

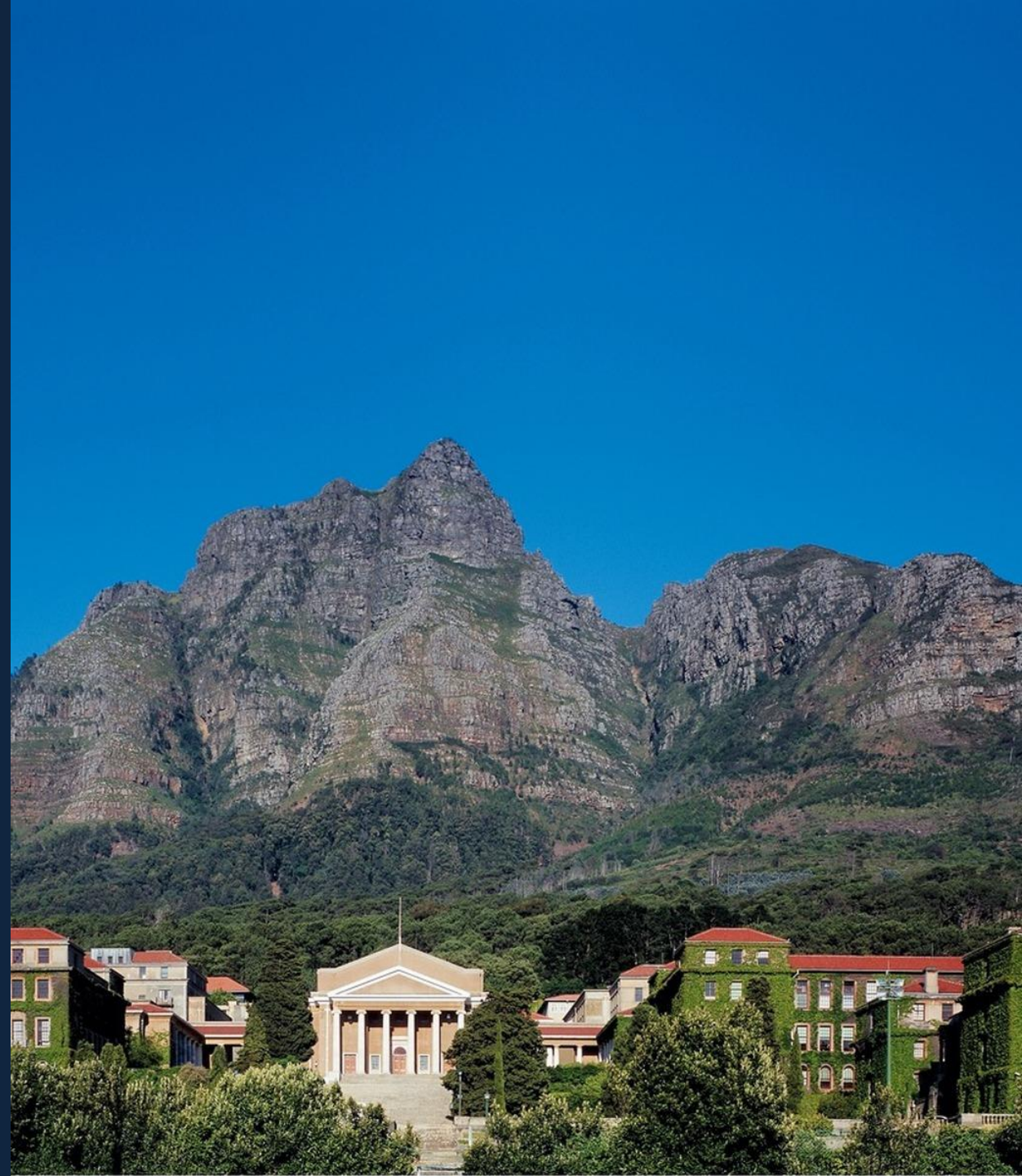
Governance Matters:

The overlooked driver of innovation in education

SABEN Connects | Hardy Maritz

**SABEN Board Member
Director: Commercial Development
University of Cape Town**

30th September 2026



01

Governance and decision-making



Governance matters in higher education

The role of governance in decision-making, managing risk and enabling innovation

1

COMPLEXITY

Good governance connects educational purpose to clear decisions, accountable delivery and measurable outcomes.

2

UNCERTAINTY

It creates decision rights and escalation thresholds for acting when information is incomplete.

3

INTERDEPENDENCE

It makes trade-offs visible across learning, research, service, financial, cyber, data and reputational risk.

At its best, governance enables timely action within clear boundaries rather than adding unnecessary approval layers.

Decision-making in education's complex environment

Governance helps institutions act when information is incomplete and consequences are interconnected



Governance discipline: frame the decision, surface assumptions, clarify authority, set thresholds and learn from outcomes.

Managing risk without losing opportunity

Risk appetite should distinguish the institutional core, controlled experimentation and scaled delivery

Protect the core

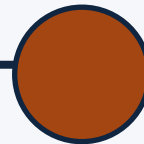
Student and staff identity
Learning-platform availability
Research data and backups
Admissions, finance and payroll

Experiment safely

AI-supported feedback pilot
Synthetic or non-sensitive data
Lecturer and student feedback
Stop, adapt or extend quickly

Scale what works

Learning-system integration
Accessibility and adoption
Academic and service ownership
Supplier and exit readiness



Avoid two failure modes

Fear-driven paralysis

Unbounded enthusiasm

Governance as an enabler of innovation



Governance as an enabler of innovation in education

Clear decision rights, proportionate controls and staged investment create room to improve learning, research and institutional services

Decision rights

Clarify who may pilot an AI tool, configure a learning platform, release a service or stop a change.

Proportionality

Use lighter controls for a reversible teaching pilot than for student records, identity or sensitive research data.

Stage funding

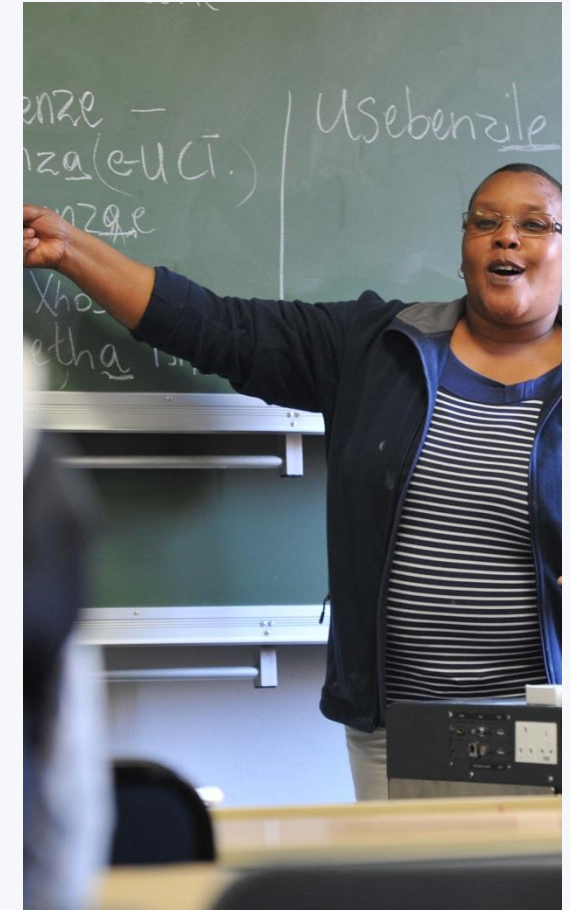
Move from discovery to pilot and scale only when learning, accessibility, security and user evidence support it.

Portfolio view

Balance core resilience, better digital services and new approaches to teaching, learning and research.

Learning cadence

Review learning outcomes, adoption and assumptions, not only compliance with the original plan.



When should a decision be escalated?

Escalate according to strategic consequence, systemic impact, irreversibility and trust

STRATEGIC FIT

Will the change materially improve learning, research, student access or institutional service outcomes?

SYSTEMIC IMPACT

Could failure interrupt connectivity, identity, payroll, teaching, learning, research or support services?

IRREVERSIBILITY

Is the change difficult to reverse, recover or support once released?

TRUST & LEGITIMACY

Could AI or digital services affect student data, accessibility, fairness, academic integrity or institutional trust?

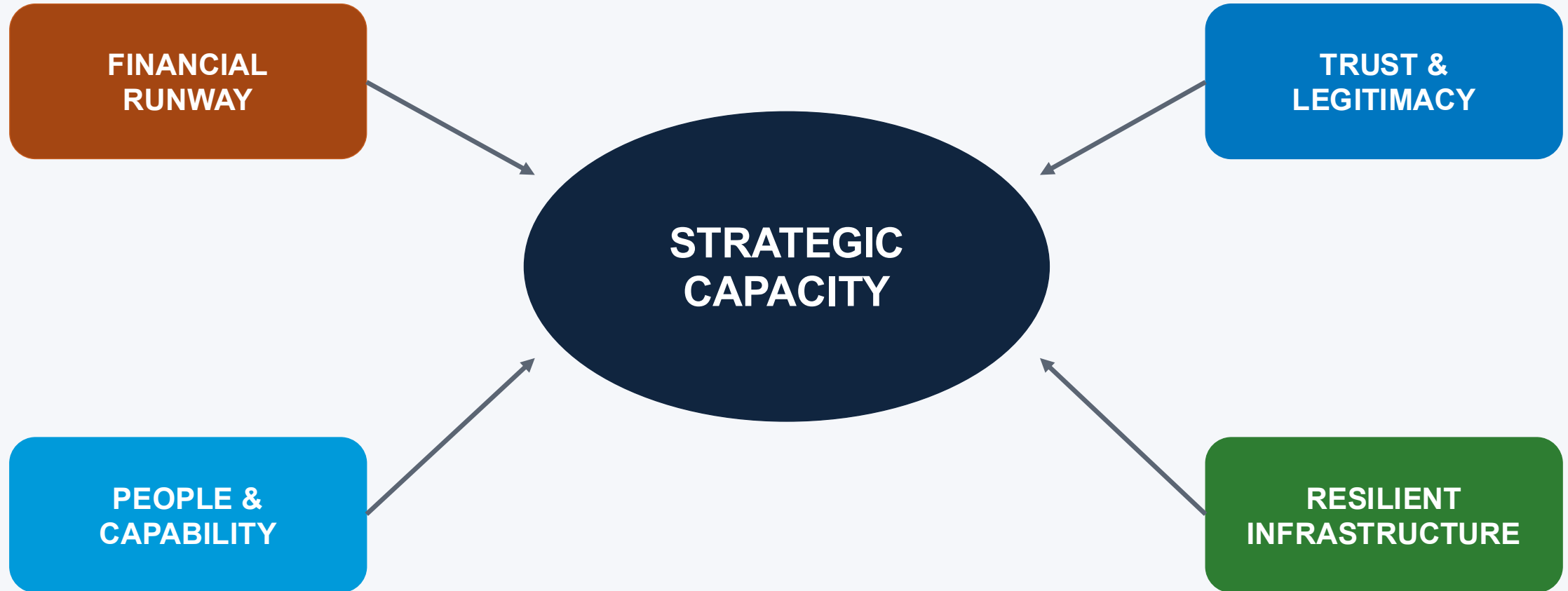
The purpose of escalation is not to move every decision upward. It is to ensure that material consequences are visible while there is still time to act.

Sustainability and financial resilience



Building sustainable institutions in a changing world

Sustainability depends on financial runway, trust, people, infrastructure and the capacity to adapt



Four enabling capacities combine to preserve institutional strategic capacity

Financial resilience

Liquidity, sustainable operating performance and renewal capacity preserve strategic choice

1

Protect liquidity

Understand available cash, commitments and the timing of inflows and outflows.

2

Build tramlines

Set targets for operating performance, reserves, staffing, debt and investment.

3

Stress-test

Use multi-year cash-flow forecasts and scenarios rather than relying on one-year balanced budgets.

4

Fund strategy

Preserve capacity for maintenance, renewal, digital resilience and selective innovation.



Financial resilience and lessons from higher education

Higher education shows how high fixed costs, constrained income and deferred investment reduce room to manoeuvre

- Revenue is concentrated in subsidy and fees, while digital expectations continue to grow
- Payroll and utilities are hard to change quickly
- Cash flows are lumpy and decision rights matter
- Learning platforms, networks, identity, ERP and cyber renewal are easy to defer
- Cloud, licence and currency assumptions compound over multiple years

The institutional lesson

Do not balance today by quietly transferring risk to tomorrow.

Institutions must make the future consequences of deferred maintenance, technical debt, skill gaps and optimistic assumptions visible today.

A governance and sustainability dashboard

Use a small set of indicators to connect current performance, future exposure and strategic value

RUNWAY

Free cash, commitments and months of cover

CORE HEALTH

Operating performance, cost growth and demand trends

EXPOSURE

Top strategic, cyber, continuity and supplier exposures

RENEWAL

Deferred maintenance, technical debt and renewal backlog

VALUE

Benefits, adoption and institutional outcomes

CAPABILITY

Critical skills, succession and supplier dependence

From principles to practice



Five questions before a major decision

A shared language for boards, executives, service owners and delivery teams

- 1 What learning, research, student access or institutional outcome are we trying to improve?

- 2 What must be true about academics, students, support, finance, data, integration and readiness?

- 3 What is the maximum tolerable financial, service, security, data or reputational impact?

- 4 How reversible is the decision, and how will we test, recover and support it?

- 5 **What evidence on learning, access, adoption, cost and risk will tell us to stop, adapt or scale?**

Practical takeaways

Six governance habits that strengthen delivery and institutional resilience

1

MAKE WORK VISIBLE

Record outcomes, assumptions, dependencies and decisions clearly.

2

KNOW YOUR AUTHORITY

Clarify local authority, reserved decisions and escalation points.

3

PROTECT THE CORE

Apply stronger controls to critical services, cash, data and irreversible commitments.

4

TEST SAFELY

Start small, test reversibly and define evidence to stop, adapt or scale.

5

SURFACE HIDDEN RISK

Expose deferred maintenance, technical debt, skill gaps and dependencies.

6

LEARN AFTER DELIVERY

Review outcomes and update forecasts, controls, standards and decisions.

Start next week: choose one material decision or recurring issue and apply all six habits to it.

Good governance enables innovation and resilience.

Clarity, courage and capacity preserve the ability to adapt.

CLARITY

Decision rights

COURAGE

Explicit trade-offs

CAPACITY

Financial runway

Thank you | Questions

Hardy Maritz | Hardy.Maritz@uct.ac.za

