



SAMRC Extramural Research Units (EMUs)

**Request for Application (RFA) for the
establishment of EMUs**

SAMRC-RFA-EMU-04-2025

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1. INTRODUCTION

The SAMRC's mission is to improve the health of South Africans through research, innovation, and technology transfer. For the SAMRC to be able to fulfil its mandate, it needs to conduct and fund research that addresses health priorities in South Africa (SA).

At present, the SAMRC has several Intramural Research Units (IMUs) and Extramural Research Units (EMUs); 10 IMUs and 25 EMUs as of 1 April 2025. The SAMRC has, as part of its long-term goal, the need to increase support of under-represented scientists engaged in health research. This RFA is for the establishment of new EMUs to expand and complement the existing EMUs and address the South Africa quadruple burden of disease and emerging global health challenges under the following SAMRC Research Programmes:

- Biomedical Research;
- Public Health;
- Health Systems Strengthening;
- HIV, AIDS and other Communicable Diseases;
- Maternal, Child and Women's Health; and
- Health Promotions and Disease Prevention.

The funding for the EMUs represents a secure, discretionary, financial incentive which is approved in 5-year cycles, for a maximum of 15-years depending on performance, and should facilitate efforts to leverage external research funding. It is expected that institutional co-funding and the sum of external grants should exceed the amount invested in the EMU by the SAMRC by several-fold. Becoming an EMU also provides research institutions with the opportunity to contribute to the development of the next generation of research leaders.

2. CURRENT EMUs

There are currently 25 EMUs spread across the different research institutions around the country (Table 1).

Table 1: EMUs as at 1 April 2025 (listed alphabetically)

EMUS	UNIT DIRECTOR (UD)	INSTITUTION	ESTABLISHED
Antimicrobial Resistance and Global Health Research Unit	Prof Pascal Bessong	UNIVEN	2022
Antiviral Gene Therapy	Prof Patrick Arbuthnot	WITS	2015
Antibody Immunity	Prof Penny Moore	WITS	2019
Cardiometabolic Health	Prof Tandi Matsha	CPUT	2019
Centre for Health Economics and Priority Setting	Prof Karen Hofman	WITS	2019
Centre for the Study of Antimicrobial Resistance	Prof Keertan Dheda	UCT	2018
Child and Adolescent Lung Health	Prof Heather Zar	UCT	2015
Development Pathways for Health	Prof Shane Norris	WITS	2011
Drug discovery and Development	Prof Kelly Chibale	UCT	2009
Genomics of Brain Disorders	Prof Soraya Seedat	SUN	2019
Health Services to Systems	Prof Helen Schneider	UWC	2015
Herbal Drugs	Prof Alvaro Viljoen	TUT	2015
HIV-TB Pathogens and Treatment	Prof Salim Abdool Karim	CAPRISA	2015
Hypertension and Cardiovascular Disease	Prof Marlien Pieters	NWU	2015
Intersection of Non-communicable Disease and Infectious Disease Research Unit	Prof Mpiko Ntsekhe	UCT	2022
Microbial Water Quality Monitoring	Prof Anthony Okoh	UFH	2015
Pan African Centre for Epidemics Research Unit	Prof Nancy Phaswana- Mafuya	UJ	2022
Platform for Pharmacogenomics Research & Translation Research Unit	Prof Collet Dandara	UCT	2022
Precision Oncology	Prof Zodwa Dlamini	UP	2019
Risk and Resilience in Mental Disorders	Prof Dan Stein	UCT	2017
Rural Public Health and Health Transition	Prof Stephen Tollman	WITS	2003
Unit for Precision and Genomic Medicine	Prof Raj Ramesar	UCT	2018
Vaccine and Infectious Diseases Analytics	Prof Shabir Madhi	WITS	2020
Violence, Injury and Social Asymmetries	Prof Ashley van Niekerk	UNISA	2019
Wound and Keloid Scarring Translational	Prof Nonhlanhla Khumalo	UCT	2019

3. FUNDING OPPORTUNITY DESCRIPTION

This RFA is seeking to fund applications that allow the SAMRC to address certain priority areas to contribute to the overall vision of the SAMRC. Therefore, in addition to scientific merit, the process will take into account considerations of gender parity, priority research areas as well as geographical representation.

3.1 Sex/gender

The SAMRC recognises the importance of fostering sex/gender equity in all areas of opportunity. In alignment with this commitment, we encourage applications from individuals who are historically underrepresented in this context.

3.2 Research priorities

Preference will be given to applications that demonstrate that their proposed research addresses priority public health challenges, innovative solutions, and emerging issues in the health fields. These can include but are not limited to the following:

- Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning
- Digital Health
- Climate Change and One Health
- Indigenous Knowledge Systems
- Food security
- Aging Populations
- Regenerative Medicine and Tissue Engineering
- Health Policy Research

3.3 Geographical Representation

We aim to foster equity in research and create opportunities for researchers from all geographic areas to contribute to SAMRC's health research agenda. We strongly encourage applications from researchers based in underrepresented provinces and regions. Table 2 below shows the number of EMUs by province.

Table 2. Number of EMUs by province and institution.

PROVINCE	# EMUS BY INSTITUTION		# EMUS BY PROVINCE
WESTERN CAPE	CPUT	1	11
	SUN	1	
	UCT	8	
	UWC	1	
GAUTENG	NICD	1	9
	UJ	1	
	UNISA	1	
	UP	1	
	WITS	4	
	TUT	1	
EASTERN CAPE	UFH	1	1

PROVINCE	# EMUS BY INSTITUTION		# EMUS BY PROVINCE
KWAZULU NATAL	CAPRISA	1	1
LIMPOPO	UNIVEN	1	1
NORTHWEST	NWU	1	1
MPUMALANGA	WITS	1	1

4. ELIGIBILITY

This is an open call for applications from researchers based at South African public universities and South African public research entities, namely Science Councils, national facilities, and other recognised research institutions. Applicants must be South African citizens or permanent residence permit holders. While there is no limit to the number of applications submitted per organisation, applicants or collaborating groups may only submit one application each. Applicants should apply for one of the following:

4.1 Tier 1 Unit

This category is open for an applicant heading a well-established and highly respected research Unit and team dedicated to advancing health knowledge and solutions, often within a specific field of health research. This Unit is characterised by its extensive history of producing high-quality, impactful research, and its leader is an expert with a proven record of significant contributions to the field, recognised on an international scale. The leader's work typically influences global health policies, clinical practices, and further research. This Unit will be led by one Unit Director.

4.2 Tier 2 Unit

This category is open for an applicant that has a well-established research Unit, making significant strides in advancing health knowledge or addressing important health challenges. The Unit is rapidly gaining recognition for its innovative research, contributions, and growing influence. The research Unit has a focused research agenda, moderate funding support, and a growing team of skilled researchers. The leader of this Unit is recognised for their expertise and accomplishments, either within a specific niche or field of health research and is beginning to make a notable impact on both national and international levels. This Unit will be led by one Unit Director.

4.3 Joint Unit

This category is open to a group of researchers who are affiliated with multiple research institutions to propose the formation of a unified research Unit. Such a Unit will be led by Co-Directors; one from each of the research institutions; and collectively they will lead all the EMU's research efforts and activities. We encourage innovative approaches to collaboration that leverage diverse expertise and promote interdisciplinary research. These proposals should clearly define the roles and contributions of each partner and illustrate how joint efforts will enhance outcomes and foster an inclusive research environment.

5. CRITERIA FOR EMUs

The most important criterion for the EMU is the scientific excellence of the individuals applying as the UD. The UD, as the Principal Investigator of the application, are expected to be scientists with an outstanding scientific track record, including pioneering and impactful scholarly contributions and highly cited articles. The awarding of EMUs flows from the track record of scientific leadership of the UD, as demonstrated by the number of impactful scientific papers from studies led by the UD. Further consideration is accorded to the UD's leadership, stature, track record, as well as recognition by peers in their respective fields, i.e., through invitation to plenary conference presentations and awards for his/her achievements at both national and international levels. In the case of Tier 1 and 2, the application may only list one UD while in the case of a Joint Unit the application needs to list several Co-Directors. Each Director must have a PhD/MD or equivalent degree and be employed by a South African research institution recognised by the SAMRC.

In reviewing applications, consideration will also be given to the proposed scientific programme and the proposed capacity development activities in the EMU and at other institutions. EMUs are expected to attract and develop outstanding students and have a major impact through developing future research leaders in their specialist areas.

A well-qualified and productive research team with access to the necessary infrastructure should already exist at the respective host institutions where the EMU will be hosted. The research team should include well-established scientists, early career scientists (e.g., post-docs), postgraduate students and adequate research infrastructure within the proposed EMU.

The EMU has a lifespan of 15-years, comprising 3 five-year cycles. Funding is approved in the first instance for a single 5-year cycle. EMU reviews to consider continuation of funding for a further 5-year period are conducted during the 4th or 5th year of every 5-year cycle. Several factors will inform the decision to continue funding for each subsequent 5-year cycle including capacity development, transformation and knowledge translation, the scientific productivity of the EMU, the EMU's publications, impact and the availability of funds from the SAMRC. At the end of the third term, the EMU status and the accompanying funding will be terminated, although this can be renewed under special circumstances with the SAMRC as per the EMU guidelines.

5.1 RESEARCH MANDATE OF EMUs

The key activities of proposed EMUs include:

- Generation of new knowledge;
- Enhancement of the leadership role of South African research globally;
- Publishing scientific articles, including articles in high impact journals;
- Contributing to human capacity development, through training and mentoring of post-graduate students and post-doctoral fellows; and
- Where applicable, conversion of knowledge into new or improved products, processes, policies and practises for impact through research translation and the protection, management and commercialisation of intellectual property.

5.2 SCOPE OF RESEARCH

EMUs are expected to define an integrated interdisciplinary research effort distinguished by scientific excellence and driven by a clear vision of research progress, new knowledge, new discoveries, or technological developments having national and global scientific impact.

The scope of work of the proposed EMUs is broad and includes research in one or more of the following areas within the focus areas described elsewhere:

- Basic laboratory research;
- Clinical;
- Biomedical;
- Behavioural;
- Public Health; and
- Implementation Science.

6. APPLICATION GUIDELINES

- This call involves a two-stage application process. The first stage will involve an expression of interest (EOI), and the second stage will involve submission of a full proposal.
- All applicants must submit an EOI and then a full proposal as per the stipulated timelines for submission.
- The SAMRC reserves the right to make no awards and re-advertise a RFA if it so wishes or to cancel this RFA altogether.
- All applications and supporting documents for this RFA must be submitted online.
- No applications submitted via email will be accepted.
- All sections of the application must be comprehensively and accurately completed. It is important to include all relevant information and detail that will enable the merits of the application to be evaluated.
- Any queries in relation to this RFA may be emailed to EMUApplications@mrc.ac.za.

6.1 Expression of interest

As the first step in the application process, applicants are invited to submit an initial, formal EOI using the online form: [Express of Interest](#) by **1 May 2025**.

6.2 Full Application

As the final step in the application process, applicants are invited to submit a [Full Application](#) using the online form by **30 June 2025**.

6.3 Supporting documents to be downloaded/submitted

- Online application: Full application;
- Full CV of the UD's and key research staff;
- The biosketch(s) of collaborators, their positions, qualifications, and details of the institution where they work;
- Letter of support from the host institution (the letter should give an indication of the infrastructure and resources that will be provided to the Unit);
- The project budget in Microsoft excel.

6.4 Submission dates and times

Applicants are encouraged to submit applications **before** the due date so that the review processes can be initiated as soon as possible. Table 3 outlines the dates that are relevant to this RFA process. Applicants should please note that should their application be successful, disbursement of funds for the first year may only happen on or after **1 April 2026** which coincides with the beginning of the SAMRC financial year.

Table 3. Application timelines

STAGES	DATE/PERIOD
1. Publication of RFA	1 April 2025
2. Submission of expression of interest	1 May 2025
3. Deadline for submitting full proposal	30 June 2025
4. Evaluation period- <i>peer review</i>	1 July – 29 August 2025
5. SAMRC internal processes	September-November 2025
6. Notification of awards	December 2025
7. Contracting	January-March 2026
8. Official start of the EMU and grant payment	1 April 2026

7. BUDGET

- The baseline funding cap for EMUs is **R1 million per annum**.
- Subject to availability, EMUs will also receive incentivised funding on annual basis based on the EMU's previous year's outputs.
- The funding will be allocated to the Host institution where the Unit Directors are currently employed.
- Non-allowable costs include:
 - Purchase or construction of a building;
 - Rental costs for space that is owned by the host institution; and
 - Purchase of office furniture.
 - Topping up the salary of permanent staff employed by the research host institution.

8. EVALUATION PROCESS

All parties participating in the review process will be bound by a confidentiality agreement to under no circumstance copy, divulge or share applications, proposals, or meeting materials with anyone who has not been officially designated to participate in the peer review process, in any possible form. The review and evaluation process will be a two-step process:

- Internal SAMRC screening for responsiveness to all the specified administrative and procedural provisions required in the RFA related to the submission of the EOI and full application, and
- Peer-review to assess the scientific merit (*and other review criteria as specified below*) of applications found to be responsive to the RFA provisions.

8.1 Internal screening

All applications will be screened by the SAMRC for completeness and responsiveness to the goals of the RFA and its administrative requirements/provisions. If the application is found to be incomplete or unresponsive to the provisions described in the RFA, the application will undergo no further review.

Internal screening will be done using the following criteria:

- Was the application received on or before the closing date?
- Does the application meet all eligibility criteria according to the guidelines?
- Is the application complete, with all sections filled in, and endorsed by the entity's relevant authorised representative in a signed letter?
- Have all required supporting documents been provided?
- Does the application address one or more of the priority areas as per the RFA?

8.2 Peer-review of qualifying applications

Each responsive application will be reviewed by local and international reviewers. Reviewers will provide an overall impact score and comments to reflect their assessment of the likelihood for the project to exert a sustained, powerful influence on the research field(s) involved. These review comments and scores will be provided to an unconflicted selection committee. This committee will consider these comments and scores and further review all the eligible applications, to provide an assessment of the scientific merit of each application, and a funding recommendation to the SAMRC for its consideration.

8.3 Rating of applications

Reviewers will consider each of the review criteria below in determining the scientific merit of the research and provide separate scores and comments for each. An application does not need to be strong in all categories to be judged meritorious but will need to demonstrate scientific impact.

Reviewers will consider each of the review criteria below to determine the scientific, technical, and administrative merit of the application:

- **Track record of the UD's (50%).**

Does the leadership have an outstanding track record in research excellence and leadership? Is the leadership experienced and well-suited to conduct the research envisaged? Does the leadership have a good record of scientific publications (quantity and quality of publications, high impact publications, number of citations) in the relevant research focus area? Is the leadership recognised both nationally and internationally for his/her scientific contributions?

- **Research team (10%).**

Are the Unit's investigators, collaborators, and other researchers well suited to conduct the research envisaged? If early-stage investigators or new investigators, or in the early stages of independent careers, do they have appropriate experience and training? If established, have they demonstrated an ongoing record of accomplishments that have advanced their field(s)? Is the leadership approach, governance and organisational structure appropriate for the research? Are there any collaborations with the SAMRC Intramural Units/Extramural Units and/or historically disadvantaged institutions?

- **Research focus and strategy (10%).**

Does the proposed research address an important problem or a critical barrier to progress in the field? If the aims of the Unit are achieved, how will scientific knowledge, technical capability, and/or clinical practice be improved? How will successful completion of the Unit's research projects change the concepts, methods, technologies, treatments, services, or preventative interventions that drive this field? Is the overall research strategy, methodology, and analyses well-reasoned and appropriate to accomplish the specific aims of the Unit? If the research involves clinical research, are the plans for the protection of human subjects from research risks adequate? What is the potential for the research to impact on health?

- **Innovation (10%).**

Does the application challenge and seek to shift current research or clinical practice paradigms by utilising novel theoretical concepts, approaches or methodologies, instrumentation, or interventions? Are the concepts, approaches or methodologies, instrumentation, or interventions novel to one field of research or novel in a broad sense? Is a refinement, improvement, or new application of theoretical concepts, approaches or methodologies, instrumentation, or interventions proposed?

- **Research infrastructure and institutional support (10%).**

Will the scientific environment in which the research will be done contribute to the probability of success? Is the institutional support, equipment and other physical resources available to the investigators adequate for the research/research projects proposed? Will the Unit benefit from unique features of the scientific environment, subject populations, or collaborative arrangements?

- **Capacity development (5%).**

How many post-graduates will be trained, and post-docs mentored? Are these numbers congruent with the scope of the project? Does the UD undertake to target designated groups for recruitment to the project, or, if students have already been assigned to the project, is the group composition appropriate? Will any other capacity development take place under the auspices of this project (e.g., training of technicians)? Will staff/students/post-docs be afforded any additional benefits through work on this project (e.g., conference attendance, work at a collaborating institution)? Are any other outreach activities proposed?

- **Research translation (5%).**

The extent of past success in converting research findings into impact on health or impact on the field of research. In addition, plans for future endeavours to enhance the impact of the Unit's research on improving health policy, medical/public health practice and/or the nation's health status.

9. RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE UDS

9.1 Reporting

- The SAMRC plays a significant role in raising the profile of South African health research and in lobbying for additional research and innovation funding from local and international

governments, industry partners, funding agencies, donors, and other philanthropic institutions. The continued success of the SAMRC in raising funds for local health research is dependent on demonstrating value to the funders. This is through metrics such as publications and capacity development (e.g. students supported), which are reported on a regular basis to the funders, including the Auditor General and Parliament. Under-reporting by the SAMRC can potentially place several grant programs at risk. Therefore, all UD's will be requested to submit **quarterly** and **annual** reports from the year of receipt of the grant. Reports must be completed timeously on the template provided by the SAMRC detailing the relevant outputs of the Units as per the report requirements for the stipulated period. The following is a requirement for all publications originating from EMU research:

- The SAMRC should be **acknowledged** in the list of authors of **ALL** publications emanating from the EMU as an affiliated institution, unless deviation can be justified.
- The funding from SAMRC should also be **acknowledged** in the **Acknowledgement Section** of **ALL** publications emanating from the EMU.
- The EMUs are required to carry the SAMRC name as follows, **South African Medical Research Council/[Name of University] [Name of Research Unit]**, shortened as **SAMRC/[Abbreviated Name of University] [Name of Research Unit]**, and researchers in the EMU are required to include this EMU name as part of their affiliation in all publications emanating from the EMU.
- Should the EMU fail to acknowledge the SAMRC and its funding in its publication, the publication **will not** be counted towards the EMU's research outputs for that financial year.
- Appeals of the review process will not be accepted for applications submitted in response to this RFA.

9.2 Scientific compliance

9.2.1 Ethics

All UD's are required to maintain the highest ethical and safety standards in conducting the research, particularly when human and animal subjects are involved. It is the responsibility of the UD's to comply with all relevant regulations in this regard, including those of the institution at which the research is carried out.

9.2.2 Intellectual property rights

Funding by the SAMRC is subject to the provisions of the Intellectual Property Rights from Publicly Financed Research and Development Act 51 of 2008. Further, the SAMRC requires that intellectual property is managed in a manner that ensures "global access." Global Access requires that (a) the knowledge and information gained from funded projects be promptly and broadly disseminated, subject to intellectual property protection, where appropriate, and (b) the intellectual property be made available and accessible at an affordable price to people most in need within developing countries.

10. ADDITIONAL IMPORTANT INFORMATION

Please take note of the following important information:

- The SAMRC may seek to verify any information provided by applicants through independent research or by third parties approved by the SAMRC. The SAMRC assumes no responsibility for costs incurred in responding to this RFA or any further invitations or communications.

- The SAMRC reserves the right to amend or withdraw the RFA at any time and/or to make no awards.
- Grants will be paid to the host institution/organisation where the Unit Directors are employed, as set out in a funding agreement to be concluded between the parties.
- The SAMRC will utilise the results of the peer review to determine which meritorious applications receive funding. The SAMRC may also consider additional factors such as a balance in the range of research areas supported in making its final determinations.
- Upon request, the SAMRC will provide written summaries of the review findings for those applications found responsive and submitted to the review process. Note that reviewers' names will not be shared with the applicants.
- When UD's resign, retire from the Institution, or are unavailable for any other reason without a succession plan, the EMU status and associated funding will **be terminated within six (6) months** of such resignation, retirement, or notice of unavailability.
- The EMU status and support shall be terminated should the research conducted in the EMU breach the regulations that apply to research integrity or research ethics or any regulatory, legislative and institutional guidelines governing research.
- The SAMRC should be **acknowledged** in the list of authors of **ALL** publications emanating from the EMU as an affiliated institution, unless deviation can be justified.
- The funding from SAMRC should also be **acknowledged** in the **Acknowledgement Section** of **ALL** publications emanating from the EMU.
- The EMUs are required to carry the SAMRC name as follows, **South African Medical Research Council/[Name of University] [Name of Research Unit], shortened as SAMRC/[Abbreviated Name of University] [Name of Research Unit]**, and researchers in the EMU are required to include this EMU name as part of their affiliation in all publications emanating from the EMU.
- Should the EMU fail to acknowledge the SAMRC and its funding in its publication, the publication **will not** be counted towards the EMU's research outputs for that financial year.
- Appeals of the review process will not be accepted for applications submitted in response to this RFA.

11. POPIA COMPLIANCE

As of the 1st of July 2021, the new Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA) came into full effect. The law is designed to protect how all juristic persons use, store and process data. You can read the full details on the act here: <https://popia.co.za/>. SAMRC as a responsible statutory science council complies with POPIA.

The SAMRC will receive personal information through the applications submitted to the SAMRC in response to this RFA. The personal information requested on the application template is necessary for the SAMRC to fully evaluate the application for funding. This information will be shared with external reviewers, the relevant steering committee as well as the SAMRC management for the purposes of processing the application. The SAMRC will process this personal information strictly in accordance with POPIA. The SAMRC undertakes specifically to process the personal information on the basis that (a) it was provided voluntarily and (b) the information will be processed only as far may be necessary and within the limitation and ambit of the purpose of evaluating the application for funding (i.e., the purpose with which the personal information was received). The SAMRC confirms that it is lawfully processing the information since the purpose of processing is to seek quality applications for funding which the SAMRC

is mandated to do in terms of Section 4 of the SAMRC Act 58 of 1991, thus the SAMRC is fulfilling its legislated and lawful mandate, and strategic objectives as provided for in the SAMRC Act. By submitting your application to the SAMRC, you acknowledge and agree to the use of your personal information as outlined above. Should you not approve of such use of your personal information then please refrain from applying.

CONTACT DETAILS

Please direct your requests for further information to:

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