

**IMPLEMENTING THE OUTCOMES OF A STUDY
ON BUILDING A CADRE OF EMERGING SCHOLARS
FOR HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA**



**UNIVERSITIES
SOUTH AFRICA**

A Proposal for Implementation

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ACRONYMS AND DEFINITIONS

CoP PES COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE FOR POST GRADUATE EDUCATION AND SCHOLARSHIP

DHET DEPARTMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING

DSI DEPARTMENT OF SCIENCE AND INNOVATION

ECA EARLY CAREER ACADEMIC

SECTION 1: BACKGROUND

1.1 BACKGROUND AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

This proposal is informed by the study entitled “*Implementing the Outcomes of a Study on Building a Cadre of Emerging Scholars for Higher Education in South Africa*”. This study was initiated by Universities South Africa (USAf) in 2019/2020 with the support of the Research and Innovation Strategy Group (RISG) and follows on from the findings of two significant studies that were undertaken in recent times, namely:

- *A Study on Building a Cadre of Emerging Scholars for Higher Education in South Africa (2018¹)*
- *Recruitment, Retention and Progression of Black South African Academics (2020²)*

A priority area of engagement for the USAf Research and Innovation Strategy Group (RISG) is transformation and capacity building. As such, the RISG has a keen interest in advancing the development of Early Career Academics (ECAs) and has endorsed the interventions outlined in this proposal.

The study established that some capacity building programmes have been initiated since the Mouton report in 2018. These have been via individual university initiatives, programmes of the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and the National Research Foundation (NRF). However, it was noted in both the study and subsequent discussions (detailed in Annexure 1) of this proposal, that university representatives expressed concern that systems to support Early Career Academics (ECAs) were not entirely adequate. Several common aspects were identified as gaps or needs are outlined in section 1.1.1. below.

Furthermore, the DSI notes that coordination of the various sectoral interventions to support ECAs would be advantageous in furthering the transformation agenda. The specific needs of historically disadvantaged institutions (HDIs) and Universities of Technology (UoTs) must also be prioritised.

1.1.1 Opportunities

Many opportunities to support Early Career Academics (ECAs) were established during the study. These are outlined below, together with the recommended interventions. (See Section 2).

From the first phase Project Report, the following are noted:

- i. Capacity development programmes addressing the needs of early-career scholars exist to a greater or lesser extent in most universities. Some universities of technology and historically disadvantaged universities have only recently introduced support programmes for emerging scholars, and these are less established than those at some

¹ Mouton, J. (2018). Study on Building a Cadre of Emerging Scholars for Higher Education in South Africa. Stellenbosch: CREST.

² DHET (MTT) (2020). Recruitment, Retention and Progression of Black South African Academics. Pretoria: DHET.

historically advantaged institutions. Some HDIs have expressed a need for the development of institutional capacity instead of reliance on other collaborating or supporting institutions.

- ii. It is noted that approaches to supporting emerging academics must be holistic. It should include components addressing learning and teaching, administration and community engagement, and research to enable academic career development.
- iii. The Mouton (2018) and the MTT (2020) reports expressly noted the need for mentorship for emerging academics and recommended a structured, formalised, and accessible mentorship programme. During the Project consultation, most universities indicated that they were aware of the need for mentorships among their emerging scholars, which are not being adequately addressed. In addition, there are recognised challenges in setting up mentorship programmes, in terms of matching mentors and mentees, in finding suitable mentors, addressing power and cultural dynamics, among other aspects. Some less developed institutions expressed concerns regarding the lack of established and experienced academics in their institutions who could serve as mentors. Most participants agreed that a sector-wide coordinated approach would be most helpful to successfully develop and implement mentorship programmes with participants from the whole national spectrum of institutions.
- iv. Developing capacity for postgraduate education and supervision is a high priority. Most universities identified the need to have a greater capacity for high-quality training for postgraduate supervisors. Firstly, the number of academics who are qualified to supervise is a challenge in some institutions, where a relatively small number of academics have doctoral degrees and are therefore eligible to supervise doctoral students. Secondly, the level of expertise and quality of supervision is lacking, and many institutions seek more effective programmes for the training of supervisors. There is a significant need for academic staff to complete doctoral degrees. Universities support this through various interventions within the limitations of available resources and, in many cases, through the DHET SSAUF and UCDP programmes.
- v. In the interests of increasing capacity in the sector for postgraduate education, in general, and for the training of supervisors, specifically, there is broad agreement that it would be advantageous to develop a forum for supervisors – a community of scholarship and practice to support supervisors and to sustain the sector in terms of postgraduate education quality and expertise. This would provide for interaction between peers, for seminars and conferences focussing on all aspects of postgraduate supervision, e.g., models for supervision beyond the traditional apprentice model, supervision in different disciplinary areas.
- vi. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the necessary changes have brought to the fore the need for training on how to teach/train/supervise online, particularly for postgraduate training and supervision. Some institutions expressed their needs for online training, specifically also in relation to postgraduate studies. Other institutions are effectively working with or in the process of utilising online skills training, including diverse means such as podcasts, online workshops, webinars, and online consultation. It is noted that the development of a repository of online resources could allow for

broader access by all institutions, for example, in relation to training for postgraduate supervision and, more broadly, with respect to capacity building for ECAs.

- vii. A clear gap exists for measuring and monitoring the impact of interventions implemented to support academic development. Many universities expressed the view that they are uncertain about the effects of the programmes that they are conducting and do not have effective ways of measuring this impact. At present, there is little capacity or expertise in the sector on how best to measure and monitor the effectiveness and impact of the many academic development interventions that have been developed and implemented, whether by national departments or individual institutions. Related to this, and with respect to workload management (as noted in the MTT report), there is a lack of clear policies on appointment and promotion criteria, institutional expectations of ECAs, and special work conditions, which would facilitate the capacity building and inform career development of ECAs.

SECTION 2: PROPOSED INTERVENTIONS

2.1 MENTORSHIP STUDY AND PLATFORM

The need for mentorship via a nationally coordinated and managed online platform for the mentorship of academic and research scholars throughout South Africa was recommended by universities. Such an initiative would need to be evidence-based, and as such, the first part of this intervention would be a study on mentorship to review the current programmes in place, and what can be learnt from these. Therefore, this intervention will have two parts a) a short study on mentorship, and b) the platform.

Subject to the requirements of the POPIA and other relevant criteria, it is envisaged that the platform would provide a safe and enabling environment for ECAs seeking mentorship to contact and establish working partnerships with senior academics, researchers and scholars who are willing to support the development of ECAs through online mentorship and support. This will be open to all South African public universities. Interest to participate from international mentors would be favourably considered.

2.1.1 The Concept

This concept will be further informed and refined by the study on mentorship. However, the current recommendations are outlined below.

An online and searchable platform where:

- Mentors would be invited to voluntarily provide information about themselves and their academic interests (CV, research interests, institution, experience...).
- Mentees - ECAs and postdocs - seeking mentorship could search for suitable mentors.
- ECAs can make contact with a potential mentor and explore the possibilities for setting up a mentorship arrangement.
- Registration on the website would be monitored for record-keeping.

- Admission could be limited to members of South African universities.
- Feedback could be requested from users.
- The communication between Mentor and Mentee would be recorded in the database.
- Mentees and Mentors would voluntarily be registered on the site.
- The identity of the mentee and mentor would be recorded and monitored.

Mentees would search based on their needs and preferences

- Mentees would contact the Mentors via the site.
- The host could track the number of interactions.
- Feedback could be requested from Mentee and Mentor.

Ideally, there could be an option for ECAs to request assistance in finding a mentor.

2.1.1. Implementation

It is envisaged that this platform could be coordinated and maintained centrally with voluntary participation by established academic scholars willing to act as mentors and access offered to ECAs who are seeking mentors. The information and interactions will need to be managed with appropriate confidentiality and protection of personal information.

It is envisaged that a professional service provider will be engaged to develop the necessary technical platform. Some further research and consultation with universities is recommended, to develop a deeper understanding of the needs of ECAs and institutions

In the establishment of this platform, there is an opportunity to collaborate with scholarly societies whose membership includes experienced scholars who would be interested in offering mentorship, for example, the Academy of Sciences of South Africa (ASSAf) and the Royal Society of South Africa (RSSAf).

2.2. ONLINE RESOURCES FOR ACADEMIC CAPACITY BUILDING – A ‘NATIONAL TOOLBOX’

It is proposed that USAf invites universities to participate in setting up a coordinated national resource database of training modules, frameworks, and programmes which they would be prepared to share, and the resources would then be accessed by all institutions on a collaborative basis. This will save the duplication of effort involved in universities individually developing new capacity building programmes and will promote collaboration and cooperation between institutions in building the national ‘cadre’ of early career academics.

2.2.1. The Concept

A searchable online repository/platform where ECAs can access:

- An academic capacity development resource database of accessible national research skills development programmes and modules, including -
 - A resource index, linking to a wealth of open-access knowledge and information; and
 - Mapping of relevant research and academic resources, presented in categorised and searchable form.

The repository will provide access to:

- Research support tools - shared institutional multi-media content
- Learning tools - Online modules and MOOCs for research skills development
- Benchmarking tools - such as digital literacy testing
- Skills development tools - such as academic writing skills, scholarly communication, time management, etc

2.2.2. Implementation

Universities will be requested to indicate which (open access) resources they have and would be prepared to share for use in other universities' capacity development for ECAs and enter an MoU. The repository will require management, updating and maintenance, to be managed through a portal, and staffed by a dedicated resource.

The repository will be accessible by members of South African universities. Users will register to use the repository, and the site will have the capacity to monitor usage. Quality assurance will be provided by establishing a Steering Group that would assess the suitability of resources regularly.

2.3. A SYSTEM FOR MONITORING THE IMPACT OF ACADEMIC SUPPORT INTERVENTIONS ESTABLISHED TO SUPPORT EARLY-CAREER ACADEMICS

The proposal is that a project is commissioned to develop systems and metrics based on measurable indicators, which could be made available across the sector. This project will need to be executed by suitably specialised experts with skills in developing metrics and indicators and a deep understanding of academic capacity development. The system should include the coordinated collection of data that might then be made accessible to USAf, DHET and DSI.

2.3.1. The Concept

This online system will enable universities to monitor the effectiveness of their capacity building programmes. It will be based on set criteria, aligned metrics, and indicators developed in consultation with key stakeholders in the sector and universities. For example, collaboration with the IT Directors Forum. It will integrate with and optimise existing data sources already in place with the DHET and NRF.

- The criteria will be those relevant to career progress for ECAs, such as
 - Completion of doctoral degree
 - Appointment to academic position/promotion
 - Academic progress – publications, postgraduate student supervision etc
 - Mentorship opportunities taken
- Participating universities will be able to use the system by accessing the instrument online and inputting data for their programmes
- Aggregated national data will become available

- The system will need to be operated over the long term to enable monitoring of ECA progress.

2.3.2. Implementation

Further consultation with universities will be necessary to refine criteria and needs taking into account consideration of systems or programmes which are already in place elsewhere. A Terms of Reference will be developed. A call for proposals from service providers and/or discussion with possible partners will establish a project team to develop the system. Hosting arrangements will be determined. It is envisaged that the role of the DSI/NRF in the longer-term management of the system will be imperative. The solution, once developed, will be presented to universities for evaluation. After the completion of a final version of the system, the system can be provided to universities for implementation. Aggregation of data on the system will enable national trends to be monitored.

2.4. A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE ON POSTGRADUATE EDUCATION AND SCHOLARSHIP

A national Community of Practice on Postgraduate Education and Scholarship (COP PES) has been proposed and supported by the USAf Research and Innovation Strategy Group (RISG). The USAf Board subsequently approved this at its meeting on 25 June 2021. Funding for the convening of this structure will be made available from USAf membership fees. Still, funding for specific projects and initiatives will need to be raised and is included in the proposed budget below.

The CoP PES will focus on various aspects of postgraduate education and scholarship, including, as examples, training of supervisors, online postgraduate supervision, teaching and learning at higher degree levels, advocacy in matters relating to postgraduate education, and coordination of national activities such as conferences, colloquia, workshops, and seminars. The CoP will provide a national platform for discussion, interaction, and recommendations.

In summary, the objectives of the CoP PES are:

- To establish a community of scholarship and practice in postgraduate education.
- To support both individual and institutional skills development in postgraduate education and scholarship.
- To support collaboration and collegial engagement amongst peers.
- To contribute to the development of trans- and multi-disciplinary institutional research practices in institutions.
- To foster commitment from institutions to partner on the sharing of resources and skills
- To bring together several national programmes which have a bearing on postgraduate training (for example, those currently hosted by the NRF and the DHET SSAUF).

The CoP will comprise: A Steering group (coordinated through USAf), Institutional representatives, and invited experts.

Implementation will involve:

- A programme of regular interaction that will contribute to strengthening the quality of postgraduate supervision within universities.
- Development of a platform for sharing information on activities and resources.
- Determining how to address diverse general and institutional needs through workshops, colloquia, conferences, training sessions, external support from service providers, resource development, etc.
- Sharing of best practices and established benchmark programmes.

SECTION 3: IMPLEMENTATION PLAN FRAMEWORK - TIMELINES AND BUDGET

This section indicates

- (1) a note regarding platform hosting options;
- (2) the steps necessary for the implementation of each of the recommended interventions and associated timelines; and
- (3) budget estimates for each intervention.

3.1. PLATFORM HOSTING ARRANGEMENTS

Each of the three online interventions will require a platform through which they can be hosted and accessed. At present, this is under discussion with USAf associates and technical advisers. The design of the Monitoring System is under discussion with CREST.

3.2. TIMELINES

3.2.1. Mentorship Platform (Year 1)

	Item	Timeframe	Duration
1	Study: Review of mentoring systems and approaches.	August – September 2021	2 months
2	Consultation with the sector and establishment of an advisory committee. Invitation to academics, members of learned societies and academic organisations to collaborate and participate.	October – November 2021	2 months
3	Design a mentorship model and corresponding technical requirements and resources in consultation with key stakeholders.	January – February 2022	2 months
4	Develop and test the platform (back end and front end).	March – May 2022	3 months
5	Recruitment drive.	March – June 2022	2 months
6	Launch the platform.	July 2022	1 month
7	Maintenance and ongoing operation.	August 2022 – July 2023	12 months

3.2.2. Online Academic Capacity Development Resource platform – a ‘National Toolbox’ (Year 1)

	Item	Timeframe	Duration
1	Further research and consultation with the sector, and establishment of an advisory committee	August 2021	1 month
2	Inventory of capacity building programmes and resources universities are willing to share and MOUs, obtaining agreement and protecting intellectual property as necessary	August – October 2021	3 months

3	Design concept and corresponding technical requirements and resources in consultation with key stakeholders.	January – February 2022	2 months
4	Develop and test the platform (back end and front end) in consultation with custodian.	February – March 2022	2 months
5	Mapping of already available online and shared resources	March – May 2022	3 months
9	Launch of the platform.	June 2022	1 month
10	Operation and ongoing maintenance	July 2022	1 month

3.2.3. Monitoring system (Year 2)

	Item	Timeframe	Duration
1	Further research and consultation with universities as to criteria and needs, and consideration of systems already in place elsewhere	September – December 2022	4 months
2	Terms of Reference and call for proposals from service providers	January 2023	1 month
3	Commissioning of a project team & technical requirements	February - March 2023	1 month
4	Development & testing and pilot of system	April - June 2023	3 months
5	Completion of a final version of the system and provision to universities for implementation.	July 2023	1 month
6	Operation and maintenance	August 2023	1 month

3.2.4. Community of Practice on Postgraduate Education (CoP PES)

	Item	Timeframe	Duration
1	Consultation with the sector and establishment of a Steering Committee	August 2021	1 month
2	Further consultation with universities as to criteria and needs	September 2021	1 month
3	Development of a Terms of Reference	September 2021	1 month
4	Implementation	October 2021	1 month

