Message from the President and Chief Executive Officer

It is with great pride that I welcome you to the 2025 South African Medical Research Council's Research Capacity Development Regional Beneficiary Conference. This year's theme, "Funding for Impact: Fostering Capacity Development Partnerships for Innovation Leadership," reflects our shared commitment to strengthening the research ecosystem and nurturing the next generation of scientific leaders in South Africa.

Time to Adapt to a New Funding Era to Foster Capacity Development Partnerships for Innovation Leadership: why and how?

At the beginning of the year, five years after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and its setbacks, while going through recovery, South Africa's health research system has again stood at a critical crossroads. Global funding dynamics are shifting, with recent USAID and NIH funding cuts impacting HIV, TB, and other public health research programmes across the country. These developments highlight a sobering reality: our scientific future must rest on strong, sustainable, and locally driven innovation ecosystems.

At the South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC), we are responding with purpose and vision.

In response to the recent funding cuts from the United States, the SAMRC has acted swiftly to safeguard South Africa's vital health research enterprise. Working closely with the Department of Science, Technology and Innovation, we welcomed the establishment of the Science, Technology and Innovation Funding Working Group to coordinate a national response. We launched an emergency Request for Applications to provide bridging grants to researchers affected by the cuts, supported by a R132 million allocation from the South African government and additional commitments from philanthropic partners such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Welcome Trust. Through these collaborative efforts, we are ensuring that critical research, infrastructure, and human capital are protected, and that South Africa's scientific progress continues despite the challenges.

Through our Research Capacity Development division, we have developed a suite of funding mechanisms that support every stage of the research capacity pipeline –from postgraduate training to independent leadership. Our aim is to strengthen human capital, institutional systems, and research impact for the long-term health of our nation.

In this changing environment, we must embrace innovation leadership as the cornerstone of capacity development. Our funding models and partnerships must not only sustain research but drive solutions that improve lives, reduce inequality, and advance health justice. It is now critical that we move from grant dependency toward strategic collaboration, innovation, and knowledge translation.

A Message to Our Researchers

To PhD Students:
You represent the next generation of South African scientists. Use every opportunity to build solid research foundations, network beyond your discipline, and seek mentorship actively. Your training today is not only for a degree—it is for national transformation.

To Postdoctoral Fellows:
This is your time to sharpen your research identity. Build a clear, independent scientific niche and pursue interdisciplinary collaborations. Translate your findings into innovation and societal impact.

To Early Career Investigators:
You are the bridge between promise and leadership. Strengthen your proposal-writing, project management, and mentorship skills. Build partnerships that last—and don't wait for leadership to find you; lead from where you are.

To Mid-Career Scientists:
You are the pillars of continuity and mentorship. Guide others, shape institutional strategies, and champion sustainable research ecosystems. Your experience positions you to influence not just your field, but the future direction of South African science.

Looking Ahead
Under the theme "Funding for Impact: Fostering Capacity Development Partnerships for Innovation Leadership," this conference offers a platform to connect, reflect, and collaborate. This year, we welcome participants from Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University, North-West University, the University of Limpopo, the University of Venda, the University of Johannesburg, the University of the Witwatersrand, the University of Pretoria, and the Tshwane University of Technology.

As the global funding landscape evolves, our collective resolve must strengthen. The SAMRC will continue to invest in people, partnerships, and programmes that ensure South Africa remains a leader in health innovation and scientific excellence. It is now high time for all researchers to seize this moment to turn challenge into opportunity—to ensure that South African science not only endures global shifts but thrives through resilience, innovation, and leadership.

Prof Ntobeko Ntusi
South African Medical Research Council,
President and Chief Executive Officer

Message from the Executive Director

It is an honour to extend a warm welcome to all our valued grant holders attending the South African Medical Research Council's (SAMRC) Division of Research Capacity Development (RCD) Regional Beneficiary Conference for 2025.

We gather under the theme "Funding for Impact: Fostering Capacity Development Partnerships for Innovation Leadership." Through our grant programmes, the SAMRC continues to invest in building a strong and sustainable foundation for health research in South Africa. These programmes are designed to fast-track and transition early-career and midcareer scientists into independent research leaders—individuals who will drive innovation, lead impactful collaborations, and contribute meaningfully to solving our most pressing health challenges.

This year's conference provides a unique opportunity for our RCD grant beneficiaries to share their research, exchange ideas, and connect with fellow scientists and experts. It also offers a platform for dialogue with the SAMRC leadership, including our President, as we collectively explore strategies to strengthen research capacity through partnerships, mentorship, and collaboration.

We are proud to host participants from Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University, North-West University, the University of Limpopo, the University of Venda, the University of Johannesburg, the University of the Witwatersrand, the University of Pretoria, and the Tshwane University of Technology. Each institution represents a vital node in our national research ecosystem, and together, we continue to advance excellence, equity, and innovation in health research.

As we reflect on the progress made and look ahead to new opportunities, I encourage all our beneficiaries to make the most of this platform—to engage, to learn, and to inspire one another. Our collective efforts today will shape the future of South African science tomorrow.

MJ Mulder

Dr Michelle Mulder
Grants, Innovation and Product Development
Executive Director
RCD Line Executive

Keynote Speakers

Dr Thandi Mgwebi

Group Executive for Global Partnerships and Business Development, NRF

Dr Mgwebi has held key leadership roles in higher education and research, including serving as Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Research, Innovation, and Internationalization at Nelson Mandela University (NMU) and Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Research and Innovation at Tshwane University of Technology (TUT). Thandi has played a pivotal role in shaping South Africa's higher education and research landscape. She was the founding Executive Director of the South African Research Chairs Initiative (SARChI) at the NRF and has contributed to national policy development, including her engagements with the Council on Higher Education.

She holds a PhD in Medical Cell & Developmental Biology from the University of Cape Town (UCT) and has furthered her expertise through management programs at the University of Stellenbosch Business School (GSB) and the University of Melbourne, specializing in Management Development and Tertiary Education Management. As part of her PhD work, Thandi spent significant time at MRC Centre for Neurobiology at University College London (UCL) during her PhD. She also completed a postdoctoral fellowship at UCT's Institute of Infectious Diseases and Molecular Medicine.

Beyond academia, she has contributed to global dialogues on research and sustainability. Thandi is actively involved in driving equitable partnership modalities and driving intra-Africa collaboration. Through her leadership and strategic vision, she continues to drive impactful research and innovation initiatives on both national, regional and international platforms.

Prof Pascal Bessong

Pascal Bessong holds a PhD in Microbiology and a Master of Science in Medicine in Bioethics and Health Law, with training in South Africa, France, and the United States. His research focuses on molecular microbiology for global health, with strong emphasis on human capital development, and community involvement.

He has successfully supervised /co-supervised 58 doctoral and master's students. Pascal Bessong is currently a Research Professor and Director of the SAMRC-UNIVEN Antimicrobial Resistance and Global Health Research Unit, and Director of the Institute for Pathogen and Global Health Research at the University of Venda.

He is an elected member of the Academy of Science of South Africa, a B-2 rated scientist of the National Research Foundation, a Visiting Scholar at the Center for Global Health Equity, University of Virginia, an Honorary Professor at the School of Health Sciences, University of KwaZulu-Natal, and a recipient of the SAMRC 2023 Gold Merit Award for outstanding scientific contributions to health research. Professor Bessong is an Associate Editor of the South African Journal of Science.

Mr Will Rohde

Will Rohde is a visionary AI growth executive and founder of QuantaHub2, LLC, with over two decades of transformative leadership across healthcare, life sciences, and emerging technologies. With a career spanning Fortune 100 companies, government agencies, and cutting-edge startups, he has architec--ted go-to-market strategies responsible for over $350 million in contract wins. Will brings deep expertise in Artificial Intelligence, Cybersecurity, and Digital Health, having advised the FDA, HHS, NIH, and more on advancing next-gen solutions in Adversarial and Agentic AI. As a former professional beach volleyball player turned entrepreneurial trailblazer, he blends precision, agility, and innovation in every arena he enters. Passionate about societal impact, Will led the development of an AI-powered model to help combat the opioid epidemic demonstrating his commitment to data-driven change that saves lives.

Prof Keo Motaung

Professor Keo Motaung is a leading Biomedical Scientist, Full Professor, and Chair Holder of the FALF-FREF-NMU Research Chair in Entrepreneurship and Financial Inclusion at Nelson Mandela University. She is also the Founder and CEO of Global Health Biotech (PTY) Ltd.. With over 26 years of experience in higher education, her work bridges research, innovation, commercialisation and entrepreneurship especially in empowering women in STEAMI (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, Mathematics, and Innovation).

A passionate researcher and mentor, Professor Motaung is known for transforming scientific discoveries into real-world solutions. Her company, Global Health Biotech, is best known for La-Africa Soother, a plant-based anti-inflammatory ointment developed from her pioneering research into medicinal plants and musculoskeletal injuries. Her work exemplifies the integration of indigenous knowledge and biotechnology for accessible, sustainable healthcare.

She serves in national leadership roles including Chairperson of OWSD South Africa, Board Member of the Technology Innovation Agency, Chairperson of the EDHE Community of Practice for Entrepreneurship Research, and Chair of NIPMO's Advisory Board. Research Fellow at the School for Data Science and Computational Thinking at Stellenbosch University, reinforcing her commitment to interdisciplinary, data-driven innovation. Professor Motaung continues to influence policy, foster inclusive innovation ecosystems, and champion gender equity in science making her a transformative force in South Africa's knowledge economy. For her ground-breaking innovation, she has received recognition from a wide spectrum of institutions because she has thrown the gauntlet in bridging the gap between science, commercialisation and entrepreneurship.

Prof Johan Louw

Prof Louw has been actively involved in diabetes research for over 35 years, specialising in disease prevention, the development of plant-derived therapeutics, and foetal programming. In 2006, his research led to a joint development agreement with ZADEC for innovation funding of R120 million, resulting in five international patents, the identification of protein markers for early detection of type 2 diabetes, and the development of two therapeutic compounds for its treatment. In 2019, he was honoured with the Intellectual Property Creator Award from the Department of Science and Technology and the National Intellectual Property Office.

In 2021, Prof. Louw was appointed Senior Director of the Centre and Platforms Office, providing strategic leadership across various SAMRC platforms. In 2022, he received the SAMRC Presidential Award for Capacity Development, becoming the first recipient of this distinguished accolade. He leads a multidisciplinary team and actively collaborates with numerous local and international research organisations. Prof. Louw has published over 130 scientific articles and holds four patents. He represents the SAMRC on the Management Committee of the Global Alliance for Chronic Disease.

Prof Louw worked closely with Cell Vivo to bring optimised 3D cell culture technology to South Africa, establishing a foundation for cutting-edge cellular research. He is also the project lead for the first-of-its-kind intervention clinical trial of green rooibos extract, exploring its therapeutic potential in metabolic disease management.

He has also established the Centre for Advanced Training and Innovative Research in collaboration with Thermo Fisher Scientific and the Department of Science, Technology and Innovation. This facility provides hands-on training in genomics-based methods, including Sanger and next-generation sequencing, for students and researchers from previously under-resourced institutions.