

Communication from Council April 2025

At a moment of great flux, but also great opportunity, the Stellenbosch University (SU) Council had much to discuss at its meeting on 31 March (its first ordinary meeting of 2025). Council officially bade farewell to Prof Wim de Villiers on the last day of his ten-year tenure as Rector and Vice-Chancellor, and welcomed Prof Deresh Ramjugernath as he prepared to take up office the following day.

This was also Prof Stan du Plessis' last Council meeting. Prof Du Plessis will be leaving the office of Chief Operating Officer of SU at the end of May to join STADIO Higher Education as their chief executive. Council is extremely grateful to Prof Du Plessis, who has served the University for over two decades – his departure will leave a large gap.

Key aspects of Council's agenda included the following:

- **The pressures experienced at the beginning of the 2025 academic year in registering students.** Although student funding and registration were more efficiently managed this year than in 2024, Council regrets the stress that all stakeholders experienced. This matter will continue to receive Council's attention.
- **Consideration of the report from the Technical Committee for the Close-out of CIRCoRe (TCC).** Council is most grateful to all those who were involved in the CIRCoRe process since the establishment of the committee in April 2023. It was noted that CIRCoRe had resulted in some groundbreaking discussions, and that there had been significant positive momentum in certain aspects of transformation. The various recommendations flowing from the report of the TCC will be delegated to the relevant structures of the University for consideration and appropriate implementation. The Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Social Impact, Transformation and Personnel, Prof Nico Koopman, will lead this process, with guidance from the Institutional Transformation Committee (ITC). Moving forward, Prof Ramjugernath will chair the ITC to confirm the wider institutional commitment to the mandate of holistic transformation. The University's transformation journey still requires considerable attention, including around transformation in its broadest sense, and in improving a sense of inclusion and belonging for all stakeholders. This is reflected in the fact that the improvement of the University's BBBEE score is an important feature of the 2025 annual scorecard, which will track delivery of key elements of SU's strategy and will ensure that transformation forms an important part of every staff member's key performance areas.
- **The implications of the withdrawal of funding from the United States.** Like many other universities, SU has a number of projects that rely in part on funding from American sources. The implications of any change in this funding naturally are of great concern. The Rectorate has established a crisis contingency committee to pull together the necessary information and scenarios to determine the University's next steps. We must work hard to protect the quality, reach and impact of our research. Therefore, this crisis committee's deliberations and proposed responses are important for all of us. This is also an opportunity for the University to contemplate the sources and diversity of its funding mix so that the institution will be able to weather future storms with a level of comfort.

- **The 2024 report from the Ombud.** SU is one of only six universities in South Africa to have an Ombud. Council very much appreciated having the opportunity to engage with SU Ombud Adv Rina Meyer. She shared key themes from her work during 2024, and in particular also noted an overall willingness from staff to engage with her in resolving complaints. That said, there is a need for some administrative areas to improve response times to initial queries from the Office of the Ombud. The Rectorate has initiated a review of processes in some areas with the objective of improving turnaround, as the ability to bring speedy resolution to longstanding issues is a credit to the Office of the Ombud. Council asked that the University consider profiling the Ombud's work, including highlighting that the Ombud can only assist in certain instances, and only when all other internal routes have been exhausted. More information on the Ombud can be found [here](#).

In addition, Council discussed Prof Ramjugernath's bold vision for SU, which is anchored in three key focus areas: academic excellence; people, culture and processes; and partnerships and sustainability.

- The detailed strategic implementation plan for this vision will be finalised in the course of this year, and Council will track delivery of key elements of the plan through the annual scorecard, which was also debated at the meeting.
- Council considered the organisational and senior leadership changes needed to ensure delivery of the vision, and is committed to working with Prof Ramjugernath in this regard.

Council looks forward to a year filled with opportunity, growth and bold action. Thank you to everyone who has stepped up to lead.

Warm regards

Nicky Newton-King
Council chair