

Foreword

by the Council of the HSRC

The Council of the HSRC expresses its appreciation to the members of the Panel whom it engaged to conduct the 2003 Review of the HSRC. In a limited time the Panel considered a wealth of material and presentations, and produced a substantial and thought-provoking final Report. It provides much food for thought regarding the HSRC's functioning, the extent of our transformation and future directions and challenges.

We are gratified by the Reports's overall recognition that "the HSRC of 2003 is a different and much better organisation in important respects than the HSRC of 1997. It has earned the respect given to it by the bulk of its collaborators and stakeholders by the breadth, quality and relevance of its contributions to the study and practice of social development in South Africa."

The Report identifies important challenges and makes far-reaching recommendations. The Council readily accepts many of them: for example initiating networks with counterpart agencies, especially in the rest of Africa; enhancing stakeholder involvement in formulating our research agenda and designs; extending peer review of our outputs and monitoring their impact; improving the management of our relations with our research users; better co-ordinating our decentralised capacity-development efforts; heightening our attention to gender (and other discriminatory differentia); clarifying the disposition of our Parliamentary grant; providing upgraded corporate services and

systems to support research across our multiple centres; and developing and implementing a systematic communications strategy.

In some instances, however, the Council differs on the emphasis or the substance of the conclusions drawn or proposals made by the Panel. In others, further research or consultation will be required. However, even in these instances the Review process has generated constructive debate. Our considered views in these respects are as follows.

HSRC functions, relationships and programmes

An important issue during the Review was the balance between two key functions in the HSRC's mandate, namely undertaking policy-relevant social-scientific research of public benefit, and managing collaborative networks among research institutions to undertake such research. The Council appreciates the Panel's endorsement of the numerous powerful collaborative research networks that the HSRC already has underway. While we agree that this mode of operation can be extended, and replicated in other areas, we affirm that this networking is not separable from, nor should it outweigh, the HSRC's continuing responsibly to undertake policy-relevant social science in the public interest.

A related issue is the interaction between the HSRC and higher education institutions (HEIs). The Panel usefully stresses the importance of maximising collaboration rather than competition, in both the pursuit of research opportunities and the deployment of the country's scarce supply of skilled researchers. The successful transformation of the HSRC into a respected and responsive participant in the research arena has understandably caused tension in some of these relationships, which was referred to by some of the Panel's interviewees. However, the Council feels that positive engagements that have been achieved with HEIs in many respects should not be underestimated.

Thus, a majority of HSRC research projects are now undertaken jointly with other institutions, mainly HEIs, both in South Africa and abroad, with sharing of the research income generated; senior HSRC staff members are encouraged to set up part-time academic appointments, especially involving graduate teaching and supervision; some HSRC staff members and all the research interns are registered for

postgraduate degrees at universities; and there are a significant number of joint publications.

At the same time, we look forward to extending and institutionalising these areas of engagement with the HEIs, and considering innovative ways of co-operating. The same applies to HSRC collaborations with the research functions of non-governmental and community-based organisations, government departments, and other science councils, and in particular the Africa Institute.

In responding to user needs, a related balance to be struck is between smaller, discrete projects, which are often undertaken to tight deadlines by the HSRC itself; and larger projects, linked into coherent, multi-year research programmes concerned with national development challenges, which are usually undertaken in collaboration with other institutions. The Council notes that much of the HSRC's work is already focussed on the latter, and welcomes the recommendation that this emphasis should be even further increased. But it does not share the Panel's anxiety about the HSRC also undertaking smaller projects, and notes that most of these are responses to the urgent requests or tenders of public-sector users, for which the HSRC's flexible and dedicated research-capacity and national coverage are well suited.

Legislation and policy

One of the important challenges facing the new Council of the HSRC during its term of office will be the drafting of a new HSRC Act. The Panel proposes five "public purposes" for the HSRC, as the basis for justifying partial funding by Parliamentary grant, to be considered for inclusion in the legislation. The Council accepts the substance of the first four of these: in essence, to conduct and foster development-oriented policy-relevant social science; to advance the policy relevance of its research through dissemination; to foster capacity-building and collaborations in the science system; and to meet the social-scientific research needs of disadvantaged communities.

But the Council would be reluctant to accept the fifth recommendation without considerable further investigation. This proposes for the HSRC the role of making data sets public, with due regard for

intellectual property, and the maintaining of archives. Our belief is that this function is already served by the SA Data Archive (SADA) of the NRF, which is funded and equipped to deal with intensive support to users, issues of anonymity, agencies that need to pursue cost-recovery, etc.

Apart from the technicalities of making data public, the management of the HSRC's intellectual property is proving to be a complex matter, both within the organisation and regarding its present and possible collaborations. There are diverging viewpoints, only some of which were taken into account in the Report. The HSRC supports the principle of openness in regard to information and would welcome a policy applicable across all research-producing entities for optimising access to data that have been produced with public funds. This general commitment would need to be balanced with relevant considerations such as the need to protect the intellectual property of a research institution engaged in cost recovery, or in work funded for specific purposes by private users; and the importance of avoiding the misuse of data out of context or protecting identifiable respondents. The Council accordingly agrees with the Panel that the matter requires the careful research of options and precedents, in concert with the Department of Science and Technology, other science councils and HEIs, followed by detailed policy.

Sustainable organisational development

The Report expresses concern about the sustainability of the present model of the HSRC, notably the need extensively to supplement the Parliamentary grant with research earnings. The Panel expressed concern about the pressures this places on HSRC staff, with consequences including researcher stress and turnover. Whilst the Council does take seriously the recommendation to hear and attend to such staff issues, and has recently undertaken a special investigation in this regard, we believe that the phenomena reported by the Panel need to be set in the current South African context, namely a powerful expectation of public sector transformation despite the constraint of limited extra resources for the science system. The Council welcomes what the Panel describes as "a vibrant environment for creativity and production" under the strong leadership of the CEO and Executive

Directors. We believe that, with care, the energetic and performance-oriented culture we have installed can be sustained.

Some of the recommendations of the Report will involve very careful balancing, if not difficult trade-offs. For example, at the same time that the Panel proposes a period of consolidation of the rapid transformation, it urges that the already impressive rate of improving representivity in the HSRC be accelerated. Yet this would create the risk of depleting the tertiary institutions, contradicting a further concern of the Panel. Thus, while entirely supporting the urgency of improving the HSRC representivity whenever opportunity arises or can be created, especially at top researcher levels, the Council has recognised the need for improving the supply of researchers, as with the HSRC's expanding internship scheme and programme for professional development and capacity building.

Other recommendations will be costly to implement without generating more income. For example, strengthening administrative support services and systems will incur expense, whether provided by better technology or more staff. This in turn will place a pressure on research components to earn more, itself a matter of considerable concern to the Panel.

The Council thus welcomes the Panel's strong support for the HSRC's application for enhanced funding, and for annual increases comparable to those accorded to other science councils.

The Council has mandated the CEO and his research and administrative teams to produce plans in phases for its consideration, for appropriately implementing or further investigating the recommendations and the matters covered in this Foreword. Thereafter these plans will be passed on to the incoming Council when it takes office in 2004, for it to take up, implement and monitor. Progress will be reported to the Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology. In the meantime, comments for the present Council to take into consideration when it receives the plans may be addressed by 30 January 2004 to the Council Secretary (at council@hsrc.ac.za or by fax to 012 302 2828).

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Chair: HSRC Council
27 November 2003