

INAUGURATION ADDRESS

PROF HESTER C. KLOPPER
15TH VICE-CHANCELLOR AND PRINCIPAL
ODEION AUDITORIUM | BLOEMFONTEIN CAMPUS
UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE
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WALKING WITH PURPOSE: UNLOCKING EXCELLENCE TO LEAD CHANGE



Honourable Deputy Ministers, Premier, MEC, MPs, Executive Mayor, Excellencies of the Royal Houses, Chancellor, fellow Vice-Chancellors, Deputy Vice-Chancellors, Registrars, UFS Council members, executive and senior management, distinguished guests, UFS colleagues, students, alumni, family, friends, and partners of the University of the Free State,

**Good morning, Goeiemore, Dumelang,
Sanibonani,**

It is with profound humility and an unwavering sense of purpose that I stand before you as the 15th Vice-Chancellor and Principal of this iconic institution with a history of 121 years. I am deeply honoured to accept the trust that the University Council has placed in me.

As I embark on this journey, I am guided by the profound words of Rabindranath Tagore – the 1913 Nobel Prize laureate in Literature, whose philosophy of leadership resonates deeply with me:

*“I slept and dreamt that life was joy
I awoke and saw that life was service
I acted and beheld that service was joy”*

These words encapsulate what I believe leadership should embody – service that brings joy not only to oneself, but to all we serve. I commit myself to serving our university community with integrity, vision, and relentless dedication to excellence.

Allow me to also acknowledge those who came before me; I am delighted to recognise Prof Frederick Fourie and Prof Jonathan Jansen, past Vice-Chancellors who are present here today – all my predecessors whose vision, dedication, and leadership shaped this institution into what it is today.

THE SHOES THAT CARRY DREAMS

I begin with a story that has stayed with me – a story told by one of our students, Reneilwe Tshabalala, during our recent Senate Conference.

It was a story about shoes. These were no ordinary shoes; they were the shoes that carried him on his journey to education.

Every morning, as he laced up those worn but faithful shoes, he was not simply preparing for another day of classes.

He was preparing to bridge worlds – to connect the dreams of his community with possibilities they had never dared to imagine.

Those shoes carried more than his physical frame; they carried his unwavering belief that education could transform not just individual lives, but entire communities.

They carried hope across dusty roads and concrete pathways, through early morning darkness and late-night study sessions.

And something happened to the young man in those shoes on his very first day of work. The final step in a gradual transformation. Reneilwe describes it like this:

“I found myself now walking with a purposeful stride. Like someone who wants to get somewhere.”

Today, I reflect on those shoes and their wearer, and what they represent.

They remind me that leadership is not about reaching a destination alone, but about the integrity of

each step we take together. A journey we will lead through exemplary integrity, good governance, and shared accountability. Here at the UFS, integrity stands for zero tolerance of corruption, fraud, or gender-based violence.

The shoes remind me that our journey at the University of the Free State must be one of **walking with purpose** – towards a future where this institution stands as a beacon of innovation and hope – for the Free State, our country, and for all of Africa. As we pursue world-class excellence, we proudly foreground our African identity and our responsibility to contribute to continental development.

Universities are ***Standing at the Crossroads of Two Worlds.***

We find ourselves at an extraordinary moment in human history – a moment that demands us to confront an uncomfortable truth.

Artificial intelligence capabilities are advancing exponentially, doubling in power every few months. However, our educational systems remain fundamentally unchanged from their industrial-era origins. Consider for one moment – ChatGPT gained 100 million users in just two months.

Large language models now pass medical board exams, write sophisticated codes, and generate research papers. Quantum computing promises to solve problems in minutes that would take classical computers millennia.

Yet our lecture halls, our assessment methods, our very conception of what it means to be educated – these remain rooted in the 19th Century model. This is not merely an academic observation. This is an urgent call to action.

We are preparing students for a world that is transforming faster than we can imagine, using methods designed for a world that no longer exists. The question before us is not whether we will adapt – it is whether we will step up and lead this transformation or be swept aside by it.

It therefore requires us to face the challenge of a reimagined university

In the face of unprecedented technological disruptions, incremental tweaks are no longer enough, but renewal and reshaping with boldness. Why boldness? Ranja Gulati of HBS motivates that “in a world of hesitation, fear, and volatility, boldness becomes a leadership imperative”.

There is no blueprint for universities on how to approach the future. And in an increasingly interconnected world, it is tempting to emulate what other institutions are doing. But I believe it is essential that we **reaffirm our own institutional identity** and work towards finding our own solutions – our unique purpose and our place in this future we want to create. We need a diversity of public universities with different roles and different missions.

Through my many engagements with our staff, students, and stakeholders over the past four months, I have come to the encouraging realisation that we are building upon a foundation of excellence,

steering towards our vision of being ‘a research-led, student-centred, and regionally engaged university’. This vision is a living, breathing commitment that must be embodied by every member of our university community.

The challenge is this: *How do we further unlock the potential that lies dormant in our own university?*

We must innovate, true to our own DNA, focusing on **our distinctive mission** – finding within ourselves the agility to adapt and to future-proof ourselves. Our vision demands that we think differently, act boldly, and refuse to accept the status quo. It requires that **we walk with purpose**. And it necessitates the **courage to lead**.

Our purpose is embedded in five intersected and interconnected strategic pillars, four guardrails, and a concise action plan.

PILLAR 1: Academic Excellence and AI-Enhanced Research Impact

The UFS will transform into a powerhouse of research and innovation, where artificial intelligence amplifies human creativity rather than replacing it.

Our commitment includes exponential growth in **transdisciplinary research** that tackles the wicked challenges of our time – climate change, inequality and poverty, technological disruption, planetary health, and social transformation.

The **Free State Futures Forum** – a biennial think tank to be launched in 2026, will bring together thought leaders and the most brilliant minds from across the continent and beyond to shape the future – the UFS is changing the way we approach engagement – from the heart of South Africa, for the good of our planet. We will collaborate with the Premier’s office, the Executive Mayor, and our regional higher education institutions.

The University of the Free State is widely regarded as a global leader when it comes to our **Support for Student Success** initiatives. This is part of our institutional DNA and something we should continuously build on as we increase our future-ready **graduate desirability**, including creating employment or being employed.

The UFS is a **residential university**. This is who we are. While it is important to embrace the hybridity of learning, we will conscientiously nurture the residential experience to build a health and wellness culture on campus.

PILLAR 2: Institutional Agility in the Age of Exponential Change

In a world where change is the only constant, institutional agility is not optional – it is essential for survival. We will embrace digital transformation as a fundamental reimagining of how we operate, while harnessing artificial intelligence to streamline processes, eliminate bureaucratic bottlenecks, and create an institutional culture where innovation thrives at every level.

Eliminating long delays for simple administrative tasks is a priority. The era of siloed departments working in isolation is over. Implementing our comprehensive digital systems maturity model, which creates seamless experiences for students and staff while ensuring that our systems serve people, not bureaucracy, will be given precedence as it unleashes the opportunity to focus on our core business – the academic enterprise.

PILLAR 3: Transformational Culture for a New Generation

We will amplify a **values-driven culture** – a clear inward conviction and outward manifestation of what it is that we stand for. Our commitment to transformation goes beyond compliance; it is about creating an institutional culture that embodies our values of excellence, innovation and impact, sustainability, accountability, care, and social justice.

We are building more than an **inclusive environment** – we are creating a culture that prepares students for a world where emotional intelligence, creativity, and adaptability are as valuable as technical knowledge.

This transformation will be visible in our curriculum, our innovative teaching methodologies, how we engage with one another, and our deep connection with society.

PILLAR 4: Systemic Sustainability and Strategic Responsible Investment

The sustainability of our university depends on our ability to diversify income streams, build strategic partnerships, and optimise resource use. Sustainability is our responsibility to future generations.

This is why I am pleased to announce two new initiatives:

The VC-ISRC Imbewu Legacy Fund: A dedicated student support fund that will ensure that no deserving student is denied access to quality education due to financial constraints. **Imbewu** – meaning seed – symbolises growth, investment in the future, and nurturing potential. I invite all present to support this fund by sowing your seeds. I want to express my appreciation to the Motsepe Foundation who contributed R1,3 million, which we matched, giving us a springboard of R2,6 million.

The VC Talent Magnet Fund: An ambitious talent recruitment initiative designed to attract the world's brightest academic minds to the UFS. We will compete globally for the best researchers, innovators, and thought leaders, offering them not just competitive salaries but also the opportunity to shape the future of education in Africa. We were able to assign R40 million to this initiative.

Our goal is ambitious: a 25% increase in third-stream income by 2027 and a 200% increase through partnerships and philanthropy. But more importantly, we will demonstrate that African universities can be sustainable while remaining true to their mission of serving society.

PILLAR 5: Collaborative Innovation and Global Integration

In an age of disruption, going solo is no longer a viable approach. **Building future-fit partnerships** is critical, as is breaking down the artificial barriers between disciplines, institutions, and sectors. I concur with Salim Ismael's sentiment – "let's stop building walls and start building bridges".

My vision is for the University of the Free State to become an **Innovation Hub – a true Entrepreneurial Knowledge Ecosystem**, thriving on the creative synergy produced when our best academic minds work together across our three campuses, allowing us to be the very best we can be. Let us build an ecosystem that evolves, adapts, and amplifies our capacity.

Preparing our students is focused on their ability to think creatively, to empathise deeply, to ask the right questions, to challenge assumptions, and to work collaboratively with both humans and artificial intelligence.

This is why we are establishing our **innovation and entrepreneurial knowledge ecosystem** as a dynamic space where staff and students tackle society's most complex challenges. Where they learn not just to use AI, but to direct it, to question it, to ensure that it serves humanity's highest aspirations.

GUARDRAILS

If we want to achieve our aspirations by building on the five strategic pillars, four guardrails will guide our journey.

1ST GUARDRAIL: The Irreplaceable Heart of the UFS is our people

At the core of our strategy is our **people**. In an age of artificial intelligence, human connection becomes more precious. Every strategic initiative we undertake must ultimately serve our students' holistic development as global citizens and change agents. The rich contribution of art, music, culture, and multilingualism will be preserved for the UFS, Bloemfontein, and the province.

Investing in the **professionalisation of our administrative and support staff** and in the standardisation of all our operations is a priority to embrace the exponential change. This forms part of our **Strategic People Development Strategy** to build leadership capacity for the digital age. Continued support for existing academic capacity development programmes is a commitment.

I believe in creating a conducive and fearless environment where psychological safety prevails and our staff members are allowed to innovate and experiment – where there is room to fail, but to fail *forward*. As Amy Edmondson states and I quote, "For knowledge work to flourish, the workplace must be one where people feel able to share their knowledge. This means sharing concerns, questions, mistakes, and half-formed ideas."

2ND GUARDRAIL: Leading Through Partnership in the Age of Collaboration

Comprehensive transformation cannot be achieved by any individual or institution working in isolation. It requires **‘unified leadership with a unified purpose’** – a collaborative approach that brings together our executive management, deans, senior directors, academic staff, administrative professionals, students, alumni, industry partners, organised labour, and community stakeholders.

3RD GUARDRAIL: Implementation: From Vision to Innovative Reality

The journey ahead demands bold action, courageous collaborative leadership, and a relentless focus on execution. Success is not measured by the elegance of our plans, but by the transformative impact of our actions. Our recent executive and senior management workshops have produced concrete recommendations that will slingshot our trajectory.

4TH AND FINAL GUARDRAIL: UFS North Star – Responsible Societal Futures

Moving forward, the UFS will be globally known for our resolute focus on **Responsible Societal Futures** – using our knowledge and resources to build a more just, sustainable, and humane society.

COMMITMENT TO IMPLEMENTATION

To demonstrate our commitment to implementation, the following seven-point plan has been actioned:

1. Completion of the **Transdisciplinary Innovation Hub** on the South Campus in Bloemfontein to drive research commercialisation, industry partnerships, and student entrepreneurship. This is where the boundaries between academia and industry will dissolve in the service of human progress – as science and society walk boldly together.
2. **Transdisciplinary research** within the synthesised **thematic research themes** of
 - Sustainable and Green Futures
 - Systems for Societal Advancement
 - Planetary Health Futures (merging the health and well-being of human, animal, and Earth’s ecosystems; we are very pleased that the UFS has received the approval of the Council on Higher Education (CHE) to offer Veterinary Science – this will be the second programme in South Africa)
 - Social Dynamics for a Flourishing Life

The consolidated **UFS Strategic Fund** will serve as an investment in and catalyst for transdisciplinary research linked to these themes. Among those, the expansion of the **Interdisciplinary Centre for Digital Futures**.

3. **Optimisation of professional and support services** through a distributed model following the alignment and streamlining of functions.

4. **Systematic review and renewal** of our academic programme portfolio and academic structures to optimise excellence and relevance in a rapidly changing world.
5. **A Strategic People Development Strategy** to be implemented by the soon-to-be-launched **UFS Training Academy** to build leadership capacity for the digital age.
6. **Implementing a comprehensive Transformation Scorecard** to track and accelerate progress in inclusivity and equity.
7. In building a sustainable future for the UFS, we are establishing two consolidated entities: **UFS Knowledge Enterprise and UFS Commercial**, which will allow for diversification of our income and optimisation of our assets.

WALKING WITH PURPOSE TO AN EXTRAORDINARY FUTURE

As I conclude, I return to the image of those shoes – and to the purposeful walk they represent. Today, we lace up our own shoes for the most important journey in the history of this institution. Each step we take must be guided by integrity, informed by wisdom, and inspired by hope.

We walk towards academic excellence that serves humanity in the age of rapid and fundamental change. We walk towards innovation that solves real problems while preserving our humanity. We walk towards transformation that creates opportunity for all, regardless of background or circumstances.

We walk towards sustainability that ensures that the UFS will thrive for generations to come.

Most importantly, we walk together towards **RESPONSIBLE SOCIETAL FUTURES**, unified in purpose, committed to excellence, and determined to make the University of the Free State a beacon of hope for our city, our province, our nation, our continent, and our world.