



Professor Jakes Gerwel

# Promoting human science research of the highest quality

## Message from the Chair of Council

The 2008/09 financial year has been an eventful one for the HSRC. The new Human Sciences Research Council act, 2008 (Act No 17 of 2008) was assented to in September and promulgated in December 2008. In terms of the new act, the governing body of the HSRC, previously known as the HSRC Council, would in future be referred to as the HSRC Board.

Act No 17 of 2008 also stipulates new requirements and a different process for the selection and appointment of members to the HSRC Board. The Minister of Science and Technology therefore requested the members of the HSRC Council, whose term of office was due to expire on 31 October 2008, to extend their

tenure to serve as the Board until such time as the new, duly constituted Board was inaugurated. The majority of serving Council members was able to oblige. It has, therefore, been my pleasure to serve as the chair of the last Council and first Board of the HSRC, the latter in the spirit of the new act.

The Board has continued Council's responsibility of exercising oversight over the functioning of the HSRC as a national public entity. The Board is grateful for the commitment, integrity and transparency of Chief Executive Officer Shisana and her senior staff that has underpinned interactions with the governing body.

The new act does more than simply restructure the organisation's governing body. The preamble articulates a broadened HSRC mandate with respect to its public purpose in line with the recommendations of the 2003 Institutional Review, and further mirrors the actual scope of work that the HSRC has carved for itself in recent years in order 'to promote human science research of the highest quality in South Africa [and] to engage with their colleagues elsewhere in Africa and the rest of the world through networks and joint programmes of research on pressing social issues relevant to human welfare and prosperity'. The act then continues to set down the objects of the HSRC, which include the obligation to:

- initiate, undertake and foster strategic basic research and applied research in human sciences relevant to developmental challenges in the Republic, elsewhere in Africa and in the rest of the world;
- inform the effective formulation and monitoring of policy and to evaluate the implementation of policy;
- stimulate public debate through the effective dissemination of fact-based results of research;
- foster and support research collaboration, networks and institutional linkages within the human sciences research community; and
- respond to the needs of vulnerable and marginalised groups in society by researching and analysing developmental problems, thereby contributing to the improvement of the quality of their lives.

All of these objectives are substantively embedded in the HSRC Strategic Plan, Business Plan and Shareholders' Agreement for the 2008/09 budget year. As reflected in its full report, the Board is satisfied that the organisation's performance has substantially met and, in some instances, exceeded the targets envisaged in these documents.

The act instructs the HSRC to 'respond to the needs of vulnerable and marginalised

groups in society by researching and analysing developmental problems, thereby contributing to the improvement of the quality of their lives'. The Board therefore noted with approval the fact that 97% of all research conducted by the HSRC in the period under review was concerned with developmental issues such as employment and economic development, education and training, service delivery, social development, and HIV and AIDS.

In fulfilment of the mandate to engage with colleagues elsewhere in Africa, 25% of all research projects with a budget of R1 million or more was conducted collaboratively with researchers from elsewhere in Africa. But, the HSRC also conducted scholarly research with output (as measured by the number of publications in scholarly journals) increasing significantly year-on-year.

The HSRC has achieved significant milestones with respect to the communication and dissemination of evidence-based knowledge and information to both the academic audience and the public-at-large. The HSRC Press, arguably the largest non-commercial academic publisher in Africa, publishes edited peer-reviewed books and monographs by researchers from both within and outside the organisation, and is a frequent co-publisher of scientific work with overseas academic publishers.

All print publications are also published electronically and are freely accessible online. In the period under review, the Press distributed over 30 000 copies of its print publications, whereas the electronic copies were browsed by nearly 500 000 readers, and downloaded by 129 888 internet users in 192 countries. Dissemination to the public-at-large is evident from the organisation's large presence – valued as equivalent to R65 million free exposure via news stories and reports – in both the print and electronic media in the form of news stories and reports.

None of these achievements would be possible without an enabling resource base. For this

## Message from Chair continued

reason, the 2008/09 Business Plan lists as one of the organisation's strategic priorities the objective to ensure the financial sustainability of the organisation, in part through increased Parliamentary grant allocations, and in part through externally-sourced funding in respect of which the HSRC has sought to 'prioritise funding sources that preferably offer large, multi-year grants' as opposed to small, short-term projects and commissions. Large multi-year grants impart a large measure of financial stability and predictability, while at the same time mitigating the pressure on senior researchers to allocate a disproportionate amount of their valuable time to fundraising. This is not to minimise the role and importance of shorter-term, needs-driven work that also has its place.

The HSRC increased its 2008/09 overall turnover by 24,4% compared to the preceding financial year, and in the process achieved the highest turnover in the organisation's history. Some of this growth derived from increases in the Parliamentary grant allocations. However, external research income – which constitutes the larger income contributor – grew by 34,4% year-on-year, with a robust 73,1% of all external income coming from international sources. Most of this funding is made up of multi-year commitments and will therefore be sustained well into the foreseeable future. Internationally sourced funding helps boost the science and technology research base for the country as a whole, and the Board warmly commends the CEO and her senior HSRC researchers for these remarkable

achievements in the face of a burgeoning global recession.

Although not without its challenges, this has been another successful year for the HSRC, and I would like to congratulate the CEO, the researchers and support staff on a job well done.

I must further thank my fellow Board members for their dedication and commitment and for their willingness to stand by the HSRC at this time of transition. Some of the members, including myself, have served for two terms. Our interest in, and commitment to, social and human sciences that can make a difference in the world we live in, motivated us to remain available over an extended period. Another Board member who served with us since October 2002, was Professor Wally Morrow, who passed away on 11 February 2009. His insightful contributions will be sorely missed.

As we depart to make way for the new Board, I want to wish my fellow and former Board members well. I would also like to thank them for their contributions, some of which are reflected on elsewhere in the formal report of the Board.

My final word of appreciation goes to the previous Minister of Science and Technology, Mr Mosibudi Mangena, to the incoming Minister, Ms Naledi Pandor, and to the Department of Science and Technology for their unstinting support during the tenure of the outgoing Board.