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2022 OFFICIAL OPENING CEREMONY

UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE

11 FEBRUARY 2022

OPENING ADDRESS BY PROF FRANCIS PETERSEN
RECTOR AND VICE-CHANCELLOR

Good morning, Colleagues – Goeiemore – Dumelang – Sanibona

A special word of welcome to the Chancellor of the university (Prof Bonang Mohale), Chair of Council (Mr David Noko), Deputy Chair of Council (Ms Tirelo Sibisi), Council members (Mr Kopung Ralikontsane and Mr Zama Sigwebela), President of the Convocation (Dr Pieter du Toit), my fellow Rectorate members, members of the Senior Leadership Group (deans, senior directors, and directors), ISRC President (Simpfiwe Dube) and members of the ISRC, friends of the university, and all staff.

It is an enormous pleasure to address you at the official opening of the University of the Free State (UFS).

Welcome back; I hope you had a well-deserved break, but that you are ready with renewed energy for 2022.



UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE
UNIVERSITEIT VAN DIE VRYSTAAT
YUNIVESITHI YA FREISTATA



For those who are joining the University of the Free State for the first time – a hearty welcome, and I hope that you will have a long and rewarding future at the UFS.

Although there are only a few of us gathered here (in the Odeion), it is good to share this official opening remotely with many more of you – a method of communication that has become all too familiar over the past two years.

It has been an unprecedented two years, with tremendous innovation. So many of you have helped others find new ways to learn, new ways to teach, new ways to pursue research, new ways to care for students and staff, and new ways to keep the university running. We can be proud of the accomplishments we have made in the face of daunting challenges.

Colleagues, we are not yet out of the pandemic woods. My sincerest wish – and that of so many of us here – is that we can sensibly and safely return to as much face-to-face teaching and in-person work as conditions permit. This is what we are planning for – though contingencies are in place in case we cannot.

On 26 November 2021, the UFS Council approved the *COVID-19 Regulations and Required Vaccination Policy*, which we started to implement as from 9 December last year.

The policy implies that the University of the Free State does not force anyone to be vaccinated, but the institution has the right to require vaccination if anyone wants to access our campuses, in order to protect our staff and students. To all staff and students – please vaccinate.

Let me take this opportunity to express my heartfelt condolences to staff and students who have lost loved ones as a result of the pandemic – we (as a university community) also lost staff members through the pandemic – it always has an impact if someone in our community or extended community experience such trauma – a moment of pause to remember them.

The COVID-19 pandemic has proven that no institution or individual can take on the economic, environmental, social, and technological challenges of our world by itself.

But the COVID-19 pandemic also provided us, and the University of the Free State in particular, an opportunity to rethink and re-imagine higher education by contributing to a more inclusive, cohesive, fairer, and sustainable future.

At the beginning of a year, there is always a moment of reflection – **a reflection on the past year** (2021) – although we know it was an immensely challenging year, in fact two years (2020 and 2021), I was impressed by the resilience of our staff and students.



2021 – our key focus was to complete the academic year successfully and ‘not to leave any student or staff member behind’.

Against the background of the UFS Strategic Plan (2018 – 2022), the Integrated Transformation Plan (which was revised through a mid-term review), the seven VC’s Strategic Projects, the Institutional Multi-Stakeholder Group, and the Institutional Risk Register, the focus of 2021 was on ‘delivery and on re-imagining what is possible and doing it’ – and I can say that we have achieved much!

Our undergraduate student success rate increased during this period (by almost 5%). We have done very well in the areas of student success, staff development, quality assurance and have progressed beyond expectations on the multi-campus management model and institutional digitalisation projects.

Our infrastructure developments (maintenance and green fields) are on track, and through extensive engagements and detailed financial modelling, we have obtained approval to start with the phased implementation of insourcing.

We are driving POPIA and the Student Life Cycle (system and academic administration renewal) projects with energy, commitment, and effectiveness.

Overall, institutional governance is in place, with an excellent relationship between the Rectorate and the Council – all Council committees are functioning well. Currently, a governance project is in place to revise and/or update the remits of all Council and Senate committees, and to ensure alignment with faculty committees. It was critical to obtain alignment between the UFS Statute, the Institutional Rules, and the constitutions of other formal university governance structures. We will continue to ensure that our institutional governance is current and correct!

DURING 2021, WE HAVE COMPLETED (OR ALMOST COMPLETED) THE FOLLOWING:

- Digitalisation Plan for the institution
- Flexible Human Resources model
- Revised Internationalisation approach
- Multi-Campus Management Model
- Collaboration and co-creation with different sectors of the economy (Centre for Digital Futures)

We will pursue these with passion for full implementation in 2022.



In the portfolio of Research and Internationalisation, the *Differentiated Research* strategy, the *Internationalisation* strategy, and the Innovation strategy have been implemented through faculties, but more needs to be done to convert these plans into demonstrable actions. Although some work has been done on postgraduate funding and support, together with postgraduate governance (mainly through the Postgraduate School) and a doctoral review by the Council on Higher Education, this will be a key area of focus in 2022, with an emphasis on how to **resource and support the postgraduate and research environment towards a research-led university**. We have increased the number of NRF-rated researchers, our researchers have demonstrated excellence in various areas, achieved international recognition for these efforts, and participated in international research and funding consortia.

Much has been done in relation to student governance and student well-being. Faculty councils have been established, student representation has been increased in most of the governance structures at the university, student safety (on and off campus) has received much attention (will need to do much more, though), policies and guidelines related to protest, discipline, engagement, and student wellness have been finalised and are being implemented. In the area of violence and gender-based violence and xenophobia, the Unit for Institutional Change and Social Justice (in collaboration with other academic and support services functions) has conducted and developed critical conversations, position papers, and policies to guide the institution towards an inclusive and socially cohesive space that embraces the values of Ubuntu and respect.

2022 will mark a more dedicated focus on the Engaged Scholarship strategy, and a sub-committee of Senate has already been established to support this dedicated focus.

The engaged university of the future enjoys academic freedom and institutional autonomy but engages with the communities it serves. We must be enquiry-driven, and at the same time be learning- and community-focused. We must be professionally attuned, but humanely informed, taking our global responsibilities seriously.

Our human resources, infrastructure, information and communication, housing and residences are all on track with what they have committed to do, and we will refresh our focus in 2022 to continue to deliver an innovative, superior contribution to the Academic Project. Financial management remains key – the relationship with DHET and NSFAS is very important in this regard – we have maintained a very proactive relationship with both and will deepen our focus on these in 2022 – changing our approach from merely an administrative focus to an aggressive business focus.

We have made good progress in the areas of student application management – the whole process of automating the student life cycle, student data governance, student appeals, and student discipline. The 2021/2022 application/registration cycle is building on the 2020/2021 cycle of fully online registration.



The Reputation Management Forum (Communication and Marketing, Institutional Advancement, International Office, Community Engagement Office, Careers Office, and Student Recruitment Services) has produced a very progressive narrative for the University of the Free State, which will be communicated and socialised more broadly during 2022 and will be followed by a Reputation Index Survey later this year.

Let's focus on 2022:

The UFS Strategy (2018–2022) will end this year.

The Seven VC Projects have been completed and are now mainstreamed in the normal business of the university.

We have started engaging on the design of a process to develop a new vision and strategic plan for the university as from 2023.

In this regard, a Planning Team, convened by Dr Molapo Qhobela, Vice-Rector: Institutional Change, Strategic Partnerships, and Societal Impact, was established to drive this process.

The development of a new vision and strategic plan for the university will be fully consultative.

The focus of the vision will be on: **Visibility and Impact**

The vision, and subsequently the strategic plan, will be framed by the **United Nations Sustainable Development Goals**.

I can assure you that we will continue with engagement in a sphere of respect and tolerance for different views – always focusing on fairness and social justice.

Respect is an ethical demand that corresponds to the full diversity of our university community.

Respect for diversity means respect for people with many forms of ability – whether racial, ethnic, religious, gender, intellectual, or demographic backgrounds.

We will ensure that diversity in all its facets is fully implemented at the UFS.

We must always remember: the UFS exists through its **staff** and **students**, and we should never let one of them feel neglected or not being heard. Your safety and well-being remain our number one priority.



Colleagues, 2022 will again test our resilience, BUT

We will drive **long-term sustainability, brand value and reputation, local and global positioning, and diversity and transformation.**

As a university, we will be more **outward focused**, and we will look for opportunities to project our strength and capabilities to the outside world.

We have our eyes very firmly set on the far horizon to ensure that we bestow an institution on the next generation that is different from the past, equally impressive, a place whose very essence is found in perpetual renewal.

2022 marks the start of our journey of **visibility** and **impact**.

We will embark on it collectively.

THANK YOU.

