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Rejoinder to Moche (2026) 'The National Research Foundation researcher rating system: An expensive bureaucracy whose time has passed'

Significance:

The National Research Foundation (NRF)'s response (S Afr J Sci. 2026;122(9/10), Art. #28534) to my critique (S Afr J Sci. 2026;122(9/10), Art. #27295) concedes that the rating system's true costs have never been audited in 42 years, that its financial rationale has weakened markedly, and that peer review cannot deliver mechanical objectivity. Its own sensitivity analysis places the annual cost higher than the original estimate, and its own data show that 25 of 32 A ratings awarded in 2025 went to four historically advantaged universities. I accept the factual corrections, but argue that the evidence the NRF supplies supports abolition more strongly than reform, and calls for that audit to be commissioned and published.

I am grateful to Dr Moche of the National Research Foundation (NRF) for a serious and constructive response[1] to my critique[2]. The response narrows the disagreement considerably, and where it corrects me I accept the correction. However, where it defends the system, the evidence it supplies tends to support the case for abolition more strongly than the case for reform. I should disclose at the outset that my own rating application, submitted in November 2024, was concluded in August 2026 with a B2 rating, and that I have also served as a reviewer for rating applications. The argument that follows is not a grievance about an outcome.

What I accept

Three corrections stand.

First, the rating cycle is 6 years, not 5 years. This alters the renewal arithmetic (roughly 750 renewals annually rather than 900) but not the conclusion, as my costing used 500 applications, conservative on either basis.

Second, approximately 90% of an application is pre-populated from the researcher's existing NRF CV. While this reduces manual administrative entry for the applicant, it does nothing to alleviate the cognitive load on reviewers or panels. An evaluator must still read, contextualise and judge 8 years of cumulative scholarly output regardless of how quickly the applicant imported the data. The reviewer, panel and institutional evaluation burdens, which constitute the vast majority of the total labour, remain completely untouched.

Third, the process contains more procedural safeguards than my initial commentary implied: independent reviewer nomination alongside applicant suggestions, specialist committees, escalation to the Executive Evaluation Committee, and an appeals mechanism. I should have described these, and Boshoff's[3] rebuttal to Callaghan[4] is a fair corrective.

I accept too the point about the P and Y categories. They recognise trajectory and potential in a way that publication and citation records cannot, and any redesign should preserve that function. But my argument is directed at established researchers, for whom a rating adds little that is not already public and continuously updated.

The response strengthens the case it seeks to answer

The NRF criticises my cost estimate as modelled rather than audited. It then supplies its own sensitivity table, built on my assumptions, putting the cost at ZAR 10.8 million to ZAR 32.6 million at 750 applications and ZAR 13.0 million to ZAR 39.2 million at 900 applications. These figures are higher than mine. Offered as a caution about the fragility of the estimate, the table instead shows that the plausible cost is wider than I claimed, and that the NRF is perfectly able to model it.

The response then states that there is no recent public activity-based audit bringing together application volumes, NRF staff effort, reviewer and panel hours, institutional research-office effort and system costs. It concludes that my call for an audit should be accepted. I welcome that, but the implication deserves stating plainly: a national instrument has operated for 42 years, has absorbed more than ZAR 800 million in incentive funding and an unmeasured volume of academic labour, and has never been costed. The burden of proof does not rest on those who question it. A public body that cannot say what its flagship instrument costs has not established that it should continue.

On equity, the response supplies the sharpest datum in the exchange. Of the 32 researchers recognised for new or repeat A ratings in 2025, 25 (78%) were located at four historically advantaged universities. The response fairly notes that an award cohort is not the full rated population. It is nonetheless the NRF's own figure, and it sits alongside Breetzke and Hedding's[5] finding that the rated population remained predominantly white and male across a decade, with black African researchers particularly underrepresented at A and B level. I accept that rating outcomes may reflect structural inequality rather than generate it. But an instrument that reproduces the geography of apartheid opportunity with this fidelity, and that has never been evaluated for whether it mitigates or amplifies that pattern, is difficult to defend on grounds of transformation.

The international examples run the same way. The response notes that Australia discontinued Excellence in Research for Australia in 2023 in favour of a lower-burden, data-informed capability, and that New Zealand is replacing the Performance-Based Research Fund with an instrument assessing providers rather than individual researchers. Both have moved away from individual peer-reviewed rating toward lighter, indicator-informed institutional assessment.

That is the direction I propose. Offered as evidence for reform, these cases are better read as evidence that comparable systems, having asked the question, answered it by abandoning individual ratings.

On metrics

I accept that bibliometric indicators carry structural biases across fields, languages and publishing systems, and that automating a bias does not neutralise it. But this is not an argument for the status quo: the rating system anchors excellence to the same internationally indexed journals and so embeds the same bias, with a bureaucracy on top of it. The relevant comparison is not metrics against an unbiased ideal, but lightweight, field-normalised indicators against a multimillion rand bureaucracy carrying the exact same epistemic bias. Moving to open, field-normalised metrics does not create new biases; it simply strips away the expensive apparatus that sits on top of them. Moreover, within a national cohort, a shared bias is a constant rather than a discriminating variable. The indices already exist, are already consulted in every appointment and promotion decision in the country, and cost nothing further to read.

On reform vs abolition

The response concludes that the evidence supports reform rather than abolition. It proposes no reforms. That is the difficulty. Krige's 2007 review for the NRF[6] observed that if ratings do not correlate strongly with outcomes, the effort is hard to justify, and urged that the associated costs be examined. The Foundation for Research Development's 1997 evaluation of its Core Programme[7] warned that establishing a hierarchy of researchers is fraught with difficulty, particularly when viewed sceptically, and may act as a disincentive to able individuals in all categories, especially those classified C or Y. Now, 19 and 29 years later, respectively, the audit has not been done and the hierarchy remains.

Proposition

So let me put a modest proposition. Let the NRF commission the activity-based audit it agrees is needed, and publish it alongside the evidence on reviewer agreement rates, panel variation, appeal outcomes and the distribution of ratings by institution and demographic profile. If the instrument demonstrates its value on that evidence, I will withdraw the argument without reservation. If the audit is not commissioned, or is commissioned and not published, that silence will itself be an answer.

Declarations

I have no competing interests to declare. I have no AI or LLM use to declare. The opinions expressed in this work are my own and do not necessarily reflect those of my affiliated university.

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