

Research

## Decolonial dilemmas: balancing global recognition and local impact in South African research

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### Abstract

The pursuit of decolonial scholarship in academia can be impacted by the pressure to attain international recognition as a requirement for academic promotion. Academic promotion for scholars is often linked to publishing in *high-impact journals*, which frequently lack African representation. This paper critically examines the internationally benchmarked system of evaluating and rating researchers employed by the National Research Foundation (NRF) of South Africa, focusing on the concept of Considerable International Recognition (CIR) and its ramifications for decolonial scholarship. Utilizing Qualitative Document Analysis (QDA) this study investigated how the definitions and criteria related to CIR in documents provided by the NRF of South Africa influences researchers to prioritize international scholarly activities over locally relevant work. This analysis also seeks to uncover the implications of this prioritization for decolonial work within the South African research landscape. Findings indicate that NRF ratings heavily prioritize international recognition, often overlooking locally impactful research, which can limit support for decolonial scholarship. Recommendations call for expanded criteria that include local relevance, enabling researchers to be rated for contributions grounded in locally relevant work.

**Keywords** Epistemic freedom · Considerable International Recognition (CIR) · Qualitative Document Analysis (QDA) · Decolonization · Research Prioritization

## 1 Introduction

In the pursuit of decolonizing academic practices, there is a growing recognition that the knowledge production landscape requires a fundamental re-evaluation. The dominant paradigm of "publish or perish" has long dictated the trajectory of academic progression, placing significant emphasis on research publications as the primary measure of scholarly success. However, it is crucial to question not only the quantitative aspects of publishing but also the underlying assumptions about where knowledge should be produced and disseminated.

This paper advocates for a paradigm shift that acknowledges the importance of promoting African scholars' contributions to addressing local problems, publishing in African journals, and prioritizing the use of local languages [19]. In this study, "decolonization" refers to the process of dismantling colonial structures and epistemologies that marginalize indigenous knowledge systems. Drawing on Moosavi's critique of superficial decolonial rhetoric [33], this paper advocates for an authentic engagement with Southern scholarship that challenges Eurocentric paradigms, particularly in the context of the NRF's emphasis on international recognition. Additionally, the insights of Mahmood and Sabelo [30,

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[42] are incorporated to highlight the historical inequities in knowledge production in Africa. They argue for creating alternative frameworks that uplift local scholarship, which this study reflects by analysing the implications of the NRF's evaluation criteria on the promotion of locally relevant research [22].

This paper delves into the internationally benchmarked system utilized by the National Research Foundation (NRF) in South Africa to evaluate and rate researchers. Specifically, it examines how the concept of Considerable International Recognition' (CIR) as defined by the NRF affects the priorities of researchers, often leading them to prioritize international scholarly activities over work that may be more locally relevant.

The NRF, is a governmental research funding agency in South Africa known for its peer-based evaluation system used to assess researchers. The origins of the NRF can be traced back to its predecessor, the Foundation for Research Development, which was established in the 1980s (for a comprehensive history, see [46]). The NRF's primary mission is to advance and support research by providing funding, fostering human resource development, and offering essential facilities [1, 10]. Its overarching goal is to facilitate the creation of knowledge, innovation, and development across all fields of science and technology, including the preservation and promotion of indigenous knowledge [10, 53]. Through these efforts, the NRF aims to contribute to enhancing the quality of life for all the citizens of the Republic of South Africa [41]. The NRF's strategic approach revolves around four core principles: "*transformation, excellence, fostering a service-oriented culture, and ensuring sustainability*", these principles guide its initiatives and activities.

In the NRF rating system, peer assessment evaluates an individual's recent research outputs and impact through both local and international reviewers. The concept of Considerable International Recognition (CIR), central to the ratings, has raised concerns for its lack of clear definition, prompting a need for contextualization within the varied academic practices across South African and global research in humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences [42]. In South African universities, publishing in accredited journals is crucial for career advancement, as the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) provides subsidies for eligible research outputs [31]. These publications meet specific standards to qualify, directly supporting academic departments and reinforcing the focus on measurable research achievements [2, 12].

This paper aims to uncover possible knowledge production biases linked to the implementation of the South African National Research Foundation's (NRF) rating system. It intends to connect these potential biases to a conversation about the outcomes of such a system, highlighting how these outcomes have societal costs anticipated to arise from decision criteria that rely more on subjective judgment rather than objective indicators of research performance. The following research questions underlie the study:

1. How does the NRF's concept of Considerable International Recognition (CIR) shape the priorities and research activities of South African scholars?
2. How do Eurocentric knowledge hierarchies shape the NRF's criteria for evaluating researchers and its emphasis on international recognition?
3. What recommendations can be derived from the NRF's evaluation criteria for enhancing the support of locally relevant research and promoting a more equitable knowledge production landscape in South Africa?

The paper proceeds in four sections. First, I locate the discussion of knowledge hierarchies within existing scholarship. Secondly, I discuss the methodology and data analysis employed in this paper. Thirdly the results and discussion follow which is then followed by study limitations and conclusion.

## 2 Literature review

### 2.1 Inclusivity in educational settings: non-western perspectives and knowledge hierarchies

There has been a growing demand for cultural diversity and inclusivity within educational settings. However, there remains limited openness to non-Western ideologies, epistemologies, and philosophies [44]. Existing literature shows how knowledge hierarchies still prevail in scholarship, also how it is still predominantly rooted in a Eurocentric theoretical canon and practice [24]. The prevailing dominance of Eurocentric theoretical frameworks and practices in scholarship, as evidenced by the limited openness to non-Western ideologies and epistemologies, underscores deeply entrenched knowledge hierarchies that persist despite efforts towards decolonization [20]. The postcolonial era prompted critical reflection on the constitution of knowledge, particularly in African contexts, leading to calls for the development of a

specifically African theory of knowledge detached from dominant European epistemologies [20]. This shift towards a more cosmopolitan and Afropolitan understanding of African identity has given rise to diverse intellectual traditions that challenge Eurocentric hegemony, marked by movements like negritude, Pan-Africanism, and black consciousness, and the work of scholars like Asante [5] and Fanon [14]. However, despite a reflexive turn in academic scholarship towards interrogating knowledge hierarchies, African scholars continue to face significant barriers to visibility and recognition [40], with practices of silencing and perpetuating the subalternity attached to researchers from the Global South, thus reinforcing existing inequalities in 2004knowledge production and dissemination [40].

Research on non-Western contexts is not only influenced by a US-style but is constantly judged by Western yardsticks and traditions. Briggs and Weathers [10] conducted a thorough analysis of research articles from esteemed journals African Affairs and the Journal of Modern African Studies over 21 years, revealing a troubling decline in contributions from Africa-based authors, dropping from around 25% in the early 1990s to just 15% by 2013, with no year since 2005 surpassing the 20% mark. Additionally, gender disparities were evident, with many articles authored by men. Briggs and Weathers [10] attributed this trend to low acceptance rates despite increased submissions from Africa-based authors, suggesting editorial gatekeeping, and reviewer bias, as well as perceived low submission quality influenced by pressures faced by academics in African universities. This decline in contributions from non-Western contexts mirrors the broader issue of research being judged by Western yardsticks and traditions, perpetuating unequal power dynamics in knowledge production. As also discussed by Moosa [31] that the current academic era is infiltrated by the idea of *publish or perish* where even the publication success and standard is set against not just how much you publish but where you publish (*high impact or low impact journals*). Through these traditional academic values such as autonomy, intellectual freedom, creativity, critical thinking, and the generation of intellectually stimulating ideas are being challenged and sometimes compromised (Shams [51];, Tulubas and Gokturk [54], Ylijoki and Ursin [60]).

Andrews and Okpanachi [3] argue that epistemic freedom for Africa lies in her ability to forge her unique intellectual trajectory, leading to the creation of models tailored to its specific context that can drive the social transformation needed by its people. Similarly, Ndlovu-Gatsheni [39, 40] contends that the concept of a "cognitive empire" has permeated the intellectual landscape of Africans. He explored how the pursuit of epistemic freedom plays a crucial role in the resurgence and revolutionary decolonization efforts of the twenty-first century. Africa's integration into the modern globalized Euro-American civilization, which originally had mercantilist roots, has been an ongoing process. Western influence on the continent has persisted from the late colonial era through the first two decades after independence. During this time, there have been deliberate efforts to promote independent knowledge production and indigenize the processes of knowledge creation in response to Western dominance [3]. Since knowledge producers are situated within various national economies and draw their unique perspectives from their specific historical backgrounds, disparities among these nations accumulate and form the primary sources of inequalities among individual actors and knowledge producers on the global stage [28, 29, 62].

## 2.2 Critical engagement and epistemic balance in intellectual decolonization

Moosavi [33] critiques the current trend of intellectual decolonization in the Global North by highlighting several key issues. First, he points out the irony that Northern academics, despite their intentions, might be enacting intellectual colonization rather than dismantling it. This is particularly evident among those who have "jumped on the decolonial bandwagon," treating decolonization as a fashionable cause rather than a substantive change. Moosavi emphasizes that this Northern-centric approach often ignores or marginalizes scholarship from the Global South, leading to what Lewis [27] calls "epistemic incuriosity"—a failure to engage deeply with Southern perspectives.

Decolonial scholars like Mahmood Mamdani and Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni offer counterpoints that further enrich this critique. Mamdani [30] emphasizes the importance of understanding colonialism's legacy in shaping current intellectual paradigms and advocates for a decolonization process that critically engages with both Northern and Southern scholarship to dismantle colonial epistemologies. Ndlovu-Gatsheni [42] critiques the oversimplification of decolonial efforts, highlighting the need for a nuanced approach that avoids binary oppositions between North and South. He argues for a comprehensive decolonial project that addresses global power imbalances while fostering genuine epistemic diversity. These scholars underscore the complexity of decolonial efforts, suggesting that while Moosavi's [33] concerns about Northern epistemic dominance are valid, a more integrative approach that incorporates rigorous critique and collaboration across geographical and intellectual boundaries is essential for truly transformative decolonization.

In this context, it is important to note that the foundational assumptions and theoretical frameworks guiding knowledge production and research are often influenced by political considerations rather than being purely altruistic, independent, or impartial [62]. Furthermore, these endeavours are never devoid of intentions and interests. While knowledge is undeniably a source of power, the uneven distribution of global economic, military, and political resources results in unequal access to knowledge, contributing significantly to the historical imbalances of power between the Global North and the Global South [20]. Consequently, owing to these historical factors, countries that control the concentration and ownership of such resources naturally exert dominance over the global generation and dissemination of knowledge.

One of the key arguments put forth is that African scholars possess unique insights and understandings of their own societies and contexts. By prioritizing localized knowledge production, African academics are better positioned to bring forth innovative and contextually relevant solutions to the challenges faced by their communities [30]. This approach not only ensures that academic endeavours align with the needs and aspirations of African societies but also challenges the historical dominance of Eurocentric knowledge systems that have often overlooked or marginalized African perspectives. "Decolonization efforts among African scholars often confront the challenge of operating within educational settings that prioritize alignment with Western paradigms as a yardstick for academic progression. This alignment is frequently assessed through conventional metrics, such as publication in high-impact Western journals, participation in international conferences held predominantly outside the African continent, and the cultivation of international research collaborations [24]. This reliance on Western metrics underscores the need for linguistic diversity and African scholarly independence to amplify authentic African voices.

### 2.3 The imperative of linguistic diversity and African scholarly independence

Language is another critical dimension in decolonizing knowledge production. Prioritizing local languages not only promotes linguistic diversity but also ensures that knowledge is accessible and relevant to local communities [37, 49]. African scholars can enrich academic discourse by embracing and utilizing indigenous languages, thereby revitalizing and empowering local linguistic traditions that have been historically suppressed or marginalized [51]. However, the way research is conducted in Africa often follows a different path. Frequently researchers find themselves investigating topics primarily of interest to Western audiences. Many of the research articles are published in journals located outside of Africa, primarily targeting non-African readers [45].

According to a report titled "Global Publishing Statistics 2022," which provides insights into the global publishing industry, Africa's share of global scholarly and scientific journal articles remains relatively low compared to other regions [60]. Even when we do publish within Africa, it's a fact that African scholarly journals tend to have a larger readership outside Africa than within the continent. According to Basedau [7] around 17% of articles and books are authored by Africans, with only 13% written or co-authored by scholars based at African universities. Including African authors from non-African institutions raises the figure to approximately 30%. However, about 70% of authors are still non-African [7]. Under representation of African scholars may not be intentional but rather stems from challenges such as limited resources for higher education in African countries. This means that our scientific endeavours often have an outward orientation, aimed at fulfilling the theoretical needs of our Western counterparts and addressing the questions they pose [30]. Consequently, African scholars often prioritize engaging with Western discourse over fostering meaningful dialogues within the African scholarly community. This trend underscores the broader challenges faced by African academia in navigating linguistic and epistemic disparities within the global academic landscape [36].

In the academic realm, there has been a notable trend where scholars from various African regions and disciplines have predominantly engaged in one-sided conversations with counterparts from the Northern hemisphere, rather than fostering meaningful dialogues with fellow African scholars. This observation underscores the need to recognize the diversity inherent within African scholarship, considering the varied academic landscapes across different regions and countries [20, 22, 54]. Wa Thiong'o [59, 60] offers a cautionary perspective, contending that 'Merely writing in our native languages, while serving as an essential initial stride in the appropriate direction, shall not autonomously initiate the renaissance of African cultures unless the literature therein conveys the substance of our populace's anti-imperialist endeavours aimed at emancipating their productive capacities from foreign dominion'. Wa Thiong'o's insight highlights those reclaiming African languages is just one step; equally vital are quality platforms that uphold and disseminate these narratives. This leads us to examine the role of African-based journals in sustaining and promoting such work.

## 2.4 Quality and sustainability of African-based journals

The quality and sustainability of African-based journals are crucial to the decolonial project, which seeks to dismantle Eurocentric structures and colonial epistemologies that marginalize indigenous knowledge systems. Within the context of CIR, the question of African journal quality becomes central, as researchers are often pressured to publish in Western journals to achieve "considerable international recognition." This orientation undermines local journals, reinforcing academic hierarchies that privilege Western epistemologies and marginalize African perspectives [12, 53].

Challenges faced by African-based journals, such as limited resources and predatory publishing practices, exacerbate these issues by making it more difficult for them to establish themselves as credible, impactful outlets [19, 34]. Addressing these challenges requires collective efforts, from implementing quality standards that consider regional needs to fostering financial and structural support for African journals. Such steps are not only essential for validating indigenous knowledge systems but are also foundational to reshaping CIR criteria in a way that genuinely values African scholarship and local relevance. Shen and Björk [53] argue that the issues posed by predatory journals are relatively limited and regional, suggesting that the growth in publishing volumes within these journals may plateau soon, thus deeming immediate action unnecessary. However, various scholars advocate for proactive measures. Berger and Cirasella [8], Roberts [50], and Umlauf [57] propose the utilization of Beall's list or a set of criteria for assessing journals. Dadkhah and Bianciardi [12] introduce an extension of Beall's list, proposing a new metric named the Predatory Rate, which categorizes journals into predatory, those with predatory practices, and non-predatory ones. Moher and Moher [31] suggest a collaborative approach involving publishers, editors, funders, and academic institutions. Asadi et al. [5] proposes cross-disciplinary online-based methods to evaluate scientific journals, aiming to prevent the proliferation of hijacked journals. Lastly, Jalalian [24] recommends establishing a republication procedure for authors who have published in hijacked journals, allowing them to republish their work. Following Jalalian's call for a republication procedure, the subsequent section discusses the targeted research methods to examine these issues in depth.

## 2.5 Research methods

This study employed a qualitative research design to investigate the impact of the National Research Foundation's (NRF) definitions and criteria related to Considerable International Recognition (CIR) on researchers' priorities and their implications for decolonial work within the South African research landscape. Qualitative research was chosen as it allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives and experiences.

### 2.5.1 Document analysis

The primary method of data collection involved qualitative document analysis (QDA) using ATLAS.ti software. Document analysis represents a well-established and valuable research methodology with a longstanding history of application. This approach involves the examination and scrutiny of diverse document types, encompassing books, newspaper articles, scholarly journal publications, and institutional reports [9]. Essentially, any text-bearing document holds the potential to serve as a valuable resource for conducting qualitative analysis [35]. This method was chosen to examine the definitions and criteria related to CIR as outlined in documents provided by the NRF of South Africa. These documents included official policy documents, guidelines, and reports related to academic promotion and research evaluation.

### 2.5.2 Selection of documents

The initiation of document analysis commenced with the meticulous selection of relevant documents. In this study conducted in 2023, documents spanning from 2002 to 2022 were meticulously sourced. This time frame was selected due to historical reasons: from 1984 to 2001, the evaluation and rating system exclusively targeted scientists in the natural sciences, engineering, and technology. However, in 2002, the NRF Board sanctioned the expansion of this system to encompass researchers in the social sciences and humanities [46]. Thus, the chosen period ensures the inclusion of developments pertinent to the research context.

As outlined by Flick [18], four key factors come into play when determining the inclusion of documents:

1. **Authenticity:** refers to the genuineness and reliability of the documents being analyzed. In the context of the study, authenticity entails ensuring that the selected documents accurately represent the policies, guidelines, and practices of the NRF regarding Considerable International Recognition (CIR). This included verifying the origin and source of the documents to confirm their authenticity, such as ensuring they are official publications or statements issued by the NRF.

2. **Credibility:** relates to the trustworthiness and reliability of the information contained within the documents. In this study, credibility involved assessing the credibility of the NRF as an authoritative body in setting research evaluation criteria and academic promotion guidelines.

3. **Representativeness:** refers to the extent to which the selected documents accurately represent the diversity of perspectives and practices within the NRF and the broader research community. In this study, representativeness involves ensuring that the selected documents provide a comprehensive overview of the NRF's policies and guidelines related to CIR and its impact on researchers.

4. **Meaning:** pertains to the significance and relevance of the information conveyed by the documents in relation to the research questions and objectives. In this study, meaning involves interpreting the implications of CIR-related policies and guidelines for researchers within the South African research landscape.

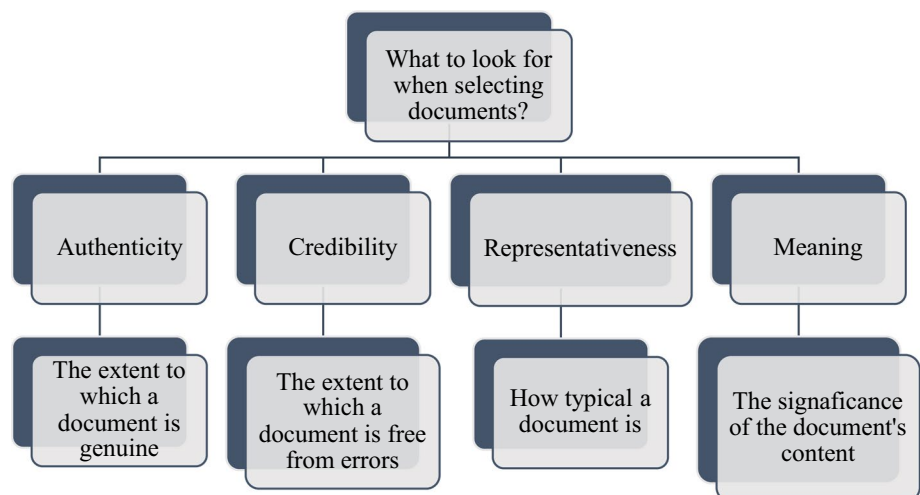
Figure 1 clearly shows the factors that I also looked for when I was considering documents to be considered for this study.

### 2.5.3 Sampling

Purposive sampling was employed to select a representative sample of documents from the NRF that were relevant to the research objectives. Documents were selected based on their pertinence to the NRF's CIR criteria and their potential to shed light on how these criteria influence researchers. The selection of documents for analysis was guided by specific search terms and criteria to ensure relevance and comprehensiveness. The following search terms were used to identify documents from the National Research Foundation (NRF) of South Africa related to Considerable International Recognition (CIR) and its impact on researchers:

- "National Research Foundation South Africa"
- "Considerable International Recognition (CIR)"
- "Research evaluation criteria"
- "Academic promotion guidelines"
- "Scholarly publications criteria"
- "Research impact assessment"
- "Research output assessment"
- "Research funding guidelines"

**Fig. 1** Criteria for selecting documents. Source: Kridel [26]



These search terms were utilized across various databases and online repositories to retrieve documents such as official policy documents, guidelines, reports, and publications issued by the NRF. The search was conducted across various academic databases, including Google Scholar and Scopus, using specific search terms related to the National Research Foundation (NRF) of South Africa and Considerable International Recognition (CIR). The search process yielded a substantial number of documents meeting the study's criteria. After careful screening and selection based on relevance and date range, a total of 15 documents were identified as suitable for qualitative document analysis. These documents comprised official policy documents, guidelines, reports, and publications issued by the NRF, providing a diverse and comprehensive dataset for the research analysis.

## 2.6 Data analysis

The data obtained from the document analysis were subjected to a rigorous coding process. An initial set of codes was developed based on a close reading of the documents. These codes were then refined through an iterative process, and themes emerged as patterns and commonalities in the data became apparent. Thematic analysis was employed as a method of pattern recognition within the data, with emerging themes serving as the categories for analysis [15]. The process involved a careful, more focused re-reading and review of the data. The reviewer took a closer look at the selected data and performed coding and category construction, based on the data's characteristics, to uncover themes pertinent to a phenomenon. Thereafter an interpretative analysis approach was applied to the coded data. This involved exploring the underlying meanings, implications, and relationships within the data. I sought to understand how the definitions and criteria related to CIR influenced researchers' choices and priorities regarding their scholarly activities, particularly in relation to international recognition and its impact on local work.

The first step was to upload the 15 documents together with the code list into Atlas.ti. A round piloting the code list was undertaken, during which several were read, analysed and coded in order to enhance inter-coder reliability. In the second step of analysis, the a priori and in vivo codes were grouped into seven themes which included *Knowledge production, Global and local relevance, Decolonization, high impact journals, low impact journals, International recognition and African scholarship*. The aggregation of coded excerpts was then retrieved as code reports from Atlas.ti and analysed by theme. To ensure consistency in coding, coding patterns were cross-checked by means of document-code matrices generated by Atlas.ti. The use of the QDA software thus enabled a more systematic and collaborative way of conducting a standard qualitative analysis across the large data set in a short time.

### 2.6.1 Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were an integral part of this study. I ensured that all documents used for analysis were publicly available and did not contain any confidential or sensitive information. No human participants were directly involved in this study; therefore, informed consent and confidentiality issues related to individuals were not applicable.

## 3 Results and discussion

### 3.1 Understanding The NRF rating system: evidence from document review

When it comes to evaluating individuals, their recent research contributions and their influence as perceived by international peer reviewers are considered for ratings. The rating system employed by the NRF relies on qualitative and subjective judgments. Creating an objective impact index, using metrics such as citations or a formula that considers publication impact factors, should theoretically be feasible [16]. However, in practice, the assessment of an individual's research is often subjective and conducted by a limited group of evaluators. For instance, if four reviewers recommend a rating, but two express objections, it can lead to the rejection of that rating.

The NRF conducts its peer review process in a closed and anonymous manner, making it difficult to verify the claim that their peer review system produces reliable results. Unlike the open and transparent peer review process found in scholarly journals where contributions are scrutinized after acceptance for publication, the NRF's process lacks this level of transparency.

Crucially, the scholar being reviewed in the NRF system is not granted the same methodological protection of anonymity that is typically afforded in standard review processes. This means that they may be susceptible to biases not

**Table 1** Definition of research ratings

A	“Leading international researcher Researchers who are unequivocally recognised by their peers as leading international scholars in their field for the high quality and impact of their recent research outputs
B	Internationally acclaimed researcher Researchers who enjoy considerable international recognition by their peers for the high quality of their recent research outputs
C	Established researcher Established researchers with a sustained recent record of productivity in the field who are recognised by their peers as having produced a body of quality work, the core of which has coherence and attests to ongoing engagement with the field as having demonstrated the ability to conceptualise problems and apply research methods to investigating them
P	NRF President’s Awardee Young researchers (younger than 35 years of age), who have held the doctorate or equivalent qualification for less than five years at the time of application and who, on the basis of exceptional potential demonstrated in their published doctoral work and/or their research outputs in their early post-doctoral careers are considered likely to become future leaders in their field
Y	Promising young researcher Young researchers (below 40 years of age), who have held the doctorate or equivalent qualification for less than five years at the time of application, and who are recognised as having the potential to establish themselves as researchers within a five-year period after evaluation, based on their performance and productivity as researchers during their doctoral studies and/or early post-doctoral careers
L	Late entrant into research (category terminated at the end of 2009) Persons (normally younger than 55 years) who were previously established as researchers or who previously demonstrated potential through their own research products, and who are considered capable of fully establishing or re-establishing themselves as researchers within a five-year period after evaluation.”

Source <http://www.nrf.ac.za/projects.php?pid=34> (accessed 10 December 2023)

**Table 2** Rated researchers as of August 2024

Rating category	Total number of researchers	Increase/decrease (%)
A	128	– 4.48
B	765	– 4.97
C	2871	2.28
P	18	– 14.29
Y	864	4.85

Source: <https://www.nrf.ac.za/information-portal/nrf-rated-researchers/>

encountered in the blind review of journal articles. This raises concerns because, at best, it could result in inconsistencies between different fields and individual ratings. At worst, the inherent potential for bias in these evaluations could be exploited for personal vendettas or settling scores.

While there is no concrete evidence of such abuses occurring, the lack of transparency in the process leaves room for potential harm. As scientists, whether in the natural or social sciences, it is essential to ensure the fairness of a rating system that has a significant impact on individuals’ careers, particularly in a context where research is given more weight than teaching. This is especially important given the societal imperatives related to higher education for the masses and the significant inequalities in access to opportunities in our society. The NRF [43] ratings are categorized as follows in Table 1: [followed by the specific categories]:

As part of the application process, researchers submit evidence of their research outputs to the NRF. While peer-reviewed publications form the primary basis of assessment, the application includes a comprehensive overview of various outputs, such as journal articles, books, conference presentations, patents, policy or technical reports, and publications in the public press. It is noteworthy that rankings are not solely determined by the volume of outputs or citation rates. Following submission, a specialist review panel comprising local subject experts selects three reviewers from a pool of six to ten reviewers suggested by the applicant, along with three additional reviewers. Each reviewer evaluates the research outputs, and their reports are considered by both an independent assessor and the specialist review committee.

The NRF ratings for 2024 in Table 2 reveal a significant trend, with the majority of researchers categorized as C-rated. Notably, the number of A and B ratings is on the decline, while C ratings are increasing. It remains unclear why A and



B ratings are diminishing, but this shift raises important questions about the factors influencing these evaluations. According to the NRF definitions, attaining an A rating requires researchers to be recognized unequivocally as leading international scholars, while B-rated researchers must enjoy considerable international recognition for the quality of their outputs. The decreasing numbers in these higher categories suggest that despite ongoing contributions from researchers, achieving the level of CIR necessary for A and B ratings is increasingly challenging. Achieving an A rating requires clear recognition as a leading international scholar, while a B rating demands substantial international recognition of research quality. The NRF's diverse evaluation process, shaped by varying academic standards across disciplines, likely contributes to these outcomes. In cases where ratings are contested, assessments may be escalated to an executive committee, and researchers retain the option to appeal. The NRF's evaluation and rating system should account for the wide range of academic customs and disciplinary standards it represents. "Considerable international recognition" (CIR), a key criterion for high ratings, is interpreted within diverse academic contexts. Since NRF provides no strict definition for CIR, assessments rely on varied academic norms across humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences in South Africa and globally [43, 44].

### 3.2 The NRF's emphasis on international recognition and its implications

The analysis of the 15 documents identified for the QDA repeated references to 'international recognition' as a key criterion for researcher ratings [42, 43]. For instance, the phrase 'research of international standard' appeared 14 times across these documents, often in sections outlining criteria for A- and B-rated researchers. This emphasis on 'international' impact overshadows local relevance, as no mention was found of 'locally impactful research' or equivalent terms. The data shows that the NRF's criteria for international recognition implicitly marginalize decolonial scholarship. In 12 of the 15 documents reviewed, phrases such as 'impact factor' and 'global standards' were directly linked to high research ratings [44]. However, lack of mentions was found of criteria recognizing the value of indigenous or locally relevant research. This is particularly problematic for decolonization efforts, as the NRF's framework offers no formal support for researchers aiming to prioritize African epistemologies or address local challenges [16, 53].

The NRF documents on the articulations on CIR mentions the importance of differentiating "between research that results in a researcher achieving international standing and research of international standard" ([43], p. 2). The quality of research is benchmarked by way of peer review process and most importantly the NRF expects research conducted to meet internationally accepted standards of quality. This notion of *international* has been cautioned as some experts feel that "all too easily 'international' equates with publishing and review in and by North American and UK-based experts" ([44], p. 10). In attempt of trying to demystify the notion of international and how work is placed into the category of CIR, NRF ([43], pp. 3–4) alongside the specialists serving in the rating committee have sketched three broad categories that are used in consideration of rating research work.

1. Researchers are participants in disciplinary work, that adds new knowledge and appreciated by international community.
2. The research work has depth (theory, methodology and/or argument) with international impact.
3. The research that cannot be ignored by the field, paradigm shifting research which demonstrates leadership in the field/discipline.

What seems to be the emphasis on these three broad categories is that research should transcend local circle and be of international importance. This contributes to the problematic assertion that quality high impact -research is international and locally relevant research is equated to low impact. This sort of classification of research work is responsible for the knowledge hierarchies that exists which is challenged by decolonial scholars (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, [40]; Makhanya [28], Mamdani, [30]). The strong focus on gaining international recognition often leaves non-Western theories and philosophies in the hands of Western academics. Their interest and endorsement determine the validation of research.

This process further accentuates the disparities in knowledge dissemination, reinforcing the existing imbalances in who gets to contribute to and influence the philosophical conversation. This Eurocentric approach perpetuates colonialism and the legacy of imperialism within academic curricula. This is evident in how the legitimacy of research contexts for knowledge production is determined. Other types of scholarship, especially those from Black and non-Western backgrounds, frequently grapple with what can be described as an "epistemic struggle" [37, 38]. This struggle is characterized by a lack of recognition, biased treatment, devaluation, and structural obstacles within an academic system that may be perceived as racially biased [24].

The NRF further established indicators of CIR which when examined closely again have a bias towards internationally relevant work for instance in no order:

1. Impact factor journals internationally recognized.
2. Citations and H indexes.
3. Books/monographs published by well-known international publishing houses.
4. Leading role in international projects
5. Co-supervisors of PhD students of prominent scholars in the field

To fulfil these benchmarks, researchers frequently need to veer away from locally pertinent work because many African local journals lack prominence and high impact. Engaging with international publications necessitates crafting and disseminating monographs that tackle subjects appealing to a global readership. The data shows that the NRF's criteria for international recognition implicitly marginalize decolonial scholarship. In the reviewed documents reviewed, phrases such as 'impact factor' and 'global standards' were directly linked to high research ratings [44]. However, a lack of mention was found of criteria recognizing the value of indigenous or locally relevant research. This is particularly problematic for decolonization efforts, as the NRF's framework offers no formal support for researchers aiming to prioritize African epistemologies or address local challenges. This imbalance underscores a critical gap in the NRF's recognition framework, where the value of decolonial scholarship and indigenous knowledge systems remains marginal. To address this gap, it becomes essential to explore how NRF's rating criteria could better balance global standards with the local impact, supporting African scholarship and decolonial priorities.

### 3.3 Harmonizing priorities: balancing local impact and global standards

The theme of 'decolonization' was operationalized by identifying any mention of concepts related to indigenous knowledge, African scholarship, or critiques of Eurocentric frameworks. For example, in NRF Document [44], the phrase 'promotion of indigenous knowledge systems' appeared under the section discussing the NRF's strategic objectives (p. 5). However, this phrase was only mentioned once, compared to 23 references to 'high-impact journals' and 'global relevance' [14]. This imbalance highlights the minimal emphasis on decolonial scholarship within the NRF's rating criteria. This imbalance underscores a critical gap in the NRF's recognition framework, where the value of decolonial scholarship and indigenous knowledge systems remains marginal. To address this gap, it becomes essential to explore how NRF's rating criteria could better balance global standards with the local impact, supporting African scholarship and decolonial priorities.

The theme of 'global relevance' was evident in the NRF's criteria, which prioritize publications in 'high-impact' international journals. For example, NRF states that researchers seeking a B-rating must demonstrate 'considerable international recognition through publications in journals with global readership'. This criterion was mentioned throughout the documents analysed. Notably, no equivalent criterion exists for publications in African-based journals, which are often labelled as 'low-impact' [14]. This indicates a clear preference for research aligned with international rather than local standards.

The concern extends to cases where work does not resonate with the conventions of Anglo-American social science and legal practices, where the concept of CIR is traditionally rooted in most disciplines due to their academic dominance [43]. It is argued that senior scholars, especially in fields such as languages and law, should engage in local as well as global publication to advocate for an alternative 'Southern' voice and thereby achieve CIR. However, despite some research meeting the criteria for impact described in the NRF assessment criteria's focus on local issues places researchers at a disadvantage for various reasons. These may include a smaller scholarly community, research not aligning with global interests, or a strong focus on national concerns or societal challenges. The argument emphasizes that the pursuit of international relevance for NRF rating has implications for locally relevant work, potentially causing researchers to alter their focus or engage less in work intended to serve their local community.

## 4 Discussion

The results obtained from the document review illuminate the complexities surrounding the National Research Foundation (NRF) rating system, particularly in relation to Considerable International Recognition (CIR). This discussion engages with these findings to explore the tensions between locally relevant research and internationally recognized scholarship, reframing the conversation to better reflect the critical issues at hand.

The analysis revealed that the NRF's CIR significantly influences researchers, particularly regarding academic promotion and career advancement. The pressure to conform to global standards often dictated by the CIR framework frequently shapes researchers' priorities and choices. This emphasis on achieving recognition in high-impact journals and securing leadership roles in international projects can divert attention from addressing pressing local concerns and societal challenges. As a result, African perspectives and locally relevant research risks being marginalized within the academic landscape.

Moreover, the criteria associated with the NRF's CIR framework, including impact factor journals and citation metrics, tend to prioritize research that aligns with global narratives while often overlooking the unique issues faced within the South African context. This bias towards globally appealing topics reinforces existing power dynamics in knowledge dissemination, potentially exacerbating inequalities in the representation of diverse voices and perspectives.

The tension between adherence to international standards and the advancement of decolonial scholarship is particularly pertinent for scholars from non-Western backgrounds. The prevailing pressure to publish in globally recognized venues may lead to the neglect of indigenous knowledge systems and local epistemologies, further erasing non-Western perspectives from the academic discourse.

As we navigate these challenges, it is imperative to critically assess the pursuit of international recognition as outlined by the NRF's CIR framework. The academic community must interrogate whether this framework inadvertently perpetuates a Eurocentric approach to knowledge production, thereby obstructing the development of a more inclusive and diverse scholarly environment. This reframed discussion underscores the necessity for a nuanced understanding of the interplay between global recognition and local impact, highlighting the urgent need to address biases inherent in research evaluation systems to foster a more equitable academic landscape.

## 5 Limitations

The study uses primarily Qualitative Document Analysis (QDA) which while insightful for examining institutional framework, does not capture the lived experiences of researchers. The absence of first-hand data such as interviews, limits the ability to provide concrete evidence of how CIR affects researchers' priorities. Future research could incorporate interviews to deepen understanding.

## 6 Conclusion

This study examined the dynamics of knowledge production within South African academia, particularly as influenced by the National Research Foundation's (NRF) rating system. The findings revealed a significant tension between the pressures of the "publish or perish" culture and the imperative to promote decolonial scholarship. The NRF's emphasis on "Considerable International Recognition" (CIR) often prioritized global standards at the expense of local relevance, indigenous knowledge systems, and diverse epistemologies. This focus perpetuated a Eurocentric bias in academic discourse, marginalizing essential non-Western perspectives.

To foster a more inclusive and equitable scholarly environment, it became crucial to re-evaluate the existing evaluation criteria within the NRF framework. Success in academia must encompass a broader definition that values both global impact and local significance, recognizing the contributions of diverse knowledge systems. Such a redefinition should embrace interdisciplinary approaches that align international standards with the unique context of South African research and scholarship.

The study advocated for ongoing dialogue among scholars, policymakers, and funding bodies to refine evaluation metrics, ensuring they reflect the richness of local scholarship and support the decolonial project. Additionally, greater investment in platforms that facilitate research dissemination in local languages and enhance collaboration with communities is deemed vital for bridging the gap between academia and societal needs. This research calls for a paradigm shift that celebrated the interconnectedness of global and local knowledge production, urging the academic community to resist the allure of international recognition that overlooked the diversity and depth of scholarly contributions. True academic excellence lies in the ability to integrate various perspectives, acknowledging that every voice enriches the collective pursuit of knowledge and understanding across the globe.

**Author contributions** ZM wrote the manuscript she is the sole author.

**Data availability** Data on the rating documents can be found on the NRF website: <https://www.nrf.ac.za/rating/rating-documents/>

## Declarations

**Competing interests** The authors declare no competing interests.

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