

# HSRC

Institutional Review 2024

Report



science & innovation

Department:  
Science and Innovation  
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



**HSRC**  
Human Sciences  
Research Council

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Introduction

In 2024 the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) constituted and appointed an expert review panel to conduct an evaluation of its performance during the period, 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2024.

The purpose and scope of the institutional review, as communicated to the review panel,<sup>1</sup> were as follows:

## Purpose of the institutional review

The primary purpose of the review was to assess the HSRC's performance in relation to (a) its mandate of responding to the most pressing societal concerns nationally and on the continent through "cutting edge basic and applied research in the social sciences and humanities" (Self-reflection Report, p. 2), and (b) its strategic objectives.

## Scope of the review

The review process had been designed to provide the HSRC, its Board, and the DSI with the opportunity to reflect on the distinctive role of the HSRC as a public entity mandated to conduct and coordinate research in the social sciences and humanities, and to assess the influence, impact and quality of its work.

In keeping with the developmental intent of the review process, this report also considers the HSRC's responses to and execution of the recommendations contained in the report of previous review of the institution conducted in 2018.

As per its brief, the review panel was also requested to consider the most pertinent features of the wider environment in which the institution functioned during the period covered by the review, insofar as these posed potential strategic risks for the HSRC. These environmental features or conditions include (a) the deteriorating local economic climate (financial sustainability); (b) the challenge of building a community of researchers who can contribute to understanding the most pressing social issues in the country and developing policies to deal with these (insufficient senior research capacity and transformation), (c) the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic (sustainability), and (d) the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), including advances in artificial intelligence (AI).

Furthermore, the review panel was tasked to consider the following specific questions as part of the review: (a) How well is the HSRC responding to its mandate, and how should it apply itself in what and how it researches with respect to the most urgent and pressing challenges in society? (b) What is the unique role of the HSRC in the National System of Innovation (NSI)? (c) To what extent is the HSRC responding to its mandate, particularly as it relates to its contribution to national goals (as outlined in the National Developmental Plan)? (d) What is the role of the HSRC in the Decadal Plan? (e) What is the relevance of the HSRC's current research focus areas? (f) To what extent does the HSRC create an impact in communities and influence policy? (g) How adequate are the HSRC's organisational design, management, resources, and business and funding model in relation to its mandate?

As per the brief presented to the panel, this review was also meant to assist the HSRC as it prepares for its next five-year strategic plan.

## Review panel

The following external assessors constituted the review panel: Professor Norman Duncan (Chairperson), Professor Sandy Africa, Dr Mzikazi Nduna, Dr Gugu Moche, and Professor Lyn Ossome.

## Site visit and interviews

The site visit to the HSRC offices in Pretoria and interviews with the relevant stakeholders took place from 3 to 9 April 2024. It can be noted here that the arrangements for the site visit and interviews were exemplary, with all the relevant documents required for the review forwarded to the panel well ahead of the site visit and interviews. Also, to the institution's credit is that all interviews took place as scheduled, with sufficient time between interviews allocated for the panel to reflect on and discuss what was conveyed in the interviews.

<sup>1</sup> See Addendum A for full terms of reference.

## Preliminary feedback

On 9 April, i.e. the last day of the site visit and interviews, the review panel met with Professor Sarah Mosoetsa, Chief Executive Officer of the Human Sciences Research Council, to provide her with preliminary feedback in respect of the review. This feedback meeting took place online. Professor Mosoetsa was informed that the feedback was tentative and highlighted only some of the most pertinent observations of the panel. A verbatim record of the feedback provided to Professor Mosoetsa on this occasion is contained in Addendum B of the attached report.

The commendations, recommendations, and suggestions for future research directions for the HSRC flowing from this institutional review are presented below.

## Commendations

1. While it has registered mixed success in addressing the recommendations of the 2018 institutional review, the HSRC is nonetheless commended for its evident ongoing endeavours to address all of these recommendations.
2. The HSRC is commended for its responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in respect of its research during and related to the pandemic. The HSRC demonstrated its resilience and adaptability by pivoting its resources and focus to assist the government and other stakeholders to better understand the social implications of the Covid-19 pandemic.
3. The HSRC is commended for the quality and impact of three of its flagship surveys, namely the *South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS)*, the *South African National HIV Prevalence, HIV Incidence, Behaviour and Communication Survey (SABSSM)*, and the *Research and Development (R&D) Survey*.
4. The HSRC is commended for its efforts to align its research endeavours with the national objectives of the state.
5. The HSRC is commended for its efforts at aligning its research priorities with the overarching goals of the Decadal Plan.
6. The HSRC's Master's and PhD trainee programme is manifestly one of its flagship programmes, and the review panel commends the institution for the effort it has invested in the training of interns and the successes it has attained with this programme.

## Recommendations

1. The HSRC should consider more ambitious journal article output targets per capita for its research staff and provide the necessary support to the latter to meet the targets.
2. The HSRC should refine its impact monitoring processes to measure the impact of its policy briefs.
3. The institution should work towards increasing the proportion of senior black researchers and women in leadership positions.
4. The HSRC should consider offering greater levels of support to provincial departments and municipalities by means of research partnerships or commissioned research. Provinces have some autonomy and can therefore extend research contracts.
5. The establishment of the Impact Centre was a singularly progressive initiative. Consequently, the HSRC should review the concept, role, and structural configuration of the Impact Centre to ensure that it encompasses streams of best practice across a range of fields. This can be done through comparative studies of Impact Centres in similar institutions.
6. The HSRC should evaluate, benchmark, and improve the policies, procedures, and tools for measuring impact and ensure that they are consistently applied across the institution. Ongoing efforts at refining the conceptualisation of 'impact' is also recommended.
7. The HSRC should consider fostering closer collaboration with relevant government departments, academic institutions, and civil society organisations to leverage synergies and maximise impact.
8. The HSRC should strive to enhance the alignment between its research priorities and the specific objectives and priority areas identified in the STI Decadal Plan to ensure relevance and policy impact.

9. The HSRC should consider investing in capacity-building initiatives to strengthen its research capabilities and technical expertise in key thematic areas aligned with the Decadal Plan.
10. The HSRC must continue to plan and work collaboratively with other institutions in the NSI to ensure that the social dimensions are factored into research plans.
11. The HSRC, together with other key role-players, should devise strategies to manage substantive overlaps in research areas.
12. The HSRC should endeavour to further streamline and synergise the work of its research divisions, centres, and institute for greater impact.
13. The HSRC must develop a policy document that clarifies the distinction between what constitutes a centre, division, and institute in the institution.
14. The HSRC must urgently address the decline in the proportion of research staff in relation to its total staff complement.
15. The HSRC must urgently develop an innovative staff retention strategy to address its ongoing loss of senior research staff.
16. The HSRC should ensure that researchers in the institution have easy access to the datasets of projects beyond their immediate research areas.
17. The HSRC should more actively communicate to the public which of its research is Open Access.
18. The HSRC should consider conducting regular reviews (in the intervals between the major quinquennial institutional reviews) and updates to the strategic plan to ensure alignment with evolving national priorities and development needs.
19. The HSRC should consider expanding research initiatives aimed at addressing emerging issues such as the value of artificial intelligence for national development.
20. The HSRC should consider undertaking an evaluation of the role of Deputy CEO in its management structure.

Following engagement with the HSRC after the latter had read the draft of this report it is recommended that the twenty recommendations listed above should be clustered as follows, so as to facilitate the institution's engagement with and responses to these recommendations:

**Cluster 1. Research-based knowledge production and use:** Recommendations 1, 2, 16, and 17, which focus on supporting the eradication of poverty, reducing inequalities, and promoting employment.

**Cluster 2. Transformed research capabilities:** Recommendations 3, 14, and 15, which are aimed at enhancing research skills and capacities.

**Cluster 3. Sustainability (Funding):** Recommendation 4, which addresses financial sustainability and income generation.

**Cluster 4. Partnerships:** Recommendations 7 and 10, which emphasise collaboration with government, the National System of Innovation (NSI), and civil society to guide and inform policy.

**Cluster 5. Research, strategy, and impact:** Recommendations 8, 9, 10, 11, 18, and 19, which focus on strengthening research strategies and maximising impact.

**Cluster 6. Mandate and structure:** Recommendations 5, 6, 12, 13, and 20, which concern the organisational mandate and structure.

## Summary of grouping: Themes, recommendations and page location in the report

Clusters	Recommendations	Pages
1. Research-based knowledge production and use	1, 2, 16, 17	22, 35
2. Transformed research capabilities	3, 14, 15	22, 35
3. Sustainability	4	22
4. Partnerships with government, NSI, and Civil Society	7, 10	28, 30
5. Research, Strategy, and Impact	8,9,10,11,18,19	28, 30, 35
6. Mandate and Structure	5, 6, 12, 13, 20	27, 35

### Suggested future strategic directions for the HSRC

At the end of this report, the institutional review panel offers a set of suggestions for consideration by the HSRC as it develops its next strategic plan. These suggestions relate to the following:

1. The broadening formal partnerships.
2. The prioritisation of collaborations on the continent.
3. The development of a global partnership strategy.
4. Planning for the proposed incorporation of the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Science (NIHSS) by the HSRC.
5. Developing a strategy aimed at harnessing appropriate innovative and cutting-edge digital technologies for research and research administration.

# REVIEW REPORT

## Introduction

The Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) is a statutory research council. Its mandate and responsibilities are codified in the *Human Sciences Research Council Act, 2008 (Act No. 17 of 2008) (HSRC Act)*.

Established in 1968, the HSRC is currently the largest institute in Africa focussing on research in the social sciences and humanities. It is mandated to produce and disseminate knowledge that contributes to policies and programmes that address the needs of South Africa and the African continent, as well as to work towards the uptake of research for policy development and interventions.

The institutional mission, vision, values, and strategic plan that informed the functioning and aspirations of the HSRC during the period under review are as follows:

## Vision

“The HSRC will be a national, regional and global leader in the production and dissemination of transformative social science and humanities research in the interests of a just and equal society” (Strategic Plan 2020-2025 Mid-term Progress Report, p. 10).

## Mission

“The HSRC produces leading-edge policy research, through engaged scholarship, to utilise in understanding and explaining social conditions and informing social change for inclusive growth in communities” (Strategic Plan 2020-2025 Mid-term Progress Report, p. 10)

## Values

The values of the institution, as listed on its website and its Strategic Plan 2020-2025 Mid-term Progress Report are as follows: “acceptance, critical friendship, integrity, respect, excellence, and trust” (p. 10).

## Strategic Plan: 2020-2025

For the period under review, the HSRC committed itself to a strategic plan, which according to the institution’s self-reflection report (SRR), is aligned with the National Development Plan 2030, South Africa’s Medium-Term Strategic Framework 2019-2024 (MTSF), and the *White Paper on Science, Technology and Innovation* (2019) together with the latter’s quinquennial and decadal implementation plans. It is against this strategic plan that key aspects of this review had been conducted.

## Review Panel

The review panel was composed of the following five external assessors.

- Professor Norman Duncan (Chairperson), Professor Emeritus, University of Pretoria; Visiting Professor, Nelson Mandela University.
- Professor Sandy Africa, Acting Dean and Deputy Dean: Teaching and Learning, Faculty of Humanities, University of Pretoria.
- Dr Mzikazi Nduna, Independent Consultant; Research Fellow, AVREQ, University of Stellenbosch
- Dr Gugu Moche, Group Executive: Digital Transformation, National Research Foundation.
- Professor Lyn Osome, Director, Makerere Institute of Social Research (MISR) Makerere University; President, Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA)

All five members of the panel participated in the review site visit and all interviews.

## Site visit and interviews

The site visit to the HSRC offices in Pretoria and interviews with the relevant stakeholders took place from 3 to 9 April 2024. Some of the interviews took place in person and some online (See Addendum C). The panel was guided by the Terms of Reference (Addendum A) and the SRR report prepared by the HSRC. The arrangements for the site visit and interviews were exemplary, with all the relevant documents required for the review forwarded to the panel well ahead of the site visit and interviews. Also to the institution’s credit is that all interviews took place as scheduled, with sufficient time between interviews allocated for the panel to reflect on and discuss what was conveyed in the interviews.

## Preliminary feedback

On 9 April, i.e. the last day of the site visit and interviews, the review panel met with Professor Sarah Mosoetsa, Chief Executive Officer of the Human Sciences Research Council, to provide her with preliminary feedback in respect of the review. This feedback meeting took place online. Professor Mosoetsa was informed that the feedback was tentative and highlighted only some of the most pertinent observations of the panel. A verbatim record of the feedback provided to Professor Mosoetsa on this occasion is contained in Addendum B.

## Purpose and scope of the institutional review

### *Purpose of the institutional review*

According to the brief presented to the review panel, the primary purpose of the institutional review was to assess the HSRC's performance in relation to its mandate.

### *Scope of the review*

The review covers the period from 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2024, and is the fifth review of the HSRC. The previous institutional reviews took place in 1997, 2003, 2010, and 2018.

The review was intended to provide the HSRC, its Board, and the DSI with the opportunity to reflect on the distinctive role of the HSRC as a public entity dedicated to research in the social sciences and humanities, and to assess the influence, impact, and quality of its work. The review also considered the institution's responses to the recommendations contained in the report of the previous institutional review conducted in 2018.

The panel was informed that the review was also meant to assist the HSRC as it prepares for its next five-year strategic direction.

In accordance with its brief, the review panel considered the most pertinent features of the wider environment in which the HSRC functions, insofar as these pose strategic risks to the HSRC. The strategic risks specifically referred to in the HSRC's SRR are:

- a. *The risk to financial sustainability*, in the context of a deteriorating local economic climate (financial sustainability).
- b. *The risk of insufficient senior research capacity and transformation*, in view of the challenge of building a community of researchers who can contribute to understanding the most pressing social issues in the country and developing policies to deal with these (insufficient senior research capacity and transformation).
- c. *The risks associated with the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic*, including the various lockdown stages declared by the government (sustainability).
- d. *The risks related to, inter alia, technology insufficiencies, data security, and ethics*, in the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), including the associated advances in artificial intelligence (AI).

The review panel was tasked to consider the following specific questions as part of the review:

### *Primary question:*

According How well is the HSRC responding to its mandate, and how should it apply itself in what and how it researches with respect to the most urgent and pressing challenges in society?

### *Secondary questions:*

- a. What is the unique role of the HSRC in the National System of Innovation (NSI)?
- b. To what extent is the HSRC responding to its mandate, particularly as it relates to its contribution to the national goals?
- c. What is the role of the HSRC in the Decadal Plan?
- d. What is the relevance of the HSRC's current research focus areas?
- e. To what extent does the HSRC create an impact in communities and influence policy?
- f. How adequate is the HSRC's organisational design, management, resources, and business and funding model in relation to its mandate?



## Review methodology

The review panel employed a mixed-method approach in conducting the review. The approach entailed the following:

- a. An assessment of the SRR prepared by the HSRC.
- b. An analysis of a suite of other relevant documents complementing the SRR (See Addendum D for a full list of these documents).
- c. An interview with Dr Cassius Lubisi, the Chair of the HSRC Board, on 3 April 2024.
- d. A follow-up interview between Dr Lubisi and the Chair of the review panel on 2 May 2024.
- e. A presentation by Professor Sarah Mosoetsa, the Chief Executive Officer of the HSRC, on 3 April 2024.
- f. A follow-up interview with Professor Mosoetsa, on 5 April 2024.
- g. Presentations by the other members of the HSRC Executive team, between 3 and 5 April 2024 (See Addendum C).
- h. In-person and online interviews with a range of internal and external stakeholders (including funders and collaborators of the HSRC), between 3 and 9 April 2024 (See Addendum C for a full list of interviews).

## The self-reflection report

In the review panel's estimation, the institution's self-reflection report (SRR), in the main, is sufficiently comprehensive and balanced. The report is presented in five sections. The first section introduces the report and outlines the structure of the report. Section 2 presents the HSRC's 2020 Theory of Change and outlines how the institution had set out to re-define itself, as well as the contributions it had aimed to make to South African society during the period, 2020 to 2025. The third section of the report provides an assessment of the extent to which the HSRC had met its mandate during the period under review, as measured by the five key strategic outcomes elaborated in its Theory of Change. Section 4 provides an analysis of how key organisational inputs, such as human and financial resources, and contextual conditions, such as COVID and a strained economy, had influenced progress towards its outcomes and impact. This section also assesses the appropriateness of the institution's organisational design, management, human resources, and business and funding models. The final section of this report presents an assessment of the opportunities available to the institution, the constraints that it has to contend with, and the gaps in its functioning and outputs that it wishes to address.

As indicated above, the contents of the report are sufficiently detailed and balanced, thereby allowing for a considered assessment of the HSRC's performance during the period, 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2024.

## Extent to which recommendations from the 2018 review have been addressed

A critical aspect of this review was a consideration of the extent to which the HSRC has addressed the recommendations of the review panel responsible for the 2018 institutional review. The HSRC's responses to the 2018 review are considered per individual recommendation below. Each 2018 recommendation is followed by the review panel's assessment of the HSRC's responses and performance in relation to the recommendation.

### **Recommendation 1:**

*While its past vision and strategy have served it well, the HSRC needs to pursue a new vision; one that was well articulated to the Panel by its CEO – a vision of the HSRC as a global centre of excellence in the humanities and social sciences, focusing on the pressing issues facing South Africa and the continent to provide new insights, deep meanings and potential solutions to these challenges. To achieve this the organisation must grow the echelon of senior researchers and strengthen its strategic leadership of the humanities and social sciences agenda.*

### **HSRC's self-assessment:**

In its Strategic Plan 2020-2025 Mid-term Progress Report, the HSRC indicates that it had adopted a new vision and mission statements in response to this recommendation.

### **Review panel's observations:**

This assertion by the HSRC is indeed borne out by the documentation provided to the review panel as well as the content of the interviews conducted. According to the information provided, the institution had developed a Theory of Change as a means of actualising its new vision. It is the considered opinion of the review panel, however, that the HSRC will benefit from ensuring that its Theory of Change is understood and accepted as an institutional framework by all its stakeholders (including its board, senior management, interns and other and staff), as it was evident during the course of the interviews conducted by the review panel that some interviewees were not sufficiently familiar with aspects of the institution's Theory of Change, while others expressed concerns about the Theory of Change. It is the review panel's view that there may be a need for communication about the Theory of Change to all relevant stakeholders at regular intervals.

The 2018 review panel recommended that the HSRC should further grow its cohort of senior researchers, so as to support its aspiration of becoming a "global centre of excellence in the humanities and social sciences". It is worth noting, however, that one of the HSRC's key concerns at the moment, as expressed in the SRR and interviews, revolves around the challenges of recruiting and retaining senior research staff. Furthermore, the HSRC's SRR indicates that the percentage of staff with doctoral qualifications fell short of its set targets during the 2021/22 and 2022/23 reporting periods. This should be a matter of concern, particularly given that the targets (76% and 78%, respectively) can be considered relatively modest for a 21<sup>st</sup> century research institution. To the institution's credit, however, the percentage of PhD trainees onboarded met or exceeded the set targets during the 2020/21 and 2022/23 reporting periods (HSRC, 2024). This achievement is noteworthy, as it contributes to one of the key objectives of the HSRC, namely, to contribute to capacity building for the National System of Innovation.

Furthermore, the institution has several significant international research collaborations, some of which bolster strategic South-South collaborative initiatives. The HSRC Press also continues to publish extensively, providing an important expression of its endeavours in pursuit of becoming a global centre of excellence in the humanities and social sciences. Additionally, the HSRC currently employs a productive and respected cohort of senior researchers (despite the difficulties the institution is experiencing in recruiting and retaining senior researchers) and is strategically investing in the development of early-career researchers. The latter is a good strategy and over the long term will undoubtedly yield positive benefits for the HSRC as well as South Africa more broadly.

### **Recommendation 2:**

*The HSRC needs to bring an African lens/perspective to its work. The HSRC should build on its excellent track record and take its work outside South Africa. It has to play a bigger role on the African continent and this opportunity is enhanced by the presence of AISA within the HSRC. Local context is the organisation's comparative advantage, and this can enable it to be a global player in the humanities and social sciences.*

### **HSRC's self-assessment:**

In the documents provided, the HSRC indicates that the "Africa Institute of South Africa (AISA) is being repositioned and strengthened as part of this strategic planning process, to be both the catalyst and coordinator of closer collaboration on the continent" (Strategic Plan 2020-2025 Mid-term Progress Report, p. 15).

### **Review panel's observations:**

It is clear to the review panel that through the work of AISA, the HSRC has indeed been extending its reach into other African countries. Besides AISA, other divisions within the HSRC also have projects in various African countries. The review panel believes, however, that it will be in the HSRC's interest to ensure that the diverse projects of the different institutional divisions that logically and strategically should fall within AISA's remit are coordinated by the latter, so as to optimise the impact of the institution's research and related endeavours.

The report on the 2023 external review of AISA argues that the problems related to AISA's integration into the HSRC "continue to linger", and states emphatically that "this debilitating situation must be dealt with once and for all" (p. 9). The 2023 panel further observed that "AISA is an asset of enormous value to the HSRC and its Africa agenda. It has achieved much since its founding, and it is capable of achieving even greater heights" (p. 27). The current (2024) review panel concurs with this view and therefore encourages the HSRC to attend to all the recommendations contained in the AISA review report as expeditiously as possible – particularly since reference to the organisational problems outlined in the 2023 report surfaced in more than one of the interviews conducted as part of the current review.

### **Recommendation 3:**

*The government allocation to the HSRC needs to be increased, recognising that this may need to be addressed with vigour as the state of the South African economy improves.*

### **HSRC's self-assessment:**

In the Strategic Plan 2020-2025 Mid-term Progress Report, the HSRC confirms its intention of pursuing the implementation of this recommendation "in collaboration with its Executive Authority" (p. 15).

### **Review panel's observations:**

The review panel notes that, due to a constrained fiscus, the HSRC's budget has not been increased as recommended by the 2018 review. The HSRC has consequently endeavoured to manage its commitments through increased efforts to raise external funding for research and capacity building projects and partnering with other research institutions, as a means of spreading costs. The panel is of the view that, given that its parliamentary allocation is unlikely to be increased substantially in the short and medium term (given economic conditions predicted for South Africa in the short and medium term), the HSRC should, in addition to its traditional sources of external research funding, also consider other sources of income, such as endowments and donations that are not tied to specific projects.

### **Recommendation 4:**

*The current business model, which may have served the organisation well in the past, needs to be drastically revamped to meet the HSRC's upcoming challenges. In this context, the current approach of allocating funding to salaries first needs to be reviewed to first allocating both salary and operating funds to priority research areas.*

### **HSRC's self-assessment:**

The HSRC indicates that this recommendation forms part of "an ongoing process of institutional re-alignment and uncovering of funding opportunities, with support from the HSRC's Executive Authority" (Strategic Plan 2020-2025 Mid-term Progress Report, p. 15).

### **Review panel's observations:**

The current business model is predicated on the HSRC receiving a parliamentary grant. To supplement this allocation, as indicated above, the institution engages in external fundraising.

It is evident that, due to its constrained parliamentary grant, the HSRC is compelled to increasingly partner with external funding organisations. The review panel notes, however, that while this strategy potentially has significant short-term benefits, it is accompanied by the distinct risk that the HSRC may increasingly find itself subject to grant or funding conditions that do not cohere with its institutional priorities and obligations. Another risk associated with an increasing reliance on external funding is that staff (particularly senior staff with substantive research skills and responsibilities) may end up spending inordinate amounts of time fundraising, resulting in a decreasing focus on and a progressive dilution of the HSRC's strategic research priorities. Furthermore, while the HSRC has managed to progressively increase its funding from diverse external sources, external funding in most cases does not cover human resources costs, thus not providing relief in relation to a significant organisational expense.

**Recommendation 5:**

*The HSRC mandate is extremely broad. In light of financial constraints (experienced nationally and globally in the research arena) and in light of limited human resources, in the organisation, a narrower focus on the social determinants and outcomes of poverty and inequality may be prudent moving forward if the HSRC is to remain relevant and competitive.*

**HSRC's self-assessment:**

In its Strategic Plan 2020-2025 Mid-term Progress Report, the HSRC indicates that “the five-year strategy commencing April 2020 will focus on three core research areas that are aligned with the NDP implementation pillars” (p. 15). This strategy has already been initiated.

**Review panel's observations:**

The HSRC has clearly invested considerable thought and effort into streamlining its research priorities. Nonetheless, some of the staff interviewed indicated that the scope and coverage of the HSRC's research agenda at times appears somewhat overwhelming. Of course, the panel is cognisant of the fact that the HSRC, while narrowing its focus to three core research areas, must also keep its statutory obligations and the government's priorities in mind. Additionally, it obviously also has to consider issues of intersectionality. The HSRC's current core research areas (viz., Equitable Education and Economies; Public Health, Societies and Belonging, and Developmental, Capable and Ethical State) intersect with a range of other issues that cannot be ignored.

**Recommendation 6:**

*The HSRC needs to be better profiled strategically to government departments that can contribute to enhancing the impact of the HSRC's research to allow it to act as an evidence-based decision support system including at national, provincial and local levels. It needs to advocate more to government.*

**HSRC's self-assessment:**

The HSRC indicates that it has “adopted, as one of its outcomes for the next five years, a consolidated relation of trust and influence with government” (Strategic Plan 2020-2025 Mid-term Progress Report, p. 15).

**Review panel's observations:**

It is evident that the HSRC is highly regarded by institutions with overlapping mandates as well as decision-makers who value evidence-led policymaking and consequently regularly make use of the institution's expertise and resources. Key government stakeholders that have used the research expertise of the HSRC during the period covered by this review include the Presidency, Statistics South Africa, the National Department of Health, the National Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development, the National Department of Tourism, and the National Department of Basic Education. The HSRC has regularly also worked with, and consequently developed strong relationships of trust with provincial and local government entities. Of course, the HSRC must guard against the impulse to respond to all requests that come its way. Given the resource constraints facing the institution, it should ensure that whatever research is undertaken at the request of government partners are substantively aligned with its mandate and priorities. Furthermore, in its next strategic plan, the HSRC may wish to consider setting targets for large long-term research projects that are key to the government's priorities.

**Recommendation 7:**

*The HSRC should think seriously about occupying the leadership space in the humanities and social sciences and aim to be the go-to organisation for research excellence in the critical and relevant area of poverty and inequality research, as this speaks to the priorities of the country. The HSRC needs to develop a clearly defined human resource development strategy to support universities and other degree awarding institutions with their master's and doctoral level research work.*

### **HSRC's self-assessment:**

The HSRC indicates that its response to this recommendation is “encapsulated in the HSRC’s new vision and mission statements, which are at the core of and form the foundation of the next five-year strategy” (Strategic Plan 2020-2025 Mid-term Progress Report, p. 15).

### **Review panel's observations:**

Based on the interviews conducted and the documentation provided, the HSRC is manifestly committed to this imperative articulated in the 2018 review report. It should be noted, however, that while the HSRC does collaborate with tertiary institutions and while it is making a significant contribution to the humanities and social sciences through its work with doctoral and master’s trainees, much more will have to be done to definitively establish its leadership profile in these fields of research. Of course, it is possible that its position in these fields may be strengthened if the overlap between its mandate and that of the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS) is addressed within the shortest possible delay. This issue is addressed again later in this report.

### **Recommendation 8:**

*The HSRC should strengthen its research capacity leadership in terms of increased internationalisation and seniority as prerequisites for leadership and delivery of the vision of a global centre of excellence in humanities and social sciences. The HSRC should within the context of current funding constraints, develop innovative strategies to bring in high calibre African and international scholars to contribute to this new vision.*

### **HSRC's self-assessment:**

The HSRC indicates that “a suite of indicators to measure excellence and to transform research capabilities has been formulated” (Strategic Plan 2020-2025 Mid-term Progress Report, p. 15) in response to this recommendation.

### **Review panel's observations:**

The panel was not provided with evidence of the extent to which progress has been made in engaging the collaboration of high calibre African and international scholars on an ongoing and substantive basis. This is an area that clearly requires the attention of the HSRC, if it is not already being attended to.

Furthermore, it will be in the institution’s interest to ensure the ongoing implementation of its recently finalised employment succession policy, so that it does not find itself in the situation where senior positions are vacant or with acting managers filling the vacancies for extended periods of time. The panel noted that the position of the Deputy CEO (Research) was vacant at the time of the review. According to the documentation provided, the HSRC also functioned without a CEO from 1 April 2021 to 31 January 2023. During this time an Acting CEO headed the institution.

### **Recommendation 9:**

*As was recommended in the 2018 Review, the HSRC needs to move from a short-termism approach of multiple contracts (also linked to the funding model) to a long-term view that can provide the necessary evidence base for longitudinal changes and impacts for the country and its development policy.*

### **HSRC's self-assessment:**

In its Strategic Plan 2020-2025 Mid-term Progress Report, the HSRC indicates that it “will endeavour, over the next five years, to secure at least nine (9) multi-year projects” (p. 15).

### **Review panel's observations:**

It is evident that the HSRC is trying to meet the target that it had set for itself in relation to the afore-mentioned recommendation by the 2018 review panel. The review panel notes, for example, that the institution had procured large-scale funding from the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Mastercard Foundation, and from the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development during the period under review. No evidence of other large-scale funding is provided in the documents viewed by the review panel. This means that the HSRC is short of its own goal of securing “at least nine (9) multi-year projects” during the period covered by the review.

**Recommendation 10:**

*The HSRC must continue to seek closer working relationships with partners that pursue research in the humanities and social sciences. This may not be easy because of the limited availability of public grants and the expectations that South Africa must use its financial resources efficiently and responsibly. The HSRC must find its space by ensuring it seeks the inevitable commonalities with the work already been undertaken by universities and other role players. The Panel wishes not to be prescriptive regarding the identification of partners.*

**HSRC's self-assessment:**

According to its Strategic Plan 2020-2025 Mid-term Progress Report, the HSRC indicates that its strategy "for the next five years seeks to establish and solidify collaboration with the local and international scientific community" (p. 15).

**Review panel's observations:**

As indicated by the HSRC's response above, its response to this recommendation ensuing from the 2018 review is clearly work in progress. Nonetheless, evidence contained in the documentation made available to the review panel indicates the HSRC has managed to sustain several long-standing collaborations as well as establishing new collaborations with various universities and academics. The review panel notes, however, that the HSRC's SRR indicates that it had collaborated with 12 South African public universities on various research initiatives during the period covered by this review. This means that it had collaborated with fewer than half of the public universities in South Africa during this period. The review panel is of the view that if the institution really wants to be viewed as a leading research institution in the fields of the humanities and social sciences, it will have to endeavour to collaborate with a larger proportion of South African as well as international universities. Worth noting, however, is that judging by research co-authorships with non-HSRC staff, the HSRC seems to be doing well in respect of authorship collaboration.

**Commendation:**

While it has registered mixed success in addressing the recommendations of the 2018 institutional review, the HSRC is nonetheless commended for its evident ongoing endeavours to address all of these recommendations.

**Recommendations:**

All substantive recommendations flowing from the review panel's assessment of the HSRC's responses to the recommendations of the 2018 review are addressed in the next section of this report.

# 2024 Review: Detailed findings

## Introduction

In accordance with the brief given to the review panel, this section of the report details the panel's findings in respect of:

1. The extent to which the HSRC is responding to its mandate, including:
  - a. How it is responding to the most urgent and pressing challenges in society.
  - b. What its contribution to the national goals are.
  - c. Its role in the Decadal Plan.
  - d. The relevance of its current research focus areas.
  - e. The extent to which it creates an impact in communities and influences policy.
2. The adequacy of the HSRC's current organisational design, management, resources, and business and funding model.
3. Recommended future strategic directions for the HSRC.

According to the SRR submitted to the review panel, the HSRC measures its performance against the following outcomes proposed in its strategic plan:

- Recognition as a knowledge hub
- Recognition as a critical partner to government
- Recognition as a community partner
- Transforming research capabilities
- Sustainable income streams

Each of these outcomes (collectively represented by the acronym, LeaPPT+S<sup>2</sup>) is linked to a set of annual output indicators.

We consequently use these strategic outcomes as the point of departure for our assessment of the HSRC's performance during the period under review.

### Recognition as a knowledge hub

**Strategic outcome 1:** *The HSRC will be a national, regional and global leader in the production and dissemination of targeted knowledge to support the eradication of poverty, the reduction of inequalities and the promotion of employment.*

The HSRC registered a steady output of journal articles, book chapters, and books during the period under review. Scrutiny of the SRR indicates that the institution's journal article targets were quite modest and that the output per staff member was significantly below the set targets during the 2019/2020 and 2022/2023 reporting periods (See page 6 of the SRR). There was, however, an increase in the number and proportion of articles cited more than 10 times (the metric utilised by the institution to measure the impact of its publications). There had also been a noteworthy increase in the number of books published by the HSRC during the period under review. Downloads of the HSRC's datasets also increased significantly beyond the set targets. The primary users were higher education institutions (54% of all users), followed by the private sector (33%), and science councils and research institutes (10%). According to the HSRC, "these trends indicate that HSRC data is being used for secondary analysis, reflecting our value as a national knowledge producer. The growing use of our data by other countries in the region and internationally is a positive trend that we would like to grow" (SRR, p. 10). This assertion was confirmed by internal and external stakeholders during the course of the interviews conducted by the review panel.

<sup>2</sup> LeaPPT+S: Leadership, Policy influence, Partnership, Transformed research capabilities, and Sustainability.

## The HSRC as a critical partner to government

**Strategic outcome 2:** *The HSRC will demonstrate the value and impact of the knowledge it produces to forge relationships with all spheres of government, including Parliament and the judiciary, in support of creating a capable state. By being a trusted partner to government, the HSRC can assist policy makers by guiding and informing policies and decision-making through the careful knowledge-brokering of high-quality, high-impact output.*

According to the HSRC, during the period under review, it had produced a large body of publications, including a growing number of peer-reviewed policy briefs aimed at assisting policy makers in their work. According to the documentation presented to the review panel, 76 policy briefs were published between 2019 and 2024, with the number produced escalating year on year. As indicated later in this report, however, the impact of the briefs, currently, is not clear. Furthermore, the institution reports various obstacles in engaging with government departments as a result of, *inter alia*, “bureaucratic processes, red tape, and slow decision-making, which may delay the implementation of recommendations and initiatives” (p. 15).

As previously noted, based on the documentation provided and the interviews conducted, the HSRC worked with several government departments during the period under review. These included the National Departments of Health; Performance, Monitoring and Evaluation; Military Veterans; Public Service and Administration; Tourism, Agriculture, Rural Development and Land Reform, and Women, Youth and People with Disabilities. Some of its most impactful or visible work with or for the government included the national survey of healthcare workers’ response to COVID-19 and other interventions related to the pandemic, as well as its 2023 colloquium, titled *Post Zondo: The Future of Democracy*.

## The HSRC as a community partner

**Strategic outcome 3:** *The HSRC will contribute to developing the capabilities of South Africans by establishing itself as a trusted and engaged partner with both scientific communities and civil society. By forging active collaborations in the scientific community, it will be able to share, and share in, resources, and provide complementary research to other research disciplines. These collaborations will be used to stimulate community innovation through knowledge sharing and by enhancing the understanding and use of science by communities.*

The definition of community adopted by the HSRC is intentionally broad and refers to “the scientific/ research/ academic community working together to support community innovation or solution-oriented research, rather than producing mainly academic outputs” (SRR, p. 16). Furthermore, according to the SRR, the “levels of communities” that the HSRC engages with include formal civil society organisations, such as non-governmental organisations as well as informal entities at local community level. Importantly, according to the HSRC, “the participants in an engagement can thus range from direct beneficiaries in local communities, to those working directly with beneficiaries, to those researching to the benefit of local communities” (SRR, p. 16).

The data provided by the HSRC in its SRR indicate consistent growth in community engagement activities and outputs during the period under review. The SRR argues that a “major strength of the HSRC is its capacity to manage large-scale, national longitudinal surveys, building up datasets over time for use by other researchers” (p. 16). Indeed, 2023 marked the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of three of its surveys, viz., the *South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS)*, the *South African National HIV Prevalence, HIV Incidence, Behaviour and Communication Survey (SABSSM)*, and the *Research and Development (R&D) Survey*. The significant contributions of these surveys to the South African research landscape are widely acknowledged.



## Transformed research capabilities

**Strategic outcome 4:** *The HSRC's approach to transformation over the five-year period is not limited to demographic transformation. It will also focus on:*

- *Developing the required internal processes and systems to enable economic, efficient and effective implementation of the HSRC mandate.*
- *Approaching the research life-cycle – including data gathering, reporting and dissemination, data storage and sharing, and knowledge use – in new and innovative ways.*
- *Building research capacity and transforming human capital.*

In its SRR, the HSRC argues that it had been reasonably successful in the appointment of senior women and black researchers. The statistics provided in the SRR indicates a steady growth in the proportion of senior black researchers employed by the HSRC (specifically, from 46% in the 2020/21 reporting period to 53% in the 2023/24 reporting period). The HSRC attributes its success in this regard to “several strategies that the organisation has employed, which include, among others, aggressive and targeted recruitment, permanent conditions of employment for eligible South Africans (viz., Blacks in general, females, and people with disabilities), and improvement of salaries across the spectrum” (SRR, p. 20). The institution acknowledges, however, that its gains are often reversed, as the researchers that it had so painstakingly recruited, inducted, and offered career development opportunities to are frequently headhunted, particularly by universities seeking their exceptional skills. While no mention was made of ‘push factors’ resulting in resignations in the SRR and the interviews conducted, this is certainly a matter worth investigating.

It should be noted of course that the institution’s performance in respect of the percentage of senior researchers who are female will be considered by many as less than stellar. While the proportion of senior female researchers in the employ of the institution has certainly grown since the 2020/21 reporting period, it currently remains significantly inferior to the proportion of senior male researchers (viz., 42%, as opposed to the 58%) employed by the institution. Furthermore, women of colour are manifestly under-represented in formal leadership positions.

Despite introducing a range of interventions to support staff who must improve their qualifications, according to the statistics provided to the review panel, the percentage of staff with doctoral degrees as their highest qualification has shown a decrease between 2020 and 2023 (specifically, from 79% in the 2020/21 reporting period to 70% in the 2022/23 reporting period). This should be considered a cause for concern. To the institution’s credit, it has been signally successful in the research training opportunities it has provided to master’s and doctoral trainees during the period covered by this review.

## Sustainable income streams

**Strategic outcome 5:** *The HSRC must secure a steady income stream to ensure its sustainability and alleviate the pressure on senior researchers to raise income year-on-year. In order to achieve this, it is imperative to focus on securing multi-year grants of between three and five years.*

The HSRC’s funding model is based on the Framework Autonomy principle, as outlined in the *White Paper on Science and Technology*. The framework is applicable to all public research institutes nationally. In essence, the model entails co-funding consisting of annual parliamentary grants and externally generated funding. While the HSRC’s parliamentary grant has remained virtually static (at approximately R270m per annum) during the period covered by this review, its income in the form of research grants and contract research had increased markedly during the period under consideration. Indeed, following a noticeable decline in external revenue between 2019 and 2021, the HSRC had grown this form of income quite substantially from 2021 onwards. According to the SRR, and as indicated earlier, this increase is largely due to large-scale funding received from, amongst others, the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Mastercard Foundation, and from the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development.

Important to note is that during the period covered by the review, the HSRC has managed to keep its salary budget steady.

In the main, therefore, despite its *quasi*-stagnant parliamentary grant, the HSRC’s and its finances currently are relatively healthy and its financial processes relatively sound.

## **Recommendations:**

1. The HSRC should consider more ambitious journal article output targets per capita for its research staff and provide the necessary support to the latter to meet the targets.
2. The HSRC should refine its impact monitoring processes to measure the impact of its policy briefs.
3. The institution should work towards increasing the proportion of senior black researchers and women in leadership positions.
4. The HSRC should consider offering greater levels of support to provincial departments and municipalities by means of research partnerships or commissioned research. Provinces have some autonomy and can therefore extend research contracts.

## ***The HSRC 's response to the most urgent and pressing challenges in society***

Scrutiny of the documentation provided to the review panel as well as what was conveyed during the interviews conducted by the panel indicates a clearly expressed commitment on the part of HSRC to engage with and conduct research on some of the more intractable problems confronting South Africa, including poverty, unemployment (especially youth unemployment), HIV/AIDS, manifestations of racism, xenophobia, gender-based violence, violent protests, and inequality. In the introductory pages of its SRR, the HSRC states that it is:

*“Resolved to undertake cutting edge basic and applied research in the social sciences and humanities that would contribute to the alleviation of poverty, a reduction in the inequality gap and the expansion of decent work opportunities for the majority of South Africa’s people” (SRR, p. 2)*

This commitment is reflected in the institution’s research and publication outputs during the period covered by this review.

One of the most significant health crises that has thus far affected South Africa, as it had most other parts of the world, namely the COVID-19 pandemic, occurred during the period covered by this review. During this period, the HSRC had, through its research, supported the government in understanding the human and social impact of the pandemic on South Africa and beyond. The large number of studies, publications, and capacity-building initiatives related to the COVID-19 pandemic generated by the HSRC bear testimony to the institution’s engagement with the sequelae of the crisis faced by the country at the time.

During the period under consideration, the HSRC had also conducted research and worked with local government structures to address issues related to social services, such as housing and health care. In addition, it had invested considerable resources in addressing the challenges of inclusive economic growth, skills, and education, with a focus on the challenges faced by young people.

The review found that there has been increasing engagements by the HSRC with civil society. The new indicator for solution-orientated communities of practice created or supported with active involvement of HSRC researchers shows that this is a success (HSRC, 2024).

In response to its mandate to initiate, undertake, and foster research, the HSRC is doing noteworthy work at the community level. In this regard, its Centre for Community-Based Research (CCBR) stands out through its focus on basic research attuned to extant social problems and the lived experiences and daily struggles of communities. The HSRC’s long-term work on HIV/AIDS research is similarly embedded in communities. Worth emphasising is the high-level skills set that the HSRC possesses to produce scientific research and rich empirical data backed by community-based evidence that can be leveraged to change policy.

The HSRC’s expertise and research skills in respect of the psychosocial aspects of human functioning, especially in the field of HIV/AIDS research, are considered by peer organisations as major strengths. The review panel is of the view that the HSRC should foreground its high-level research skills and knowledge in respect of the psychosocial aspects of human functioning to a much greater extent.

There is inevitable overlap in the research scope of the HSRC and that of universities, and other humanities and social science research bodies, such as the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS). Such overlap includes the HSRC's health focus and the work of the Medical Research Council (MRC) in respect of HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and the social determinants of health. This may require a refinement of the HSRC model for collaboration (if this is not already under consideration).

There is a manifest need for research and information that can assist humanitarian and emergency work endeavours in the region. It is not clear from the SRR whether this is an area that is enjoying any attention on the part of the HSRC. If it is an area of focus, the SRR should perhaps have included information on this – particularly in relation to budgets, ethics, and shared services support.

### **Commendation:**

1. The HSRC is commended for its responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in respect of its research during and related to the pandemic. The HSRC demonstrated its resilience and adaptability by pivoting its resources and focus to assist the government and other stakeholders to better understand the social implications of the Covid-19 pandemic.

### **The HSRC's contribution to national goals**

#### **Alignment of HSRC's agenda with national priorities**

In its 2024 SRR, the HSRC confidently argues that its agenda is relevant to and supports the national priorities, as articulated in the National Development Plan, the STI Decadal Plan, the African Union's Agenda 2063, the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, and 2013 *White Paper for Post-School Education and Training* (PSET). As stated in the *Strategic Plan 2020-2025*, the HSRC research agenda is "strategically aligned to generate knowledge in support of the NDP implementation pillars, namely Inclusive Economic Growth, Capabilities of South Africans, and a Capable State" (p. 3).

As further stated in the Strategic Plan 2020-2025, the HSRC has been guided by the government's Medium-Term Strategic Framework 2019 – 2024, which identifies the following seven priorities through which to achieve the above goals in respect of: (a) a capable, ethical and developmental State; (b) economic transformation and job creation; (c) education, skills and health; (d) consolidating the social wage through reliable and quality basic services; (e) spatial development, human settlements and local government; (f) social cohesion, safer communities, and (g) a better Africa and a better world.

The HSRC has also been strategically positioned in relation to the national system of innovation. Given the renewed vision and priority setting for the fields of science, technology, and innovation, as spelt in the 2019 *White Paper on Science, Technology and Innovation*, linking up with partners under the Department of Science and Innovation umbrella has supported the HSRC's research endeavours in respect of the social dimensions and impact of innovation on society, particularly the poor and vulnerable.

As previously indicated, much of the HSRC's work during the period covered by this review relates to some of the core challenges South Africa has been grappling with, including (a) the triple challenges of poverty, inequality, and unemployment; (b) housing; (c) food security; (d) health; (e) transformative leadership and the world of work, and (f) inclusion (e.g., LGBTQI experiences and disability).

The above provides an indication of the extent of the alignment of the HSRC's work with the national objectives of the state.

The HSRC has used its well-established track record in conducting long-term, large-scale research projects that provide new understandings of key societal problems to focus on issues that feature among the national priorities.

As indicated in the previous section of this report, the major large-scale surveys that the HSRC continued to consistently deliver in the reporting period included: (a) the South African National HIV Prevention, HIV Incidence, Behaviour and Communication Survey (SABSSM); (b) the South African Social Attitudes Survey, and (c) the South African National Survey on Research and Experimental Developmental Inputs (the R&D survey).

Another major contribution on the part of the HSRC was its response to the cases of corruption investigated by the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture (often referred to as the “Zondo Commission”) chaired by Chief Justice Raymond Zondo, which had brought the country to a crisis point. Through its Future of Democracy project, the HSRC has supported the South African authorities and the public in synthesizing and making sense of the outcomes of the Zondo Commission, as well as identifying those aspects of the findings that could form the basis of future research.

### Measuring the impact of HSRC’s research

In its Theory of Change, the HSRC outlines how its research can be used by the government, and how this can have a social impact, measurable by a reduction in unemployment, inequality and poverty, and increased skills development, social cohesion, nation-building, and social protection. This is captured in the HSRC’s Impact Statement, as reflected in its Strategic Plan 2020-2025:

1. “A South Africa where poverty is alleviated: Through its realigned and engaged research agenda, the HSRC will contribute to government’s policy options and programmes in poverty alleviation.
2. A society in which inequality gaps are reduced: In collaboration with government and civil society role-players, the HSRC will work with research peers and communities to develop and test research-based solutions to reduce the inequality gap.
3. An economic climate that stimulates employment creation: By strengthening its research focus on economic growth and human capabilities, the HSRC will use its work around the 4IR and engagement with young people to identify and develop research-based innovative employment options” (p. 19).

In addition, the HSRC also committed itself to supporting the Department of Science and Innovation outcomes. The Strategic Plan 2020-2025 lists these as follows: (a) a transformed, inclusive, responsive, and coherent NSI; (b) knowledge utilization for economic development; (c) human capabilities and skills for the economy and for development; (d) increased knowledge generation and innovation output; (e) knowledge utilization for inclusive development, and (f) innovation in support of a capable and developmental state.

Despite the intended impact being so well-framed, the HSRC has not always been sure of whether its contribution has had the intended effect. The senior officials interviewed by the review panel acknowledged that there is still room for improvement in measuring impact. The establishment of the HSRC’s Impact Centre in 2020 has been a step in that direction, but its work is at a relatively early stage, and it is still attempting to model the study of impact through pilot projects.

The afore-mentioned HSRC officials also pointed out to the panel that, in the case of collaborative and commissioned research, they do not always have full control over the research outputs, and the process of translating evidence into policy is often beyond the remit of their commissioned research. Another challenge referred to relates to the significant amount of informal translational work done, alongside formal research projects. It is argued that it is not always possible to measure the impact of the translational work.

Finally, the HSRC acknowledges that there are cases where it should lead in identifying research opportunities even before they had been seen by government. In such cases, the institution must provide leadership, while driving advocacy and dialogue to ensure that critical research opportunities are prioritised.

Overall, whilst the work that the HSRC does is manifestly relevant, there are systemic challenges in measuring and evaluating the extent to which it influences policymaking.

### Perceptions of HSRC’s contribution to national goals

The HSRC is positively regarded by its institutional partners in the sector, who acknowledge the noteworthy specialist skills sets the institution brings to partnerships and collaborations. Examples were provided where this enhanced the quality of research and capacity-building interventions.

As noted elsewhere in this report, the HSRC has served an important strategic role in facilitating the growth of the pool of social scientists in South Africa and on the African continent. It is generally commended for this.

### **Commendations:**

2. The HSRC is commended for the quality and impact of three of its flagship surveys, namely the *South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS)*, the *South African National HIV Prevalence, HIV Incidence, Behaviour and Communication Survey (SABSSM)*, and the *Research and Development (R&D) Survey*.
3. The HSRC is commended for its efforts to align its research endeavours with the national objectives of the state.

### **Recommendations:**

5. The establishment of the Impact Centre was a singularly progressive initiative. Consequently, The HSRC should review the concept, role, and structural configuration of the Impact Centre to ensure that it encompasses streams of best-practice across a range of fields. This can be done through comparative studies of Impact Centres in similar institutions.
6. The HSRC should evaluate, benchmark, and improve the policies, procedures, and tools for measuring impact and ensure that they are consistently applied across the institution. Ongoing efforts at refining the conceptualisation of 'impact' is also recommended.

### ***The HSRC's role in the Decadal Plan and the relevance of its current research focus areas***

The HSRC's research initiatives span diverse disciplines and address critical societal challenges. The Decadal Plan articulates national priorities for economic development, poverty reduction, social cohesion, and environmental sustainability. It emphasises the importance of inclusive growth, human capital development, and innovation-driven strategies.

The thematic priorities of the HSRC' Strategic Plan 2020-2025 align closely with the overarching goals of the Decadal Plan. Both documents emphasise the importance of addressing socio-economic inequalities, promoting inclusive development, and enhancing the well-being of South Africa's citizens.

Key research thematic areas, such as healthcare, education, and economic development are identified as priorities in both the HSRC Strategic Plan 2020-2025 and the Decadal Plan, demonstrating strong alignment between the two documents.

The HSRC's emphasis on interdisciplinary collaboration and stakeholder engagement aligns with the Decadal Plan's call for integrated approaches and multi-sectoral partnerships to address complex development challenges.

By deploying its research expertise and institutional resources, the HSRC can play a critical role in contributing to the achievement of the Decadal Plan's goals and advancing the country's development agenda. Continued collaboration, strategic focus, and capacity-building efforts will be essential to ensure that the HSRC's research efforts effectively support national development priorities and drive positive socio-economic change in South Africa.

### **Commendation:**

4. The HSRC is commended for its efforts at aligning its research priorities with the overarching goals of the Decadal Plan.

### **Recommendations**

7. The HSRC should consider fostering closer collaboration with relevant government departments, academic institutions, and civil society organisations to leverage synergies and maximise impact.
8. The HSRC should strive to enhance the alignment between its research priorities and the specific objectives and priority areas identified in the STI Decadal Plan to ensure relevance and policy impact.
9. The HSRC should consider investing in capacity-building initiatives to strengthen its research capabilities and technical expertise in key thematic areas aligned with the Decadal Plan.

## ***The HSRC's impact in communities and on policy***

### **Community-engaged research**

The HSRC has adopted community-engaged research as an approach to its work. The review panel is of the view that the institution's orientation in respect of community-engaged research is progressive. However, that it can be developed further, as in certain respects, community engagement appears to be a stand-alone endeavour.

The HSRC Sweetwater office is advantageously located for community-engaged research. The other HSRC offices in towns are also within reach of communities, which facilitates community-engaged research in various forms.

The skills and experiences of the Centre for Community-based research (CCBR) needs to be shared across the organisation so that research for change is a leitmotif discernible in all HSRC work. It should also be borne in mind that the impact of community-engaged research is not simply a function of the location of research offices (in communities), but should also be demonstrated through the involvement of target communities in research agenda setting and in the uptake and utilisation of research findings.

The review panel notes that the HSRC's reporting tools make it easy to discern the contribution of each research division to the overall research output of the institution in relation to policy development. The disaggregation of the research divisions' proportional contribution to the HSRC's overall output makes it easy to assess how each division contributes to LeaPPT+S (leadership, policy influence, partnership, transformed research capabilities, and sustainability) and how the distribution of outputs varies between and within divisions. The quantitative measures in the LeaPPT+S framework are useful. However, a more qualitative account of the 'story behind the numbers' and the impact of the institution's quantum output on policy and practice would have facilitated the review.

As indicated earlier, during the period covered by this review, the HSRC divisions produced a range of outputs in formats that are accessible to the diversity of stakeholders that are consumers and/or co-producers of its knowledge products. The outputs included books, journals publications, policy engagement reports (including policy briefs), research summaries, and media products (including TV, radio, and social media products). As mentioned in the previous section, the establishment of the Impact Centre as a 'shared service' was a good strategy to infuse and mainstream impact assessment in all units, as well as the organisation as a whole. The review panel is of the view that the Impact Centre should perhaps also devise a feedback mechanism for the HSRC to get a sense of the use of its findings to change policy.

One of the key foci of the current review is to assess the extent to which the HSRC, during the period under consideration, produced knowledge that is in support of the government's policies and decision-making in respect of its efforts to end poverty, inequality, and unemployment as articulated in the National Development Plan 2030. The envisaged impact of the HSRC's research on the three national development challenges (viz., poverty, inequality, and unemployment) is represented schematically in Figure 2 of the SRR (p. 3) and suggests that reducing unemployment and poverty will impact inequality. As indicated earlier, the panel is of the view that the current constellation of the HSRC's research divisions, in the main, support the government's efforts in dealing with these challenges.

Nonetheless, while the HSRC leadership's commitment to responding to the key imperatives contained in the National Development Plan is clear, an appreciation of this commitment was not consistently evident in the responses of all other staff (across all divisions) to the panel's questions.

Based on the documentation provided to the review panel, it is evident that the HSRC is in full support of the NDP's positioning of South Africa in the context of an African identity (National Planning Commission, 2013). Hence, its work endeavours to address national concerns in the context of regional and continental development.

### Impact on the scientific community

The panel adjudges the work of the HSRC as impactful in the scientific community. Several of the research projects, memoranda of understanding, and collaborative endeavours with other institutions in the National System of Innovation, particularly the CSIR and the NRF, which the HSRC maintained or entered into during the period under consideration, support the development of research capacity in the humanities and social sciences.

As previously indicated external stakeholders interviewed spoke highly of the HSRC's research outputs. In the words of the representatives of an external stakeholder, "The HSRC's survey capabilities and research on psychosocial matters are unparalleled in the region".

Furthermore, the panel was informed that the research produced by the HSRC generally has a heuristic impact in that it often informs the formulation of new research endeavours. In particular, the HSRC's flagship surveys inspire other generative research endeavours.

However, concern was raised in the interviews conducted about a lack of coordination of research agendas across institutions, which could result in duplication and lack of synergy between the HSRC, universities and independent think tanks that work in overlapping areas.

### Recommendations:

10. The HSRC must continue to plan and work collaboratively with other institutions in the NSI to ensure that the social dimensions are factored into research plans.
11. The HSRC, together with other key role-players, should devise strategies to manage substantive overlaps in research areas.

### ***The adequacy of the HSRC's current organisational design, management, resources and business and funding model.***

#### Organisational structure

The HSRC revised its organisational structure as part of its current strategic plan in 2020. This revised design resulted in the creation of the following three research divisions, one institute and two centres.

- Equitable Education and Economies (EEE) Research Division (formerly, Inclusive Economic Development)
- Public Health, Societies and Belonging (PHSB) Research Division (formerly, Human and Social Capabilities)
- Developmental, Capable and Ethical State Research Division.
- Africa Institute of South Africa (AISA) (legacy structure)
- Centre for Science, Technology and Innovation Indicators (CeSTII) (legacy structure)
- Impact Centre

According to the SRR, the research divisions established new posts aimed at integrating business development, impact, and engagement, into the divisions' core research mandate. The Impact Centre was established to enhance the impact and visibility of the HSRC's research.

The redesign of the organisational structure had enhanced the functioning of the institution and had streamlined its activities in many respects. Notwithstanding this, and although a healthy culture of transdisciplinarity prevails at the institution, the panel observed that, in certain respects, the institution's research divisions and other research entities function somewhat independently of each other. This was raised as a concern by some of the interviewees. Consequently, the panel is of the view that there is space for further streamlining and synergising the work of the research entities for greater impact.

Furthermore, clarity is required in respect of the distinction between what constitutes a centre, division, and institute in the HSRC's structure.

## Governance Structure

The HSRC's governance structure comprises a Board of Directors, Executive Management, and various research programmes and units. While the Board provides strategic oversight and governance guidance, the Executive Management oversees day-to-day operations and programmatic activities. This hierarchical structure ensures accountability and transparency in decision-making processes.

While the executive management structure of the HSRC, in the main, appears to serve the needs of the institution adequately, questions were raised in the interviews conducted concerning the logic of the existence of a Deputy CEO focussing primarily on research. As the review panel does not have sufficient details regarding the rationale for the existence of this position in its current form, it will not presume to make a definitive recommendation in respect of whether the position should be redesigned or 'repurposed'. Instead, it recommends that the HSRC should undertake a comprehensive review of the position and thereafter decided whether it should be maintained as is or repurposed. For what it is worth, however, it can be argued that the Deputy CEO's role should broadly mimic that of the CEO (instead of only focusing on research), so that the Deputy CEO can assist the CEO in all facets of her portfolio. This will also make it easier for the Deputy CEO to stand in for the CEO when there is a need for this.

The above of course raises the question whether the HSRC's overall management structure is fit for purpose. This of course is an issue that the HSRC should assess continuously.

## Human resources

Based on the documentation provided, the panel is of the view that the HSRC, in the main, is fulfilling its obligations in respect of human resource processes. To its credit, according to its SRR, it has, over the past two years, undertaken salary benchmarking and job grading and salary parity exercises. Interviews conducted by the review panel also pointed to adequate levels of job satisfaction on the part of those interviewed.

The HSRC's SRR, however, identifies several challenges that it is confronted by in respect of human resources. These include (a) a decrease in the overall number of research staff employed by the institution; (b) a significant decline in the proportion of research staff (as opposed to administrative and technical staff); (c) a decrease in the proportion of senior research staff, and (d) difficulties in recruiting and retaining senior research staff. Concerning the latter challenge, during the course of the interviews conducted, the review panel was informed that because of the challenge faced by the institution in recruiting senior research staff, positions may remain vacant for protracted periods of time. At times, this results in positions having to be filled at lower levels. Of course, in the long run, this practice will seriously compromise the functioning of the institution and the quality of research it produces.

In addition to the challenges listed above, the review panel here must note its concern that, until 2023, the institution did not have a coherent employment succession policy (or related processes) in place. To a certain extent, this may account for some of the staffing challenges listed by the HSRC in its SRR.

## Training and capacity development

Based on the interviews conducted as well as the documentation provided, it was evident to the review panel that the HSRC provides researcher training of an exemplary quality. Unfortunately, HSRC staff are frequently 'poached' or recruited by universities, government, and the private sector.

The HSRC provides significant career development or progression opportunities for staff, as is evidenced by the fact that a number of staff occupying senior positions at the HSRC started out their careers as interns who subsequently completed master's and doctoral qualifications.

The HSRC has a 60/40 percent split for work and studies for its early career researchers. This is largely honoured. However, some of the early career researchers interviewed indicated that they could not utilise the study time to which they are entitled due to work pressures.



The challenge for the HSRC in respect of obtaining a return on its investment in trainee development is that the institution cannot always offer permanent full-time positions to trainees, who are then recruited by other institutions. Of course, in the context of the National Development Plan 2030 and the Decadal Plan, the obligations of the HSRC can be seen as having been fulfilled – even if early career researchers leave the institution. Often the latter leave to join other science councils, universities, or the government, which means that at the very least the HSRC is fulfilling its mandate of training young researchers for the benefit of the country.

While the HSRC has a noteworthy track record of significant contributions to the training of master's and doctoral students, in its SRR it notes that it has decided to shift its focus increasingly to doctoral students. Given that this shift is in alignment with a steady growth in doctoral student numbers in South Africa and the continent, the review panel supports this decision.

The HSRC's Master's and PhD trainee programme programme is manifestly one of its flagship programmes, and it should be commended for the effort it has invested in the training of interns. Similarly, its contributions to the DSI/HSRC internship programme is proving to be impactful and quite exemplary. However, the review panel wishes to caution the institution against mission drift. The HSRC's priority is research. Consequently, it is hoped that an evidence-informed DSI/ HSRC internship model will ultimately be developed (on the basis of the current implementation of the programme) for use by other institutions as well, rather than this programme, in its current form, becoming a primary feature of the HSRC's ongoing activities. Universities should share the responsibility assumed by the HSRC in respect of the training of interns.

#### Funding, finances, and sustainability

As indicated earlier in this report, the HSRC's finances currently appear to be healthy. However, the institution's increasing reliance on large-scale external income (largely because its parliamentary grant has remained somewhat stagnant during the period covered by this review), as stated in its SRR places it at risk, as this income is subject to the vagaries of the economy and other factors, such the changing priorities of funding organisations.

The panel was informed that in order for the HSRC to do work for the government it is required to respond to a call for Requests for Proposals (RFPs). The challenges that this process entails for the HSRC include the following:

- a. The RFPs by their very nature specify a pre-set research agenda which may not necessarily cohere with the HSRC's research priorities.
- b. Research that responds to RFPs is typically of a short-term nature. The HSRC was faulted in the 2018 review for its tendency to undertake too many short-term research engagements. To correct this, the institution needs to explore with the government ways in which successful bids for longer-term research can be secured.
- c. The government RFPs process is competitive and the HSRC's 'time billing' rates place it at a disadvantage.
- d. The HSRC has struggled over the past 30 years to obtain a favourable BBBEE rating, which arguably affects the institution's efforts to win bids. However, the review panel was informed that situation is being rectified with the use of an external agent and improved data collection. When the conditions of doing business with the government are fulfilled, it may be advisable for the HSRC to approach the relevant government departments to secure longer-term research contracts.

The SRR indicates that the HSRC had undergone significant organisational restructuring during the period under review. However, there is scant reference in the documentation provided to the review panel on how resource allocation was recalibrated to accommodate the restructuring.

While the HSRC is clearly performing competently in the execution of its key obligations towards its funding partners, the following two apparent organisational lapses were reported to the review panel by two of the HSRC's funding partners: (a) a significant delay in the finalisation of the most recent SABSSM report, and (b) a delay in the submission of a financial report to a key funder, which has resulted in the funder changing the HSRC's rating as institution from 'low-risk' to 'medium-risk'. Lapses such as these obviously entail significant funding as well as reputational risks for the institution.

Furthermore, some of the role players interviewed (internal as well as external) expressed concern regarding the responsiveness of the HSRC's finance division to the needs of researchers and the requirements of external stakeholders.

### Information technology

According to the HSRC Strategic Plan 2020-2025, the eResearch Knowledge Centre (eRKC) supports the institution's research agenda "by providing professional research information services, establishing data standards, preserving and sharing HSRC data and research outputs, and offering spatial computation and data analytics" (p. 14). However, it is not clear to the review panel how the eRKC aligns with the HSRC's overall strategy in relation to information technology and data management, curation, and access. Furthermore, in the panel's interviews with HSRC staff it became clear that the centrality of the eRKC to the institution's research data curation, data management, and data access is not apparent to all. Organisational socialisation in this regard is therefore clearly required.

In its Strategic Plan 2020-2025, the institution also acknowledges that it has been working with outdated information technology equipment, primarily because it does not have a "dedicated capital expenditure allocation for infrastructure" (p. 14). This, the review panel believes, is a matter that requires urgent attention.

### Collaboration in Africa

The evidence provided indicates that the HSRC, through AISA, worked well with African countries that South Africa had bilateral agreements with during the period under review. During this period, the HSRC also continued its support for research capacity building on the continent.

As indicated earlier, the impact of the HSRC's work on the continent would be more visible if collaborative research by the various HSRC divisions was more coordinated or consolidated, with leadership in this regard vested in AISA.

To further facilitate the work of the institution continentally there appeared to be consensus amongst the researchers interviewed of the need to work according to multilateral agreements.

### Commendation:

5. The HSRC's Master's and PhD trainee programme is manifestly one of its flagship programmes, and the review panel commends the institution for the effort it has invested in the training of interns and the successes it has attained with this programme.

### Recommendations:

12. The HSRC should endeavour to further streamline and synergise the work of its research divisions, centres, and institute for greater impact.
13. The HSRC must develop a document that clarifies the distinction between what constitutes a centre, division, and institute in the institution.
14. The HSRC must urgently address the decline in the proportion of research staff in relation to its total staff complement.
15. The HSRC must urgently develop an innovative staff retention strategy to address its ongoing loss of senior research staff.
16. The HSRC should ensure that researchers in the institution have easy access to the datasets of projects beyond their immediate research areas.
17. The HSRC should more actively communicate to the public which of its research is Open Access.
18. The HSRC should consider conducting regular reviews (in the intervals between the major quinquennial institutional reviews) and updates to the strategic plan to ensure alignment with evolving national priorities and development needs.
19. The HSRC should consider the value of emerging issues such as artificial intelligence for national development.
20. The HSRC should consider undertaking an evaluation of the role of Deputy CEO in its management structure.

# Suggestions for future strategic directions for the HSRC

The review panel suggests that the HSRC gives some consideration to the following matters when developing its next strategic plan.

## **Broadening formal partnerships**

According to the documentation provided to the review panel, the HSRC is currently partnering with a relatively limited number of universities. It is the view of the panel that if the HSRC wishes to fulfil its aspiration of offering “national, regional and global leadership in the production and use of targeted knowledge to support the eradication of poverty, the reduction of inequalities and the promotion of employment” (SRR, p. 5), it will have to consider broadening the pool of universities with which it has developed formal partnerships. It may be worthwhile for the HSRC to consider entering a formal agreement with Universities South Africa (USAf), which could serve as a launchpad for developing partnerships with a broader spectrum of South African universities.

## **Prioritising collaborations on the continent**

While the development of partnerships with a broader spectrum of universities in South Africa is important, given the HSRC’s mandate, partnerships with universities further afield should also be prioritised. In respect of collaboration on the continent, there is need to give greater consideration to strategies for establishing research partnerships, including decisions around suitability of collaboration partners. Another consideration should be in deepening the HSRC’s strength as a capacitating type of institution, which it has been doing very well so far.

## **Refining the institution’s global partnership strategy**

The review panel acknowledges receipt of the document, Stakeholder Management and Engagement Strategy. Aimed at driving the HSRC’s partnership endeavours, this document is useful in most respects. However, it also reflects a few weaknesses, such as the following, which should be addressed.

Firstly, the document requires a thorough edit. Secondly, it is not clear whether this document serves as a policy document or whether it is a strategy document that is linked to a policy (If it is linked to a partnerships policy, this should be identified in the document). Critically, the document also does not identify the entity or person(s) in the HSRC charged with the responsibility of managing or driving this strategy. This too should be clarified.

The document should also be more explicit in respect of the HSRC’s approach to global research equity. This will address some of the concerns that were raised by staff. For example, under the ‘Principles of Stakeholder Engagement’, the document could include reference to decoloniality and diversity, inclusion and equity (DIE) values in relation to the roles assumed by various team members. This is so that the HSRC can negotiate leadership roles in multi-principal investigator teams. Alternatively, the strategy document could have an addendum that contains the principles to be considered when entering partnerships, such as those related to principal investigator positions and data ownership.

## **Planning for the proposed incorporation of the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Science (NIHSS) by the HSRC**

Following the review panel’s site visit, the Chair of the review panel was informed of a letter from Prof. BE Nzimande, the Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation to the Chairperson of the HSRC Board, Dr C Lubisi. The letter informed the HSRC Board of the Minister’s intention to incorporate the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Science (NIHSS) into the HSRC. Dr Lubisi shared the Board’s response to the Minister’s letter with the review panel. While the panel is of the view that it will be in the interest of the research community for the NIHSS to be incorporated into the HSRC (given the considerable overlap between the brief of the NIHSS and the mandate of the HSRC), it takes cognisance of the concerns expressed in the Board’s response to the Minister’s letter. Indeed, the panel concurs with the Board in respect of the key concerns raised. Consequently, the review panel urges the HSRC, as it considers its future strategic directions, to give urgent and serious attention to the possibility of incorporating the NIHSS

but also to ensure that said incorporation follows due process and strengthens the HSRC. Furthermore, the incorporation should build on the sterling work that has been done by the NIHSS thus far and acknowledge the unique organisational cultures existing in the HSRC and NIHSS respectively.

### **Periodic strategic alignment processes**

The HSRC's strategic objectives are aligned with national development priorities, as articulated in the country's policy frameworks. By focussing on research areas that contribute to socio-economic development, the HSRC demonstrates strategic alignment with broader national goals. However, periodic reviews (in the period between the major quinquennial institutional reviews) and adjustments to the strategic plan are necessary to ensure responsiveness to evolving societal needs and emerging challenges.

### **Harnessing appropriate innovative digital technologies for research and research administration**

As indicated in the HSRC's Strategic Plan 2020-2025, recent technological advances have the potential to significantly enhance data collection, analysis, curation, and sharing. If it is to assume a leadership position in the humanities and social sciences, the HSRC will have to ensure that it develops a coherent strategy (including ways of acquiring the necessary funding) to harness the latest cutting-edge (but appropriate for the African context) technologies to fulfil its mandate more efficaciously and to advance its ambitions.

## Consolidated list of commendations

1. While it has registered mixed success in addressing the recommendations of the 2018 institutional review, the HSRC is nonetheless commended for its evident ongoing endeavours to address all of these recommendations.
2. The HSRC is commended for its responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in respect of its research during and related to the pandemic. The HSRC demonstrated its resilience and adaptability by pivoting its resources and focus to assist the government and other stakeholders to better understand the social implications of the Covid-19 pandemic.
3. The HSRC is commended for the quality and impact of three of its flagship surveys, namely the *South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS)*, the *South African National HIV Prevalence, HIV Incidence, Behaviour and Communication Survey (SABSSM)*, and the *Research and Development (R&D) Survey*.
4. The HSRC is commended for its efforts to align its research endeavours with the national objectives of the state.
5. The HSRC is commended for its efforts at aligning its research priorities with the overarching goals of the Decadal Plan.
6. The HSRC's Master's and PhD trainee programme is manifestly one of its flagship programmes, and the review panel commends the institution for the effort it has invested in the training of interns and the successes it has attained with this programme.

## Consolidated list of recommendations

1. The HSRC should consider more ambitious journal article output targets per capita for its research staff and provide the necessary support to the latter to meet the targets.
2. The HSRC should refine its impact monitoring processes to measure the impact of its policy briefs.
3. The institution should work towards increasing the proportion of senior black researchers and women in leadership positions.
4. The HSRC should consider offering greater levels of support to provincial departments and municipalities by means of research partnerships or commissioned research. Provinces have some autonomy and can therefore extend research contracts.
5. The establishment of the Impact Centre was a singularly progressive initiative. Consequently, The HSRC should review the concept, role, and structural configuration of the Impact Centre to ensure that it encompasses streams of best-practice across a range of fields. This can be done through comparative studies of Impact Centres in similar institutions.
6. The HSRC should evaluate, benchmark, and improve the policies, procedures, and tools for measuring impact and ensure that they are consistently applied across the institution. Ongoing efforts at refining the conceptualisation of 'impact' is also recommended.
7. The HSRC should consider fostering closer collaboration with relevant government departments, academic institutions, and civil society organisations to leverage synergies and maximise impact.
8. The HSRC should strive to enhance the alignment between its research priorities and the specific objectives and priority areas identified in the STI Decadal Plan to ensure relevance and policy impact.
9. The HSRC should consider investing in capacity-building initiatives to strengthen its research capabilities and technical expertise in key thematic areas aligned with the Decadal Plan.
10. The HSRC must continue to plan and work collaboratively with other institutions in the NSI to ensure that the social dimensions are factored into research plans.
11. The HSRC, together with other key role-players, should devise strategies to manage substantive overlaps in research areas.
12. The HSRC should endeavour to further streamline and synergise the work of its research divisions, centres, and institute for greater impact.
13. The HSRC must develop a policy document that clarifies the distinction between what constitutes a centre, division, and institute in the institution.

14. The HSRC must urgently address the decline in the proportion of research staff in relation to its total staff complement.
15. The HSRC must urgently develop an innovative staff retention strategy to address its ongoing loss of senior research staff.
16. The HSRC should ensure that researchers in the institution have easy access to the datasets of projects beyond their immediate research areas.
17. The HSRC should more actively communicate to the public which of its research is Open Access.
18. The HSRC should consider conducting regular reviews (in the intervals between the major quinquennial institutional reviews) and updates to the strategic plan to ensure alignment with evolving national priorities and development needs.
19. The HSRC should consider expanding research initiatives aimed at addressing emerging issues such as the value of artificial intelligence for national development.
20. The HSRC should consider undertaking an evaluation of the role of Deputy CEO in its management structure.

## Conclusion

It is the considered view of the review panel that the HSRC, during the period covered by this review, in the main, has performed at acceptable levels in respect of its mandate of (a) responding to the most pressing societal concerns nationally and on the continent, as well as (b) its strategic objectives. Indeed, as reflected in the commendations listed at the end of this report, the HSRC has done well in relation to certain key aspects of its mandate. Of course, as is the case with all research institutions, there are also areas in the HSRC's functioning that require attention. The review panel has endeavoured, as best it could, to capture these lacunae in this report as well as providing recommendations on how these can be addressed. The review panel thanks the HSRC for the confidence it has expressed in the panel to provide an honest and constructive assessment of its performance during the period covered by the review. We trust that this report will be useful to the institution in its endeavours to enhance its functioning and the quality of its deliverables.

## Acknowledgements

The review panel herewith acknowledges and thanks Dr Cassius Lubisi, the Chairperson of the Board of the HSRC, Professor Sarah Mosoetsa, the Chief Executive Officer, and all HSRC executives and staff who participated in the interviews for their frank engagement with the panel during the course of the review. The panel also acknowledges and thanks the entire HSRC team that provided administrative and logistical support to the panel prior to and during the review process. The support provided by Ivy Mahloko and Marizane Rousseau, in particular, was truly exceptional.

# Acronyms

4IR:	Fourth Industrial Revolution
AI:	Artificial Intelligence
AISA:	Africa Institute of South Africa
BBBEE:	<i>Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment</i>
BMGF:	Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation
CCBR:	Centre for Community-Based Research
CDC:	Centres for Disease Control and Prevention
CEO:	Chief Executive Officer
CeSTII:	Centre for Science, Technology and Innovation Indicators
CSIR:	Council for Scientific and Industrial Research
DCES:	Developmental, Capable and Ethical State
DSI:	Department of Science and Innovation
EEE:	Equitable Education and Economies
eRKC:	eResearch Knowledge Centre
HSRC:	Human Sciences Research Council
IDRC:	International Development Research Centre
LeaPPT+S:	Leadership, Policy influence, Partnership, Transformed research capabilities, and Sustainability
MRC:	Medical Research Council
MTSF:	Medium-Term Strategic Framework 2019-2024
NIHSS:	National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences
NRF:	National Research Foundation
NSI:	National System of Innovation
PHSB:	Public Health, Societies and Belonging
PSET:	Post-School Education and Training
SABSSM:	South African National HIV Prevalence, HIV Incidence, Behaviour and Communication Survey
SASAS:	South African Social Attitudes Survey
SRR:	Self-reflection Report
R&D:	Research and Development (R&D)

## HSRC Institutional Review 2024: Terms of Reference

### Introduction

The HSRC was established in 1968 to undertake, promote and co-ordinate research in the human and social sciences. It operates in terms of the Human Sciences Research Council Act, 2008 (Act No. 17 of 2008), which replaced the Human Sciences Research Act, 1968 (Act No. 23 of 1968) and provided for the continued existence of the HSRC. The Act outlines the functions of the HSRC Board and mandates the HSRC to:

- Initiate, undertake and foster strategic basic and applied research in human sciences;
- Address developmental challenges in the Republic, elsewhere in Africa and in the rest of the world by gathering, analysing and publishing data relevant to such challenges, especially by means of projects linked to public sector-oriented collaborative programmes;
- Inform the effective formulation and monitoring of policy, as well as to evaluate the implementation thereof;
- Stimulate public debate through the effective dissemination of fact-based research results;
- Help build research capacity and infrastructure for the human sciences in the Republic of South Africa and elsewhere in Africa;
- Foster and support research collaboration, networks and institutional linkages;
- Respond to the needs of vulnerable and marginalised groups in society through research and analysis of developmental issues, thus contributing to the improvement of the quality of their lives;
- Develop and make available data sets underpinning research, policy development and public discussion of developmental issues; and
- Develop new and improved methodologies for use in the development of such data sets.

The HSRC Act also allows the HSRC to undertake or commission research on any subject in the field of the human sciences and to charge fees for research conducted or services rendered at the request of others.

The Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) is a Schedule 3A national public entity governed by a Board appointed by the Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation. In terms of the Public Finance Management Act, 1999 (Act No. 1 of 1999), the Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation is the Executive Authority, and the HSRC Board is the Accounting Authority of the HSRC.

The Minister and the Department of Science and Innovation require its entities, including the HSRC, to be subject to periodic external review. This external institutional review process was introduced in the 1996 White Paper on Science and Technology and was expected to feed into an integrated system-wide review. The purpose of these reviews is to provide a system for assessing the outputs from and outcomes of science, engineering and technology institutions (SETI) in the context of current and projected national needs and benchmarked according to best-practice criteria. To aid general development planning at the government level, the system of periodic review should consider three key aspects:

- The contribution of the organisation to national goals;
- The scientific quality of output;
- The quality of management of the organisation. (White Paper on Science & Technology, 1996)

Previous institutional reviews of the HSRC took place in 1997, 2003, 2010/11 and 2018. The 1997 institutional review fed into the 1998 system-wide review of science councils in South Africa, and findings from this review led to the restructuring of the HSRC from 2000 onwards. The 2003 review reflected on the overall performance and relevance of the HSRC following this restructuring, and also made specific recommendations that led to further strategic realignment of the organization as of 2005, and the promulgation of the new HSRC Act in 2008. The new Act provided additional context to the 2010 review, which attempted to assess



the extent to which the HSRC responded to its “public purpose” mandate as captured in the Act. (HSRC Institutional Review Report, 2011). The 2018 review evaluated the performance of the HSRC in relation to how well it is performing in terms of its mandate, its strategic objectives, and the operational performance of the organisation in relation to broader society. It followed a leadership change of the CEO in 2015 and the appointment of a new Board in 2017. The 2018 review was integral in informing the HSRC’s 2020 – 2025 Strategic Plan.

The fifth institutional review of the HSRC is now due. This review also coincides with a leadership change, as it follows the appointment of the current Chief Executive Officer in February 2023.

This document outlines the terms of reference for this review.

### **Purpose of the review**

The primary purpose of the review is to assess the HSRC’s performance in relation to its mandate in responding to the most pressing societal concerns nationally and on the continent.

The review will also assist the HSRC as it prepares for its next five-year strategic direction.

### **Scope of the review**

The review will cover the period from 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2024.

The review is expected to provide the HSRC, its Board and the DSI with the opportunity to reflect on the distinctive role of the HSRC as a public entity dedicated to research in the social sciences and humanities, and to assess the influence, impact and quality of its work. It will also briefly consider developments since the previous review.

Important features of the wider environment, some of which pose strategic risks to the HSRC, will be taken into account:

- (i) the deteriorating local economic climate (financial sustainability);
- (ii) the challenge of building a community of researchers who can contribute to understanding the most pressing social issues in the country, and developing policies to deal with them (insufficient senior research capacity and transformation); and
- (iii) 4IR and the advancement of Artificial Intelligence (AI) with associated cyber security risks.

### **Specific questions to be addressed during the review**

The primary question is concerned with determining how well the HSRC is responding to its mandate, and how it should apply itself in what it researches and how it researches with respect to the most urgent and pressing challenges in society.

The secondary questions for the 2024 review will investigate:

- The unique role of the HSRC in the National System of Innovation (NSI);
- The extent to which the HSRC is responding to its mandate, particularly as it relates to its contribution to the national goals;
- The role of the HSRC in the Decadal Plan;
- The relevance of the current research focus areas;
- The extent to which the HSRC creates an impact in communities and influences policy; and
- The adequacy of its organisational design, management, resources and business and funding model.

### **Reference resources**

The reading pack for the panel will include:

- The Terms of Reference of the 2024 Institutional Review
- The HSRC Self-reflection Report
- The HSRC 2018 Institutional Review Report

- The HSRC Act 17 of 2008 as amended
- The White Paper on Science and Technology (2019)
- The STI Decadal Plan
- The Strategic Plan 2020/21 to 2024/25
- Annual Performance Plans for 2021/21 to 2024/25
- Annual Reports for 2020/21 to 2022/23
- The Mid-term Strategic Plan Review Report
- The AISA External Review Report
- The HSRC Strategic Risk Register

## **Review process**

### **Review panel**

The panel will consist of four to five members who will be selected by the Board based on their knowledge of research, the management of public research institutions and the public research infrastructure in South Africa. The panel will include members with a thorough understanding of the HSRC's mandate, work, and regulatory environment and will include an international counterpart from Africa.

The panel membership, leadership and final terms of reference will be confirmed by the HSRC Board. The panel will engage with presentations from the executive management of the organisation. It will also meet with members of the HSRC Board, DSI executives and selected external stakeholders.

### **Output**

A Review Report, incorporating the Panel's recommendations, will be approved by the HSRC Board and shared with the Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation and the Department of Science and Innovation.

The final report will incorporate the Board's response, which will be included as a preface to the report.

### **Timeline**

An indicative timeline for the review is provided below.

#### Milestones

Preliminary findings:	9 April 2024
Draft Report:	21 May 2024
Final Report:	20 May 2024

### **Logistical arrangements**

All logistical and administrative support will be provided by the HSRC. The Review process will be overseen by an HSRC Review Reference Group.

The DSI nominated the Chief Director: Innovation for Inclusive Development to serve as a contact point during the Review.

## Preliminary feedback provided to the HSRC CEO on 9 April 2024

**Based on the interviews conducted by the review panel as well as the documentation provided to it, it is clear to the panel that:**

1. The HSRC is generally considered by national and international stakeholders as a prestigious institution with a strong brand.
2. Various government stakeholders have manifest confidence in the institution. This, in part, is evidenced by the number of government institutions turning to the HSRC for research support in policy formulation and implementation processes. As indicated by a number of informants, the HSRC is increasingly viewed as the 'go to' organisation for social scientific and cognate research.
3. The HSRC has the infrastructure and research capabilities to deliver on very large social research projects, with one of its funding partners stating that its "domain knowledge and research capabilities in respect of large-scale survey research are unparalleled in the region".
4. The HSRC is recognised by South African peer institutions as an important strategic partner in the National System of Innovation. This relates in part to its institutional identity. Key partners consider research on psychosocial and human behavioural issues to constitute an important strength of the institution.
5. The HSRC appears to be an employer of choice by many of its staff members. This appears to be a result in part of the ongoing and comprehensive support provided to particularly early career researchers.
6. In the main, HSRC researchers are aware that greater levels of agility are currently required in respect of fundraising, given the vicissitudes in the allocation of parliamentary grants and the increasing challenges of finding alternative sources of funding.

**It is also evident that:**

7. Clarity is required in respect of the distinction between what constitutes a centre, division, and institute in the HSRC's structure.
8. In certain respects, some of the entities mentioned under point 7 above appear to function independently of each other, and not necessarily in alignment with each other and the core vision and mission of the HSRC.
9. The role of the HSRC's Board in strategy formulation is not sufficiently clear.
10. The HSRC's focus on research to end poverty inequality and unemployment clearly reflects its commitment to responding to a key imperative contained in the National Development Plan. While this commitment was clearly articulated by the leadership of the organisation in its engagement with the panel, an appreciation of this commitment was not consistently evident in the responses of other staff (across all divisions) to the panel's questions.
11. While the HSRC's internship programme is manifestly one of its strong programmes, the organisation should guard against mission drift. The HSRC's priority is research. Consequently, it is hoped that an evidence-informed internship model will ultimately be developed (on the basis of the current implementation of the programme) for use by other institutions, rather than this programme in its current form becoming a key and permanent feature of the HSRC's ongoing activities.
12. The centrality of the eResearch Knowledge Centre (eRKC) to research data curation, data management, and data access is not sufficiently salient and mainstreamed. The articulation of the eRKC's functioning with the HSRC's ICT strategy is also not sufficiently clear.
13. While the HSRC has put a policy guiding succession planning in place, there is currently little evidence of the implementation of programmatic succession planning by the institution, as evidenced by the multiple cases of staff serving in an acting capacity in leadership roles in recent years. This cannot be conducive to stability and ultimately to the quality of the institution's outputs.
14. The above observation may be one of the reasons for the following two apparent organisational lapses reported by two of the HSRC's funding partners during the course of the interviews conducted by the panel: (a) a significant delay in the finalisation of the most recent SABSSM report, and (b) a delay in the

submission of a financial report to a key funder, which has resulted in the funder changing the HSRC's rating as institution from 'low-risk' to 'medium-risk'. Lapses such as these obviously entail significant reputational risks for the institution.

15. At certain levels, some of the entities in the HSRC appear to be functioning in silos, which can result in unhealthy internal competition. This has implications for the coherent management of human resources and data, as well as for horizontal and vertical mobility in the organisation, especially for early career researchers.
16. The HSRC's current funding model may compromise its ability to adequately fulfil its mandate. There is a distinct possibility that, if not carefully managed, the increasing reliance on commissioned research for external funding agencies could result in the HSRC becoming so focussed on meeting the needs of funding agencies that it fails to deliver on key elements of its core mandate, such as the generation of research that informs government policy and national development. It may also compromise its commitment to its research obligations to the rest of the continent.
17. There is a clearly articulated need on the part of scientific and funding partners for a greater level of flexibility on the part of the HSRC, as well as a greater level of openness to the involvement of these partners in research processes.
18. Some of the role players interviewed (internal as well as external) expressed concern regarding the responsiveness of the HSRC's finance division to the needs of researchers and the requirements of external stakeholders."

## Presentations, interviews, and meetings

(In order of presentations/interviews)

### 3 April 2024

Dr Cassius Lubisi, Board Chairperson

Prof Sarah Mosoetsa, Chief Executive Officer<sup>‡</sup>

Dr Palesa Sekhejane, Africa Institute of South Africa<sup>‡</sup>

Dr Glenda Kruss, Executive Head, Centre for Science, Technology and Innovation Indicators<sup>‡</sup>

Prof Heidi van Rooyen, Group Executive, Impact Centre & Acting Deputy Chief Executive Officer<sup>‡</sup>

### 4 April 2024

Prof Sharlene Swartz, Divisional Executive, Equitable Education and Economies<sup>‡\*</sup>

Prof Narnia Bohler-Müller, Divisional Executive, Developmental, Capable and Ethical State<sup>‡</sup>

Prof Khangelani Zuma, Divisional Executive, Public Health, Societies and Belonging<sup>\*</sup>

Prof Alastair van Heerden, Director, Centre for Community-Based Research<sup>\*</sup>

Ms Lulekwa Ngcwabe, Group Executive, Shared Services<sup>‡</sup>

Ms Jacomien Rousseau, Chief Financial Officer<sup>‡</sup>

Prof Sarah Mosoetsa, Chief Executive Officer

### 5 April 2024

Dr Tshepang Mosiea, Chief Director, Department of Science and Innovation<sup>‡\*</sup>

Dr Ndumiso Cingo, Strategic Partnerships Manager, Council for Scientific and Industrial Research<sup>‡\*</sup>

Dr Fulufhelo Nelwamondo, Chief Executive Officer, National Research Foundation<sup>‡\*</sup>

Dr Prudence Makhura, National Research Foundation

Dr Mbulelo Ncango, National Research Foundation

### 8 April 2024

Early career researchers attached to Africa Institute of South Africa, Centre for Science, Technology and Innovation Indicators, and Impact Centre

Dr Gina Weir-Smith, eResearch Knowledge Centre<sup>‡\*</sup>

Ms Bongji Moni, External Capacity Development and Internships<sup>‡\*</sup>

Ms Shirin Motala, Chief Research Manager<sup>‡\*</sup>

Ms Rachael Joseph, Centres for Disease Control and Prevention<sup>‡\*</sup>

Dr Liesl Page-Shipp, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation<sup>‡\*</sup>

### 9 April 2024

Dr Ellie Osir, International Development Research Centre<sup>‡</sup>

Early career researchers attached to Developmental, Capable and Ethical State Division, Public Health, Societies and Belonging Division, and Equitable Education and Economies Division<sup>\*</sup>

Prof Sarah Mosoetsa, Chief Executive Officer<sup>\*</sup>

### 2 May 2024

Follow up interview with Dr Cassius Lubisi<sup>\*</sup>

<sup>‡</sup> Presentation and interview

<sup>\*</sup> Presentation and/or interview conducted online.

## Documents consulted

The HSRC 2018 Institutional Review Report

The *Human Sciences Research Council Act, 2008 (Act No. 17 of 2008)*

The White Paper on Science and Technology (2019)

The Decadal Plan for Science, Technology and Innovation 2022

The HSRC Strategic Plan 2020/21 to 2024/25 and approved revisions thereof

The HSRC 2020-2025 Strategic Plan Mid-Term Review Report 2022

HSRC Annual Performance Plans for the periods 2020/21 to 2024/25

HSRC Annual Reports for the periods 2020/21 to 2022/23

The Africa Institute of South Africa (AISA) Review Report 2023



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