



# UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN CAPE (UWC)

## RESEARCH POLICY SECTION 2: STRATEGIC RESEARCH AREAS (SRAS)

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WESTERN CAPE

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## RESEARCH POLICY

### SECTION 2: STRATEGIC RESEARCH AREAS (SRAS)

Given its past history as a historically disadvantaged university, UWC is committed to a meaningful research capacity development programme to address the inequities of the past. Hence, support for staff to obtain their doctoral qualifications and establish their postdoctoral research profiles is essential. At the same time, UWC has to acknowledge the enormous enhancement of the University's profile as a research-driven university through the efforts of research teams and individuals who have established research and development niche areas which are engaged in cutting-edge research of strategic national importance. The University needs to recognise, support and expand these initiatives as it strengthens its national/international profile.

There is strategic advantage to be gained for the University in identifying, maintaining and fostering Strategic Research Areas (SRAs), and that such structures should henceforth be a component of the University's Institutional Operational Plan.

The advantages include:

- Enhancing the capacity of the University to promote its research identity by articulating strengths which accrue to the University community more broadly, and not just to individual achievements such as NRF ratings.
- Assisting the University in strategic research development, including future planning, staff acquisitions and targeted resourcing.
- Enhancing the pool of research skills, postgraduate supervision and mentoring of emerging researchers in a team based environment (as opposed to solely on an individual basis or that which emanates from a specific research entity (e.g. Centre or Institute).
- Increasing publications, student graduates and other outputs.
- Providing a destination for donor funds, awards and other forms of concrete support.

It is proposed that SRAs are defined as over-arching fields of academic (particularly research) activity, rather than as defined specific structures. In so doing, the University will be informed by the opportunities presented by the country's national research and development strategy.

It is further proposed that UWC as an institution, as well as individual academics, Departments and Faculties, should be involved in their identification.

#### **Background**

In the mid to late 1990s, there was a donor-driven drive (mainly instituted by the National Research Foundation) to require the University and faculties to identify research niche areas (RNA), which could then apply for a ring-fenced funding allocation. RNAs were identified across the University, and some, but not all were successful in leveraging funding from the NRF. Since

the late 1990's, the RNA-related research programmes have earned UWC approximately R8m per annum.

Nevertheless, the identification of research niche areas did indeed occur at UWC and there is evidence that some such niche areas expanded and thrived when the clustering was accompanied by broader academic engagement and support, such as that provided by the NRF. However, it remains the case that the process of identification of research niche areas (also termed strategic research areas (SRAs)) has been murky and unclear, and that the decision making and identification process has been left to individual faculties.

The criteria for identifying a SRA have seldom been made explicit, nor, as far as can be ascertained, has there been an inter-faculty attempt to identify potential multidisciplinary SRAs, or to prioritise research thrusts across the University as a whole.

Nevertheless, the identification, formation or recognition of SRAs has in no way detracted from the recognition of the autonomy of individual researchers or academics to pursue whatever research agenda they chose, to choose their own collaborators, and to determine how they wished to contribute to the generation, preservation and dissemination of knowledge.

### **Definition of a SRA and criteria for assessment**

A Strategic Research Area is defined as a 'field of study' which fulfills at least some of the following criteria (in no particular order):

- Has a formally identified status within the University.
- Is an area of current research strength in the University.
- Is of notable national and/or international importance.
- Is identified as a field of such importance that it warrants specific intervention, such as targeted resourcing, by the University.
- May be 'populated' by individuals and/or Research Entities.
- Should preferably incorporate both internal and external (national and international) collaborative linkages.
- Is likely to be interdisciplinary in nature.
- Is capable of engendering research activities which will fulfill the objectives of the University (including research grant income, postgraduate training and graduation, publications and other recognized research outputs).
- Has the potential to attract significant external funding.
- Is an area that has the potential to promote socio-economic development.
- Is an area that will enhance the standing of the University on the international research landscape.

### **Review of Existing SRAs**

The University should establish an interdisciplinary panel (the SRA Panel) to assess and review existing SRAs. Leaders of existing and new RNAs should be invited to submit to the panel a motivation, accompanied by a research plan for the SRA, plans for future projects, conferences, seminars or other forms of academic and research based dissemination of knowledge, evidence of compliance with the above criteria, and abbreviated CVs of the principal member(s). The designation as a SRA should be valid for five years after which time it should be re-evaluated. If the SRA has not developed a structure involving a critical mass of staff, post graduate students

and interdisciplinary linkages which can lead to an enhancement of the research activities and imaginative thinking within that period, the SRA designation may be withdrawn.

### **Establishment of New SRAs**

New SRAs should be identified through either of two possible routes. The University SRA Panel should be assigned the responsibility for managing the process of identification and selection of SRAs.

- Proposals for new SRAs should be submitted by existing groupings at the University, provided that the above criteria are met. The structure, detail and format of such submission should be decided by the Panel and communicated to the University academic community.
- The research office/research committee of the University may additionally, of its own accord, proactively identify (and recommend to the Panel) the need for SRAs to be established in a field where the existing capacity does not yet exist. This could occur where:
  - National/global demands dictate that UWC should develop a research identity in this area.
  - there is a gap which other universities in South Africa have not seized but where UWC could play a lead role if this gap were filled.
  - there is donor support and other indications of sustainability which would be well served by the identification of a SRA.
  - socio-political, scientific or other contemporary or emerging developments suggest that UWC's profile would be enhanced by the development of a SRA in a particular sphere.
- Once established as an SRA, the same review/evaluation process should be applied every three years.

### **Development and Growth of SRAs**

While the initial 'population' of a new SRA may comprise those individuals or Research Entities having presented the successful application, a mechanism is required for the addition of new participants within an SRA. Hypothetically, such decisions might be made *ad hoc* by the 'leader' of a SRA, or by a more formal process. In light of the suggestion (below) that the University would invest in SRAs, a more formal membership, possibly managed by the SRA Panel, is recommended.

### **University Support to SRAs**

By recognizing a SRA as a node of research excellence (or potential research excellence), the University would undertake to provide support to the individual academics and/or entities which comprise the SRA. This support may include:

- prioritizing the SRA in fundraising activities
- investing in equipment or infrastructure (offices, laboratories etc)

- leveraging external funding
- direct allocation of bursaries and/or staff positions
- marketing, including recruiting postgraduate students, postdoctoral fellows and contract staff to build capacity
- assisting with outreach activities including conferences, seminars, distinguished visitors, linkages with partners, and internationalization
- a more flexible allocation of subsidy accrued from accredited publications to enable the SRA to build capacity (upon negotiation).