The ABCs of an NRF rating

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I have now been awarded virtually every NRF (National Research Foundation) rating reasonably available. Many years ago at the start of my academic life I received a 'Y' label; I have recently been awarded an 'A' rating. My most recent rating came as a pleasant but unexpected surprise, motivating me to think, more deeply than might otherwise have been the case, about NRF ratings. More particularly, I thought about what an NRF rating means, not only to me personally, but also to the research community of South Africa.

I have been known to be quite critical of the NRF rating process in the past. I continue to maintain that it is a system that bears some important flaws. However, I also recognise that it is a system that has value. Because it is used extensively and in various ways by academic institutions in South Africa, it is not likely to be abandoned in the foreseeable future. As a Deputy Dean for Research in a science faculty, I have to admit that consideration for promotions and other awards is made much easier where candidates have NRF ratings. Clearly, by providing an independent evaluation of accomplishment, apparently free of internal political considerations and other nuances, NRF ratings save considerable time and effort for universities. The system is, however, harsh and in some cases provides a skewed view of accomplishment. It is, therefore, imperative that we do not allow NRF ratings to define us as scientists, nor allow this 'label' to limit our goals and aspirations.

Much has been written regarding the fact that our perceptions define our reality. Scholars who are told they have higher IQs often achieve better results; sometimes despite the fact that their IQs are not quite as high as they think they might be! Likewise, an NRF rating should not unduly influence the kind of research one does or how one goes about this process. The fact that the ratings are inevitably perceived as hierarchal does unfortunately lead to strange perceptions among scientists, which often are quite damaging. As noted at the outset, I started off my career with a Y rating, which led to my second rating in the C category. My understanding of this system is that the NRF's expectation is that Y-rated researchers are likely to move to the C category and that those few young scientists in the P category will likely move to B category when they next apply for rating. I thus seemed to be progressing reasonably well.

As an administrator of research, I all too often overhear colleagues speaking of having 'only a C rating'. This is very unfortunate as a C rating is neither trivial to achieve nor to maintain. For many (perhaps most) researchers, this is also a necessary step in the hierarchy of ratings that they must logically wish to climb. The exceptions here are those very few young researchers who achieve a P rating the first time they apply; the remaining majority achieve Y ratings the first time. In fact, a Y rating should be hugely celebrated as it is an indication that one has successfully taken a very important step towards a career in research.

After achieving a Y rating, it is important to act strategically in terms of research and thus to ensure a jump to clear the next hurdle and achieve a C rating. This requires an intensive effort and it is important that one achieves a sustained output for a 5-year period. Alexander Graham Bell is quoted as having said that genius is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration. In this regard, achieving a significant research output involves focused and sustained research activity, which requires commitment to one's career and involves far more than the 40-h week that is typically defined as a normal effort for which one recieves a salary. The defining issue here is that being a research academic is a vocation – not a job. I believe that many researchers are confused by the fact that successful academics often seem to be having fun. There is a perception that fun cannot be equated to hard work. Certainly it is much easier to work very hard when one is in fact having fun. I am often heard to say that I am paid to have fun – at least most of the time! I clearly enjoy my academic life hugely, but I also work very hard. I am without question not paid to work as hard as I choose to do. Most of the time this is a choice I am very happy to make. My view (I understand that others might feel differently) is that there are many benefits to a successful research career that cannot be measured in monetary terms.

The jump to a B rating in the NRF system requires engagement with the international science community. For me, one of the really incredibly enjoyable aspects of my work is that I have been able to participate in an exciting global community of scientists. I have friends and colleagues in many parts of the world and they have substantially enriched my life and work. The Internet has made this engagement easier and the network of people with whom I communicate is truly international. These networks take time to establish and they require that one engages in research problems that are significant to one's discipline, globally.

I am often confronted with researchers who tell me that their particular research interests are really only important to South African situations. Generally I find that this belief is as a result of a misplaced understanding of what the important research questions are or how one chooses to align our research (which might be focused on a local problem) with interests in the global arena. The problem I see in South Africa is that as researchers, we can be inordinately inward looking; it is commonly easier to publish research in local journals and to attend local conferences. This should not imply that I do not support national journals and society meetings, they clearly have their value; but all too often I see that a local perspective defines the totality of many South African researchers. In this regard, they choose not to elevate their research to the global arena and while their research might be very good, it is unlikely to ever be seen by the international community. And the consequence here is that these researchers will never be challenged by the international peer-review system, which admittedly can be very tough, to become world players. In terms of NRF ratings, the outcome is that some academics who are actually excellent researchers never make it into the B-rated researcher ranks.

There are many myths regarding the need to be an independent researcher and these myths have important implications in terms of NRF ratings. For example, it is often suggested that if one works in a team, one's input is not fully appreciated; and that one might forever languish in the shadow of some senior professor. As is true

for many myths, there is some truth in this contention. It is sometimes difficult to determine the relative inputs of individual researchers in a team. However, my experience has been that those researchers in teams who 'pull their own weight' are in fact quite readily recognised as a driving force behind certain activities in a team. Indeed, there might be a lag of a year or two before this recognition rises to the surface. However, if one considers the time and effort that is required to establish an entirely independent research group, the relatively short lag phase before being recognised as a key member of a team, seems quite reasonable.

As is often said of accomplishment, 'Rome was not built in a day' – this sentiment is equally true for a research career. A significant academic profile takes years to establish. I know from my own experience that there have been times along the way that I have felt a sense of frustration that the quality of my research has not been fully appreciated. However, looking back I recognise that this is because it really does take time for the research community to appreciate the research that one has done. And in many cases, one commonly receives recognition for research, years after the work was done.

My work is conducted as part of a large research team; and shortly after completing my PhD, I began to collaborate with my husband. In this regard, my only mistake was that I took my husband's name when we married. I had no idea at the time that we would work together in such a successful team, but the result has often been confusing, for both of us and for others. The fact that we both have A ratings says a lot for what two researchers can achieve together. While we are not unique in South Africa nor elsewhere in the world, our situation is unusual. As a firmly committed feminist, I believe that women often accept more of a supporting role in a marriage. This is especially the case when children are part of the package. In this regard, I urge young professional couples to understand the consequences of the choices that they make and to consider the 20- to 30-year horizon at which point children have grown up. It is at this point that I find many female colleagues are no longer particularly pleased about the choices that they believed they needed to make when they were younger.

Achieving the various levels of NRF ratings is similar to the ABCs of literacy. It is a process that involves hard work and sustained effort over time. In his article 'The secret of success', Michael Bond[1] highlights the fact that success cannot be attributed solely to IQ, ability or geographical or socioeconomic advantage. These can all be part of the mix, but another ingredient – which he calls 'grit' – concerns determination, time, effort and also 'staying power'. Do I have the grit to maintain my current NRF rating? I would like to think that I will be able to maintain at least my current level of accomplishment. But to do this I will need to ensure that my profile and productivity, at the very least, matches its current level. But I also believe strongly that one's focus should not be on a particular rating but rather on enjoying one's research in such a way that the experience is enjoyable and that the effort is not painful, neither to oneself nor to others. An academic career is a wonderful privilege and it can be hugely rewarding. Succeeding is akin to 'catching and riding a wave' – substantial effort is required but the results can be invigorating and enormously satisfying.

Reference

1. Bond M. The secret of success. New Scientist. 2014;221:30–34. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0262-4079(14)60488-7