

2026 ***Official Academic Opening***

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UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE

Advancing with **Purpose:**
Shaping **Responsible Societal**
Futures



UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE
UNIVERSITEIT VAN DIE VRYSTAAT
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INTRODUCTION

Programme Director, Fellow Executive Colleagues, Deans, and all of you who joined in person and online, ISRC and SRC members in attendance.

Good morning, Dumelang, Goeiemôre, Sanibonani

It is a great honour to welcome you all back to the University of the Free State. I trust that you all had time to recharge and connect with family and friends, and that you are ready for the year ahead.

A special welcome to our **newly appointed colleagues** – those present in person, please stand so that we can recognise you. We are pleased that you chose the University of the Free State as your employer, and we look forward to the journey with you.

Also, a hearty word of welcome to our colleagues from the Qwaqwa Campus who are joining us via live streaming this morning.

I am humbled and deeply honoured to be able to start my second year as Vice-Chancellor and Principal. For me, the past year has been a period of immense grace and immeasurable growth.

It was a year in which *walking with purpose* truly became a lived reality.

I want to take this opportunity to thank you from the bottom of my heart for the way you have received me into this extraordinary community.

OPPORTUNITY PRESENTED BY BEGINNINGS

The beginning of a year is always an opportune time to take stock: to look back to learn from the past; and to look ahead to the future to determine priorities for the present.

I am reminded of the symbol that Prof Melanie Walker, one of our distinguished professors and Research Chair in Higher Education and Human Development, used for her research project on climate change in a higher education context.

It was that of the **Sankofa bird from Ghana**: a mythical creature with its feet firmly facing forward, while its head is turned back as it carries a precious egg in its beak. Many of you might be familiar with this image.



For me, it is a powerful reminder that we should cherish lessons from the past on our journey forward.

Last year, we spoke about rediscovering our institutional heart. **Why** we do what we do.

We explored what lies at the centre of who we are as the University of the Free State. And we agreed that *people* will always lie at the heart of what we do.

This year calls us to listen more closely to that heartbeat – to the **purpose** that drives each decision, each movement, and our collective direction.

And to start off, I would like to share two quotes with you.

The first is by **Mary Catherine Bateson** – acclaimed anthropologist and educator. She said: “We are not what we know, but what we are willing to learn.”

And then there are the words of **Alvin Toffler**, the well-known futurist – a quote that I often hear repeated nowadays – which dovetails beautifully with Bateson’s sentiment: “The illiterate of the 21st Century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.”

Taken together, these two insights converge on a single, powerful conclusion:

In the 21st century, identity, capability, and leadership are defined less by accumulated knowledge than by adaptive learning capacity. Knowledge is paramount to what we do. But knowledge should never be an end in itself. It should always be an instrument that leads to improved lives for others.

Therefore, the question is not whether we will adapt to this rapidly changing world. The question is whether we, as a university, will **lead** the change and transformation or be swept aside by it. How will we be a future-ready African university?

There is a saying we all know: we must be able to *walk the talk*. It means that great strategies and visions should always be followed by real action. But today I also want to *talk about the walk*. Because walking with purpose is not just a line in a speech. It embodies our character – how we, as the University of the Free State, are not merely responding to change, but actively and purposefully shaping **responsible societal futures**.



CELEBRATING 2025 | A YEAR OF PURPOSEFUL STRIDES

Walking with purpose is about tangible steps, measurable progress, and real impact.

And last year, we were blessed with many examples of taking those steps.

Let me remind you of a few of them:

Fifty-three (53) of our students were recognised among the Top 500 in the 2025 GradStar Awards. These awards acknowledge academic achievement, plus the potential to make a meaningful impact in the world. Our university also secured a top three national position. This was the result of deliberate, purposeful investment in student excellence, employability, and leadership development.

With the adoption of the Radiation Planning Assistant, our departments of Medical Physics and Oncology became the first clinical sites worldwide to integrate artificial intelligence into cancer treatment planning. Again – an example of real-world impact – changing the lives of women with cervical cancer.

Another world first was the launch of the Giraffe Research Programme and Infrastructure at the Amanzi Nature Reserve near Brandfort.

On the operations front, the University of the Free State was the **only** university to achieve a prestigious Platinum Status under the Good Financial Grant Practice accreditation.

We are currently navigating our first fully online registration process and have registered close to 80% of all our students to date – I want to thank the Registrar and his team and all faculty personnel who have been hard at work since 2 January.

We also won 21 awards at the Excellence Awards of the national association for Marketing, Advancement, and Communication in Education (MACE), including the highest award for consistent excellence in the awards programme for the second consecutive year.

On the sports front: we were the national 2025 Varsity Football winners, and runners-up in the Varsity Netball League.

Driving our international agenda, we have joined the International Association of Universities and the International Network of Universities – networks that provide us with copious opportunities for collaboration and exchanges.

There are, of course, many other examples – proving that 2025 was a year of purposeful strides. But it was also a year that revealed the urgency of the work still before us.



WHERE WE ARE | GLOBAL CONTEXT

We are all well aware of the challenging global context we find ourselves in. For more than two decades we have been referring to the VUCA world (volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous), and then, about five years ago, BANI appeared – brittle, anxious, non-linear, incomprehensible. Whatever we call it, in the past few years, it has become clear that we are moving towards a very different sort of normal. We have a more fractured world, with converging crises around resources, geopolitical conflicts, leadership shifts, misinformation, and climate disasters – all of which continue to present ample material for research to address the wicked problems of our time.

Higher education is being reshaped by a convergence of **global structural forces** rather than a single trend.

For today, I am focusing on three consequential forces:

Technological Acceleration (AI, data, digital platforms) – Artificial intelligence continues to fundamentally transform what it means to work, to learn, and to create value. Our task is clear: the skills we teach must increasingly be those that machines cannot replicate – creativity, critical thinking, empathy, ethical reasoning, collaborative problem-solving. This means that we cannot prepare students merely to follow instructions or memorise information. Because AI can do that so much better. We must prepare them to ask better questions, to challenge assumptions, to synthesise knowledge across boundaries, and to lead with integrity. *Implication* is that universities must redefine what is uniquely ‘university’ in a world where information is abundant and automation is pervasive. On 4 and 5 May, our Senate conference will address this theme – looking forward to insightful contributions.

Shifts in Global Demography and Student Demand. Declining youth populations in parts of Europe and East Asia contrast with **rapid growth in Africa and South Asia**. Tuition is more price-sensitive, employment-oriented, and mobile (physically and virtually). Lifelong learning and mid-career reskilling are becoming dominant demand drivers. *Implication:* Institutions must move from a linear ‘school-to-degree’ model to flexible, modular, and lifelong engagement.

Geopolitics and Fragmentation of the Global Academy. Rising geopolitical tensions affect **research collaboration, mobility, and knowledge flows**. Science and technology are increasingly securitised (e.g., export controls, data sovereignty). A shift from a single global knowledge system to **regional or bloc-based academic networks**. *Implication:* Universities must navigate diplomacy, ethics, and risk while protecting academic freedom.

In the fractured and uncertain world of 2026, universities are being exposed to new risks and opportunities that were not envisaged even just a few years ago. Is a rethink needed? My viewpoint is that we need a more radical approach. Business unusual.



WHERE WE ARE | LOCAL CONTEXT

In a national context, public funding is stagnating or declining in real terms in many systems, while costs rise. There is a greater emphasis on **return on investment**, graduate employability, and measurable impact. Increased reliance on **third-stream income** (industry partnerships, philanthropy, international students). At the same time, research funding is becoming more competitive and more difficult to secure. *Implication:* Financial sustainability is now a strategic leadership issue, not merely a finance function. Colleagues, collectively, we must work intentionally to meet the targets of our enrolment plan. In this year's subsidy allocation, we were penalised with R40 million due to our 8% under-enrolment two years ago. This trend cannot continue as it will have a direct impact on our next enrolment plan due in three years.

The **Free State** – our province – looks to us for solutions; for innovation that creates jobs; for research that improves agricultural productivity; for graduates who become capable entrepreneurs, educators, health-care providers, engineers, and thought leaders.

South Africa looks to us to produce the knowledge and skills that our economy desperately needs.

This is where we are. This is the urgency of our moment. And institutions of higher learning have never had a more vital role to play. **Bottom line is that** globally, higher education is shifting from a **stable, elite, nationally anchored system** to a **contested, global, technology-mediated, and socially accountable enterprise**. The defining leadership challenge is not adaptation alone, but **purpose**: clarifying what universities are for in an age of profound uncertainty.

RESPONSIBLE SOCIETAL FUTURES | OUR NORTH STAR

Let us thus shift to the UFS North Star.

There is an old Ugandan proverb that says:

'If you don't know where you are going, any road can take you there.' That sounds a lot like 'aimlessly drifting' and 'being swept aside by change' – the things we do not want for our university.

We need to know where we are going. Which brings me to our North Star: *responsible societal futures*. During 2025, we did a mid-term review of our strategic plan (2023-2028), and it provided the opportunity to refine our vision and strategy. Not changing direction, but more clearly mapping our journey for the next three years. Our North Star is embedded in our vision – **The UFS aspires to be an innovative, research-led, student-centred and regionally engaged university that contributes meaningfully to responsible societal futures.**



Responsible societal futures mean that we look ahead *deliberately*. We anticipate social, economic, environmental, and technological shifts – and we actively guide our research, our innovation, our teaching and learning, and our engaged scholarship to address these shifts.

It means that we refuse to be passive observers of change. We choose to be active architects of better futures.

WALKING WITH PURPOSE | RESEARCH

In our **research**, responsible societal futures mean that we measure ourselves not just by publications and citations, but by real-world impact. Does our research contribute to the UN Sustainable Development Goals? Does it advance the African Union's Agenda 2063? Does it solve problems that communities face?

Our researchers in the Faculty of Health Sciences, who are developing breakthrough cervical cancer technology, are demonstrating responsible societal futures in action.

Another example is agricultural sciences – Prof Maryke Labuschagne, NRF SARChI Chair in Disease and Quality of Field Crops and her team – who are working on the bio-fortification of staple crops and addressing the pressing problem of food security.

Our indigenous knowledge experts – Prof Matsabisa and his team – are using age-old insights to produce modern medicine, looking back to the past, and improving lives in the present.

This is what research with purpose looks like.

WALKING WITH PURPOSE | TEACHING AND LEARNING

In our *teaching and learning*, responsible societal futures mean delivering graduates who are not just employable, but who also possess leadership potential, social consciousness, and innovative thinking.

This requires us to integrate innovation and entrepreneurship throughout our curricula. To emphasise digital literacy alongside emotional intelligence. And to develop critical thinking that can navigate an age of AI and misinformation. A concerted effort to renew our academic offering will gain momentum this year. New qualifications to address the unfolding world of work will be prioritised by our DVC: Academic.



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WALKING WITH PURPOSE | ENGAGED SCHOLARSHIP

In our *engaged scholarship*, responsible societal futures mean genuine partnership. It means co-creating solutions with communities rather than imposing them. It means recognising that knowledge exists beyond university walls. It means humility about what we do not know, alongside confidence about what we can contribute.

WALKING WITH PURPOSE | PROFESSIONAL AND SUPPORT FUNCTIONS

And then, in our professional and support functions – because, at the University of the Free State, we acknowledge that this is just as important as our Academic and Knowledge Enterprises. Walking with purpose means streamlining processes, reducing bureaucracy, and excellence is non-negotiable.

OUR PATH FORWARD | PUTTING OUR FIVE GOALS IN MOTION

So, how do we walk this path? What does purposeful implementation look like? Our refined Strategic Plan for 2023–2028 builds on the five interconnected goals. I want to quickly touch on specific elements of our goals.

Firstly: Academic Excellence and AI-Enhanced Research Impact

We must harness AI to eliminate bureaucratic bottlenecks, accelerate discovery, and amplify impact. More than ever, the focus should be on developing distinctly human capabilities – the research questions that only humans can formulate, the ethical judgments that only humans can make, the creative leaps that only humans can take.

Secondly: Institutional Agility in the Age of Exponential Change

If the world is changing exponentially, we cannot respond linearly. We must become faster, more flexible, more decisive. This means streamlining approval processes. Reducing bureaucracy.

When we digitise systems, we should not be automating old inefficiencies – we should be designing new possibilities. Our CIO will be driving our digital transformation with new momentum this year.

The approach of ‘we have always done it this way’ is not going to take us forward. Working across functional domains will move us forward – a family of functions approach. This requires us to be honest about structures that no longer serve us.



Thirdly: Transformational Culture for a New Generation

Our six values – excellence, impact, accountability, care, social justice, and sustainability – must be visible in how we treat each other daily. In our hiring decisions, in our resource allocations, in our responses to failure and success.

In a recent article I read, the author stated that the culture of an institution is how employees feel on a Sunday night. It referred to the culture, the atmosphere, and character of a place or institution. That ‘something’ that creates an environment that sets everyone up for success and fulfilment.

Creating a sense of belonging across all our differences is foundational to our institutional success. It includes creating space for failure – but *failing forward*.

Transformation must be visible in our leadership. We must continue to improve the equity profile of our professoriate and our leadership, and champion epistemic diversity. Not because it is politically correct. Because it makes us better. Because the problems we face are too complex for homogeneous thinking.

It is also living our values – demonstrating congruency and authenticity in our behaviour. It requires us to speak up when we see any fraudulent activity, whether academic, administrative, or otherwise unethical. The University of the Free State has no tolerance for any fraudulent activity; this is non-negotiable. Our Internal Audit division is rolling out an awareness campaign this year on what constitutes wrongdoing and what to do about it. I urge our staff to be aware of the channels where fraudulent misconduct can be reported safely and confidentially.

Fourthly: Systemic Sustainability and Strategic Investment

Walking with purpose requires **resources** – financial, physical, human, and infrastructure. If we depend entirely on declining government subsidies and constrained student fees, we cannot invest in the innovation infrastructure our researchers need, the support systems our students deserve, and the competitive salaries that attract top talent. The commercial enterprise will gain momentum this year.

But sustainability is not just financial. It is about optimising our academic programme and qualification mix – ensuring that every programme we offer achieves sufficient scale and quality.

It is about regularly reviewing our structures for efficiency and relevance. It is about being good stewards of every resource entrusted to us – using them strategically for maximum impact. I am awaiting the results of the **space audit** that was started last year to determine how we unlock the value of our assets.



Fifthly: Collaborative Innovation and Global Integration

We must actively break down silos. Between faculties, between campuses, and between disciplines. Between academia and industry.

Our emphasis on comprehensive internationalisation and building our global reputation adds value to the qualifications of our students and increases the impact of our research. Research excellence today requires scale. It requires collaboration. It requires infrastructure.

Our nearly complete Transdisciplinary Innovation Hub represents this future. The positions for the appointment of the thematic leaders of our four identified research themes have commenced. I have also mandated Universities Estates to develop a space where personnel will have access to engage and unlock innovation.

TO MOVE FORWARD IN 2026, WHAT IS REQUIRED FROM EACH OF US?

It requires **courage** – to question assumptions, including our own. To risk discomfort in pursuit of excellence.

It requires **collaboration** – recognising that none of us, no department, no campus, no discipline has all the answers. That we must build bridges rather than defend territories.

It requires **commitment** – firstly to our students who trust us with their futures. But also, to the communities depending on our solutions. You have my commitment and the executive and senior management teams' commitment to continue to serve this university with undivided dedication.

We are building a legacy that will outlive any of us individually. An institution that transforms lives for generations to come.

In closing, as we begin 2026, my challenge to each of you is this:

Rediscover the purpose that brought you to this work. Reconnect with the passion that makes you rise each morning despite the challenges. Remember why what we do here *matters*. Let us make 2026 a year to remember. Thank you.

