

**Business Day**

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Sixty new research chairs as initiative gathers momentum

ANOTHER 60 research chairs would be awarded to tertiary institutions between this financial year and 2013-14, bringing the total to 152, Science and Technology Minister Naledi Pandor said yesterday.



"The idea of research chairs was to have leading academics at professorial level whose primary activity is to do research and train postgraduate students," Romilla Maharaj, the National Research Foundation's (NRF'S) executive director: human and institutional capacity development, said.

Scientific output is an important part of the Department of Science and Technology's 10-year innovation plan. It aims to develop the country's knowledge economy to boost economic competitiveness and job creation.

According to a report released last year in the South African Journal of Science, titled A Bibliometric Analysis of SA'S Scientific Outputs, SA'S scientific publications have increased 60% since

1994 but the number of researchers has remained static, signalling the need to develop a new generation of researchers.

Since its inception in 2005, the department has invested R1,1bn in the South African Research Chairs Initiative through the NRF. The initiative aimed to “attract and retain excellence in research and innovation in the South African science system”, the Department of Science and Technology said yesterday.

“The future of our country in the knowledge century depends on our keeping up to date and leading the world in some cases,” dean of research at the University of the Western Cape, Prof Renfrew Christie, said yesterday.

“The Chinese, Indians, South Koreans are not waiting for us.”

The initiative “released people who are good researchers” from undergraduate teaching commitments and allowed them to “leap forward” in their research, Prof Christie said.

The initiative had “provided a serious jump in original and new output, rather than just churning out little bits of salami-sliced research”, Prof Christie said. The research chairs “enable us to make the sorts of new discoveries that will make us a winning nation in the knowledge century”.

There are now 21 universities hosting research chairs, in disciplines from astronomy to energy and biofuels. The research areas were disciplines that could address SA’S social and economic challenges, Dr Maharaj said

There are two tiers. First-tier chairs are awarded to researchers who are leaders in their fields or have had substantial international recognition. “The starting award is R2,5m a year, and this includes salary contribution, running expenses, postgraduate bursaries, travel expenses and other things directly related to chair activity,” she said.

The second tier is for “people under the age of 40, to grow the next level of leadership. They have to be established researchers, but do not have to have substantial international recognition.” Awards start at R1,5m.

Prof Christie emphasised that not all of the award was spent on salaries, but covered other expenses. In fact, Dr Maharaj said chairs’ salaries were capped at R750 000 and “the institution had to top it up to a marketrelated salary”.

The goal is to recruit chairs who were not initially based at South African universities. “About 20% of current research chairs were recruited from outside the research sector. We want 60% to be from outside South African universities — from science councils or industry in the country, or from abroad,” Dr Maharaj said.