



**National Research Foundation Response to the Findings and  
Recommendations contained in the  
South African Research Chairs Initiative Review entitled:**

**Five year review of the South African Research Chairs Initiative**

Commissioned by: National Research Foundation

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Respondents: Human and Institutional Capacity Development: South African  
Research Chairs Initiative

Grants Management and Systems Administration:

South African Research Chairs Initiative

## **BACKGROUND**

The South African Research Chairs Initiative (SARChI) is a national knowledge and human resource development intervention aimed at strengthening and improving research and innovation capacity of public universities for producing high quality postgraduate students, research, and innovation outputs. The programme attracts world-class local and international researchers to South African public universities and provides them with a conducive environment that enables realisation of the objectives of the programme. SARChI was established in 2006 by the Department of Science and Technology (DST), however, participation, with regard to investing in the programme, is open to any public or private funder.

In accordance with the Research Chairs contractual agreement between the DST and the NRF, the NRF is required to undertake a five-year external review. The review is intended to judge the conceptualisation, implementation and management of SARChI and its overall performance in terms of its mandate and objectives; and to ultimately make the necessary improvements to enhance the performance of the programme. The review covers the period from January 2006 to March 2012 inclusive.

## **SARChI OBJECTIVES**

The main goal of the Research Chairs initiative is to strengthen and improve research capacity of public universities for producing high quality postgraduate students and research outputs.

Original SARChI objectives from the inception of the programme in 2006 to 2010 were to:

- Increase the number of world class researchers in South Africa;
- Retain and/or attract qualified research scientists to the Higher Education sector and thereby:
  - Help reverse systemic decline in research outputs, focus and capacity at publicly funded Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), Science Councils and other research institutions; and
  - Strengthen and improve the capacity of HEIs, Science Councils, museums and other research institutions to generate and apply new knowledge;
- Stimulate strategic research across the knowledge spectrum and thereby increase the level of excellence in research areas of national and international importance;

- Create research career pathways for highly skilled, high quality young and mid-career researchers that effectively address historical racial, gender and age imbalances; and
- Improve and accelerate the training of highly qualified personnel through research.

The objectives of SARChI were revised in 2011 with the opening of a call for applications for 62 new Research Chairs.

The revised main goal of the initiative is to strengthen and improve research and innovation capacity of public universities for producing high quality postgraduate students, research, and innovation outputs.

### **THE REVISED SARChI OBJECTIVES ARE TO:**

- Expand the scientific research and innovation capacity of South Africa;
- Improve South Africa's international research and innovation competitiveness while responding to social and economic challenges of the country;
- Attract and retain excellent researchers and scientists;
- Increase the production of Masters and Doctoral graduates; and
- Create research career pathways for young and mid-career researchers, with a strong research, innovation and human capital development output trajectory.

**NOTE:** For the purpose of the review, the original SARChI objectives were used.

## **SARChI REVIEW CONCLUSION**

*Despite the slower than expected roll out of the ambitions of the programme (210 Chairs by 2010), the initiative in its first phase has been effective, efficient and producing a number of results and benefits.*

*Chair holders, host Universities, research students and other stakeholders are very enthusiastic about the SARChI programme and the host of new opportunities it brings. The implementation of the programme has seen significant attraction and retention of talented researchers, increasing numbers of graduate students (masters, doctoral and post-doctoral) and an increasing flow of publications including those to prestigious journals. In addition the programme has resulted in the development of significantly improved research capacity at host institutions and created and reinforced nodes of excellence at the major research universities, as well as at a number of newer and/or historically disadvantaged institutions. Some issues remain about processes that require addressing. Further enhancements to the programme, however, are required to consolidate and build on the success achieved so far.*

## **FINDINGS**

### **Finding 1**

#### **SARChI bursary values**

*Student bursary levels are currently perceived to be too low, with the result that many good students are potentially lost to the system. Some Chairs have argued for a more holistic view regarding how a Chair can contribute to achieving the overall goal of Highly Qualified Personnel training and capacity building. This requires greater budgetary flexibility, in particular if students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds are to be attracted and retained.*

#### **Noted**

The DST and the NRF are making concerted efforts to increase the value of bursaries across all programmes to make full-time postgraduate studies more attractive and a viable option for students.

### **Finding 2**

#### **Performance evaluation of Research Chairs**

*The rigidity in evaluation, with its primary focus on publications and graduating students, is too narrow and constraining and fails to capture the true results of the research investment and its impact on the wider society. The “Monitoring and Evaluation Framework Document” of 2010 is good and does reflect good practice, but there is little evidence of its use in assessing individual SARChI Chairs.*

#### **Noted**

SARChI is an evolving programme with an intention of improving processes in order to support realisation of programme objectives. Performance evaluation indicators will be reviewed and modified accordingly to allow for comprehensive reporting on achievements.

### **Finding 3**

#### **Performance evaluation of Research Chairs**

*The Chairs have much to contribute outside of their research labs. Encouragement should be given to consultancies, and undertaking work for public bodies. These contributions need to be acknowledged in any subsequent evaluation.*

#### **Noted**

The requirement for Chairs to spend 95% of their time on Chair activities warrants revision.

### **Finding 4**

#### **Developmental support for Tier 2 Chairs**

*If the aspirations of the scheme are to be fully realised then teams of critical mass are needed. This is especially true where Tier 2 Chairs are isolated in historically disadvantaged universities. Such Chairs should have links with others, within a Centre of Excellence or possibly with international Tier 1 Chairs being connected with them on a 50% basis.*

#### **Noted**

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Recommendation 1**

*The SARChI programme be continued and funded at a level commensurate with expectations.*

**Noted**

### **Recommendation 2**

*The NRF sets up a facilitative office headed by a senior scientist/researcher to oversee the SARChI project, to be the contact person for SARChI Chairs, to promote consistency and coherence among the various discipline based review panels and to provide feedback to Chairs and institutions.*

**Noted**

### **Recommendation 3**

*The prescribed ratio of 95%/5% research/non-research time of Chairs be revised up to 80% / 20%, to allow for greater interaction with undergraduate and honours students, contribute more to research development in the department as a whole, undertake consultancies and work for public bodies.*

**Agreed**

### **Recommendation 4**

*The conditions of the SARChI grant and the processes governing the relationship between DST, NRF, HEI and Chair be streamlined to reduce bureaucracy, minimise rigidity and promote transparency.*

**Noted**

### **Recommendation 5**

*A more holistic recognition of research outputs/outcomes be developed that*

*includes research impact on the discipline, the institution and society at large.*

**Agreed**

**Recommendation 6**

*Monitoring of the SARChI program include a reflective annual report from the Vice-Chancellor of a host institution that captures the institutional impact of the Chair(s).*

**Noted**

**Recommendation 7**

*The NRF consider the pairing of local Tier 2 incumbents with part-time (50%) national or international Tier 1 appointments.*

**Noted**

**Recommendation 8**

*The NRF consider dovetailing the SARChI and CoE's programmes, and allowing a SARChI Chair to head a CoE.*

**Noted**

**Recommendation 9**

*Opportunities and incentives to attract national and international post-doctoral fellows (PDFs) be created.*

**Agreed**

**Recommendation 10**

*The SARChI programme be widely branded to give it national and international visibility and identity, and the achievements and societal impacts of the programme be widely reported in the public domain.*

## **Noted and agreed**

### **Recommendation 11**

*The NRF (through the facilitative office recommended above) establish annual symposia/workshops of SARChI chair holders and of SARChI students, to serve as open fora for the mutual sharing of experiences and accomplishments. The symposia/workshops would also provide opportunities to collect the success stories of the SARChI programme for the benefit of the academic fraternity and the community at large.*

## **Agreed**

The programme hosts an annual Community of Practice Forum for Chair holders of Chairs in Mathematics Education and Numeracy. The forum is aimed at creating a platform for Chairs holders to interact with policy makers, academics and practitioners in the two research areas. The programme is planning on establishing additional Community of Practice Fora in broad discipline/thematic research areas that span the full spectrum of the Research Chairs.

### **Recommendation 12**

*The NRF monitor the adequacy of co-investment by host institutions in support of SARChI Chairs.*

## **Noted**

### **Recommendation 13**

*The NRF monitor the implications of co-funding of SARChI Chairs by bi-lateral agreements with other countries and stake holders.*

## **Noted**

### **Recommendation 14**

*The NRF consider re-engineering its SARChI systems to cope with the envisaged*

*expansion of the program.*

**Agreed**