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# NUTA

NATIONAL UNIVERSITY  
TEACHING AWARDS



## NATIONAL UNIVERSITY TEACHING AWARDS (NUTA)

### NUTA FRAMEWORK 2024



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## NATIONAL UNIVERSITY TEACHING AWARDS FRAMEWORK

### 1. PREAMBLE

The pursuit of high-quality teaching practices has become more pronounced globally, given external and internal stimuli such as international university rankings and university recognition. As such, teaching awards in higher education have become common practice with varying perspectives of how these awards are viewed and practiced by the global higher education sector. For example, [the Teaching Excellence Framework \(TEF\) in the United Kingdom \(UK\)](#) is a system that assesses the quality of teaching in universities (as opposed to individuals). Similarly, the Awards for Teaching Excellence in Australia recognise university teachers who have demonstrated outstanding leadership through sustained commitment to innovation, delivery of quality teaching and dedication to improving the student experience (Australian Awards for University Teaching, 2022). Higher education institutions in South Africa have, over the years, institutionalised “Teaching Excellence Awards” (TEAs), with the apex awards being the National Excellence in Teaching and Learning Awards. These awards are made at the annual Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa (HELTASA) conference in collaboration with the Council on Higher Education (CHE) and the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET).

In 2019, the National University Teaching Awards (NUTA) were initiated by a subcommittee of South African University Teachers (SAUT), which is a national body comprising representatives from all public higher education institutions, including Universities South Africa (USAf), DHET, CHE and HELTASA. The NUTA, as a DHET national initiative, acknowledges innovative teaching informed by principles of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). The Minister of Higher Education will be the patron of the awards. It is important to acknowledge that the NUTA framework is a guiding document and the recognition and rewarding of good teaching remains an imperative that needs to be pursued by universities.

This framework includes the guiding principles for the National University Teaching Awards. Further details of processes and procedures may be found on the SAUT website here: <https://sauniversityteachers.org.za/national-university-teaching-awards/>.





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## 2. THE IMPETUS FOR NATIONAL TEACHING AWARDS

The awards are expected to serve several important purposes:

- they provide formal recognition for academics and organisations' achievements;
- they provide role models for what is held to be exemplary practice;
- they ascribe status to the activity with which the award is associated;
- they increase awareness of innovative activities and their value in higher education;
- they spur the aspirations of others engaged in similar activities
- and they provide an occasion for celebration (National Teaching Awards Committee, 2021).

Consistent with the aim of the HELTASA/CHE awards, which was to 'recognise and reward reflective, critical and contextually aware teaching across our diverse sector' (HELTASA, 2019), the NUTA will continue to recognise academics from all 26 higher education institutions (HEIs). To this end, applicants are invited to submit portfolios of evidence, irrespective of the contextual realities and disparities in which some academics and professionals function. The massification of higher education has catalysed a degree of transformation at universities but has also emphasised the unequal access to resources and the concomitant diversity in equity among students and lecturers. The NUTA acknowledges these disparities and inequalities and commits to addressing them in the new framework.

The NUTA framework draws on previous practice and discussion documents on teaching awards, such as:

- The National Framework for Enhancing Academics as University Teachers (DHET, 2018)
- Review of CHE/HELTASA National Teaching Excellence Awards Selection Committee (2021)
- NUTA Concept Note: National Teaching Awards Committee (2021)
- Concept Document. Towards the establishment of an enhanced national excellence in university teaching awards programme (CHE, 2020)
- National Excellence in Teaching and Learning Awards (HELTASA/CHE, 2019)
- Teaching Excellence Awards in South Africa: A national study (CHE, 2012).



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To address the unique context of each institution, the purpose of the NUTA is to present a revised, inclusive framework for all higher education institutions in South Africa and invite practitioners to present their submissions, acknowledging the importance of different university contexts.

### 3. AN OVERVIEW OF CHE/HELTASA AWARDS: THE NEED FOR CHANGE

Given the number of submissions, awards and commendations made since the inception of the [HELTASA/CHE awards](#) in 2007, it could be argued that the aims of the HELTASA/CHE awards as noted in section 2 above, were achieved. However, an analysis of awards from 2015-2019, as well as findings of a national study conducted in 2012, foregrounded several improvements for consideration. It should be noted at the outset, that applications for the HELTASA/CHE awards were in response to an open call for portfolio submissions each year, and that the applications were submitted via university structures. Each university was asked to submit up to three nominations. Despite the open call by HELTASA each year (refer to the example of HELTASA, 2019), the disparity of awards and commendations made across the gender and racial divide suggest that much work needs to be done to not only market the NUTA to all public institutions, but to develop capacity and provide mentorship to support diverse applicants with portfolio submissions. The data reveals that recipients of awards and commendations are mostly White females and that several public institutions were not represented among the list of recipients.

The following summary from the [HELTASA website](#), provides details of the profile of the CHE/HELTASA awards between 2015 and 2019:

- Submissions were received from 14 public universities
- With reference to racial profile, 22 awards were made to White academics and eight to African academics (inclusive of Indian and Coloured academics)
- With reference to the gender profile, the overwhelming majority of recipients were females.
- Nine commendations were made of which 6 were White recipients.

The findings of the CHE (2012) national study on teaching awards highlighted the need for improvements in future awards. For example, not all applicants received support from and by their institutions, criteria and guidelines were unclear, and the general feedback provided was not helpful since it was not





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individualised for specific applicants. After 2012, individualised feedback was given to promote personal growth. The findings of the data analysis informed the eligibility criteria, the selection of institutional candidates, the conceptualisation of the criteria and the rubrics, the composition of the adjudication panel and the provision of mentorship.

The NUTA aims to address the limitations raised above and promotes the awards nationally, by supporting institutions and applicants with appropriate mentorship, and by clarifying the criteria and expectations of portfolios, amongst other support strategies.

To this end, the NUTA aims to:

- Increase the reach and widen stakeholder ownership of the award, which will be managed by an expanded group of stakeholders represented on SAUT, including all public HEIs, DHET, CHE, HELTASA and Universities South Africa.
- Elevate the University Teaching Awards Programme as a valued and highly recognisable brand in the university sector and beyond.
- Achieve equity and representativity while aspiring to minimise biased practices, which advantage better resourced institutions and teachers with privileged cultural and pedagogical capital.
- Create an enabling environment for academics from universities that have been unrepresented or underrepresented.
- Develop a mentoring system for award candidates, especially those from un- represented or under-represented universities, drawing on suitable mentors which include past awardees.
- Accommodate different categories, including individuals and teams, taking into consideration contextual and systemic disparities, while recognising academics at different stages of their careers, as well as special awards related to specific temporal and contextual conditions.
- Recognise the voice of students in the design of the awards, ensuring transparent criteria and fair adjudication processes.
  - Ensure that award recipients are recognised at appropriate awards ceremonies.
  - Ensure that appropriate media coverage is solicited to promote exposure of awardees.





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- Induct awardees into the 'Hall of Fame', to provide an enduring tribute to their accomplishments.

Despite the previous national teaching awards receiving due recognition mainly from the HELTASA fraternity, this was not on par with the prominence, stature and monetary award associated with National Research Awards from the National Research Foundation (NRF). Following collaboration between the Department of Higher Education (DHET), CHE and HELTASA, concerted efforts were made to elevate teaching awards 'to achieve parity with the NRF awards', including that 'the name of the awards may have to be reconsidered with a view to giving the awards greater prominence' (CHE, 2020). The name change to the 'National University Teaching Awards' (NUTA), omitting the reference to teaching *excellence* awards, was therefore intentional. The NUTA encourages representativity of all institutions and applications across the rural/urban, gender and racial submissions.

The reach of the awards will be increased by promoting a range of activities in the year following the award in which the winners' work is showcased and the winners are involved in capacity building in university teaching. This should be done at both institutional and national levels through, for example, promoting exposure in the media, contributing to institutional, regional and national workshops and professional development activities, writing practice-based articles aimed at academic staff, creating an online database of winners as possible invited speakers and a strong mentoring programme. It is envisaged that an integrated approach to CHE and DHET developmental initiatives such as the Teaching Advancement at University (TAU) programme and the National Framework for Enhancing Academics as University Teachers project, amongst others, would encourage submissions each year, while simultaneously enhancing capacity for NUTA mentorship and adjudication. These projects collaboratively foreground good teaching practices in higher education, which are underpinned by the scholarship of teaching and learning.

#### 4. THE COMPLEXITY OF 'EXCELLENCE' IN 'TEACHING EXCELLENCE'

Most universities in South Africa (for example, North West University, University of Pretoria, Mangosuthu University of Technology, University of Free State and University of the Witwatersrand) and abroad still refer to teaching 'excellence' awards. For example, the Teaching Excellence Awards in the UK, the Awards for Teaching Excellence (Australia) and the National Tertiary Teaching Excellence Awards (New Zealand).





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The excellence discourse is still prevalent in how teaching awards are conceived. Yet, much has been written about the elusive nature of providing clear definitions of teaching excellence and how teaching excellence as an overarching criterion might be measured (Zou, Harfitt, Carless and Chiu, 2022; Behari-Leak and McKenna, 2017; Burke, Stevenson and Whelan, 2015; Leibowitz, Farmer & Franklin, 2012; Mclean, 2001).

In addition, perspectives on how the term is used, i.e., ‘teaching excellence’ or ‘excellent teaching’ present further complexities (Zou, Harfitt, Carless and Chiu, 2022). Within the South African higher education context of historically disadvantaged institutions and rural/urban divide, where there are still stark differences in access to resources, teaching excellence would have different interpretations and perspectives. Context thus determines both the perspectives on and interpretations of teaching excellence. Behari-Leak and McKenna (2017:3) accordingly contend that, in the South African higher education context, the awarding of teaching excellence emphasises excellence “at the expense of attending to unequal social and economic relations.” Furthermore, the awards were perceived to be exclusionary in terms of what excellence portrayed at historically advantaged institutions, where most awardees and those awarded commendations were located.

Given the contention of what excellent teaching actually means and the complexities of describing and measuring teaching excellence for award purposes, the SA higher education teaching awards do not include ‘excellence’ as a qualifier in its name.

Despite the contention in the use of excellence and what it might mean for teaching awards, for the sake of appropriate description, it is recommended that “excellence” as a concept be retained to distinguish the exceptional, with the discrete understanding that excellence is interpreted in varying ways depending on the unique contexts of the applicant. Furthermore, the NUTA awards will in no way be used to exclude or discriminate. It is further recommended that the term “innovative” be used (for whichever term is used to describe good teaching, there needs to be a qualifier. ‘Eminent’, ‘outstanding’, ‘effective’ may well be used, which then becomes a matter of semantics). An innovative teacher is aware of their context and reflects on the ways in which their discipline, institution, own history and students’ lived experiences affect teaching and learning. An innovative teacher is a reflective practitioner who has grown more effective over a number of years in relation to increasing knowledge of teaching and learning, experience in teaching and the







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facilitation of learning, and systematic observations of what happens in the classroom with a view to improving student engagement and learning outcomes. An innovative teacher demonstrates a willingness to experiment in their teaching with the means at their disposal and integrates fresh and high impact practices into their teaching. An innovative teacher has a clearly articulated teaching philosophy, informed by educational theory appropriate for a university teaching context.

‘Teaching’ can be interpreted broadly to include all aspects of curriculum design and implementation, the latter in class and/or flexible, hybrid models of teaching, learning and assessment (TLA), including related TLA projects such as work-integrated learning and community projects, or through materials development. Teaching experience can include both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. In evaluating teaching and learning, the NUTA considers the substance of an applicant's work, i.e., their body of work, and particularly the reach and impact of their work.

In using the notion of “teaching innovation” in a National University Teaching Awards context, care must be taken to ensure inclusivity. Criteria to judge innovation must include the extent to which teaching is responsive to context, and the ways in which university teachers work with the context to promote success for their students. Additionally, the extent to which teaching addresses and promotes the social justice imperative is an important consideration. Definitions of innovation should consider, among others: conditions of adversity, recognising exemplary performance in spite of these conditions, innovative initiatives responding to the challenges of historical legacy, linguistic diversity and such factors which may impinge on the teaching and learning process. (adapted from DHET/CHE/HELTASA Concept Document, 10-11).

For the purpose of this document, *context* refers to what it means to teach in higher education on the African continent and in South Africa. This involves a focus on critical citizenship in programmes, i.e., teaching that advances social justice and is broadly linked to democratic change in society. Accordingly, teaching should represent and model values such as tolerance, diversity, human rights and democracy in student learning (Bitzer & Costandius, 2018). Enhancing critical citizenship in learning also requires teaching that addresses important social issues such as equity, social cohesion and relational human capital (Bitzer & Costandius, 2018).



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*Context* also includes the effects of significant external influences, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, on teaching and learning, which necessitated a move to emergency remote teaching, learning and assessment in 2020. It furthermore involves student protests or any other occurrences which had a significant impact on the teaching and learning environment at an institution (Stellenbosch University Teaching Awards, 2022).

The NUTA accordingly aims to be inclusive of all contexts, acknowledging that university environments and resources impact teaching practices. The NUTA foregrounds innovative, agile, reflective, holistic student-centered teaching practices within each unique context in which lecturers must function.

## 5. AIMS OF THE NUTA

The aims of the NUTA are to:

- recognise excellence in teaching in higher education at an institutional level (these are teaching awards, not learning awards. Excellent teaching by definition must promote student learning)
- generate a cadre of academics who can provide inspiration and leadership in teaching and learning in their disciplines, across and beyond the institution
- advance the scholarship of teaching and learning
- stimulate the growth of academics as university teachers
- ‘generate appreciation of the value of lessons learnt as opposed to only valuing successes’, (Stellenbosch University Teaching Awards, 2022)
- celebrate the unique contextual responsiveness of academics that led to their transformed practice.

In achieving the above aims, the intention of the framework is to generate debate and public awareness about what constitutes teaching innovation. As part of widening access to all institutions and for prospective candidates, the NUTA framework now includes a workshop series and mentorship system.



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## 6. NUTA WORKSHOP SERIES

The NUTA framework offers three types of workshops to targeted participants across all universities. One type of workshop is designed for high-level university leadership such as Deputy-Vice Chancellors of Teaching and Learning and Directors of Teaching & Learning Centers or Units (or any such nomenclature used). These workshops offer a platform for learning and teaching leaders and managers to collectively explore existing or proposed internal awards structures. The NUTA respects the autonomy of universities in terms of internal awards structures. The workshops offer a platform for reflexivity, lesson learning and preparation for supporting potential NUTA candidates. The second type of workshop is tailored to prospective NUTA candidates, including ways of meeting NUTA criteria and development of the teaching portfolio. The third type of workshop is available for adjudication panel members who will evaluate submissions and make ultimate determinations about awardees.

## 7. NUTA MENTORSHIP SYSTEM

The workshop series is integrated with a mentorship system. The mentorship system covers the same three categories of participants targeted by the workshops. The operationalisation of the mentoring system is introduced during the relevant workshop series. The mentoring system facilitates connections between mentors and mentees to provide guidance and support to different interest groups on teaching awards and portfolio development as follows:

- Institutional leadership, especially at HEIs that may not have benefitted from the HELTASA/CHE awards in the past
- Candidates who have expressed their intention to submit portfolios for adjudication
- Teaching and learning support staff at institutions who will, in turn, mentor teaching awards candidates and
- The NUTA adjudication panel.

## 8. NUTA PROCESSES AND PROCEDURES

The process for the awards programme is as follows:



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## 8.1 Call for Applications

The NUTA [call for applications](#) will be made by the Chair of the NCC to Vice-Chancellors and Deputy Vice-Chancellors: Teaching and Learning of public higher education institutions. The call will also appear on the DHET, CHE, HELTASA, SAUT, as well as professional association websites.

A marketing and communication strategy will be developed to raise awareness of NUTA and provide relevant information on processes and outcomes.

## 8.2 Eligibility

**8.2.1** Academics and teaching and learning specialists at all South African public higher education institutions are eligible for this award.

**8.2.2** Applications can be from individuals or from a teaching collaboration team. A teaching team consists of two or more academics, or teaching and learning specialists, who collaborate over a sustained period of time to develop and deliver a module, course, programme or project (such as renewing a module/programme). The portfolio should clearly indicate the role played by each of the team members.

**8.2.3** No individual application that has not been endorsed by the institution will be considered. Institutions nominate applicants.

**8.2.4** Recipients of commendations may re-apply after two years of receiving the commendation demonstrating further growth and development, while accessing the workshop and mentoring programme initiatives.

## 8.3 PROCESS

**8.3.1** The university identifies and nominates a maximum of four candidates through processes that are transparent and inclusive. This will require universities to publicise and prioritise the NUTA within the institutional environment.

**8.3.2** Each candidate is expected to submit a portfolio of evidence which meets specific NUTA criteria and relevant rubrics.

**8.3.3** A maximum of five awards overall will be made annually. The adjudication panel may decide which awards will be made in the various categories.



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**8.3.4** A candidate(s) may apply for one of three categories: (1) an individual category of beginner teachers (in their first five years of teaching); (2) an individual category of experienced teachers and mid-career applicants who have made noteworthy contributions and shown leadership in discipline-specific teaching; (3) a collaboration of academics and/or teaching and learning specialists who have shown innovation in teaching and learning. Both undergraduate and postgraduate teaching will be recognised.

**8.3.5** As noted in point 6.3.1, universities may submit a maximum of FOUR nominations.

**8.3.6** Candidates' portfolios are evaluated by an adjudication panel according to the published criteria.

**8.3.7** All shortlisted applicants will be required to make a short presentation to the adjudication panel. The presentation may be in-person or online depending on the logistics and arrangements required to meet in-person. Details about the presentation will be provided by the adjudication panel.

**8.3.8** Awards will be made at the annual NUTA Gala event. Winners will receive a monetary award.

## 9. CONCLUSION

This NUTA Framework presents an overview of teaching awards, in particular the HELTASA/CHE awards, and the subsequent need to review previous practices to promote greater inclusivity by recognising contextual circumstances. This inclusivity is evident in the collaborative efforts of various stakeholders to ensure representativity from DHET, CHE, USAf and professional organisations. The aims of NUTA outline the principles that underpin how the awards will be viewed and actioned. This framework is augmented by the Process and Procedures document that provides further details of eligibility of candidates, applications, adjudication, workshops and mentoring, rubrics criteria, as well as award details. The NUTA framework and all accompanying documents will be accessible on the NUTA, CHE, HELTASA and SAUT websites to maximise accessibility and to encourage submissions from all public universities in South Africa. This framework replaces all previous national teaching excellence awards frameworks and guidelines.



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