



Academic excellence and research impact: The role of Walter Sisulu University scholars in advancing knowledge and institutional prestige

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of Walter Sisulu University (WSU) scholars in advancing academic excellence, strengthening research impact, and enhancing institutional prestige. Adopting a quantitative research approach, the study analyses secondary numerical data presented through graphs and pie charts to assess the contributions of NRF-rated and other WSU academics to knowledge production and institutional standing within South Africa's higher education sector. The study will provide clear findings to show the proportional share of NRF-rated researchers among *UCT, Wits, UJ, and WSU* in 2024. The findings highlighted the persistent challenges faced by scholars at historically disadvantaged universities like Walter Sisulu University and others, alongside measurable strategies used to navigate systemic constraints. The study emphasises the importance of institutional support, including mentorship, collaborative research networks, and equitable resource allocation, in improving research productivity and visibility. Lastly, the paper demonstrates how quantifiable scholarly outputs contribute to institutional growth and prestige, offering a foundation for evidence-based policy and future empirical research.

Keywords: Walter Sisulu University, academic excellence, research impact, NRF-rated scholars, higher education

INTRODUCTION

During the past decade, South Africa's higher education landscape has undergone significant transformation, particularly within historically disadvantaged institutions. Walter Sisulu University (WSU), situated in the Eastern Cape, stands out as a compelling case of institutional growth, resilience, and research-driven development.¹ Despite grappling with systemic challenges inherited from its legacy institutions, WSU is steadily establishing itself as an important contributor to the national research agenda and higher education discourse.

¹ Walter Sisulu University (WSU) in the Eastern Cape has been a significant player in the transformation of higher education in South Africa. The university has shown resilience and growth, particularly in research-driven development. WSU's journey reflects the broader challenges and opportunities within the South African higher education landscape.

In today's global knowledge economy, universities are increasingly expected to produce high-impact research, stimulate innovation, and provide sustainable solutions to social issues through engaged scholarship.² The commitment of WSU to this mandate is reflected in its adoption of institutional strategies that prioritise research development, academic excellence, and community responsiveness. Central to this trajectory is the scholarly engagement of its academic workforce, professors, doctors, and lecturers, whose research outputs, postgraduate supervision, and community-oriented initiatives are redefining the university's academic profile.

A critical marker of research quality in South Africa is the National Research Foundation (NRF) rating system.³ The receipt of an NRF rating is a recognition of the sustained research excellence and its global impact. At WSU, the increasing number of NRF-rated researchers not only affirms the academic calibre of its staff but also improves the university's visibility in the national and international research arenas. This development signals a maturing institutional research culture, aligned with national priorities in science, technology, and innovation.⁴

This paper explores the transformative role of research-active academic staff at WSU, with a particular focus on NRF-rated scholars. It investigates how their academic productivity contributes to research quality, institutional reputation, and broader developmental objectives.⁵ Furthermore, it examines the institutional mechanisms such as research policies, leadership support, and capacity-building initiatives that facilitate scholarly productivity and impact.⁶ Using a qualitative approach, the study draws on the experiences of key academic actors to illuminate how institutional environments shape research trajectories. The findings offer insight into how academic excellence and innovation can serve as vehicles for institutional advancement and social change.

In contributing to ongoing debates on higher education transformation in South Africa, this paper will attempt to illustrate how universities like Walter Sisulu University and others, despite structural disadvantages, can become knowledge-generating institutions through strategic investment in research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on the transformation of higher education in South Africa reflects the intricate intersection between historical legacy, institutional capacity, and evolving policy priorities.⁷ Post-apartheid higher education reforms have placed a sharp focus on addressing historical disparities in research output and building inclusive and knowledge-generating universities.⁸ Institutions such as WSU, once sidelined in the national research agenda, are increasingly recognised for their potential to contribute meaningfully to the knowledge economy in South Africa.⁹

Institutional Leadership and Vision

Effective leadership is essential in cultivating a research-oriented academic culture. At Walter Sisulu University, executive leadership, particularly within the Research and Innovation Directorate, has articulated a clear vision that aligns with national development priorities and global academic standards.¹⁰ This vision includes increasing research output, supporting emerging scholars, and embedding research in teaching and community engagement.¹¹ The interviewees highlighted that strong

² National Planning Commission, *National Development Plan 2030: Our Future - Make It Work* (Pretoria: Government Printer, 2012), 319.

³ National Research Foundation (NRF), "NRF Rating System," 2023, <https://www.nrf.ac.za>.

⁴ Department of Science and Innovation Decadal Plan for Science, "Technology and Innovation 2021–2031," 2021, 12.

⁵ V. P. Mahlangu, "The Contribution of NRF-Rated Researchers to Higher Education in South Africa," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 38, no. 2 (2020): 29.

⁶ N. Cloete and P. Maassen, "Roles of Universities and the NRF in South Africa's Research System," in *Knowledge Production and Contradictory Functions in African Higher Education*, ed. N. et al Cloete (African Minds, 2018), 159.

⁷ S. Badat, *Higher Education Transformation in South Africa* (Council on Higher Education, 2017).

⁸ Nico Cloete, Ian Bunting, and François van Schalkwyk, *Research Universities in Africa* (Cape Town: African Minds, 2018).

⁹ S. Fongwa and G. Wangenge-Ouma, "Re-Imagining Higher Education in South Africa: Towards an Engaged and Inclusive Research Culture," *Studies in Higher Education* 45, no. 3 (2020): 494.

¹⁰ Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), "Annual Report 2019/2020" (Pretoria, 2020).

¹¹ Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), "Annual Report 2019/2020" (Pretoria, 2020).

leadership has been instrumental in securing funding, promoting cross-disciplinary collaboration, and creating accountability mechanisms for research performance.¹²

NRF Ratings and Academic Recognition

NRF ratings serve both symbolic and material functions in higher education. At WSU, being NRF-rated enhances an academic's credibility and positions the university as a legitimate actor in the national research space.¹³ Participants noted that receiving an NRF rating was a career-defining milestone, often leading to increased visibility, invitations to collaborate, and eligibility for research grants.¹⁴ The university actively supports staff in applying for ratings, including workshops and peer review processes, which further institutionalize a culture of excellence.¹⁵

Research Capacity Development

The development of research capacity remains a cornerstone of the WSU's academic agenda.¹⁶ The university has introduced training workshops, internal grant schemes, and mentorship programs to empower junior academics and postgraduate students.¹⁷ Faculty research committees and school-based research coordinators have also been introduced to monitor progress and support researchers at various stages of their careers.¹⁸ Several participants credited these initiatives with increasing their confidence and providing opportunities to present at conferences and publish in high-impact journals.¹⁹

Funding and Resource Allocation

One of the recurring themes of the interviews was the critical importance of funding.²⁰ While external funding remains competitive, WSU has made efforts to allocate internal funds to support research activities, travel, and postgraduate bursaries.²¹ The NRF Thuthuka and Competitive Programme for Rated Researchers (CPRR) grants have also been crucial for advancing individual and collaborative research.²² However, participants also expressed concerns about bureaucracy, delays in fund disbursement, and limited infrastructure in some faculties.²³

Mentorship and Academic Socialisation

Mentoring has emerged as a vital element in the professional development of researchers.²⁴ Senior academics, particularly those with NRF ratings, serve as mentors for junior staff and postgraduate students.²⁵ Participants appreciated the informal and formal mentorship structures at WSU, which include writing retreats, supervision workshops, and peer-review support. These initiatives contribute to

¹² Cloete and Maassen, "Roles of Universities and the NRF in South Africa's Research System."

¹³ J. Mouton, J. Blanckenberg, and M. Van Lill, "The Changing Landscape of Research Productivity in South African Universities," *South African Journal of Science* 115, no. 11/12 (2019): 1-9.

¹⁴ Walter Sisulu University, "Institutional Research Report 2023."

¹⁵ Walter Sisulu University, "Research and Innovation Strategic Plan 2023–2028."

¹⁶ N. Cloete, J. Mouton, and C. Sheppard, *Doctoral Education in South Africa: Policy, Discourse and Data* (African Minds, 2018), 121.

¹⁷ M. T. Gumbo and R. Williams, "Research Capacity Development of Early Career Academics in Higher Education: A Case Study of the University of South Africa," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 19, no. 1 (2022): 123.

¹⁸ A. Dison and B. Mendelowitz, "Strengthening Research Capacity at South African Universities: Conceptual and Strategic Approaches," *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* 34, no. 1 (2020): 57.

¹⁹ J. Mouton and E. Bitzer, "Supporting the Research Productivity of Emerging Scholars in South African Higher Education," *Studies in Higher Education* 33, no. 2 (2019): 219.

²⁰ Temwa Moyo and Sioux McKenna, "Constraints on Improving Higher Education Teaching and Learning through Funding," *South African Journal of Science* 117, no. 1/2 (January 29, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2021/7807>.

²¹ The Walter Sisulu University Directorate of Research & Innovation administers internal bursaries and grants for research, travel, postgraduate support and conference attendance- [https://www.wsu.ac.za/index.php/en/research-innovation/directorate-of-research-development-overview?\(Accessed](https://www.wsu.ac.za/index.php/en/research-innovation/directorate-of-research-development-overview?(Accessed) 11 May 2025).

²² UFS, "Thuthuka Funding - Call for Applications for the Thuthuka Funding Instrument 2024 Is Now Open," 2024, <https://www.ufs.ac.za/research/research/archive/research-support/thuthuka-funding?>

²³ Kevin Gross and Carl T Bergstrom, "Contest Models Highlight Inherent Inefficiencies of Scientific Funding Competitions," *PLoS Biology* 17, no. 1 (2019): e3000065.

²⁴ Susan Benvenuti, "Pedagogy of Peers: Cultivating Writing Retreats as Communities of Academic Writing Practice," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 31, no. 2 (2017): 89–107.

²⁵ Nyika Aceme and Patricia Smit, "Mentoring Black Women Academics at the University of Pretoria to Achieve NRF Rating," *DHET Research Practice Bulletin*, 2017.

the academic socialisation of young scholars and ensure the sustainability of the university's research agenda.

Community Engagement and Research Relevance

The commitment of WSU to community-engaged scholarship is based in numerous research projects that address local needs.²⁶ These include rural health initiatives, agricultural cooperatives, environmental sustainability, and educational development. Researchers are encouraged to involve communities in the research process, ensuring that findings are translated into practical solutions.²⁷ This approach strengthens the university's social contract and enhances the relevance of its academic work.

Challenges and Institutional Constraints

Despite significant progress, WSU faces challenges to maintain its research momentum. Interviewees cited issues such as high teaching loads, inadequate research infrastructure, administrative inefficiencies, and limited access to international networks.²⁸ The dual role of academics as teachers and researchers often leads to burnout and affects the research output.²⁹ Addressing these challenges requires systemic reforms and continuous investment in academic development.

Future Prospects and Strategic Opportunities

Looking forward, WSU is well-positioned to further its research ambitions. Participants emphasised the importance of international partnerships, digital infrastructure, interdisciplinary research, and the expansion of postgraduate programs.³⁰ Strengthening collaborations with industry and government departments can also diversify funding streams and improve the societal impact of research.³¹ The university's strategic plan includes measurable research growth, which, if implemented effectively, could cement its place among South Africa's top research institutions.³²

The Department of Higher Education and Training's (DHET) White Paper on Post-School Education and Training outlined a vision for a more equitable research landscape, calling for increased support for historically disadvantaged universities.³³ Since 2017, this policy agenda has been operationalised through targeted investments, including infrastructure development, research capacity-building programmes, and academic development grants.³⁴ These structural shifts have contributed to the emergence of regional research hubs and strengthened the role of institutions such as WSU in national research priorities.

Central to this transformation is the role of the National Research Foundation (NRF), whose rating system functions both as a measure and a driver of research excellence.³⁵ The NRF rating incentivises productivity by recognising scholars for sustained, high-quality research contributions.³⁶ Although NRF ratings remain disproportionately concentrated among historically advantaged universities, recent trends indicate that emerging institutions like WSU are gaining ground.³⁷ As Mouton, Blanckenberg and Van Lill noted, the growth of NRF-rated researchers at newer institutions reflects not only individual excellence but also the maturation of institutional support systems.

²⁶ Busisiwe Octavia Ntsele, "Critical Study of Community Engagement at A South African University," 2024.

²⁷ Ali Whitmer et al., "The Engaged University: Providing a Platform for Research That Transforms Society," *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment* 8, no. 6 (2010): 314–21.

²⁸ Dison and Mendelowitz, "Strengthening Research Capacity at South African Universities: Conceptual and Strategic Approaches," 54.

²⁹ D. Teferra, "Unpacking the Teaching-Research Nexus in Higher Education: Insights from Africa," *Journal of Higher Education in Africa* 46, no. 2 (2018): 83.

³⁰ A. du Toit and M. Gaotlhobogwe, "Digital Scholarship and Research Capacity in Southern Africa: Emerging Opportunities and Challenges," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 36, no. 3 (2020): 58.

³¹ G. Kruss and M. Visser, "Industry-University Partnerships and Innovation in South Africa: Tensions and Prospects," *South African Journal of Science* 45, no. 2 (2017): 37.

³² Wits University Research Office, "Research and Innovation Strategy 2021–2025" (Johannesburg, 2021), 7.

³³ Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), "White Paper on Post-School Education and Training" (Pretoria, 2013).

³⁴ Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), "University Capacity Development Programme Framework" (Pretoria, 2018).

³⁵ National Research Foundation (NRF), "NRF Rating System."

³⁶ Mouton, Blanckenberg, and Van Lill, "The Changing Landscape of Research Productivity in South African Universities."

³⁷ Habib, A. and Padayachee, V. (2018) *South Africa's Suspended Revolution: Hopes and Prospects*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.

Institutional facilitators, such as dedicated research offices, access to seed funding, and robust postgraduate support structures, are essential in promoting research productivity.³⁸ The establishment of the Directorate for Research and Innovation at WSU exemplifies how administrative coordination and strategic vision can significantly improve academic output and policy alignment. The Directorate has led initiatives in research ethics training, funding facilitation, and cross-disciplinary collaboration, all of which contribute to a deepening research culture at the university.³⁹

The interface between research and community engagement has also emerged as a defining feature of South African higher education.⁴⁰ Scholars have increasingly argued that research in the Global South must be socially responsive and grounded in the lived realities of communities.⁴¹ WSU's emphasis on community-based participatory research, particularly in areas, such as public health, food security, teacher education, and environmental sustainability, illustrated a model of engaged scholarship that aligns with national development imperatives.

Furthermore, diversity and inclusivity are recognised as foundational to sustainable academic transformation.⁴² Gender equity and support for early-career researchers remain key challenges nationally, yet some institutions have begun to make concerted efforts to address these issues.⁴³ WSU's internal policies, including mentorship programmes, targeted grants for women researchers, and support for emerging academics, reflect an awareness of the need to create an enabling environment for all scholars. As Walker and Boni contended, inclusive research cultures are not only more just but also more innovative and impactful.⁴⁴

The literature above demonstrated that institutional transformation in research is possible when academic commitment is matched by policy support, strategic investment, and inclusive leadership. Walter Sisulu University offers a compelling case of how these elements can converge to foster a more equitable and dynamic research ecosystem within a historically marginalised context.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research method to gain a nuanced understanding of the research culture and academic contributions at Walter Sisulu University. A qualitative approach was selected due to its strength in exploring complex social phenomena, understanding human experiences, and generating context-rich insights. The research focused on the perspectives and experiences of NRF-rated scholars, emerging researchers, research administrators, and academic leaders. Secondary sources in this study contained books, internet journal articles and the Walter Sisulu University policies. Using this method, the study will provide clear findings to show the proportional share of NRF-rated researchers among UCT, Wits, UJ, and WSU in 2024.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

NRF-Rated Researchers by South African Universities (2024)

³⁸ Cloete and Maassen, "Roles of Universities and the NRF in South Africa's Research System."

³⁹ Walter Sisulu University, "Institutional Research Report 2023."

⁴⁰ B. Leibowitz and V. Bozalek, "The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning from a Social Justice Perspective," *Teaching in Higher Education* 22, no. 2 (2017): 227.

⁴¹ B. Chilisa, *Indigenous Research Methodologies*, 2nd ed. (London: Sage Publications, 2019).

⁴² M. Walker and A. Boni, *Higher Education and Human Development: Towards the Public and the Common Good* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

⁴³ N. Boshoff and E. Conradie, "Gender Equity in South African Science: Policies, Progress and Prospects," *South African Journal of Science* 117, no. 1/2 (2021).

⁴⁴ Walker and Boni, *Higher Education and Human Development: Towards the Public and the Common Good*.

Distribution of NRF-Rated Researchers Across South African Universities (2024)

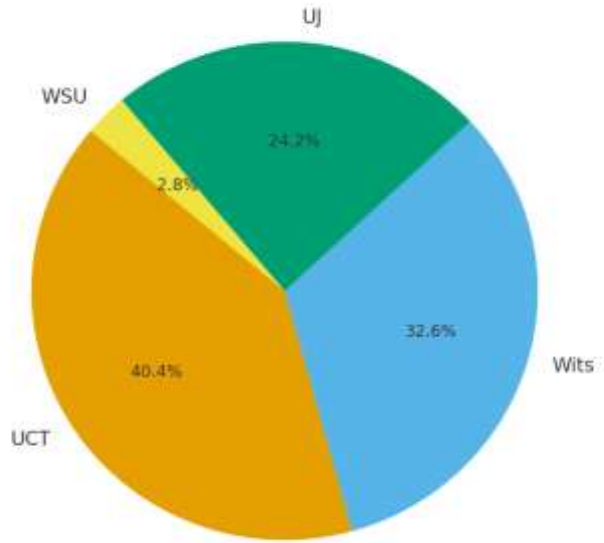


Figure 1: The pie chart shows the proportional share of NRF-rated researchers among UCT, Wits, UJ, and WSU in 2024

The following is a bar graph:

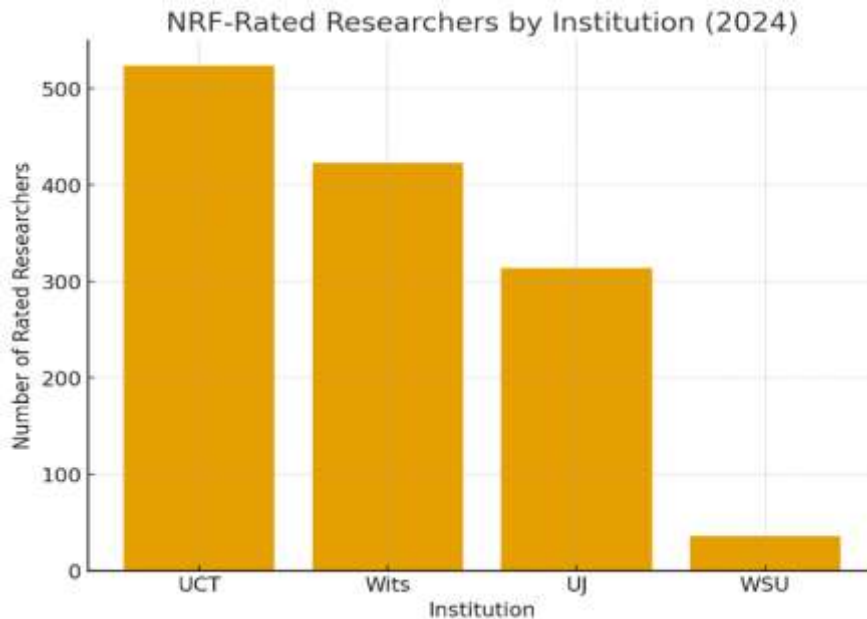


Figure 2: The bar graph compares the total number of rated researchers per institution, highlighting UCT's dominance and WSU's emerging presence

Data Analysis

NRF ratings confer both symbolic prestige and practical advantage in South African academia. At WSU, having an NRF rating boosts a scholar’s credibility and improves the research standing of the university nationally. Several staff members described receiving NRF ratings, particularly C2 and Y2 categories, as “career-defining milestones” that often lead to:

- Elevated visibility within academic circles.
- Invitations to international and national collaboration.
- Increased eligibility for research grants and funding support.

WSU supports its staff in obtaining NRF ratings through dedicated workshops, mentorship, and internal peer-review processes. This structured assistance helps embed a culture of scholarly excellence within the institution and signals WSU's strategic commitment to research development.

As of 2024, the University of Cape Town (UCT) continues to lead South African higher education institutions in terms of highly rated researchers. It boasts 35 A-rated researchers, who are recognised as leading international scholars, along with six P-rated researchers, who are recognised as young researchers with exceptional potential. Although the precise number of B, C, and Y-rated researchers at UCT is not specified, the university's total is estimated to be approximately 524 rated researchers.

Similarly, the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) remains a prominent contributor to South African research, with 28 A-rated researchers and a total of 423 rated researchers across all categories. However, specific figures for B, C, P, and Y ratings at Wits are not explicitly available in the public datasets reviewed.

The University of Johannesburg (UJ) has shown significant growth in its research capacity, with a reported 314 NRF-rated researchers in 2024. These include seven A-rated researchers, 68 B-rated, and 171 C-rated individuals. In addition, UJ has 68 Y-rated researchers, with no P-rated researchers recorded.

In contrast, the WSU, a historically disadvantaged institution, has recorded a modest yet significant number of 36 NRF-rated researchers by mid-2024. Although a detailed breakdown by rating category is not publicly disclosed, internal reports and the institution's research portal suggest the presence of researchers in categories such as C2 and Y24.

This study has highlighted the critical role that NRF-rated and research-active scholars play in enhancing the academic profile of WSU. Their contributions are visible in increased research outputs, postgraduate supervision, increased community engagement, and greater institutional recognition. The qualitative data underscore the importance of leadership, funding, mentorship, and institutional support to foster a vibrant research culture. Although challenges remain, the commitment of WSU to academic transformation through research is evident. The university's strategic focus on building capacity, recognizing excellence, and aligning with national development goals positions it for continued success.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study above has proposed the following recommendations:

- Invest in research facilities, digital resources, and laboratories to support advanced research. This is fundamental to building institutional research capacity and aligns with national priorities for higher education transformation.
- Implement workload models that allocate dedicated research time to academic staff. Research productivity improves significantly when staff have structured time for inquiry and publication.
- Formalise mentorship programmes for early-career researchers and postgraduate students. Such initiatives contribute to talent retention, capacity development, and institutional sustainability. Improve internal grant administration to ensure timely access to funds.
- Efficient distribution mechanisms to enhance the planning and execution of research projects.
- Establish partnerships with global institutions to improve research visibility and impact. International collaborations are associated with higher citation rates and a wider dissemination of knowledge.
- Lastly, encourage research across disciplines to address complex societal challenges. Interdisciplinary work promotes innovation and responsiveness to developmental needs.

CONCLUSION

The progression of Walter Sisulu University toward academic excellence and enhanced research visibility illustrates the transformative power of deliberate institutional strategies. Through a combination of visionary leadership, dedicated academic personnel, and an enabling environment, WSU

has steadily moved beyond its origins as a historically disadvantaged institution. Central to this transformation has been the role of NRF-rated researchers, whose scholarly contributions have not only enriched the university's intellectual capital but also positioned it as a credible generator of knowledge within the national and regional research landscape. These advancements underscore the importance of recognising and nurturing academic talent, while also ensuring that support and recognition systems are in place to promote sustained scholarly productivity.

Despite the notable progress, WSU continued to face structural and resource-related challenges that could affect the pace and depth of its research growth. However, the qualitative findings presented in this study provided compelling evidence of the resilience and potential of the institution. The emergence of a vibrant research culture fostered through mentorship, collaboration, and a growing emphasis on postgraduate training points to a promising trajectory. To maintain and accelerate this upward path, it will be essential to invest consistently in human capital development, research-enabling policies, and strategic partnerships at both national and international levels. These efforts will not only consolidate existing gains but also pave the way for WSU to assert itself as a leading research-intensive university on the continent.

Areas of Further Studies

Future research could undertake a comparative analysis of Walter Sisulu University's (WSU) NRF-rated researchers against those in other leading South African universities, including the University of Pretoria (UP), University of Kwa-Zulu-Natal (UKZN), etc. They can also compare in 2025, examining the trends in the number and categories of NRF-rated researchers, the quality and impact of research outputs, and the institutional support structures that facilitate research excellence. By comparing WSU's performance with these universities, researchers would gain valuable insights into WSU's progress, its relative competitiveness, and its evolving role in strengthening South Africa's national research landscape. This approach would also highlight potential strategies for WSU to enhance research capacity, foster innovation, and further contribute to the country's academic and socio-economic development.

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