UNIVERSITIES SOUTH AFRICA

4th USAf Higher Education Conference



Professor Stephanie Burton

AECRS Programme Leader and USAf Research Fellow; Professor, University of Pretoria

Session

Building the next generation of Academics and Researchers

Advancing Early Career Researchers and Scholars Programme (AECRS)

https://aecrs.usaf.ac.za/

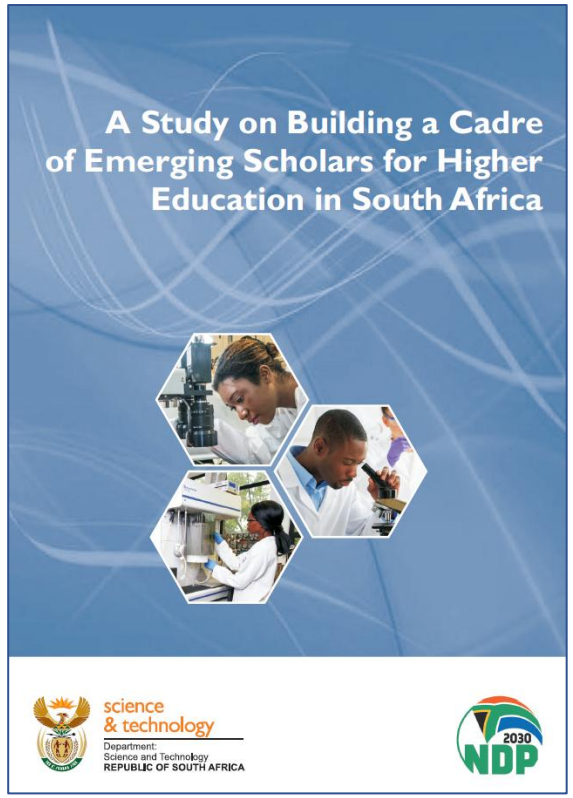
BUILDING THE NEXT GENERATION OF ACADEMICS AND RESEARCHERS

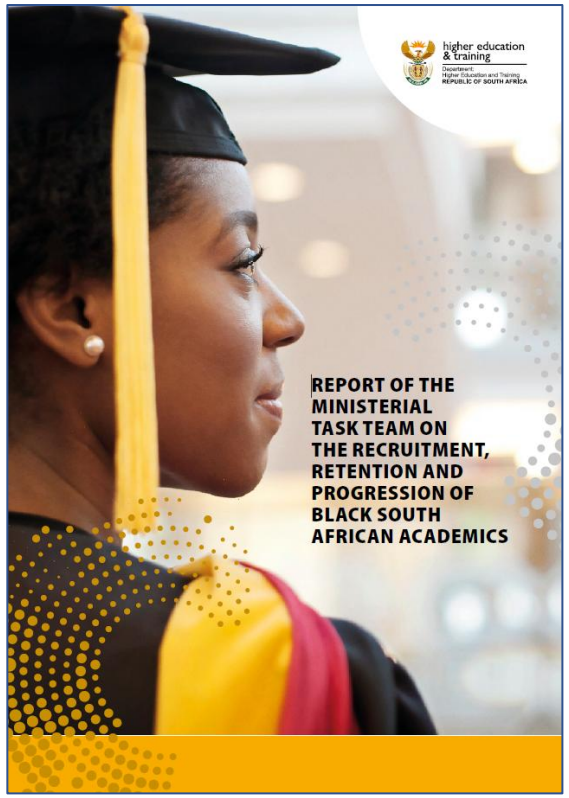
USAf Conference

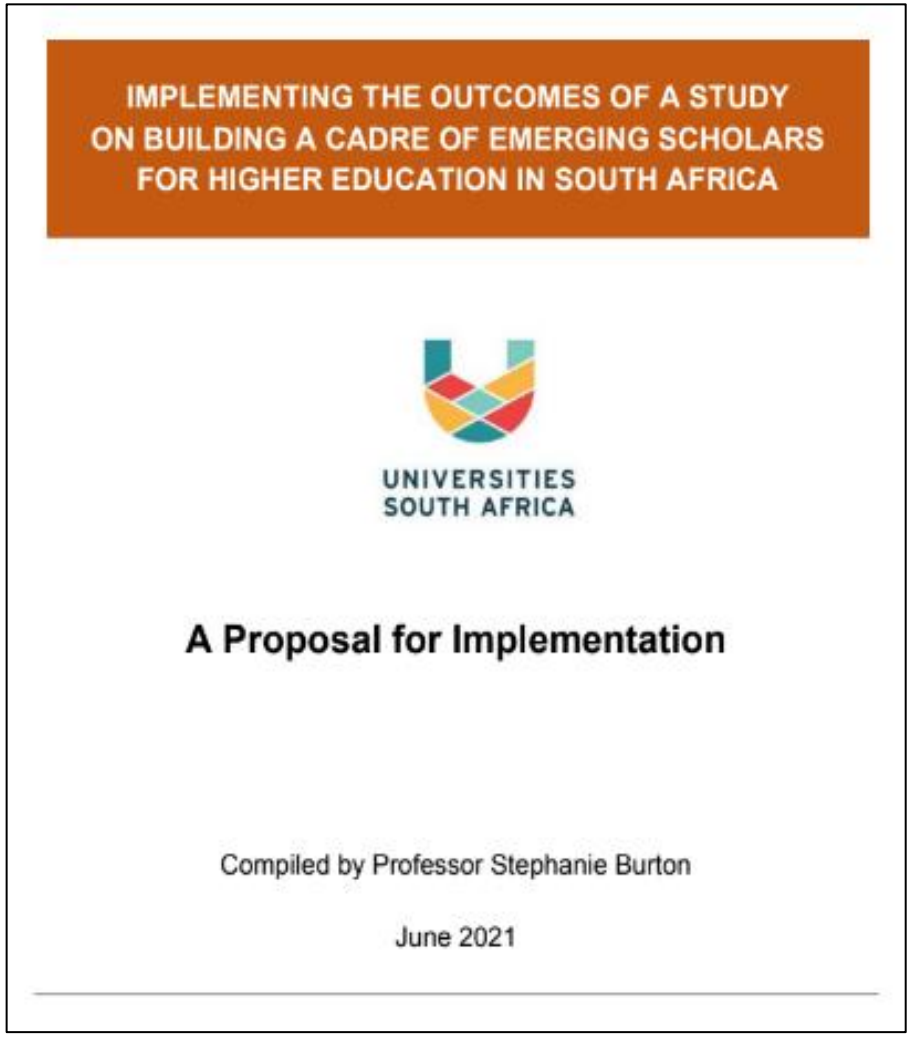
October 2026

Professor Stephanie Burton
Programme Leader, USAf Fellow

BACKGROUND







- DST | NRF | DHET
- Interviews with DVCs and Directors
- Information gathering and mapping

UNIVERSITIES SOUTH AFRICA

science, technology & innovation
Department: Science, Technology and Innovation
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

Advancing Early Career Researchers And Scholars (AECRS) Programme established in 2020 to implement recommendations

OVERVIEW - Building the next generation of academics and researchers

AECRS
Advancing Early Career Researchers and Scholars

Areas of focus: Training and supervision | Career development | Networking | Monitoring and evaluation

Supervision training and capacity

Improved supervisor training and mentorship for emerging academics

Increased capacity for training of supervisors

Develop internal institutional capacity to supervise postgraduate research-based programmes

Improve quality of the supervision
Reduce stress experienced by supervisors and postgraduate students

Supporting ECAs

Resources and interventions to support Early Career Academics in developing their research and academic careers

Mentorship

A need for experienced mentors
Expertise in specific fields as well as for general guidance

Reduce issues regarding institutional culture and power dynamics, in internal mentorship programmes

Address the shortage of black South African mentors

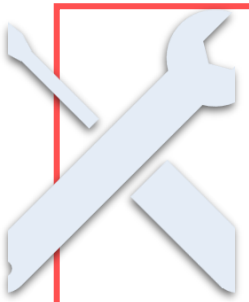
Monitoring and Evaluation

Measuring and monitoring the impact of interventions to support academic development

AECRS
Advancing Early Career Researchers and Scholars

FOUR PROJECTS, ONE PROGRAMME

thusoresources



An academic capacity development resource database – a **'national toolbox'**

thusoconnect



A nationally coordinated **mentorship resource platform**



A **national strategy group** focussing on postgraduate education

CoPPGES
Community of Practice for Postgraduate Education and Scholarship



A project to develop an effective system for monitoring the impact of academic support interventions

thuso monitor

science, technology & innovation
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CoPPGES

Community of Practice for Postgraduate Education and Scholarship

The CoP PGES advises USAf's Research and Innovation Strategy Group (RISG) and advocates for the sector on matters relating to postgraduate education; coordinates national activities such as conferences and colloquia and facilitates the sharing of resources and exchanging good practices for the benefit of the postgraduate community.

https://usaf.ac.za/communities-of-practice/community-of-practice-on-postgraduate-education-and-scholarship/

AECRS Advancing Early Career Researchers and Scholars

CoPPGES

Community of Practice for Postgraduate Education and Scholarship

What the Community of Practice does

- A forum for sharing of best practice
- A strategic think tank
- A lobby to advocate for matters relating to postgraduate education
- Coordination of national activities focussed on postgraduate training and capacity development
- A national platform for discussion, interaction and recommendations
- Connecting with DHET and NRF programmes
- Collation of information from participating universities
- Facilitation of cooperation and collaboration between institutions and programmes .

CoPPGES
Community of Practice for Postgraduate Education and Scholarship

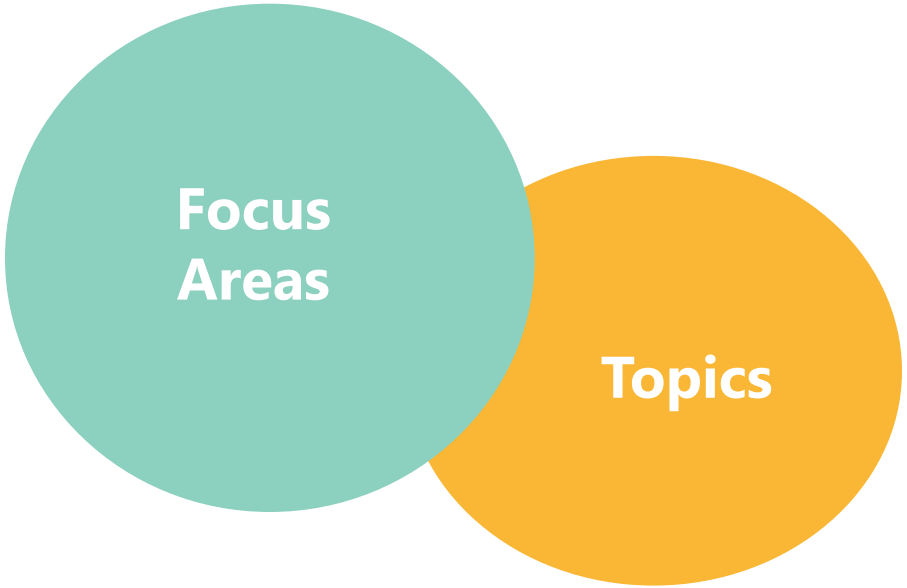
AECRS Advancing Early Career Researchers and Scholars

Postgraduate supervision capacity

Doctorateness: Theoretical approaches, Social justice and equity

Advocacy: Funding / resourcing, accountability and responsibility

Collaboration and coordination of national activities: conferences, colloquia, workshops, and seminars



Research integrity and ethics

Student mobility

Funding - standing item

Supervision

Mentorship for supervisors and postgraduate students

Assessment of postgraduate degrees

Preparedness for doctoral study

AIs in postgraduate study

https://usaf.ac.za/communities-of-practice/community-of-practice-on-postgraduate-education-and-scholarship/

Programme for the CoP PGES

AECRS
Advancing Early Career Researchers and Scholars

CoP PGES News



An early-career scientist is chasing a breakthrough in African medicine
11 December 2025
Read More ›



Senior scholars acknowledge the AECRS programme's utility, and call for urgent other reforms to address systemic challenges
11 December 2025
Read More ›



Collaboration is advocated as the preferred strategy for strengthening SA's pipeline of future scholars and researchers
11 December 2025
Read More ›



Mentorship models must evolve to support academic success
11 December 2025
Read More ›



Everything Researchers need to know about Open Access publishing: A discussion
10 December 2025



What researchers need to know about Open Access publishing, but are afraid to ask
10 December 2025



Senior academics' insights shared at the postgraduates and AI workshop
27 May 2025



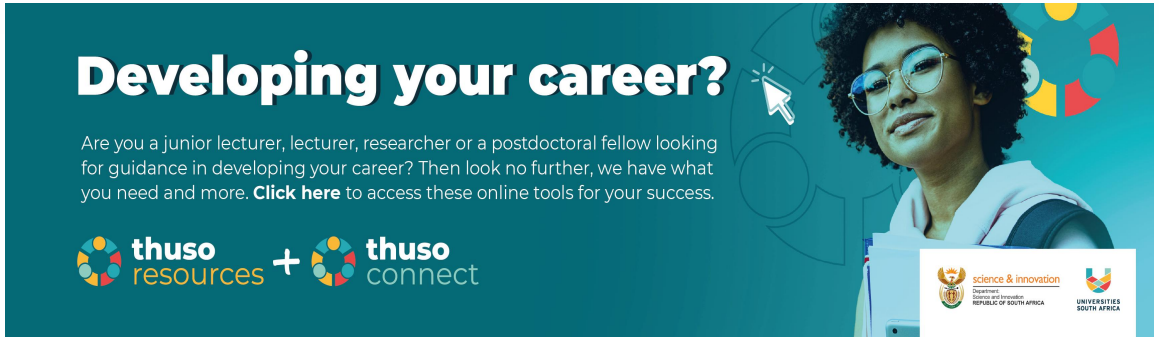
Open student engagement about AI would be more beneficial than policing them on its use – a senior Rhodes University scholar advises

Community of Practice on Postgraduate Education and Scholarship

ONLINE PLATFORMS

AECRS Advancing Early Career Researchers and Scholars

thusoresources



Go to Thuso Resources

thusoconnect



Go to Thuso Connect



Watch Video on YouTube

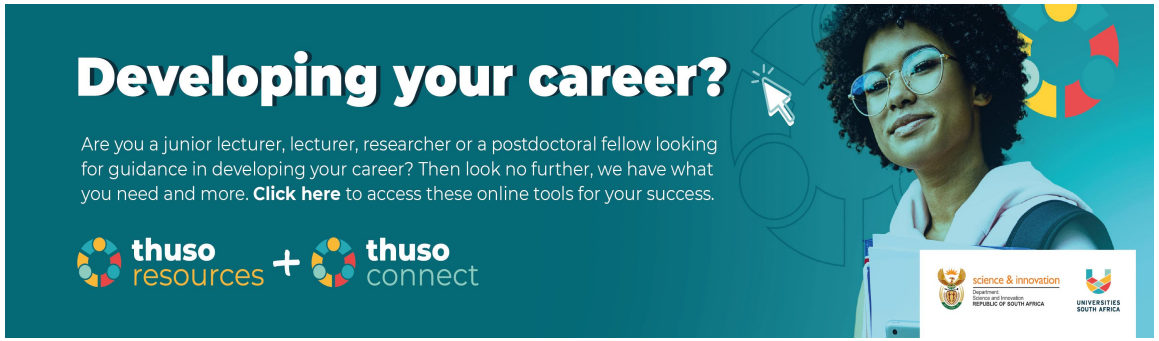
Watch Video on YouTube

Watch Video on YouTube

ONLINE PLATFORMS

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Go to Thuso Connect

These platforms are well-established and are being used extensively

Communication is ongoing

https://aecrs.usaf.ac.za/



[Go to Thuso Resources]

thusoresources

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HOME | CATEGORIES | RESOURCES | FAQ | ABOUT | CONTACT | SIGN IN | SIGN UP

Research design

Research funding

Research publishing

Develop your academic career

Develop your leadership skills

Skillful teaching

Being successful at supervision

Open access

Welcome to

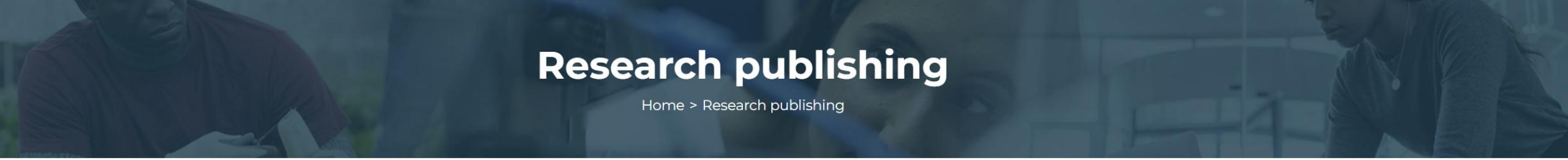
Thuso Resources

Thuso Resources is a national toolbox of help (thuso) resources for early career researchers and scholars, developed in response to nation-wide studies which showed a need for this support platform. In the interest of collaboratively building strengths, South African universities have shared instruments, resources, and training offerings on this platform to inform and assist early career researchers and scholars in their career development.

About Thuso Resources ›



[Go to Thuso Resources]



Research publishing

This category contains a total of **30** articles.

How Early Career Researchers are Advancing an African Approach to Open Science

Source: LIBSENSE Open Science Network | Published: 31 August, 2026 | Categories: Research publishing, Open Access | Keywords: Open data, Global South, African open science, Research assessment reform, Scholarly communication

[PODCAST] Exchanges Discourse: Dealing with Reviewer Feedback and Interdisciplinary Publishing

Source: The Exchanges Discourse podcast | Published: 28 August, 2026 | Categories: Research publishing | Keywords: Academic writing, Interdisciplinary research, Publishing advice, Peer review, Podcast

Research Integrity: Manuscript Development and Dissemination

Source: Taylor & Francis | Published: 27 August, 2026 | Categories: Research publishing | Keywords: Research integrity, Ethical authorship, Peer review response, Publication ethics, Early career researchers

SciELO SA Publication and Submission Guidelines

Source: Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO) South Africa | Published: 27 August,

Search...

Keywords

Academic Citizen
Academic Freedom
Academic wellbeing
Academic writing
AI Productivity
AI productivity partner
Argument cohesion
Batch process e-mail
Chapter structure
Data collection
Deeper questions
Doctoral proposals
E-mail to task
Feasibility
Gen AI
Giving academic guidance
Inbox maintenance
Interdisciplinary exchange
Next generation
No code AI
PhD milestones
Planning
Podcast
Prioritisation
Productivity skills

thusoresources

AECRS Advancing Early Career Researchers and Scholars

WHAT THE NUMBERS SAY

26 **Active SA Universities | 26**

8 Historically Disadvantaged Institutions(HDI)

Total Distinct Visitors > 16 300

Total Registered Users 697

389 **Emerging Researchers**

48 **Established Researchers**

TOP 5 TOPICS ON THE SITE

1. Develop your academic career
2. Skilfully teaching
3. Research publishing
4. Research design
5. Being successful at supervision

Partnerships with contributing institutions

Cape Peninsula University of Technology

CUT Central University of Technology Free State

Rhodes University Where leaders learn

Tshwane University of Technology We empower people

University of KwaZulu-Natal Inyuvesi YaKwaZulu-Natali

Universiteit van Pretoria University of Pretoria Yunibesithi ya Pretoria

University of the Free State Universiteit van die Vrystaat Yunivesithi ya Freistata UFS UV

thusoresources

QUICK POP-UP POLL UPON EXITING PLATFORM

Statistics: March – May 2025

RATE YOUR EXPERIENCE ON THE PLATFORM

Total Responses: 50

5 ★ Responses: 29

4 ★ Responses: 13

3 ★ Responses: 3

2 ★ Responses: 1

1 ★ Responses: 4

84%

Did you find what you are looking for?



94%

Would you recommend the platform?

94%





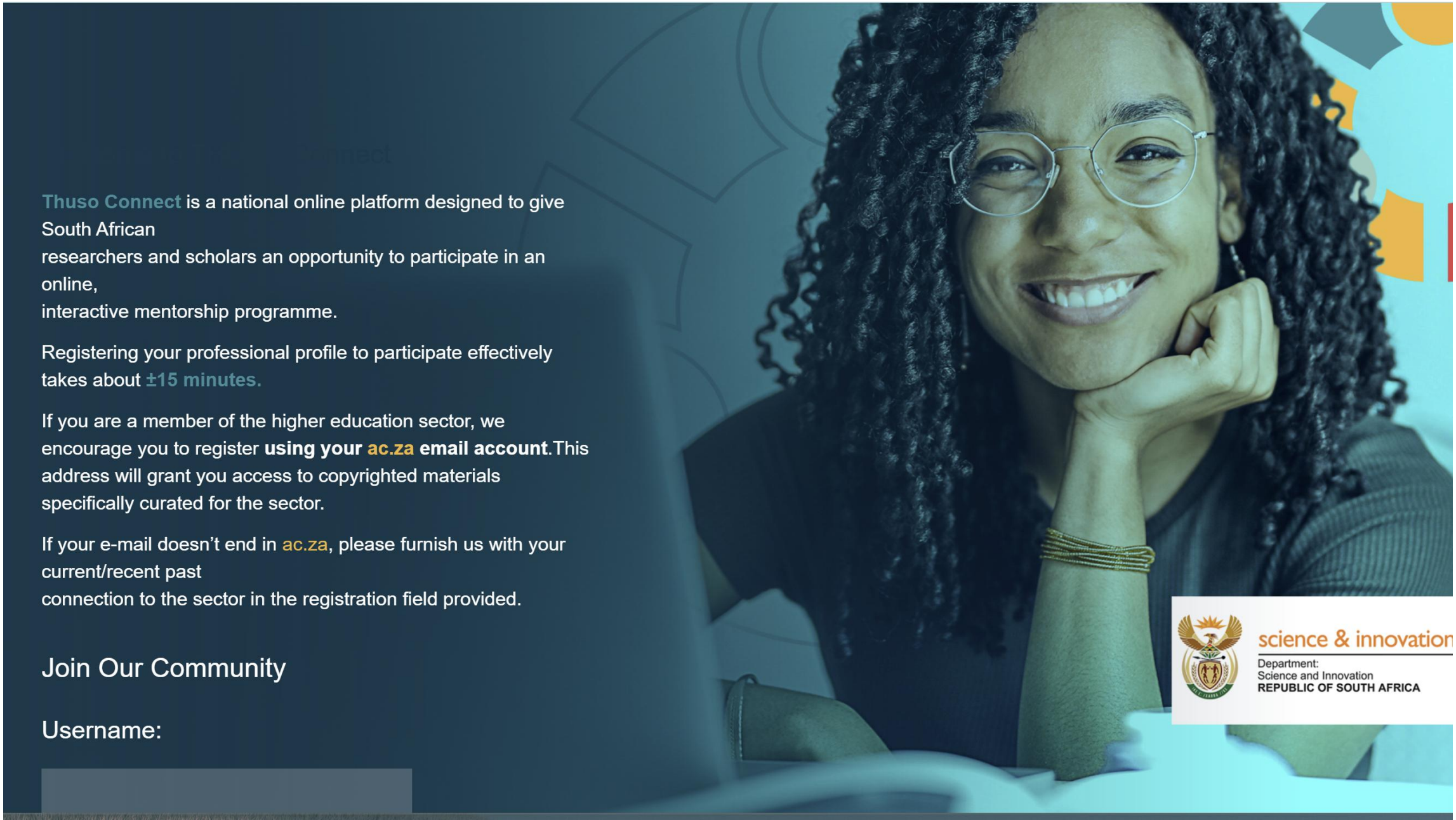
Thuso Connect is designed to give South African academic researchers the opportunity to participate in a nationwide, interactive, online mentorship programme. Individuals who are seeking mentorship, and others who are willing to offer it, can meet through the platform, and work together in a partnership. The platform provides an effective, ethical way of introducing mentors and mentees.

Go to AECRS project | USAf

Go to Thuso Connect

https://aecrs.usaf.ac.za/

thuso connect



Thuso Connect is a national online platform designed to give South African
researchers and scholars an opportunity to participate in an online,
interactive mentorship programme.

Registering your professional profile to participate effectively takes about **±15 minutes.**

If you are a member of the higher education sector, we encourage you to register **using your ac.za email account**.This address will grant you access to copyrighted materials specifically curated for the sector.

If your e-mail doesn't end in ac.za, please furnish us with your current/recent past
connection to the sector in the registration field provided.

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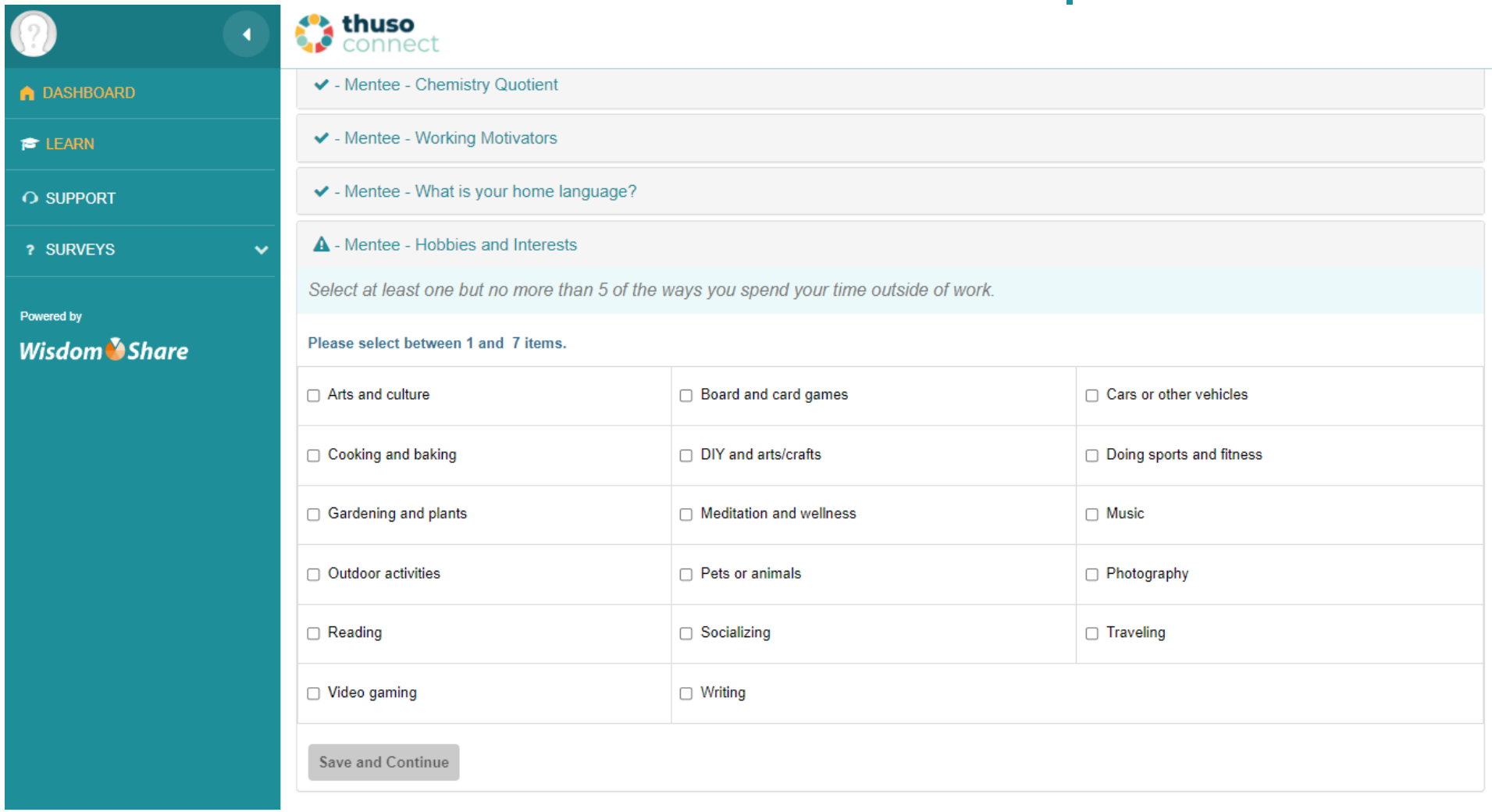
Join Our Community

Username:

thusoconnect

AECRS Advancing Early Career Researchers and Scholars

SETTING UP A PROFESSIONAL PROFILE | ± 15 MINUTES



Thuso Connect matches personalities for higher success rate and retention

80%- 90% (98.6%) 60% (70%)

thusoconnect

Mentee

Mentor

MENTORING PARTNERSHIPS

26 Active targeted Universities | 26

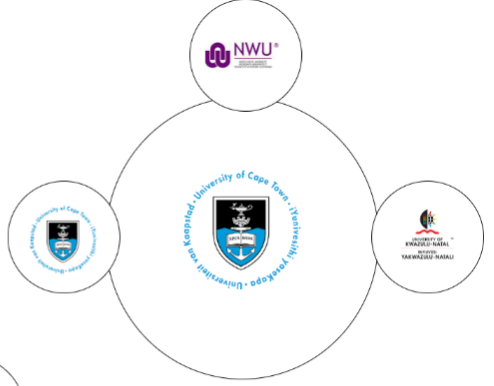
8 Historically Disadvantaged Institutions(HDI)

Fully Registered 304

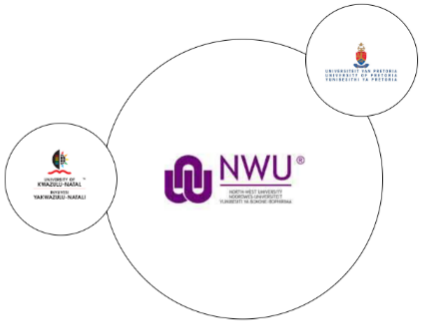
Partnerships that Connect made possible 150+



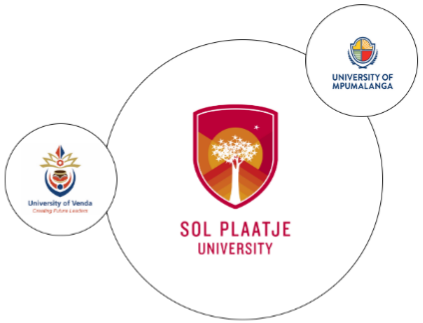


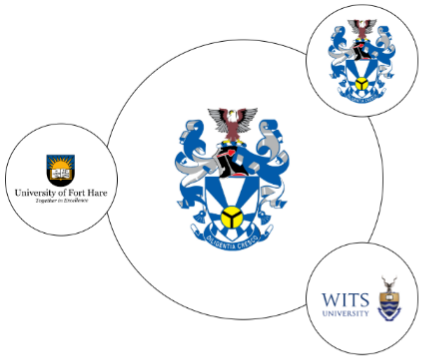














AECRS Advancing Early Career Researchers and Scholars

UPTAKE AND USAGE

This, as far as we know, is a unique project.

We have not yet found a country that has implemented **a nationwide mentorship platform for academics and researchers**



Focus:

- Higher Education Sector
- **Mentor** and **Mentee** registration

Watch Video: Overview of Thuso Connect

INFORMATION ON UPTAKE

MENTOR BACKGROUND AND EXPERTISE

1. Broad Knowledge of Higher Education and Research
2. Supervising Research
3. Career Transition - From Emerging Researcher to Established Researcher
4. Professional Development
5. Strategic Thinking

MENTEE TOP DISCUSSION TOPICS

1. Career planning and advancement.
2. How to navigate the research environment.
3. Build stronger professional networks.
4. Broadening the scope of my research.
5. Objective person to provide constructive feedback on my work.

SKILLS AND COMPETENCIES

1. Career Planning
2. Research Grant Proposals
3. Leadership and Management
4. Networking
5. Rated Researcher

TOP DISCIPLINARY AREAS

1. Education
2. Social Sciences
3. Business, Economics and Management Studies
4. Life Sciences
5. Health Professions and Related Clinical Sciences

AECRS Advancing Early Career Researchers and Scholars

thusoconnect

AECRS Advancing Early Career Researchers and Scholars

The invitation...

Join as a mentee

Join as a mentor

Become a part of the **Thuso community**

Developing your career?

Are you a junior lecturer, lecturer, researcher or a postdoctoral fellow looking for guidance in developing your career? Then look no further, we have what you need and more. **Click here** to access these online tools for your success.

thuso resources + thuso connect



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NEXT FOR ADVANCING EARLY CAREER RESEARCHER AND SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAMME

Monitoring and Evaluation

THUSO DIGITAL ECOSYSTEM

AECRS Advancing Early Career Researchers and Scholars



01

Mentorship

Relationships, support

02

Toolbox

Content, guidance

03

Tracking and Supporting

Tracking, insight, feedback

All platforms serve early-career academics (post-Masters/PhD, employed at SA public universities).

Thuso Monitor links the other two by:

Informing resource needs (e.g., “ECRs at 40% progress need grant-writing help”).

Triggering mentorship prompts (e.g., “You’re ready for a promotion mentor”).

MONITOR: INFORMATION FOR THE UNIVERSITIES

AECRS Advancing Early Career Researchers and Scholars

Thuso Monitor provides a framework that covers the currently available interventions and systems.

We are revisiting the interventions universities are now using, and where the gaps and needs exist, to give **a comprehensive national picture**

1. **What interventions** are underway
2. **Which ECAs** are in the system

We have mapped the ecosystem to determine measures of what enables success, and what are the enabling pathways, for individuals, institutions and the sector.

- **We now invite universities to participate and contribute**

and

- **to invite their ECAs as individuals to participate**

MONITOR: THE INSTITUTIONS

AECRS Advancing Early Career Researchers and Scholars

01

The Survey

The Dashboard

EARLY CAREER RESEARCHERS AND SCHOLARS

02

The Survey

The Dashboard

OPERATIONAL TEAMS

03

The Survey

The Dashboard

INSTITUTIONAL CUSTODIANS E

PERFORMANCE INSIGHT SYSTEM

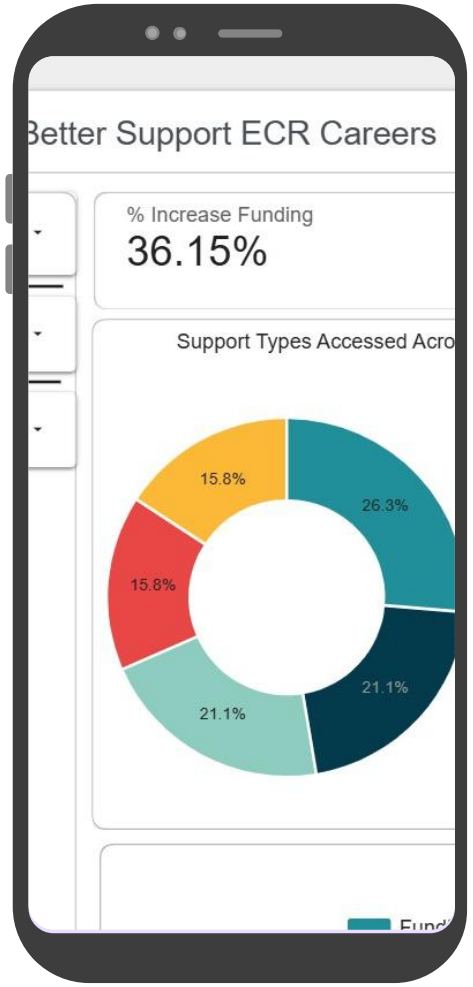
AECRS Advancing Early Career Researchers and Scholars

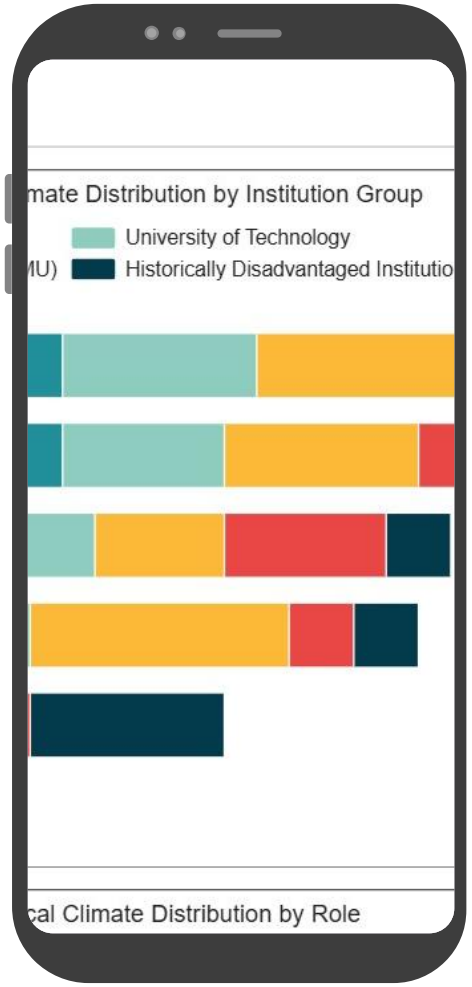
INSTITUTIONAL PULSE CHECK

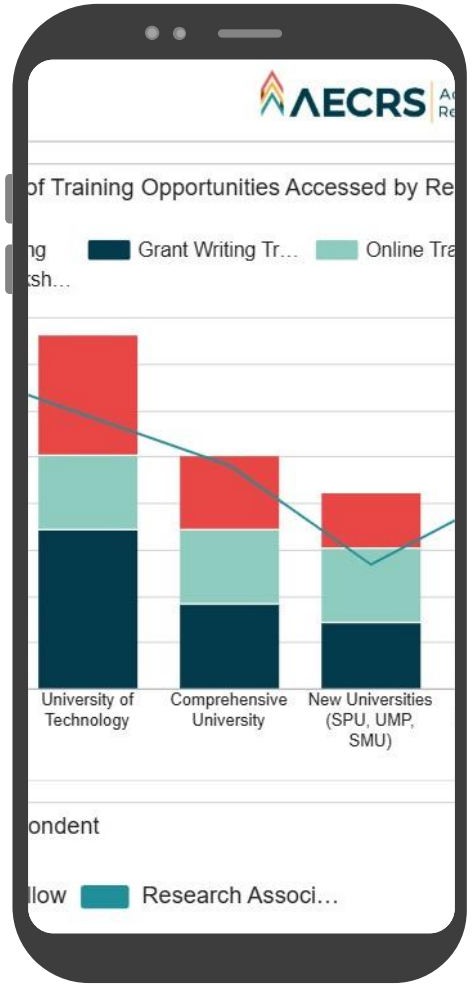
Key Features:

- **Real gaps can be confirmed**
- **Fragmented support can be highlighted**
- **Ethical climate matters –** insights gained.

Stakeholders want this.







Ethical Clearance – CHE.

PERFORMANCE INSIGHT SYSTEM

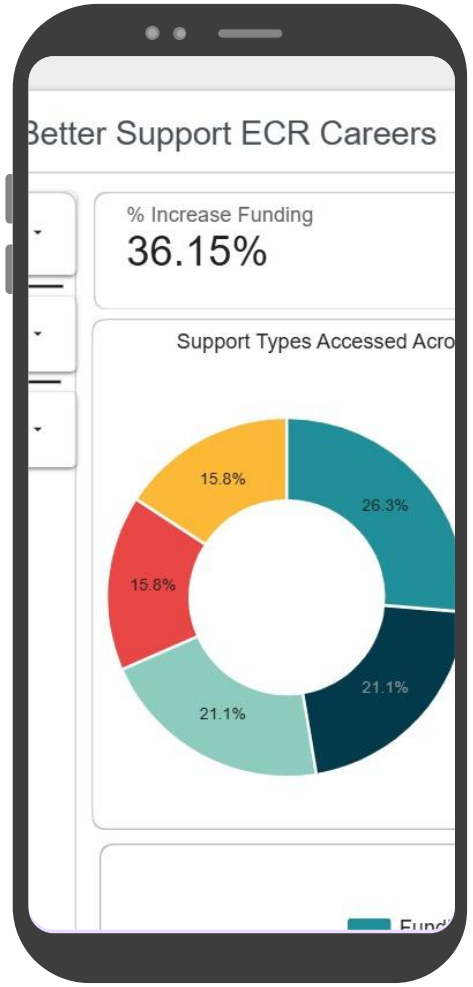
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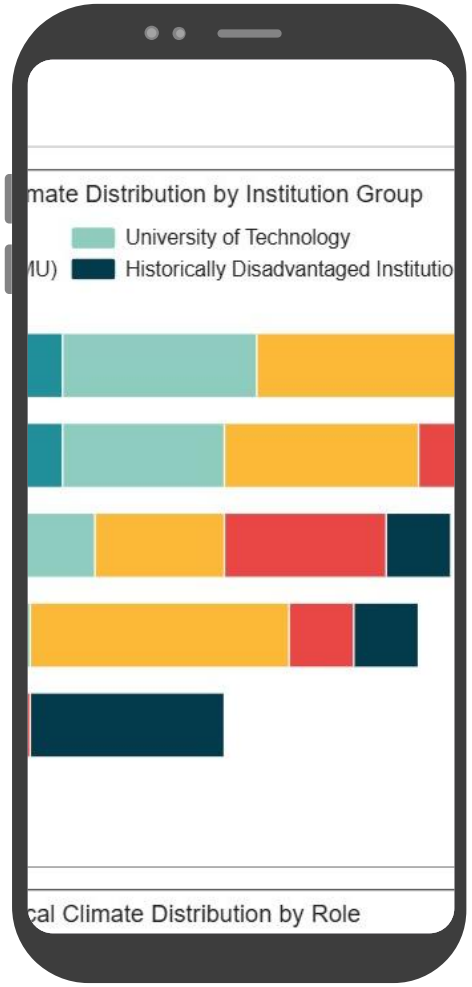
INSTITUTIONAL PULSE CHECK

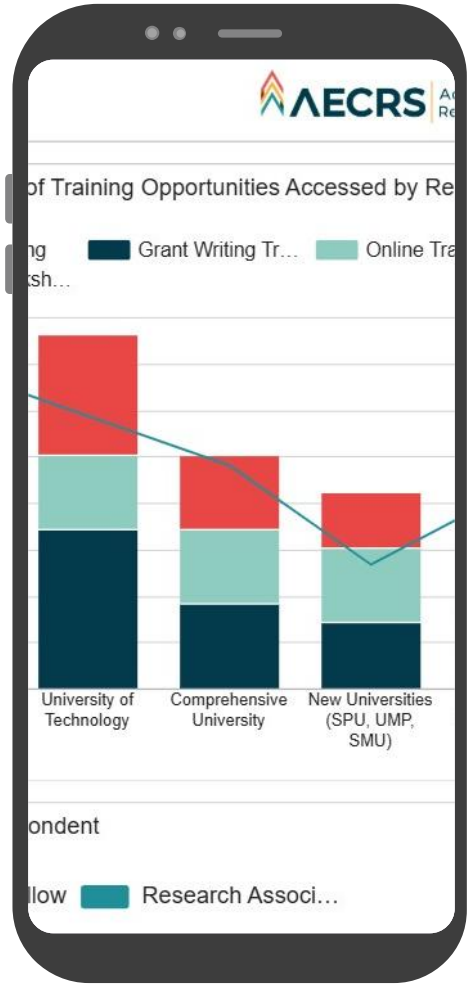
Key Features:

- Annual surveys for 3 stakeholder groups and the ECR career progression.
- Measures: support quality, barriers, policy alignment.
- Dashboards show trends by institution type (e.g., UoT, HDI).
- .

- **Outputs: Actionable insights for policy, resource allocation, and programme design.**

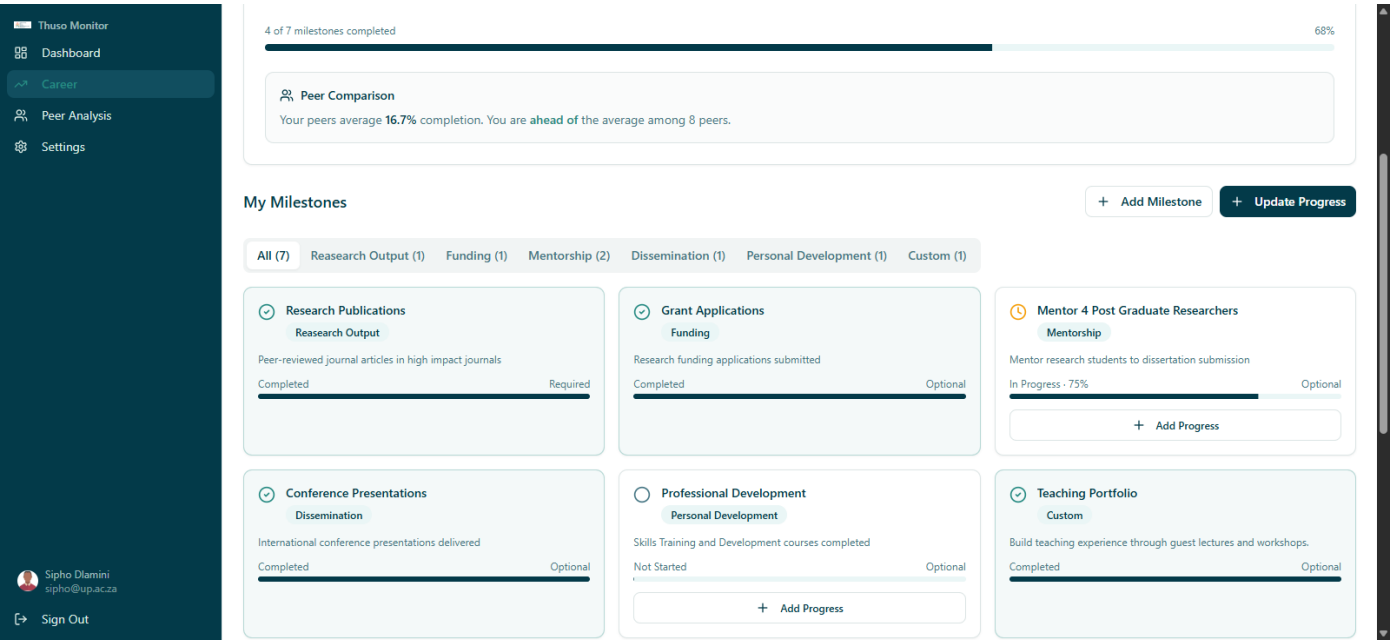




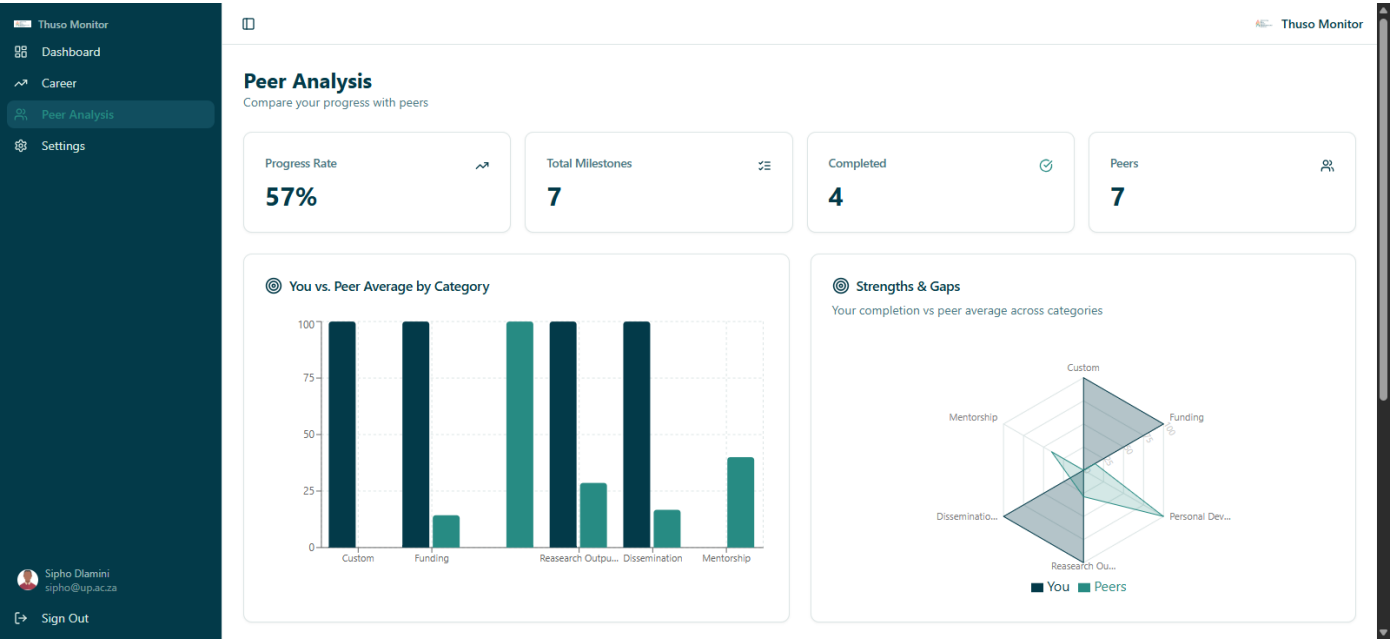


ECR CAREER TRACKER DASHBOARD

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Milestones



Peer Analysis

AECRS Advancing Early Career Researchers and Scholars

WHY WE KNOW IT'S WORTH DOING THIS

EVIDENCE FROM A NATIONWIDE PROOF-OF-CONCEPT SURVEY ACROSS SOUTH AFRICA'S UNIVERSITIES

- **Real gaps confirmed:** ECRs face unclear promotion criteria, uneven mentorship, and overwhelming workloads, especially at Universities of Technology.
- **Support is fragmented:** Access to training and career guidance varies significantly by institution type.
  Ethical climate matters: Concerns about institutional culture directly affect retention and well-being.
- **Comprehensive universities lead in structured support,** but all types need better data to improve.
- **Stakeholders want this:** Input from Institutional Custodians, Ops Teams, and ECRs shows strong demand for coordinated, evidence-based support.

AECRS Advancing Early Career Researchers and Scholars

ROADMAP AND SUSTAINABILITY

STEP 1

MP has been developed.

STEP 2

Enhance dashboards, add integrations (e.g., Thuso Connect status)

STEP 3

Institutional adoption, longitudinal reporting

COST MODEL

No licenses; uses free, scalable tools. Universities can take on a version for themselves.

SUSTAINABILITY

Training, documentation, regular refresh cycle

WHAT WE NEED NOW…

ROLL OUT TO UNIVERSITIES

DVCs' agreement as institutional custodians

Invitation letters have been sent

Survey questionnaires to be completed

INFORMATION TO OPERATIONAL TEAMS

Request for information on interventions

Survey questionnaires to be sent

INVITATIONS TO ECAs - CAREER TRACKER

Survey questionnaires *and*

Information on how to participate

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THANK YOU

UNIVERSITIES SOUTH AFRICA

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stephanie.burton@up.ac.za