

The Emerging Researcher Acceleration Programme Call

Doctoral Support for the 2026 Calendar year

Call Background and overview:

Highly skilled individuals are key to enabling faster and more effective development and deployment of context-appropriate solutions to water sector challenges. Given this need, and the Water Research Commission's (WRC) organisational mandate to work within the water system of innovation, our strategy has a commitment to nurturing the emerging research and innovation pipeline that supports long term water security.

The WRC Emerging Researchers Acceleration Programme is in place to respond to this need. An emerging researcher is defined in this programme as someone who wishes to pursue a career in research and innovation and has not yet established themselves as a full academic. These candidates should be under 40 years old.

The programme focuses on:

- growing the number of people with research qualifications (post-graduate) working in the water sector;
- supporting a career pathway for emerging researchers to work in the research and innovation space of the water sector;
- Increasing exposure of emerging researchers to research project management and implementation processes;
- Supporting emerging researchers to publish and supervise students;
- Supporting emerging researchers to grown their national and global networks and partnerships.

In order to emerge as a water sector researcher, ready to be a leader in a chosen field; emerging researchers need a long-term programme of support that provides them with security in being able to plan for their early stages of career development. This includes support to complete a well-supervised doctoral programme and from there they need to transition into a post doctoral learning programme where they can grow their publication record, supervision experience, research project management track record and deepen networks. To have a post doctoral experience that allows candidates to be set up for success, providing emerging researchers with opportunities to gain 'lead investigator' experience on projects and build global research partnerships is key.

Based on these insights the selected WRC Emerging Researchers are provided with up to three phases of support, provided that they meet specified milestones and requirements of each phase:

- PhD Bursary Support
- Post doctoral Support
- Emerging Researchers Research Grant: either for implementing a research project or undertaking an exchange programme

Type of Support	Maximum Years to be supported in this phase	Maximum Total Budget per candidate
PhD Bursary Support	3	R 540 000 (R 180 000 per year)
Post doctoral Support	2	R 560 000 (R 280 000 per year)
Emerging Researchers Research Grant and/or exchange	2 <i>(running concurrently with the post doc support period)</i>	Up to R 400 000

In the 2024/25 and 2025/26 Call, the Department of Science, Technology and Innovation (DSTI) has partnered with the WRC to co-fund the programme, in line with its Decadal Plan priorities and strategic investment into the National Water RDI Roadmap.

Focus of the 2025/26 Call:

The WRC and DSTI are seeking 11 emerging researchers who are committed to a long-term research and innovation career in the water sector, to award support to, starting in the 2026 calendar year.

This particular call is open to candidates applying for doctoral support, who fit the emerging researcher definition, are South African and studying on a full time basis.

If the selected PhD candidates are successful in meeting the required PhD milestones, they will then transition into the post-doctoral and research grant support offerings.

In order to apply for support, the PhD topic needs to be aligned to the WRC Strategy themes and the Water RDI Roadmap clusters outlined below:

WRC Thematic Priorities:

1. Water availability
2. Water use
3. Water quality and health

Water RDI Roadmap clusters:

1. Unlocking alternative sources of water
2. Governance, planning and management of supply
3. Improving adequacy and performance of infrastructure (built and ecological)
4. Financially sustainable “business” approaches for improving operational performance
5. Governance, planning and management of demand
6. Reducing losses and increasing efficiency of productive use
7. Improving monitoring and metering

Please note that we will be prioritizing candidates that come from the below disciplinary areas and/or sub themes outlined below:

1. Disciplines: Hydrology; Data Science; and Engineering, Built Environment & IT (EBIT)
2. Sub themes: Groundwater Hydrology; Data and Analytics; Governance, Economics and Policy; Sanitation and Water Quality; Non-revenue Water & Demand Management.

Further points for noting:

- Applications need to be completed by the supervisor, working in conjunction with the student they wish to appoint. Any university employed supervisors may apply.
- A new/separate application must be completed for each student (i.e. if a supervisor wishes to apply for more than one student you must generate separate application forms for each student).
- Applications are adjudicated on the strength of the PhD topic clarity and relevance, student career motivation, as well as planned supervisory support.
- Please note that Artificial Intelligence / chat bots should not be used to generate any responses on the application/proposal.
- Funding will be for candidates starting their studies in January 2026.
- South African candidates from previously disadvantaged race, gender groups and institutions will be given priority in this call.
- In cases where the proposal is successful, the successful institutions will need to enter into a standard WRC research MoA. The contractual arrangement will thus be between the WRC and institution where the supervisor is employed, with the supervisor acting as the project leader/manager on the contract.

Application deadlines and process:

1. **Closing date for Applications/proposals: 25 September 2025, by 15h30.**
2. Note that all applications must be submitted on the WRC Business Management System (BMS). The BMS System is open from 4 September 2025 for application submissions.
3. No late applications, or out of system applications can be accommodated.
4. We urge you to submit your application timeously so that there is time to resolve any submission challenges you may face, by logging a call to the BMS Support Centre.
5. To access the BMS proposal portal, please login or register at the following link:
<https://wrc.microsoftcrmportals.com/>
6. Once you have logged into the BMS Portal please navigate to the following link to read the details of the call and start the process of populating your Emerging Researchers Acceleration Programme PhD Support Application/proposal: <https://wrc.microsoftcrmportals.com/programmes/erap/calls-for-erap-proposals/call-for-proposal-details-erap/?id=27ca5cb7-9d88-f011-b4cc-6045bddd5972>
7. As an alternative to step 6 above, you can:
 - a. Navigate to the 'Programmes' drop down menu on the top banner and click on 'Emerging Researchers Acceleration Programme'.
 - b. From there click on 'Calls for Proposals' and follow instructions to view the details of the Call (see drop down option that will take you to 'Call for Proposals Details')
 - c. From 'Call for Proposals Details' follow the instructions to use the drop down option that will take you to 'Submit a proposal'

For enquiries:

- Topic areas/ technical focus of the call: Shanna Nienaber, RDI Programme Manager, Shannan@wrc.org.za
- General Administrative enquiries: Sarah Ravhudzulo: Project Administrator, SarahR@wrc.org.za
- BMS System support: Kevin Matos: System Developer, bms-support@wrc.org.za

We look forward to receiving your applications!