

## **Communication from Council: December 2025**

As we conclude 2025, a year marked equally by challenge, renewal and progress, Council met on 1 December for its final meeting of the year with a deep appreciation for the work done across the Stellenbosch University (SU) community.

Throughout 2025, Council's discussions have grappled with a higher education landscape marked by serious geopolitical and economic pressures, the withdrawal of US federal funding, uncertainty around NSFAS, a strained local macro-economic environment, and the increasing importance of third- and fourth-stream revenue. Our discussions this week offered an important opportunity to reflect on the journey of the past twelve months, to take stock of the significant shifts underway, and to position our University for long term sustainability and the achievement of the bold vision set out by the Rector and Vice Chancellor, Prof Deresh Ramjugernath, as we move toward 2026.

Across the year, several clear themes emerged in Council's oversight:

**Financial resilience and sustainability:** From crisis-response work around US funding cuts to the strengthening of long-term financial planning, Council has supported the importance of making disciplined financial choices without compromising academic excellence.

**Transformation and inclusion:** Taking forward CIRCoRe recommendations (including creating a university where all its stakeholders feel included and that they belong) and improving the University's B-BBEE position and commitments have been central to discussions of demonstrated transformation.

**People, culture and organisational alignment:** The Rectorate realignment, capacity building, deliberate attention to staff wellbeing, increasing the rigor of academic delivery and the development of the performance advancement framework, have taken considerable attention at Council and its committees. It would, however, be fair to say that Council would have liked to see better progress on all these issues.

**Academic excellence and student success:** Council is mindful of the importance of programme renewal, data integrity, multilingualism, hybrid learning, quality assurance and wrap around support for students in shaping the academic project at SU and has appreciated engagements on these issues.

**Innovation, partnerships and new revenue streams:** Whether through research cooperation, entrepreneurship, technology transfer or continental partnerships, SU has expanded its footprint and future-oriented capabilities. Council has recognised that embedding capabilities within SU to land and drive these initiatives successfully will be fundamental to the future success of the University.

**Governance and accountability:** Council takes its oversight responsibilities extremely seriously and as such statutory, academic, financial and risk reviews form a large part of the agendas of Council and its committees. Council also gained much from its two engagements a year with the Ombud.

### **Leadership shifts in 2025**

At the end of March, we bid farewell to Prof Wim de Villiers whose second and last term as Rector and Vice-Chancellor came to an end.

Prof Deresh Ramjugernath assumed office as the University's 13th Rector and Vice-Chancellor on 1 April and was formally inaugurated on **1 October**. His bold strategic focus – **academic excellence; people, culture and processes; and partnerships and sustainability** – has shaped the institution's direction throughout the year.

We also welcomed our new Chancellor, Reserve Bank Governor Lesetja Kganyago, who was formally inaugurated on 20 June.

Both Prof Deresh and Governor Kganyago's inauguration ceremonies were wonderfully joyous occasions, showcasing much of what makes SU so special and leaving an indelible memory for those of us privileged to attend.

At the same time, there were moments which should give us pause to reflect on how much work we still must do to bring all our stakeholders with us on the journey ahead. This should not surprise, as change can be disconcerting and can challenge a sense of belonging. But the creation of SU as a place where all stakeholders feel that they belong is work, I think, for all of us in our personal and in our professional capacities.

### **Key December matters**

The Council agenda this December captured both the culmination of 2025 – opening with the Rector's reflection of SU's progress during his first year in office – and the first concrete steps towards 2026.

### **Strategic planning and alignment**

Council reviewed the draft strategic framework and institutional plans. These will be finalised in the coming weeks once Council's comments have been addressed.

### **2026 Budget**

Council approved the main and integrated budget for 2026 which, recognising the risks in the operating context reflected above, balances prudence with the need to sustain SU's academic mission.

Council supported a 5% salary increase for staff, which is above CPI, as well as an ex-gratia payment of 1% for 2025, to thank staff for the commitment and resilience with which they have navigated a demanding year. In 2026, Council anticipates paying a bonus to top performing staff and, as such, the conclusion of the performance advancement framework is critical.

### **People, culture and processes**

Council reflected on key matters raised throughout the year, including staff and student wellbeing and the need for strengthened collaboration, trust and improved administrative and change processes.

Council also had extensive feedback from the Acting Chief Operating Officer, Acting Deputy Vice-Chancellor (DVC): Academic and Acting DVC: Strategy, Global and Corporate Affairs, all of whom reflected on the strength and commitment of their teams. Council is grateful to these colleagues for stepping up to lead these responsibility centres in such a big year for the University. Thank you too to those who have stepped in to lead the positions they temporarily vacated.

### **Deep dive**

Prof Erick Strauss led a discussion on his work in creating the African Centre for Therapeutics Innovation (ACTI), a cross-disciplinary and cross-continental initiative focused on drug discovery, platform development and research collaboration. Lessons around the rich potential of cross disciplinary collaboration and partnerships (and in this case cross continental collaboration too), as well as difficulty in landing this type of initiative provided Council with a real-life example of the work necessary to unlock more such collaborations in the future.

### **SU at the end of 2025**

SU ends 2025 having navigated significant pressures while advancing the Rector's agenda of change, strengthening financial sustainability, investing in people, stabilising core systems, and maintaining its commitment to academic excellence.

The coming year will be one of disciplined implementation. Council stands firmly behind the Rector and the University community in delivering his bold vision.

Thank you all for your dedication and contribution throughout 2025.

Council looks forward to working together with you in 2026 towards a strong, forward-looking and inclusive Stellenbosch University.

Warm regards

**Nicky Newton-King**

Chair of Council