

Communication from Council
June 2025

I write this a few days after the ceremonial investiture of Reserve Bank Governor Lesetja Kganyago. Part of the ceremony was broadcast live by SABC News. Simultaneous interpreting into Afrikaans and isiXhosa was on offer for those who attended in person, with a South African Sign Language interpreter on stage. At the end of the ceremony, the rain lifted to allow a brief academic procession down Victoria Street, capping a beautiful showcase of so much of what is excellent at our special university. We look forward to Chancellor Kganyago's symbolic leadership with his words on the critical importance of academic freedom, our responsibility to the future and being a place for all providing a clear compass. Thank you to all who participated in making these celebrations so special.

The Stellenbosch University (SU) Council met on 17 June as universities worldwide grapple with significant challenges to their financial sustainability driven by geopolitical developments, particularly the withdrawal of US federal funding for critical academic programmes. In South Africa, well-documented issues regarding NSFAS are compounding the immense pressure on local higher education institutions, especially those – such as SU – that are committed to supporting the country's national and regional public health systems.

In his inaugural report to Council as Rector and Vice-Chancellor, Prof Deresh Ramjugernath positioned these issues and the steps that the University is taking in response to them. In an extensive discussion and against this background, Council recognised the work being done by the SU Contingency Committee focused on mitigating the impact on SU research projects and clinical trials due to US federal funding cuts. Together, the Rectorate and the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences have made available R70m to support critical research projects from the University and Faculty's contingency funds while alternative funding is sought including from National Treasury through the submission to Universities South Africa (USAf).

Council noted that, while immediate attention was on the impact of US funding cuts, the increased financial pressure on our sector required an urgent, broad-based and detailed response from SU that would focus on ensuring the University's long-term financial sustainability. These conversations will undoubtedly impact the University's 2026 budget process, which will focus not only on cost control and careful prioritisation of capital expenditure, but also on the need to consider new business models and revenue opportunities.

SU has worked hard over decades to build an outstanding financial capacity and a reputation for academic excellence, and I thank all of you for your part in that. Council approved the 2024 Annual Financial Statements, which reflect a sound basis from which to navigate the turmoil in our sector. Nonetheless, we will have to make some clear choices in the months ahead.

The Rector has reflected, too, on his many meetings with stakeholders since assuming office. Many of those focused on the possibility of building stronger partnerships with SU. Most recently, he and his accompanying colleagues were received with exceptional enthusiasm in Zimbabwe, Kenya, Uganda and Rwanda – opportunities for future collaboration.

Prof Nico Koopman, Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Social Impact, Transformation and Personnel, presented the forthcoming rollout of the new Performance Enhancement Framework, including a key performance area (KPA) for transformation. Beyond BBBEE targets and accountability structures, Prof Koopman also emphasised the pressing need to address staff wellbeing, stressing the importance of creating a safe, respectful and inclusive workplace.

Other matters discussed by Council:

- Progress with the Rectorate realignment process
- The proposed five-year enrolment management plan, which will be revised in due course to take account of strategies that may impact the shape and size of SU and its academic offerings
- Progress on the Wilgenhof facilitation process; Council took note that refurbishments to the residence would be completed in time for students to return as planned – at the start of the second semester
- The need to review the Student Disciplinary Code and the SU Statute, both of which are more than five years old
- The pilot rollout of an AI tutor bot (initially in Afrikaans) to enhance academic support and student success
- The renewal of the Dell Young Leaders Programme, in which SU continues to co-invest to provide scholarships and wraparound support that empowers deserving students in need, both academically and personally

We welcomed Prof Bertie Fielding as the new Senate representative to Council and extended our sincere thanks in bidding farewell to the outgoing ministerial appointee, former Matie and SRC member Ziyanda Stuurman, who would be stepping down from Council after 10 years of distinguished service.

While we continue to face complex challenges, Council remains deeply confident in the leadership, staff and students of Stellenbosch University. With your continued support, SU is well positioned to pursue innovation, transformation and excellence in, with and for Africa.

Thank you once again.

Warm regards
Nicky Newton-King
Chair of Council