



**UNIVERSITY OF
ZULULAND**

POLICY AND PROCEDURES

on

**NICHE AREA DEVELOPMENT: PROCESS &
PLANNING**

POLICY NUMBER	RI P31	POLICY OWNER	DVC, RESEARCH & INNOVATION
OVERSEEING COMMITTEE(S)		RESEARCH → SENATE → COUNCIL	
APPROVAL DATE	03 October 2017	REVISION DATE	03 October 2020

POLICY STATEMENT

This policy outlines the objective for the development, and the underlying principles, procedures as well as templates to plan, assess and implement research niche areas in faculties, so as to support the focus and alignment of all research activity – with the research strategy of the institution.

REVISION HISTORY

CURRENT APPROVAL CYCLE			
POLICY NUMBER		REF	
DATE OF APPROVAL BY MANCO			
DATE OF APPROVAL BY SENATE		27 August 2017	
DATE OF APPROVAL BY COUNCIL		03 October 2017	
EFFECTIVE DATE FOR IMPLEMENTATION		03 October 2017	
NEXT REVISION DATE		03 October 2020	

APPROVAL HISTORY			
DATE OF FIRST APPROVAL			
POLICY NUMBER	MANCO NUMBER(S)	SENATE / MANCO REVISION DATE	COUNCIL APPROVAL DATE

RELATED POLICIES	
POLICY NUMBER	NAME OF POLICY
	UNIZULU RESEARCH STRATEGY
	UNIZULU RESEARCH POLICY

TABLE OF CONTENTS

POLICY STATEMENT	1
1. INTRODUCTION	5
2. OBJECTIVE/S	5
3. SCOPE	5
4. DEFINITIONS	6
5. PRINCIPLES	7
6. POLICY PROVISIONS	9
SECTION B: PROCEDURE	11
7. Development, Application and Assessment of a Research Niche Area.....	11
7.1 RNAs, Faculties and inter-faculty committees must ensure that.....	11
7.2 The Faculty / inter-faculty process	11
7.3 The institutional and stakeholder process.....	11
7.4 Critical Assessment criteria & guidelines for RNA Proposal reviewers	12
8 RNA proposal template and development criteria to be followed	12
8.1 University support needed of the proposed RNA.....	13
8.2 Outlining Potential benefits.....	15
8.3 Time line and operationalisation of Research Niche Area proposal development	15
8.4 Budget Template.....	15

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: RNA Proposal Template & Development Criteria	12
Table 2: The Proposed RNA's Research Strength and Competencies	13
Table 3: Organisational Structure and Governance	13
Table 4: Academic Support	13
Table 5: Infrastructure.....	14
Table 6: Financial Support.....	14
Table 7: Leadership & Management	14
Table 8: Operationalisation of RNA Proposal Development	14
Table 9: INCOME	17
Table 10: EXPENDITURE.....	18
Table 11: NOTES TO EXPENDITURE BUDGET ITEM.....	19

1. INTRODUCTION

Challenges facing Faculties are to identify the most appropriate research areas to develop.

Some criteria which can be applied in order to make such decisions would be:

- The strategic research focus of the Faculty
- Human resources capacity
- Physical infrastructure
- Potential impact
- Relevance for the local context
- Competitive advantage
- Regional exclusivity
- National and international relevance

The institutional research strategy a major policy document upon which institutional research structures including research niche areas are based.

This policy document outlines a motivation and objective for the development of research areas, as well as the underlying principles, procedures and templates to assist the development and assessment of research niche areas in faculties.

2. OBJECTIVE/S

In alignment with the institutional strategic research objectives, the objective of the proposed policy is to prepare the University for the development and implementation of selected Research Niche Areas.

The development of Research Niche Area (RNA) proposals by Faculties (or inter-faculty committees) shall concentrate the University research in specific ways, including:

- The review process and suggested (potential) RNAs
- The current SARCHi chair
- Research groups operating in faculties
- Existing research projects funded by the science system, government or the private sector
- The need to position the RNA in the context of other research entities such as Centres, Units, Institutes etc.

3. SCOPE

This policy applies to all academic departments, faculties, research centres, groups or individual working as a researcher in a full-time, part-time capacity, be it in a scholarship, fellowship, or any collaborative capacity at or with – the University of Zululand.

4. DEFINITIONS

4.1 Research Niche Area (RNA)

A well-established research focus with a number of supporting research themes representing a strong inter and trans-disciplinary embedded-ness which is aligned to the institutional (university) research plan

4.2 Human Resource Capacity

This refers to the adequacy of skilled personnel in terms of quality and quantity, including adequacy of specialised skills to engage in niche research focused innovation, supervision, publications and community engagement.

4.3 Research Champion/s

Also referred to as a research leader, a champion refers to a researcher who takes initiative to lead in in various respects of a research focus area. This is a self-driven individual who champions research, making notable inroads in individual and collaborative research projects, the sourcing of research funds, motivating and in the mentoring others. S/he is highly visible in community engagements, industry linkages and similar activities that yield high research output, impacts, and related recognition, with positive spin-offs on department, faculty and institutional prestige.

4.4 Strategic Alignment

Strategic alignment would imply a clear linkage between a particular research programme and the research strategy of the institution. Often Research Niche Areas exemplify research focus areas that is defined to further institutional research objectives as outlined in institutional research strategies. As opposed to haphazard research activities with no link to any institutional direction, strategic alignment refers to research that is planned to further one or more aspects of the institutional research strategy.

4.5 Regional Exclusivity

It refers to institutional strengths drawn from natural and circumstantial characteristics that are unique to its regional location, be it environmentally, geographically, socially, and economically. In the context of research focus areas, regional exclusivity would yield a “comparative advantage” for a university in related research options due to its proximity to resources and facilities unique to its context, by comparison to other institutions.

5. PRINCIPLES

As Unizulu is assessing the research context, several corollaries flow from the strategic positioning process – both in terms of internal and external considerations:

- 5.1 Formal research structures must not be left in an unplanned manner, but always be linked to institutional strategic plans
- 5.2 These structures must add strategic value as areas of scholarly excellence in alignment with the University's strategic goals
- 5.3 The external (and internal) prestige attached to formally-established research structures means that they must play important roles in enhancing the university's external image.
- 5.4 Research structures that are established to promote external research work must be aligned with a considerable oversight over potential institutional liabilities.
- 5.5 Accordingly, research contracts must be supported by careful application of legal minds and the ability to manage large amounts of funds
- 5.6 A link between research structures and the strategic positioning of a university very often also results in a concentration of internal research resources in those structures – indeed, research structures are often established in order to assist in strategic resourcing.
- 5.7 The university shall invest in seed funding for a number of years in order to support the functioning of Research Niche Areas, at least until a certain level of sustainability has been achieved.
- 5.8 It is common for universities to respond to these scholarly, strategic, legal and marketing implications of formal research structures by formalizing their management through more systematic and discerning frameworks for the establishment of research structures, regular performance monitoring, and closer relations to institutional budgeting processes.
- 5.9 However, it is not feasible for the university to seek premier status in all aspects of its academic enterprise.
- 5.10 Embarking on a strategic planning and positioning exercise of these research units requires differentiation and an expansion of academic and research footprint, in the form of research niches in which the university will concentrate its efforts.

- 5.11 Research niches identification must inform and be informed by the university's existing research activities and structures.
- 5.12 Eventually, the university's areas of academic excellence and strength should correlate and align closely with those in which it excels or want to excel in future in terms of research and innovation.
- 5.13 Strengthening and consolidating existing research units must be considered in terms of this background as a strategic point of departure.
- 5.14 Strategic differentiation can only move beyond the rhetorical level if it is also resourced, this exercise will inevitably have resourcing consequences that require choices to be made between areas of internal strength and scholarly excellence, external research need, and those with less internal capacity and a more competitive external need.
- 5.15 Rational considerations and planning frameworks should move the process further, and a systematic approach to the naming, re-positioning and a possible establishment of new research structures is essential.
- 5.16 Creating an objective basis for comparison across the range of research structures in the university and across the faculties is important.
- 5.17 Nationally and internationally the use of RNA structural titles imbues the relevant research entity with greater status and prestige that it would enjoy if it were merely a research "project" or "programme", this status generally increasing in the order, research node, research niche area unit, centre, institute.
- 5.18 Hence, the establishment of formal research structures, such as Research Niche Areas, inevitably elevates those research activities associated with the structure above others in the same institution, bringing with it institutional governance issues, strategic research matters and marketing implications to be considered and managed.

6. POLICY PROVISIONS

The following framework shall guide the classification of research structures such as a Research Niche Area:

Table1 : Research Niche Areas - Minimum Criteria		
	Developing RNA	Developed RNA
Focus/ Niche: Key qualities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A clear research focus with supporting research themes representing a strong inter and trans-disciplinary embedded-ness which is aligned to the institutional plan of the university ▪ The RNA straddles Faculties incorporating a number of research activities aligned to and contributing to the development of the RNA ▪ Identified RNA must be aligned strategically, institutionally, locally, nationally and internationally ▪ The focus of the RNA must have scientific and applied merit ▪ The RNA must be in line with the approved PQM by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A well-established research focus with a number of supporting research themes representing a strong inter and trans-disciplinary embedded-ness which is aligned to the institutional plan of the university ▪ The RNA straddles Faculties incorporating a number of research activities aligned to and contributing to the development of the RNA ▪ Identified research area must be aligned strategically, institutionally, locally, nationally and internationally ▪ The Research Niche focus Area must have scientific and technical merit ▪ The RNA should be in line with the approved PQM by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET)
Plans & Resourcing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ University approved business plan with a five-year horizon which includes budget with contributing sources ▪ The RNA must strive to obtaining at least 20% of its total research budget from sources of funding other than the university ▪ The University to provide appropriate infrastructure, admin support etc 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ University approved business plan with a five-year horizon must include budget with contributing sources ▪ The RNA must strive towards obtaining at least 40% of its total research budget from sources of funding other than the university ▪ The University must provide appropriate infrastructure, admin support etc
Leadership and governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A champion/leader that has a doctoral qualification and research track record. ▪ Assistant leader and succession planning must be in place. ▪ Regular reports to relevant university structures in line with approved strategic plan and objectives ▪ Regular research group meetings to ensure the enhancement of quality and quality assurance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A champion/leader who is a rated and established researcher with recognition and standing in the university – preferably at professor or director level ▪ Assistant leader and succession planning must be in place where necessary ▪ Assistant leader (must be in possession of PhD) ▪ Regular reports to relevant university structures in line with approved strategic plan and objectives

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Regular research group meetings to ensure quality enhancement and assurance ▪ A formal governance body such as a Board
Team members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 5 active team members conducting their research within the theme of the RNA ▪ Postgraduate students (Master's and Doctoral) must be trained in the RNA ▪ There must be clear plans to improve student throughput and to address redress and equity in terms of both staff and student participation in the RNA ▪ At least one Postdoc and research fellow to be recruited 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 10 active team members conducting research within the theme of the RNA ▪ Postgraduate students, (Masters' and Doctoral) must be trained in the RNA ▪ There must be clear plans to address redress and equity in terms of both staff and student participation in the RNA ▪ A number of Postdocs and research fellows, funding dependent
Accredited Research targets over a five year period	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 2 Doctoral completed ▪ 5 Research Master's completed ▪ 1 accredited paper per team member average per year over the five year period ▪ Innovations /Patents (where applicable) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 5 Doctoral completed ▪ 10 Research Master's completed ▪ 2 accredited papers per team member per year over five years ▪ One Book ▪ Innovations / Patents(where applicable)

SECTION B: PROCEDURE

7. DEVELOPMENT, APPLICATION AND ASSESSMENT OF A RESEARCH NICHE AREA

Procedures for the development and assessment of research niche areas

7.1 RNAs, Faculties and Inter-Faculty Committees to Ensure that

- 7.1.1 The focus / theme represents a strong sense of inter and trans - disciplinary
- 7.1.2 RNAs straddle Faculties but also may have strong representations from a Faculty in an inter-disciplinary way
- 7.1.3 The locus of RNA management and governance is not Faculty bound but also reporting to, and is accountable to the Dean or Deputy Vice Chancellor of Research
- 7.1.4 Faculties must create a mechanism to consult inter-faculty before they develop the RNA proposal.
- 7.1.5 Inter-faculty committees are established to facilitate the development of the RNAs

7.2 The Faculty / inter-faculty process

- 7.2.1 Faculties to establish joint inter-faculty committee (s) to assist with the development of the proposed RNA
- 7.2.2 Use institutional criteria in the identification and selection of potential RNAs.
- 7.2.3 Follow template to develop the proposal and motivate carefully
- 7.2.4 Faculty / inter-faculty recommendation to institutional review committee

7.3 The institutional and stakeholder process

- 7.3.1 Key stakeholder involvement both internally and externally must be included in discussions
- 7.3.2 Review committee to be established with representation of Faculties
- 7.3.3 Internal selection of RNAs before it is sent to external reviewers
- 7.3.4 Recommended RNA proposals to be sent to at least three peer reviewers
- 7.3.5 Peer reviewers to assess the academic and scientific merit of the proposed RNA in line with stipulated criteria.

7.4 Critical Assessment criteria & guidelines for RNA Proposal reviewers

The following criteria will be used by internal and external review committees, including specialist external reviewers

- 7.4.1 Strategic alignment with the Unizulu research strategy and existing institutional strengths and priorities
- 7.4.2 Strategic alignment with the national, regional research strategies and programmes such as national research development objectives, the millennium development goals, etc.
- 7.4.3 Alignment to the societal, local and regional contexts
- 7.4.4 Critical human resource capacity
- 7.4.5 Physical infrastructure in place
- 7.4.6 Conceptual strength with inter and trans-disciplinarity agency
- 7.4.7 The research output impact
- 7.4.8 Competitive advantage
- 7.4.9 Regional exclusivity, novelty

8 RNA proposal template and development criteria to be followed

Alignment of the proposed RNA with strategic research frameworks and objectives to the institutional, local, regional and national levels

Table 1: RNA Proposal Template & Development Criteria

<p>Briefly describe the following and provide relevant factual information:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Strategic alignment of the proposed RNA with the Unizulu research strategy• Strategic alignment, integration and the supplementation of existing research areas or initiatives• Strategic alignment of the proposed RNA with relevant national and international strategies e.g. the National Research and Development Strategy, etc.• The role and function of the societal, local, regional contexts in the proposed RNA and strategic relevance to the institutional mission and objectives. <p>(Suggested maximum length of four A4 pages, Arial font, 11 point and 1.5 spacing)</p>

Table 2: The Proposed RNA's Research Strength and Competencies

<p>Briefly describe the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The RNA's research strengths, capabilities and competencies and the alignment of the proposed RNA with that of existing research activities and capacity.• The strategic research focus of the RNA• Critical human resource capacity• Physical infrastructure in place• Potential impact on the University• Relevance for the local context (rural and peri-urban)• Competitive advantage• Regional exclusivity <p>(Suggested maximum length of two A4 pages, Arial font, 11 point and 1.5 spacing)</p>

Table 3: Organisational Structure and Governance

<p>Describe the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reporting lines and organisational position of the RNA.• Governance processes and quality assurance <p>(Suggested maximum length of one A4 page, Arial font, 11 point and 1.5 spacing)</p>

8.1 University support needed of the proposed RNA

Table 4: Academic Support

<p>What are the expectations of University support for the RNA using non-financial means? Consider integration with other research initiatives, library, linkages, etc.</p> <p>(Suggested maximum length of one A4 page, Arial font, 11 point and 1.5 spacing)</p>

Table 5: Infrastructure

<p>Explain the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What are the additional infrastructure needs and how will the University support the RNA with infrastructure?• The provision of office and laboratory space for the RNA's research team, office furniture, IT facilities, access to necessary research equipment and infrastructure, Library needs, etc. <p>(Suggested maximum length of two A4 pages, Arial font, 11 point and 1.5 spacing)</p>

Table 6: Financial Support

<p>Use the attached budget template and motivate how the proposed RNA's activities will be funded. Use the notes section to explain and motivate.</p>
<p>See template below</p>

Table 7: Leadership & Management

<p>What are the expectations about how the University, and Faculties will provide the necessary leadership and management support to ensure the effective functioning of the RNA? (Suggested maximum length of one A4 page, Arial font, 11 point and 1.5 spacing)</p>

Note the following:

- A series of workshops / discussion will be conducted to assist Faculties and or inter-Faculty committees and or stakeholder committee with the development of their proposals.

- Starting off on a relatively small scale with two or three RNAs might be a good strategy for the University. The number of approved RNAs will depend amongst other criteria on the availability of funds
- The time line for development of RNA proposals is to be discussed

8.2 Outlining Potential benefits

The discussion document should provide some direction towards the development of the RNAs with a number of benefits to be gained, such as for example:

- 8.2.1 Focusing research on areas of strength and novelty will attract more funding and would attract postgraduate students, postdocs as well as other scholars.
- 8.2.2 This in turn would lead to the enhancement of quality and prestige
- 8.2.3 The proper funding of research projects that run over a number of years which should add to the sustainability of research in Faculties
- 8.2.4 Such RNAs will provide excellent opportunities for high level research as well as for the alignment of research strategies with societal needs
- 8.2.5 RNAs provide mentoring opportunities for emerging researchers
- 8.2.6 Research output targets can be set and monitored carefully
- 8.2.7 RNAs add to the identity of Universities and add direction to scholarship and the conceptual development of researchers
- 8.2.8 It adds value to cross cutting matters such as trans-disciplinarity and curricula development
- 8.2.9 Greater acknowledgement of community engaged research

8.3 Time line and operationalisation of Research Niche Area proposal development

The approved RNAs to be in place by Jan 2018

8.4 Budget Template

Using the current value of the Rand, prepare a detailed budget of income and expenditure for the first five years of the RNA. The University's financial support amounts to an annual maximum budget of R2.8m for Science and Agriculture based RNAs and R2.6m for all other Faculty based RNAs. Continued financial support by the University is based on the RNAs' ability to reach its output targets and its ability to

attract additional funding. Annual reviews will be conducted to determine the value and nature of continued financial support.

Prepare a realistic and cost effective estimate of what is really required.

Add notes justifying the expenditure in terms of the envisaged work, for example, by placing a number in the appropriate square and then giving a brief explanation later in the document.

In your notes also explain how you plan to link the money requested per item to the strategic objectives of the RNA

Income must include all existing grants, for example,

1. Grants from the South African government, including NRF core grants, THRIP, Innovation Fund, MRC, etc.,
2. Grants from International governments, e.g., NSF, EU, NIH, etc.,
3. Grants from local & international donors, e.g., NGOs, Wellcome Trust, endowed trusts, etc.,
4. Contributions from local and international industrial partners.

INCOME

Table 8: INCOME

Item	Sub-item	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5
Local grants						
International grants						
Angel donations						
Industry contributions						
Other						
Total						

Table 9: EXPENDITURE

[illegible]

Table 10: NOTES TO EXPENDITURE BUDGET ITEM

Note number	Brief explanation (No more than 5 lines of text per note)
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	
6.	
7.	
8.	
9.	
10.	
11.	
12.	
13.	
14	

9 REVIEW OF THIS POLICY

The Deputy Vice Chancellor, Research and Innovation or his/her nominee shall review this policy on a three year circle.

10 IMPLEMENTATION AND OVERSIGHT

10.1 The project owner of this policy is the Deputy Vice Chancellor, Research and Innovation, who is to ensure that it implemented across relevant faculties and research units across the university, and that it is presented for revision and review at appropriate times.

10.2 Nothing in this clause shall prevent Council from reviewing this policy at any time prior to the stipulated five-year cycle, in which event a new cycle shall commence from the date of such review.