

A person with dark curly hair and glasses is focused on writing in a notebook. They are wearing a white shirt and blue suspenders. A white cup of coffee with a latte design sits on a saucer on the wooden table in front of them. The background is softly blurred, showing other people in a similar setting.

REPORT

RESEARCH GRANT WRITING TRAINING



science, technology
& innovation

Department:
Science, Technology and Innovation
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



HSRC
Human Sciences
Research Council

Date:

21 – 22 September 2026

Venue/Platform:

Microsoft Teams

Facilitators and speakers:

Shirin Yousuff Motala, Dr Andrea Juan, Carolina Roscigno, Emanuel Ramphele, Carla Pheiffer, Dr Bongiwe Monica Mncwango, Nkateko Penelope Chauke, Dr Thandeka Mdletshe, Dr Angelique Wildschut, Dr Adam Cooper, Dr Alude Mahali, Jan Phalane – NRF and Brenda Isabel, Governance Hub Africa, Kenya

Target Group:

Early Career Researchers, Young African

1. Background

The Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) operates within an increasingly competitive research funding environment, where researchers are required to develop high-quality, innovative and impactful research proposals that respond to funder priorities and demonstrate clear value for money. Early Career Researchers (ECRs), in particular, require continued capacity development to strengthen their ability to identify appropriate funding opportunities, interpret funder requirements, develop compelling research ideas and translate these ideas into competitive grant proposals.

In response to this need, the Strategic Partnerships and External Capacity Development (SPECD) unit coordinated a two-day Research Grant Writing Training for HSRC ECRs. The training formed part of broader institutional efforts to strengthen research funding capacity, improve the quality of funding applications and support the sustainability of the HSRC's research portfolio. The training explored the key components of successful grant writing, including identifying funding opportunities, understanding funder requirements, developing research ideas, articulating significance and impact, developing competitive proposals and preparing realistic and well-aligned budgets.

2. Purpose

The primary purpose of the Research Grant Writing Training was to strengthen the grant-writing capabilities of HSRC Early Career Researchers and enhance their readiness to pursue competitive research funding opportunities.

Objectives:

- Understand the specific grant-making exposure, constraints and support needs of HSRC ECRs through a brief pre-training survey, supporting the Strategy's emphasis on capacity development and skills development.
- Build practical skills in identifying funding opportunities and interpreting donor or agency requirements.
- Strengthen the ability to develop fundable problem statements, objectives, methodologies, workplans, budgets and impact narratives.
- Increase ECR readiness to participate in multidisciplinary proposal teams aligned with HSRC strategic priorities and the Act's mandate to foster research collaboration, networks and institutional linkages.
- Create a realistic pathway from training to proposal development, mentoring, submission and post-submission learning.
- Improve the quality and number of ECR contributions to local and international grant applications over time.

3. Alignment with HSRC Strategic Priorities

The training contributes to the HSRC's strategic priorities by strengthening institutional research capacity and supporting the mobilisation of resources for research.

The initiative contributes particularly to the following strategic areas:

- **Research Excellence**

The training supports researchers in developing stronger research proposals that demonstrate

methodological rigour, relevance, innovation and potential impact.

- **Resource Mobilisation and Funding**

Developing researchers' grant-writing capabilities contributes to the HSRC's ability to diversify and increase its research funding base through competitive external funding opportunities.

- **Capacity Development**

The initiative strengthens the professional development of ECRs and supports the development of the next generation of HSRC researchers.

- **Strategic Partnerships**

Effective grant development frequently requires collaboration with universities, government institutions, research organisations, international partners and other stakeholders. The training therefore supports the development of collaborative approaches to research funding.

- **Research Impact**

By strengthening researchers' ability to clearly articulate the significance, relevance and expected outcomes of their research, the training contributes to improving the potential societal and policy impact of HSRC research.

4. Alignment with the HSRC Mandate

The training supports the HSRC's mandate to undertake, facilitate and support research that contributes to understanding and addressing social, economic and developmental challenges in South Africa and beyond. Research grant writing is an important enabling capability within this mandate, because competitive research funding allows researchers to undertake high-quality research, generate evidence and contribute to policy and societal development. This initiative also supports the institutional development of research capacity by equipping ECRs with practical skills that enable them to develop sustainable research programmes and access external funding. Through improved grant-writing capabilities, ECRs are better positioned to translate research priorities into fundable projects and strengthen the HSRC's contribution to evidence-informed policy and decision-making.

5. Overview of the Webinar

The Research Grant Writing Training was conducted over two days, from 21–22 September 2026 and brought together HSRC Early Career Researchers for an intensive learning and practical proposal writing and budget development. The attendance for day 1 = 67 and day 2 = 58. Presenters included internal HSRC Researchers and Professionals from SPECD, P&C, CGI, Impact Evaluation units, EEE & COO divisions, National Research Foundation, Governance Hub Africa, Kenya.

The programme covered key stages of the grant development process, including:

- Understanding the research funding landscape.
- Identifying and scanning appropriate funding opportunities.
- Understanding and evaluating funder requirements and eligibility criteria.
- Distinguishing between mandatory requirements and evaluation criteria.
- Developing and refining research ideas.
- Moving from a research idea to a fundable concept.
- Articulating the significance and relevance of the proposed research.
- Demonstrating innovation and feasibility.
- Developing appropriate research teams and partnerships.
- Articulating research impact and expected outcomes.

- Developing competitive grant proposals.
- Understanding the principles of effective grant budgets.
- Applying practical approaches to proposal development.

The training incorporated practical exercises and discussions to enable participants to allow the session to be interactive. A diagnostic approach was also incorporated to better understand participants' existing knowledge and grant-writing needs.

6. Strategic Framing

The training was strategically positioned as more than a once-off capacity development intervention. It forms part of a broader institutional approach to strengthening the HSRC's research funding pipeline and grant-development ecosystem.

The Research Grant Writing Training, therefore, provided an important foundation for developing a sustainable pipeline of researchers who are capable of independently identifying opportunities and developing competitive funding proposals.

Going forward, the training will be complemented by targeted interventions such as:

- Formation of the Evaluation Committee.
- Proposal writing and budget development clinics.

This approach would help transition research grant writing from learning to practical application.

7. Workshop Outcomes

While we did not formally measure outcomes, participant responses across the two days were encouraging. By the end of the workshop, we believe the following outcomes were observed, which are indicative of learning, not proof of it.

Knowledge and orientation

- Participants developed a clearer working understanding of the research funding landscape, including how different funders operate and where opportunities are typically found.
- Participants could distinguish between mandatory eligibility requirements and evaluation criteria, a distinction that appeared to sharpen between day one and day two as they applied it to a real case study

Concept development

- Participants moved from broad research interests towards fundable concepts, with several articulating a discernible shift in how they framed the value and relevance of their work.
- Participants recognised the importance of assembling appropriate teams and partnerships and began identifying the gaps in their own current arrangements.

Proposal drafting and understanding budgeting principles

- Participants engaged substantively with the practical mechanics of proposal development, including the logic behind effective budgets rather than simply the arithmetic.
- Participants applied their understanding to critically evaluate a proposal with exercise outputs.

Process outcomes

- The experiential format appeared to generate high levels of participation, suggesting that the practical exercises were an effective vehicle for learning compared with lecture-style delivery.
- Participants left with tangible draft material, presentations, guidelines, eligibility assessments that they can continue developing beyond the workshop.
- There was a clear expressed appetite for further training, indicating that participants saw a gap between their current capability and where they want to be.

The Research Grant Writing Training represents an important capacity-development intervention aimed at strengthening the HSRC's ability to compete for external research funding. By equipping ECRs with practical skills in opportunity identification, concept development, proposal writing, budgeting and impact articulation, the initiative contributes to both individual researcher development and broader institutional resource mobilisation.

The training should be viewed as the beginning of an ongoing grant-development support process rather than a standalone intervention. Continued mentorship, proposal clinics, and targeted technical support will be important in converting the knowledge gained into actual grant applications, successful funding outcomes and research impact.

References

- Human Sciences Research Council Act, No. 17 of 2008, especially ss. 3(a), 3(b), 3(d), 3(f), 3(g) and 4(1)(e).
- Department of Science and Innovation. 2022. Science, Technology and Innovation Decadal Plan 2022-2032, especially pp. 19-20, 23 and 55.
- Human Sciences Research Council. 2025a. HSRC Strategic Plan 2025-2030, especially pp. 17, 36, 38 and 39.
- Human Sciences Research Council. 2025b. HSRC Annual Performance Plan 2025-2026, especially pp. 39-40 and 91-92; HSRC LeaPPT+S Indicators 2025-2030, especially indicators 4.4, 4.6, 5.1, 5.2 and 5.3.



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