

From the Chair

During the year under review the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) passed through a decisive phase in its ongoing process of transformation. The organisational architecture required for the HSRC to be a science body geared towards the demands and needs of our changed and changing social circumstances was firmly set up.

The appointment of a new Chief Executive Officer (CEO) was an important development in this process, bringing to an end the inevitable uncertainties of a transitional period. Dr Mark Orkin, who had been a member of Council and had been involved in a previous review of the science councils, brings to the position a wealth of research and research management experience. His former post was that of Head of Statistics South Africa where his leadership in transforming the institution was widely acclaimed.

A rationalisation of the staffing structure of the organisation was undertaken early in the past year. The process was conducted with sensitivity and in a highly consultative manner. The management and the staff representative bodies deserve great credit for the manner in which they dealt with a process that had the potential for disruptive tensions.

An ongoing debate in Council centres on the relationship between contract work and basic research. There is a keen awareness in the organisation that the parliamentary grant cannot continue to be the only major source of funding. While we need to maintain the argument against too severe erosion of that grant, we know that the demands on the fiscus are varied and great. The new CEO and his colleagues have set themselves targets for contract research and are already making significant strides in meeting them.

Council established a research committee as one means of enabling Council members to interact directly with and interrogate the central science issues of the organisation. We are confident that basic social science research and needs-driven contract research can meet each other in a social science research approach that can make a difference.

An exciting development has been the identification of new priority areas of research. This reconfiguration of the organisational architecture, moving away from rigid separation into disciplinary sectors, has enabled the HSRC to be more flexible and responsive to social needs.



Council was keen that the HSRC should also respond to research and service needs in the SADC region and further afield on the continent. Elsewhere in this report there is evidence of how the organisation is becoming increasingly involved in projects in the region and continent.

We need to thank Dr Ben Ngubane, Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, for his genuine interest in and support for the work of the HSRC. He conveys the message that the government values scientific research and input into policy development and evaluation and into the broader societal conversation.

Council also expresses its appreciation for the energy with which the CEO and his senior management and staff are working to make the HSRC a leading agency in the transformation of South African society.

Jakes Gerwel
Chair: HSRC Council

From the CEO

There has been a comprehensive turnaround at the HSRC over the past year, continuing into the current year. The goal has been to provide a sound organisational basis for "social science that makes a difference". This has been achieved by three complementary initiatives:

- re-organising the research components and expanding their coverage, by means of multidisciplinary New Priority Areas (NPAs) focused on national development challenges;
- recruiting top-level research managers for the NPAs, in order to improve research quality and staff representivity, as well as the capacity to increase income from contracts and grants; and
- undertaking retrenchments primarily of researchers in early-2000, and restructuring the administration in mid-2001 to improve organisational competitiveness and efficiency.

The benefits have been appreciable. Research-based earnings have risen from R6 million to R16 million, i.e. from 7% to 18% of total income. With savings, this converted a nagging accumulated deficit into an appreciable surplus. Staff incentives and study bursaries could be restored, further researcher recruitment undertaken, and infrastructure installed – all contributing to future sustainability.

Multidisciplinary, problem-oriented New Priority Areas

The first turnaround initiative was to realign the old HSRC research groups and add new areas, yielding an effective spread of NPAs (described on p. 11). This process was guided by scans of the milieu conducted by the researchers, as well as inputs from key stakeholders: DACST Minister Dr Ben Ngubane, his National Advisory Council on Innovation (NACI), and the Research Committee of the HSRC Council chaired by Prof. Jakes Gerwel.

Initially, coverage was extended beyond the existing areas of educational assessment and systems, labour markets, and governance to include integrated development; human resources development; social aspects of HIV/AIDS and health; child, youth and family development, and surveys, analyses and mapping. Subsequently, as part of extending the core competencies, recruitment has been undertaken for start-up of three further NPAs: socio-cultural integration; knowledge management, and policy impact evaluation. Within the NPAs, issues of indigenous knowledge systems and gender are mainstreamed.

A weekly meeting of senior researchers was instituted in which interdisciplinary teams are set up to bid for tenders and grants. Examples of resulting projects are covered in the "Highlights" on ensuing pages and in the NPA sections. Authoritative researchers outside the organisation – from universities, NGOs, and fellow science councils – are invited to participate in the teams.



The HSRC's statutory mandate is not only to execute research but also to facilitate collaboration among research establishments. This is essential for the required scale of research into complex national problems. Each NPA is accordingly shaping a coherent, large-scale, multi-year research programme, within which researchers countrywide can communicate, and projects can be aligned for maximum relevance and impact.

Two such research programmes are already well under way: to inform the national HRD Strategy, and to extend the use of educational assessment tools throughout Africa. Others are nearing implementation: to cover the social aspects of HIV/AIDS, contribute to the integrated rural development strategy, inform urban renewal (which is the HSRC's assigned responsibility in the community of science councils), and shape interventions regarding pre-school children.

On this foundation, the HSRC has started to expand and transform its core competencies:

- from research projects to collaborative national research programmes;
- from educational assessment to policy impact evaluation;
- from database maintenance to knowledge management.

From the CEO

Recruitment of top-level NPA leaders

These advances are driven by the eight top-level social scientists that were recruited or promoted around the end of the reporting period to lead the NPAs (identified on p. 3). Four more appointments of similar calibre, to lead the further NPAs, are due during 2001/02. Twenty research directors and specialists have also been hired or promoted to head the different sections within the NPAs.

This recruitment has been helped by the opening of research offices in Cape Town and Durban, linked to Pretoria by computer network, tele-conferencing and air-travel. In addition, the HSRC's salary packages now recognise that people of professional status who are also successful research managers have to be recompensed for previous consulting income. Part-time co-appointments with universities or other science councils are welcomed, to mutual benefit.

Re-engineering the organisation

The third initiative for turnaround had two phases. At the beginning of the review period, researchers were retrenched on primary criteria of essential skills and affordability. At the end of the period, the need was recognised to restore an appropriate balance in the staffing of the organisation, by reducing the number of administration and support positions from 135 to 93. Following extensive consultations with the staff union, these arrangements were implemented early in 2001/02. With expansion of the NPAs, researchers will become a majority among the overall staff over the next two years, in line with international norms. Functions have been redistributed in the revised organogram. The next step is to simplify the cumbersome administrative processes and computerise the improved versions.

Senior managers now have an "at risk" component in their packages, using performance criteria to be discussed such as advancing excellence, earnings, and representivity. Conditions of employment are to be reviewed with the staff union, alongside introducing a coherent salary scale. Control of resources is being devolved to NPA leaders, requiring improved and transparent information systems for research project management and corporate services alike. The vacant space in the HSRC Building has been let.

Performance indicators

The turnaround has been rapid and far-reaching. The excitement has been unavoidably accompanied by some uncertainty and pain. Like other science councils, the HSRC has to be more entrepreneurial to be able to grow, and it must therefore embrace more risks. Council's revitalised Internal Audit Committee is monitoring these risks on the organisational side. On the professional side the Council's Research Committee, mentioned by the Chair, is helping the organisation advance its social-scientific excellence, independent insight, professional development,

HSRC's selected key performance indicators	End-2000/01 performance %	End-2001/02 target %	End-2002/03 target %
Contracts and grants: research earnings as a proportion of total income	27	34	41
Outreach: proportion of projects with external researcher participation	22	26	30
User-orientation: proportion of successful tender or grant submissions	24	29	34
Performance (equity): proportion of black researchers	40	47	54
Performance (efficiency): proportion of researchers in total staff	30	50	60
Excellence: proportion of researchers publishing a refereed journal article	30	40	50

and international standing, at the same time as assuring its viability through suitable research earnings.

The careful mix of commitments described above is summarised in the HSRC's "COUPE" strategy: Contracts, Outreach, User-orientation, Performance, and Excellence. Prompted by DACST's "balanced scorecard" methodology, a set of indicators has been identified to monitor the implementation of the strategy. Some important indicators are qualitative, such as instances of the actual impact of research on policy, while others are quantitative.

In this message I shall report annually on half a dozen quantitative items that summarise how the leadership team is doing on the COUPE strategy. Next year's table will be able to compare our performance with the 2000/01 baseline and the targets.

The HSRC is determined to be accountable for the income it receives, and for its organisational effectiveness in contributing through social science to South Africa's development challenges.

Mark Orkin
CEO: HSRC