They are collaborating on several academic articles and have already submitted a third manuscript – drawn from the findings of Dr Monyai's PhD study – to an accredited journal for consideration.

Support smoothed her PhD path

Dr Monyai has received research support services from the Professional Research Committee (PRC) at Unisa for her PhD.

"The support provided by the PRC was instrumental in enabling me to successfully complete my qualification. The dedicated time and resources afforded through the PRC allowed me to focus deeply on my research, ultimately contributing to the timely and successful completion of my studies," she said.

"I am especially grateful to Ms Amisha Benode for her support and guidance throughout the application process; her professionalism and kindness made the journey smoother and more manageable."



Dr Dakalo Monyai

Find your support system, stay focused on your purpose

Filled with ambition to do great things, Dr Monyai was selected to participate in the Talent Management Programme, an initiative of Human Resources at Unisa.

"I was fortunate to be part of the programme while completing my PhD. Balancing work, family and studies was one of the most demanding yet meaningful experiences of my life."

In October 2024, while she was awaiting feedback and recommendations from her examiners, she received the wonderful news that she was expecting her second child. "It truly felt like 2024 was a season of blessings and new beginnings," she says.

Her advice to colleagues considering studying towards a PhD is to find their support system, stay focused on their purpose, and never to underestimate their own strength.

DRIC managers make Unisa proud in national and regional advisory roles

Congratulations to Unisa's Ayanda Noma and Dr Retha Visagie, who have been selected for key roles in national and regional bodies promoting research management, innovation and commercialisation.

Ayanda, Director: Directorate Innovation, Technology Transfer and Commercialisation, has been appointed as a member of the National Advisory Council on Innovation's (NACI) Working Committee on Commercialisation.

The NACI advises government on science, technology and innovation, drawing on the work of expert committees, in this case the Working Committee on Commercialisation. As a member of this committee, Ayanda will contribute his formidable knowledge of the innovation and commercialisation landscape within Unisa and, more broadly, South Africa.

"This is great news, congratulations. It is a testimony to your ongoing contribution to the innovation community at large," said Prof Les Labuschagne, Executive Director of the Department of Research, Innovation and Commercialisation (DRIC).

He has also extended his congratulations to Retha, who has been appointed to the 2025 to 2027 committee of the Southern African Research and Innovation Management Association (SARIMA).

This committee is responsible for driving collaboration, capacity building and professionalisation in research management and innovation and technology transfer across the Southern African Development Community.

Retha, manager of Unisa's Research Integrity Office, will serve in the committee's Research Management portfolio, alongside colleagues from Nelson Mandela University, North-West University and the University of the Witwatersrand.



Ayanda Noma, Director: DITC



Dr Retha Visagie, Manager: Research Integrity Office

Decolonising innovation: Indigenous wisdom as catalyst for African solutions



Timed to resonate with South Africa's Heritage Month, the School of Interdisciplinary Research and Graduate Studies (SIRGS) in Unisa's College of Graduate Studies (CGS) hosted its sixth annual Indigenous Epistemologies Seminar Series from 7 to 9 October 2025.

Scholars, practitioners and postgraduate students from across the African continent converged virtually under the theme, "Decolonising innovation: Indigenous wisdom as catalyst for African solutions".

The seminar series not only attracted significant participation from Ethiopia, Ghana, Uganda, Nigeria and South Africa, but it also provided a timely platform for critical dialogue about the role of indigenous knowledge systems in shaping African futures. This reflects growing continental interest in reclaiming and revitalising indigenous epistemologies within academic spaces.

Prof Patric Ngulube of CGS delivered the welcome address, setting a collaborative tone that encouraged delegates to share their expectations and contribute to the unfolding conversations.

This year's seminar series reaffirmed the urgency of decolonising innovation and reimagining African futures through indigenous wisdom. Across the three days of engagement, several critical themes emerged: the need for robust legal protections for indigenous knowledge, the imperative of curriculum transformation at all educational levels, the importance of co-existence rather than subordination in relationships with the Global North, and the recognition that indigenous wisdom represents living innovation rather than historical artefact.

SIRGS remains committed to promoting indigenous epistemologies as vehicles for epistemic freedom and sustainable development. As Heritage Month reminds us annually, indigenous knowledge forms part of our collective heritage knowledge systems that risk being lost if we do not actively promote, protect and centre them in our academic and social institutions.

For a detailed article on the Indigenous Epistemologies Seminar Series, click [here](#).

‘Academic artist’ achieves C2 rating and paves the way for others

In a first for Unisa, visual arts senior lecturer Dr Gwenneth Miller has been awarded a National Research Foundation (NRF) rating based on her creative outputs.



Dr Miller of the Department of Arts and Music went through the same vetting process as any other NRF applicant would and, in June 2025, received the good news that she had been awarded a C2 rating.

As the first researcher at the university to have earned an NRF rating for creative outputs, Dr Miller has set an example to other Unisa academics in creative fields such as fine arts and visual arts, music, theatre, performance and dance, the literary arts, design, film and television.

What is important to note, however, is that applying for an NRF rating via the creative output route is every bit as painstaking as the usual publishing system.

Here is a summary of how Dr Miller, a senior lecturer and practising artist who describes herself as an “academic artist”, went about building the research track record she needed to apply for her rating.

DHET opens up new horizons

The starting point was the new rating pathway that opened up when, six years ago, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) introduced the creative output system. This entails awarding accredited, subsidy-bearing units to universities for their creative outputs.

“The DHET recognised that creative research can also be valuable,” says Dr Miller, whose creative research outputs include artworks, exhibitions, art collaborations, art curatorship and some academic writing, notably publishing an article in the *South African Journal of Art Historians (SAJAH)*, an accredited international journal.

The evidence she submitted to the NRF included all the work that brought her DHET creative output units, consisting of 18.7% of Unisa’s total creative outputs over a five-year period. Collectively, this work consisted of over 70 artworks, some of which have been

exhibited internationally. For example, several works from Dr Miller’s eight-piece “Domestic Matters” exhibitions were displayed in France in 2023.

In addition to her solo exhibitions, she has held 13 group exhibitions with other artists, including fellow Unisa staff and her master’s and doctoral students, with the aim of encouraging others to exhibit.

Dr Miller’s NRF application also covered the many exhibitions she has curated, such as “Uncanny stories” from 2021, presented at the Unisa Art Gallery, and the major Unisa ArtWalk project on the Florida campus (2021 to 2025). Furthermore, she described her contribution to Unisa policy changes aimed at including and acknowledging creative outputs as contributions to research.

How the creative output process works

Dr Miller emphasises that the creative outputs accreditation system is as strenuous as the conventional publishing route. “It mirrors the publishing system and is just as rigorous,” she says.

First, each proposed Unisa submission for subsidy units goes through an intensive internal vetting process and is evaluated by two peer reviewers from other universities. Once submitted, it undergoes a second round of peer review by the DHET’s panel.

Should this process result in the allocation of accredited units, these units carry the same subsidy value as more conventional research outputs.

Additionally, as Dr Miller’s experience shows, accredited creative outputs offer artists, musicians, writers and performers a pathway towards an NRF rating.

To view Dr Miller’s creative outputs, visit the extensive website she has created for her research at <https://www.gwennethmiller.com>.

Practical tips on financial research support: budgets and grants

The Budgets and Grants Office in the Directorate of Research Support plays a key role in ensuring that financial planning, budget compliance and grant funding processes are clear, efficient and aligned with institutional and funder requirements. This support empowers researchers to focus on their research while ensuring good financial governance.

Here are some tips that can assist with navigating financial research processes at Unisa:



How to request a research budget for grant submissions

1. Use the [budget tool](#) provided by the Budgets and Grants Office to ensure all costs are captured correctly and comply with funder and institutional requirements.
2. Submit the draft budget early for review and approval. Ideally, this should be done 10 working days before the funding deadline.
3. Include only eligible costs as per the funder's guidelines. Common ineligible costs include entertainment and personal expenses.

How to claim from a research cost centre

1. Ensure your cost centre is active and linked to your awarded project.
2. Use the correct [claim forms](#) and attach all required supporting documents (invoices, receipts, attendance registers, etc.).
3. Always keep copies of your claims and follow up on progress via your department's administrative channels.

How to ensure smooth postdoctoral fellow payments

1. Submit all required documentation for postdoctoral fellow appointments and renewals at least 6 to 8 weeks in advance of payment.
2. Ensure the approved Postdoctoral Fellowship contract is uploaded and signed off before the first of each month to secure payment processing for the end of the month.
3. Direct queries related to delayed payments to the Budgets and Grants Office, providing the fellow's ID or staff number.
4. Avoid mid-month submissions. Claims and contracts should be finalised before the seventh of each month for processing in the current cycle.

Frequently asked questions from researchers

Q: Can I transfer research funds between cost categories?

A: Only if the funder allows reallocation and the change aligns with project objectives. Contact the Budgets and Grants Office to guide you through this.

Q: Can I include postgraduate support in my grant budget?

A: Yes, if the funding call allows for it. Specify the student level (honours, master's, doctoral) and align with your college's postgraduate funding strategy.

Q: How do I know what expenses are eligible on my grant?

A: Refer to the funder's guidelines and your approved budget. If uncertain, consult the Budgets and Grants Office before incurring costs. Unallowable expenses may have to be covered by the department or researcher.

Q: Why was my claim returned or rejected?

A: Common reasons include missing documents, incorrect cost centre codes, exceeding budget limits, or submitting claims outside the approved project period. We recommend reviewing the claim checklist before submission.

For more information, contact: Mrs Carin Niemand at niemaac1@unisa.ac.za

Smallholder farmers to benefit from senior lecturer's research

Advancing sustainable agricultural practices that improve soil quality, climate resilience, crop productivity and environmental stewardship is a call to action and duty for agricultural scientist and senior lecturer, Dr Mashapa Elvis Malobane. Specialising in soil science and the principles of agronomy, Dr Malobane's research is centred on developing agricultural production systems that preserve soil as a vital natural resource, mitigate the effects of climate change and enhance crop yields for food security and biofuel production.

Committed to generating impactful research outcomes that meet the highest scientific standards, he has extensive experience in collaborating with multidisciplinary teams in implementing research with smallholder farmers, aiming to promote both food security and the conservation of soil productivity and quality across diverse agro-ecological systems.

"My research field is situated at the intersection of sustainable agriculture, land rehabilitation and climate resilience – key components of the Natural Sciences Catalytic Niche Area at Unisa," says Dr Malobane.

He is currently leading a multidisciplinary research project on the application of organic amendments for the carbon sequestration and sustainable cultivation of bioenergy crops like sweet sorghum.



Dr Mashapa Elvis Malobane

Advancing research excellence

An important factor in his line of duty is uplifting communities through engaged scholarship and the development of postgraduate students.

As part of his commitment to advancing research excellence and contributing to South Africa's research and innovation landscape, Dr Malobane applied for and received a Y National Research Foundation (NRF) rating.

He says the NRF rating is an affirming milestone that allows him to benchmark his work nationally and engage with a broader network of scholars. "It recognises the quality and impact of my work as an emerging researcher and motivates me to continue producing high-impact, relevant research that addresses local and global challenges."

This is what he has to say about his NRF rating and the rating process.

Please describe the application process and how you found the process

"The application process was thorough and required significant reflection and documentation of my research outputs, impact, collaborations and future potential. While rigorous, the process was well structured and allowed me to holistically present my academic journey. Support from institutional research offices and colleagues was invaluable, especially in compiling evidence of research quality and outputs."

Why would you say it is important to have an NRF rating?

"An NRF rating serves as an independent validation of research quality, innovation and impact. It enhances the visibility of one's research both nationally and internationally and strengthens opportunities for funding and collaboration. It also serves as a benchmark for career progression and institutional recognition."

What are the benefits of being an NRF-rated researcher?

"Being an NRF-rated researcher enhances academic credibility and national recognition for research excellence, opening doors to increased funding opportunities, collaborative networks and leadership roles in strategic research initiatives. It provides a competitive edge when applying for grants, institutional support and academic promotions. The rating affirms the quality, impact and international standing of one's research outputs, and positions the researcher as a thought leader in their field."

What advice would you give to young emerging scholars wanting to apply for an NRF rating?

"Start early by building a strong publication record, developing a clear research niche, and engaging in collaborative, multidisciplinary research. Document your achievements consistently and seek mentorship from experienced scholars. Most importantly, align your work with pressing societal and developmental needs; it strengthens both the purpose and value of your academic journey."