



Call for Applications

African Bank Black Pioneers PhD Scholarships (2026-2028)

Hosted by the Department of History, University of the Witwatersrand

The History Department, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in partnership with *African Bank*, invites applications for the *African Bank Black Pioneers PhD Scholarship* for 2026-2028.

These prestigious awards support two Black South African (as defined in the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Act) doctoral students, undertaking original research on the history of Black business and entrepreneurship in South Africa, broadly conceived. The scholarships aim to deepen understanding of the historical foundations of Black enterprise and innovation, and to contribute to the broader project of social and economic transformation in South Africa.

The **closing date** for applications is **Thursday, 18 December 2025**. Successful applicants will be notified in mid-January 2026 and expected to commence their studies from February 2026.

About the Scholarship

African Bank has partnered with Wits to advance cutting-edge scholarship on the history of Black business in South Africa. The scholarships are administered by the Department of History (part of the School of Social Sciences under the Faculty of Humanities), which will serve as the primary academic home for the programme.

Each scholarship will provide full funding for three years of PhD study (2026–2028), with the possibility of a fourth year (2029) subject to satisfactory progress. The value of the award is **R 310 000** per year and covers tuition, living expenses, study materials, and other approved research-related expenses.

While working under one or two supervisors, students will be required to complete a formal research proposal within six months of registration, and to take part in the department's structured, seminar-based research training programme in their first year. Throughout the degree, they will also be expected to engage actively in the wider scholarly community by attending and presenting at academic seminars and conferences, and by the end of the programme, developing their research for peer-reviewed publication. Students will also have opportunities to gain academic experience through undergraduate tutoring and, where appropriate, guest lecturing.

Research Themes

The scholarship embraces a broad understanding of African entrepreneurship in any period of South African history, stretching from early trade and enterprise to contemporary business cultures. We are open to a diversity of topics and approaches, but are especially excited to receive proposals engaging with one or more of the following new directions:

- *Creativity and Innovation*: Histories of Black business innovation, adaptation, and improvisation under structural constraints, in both pre-industrial and industrial contexts.

- *Microbusiness and Informal Economies*: Histories of self-employment, survival economies, and community enterprise.
- *Business and Government*: Engagements between Black entrepreneurs and the state or legal institutions in South African history.
- *Money, Credit, and Financial Cultures*: The social history of money, investment, and banking, including financial instruments, informal credit systems, and savings/insurance networks (such as stokvels and mutual aid societies and other 'third sector' initiatives).
- *Business 'know-how'*: The historical development and circulation of business expertise (for e.g., accounting, management, marketing, logistics) through apprenticeship, mentorship or education initiatives.
- *Business and Labour*: The history of the management and organisation of labour in African businesses.
- *Business and Spatial Transformation*: the role of Black business in shaping urban and rural landscapes in South African History.
- *Critical Biography*: Life histories and prosopography of African entrepreneurs, merchants, and innovators.
- *Business Cultures and Advertising*: Race, gender, material culture, and the social meanings of commerce in African contexts.
- *The Past in the Present*: How historical memory and heritage shape contemporary Black business identities and practices

Projects must engage new archival, oral, or material sources. Those that connect South African developments to wider continental, Atlantic or Indian Ocean worlds are especially welcome.

Eligibility & Application Process

Applicants must:

- Register for PhD in History at the University of the Witwatersrand from 2026.
- Be a Black South African citizen (as defined in the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Act 53 of 2003)
- Hold a research-based Master's degree in History (or in a closely related discipline with a suitable motivation), with a minimum grade of 65%.
- Demonstrate clear potential for independent historical research and scholarly excellence.

Submitting an Application:

Applicants must send the following documents (as separate pdf files attached to 1 email)

1. A brief academic CV (no more than 3 pages), including the names and contact details of three academic referees.

2. Academic Transcript

3. A motivation letter (1-2 pages) explaining your reasons for pursuing a PhD and how your background or experience prepares you for a PhD in this project.

4. A provisional concept paper (2 pages) outlining a possible topic, key questions, some relevant sources, and why the study matters.

Strong applications will show evidence of:

- Good prior experience with primary-source research.
- Familiarity with recent historiographical and methodological debates in Southern African History.
- An ability to engage critically with literature relevant to the chosen period, region or theme.

To submit:

Applications should be submitted via email on or before **Thursday 18 December 2025**, with the subject line “African Bank Black Pioneers PhD Scholarship Application,” to:

Dr Andrew MacDonald, Head of Department, Andrew.MacDonald@wits.ac.za
and

Dr Prinisha Badassy, Postgraduate Coordinator Prinisha.Badassy@wits.ac.za

Selection Process

Applications will be reviewed by a Selection Committee appointed by the Dean of the Faculty of Humanities, including members of the University and a representative from African Bank. Final awards will be announced in mid-January 2026.

Awardees will generally be expected to register in February 2026 but may motivate for a short delay in cases of relocation, notice periods, or other reasonable contingencies.

About the Department of History

The Wits History Department, part of the School of Social Sciences, is one of Africa’s leading centres for historical research and teaching, recognised for its strengths in Southern African social and economic history, and for pioneering work on capitalism, labour, migration, and decolonial scholarship. Drawing on the University’s world-class academic resources, digital infrastructures and deep engagement with the social realities of the African continent, the Department offers a rich intellectual home for doctoral researchers pursuing innovative projects. With a relatively small and selective cohort of postgraduate students and strong staff-to-student ratios, the Department provides close mentorship and a collegial environment in which individual researchers can flourish. The Department enjoys a demonstrably strong record of postgraduate achievement: besides earning recognition for the quality and impact of their research generally, its graduates regularly win prestigious national and international scholarships and secure academic appointments at leading institutions. An overview of its faculty and teaching/research activities may be found at <https://www.wits.ac.za/socialsciences/history/>