How the NRF Rating process for individual researchers actually works

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- Stages of the process (selected).
- How panels deliberate.
- ‘Take home’ lessons.

Stages in the process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Application submitted.</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Confirmation of panel assignment. Possible issues for researchers whose work doesn’t neatly fit a single panel. (e.g. Gender studies.)</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Prioritising ‘nominated’ reviewers.</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Identification of ‘independent’ reviewers.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Screening of reports, seeking additional reports. Aiming for six worthwhile reports, balanced between ‘nominated’ and ‘independent’.</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>‘Rating’ the reports. Determining the ‘rating’ indicated by individual reports. The ‘rating’ implied by one report is different to the overall rating of the researcher.</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Determine rating at panel meeting (with assessor, and chair). May or may not produce consensus. ‘A’ and ‘P’ ratings only nominated by panel.</td>
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How panels deliberate

- Panellists’ own judgement plays no direct role.
- The application plays at best a minor role. (At this stage!)
- By far the most important thing is the specific content of the reviewer reports.

What panels do is interpret what is said in the set of reports judged useable. This interpretation is constrained both by explicit rules, and implicit factors.

The main explicit constraints arise from the fact that the process is focused on the quality and impact of research outputs during a 5 to 8 year time window, given (especially) the definitions of the rating categories, and the panel-specific criteria for ‘considerable international recognition’.

‘Take home’ lessons

- Make sure that your ‘five best’ outputs are as easily available as possible. (You can, and absolutely should, submit them as PDF files, which will be made available to reviewers.)
- Your application is an argument. Write it with an eye to the explicit language of the rating categories, and the ‘considerable international recognition’ criteria used by the panel that will process your application. (This can help guide both the reviewers, and the panel members.)
- Learned societies have an interest in reviewing the ‘considerable international recognition’ criteria used by relevant panels, and offering suggestions.
- Consider not putting obviously appropriate reviewers on your list of nominations. (This may sound counter-intuitive, but it makes sense.)
- Consider using your application to draw attention to suitable reviewers without explicitly nominating them.
Appendix 1: Definitions of Rating Categories (selected)

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<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Researchers who are unequivocally recognised by their peers as leading international scholars in their field for the high quality and impact of their recent research outputs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>A2</td>
<td>A researcher in this group is recognised by the overriding majority of reviewers as a leading scholar in his/her field internationally for the high quality and impact (either wide or confined) of his/her recent research outputs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Researchers who enjoy considerable international recognition by their peers for the high quality and impact of their recent research outputs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B1</td>
<td>All reviewers concur that the applicant enjoys considerable international recognition for the high quality and impact of his/her recent research outputs, with some of them indicating that he/she is a leading international scholar in the field.</td>
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</table>

(Similar at boundary of B3 (= ‘most’) and C1 (= ‘some’) for reviewers finding ‘considerable international recognition’.)

Appendix 2: Rating the reports

(Adapted from generic panel instructions.)

1 Excellent report. Reviewer gives a critical analysis of the recent research outputs and comments critically on the quality of the research outputs of the last eight years as well as the international/national standing of the applicant. Reviewer has read the most important outputs of the last eight years.

1/2 Good report. […]

2 Satisfactory report. […]

2/3 Partially usable report. […]

3 Unsatisfactory report (including inappropriate reviewers). Reviewer has not read any of the most important outputs of the last eight years. Report by reviewer is a testimonial, or superficial, or contains sweeping and/or unsubstantiated statements, or over-generalises, or provides irrelevant information, or fails to focus on last eight years.

Appendix 3: ‘Considerable International Recognition’ (examples)

Historical Studies

Historians in South Africa can be said to enjoy international recognition if their work has had an impact beyond the southern African region. This would involve their work having been noticed, discussed and/or used by scholars elsewhere, for example for teaching or research purposes. While international publications are not the only benchmark for assessing international recognition, publishing in leading international journals and/or with respected international publishers will usually be the basis for a scholar’s claim to have found an international audience.

Biochemistry, Molecular and Cell Biology (BIOC)

International recognition is reflected by the following (roughly in order of decreasing weight):
- Number of citations in international journals and impact factor of journals in which cited (35 %)
- H-factor (25%)
- Plenary lectures ON INVITATION at international congresses (15%)
- International advisory panels (10%)
- Other lectures given at international congresses (5%)
- International research collaboration (5%)
- Chairing sessions/organising international meetings (5%)

Notes: Citation record and the "quality" of citations is the most reliable indicator of international recognition. Citations in high impact journals should carry more weight. Invitation to deliver plenary lectures and nomination to serve on international advisory committees also reflects the scientist’s standing as researcher.