



*Inspiring excellence, transforming lives through quality, impact, and care.*

# 2025 UFS OFFICIAL OPENING ADDRESS



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## Rediscovering Our Institutional **Heart**

**14 FEBRUARY 2025**



## INTRODUCTION

Good morning, Colleagues – Goeiemore – Dumelang – Sanibonani

Programme Director, Honoured Guests, Colleagues

It gives me immense pleasure to say:

Welcome to the University of the Free State.

Welkom by die Universiteit van die Vrystaat.

O amohetswe Yunivesithi ya Freistata.

Siyakwamukela eNyuvesi yase-Free State.

A special welcome to our newly appointed colleagues (pause – show of hands), as well as our colleagues from the Qwaqwa Campus who are joining us via live streaming this morning.

The word **'beginning'** certainly has a world of meaning locked up in it.

A beginning is generally accompanied by feelings of **excitement, anticipation, energy, and hope**. Whether it is the start of a new academic year, the start of a new job, or new project, or the start of a new tenure as Vice-Chancellor and Principal.

A beginning presents an opportunity to tap into this excitement, anticipation, energy and hope, and on the back of it, to **redefine our trajectory** in terms of where we come from, where we are, and where we are going.



For the next few minutes, I want to do just that – taking a brief look at our past, present, and future as an institution.

- I would like to dwell for a few moments on what it is that drives and inspires us – as part of this university – on our journey forward.
- **In essence:** What is it that makes us, as the University of the Free State, what we are. What lies at the centre of it all?
- In fact, if I could give this welcoming address a title, it would be **Rediscovering** Our Institutional Heart.
- A university such as ours inevitably forms and moulds the lives and characters of the people associated with it; and in turn, it too is shaped and transformed by those who have graced its campuses over the decades.
- It too has a character. And it certainly has a heart.
- Take a moment to look closely at our university's marketing logo. Such a familiar sight – we see it all around us all the time on all three our campuses and in our virtual spaces.
- You will see an image reflected in the centre of it? Yes – it is, quite deliberately, the image of a heart.
- As with 'beginning', the word 'heart' also has a world of symbolic significance and metaphorical references associated with it.
- For those of us in the health sciences, there is an almost automatic recognition and appreciation of the importance of this life-sustaining organ.
- And – if we think for a moment what day it is today – 14 February, Valentine's Day. A day that is all about matters of the heart, I think it is quite appropriate to focus on the **heart** of our institution on this day.



## WHERE WE COME FROM

- Let us now take a brief look at where we come from.
- For the past **120 years**, the UFS has been inspiring excellence and transforming lives through **quality, impact, and care**.
- It is an institution that has managed to consistently transform itself to remain relevant in the face of constant and far-reaching changes in the requirements of the world of work.
- Three years ago, we launched **Vision 130** – a roadmap of where we want to be in **2034** when we celebrate our **130th birthday**.
- Our Strategic Plan (2023–2028) outlines how this vision will be achieved over time, with clear activities to be implemented annually.

### Let us look for a moment at how well we are doing in these:

- When it comes to increasing research capacity and capability, the 2024 mid-year performance report shows that most activities and indicator targets monitored through the Annual Performance Plan have been achieved.
- This includes aspects such as scholarly output with international collaborators and postgraduate enrolments.
- The share of academic department heads who are associate or full professors stood at close to 63% last year, overachieving its set target by 7%.
- With regard to our target of becoming a first-choice institution for exceptional students and staff, great strides were made in 2024 in resourcing a technology-enriched learning and teaching environment, developing faculty-specific strategies for academic support, and the implementation of a comprehensive retention strategy to ensure student success and continuity.
- Another indication that we are doing well in this area is the fact that the country's top achiever in last year's matric exams for quintile four schools, as well as the Free State's top achiever, have chosen the UFS as their new academic home.
- As for our vision to be regionally engaged and globally competitive, our co-funded research opportunities with global strategic partners have increased from 45% in 2023 to 47% in 2024.
- Encouraging indicators such as these across the scope of our targets and indicators reflect that we are **moving from vision to implementation**.



## WHERE WE ARE: GLOBAL CONTEXT

Next, let us take a moment to reflect on exactly where we are at this specific point in time:

- In a global context, we are living in a time when dramatic and continuous change seems to be the only constant.
- It is a time of unfortunate and prevailing geopolitical conflict; of leadership and ideological shifts; of narrow interests that seem in many cases to trump concern for the greater good; and of vast, almost daily change brought about by rapidly advancing technology.
- More than ever before, the *interconnectedness* of countries and nations is becoming increasingly evident, as actions in one part of the globe reverberate to the furthest corners of it.
- This interconnectedness also has a positive implication: *Innovation* produced in one part of the world has the potential to uplift societies all over the globe.
- Groundbreaking research produced at our university at the southern tip of Africa can indeed change the world.
- Research we are already producing includes fields such as materials sciences, higher education and human development, indigenous knowledge systems, genetic improvement of staple crops, genomic sciences, cardiovascular and thoracic surgery, drone-based geological imaging, gender and African studies, and human rights – to name but a few.
- Institutions of higher learning have a more vital role to play than ever before. As catalysts of new knowledge and incubators of innovation, the real-life, innovative solutions we produce through research, teaching and learning, and engaged scholarship, can potentially make a very real difference on a global scale.
- Which makes this a truly exciting and challenging time to be involved in higher education – whatever field, discipline, and faculty you find yourself in.



## WHERE WE ARE: LOCAL CONTEXT

- Let us consider where we are in terms of our local context.
- As a responsible, caring citizen, the UFS works with its neighbours and its stakeholders to co-create solutions that benefit wider societies.
- On our continent, there are encouraging trends of cooperation among higher education institutions and a renewed emphasis and appreciation of the value of indigenous knowledge systems – a programme of which the University of the Free State is very much a part.
- Drawing the circle even closer, our university is also intricately involved in the local communities that surround us.
- For instance, over the years we have had many such successful intervention programmes in our province's schools, which have contributed to the fact that the Free State constantly achieves the highest matric pass rate in the country.
- So, in a nutshell, **this is where we are:** A multi-campus, residential university, firmly entrenched in the communities it serves, making real societal impact through its research endeavours, developing innovative teaching and learning strategies, and delivering quality graduates who are highly sought-after in the world of work.
- However, challenges do exist.
- Among the most pressing issues currently facing South African universities is our dependency on the public fiscus – as government is gradually reducing the proportion of funding to higher education institutions as a percentage of the GDP.
- It is becoming increasingly challenging to negotiate the current changing research funding landscape, with hurdles such as increased competition for limited funds, an inequitable distribution of resources, and geo-political shifts that affect international funding streams.
- This results in sustainability challenges, and a pressing need to diversify our income and strengthen industry and private sector collaborations.



## WHERE WE ARE GOING

- Let us take a moment to look at where we plan to go.
- Vision 130 illuminates our way into the future – expounding how we want to establish ourselves as a top-tier university that is continually extending its influence and impact locally, regionally, and globally.
- If we look at the measurable outcomes, it has clear targets focused on academic excellence, quality, and impact; maximum societal impact with sustainable relations; and a diverse, inclusive, and equitable university.
- Among these targets are: Improving the equity profile of our professoriate; increasing the number of academic staff with doctoral degrees to 75%; aspiring for gender parity in leadership positions; encouraging epistemic diversity; adapting our undergraduate to postgraduate numbers to a ratio of 70:30; recruiting the best students and academics; and maximising the value of our investments and assets.
- These targets are bold, but achievable. And it is going to take a combined effort and commitment from the entire UFS community to achieve them.
- To achieve these targets, we need **people** – **you** – our most valuable asset.

## REDISCOVERING OUR INSTITUTIONAL HEART

- Which brings me to how and where we should find the inspiration to achieve this vision we have set for ourselves. And how this lies in rediscovering who we are – and what lies at the heart of our institution.

Let us consider for a moment the significance and metaphorical meaning of a heart:

- Firstly, a heart signifies **importance and centrality**. The *heart of the matter* normally refers to something you cannot do without – something that is critical to life and growth.
- And this, I believe, speaks of the role that our institution fulfils – as an inspiring, life-giving hub, here in the heart of South Africa, that feeds into and supports the communities that surround it – as we apply our skills and knowledge to find real, science-based solutions to societal problems.



- Secondly, a heart signifies **vitality, flow, and energy**. This is reflected in our many examples of innovation and our concerted focus on aspects such as enhancing creative thinking and entrepreneurship in our programmes.
- It is also seen in our innovative use of technology and data analytics, in the way we embrace digitalisation, and in our resulting agile systems and processes.
- This vitality is also reflected in the way we are consistently finding creative ways to diversify our income, thereby reducing our dependence on government funds and ensuring our own sustainability.
- It is also mirrored in our emphasis on thought leadership, on stimulating new thinking, and challenging old, archaic perspectives.
- Thirdly, the heart signifies **interconnectedness**. From its central position, it serves the entire body and operates in harmony with other biological systems.
- As a university, our emphasis on internationalisation, on transdisciplinary research, and on growing research networks and partnerships beautifully reflects this interconnectedness.
- Our emphasis is on dismantling silos and fostering integration.
- Being regionally engaged and having maximum societal impact lies at the core of who we are.
- The heart is also **a beacon of resilience**. It is associated with courage and steadfastness.
- Over the past 120 years, the University of the Free State has prevailed despite adversity and has managed to constantly reinvent itself in order to remain relevant, without losing sight of the values in which it is anchored.
- And lastly: The heart signifies a **sense of belonging**. Of family – ‘hartsmense’ in Afrikaans; ‘batho ba pelo’ in Sesotho. A place where you can be who you are and express what you think, without fear of victimisation.
- A place where diverse people find a sense of common purpose, and where the symbols and spaces, systems, and daily practices all reflect commitment to openness and engagement.
- Where the value of care is reflected in various staff development strategies – allowing each employee to reach their full potential and explore their academic passions;
  - and in our student-centred character, emphasised by our ground-breaking student support strategies, our continued emphasis on safety, well-being, and universal access;
  - and in our commitment to ensure an outstanding student experience.





## FOCUS GOING FORWARD

Our main aspirations will continue to serve as guardrails:

- to be a research-led, student-centred, regionally engaged university that contributes to development and social justice through the production of globally competitive graduates and knowledge.
- In the light of all this, I want to sharpen our focus going forward on five broad areas:

### # 1 INNOVATION AND ENTREPRENEURIAL ECOSYSTEM

- The first is to establish the UFS as an Innovation and Entrepreneurial ecosystem.
- This includes advancing **transdisciplinary** research, moving towards identifying two to three core research themes that address local, regional, and global challenges, and strengthening our unique offering.
- It also entails increasing investment in research and innovation infrastructure, and research development and support.
- Ultimately, it is about expanding our footprint as an innovative university through the increased incorporation of innovation and entrepreneurship into our programmes.
- An important part of this is enhancing our postgraduate teaching support, bringing it on par with the excellent undergraduate support we already offer.

### # 2 SYSTEMIC SUSTAINABILITY

- The second area is establishing systemic sustainability – with specific focus on diversifying our streams of income.
- An important part of this is the revision and optimisation of our academic model, in the form of Programme Renewal and Programme and Qualification Mix Revision.
- We will continue with our disciplined approach to financial management and maintain our approach towards financial austerity to safeguard the long-term sustainability and success of our university.



- We also need to ensure effectiveness and efficiency through optimisation of our processes and functions.
- This means streamlining resources and ensuring that our support structures effectively align with our strategic objectives.
- This includes the streamlining of committees and eliminating duplication.
- Through careful assessment and realignment, we aim to strengthen operational effectiveness and improve service delivery to support our academic mission.

### # 3 INTERNATIONALISATION

- Thirdly, *Internationalisation* will be a core theme during my tenure.
- I believe we should strive for internationalisation on all levels by unlocking collaborative opportunities with leading African and global universities to grow our research agenda.

### # 4 FIRST-CHOICE EMPLOYER

- The fourth area is to establish ourselves as a first-choice employer, and a true ‘magnet’ for talent.
- To this end, I will be establishing a VC Strategic Personnel Fund to grow and attract the best academic talent.
- Being a first-choice employer also implies a continued emphasis on accountability and being a value-driven university.

### # 5 MULTI-CAMPUS MODEL

- A fifth priority is to strengthen our unique multi-campus model.
- The UFS is essentially one university on three campuses – each with its own profile and focus area, but all sharing the same character, underscored by the same value system.
- Out of this flows the equitable treatment of staff and students between campuses, the same teaching and learning standards, and equity in the provision of resources.



## CLOSING

- In closing: I believe that the heartbeat of the UFS lies in ***innovation through connection***.
- *Innovation* expressed in our cutting-edge programme content, our focus on creating a culture of entrepreneurship, our optimisation of the academic model, and our efforts to find new ways of diversifying our income.
- And *connection* reflected in heightened internationalisation, expansive collaborative networks, and a renewed focus on transdisciplinary research and real societal impact through engaged scholarship.
- My sincere wish is that each one of you will rediscover this heartbeat and that it will inspire you this year to take our great institution to even greater heights.