



# 2021 OFFICIAL **OPENING** CEREMONY

UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE

5 MARCH 2021

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RECTOR AND VICE-CHANCELLOR | UFS



Good morning, colleagues – Goeiemore – Dumelang – Sanibona

**A** special word of welcome to the Chancellor of the university (Prof Bonang Mohale), Chair of Council (Dr Willem Louw), Deputy Chair of Council (Mr David Noko), Council members, my fellow Rectorate members, members of the Senior Leadership Group (deans and senior directors), Institutional Student Representative Council (ISRC) President 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 (I know it was short), but that you are ready with renewed energy for 2021.

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 with the UFS.

What a year 2020 has been – a year ruled by unfamiliarity and heightened uncertainty. It was a year ago that the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in South Africa.

Let me take this opportunity to express my heartfelt condolences to staff and students who have lost loved ones as a result of COVID-19 – we have also lost staff members through the pandemic – it always has an impact if someone in our community or extended community experiences 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 on its own.

But the COVID-19 pandemic also provided an opportunity for us to rethink and re-imagine higher education and the University of the Free State in order to contribute 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 (2020) – although we know it was an immensely challenging year, it allows us to set the scene for the new year (2021).

Against the background of the UFS Strategic Plan (2018-2022), the Integrated Transformation Plan, Seven Vice-Chancellor Strategic Projects, and the Institutional Multi-stakeholder Group and Institutional Risk Register, the focus of 2020 was on 'Delivery on Track'. In this regard, the Directorate for Institutional Research and Academic Planning (DIRAP) has played a critical role in tracking the progress of implementation – and I can say that we are on track!

Overall, the institutional governance is in place, with an excellent relationship between the Rectorate (and myself) 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 (e.g. the Convocation – the executive was reconstituted and the energy levels are high!). We will continue to ensure that our institutional governance is current and correct!

While higher education has increasingly embraced online education over the past decade, the sudden pivot to remote education has been a steep learning curve for many institutions and their faculty members. I believe as a university, with the able support of the Centre for Teaching and Learning and the commitment of our staff (academic and support), the University of the Free State has done very well. With our goal of completing the 2020 academic year and not leaving any student behind in doing so, we were mainly driven by the Teaching and Learning portfolio. This portfolio continuously focuses on student success, curriculum renewal, language through multilingualism, short learning programmes, and the tracking of institutional plans.

During 2020, we also

- completed a mid-term review of the Integrated Transformation Plan (ITP), indicating what we have done well over the past two years, but more importantly, what we should do more and perhaps differently to achieve the goals of the ITP;
- progressed well in tightening the policy environment; and
- completed the Appointment, Promotion, and Performance Management policy for academic staff, and implemented it towards the end of last year for the promotion of academic staff.

By managing the COVID-19 challenge during last year, the COVID-19 Special Executive Group has provided impetus to develop the following:

- Digital Teaching and Learning strategy
- Flexible Human Resources model
- Revised Internationalisation approach
- Collaboration and co-creation with different sectors of the economy (Centre for Digital Futures)

We will pursue these with passion for full implementation in 2021.

In the portfolio of Research and Internationalisation, the *Differentiated Research* strategy, the *Internationalisation strategy*, and the *Innovation* strategy are being implemented by 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 2021.

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. We are especially proud of Profs Melanie Walker, Willem Boshoff, and Maxim Finkelstein for their A ratings, and Dr Matteo Grilli for his P rating – hearty congratulations. I am also very proud of the International Studies Group (under the leadership of Prof Ian Phimister) – for producing two P ratings within a period of 3,5 years – well done!

In the portfolio of Institutional Change, Student Affairs and Community Engagement, much has been done in relation to student governance and student well-being. Faculty councils were established, student representation was increased in most of the governance structures at the university, student safety (on and off campus) received much attention (will need to do much more though), policies and guidelines related to protest, discipline, engagement, and student wellness were finalised and are being implemented. In the area of violence, gender-based violence and xenophobia, the Unit for Institutional Change and Social Justice (in collaboration with other academic and support service functions) 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.

We were successful in signing off on an *Engaged Scholarship* strategy, and this will be fully implemented in 2021.

The engaged university of the future enjoys academic freedom and institutional autonomy but is engaged with the communities it serves. We must be enquiry-driven, and at the same time learning- and community-focused. We must be professionally attuned, but humanely informed, taking our global responsibilities seriously. In this regard, we have restructured the vacant Vice-Rector portfolio to now focus on Institutional Change, Strategic Partnerships and Societal Impact, while the Dean of Student Affairs – now re-named as Executive Director: Student Affairs – will also become a full member of the Rectorate.

Our human resources, infrastructure, information and communication technology, housing and residences are all on track with what they have committed to do, and we will refresh our focus in 2021 to continue to deliver an innovative, superior contribution to the Academic Project. Financial management remains key – the relationship with the Department of Higher Education and Training and NSFAS is very important in this regard – we have maintained a very pro-active relationship with both and will deepen our focus on these in 2021 – 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 University of the Free State has introduced fully online registration for the first time during the 2020/2021 Application/Registration cycle.

The Reputation Management Forum (Communication and Marketing, Institutional Advancement, International Office, Community Engagement, Careers Office, Student Recruitment Services, representatives from faculties and the Qwaqwa and South Campuses) has produced a very progressive narrative for the University of the Free State, which will be more broadly communicated and socialised during 2021.

Engagement, conversation, clear communication, and decisive action yield the type of environment in which we all want to work and study.

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

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, 2021 will test our resilience, BUT

We have our eyes 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.

Colleagues – *2021 is a year for re-imagining what is possible, and DOING IT.*

THANK YOU

