

# POLICY BRIEF

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## Fostering research excellence in historically disadvantaged institutions: Policy interventions

### Key messages

- Historically Disadvantaged Institutions (HDIs) face structural barriers that limit their ability to achieve research excellence, including inadequate funding, limited access to research infrastructure, and reduced participation in high-impact research initiatives.
- Addressing these challenges requires targeted policy interventions that go beyond funding allocations to include mentorship programmes, research capacity development, and structured career pathways for HDI researchers.
- Implementing a dedicated framework to support HDIs, ensuring equitable access to research funding, leadership opportunities, and global academic networks, should be prioritised.
- Collaboration between government, funding agencies, and HDI leadership is essential to ensure that policies are aligned and effectively implemented to drive sustainable research excellence.

### Who should act?

- National Research Foundation (NRF): Develop and implement targeted funding instruments, mentorship initiatives, and strategic research programmes to strengthen HDI research excellence.
- Government ministries (e.g., DHET, DSTI): Ensure that

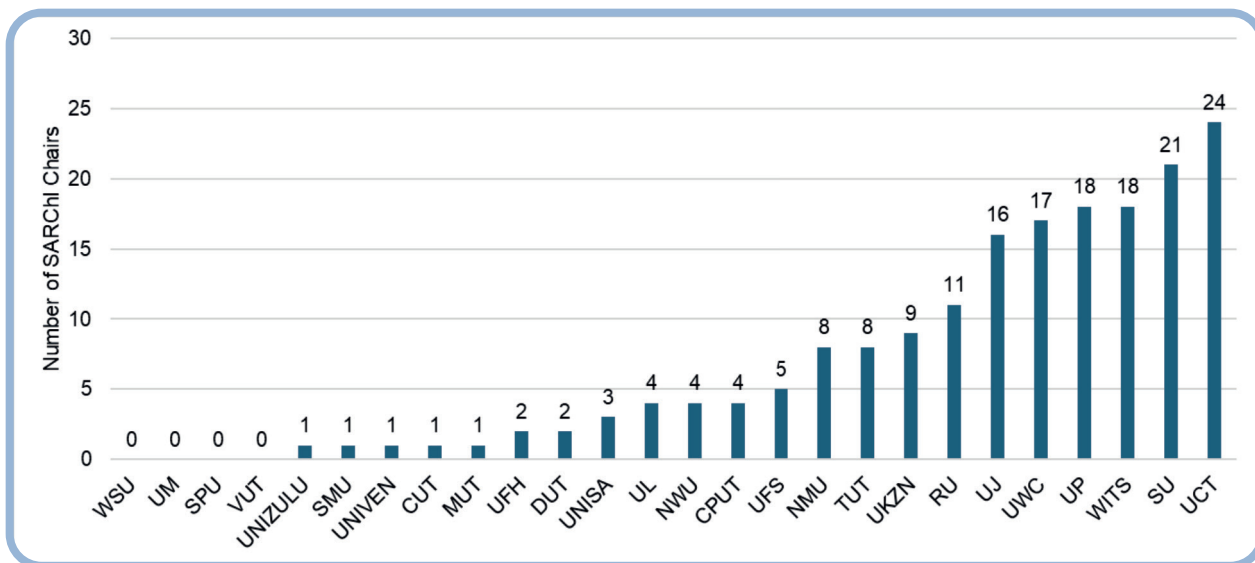
national research and higher education policies prioritise HDI research development, providing structural and financial support beyond traditional funding models.

- HDI leadership: Establish internal mechanisms to improve research productivity, including faculty development initiatives, research management support, and stronger engagement with funding agencies.

### Introduction

The STI Decadal Plan highlights the need to improve the research capacity of historically marginalised institutions (HDIs) to achieve equity and excellence in the South African higher education sector. In response, the Department of Science, Technology and Innovation (DSTI) and the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) are implementing the HDI Development Programme, which supports the development of student, staff and infrastructure. This initiative aligns with the goals of the National Research Foundation (NRF), particularly increasing the presence of South African Research Chairs Initiative (SARChI) Chairs in HDIs to strengthen institutional research capacity. However, the current distribution of SARChI Chairs remains skewed, with traditional universities hosting significantly more chairs than HDIs (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Distribution of SARChI Chairs across higher education and research institutions**



While expanding the number of SARChI Chairs at HDIs is a positive step, without a comprehensive understanding of institutional constraints, these efforts may prove ineffective. Strengthening SARChI participation in HDIs requires a critical evaluation of application and selection processes to identify systemic barriers. Key challenges include under-resourced research offices that limit grant acquisition and project management capacity, limited mentorship opportunities, restricting the career progression of early career researchers, and institutional barriers that hinder associate professors from advancing to SARChI positions (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Challenges faced by HDIs that can impact their ability to grow and compete with research-intensive institutions**



These factors significantly impact the competitiveness of HDIs, preventing them from fully benefiting from national funding opportunities. Addressing these barriers requires structured programmes that focus on institutional capacity development. One such initiative is the United States-South Africa Higher Education Network, which fosters collaboration between an HDI, a historically advantaged university, and a U.S. institution (DSI, 2021). This programme aims to increase the percentage of PhD-qualified staff in HDIs, addressing the well-documented shortage of supervisory and research capacity (Cloete et al., 2015; DHET, 2022). Additionally, strengthening international partnerships in doctoral and research training will improve the global networks of HDIs, ensuring their competitiveness and sustainability in research.

Despite these efforts, systemic barriers continue to limit the impact of SARChI Chairs on HDIs. Progress has been made through initiatives that come from the different institutions, including the NRF, DHET, and DSTI (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Institutional interventions in supporting HDIs to enhance research capabilities**

INSTITUTION	INTERVENTION
<b>NRF</b>	The Decadal Plan SARChI HDI Call and the establishment of the University Programme and Collaborations Department
<b>DHET</b>	The Sibusiso Bengu Development Programme (SB-DP) under the DHET, aimed at improving academic career pipelines at HDIs
<b>DSTI</b>	Ring-fenced funding for SARChI, Centres of Excellence (CoEs), research infrastructures, and international collaborations to boost HDI research production

The STI Decadal Plan has also advocated for the revision of the SARChI and CoE policies, introducing compulsory succession planning and a mentorship indicator to track emerging researchers. Although these measures promote equity, they do not fully address the under-representation of SARChI Chairs in HDIs, many of which still have few or no SARChI appointments (see Figure 1). Simply redistributing existing opportunities will not suffice – what is needed is a strategic and targeted institutional development approach to enable HDIs to compete effectively with research-intensive institutions.

Addressing these gaps requires a structured institutional support system, rather than focusing solely on individual SARChI appointments. Although initiatives, such as the Future Professors Programme (FPP) under the DHET, contribute to succession planning, their direct impact on SARChI progression remains unclear. A comprehensive and integrated approach is needed, incorporating:

- targeted institutional support for research management and faculty development
- capacity building programmes to improve supervisory and leadership skills
- cross-departmental collaboration between the DHET and the DSTI to ensure policy alignment and sustainable HDI support.

The NRF has already taken steps in this direction, as evidenced by the Universities Programme and Collaborations department and the Strategic Investments, Innovation, and Impact (SIII) department, which hosts SARChI and CoEs. In particular, an HDI-targeted SARChI call was introduced to increase HDI participation, demonstrating a deliberate effort to bridge the research excellence gap.

Moving forward, the NRF's strategic interventions present a unique opportunity to implement a collaborative, cross-departmental approach to HDI development. By aligning efforts across NRF units and nurturing stronger engagement with DSTI, a coordinated framework can be established to strengthen research capacity at HDIs. This approach will not only enhance the impact of the SARChI Chairs but also position HDIs as key contributors to South Africa's national and regional research agendas. This intervention aligns with the NRF's broader mandate to promote equity and inclusivity, using SARChI as a catalyst for sustainable research ecosystems within HDIs.

## Research evidence

The HDIs in South Africa continue to face systemic inequities that hinder their ability to achieve research excellence. Research and policy reports have consistently highlighted disparities in funding, international collaborations, and re-

search output between HDIs and historically advantaged institutions. Addressing these disparities through targeted policy interventions is essential to promote a more equitable research ecosystem.

The NRF Vision 2030 outlines a commitment to transformation and inclusivity but lacks specific mechanisms to enhance HDIs' participation in international collaborations. According to the NRF Annual Report (2022), only 15% of NRF-funded international partnerships involve HDI, highlighting a critical gap in policy implementation. Strengthening international collaborations is vital, as increased global engagement enhances research visibility and improves researchers' prospects for securing prestigious positions, such as the SARChI Chairs. The DSTI and the DHET along with their respective agencies must coordinate efforts to integrate HDIs into international research networks. This strategic alignment will increase exposure, enhance institutional credibility, and improve opportunities to secure research-intensive positions.

## Persistent funding disparities

Research has consistently shown that HDIs receive disproportionately low levels of funding compared to HDIs. Cloete et al. (2015) found that over 60% of NRF research funding is concentrated in traditional universities, while HDIs receive less than 10%. This funding imbalance restricts HDIs' ability to invest in research infrastructure, attract leading academics, and engage in global partnerships. Although the STI Decadal Plan has introduced funding reforms to support HDIs, financial investment alone is insufficient to transform institutional research capacities. A holistic approach, including enhanced mentorship, policy alignment, and institutional development, is required to address structural challenges at HDIs.

## Limited international reach

International research collaborations contribute significantly to research excellence, yet HDIs remain under-represented in global partnerships. The 2022 South African Higher Education Report indicates that only 5% of HDI academics participate in international research collaborations, compared to 25% of academics from historically advantaged institutions (DHET, 2022). This disparity reinforces institutional isolation and limits knowledge exchange opportunities. A Southern African Regional Universities Association (SARUA) survey (2023) found that HDIs engaged in international collaborations reported a 30% increase in research output over five years, underscoring the transformative potential of strategic partnerships.

## Policy alignment with global and regional frameworks

Despite these challenges, there are significant opportunities

within the framework of global and regional policy frameworks. The African Union's Agenda 2063 and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide strong policy foundations for enhancing research excellence at HDIs. SDG Goal 9 specifically emphasises the need to enhance scientific research and innovation in developing countries, aligning with South Africa's national objectives for HDI transformation.

Empirical evidence demonstrates the impact of targeted collaborations:

- The Pan-African University (PAU) has facilitated continent-wide joint research projects on climate resilience, resulting in over 1 200 citations in the past five years (PAU Research Output Report, 2023).
- A collaboration between the University of Limpopo and Makerere University has led to the successful deployment of drought-resistant crops in local communities (Makgopa and Nyathi, 2020).
- NRF 2022 funding reports show that projects involving South-South collaborations received higher social impact ratings (4.2/5) compared to Global North collaborations (3.8/5) (NRF, 2022).

Research has shown that there are indeed disparities when it comes to the current numbers. There are disparities in funding, research collaborations, and infrastructure, emphasising the urgency of policy interventions (see Figure 3). These examples highlight the transformative potential of strategic collaboration and reinforce the need for coordinated government-led interventions to enhance HDI research

excellence. Aligning national policies with global frameworks will ensure that HDIs are better positioned to contribute meaningfully to South Africa's research agenda.

## Recommendations

To ensure the equitable participation of HDIs in research excellence, a structured and strategic approach is required. The following recommendations focus on enhancing institutional capacity, improving policy alignment, and ensuring long-term sustainability for HDIs in the research landscape.

1. Develop a cross-cutting framework to strengthen institutional capacity and research infrastructure at HDIs.
2. Revision of current frameworks to prioritise HDIs through mandatory allocations, equitable evaluation criteria, and succession planning mechanisms.
3. Develop a national research leadership pipeline policy to create structured career progression pathways for emerging researchers at HDI.
4. Integrate research-intensive support into existing HDI development programmes within the different ministries and institutions.
5. Develop a research collaboration policy to enhance international partnerships for HDIs and increase their participation in global research networks.

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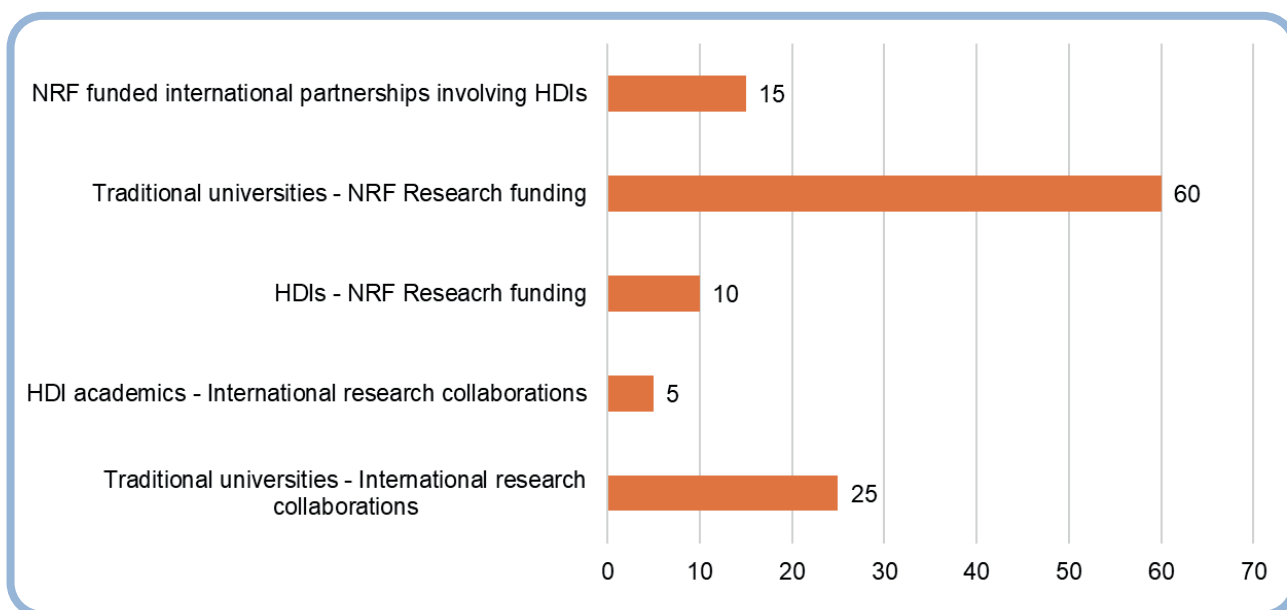
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**Figure 3: Comparative analysis of HDI and traditional universities for collaborations and research funding**



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