bult

news magazine 2025

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

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

Publication details

Published by:
Department of Communication and Marketing
PO Box 339, Bloemfontein 9300, South Africa
W: www.ufs.ac.za
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Editor's note

Welcome to this special edition of ***Bult,*** where we invite you to pause, reflect, and indulge in the highlights of a year defined by progress, purpose, and possibility. This edition captures the moments, milestones, and people that continue to shape our university community and its growing impact.

Inside these pages, you will find features that reflect the breadth and depth of life at the university – from key institutional developments and inspiring alumni stories to notable awards, achievements, and memorable events. Each story is a reminder that our strength lies not only in academic excellence, but in the collective commitment of our staff, students, and partners to making a meaningful difference.

We have also dedicated a special Initiatives section to showcasing the strides we continue to make in preparing globally competitive graduates. As an institution of higher learning, we remain firmly committed to advancing a prosperous and sustainable future through the skills, innovation, and leadership cultivated within our community. These efforts speak to our broader responsibility: shaping responsible societal futures that extend well beyond our campuses.

Bult is, above all, a celebration of connection. We warmly invite you to reach out to our editorial team if you feel called to inspire our community with your story – especially our alumni, both locally and abroad. Thank you for your continued support, engagement, and interest in our journey.

Warm regards
The Editorial Team

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Staff and Students

Alumni

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Our North Star

Prof Hester C. Klopper, Vice-Chancellor and Principal, reflects on the University of the Free State's (UFS) direction in a rapidly shifting higher-education landscape shaped by artificial intelligence, global uncertainty, and societal needs.

Heart-centred leadership is the integration of purpose, clarity, empathy, and courage. While AI is evolving at an extraordinary speed, being human remains our most powerful asset. Creating psychologically safe environments where students challenge ideas, researchers pursue ambitious discoveries, and staff innovate without fear, is core to this philosophy. AI may accelerate knowledge, but the irreplaceable strengths of creativity, discernment, and compassion remain firmly human.

The University of the Free State recently revised its 2023–2028 Strategic Plan to serve as a focused and future-fit roadmap grounded in our North Star - responsible societal futures. The strategic focus for the remainder of the 2023–2028 period centres on the transformational implementation of Vision 130 through five interconnected strategic pillars that respond to global disruption and institutional aspirations: academic excellence and AI-enhanced research; institutional agility; transformational culture; systemic sustainability; and collaborative innovation. These five pillars are supported by four essential guardrails: recognising our people as the irreplaceable heart of the UFS; leading through partnership in an age of collaboration; maintaining relentless focus on implementation - from vision to revolutionary reality; and ensuring that all initiatives contribute to responsible societal futures.

The goal is not to choose between competing priorities, but to recognise how they interconnect. We are building on a strong foundation and must prioritise with disciplined focus, identifying actions that create collective value, address the most pressing risks, and unlock momentum. This approach has informed the university's expansion into engineering, veterinary science, and innovation ecosystems such as the start-up incubator. These initiatives respond to national needs, strengthen research–teaching integration, and position the university as a catalyst for regional and societal impact.

The university is preparing to shape a sustainable, integrated, and human-centred future. The VC–ISRC Imbewu Legacy Fund, co-created with students, exemplifies systemic sustainability rooted in shared responsibility. Digital transformation initiatives are redesigning systems to be agile, transparent, and user-centred - ensuring that technology enables rather than replaces human connection.

Success is measured not only by metrics, but also by the kind of institution the university is becoming - technologically sophisticated, deeply human, courageous in purpose, and committed to societal good. We are not simply adapting to change. We are shaping it with innovation, wisdom, and heart.

***Prof Hester C. Klopper** has been the Vice-Chancellor and Principal of the University of the Free State (UFS) since 1 February 2025.*

*From the left: **Tiana van der Merwe**, Director of the UFS Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL); **Prof Anthea Rhoda,** Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Academic, UFS; and **Prof Francois Strydom,** Senior Director of the UFS Centre for Teaching and Learning.*

Learning and Teaching Conference 2025 explores innovation, sustainability, and quality in higher education

Source text: Anthony Mthembu
Photos: Ludwig Esau

The University of the Free State (UFS) hosted its annual Learning and Teaching Conference in September under the theme *Innovating the future of higher education: Sustainability and quality in learning and teaching*. The four-day event combined hybrid and online formats and featured a strong line-up of local and international keynote speakers. Prof Melanie Walker (UFS Centre for Development Support) delivered a thought-provoking keynote address, urging an 'ontological reset' in how humanity understands its relationship with nature. She argued that higher education must shift towards eco-justice and co-existence if it is to contribute meaningfully to a sustainable future. Additional keynote speakers included Prof Mike Perkins (British University Vietnam), Ben Brandon (Georgia State University), and Jana Lamprecht (UFS), who each provided insights into global trends shaping student success, innovation, and academic practice.

watch the video here

December 2025 graduation

Text: Christelle du Toit
Photos: Kaleidoscope

During December 2025, graduates from all three University of the Free State (UFS) campuses stepped onto the stage, carrying stories of challenge, transformation, and celebration. Each graduation gown reflected not only academic achievement, but also the resilience that has become a defining thread of the UFS student experience.

Reflecting on the significance of the moment, Prof Hester C. Klopper, Vice-Chancellor and Principal, reminded graduands of the responsibility and possibility that accompany their achievement. "As you step into the world beyond the University of the Free State, remember that your education is a powerful tool," she said. "Use it to create positive change, to question the status quo, and to pursue your passions with determination."

This year's graduates demonstrated exactly that spirit. Their research has offered breakthroughs with real-world impact: new biological pathways for reducing plastic waste, strengthened frameworks for protecting children's rights across Africa, strategies to elevate indigenous languages in higher education, and scientific insights drawn from pushing through personal adversity. These achievements reflect the university's commitment to excellence, innovation, care, and impact – values carried forward by every graduating class.

Their successes were made possible by the guidance of supervisors, the support of families and peers, and the academic environment that the university continues to cultivate.

Leading scholars

honoured at the 2025 Exceptional Achievers Awards

Text: Christelle du Toit
Photos: CTL

The University of the Free State honoured its leading scholars on 5 December at the 2025 Exceptional Academic Achievers Awards – an evening dedicated to recognising the people whose teaching, research, and innovation are shaping responsible societal futures. Opening the ceremony, Vice-Chancellor and Principal, Prof Hester C. Klopper, reflected on the meaning of excellence at the UFS and the collective work that defines the institution. "We celebrate not just individual achievements, but the collective pursuit of knowledge that transforms lives, inspires excellence, and creates pathways to a more just and sustainable future," she said. Her message set the tone for a ceremony that honoured top performers in learning and teaching, research, supervision, innovation, and scholarly leadership.

(Above) The highest research honour of the night - the Exceptional Established Researcher Award – was presented to **Prof Maryke Labuschagne** (Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences), while the university's highest honour in pedagogy – the Vice-Chancellor's Award in Learning and Teaching - was awarded to **Dr Frelét de Villiers** from the Faculty of The Humanities. (Right)

Honouring Research and Innovation

Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research, Innovation, and Postgraduate Studies, Prof Vasu Reddy, highlighted research excellence as central to advancing human understanding. The highest research honour, the Exceptional Established Researcher Award, was presented to Prof Maryke Labuschagne (Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences) for her breakthrough contributions and global impact. Prof Abdon Atangana (Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences) received the runner-up recognition for work that continues to influence international research communities.

Emerging excellence was celebrated through the Exceptional Young Achiever Award, awarded to Prof Wynand Goosen (Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences), with Dr Olive Khaliq (Faculty of Health Sciences) as runner-up.

Celebrating Teaching That Transforms Lives

Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Academic, Prof Anthea Rhoda, emphasised teaching as the heartbeat of progress and a cornerstone of the university's mission. The Vice-Chancellor's Award in Learning and Teaching honoured educators who have transformed the student learning experience through innovation and leadership. Additional recognition was given through the UFS Learning and Teaching Awards, celebrating excellence in curriculum design, assessment innovation, and interdisciplinary learning pathways.

A Celebration of Impact

The ceremony also recognised outstanding supervisors, interdisciplinary teams, research support professionals, and income-generating leaders. Together, the 2025 award recipients embody the UFS' commitment to knowledge that empowers, inspires, and strengthens society.

Research

Exploring Earth to understand Mars:
Lecturer joins international Space Science Team


Saline lake at Tso Kar.

Source text: Martinette Brits
Photos: Supplied

Dr Yolandi Schoeman, Senior Lecturer in Ecological Engineering within the University of the Free State (UFS) Centre for Mineral Biogeochemistry, participated in Spaceward Bound India 2025 – a programme supported by NASA and the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO). Held in the remote, high-altitude landscapes of Ladakh, the initiative brings together scientists from across the world to study one of Earth's closest analogues to Mars. For Dr Schoeman, whose work focuses on how life persists under extreme environmental conditions, Ladakh offered an unparalleled natural laboratory to explore life at the edge of habitability.

Her research investigates how micro- and macro-organisms, along with their ecological interactions, survive in hostile environments such as post-mining landscapes – where acidity, toxicity, drought, and chemical imbalances create conditions similar to extraterrestrial terrains. These extremophiles and resilient life systems provide crucial insights into how life might persist on Mars while also informing innovative strategies for restoring and re-engineering degraded ecosystems on Earth. By examining biological resilience across biochemical, mineral, and ecosystem scales, Dr Schoeman's work bridges ecological engineering, chrono-ecology, and astrobiology, advancing a new frontier in understanding how life adapts – and how we can learn from it to design sustainable futures.

She is the founder of the Extreme Ecosystems of Southern Africa (EESA) initiative and the Chrono-Ecological Observatory Network (CEON), the world's first integrated observatory network dedicated to studying how life adapts, interacts, and evolves over time in some of the harshest environments on Earth. Through EESA and CEON, she aims to establish living observatories across Africa's extreme environments – ranging from hot springs and acid seeps to saline wetlands, hypersaline pans, and arid highlands. These observatories aim to decode the biological strategies that enable life to engineer stability and resilience under intense physical and chemical stress. The same mechanisms that allow organisms to survive in African geothermal systems or mine-impacted landscapes are informing her team's work to design self-sustaining, nature-based solutions for rehabilitating degraded ecosystems.

At the Hope Site near Tso Kar Mars Analogue Habitat.

Against this backdrop, Dr Schoeman's participation in Spaceward Bound India 2025 represents more than just an opportunity to contribute to planetary science. It reflects a broader convergence between Earth system resilience, space exploration, and ecological innovation – redefining how scientists understand and engineer life at the limits of environmental possibility.

Reflecting on her experience, Dr Schoeman describes the most memorable moment as "standing at the intersection of two worlds – Earth and Mars". High in the Himalayas, while collecting samples from saline lakes, glacial melt zones, and ancient microbial deposits, she was struck by the strong parallels between Ladakh's ecosystems and the extreme environments she studies in Southern Africa. Observing high-altitude microbial mats and mineral layers, she said, felt like witnessing living stromatolites forming under Himalayan skies. These observations reaffirmed for her that studying extreme environments is not only about reconstructing early Earth or searching for life beyond our planet, but also about uncovering solutions for ecological restoration here at home.

Among the most intriguing data she collected were microbial samples from the transition zones between saline and glacial systems in the Tso Kar region in Ladakh. These biofilms displayed visible colour gradients and layered structures – clear signs of stratified microbial communities responding to changes in oxygen, salinity, and sunlight. When comparing these early observations to CEON data sets from mine-seep wetlands and other extreme sites in Southern Africa, she found striking similarities. This confirmed a key hypothesis of her work: micro-organisms across continents use comparable adaptive mechanisms to withstand acidity, desiccation, and radiation exposure. The convergence of these survival strategies suggests that the principles of life's resilience are universal, offering clues that may apply not only on Earth but potentially on other planetary bodies.

Through her work, Dr Schoeman continues to advance a vision in which studying life at its limits helps societies reimagine ecological resilience, planetary stewardship, and our place in the broader story of life in the universe.

Source text: Precious Shamase
Photo: Teboho Mositi

UFS celebrates research excellence with NRF ratings

Several of the University of the Free State (UFS) Qwaqwa Campus scholars received prestigious National Research Foundation (NRF) ratings in 2025.

Prof Jared McDonald (The Humanities), Dr Calvin Mudzingiri (Economic and Management Sciences), and Prof Richard Ocaya (Physics) have each earned C2 ratings, acknowledging their status as established researchers with notable international recognition. Prof Aliza le Roux (Natural and Agricultural Sciences) attained a C1 rating, distinguishing her as a leading international researcher whose work demonstrates exceptional quality and impact.

Emerging scholars, Dr Nthatisi Nyembe (Zoology and Entomology) and Dr Victor Gwande (History), received Y1 ratings, while Dr Regret Sunge (Economics and Finance) earned a Y2 rating – all recognising their strong potential to develop into internationally acclaimed researchers. These achievements signal a promising future for research leadership on the Qwaqwa Campus.

From the left: Prof Aliza le Roux, Dr Regret Sunge, Prof Jared McDonald, and Dr Calvin Mudzingiri.

Research chair to focus on mainstreaming climate-smart financing solutions

The Agriculture Risk Financing Research Chair in the University of the Free State (UFS) Business School, led by Prof Cobus Oberholster, drives holistic, interdisciplinary research to address climate change adaptation and mitigation in the food and agricultural sector. Established in collaboration with the Agricultural Research Council (ARC) and the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development (DALRRD), this chair forms part of a national initiative to strengthen climate resilience and sustainable agricultural practices in Southern Africa.

The chair's research centres on three interconnected pillars: regulatory and policy frameworks, entrepreneurial market exchanges, and digital financial innovations. Together, these will guide the design and commercialisation of climate-smart financing solutions tailored for the agri-food value chain.

Operating within the UFS Business School and collaborating with the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences, the chair promotes capacity building, policy support, and knowledge creation through research and training initiatives. Its focus on integrating social, ethical, and environmental considerations into financing decisions will advance responsible investment, enhance access to climate finance, and contribute meaningfully to food security and sustainable economic growth across South Africa and the African continent.

Source text: André Damons and Adele Louw
Photo: Tania Allen

Prof Johan van Niekerk, Vice-Dean: Agriculture in the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences; Prof Liezel Massyn, UFS Business School; Prof Nicolene Barkhuizen, Director of the UFS Business School; and Prof Cobus Oberholster from the Agriculture Risk Financing research chair.

Repositioning communication as a catalyst for systemic change

Source text: André Damons
Photo: Supplied

The Research Chair in Communication for Innovation at the University of the Free State (UFS), led by Prof Hlami Ngwenya from the Department of Sustainable Food Systems and Development, positions the UFS as a leader in advancing the science of delivery. The chair, one of six ARC-DALRRD-UFS partnerships with the Agricultural Research Council and the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development, promotes transdisciplinary collaboration, postgraduate engagement, and international partnerships.

Prof Ngwenya describes the chair as a living laboratory where academic rigour meets practitioner insight, and where communication is recognised as a cornerstone of systemic change. Success will be measured not only by research outputs, but also by the real-world outcomes, institutional learning, and systemic transformations it inspires.

Prof Hlamalani Ngwenya.

With decades of global experience in agricultural policy, nutrition, and sustainability, and as a trusted adviser to the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation, Prof Ngwenya brings unparalleled expertise in navigating complex agri-food systems. Her research focuses on how effective communication builds trust, strengthens partnerships, and drives climate-smart agriculture and food security.

The chair's six work packages promote frameworks for reflective practice, the testing of communication tools, and professionalising communication for innovation by training future leaders. It also aims to elevate practitioner knowledge, strengthen knowledge brokering, and establish a continental think tank and community of practice.

Ultimately, the chair seeks to reposition communication as a driver of inclusive, adaptive, and sustainable development across Africa.

Making policy work where it matters most

Text: Leonie Bolleurs
Photo: Sarel Henry

A quote from one of his examiners captures the heart of Jean-Paul Pophaim's work: "Through its rigorous and compassionate scholarship, the thesis itself becomes a source of hope – for research, for policy, and for those too often rendered voiceless by systems designed to manage rather than support them." For Pophaim, a lecturer in the UFS Department of Criminology, this is a mission. He chose to focus his research on homelessness, a group that is often overlooked not only in society, but also in policy, practice, and even academic discourse.

His work goes beyond analysis; it is about action. Central to his research is what he calls a 'victim-inclusive policy framework', an approach designed to respond to the lived realities of people experiencing homelessness. Rather than imposing top-down solutions, his framework ensures that policy and service design consider the individual's unique circumstances, guiding interventions from first contact to rehabilitation and reintegration. "Meaningful change depends on listening, collaboration, and evidence," he explains.

Through meticulous research – from analysing existing policies, engaging directly with those experiencing homelessness, to consulting stakeholders – Pophaim has shown that one-size-fits-all solutions simply do not work. His findings advocate for integrated, multi-sector approaches where grassroots perspectives shape sustainable interventions.

Beyond the thesis, his hope is for a tangible impact. He wants governments, local organisations, and fellow scholars to rethink their approach: to design inclusive, person-centred solutions that empower rather than merely manage. "I never wanted this to be just an academic exercise," he says. "The aim is to make a real difference; to ensure that people experiencing homelessness are partners, not subjects, in shaping the policies that affect them."

Pophaim's work reminds us that research can be more than just knowledge. It also provides insight for service providers, encourages better coordination between departments, and supports long-term, sustainable interventions.

Ultimately, it can be hope, advocacy, and a roadmap for a fairer, more inclusive society.

***Jean-Paul Pophaim's** research aims to bring about real change for people experiencing homelessness.*

Homegrown excellence: Dr Nthatisi Nyembe shines in parasitology research

visit the website here

***Dr Nthatisi Nyembe,** a faculty member in the Department of Zoology and Entomology on the University of the Free State Qwaqwa Campus, shines in parasitology research.*

Text: Godfrey Mabasa
Photo: Supplied

Dr Nthatisi Nyembe, a faculty member in the Department of Zoology and Entomology on the University of the Free State Qwaqwa Campus, is making notable advancements in the field of parasitology. A native of Qwaqwa, Dr Nyembe embodies the potential for academic achievement within the community she serves, representing a commendable instance of homegrown talent.

A respected graduate of the University of the Free State, Dr Nyembe completed her Bachelor of Science degree in Botany expeditiously before pursuing a Bachelor of Science Honours and Master of Science in Zoology, specialising in Parasitology, all on the UFS Qwaqwa Campus. Her postgraduate studies centred on evaluating medicinal plants for compounds with the potential to treat parasitic gastrointestinal nematodes in sheep – an area of significant importance for the sustained well-being of livestock.

Dr Nyembe broadened her academic horizons by earning a Doctor of Philosophy in Animal and Food Hygiene from the Obihiro University of Agriculture and Veterinary Medicine in Hokkaido, Japan. Her doctoral studies widened her scientific understanding and enhanced her expertise in the treatment of parasitic ailments.

Currently, her research focuses on the evaluation of naturally derived substances, synthesised compounds, and nanoscale particles for their potential efficacy in combating parasitic illnesses. Her broader research interests include pharmacological evaluation, the diagnosis and epidemiology of diseases transmissible from animals to humans, cell biology, and animal management, making her contributions essential to both human and veterinary medicine.

Her academic and research background is extensive. She has held research assistant positions at both the Obihiro University and the University of the Free State, and she also concluded a postdoctoral fellowship at the North-West University in the North West province of South Africa.

Beyond her scholarly pursuits, Dr Nyembe engages in activities such as skiing, travelling, reading, and community involvement, reflecting a well-developed character and a commitment to creating a positive impact beyond the academic sphere.

With her international academic experience and firm local connections, Dr Nyembe continues to be a symbol of distinction, inspiring students and contributing to pioneering research that addresses practical challenges.

When chemistry finds gold in the everyday

*What others throw away, **Prof Lizette Erasmus** transforms into innovation, showing how chemistry can change the world.*

Text: Leonie Bolleurs
Photography: Sarel Henry

When most people see a wattle tree, they think of firewood or a nuisance to the environment. For Prof Lizette Erasmus and her colleagues (Prof Deon Visser and Prof Marietjie Schutte-Smith) in the University of the Free State (UFS) Department of Chemistry, wattle is pure potential. This hardy invader, often blamed for choking ecosystems, has inspired one of their most exciting projects yet: transforming spent wattlebark and other plant waste into biodegradable, super-absorbent polymers that can hold water and slowly release nutrients over time. The result? A natural, water-saving fertiliser that helps crops thrive, even in dry conditions.

On top of the wattle bark project, they developed biochar from agricultural and forestry by-products to revitalise nutrient-depleted soils, and wood vinegar to act as a natural growth stimulant and soil conditioner. Then they combined these elements into what she calls the 'ultimate fertiliser' – a mix that improves long-term soil health and resilience.

Chemistry that matters

It is chemistry that gives back to the earth; and this is just one example of how she and her colleagues are turning waste into worth. "By applying the principles of green chemistry and circular economy, we're proving that waste can become a starting point for something useful, not an end."

The idea of doing research that matters started in the department's tearoom. "We were talking about publishing papers and doing great science," she recalls, "but we wanted to do more, to have an impact. That conversation sparked many of the projects we're doing today."

Prof Lizette Erasmus

They have developed bio-based absorbents that extract gold and other valuable metals from discarded electronics in an environmentally friendly way. "It's a green route for resource recovery," she says, showing how chemistry can literally turn trash into treasure. The group also recycles construction and demolition waste to create low-cost materials that remove contaminants from wastewater, including runoff from farms and even sewage. These projects support clean water and healthy soil while helping rural communities. Similarly, they have created absorbent sponges that remove oil spills without soaking up water, offering solutions for industrial and environmental cleanups.

In another innovative project, they are working with the mycelium of mushrooms; the intricate root-like network beneath the surface. Mycelium contains high levels of chitin, a natural polymer that is usually extracted from crab or crayfish shells in a costly, resource-intensive process. By using mushrooms instead, the researchers have found a greener way to produce chitosan, which has promising uses in medicine and skincare.

Building on this spirit of innovation, the group has also turned their attention to the black soldier fly, an insect increasingly used in animal feed. "The inside of the fly is great for feed, but the shell is rich in chitin and melanin," Prof Erasmus explains. "We can use these compounds in slow-release drug delivery systems and for wound care."

Sustainability that is innovative and inclusive

Wool, too, has become a new frontier. Working with Gerber & Co., they are developing techniques to make wool machine washable – a process called anti-felting – while also exploring its use in soundproofing, thermal insulation, and 'roll-out' grass mats. They are also extracting keratin from waste wool as a fine powder to create advanced composites that could aid in tissue repair, tooth remineralisation, or even self-healing materials.

Her dream is to see these efforts grow into something even bigger: a national centre for circular and nature-inspired chemistry, where scientists, students, and communities can work side by side to transform waste into valuable materials. "The goal is to make sustainability both innovative and inclusive," she says. The message is clear: in the right hands, even waste can shine.

How birdsong reveals the secrets of wetland health

Text: Leonie Bolleurs
Photos: Supplied

read article in isiZulu

When most people are still tucked in bed, the wetlands are already alive with music. Just before sunrise, a symphony of birdsong fills the air, a natural orchestra that holds more meaning than most realise. For Toka Mosikidi, a PhD candidate in the Department of Zoology and Entomology on the UFS Qwaqwa Campus, this morning performance turns beautiful sound into valuable scientific data.

He studies what is known as the dawn chorus, when birdsong is most active around sunrise. "To humans it might sound like a bit of a cacophony," he says, "but to the 'real' audience (females of the species), it is highly attractive and it's important to still find the right mate among all those gentleman singers." In the Southern Hemisphere, these early-morning serenades are most intense between September and February, forming part of the birds' efforts to establish territories and attract mates.

He often programmed his equipment to start recording before sunrise, capturing the first calls as they broke the early morning silence. From his recordings, it became clear that different species join in at distinct moments; almost as if each was following its own cue in the early-morning performance.

By analysing hours of these recordings, Toka and his team discovered how environmental factors shape when and how often birds begin singing at dawn. Temperature had the most consistent effect, with all three species – the African yellow warbler, lesser swamp warbler, and the little rush warbler – starting earlier on warmer mornings and later on colder ones. Humidity, wind, and rainfall produced species-specific responses: higher humidity advanced singing in the yellow warbler but delayed it in the swamp warbler; wind prompted earlier songs for the swamp and rush warblers; and rainfall delayed the yellow and rush warblers but advanced the swamp warbler's onset.

Lunar brightness also played a role, as the swamp and rush warblers began singing later after full-moon nights, while the yellow warbler remained unaffected. "Across species, the earliest singing occurred in mid-breeding season and the latest toward its end," he says. These patterns show how birds carefully adjust their behaviour to environmental and seasonal cues, offering valuable insight into how climate and habitat conditions shape daily patterns and wetland ecosystem health.

His research forms part of broader work in the Department of Zoology and Entomology under the guidance of Prof Aliza le Roux.

That broader perspective opened the door to a bigger question: what can birds' songs tell us about the wetlands they inhabit? Because birds are sensitive to their surroundings, changes in their songs can indicate problems in wetland ecosystems before they become visible. "Birdsong can act as a proxy for wetland health," he explains. "When there's less variety or intensity in their calls, it could mean that the environment is under stress from pollution, water changes, or habitat degradation."

For Toka, fieldwork has been both challenging and unforgettable. Working in remote wetlands meant long walks, wading through water to reach recording sites, and even losing equipment to a fire that swept through part of the area. Yet, these experiences strengthened his love for science. "We were among the few to use acoustic monitoring like this in such an environment," he says. "It wasn't easy, but it was incredibly rewarding."

His work is helping to build a new way of listening to nature. One that could guide how we monitor and protect South Africa's disappearing wetlands.

listen to the audio here
Dawn Chorus 1

listen to the audio here
Dawn Chorus 2

Hope for the tallest land mammal rises at the Giraffe Research Facility

Text: Martinette Brits
Photos: Kaleidoscope studios

On 29 October 2025, the University of the Free State (UFS) launched a groundbreaking Giraffe Research Programme and Infrastructure at Amanzi Private Game Reserve – the first facility of its kind in the world dedicated to advanced giraffe conservation. Developed in partnership with Save the Giraffes, the Kroonstad Animal Hospital, and Absolute Genetics, the centre brings together scientists, students, and conservationists to safeguard the future of Africa's rapidly declining giraffe populations.

Led by Prof Francois Deacon – whose 16-year journey in giraffe research spans global collaborations and extensive student supervision – the programme focuses on cutting-edge reproductive science, genetics, physiology, and animal welfare. The Amanzi facility allows stress-free reproductive procedures such as artificial insemination and embryo transfer, offering new hope for preserving genetic diversity and ultimately producing South Africa's first giraffe calf through assisted reproduction.

Save the Giraffes, which funded the centre, emphasised its role as a global hub where experts unite to protect the species. International partners, students, and researchers echoed their excitement about the scientific and conservation potential it represents.

UFS leaders highlighted the initiative as a milestone in research excellence and societal impact. With innovative technologies and global collaboration, the programme aims to secure a sustainable future for giraffes – ensuring that these iconic animals will continue to stand tall for generations to come.

watch the video here

visit the website here

UFS reaches new heights with Southern Africa's highest weather station

Text: Christelle du Toit
Photos: Abri de Buys

The University of the Free State Afromontane Research Unit (ARU), in partnership with the South African Environmental Observation Network (SAEON), has installed the highest weather station in Southern Africa – dramatically perched atop the Amphitheatre in the Maloti-Drakensberg at 3 100 m above sea level.

The cutting-edge station, part of the Expanded Freshwater and Terrestrial Environmental Observation Network (EFTEON), will provide real-time climate data critical to understanding one of Africa's most understudied ecosystems: its alpine zone.

"This station represents years of collaboration between SAEON and the ARU," said Prof Ralph Clark, Director of the ARU. "It opens a window into the environmental processes that shape mountain ecosystems, which are vital for water security and biodiversity." The installation was led by Abri de Buys and Jeremy Moonsamy from EFTEON.

Co-coordinator Prof Johan van Tol highlighted that the data collected will deepen scientific insight into climate patterns, water cycles, and ecological shifts across the Maloti-Drakensberg region.

The new station is one of five positioned along an altitudinal gradient stretching from the UFS Qwaqwa Campus, through Witsieshoek Mountain Lodge, to the alpine zone atop the Maloti-Drakensberg escarpment. It complements existing programmes and research initiatives currently underway within the Mount-Aux-Sources Long-Term Socio-Ecological Research Platform (MaS-LTSER) – the only cross-border, mountain-focused LTSER platform in Africa.

Prof Ralph Clark, Director of the ARU, emphasised that the station represents the culmination of years of collaboration between SAEON and the ARU.

The station will be maintained by SAEON, and real-time data will be accessible.

Parenting and advocacy:

The drivers of change in education for Deaf children

Source text: Kelebogile Boleu
Photos: Supplied

For many hearing parents, including Kelebogile Boleu, navigating a child's deafness without guidance can be overwhelming. Despite her son thriving in South African Sign Language (SASL), she became concerned about the poor literacy levels and limited support in Deaf education. National data reflects this reality: PIRLS 2021 shows that 81% of Grade 4 learners struggle with reading, with Deaf learners facing even greater barriers due to limited resources and weak early literacy foundations.

Seeking solutions, she collaborated with the UFS Library and the Department of SASL and Deaf Studies to create the HEARTS project – a parent-led initiative offering SASL training, peer support, and extra reading classes for Deaf children. Early results show meaningful improvement. HEARTS aims to promote a strong reading culture, empower families, and advocate for better schooling options, true inclusivity, and early non-medical support for parents. Those wishing to get involved can contact the programme conveners: KP Boleu at boleukp@ufs.ac.za or A le Roux at vanasa1@ufs.ac.za

Celebrating 21 awards at 2025 MACE Excellence Awards

Source text: Tshepo Tsotetsi
Photo: Stephen Collett

The University of the Free State (UFS) marked a major achievement on 13 November 2025 by returning from the annual MACE Excellence Awards with 21 awards – including the prestigious Severus Cerff Award for Consistent Excellence for the second year in a row. Held in Johannesburg under the theme *The Human Touch*, the conference brought together higher-education marketing and communication professionals from across South Africa.

In a rapidly evolving digital era, the UFS' success has highlighted the power of people-centred storytelling and collaboration. With six bronze, ten silver, three gold, and one platinum award, the university demonstrated exceptional quality across campaigns, events, digital platforms, and livestreams. The repeat Severus Cerff Award win affirmed excellence as a sustained standard rather than a once-off achievement.

visit the website here

*UFS Vice-Chancellor and Principal, **Prof Hester C. Klopper** (centre), with the UFS teams whose work earned 21 awards at the 2025 MACE Excellence Awards, including the coveted Severus Cerff Award for Consistent Excellence for the second consecutive year.*

From the left:
Keneilwe Makole, Lebohang Mahlabe, Lequcha Muller, Shirly Hyland,** and **Lorriane Hechter.

Innovating lifelong learning at the UFS: the Kovsie Phahamisa Academy's transformative work

Source text: Shirly Hyland
Photo: Kaleidoscope

The Kovsie Phahamisa Academy (KPHA) at the University of the Free State (UFS) has emerged as a leading innovation hub for short learning programmes (SLPs) and professional development in South Africa'shigher education landscape. Since its establishment in 2020, the academy has redefined how universities manage, market, and deliver SLPs – positioning itself as a model of efficiency, strategic foresight, and social responsiveness.

Strategic Governance and System Innovation

At the heart of the KPHA's success lies its pioneering governance framework and the establishment of the short learning programme management system (SLPMS). Launched in June 2023 and continuously enhanced through various phases, the SLPMS has transformed the administrative and academic management of SLPs across the UFS. These innovations have reduced administrative delays, improved compliance, and created data-driven insights for educational decision-making. By 2026, the system will introduce automated workflows, real-time analytics dashboards, and integrated contract management tools.

Driving Access and Market Responsiveness

The KPHA's work is characterised by its dual commitment to academic quality and market relevance. The academy has institutionalised a process that begins with feasibility studies and market research, ensuring that every SLP responds to real industry needs.

The KPHA's reach extends far beyond the university. Between 2023 and 2025, it identified, coordinated, and submitted proposals worth more than R190 million for SLP funding, partnering with SETAs, municipalities, and government departments. These efforts have resulted in numerous awarded contracts, including high-impact collaborations with Standard Bank (AgriBusiness Academy), merSETA, Umgeni Water, Lesotho's Ministry of Education, and Nedbank, among others.

Thought Leadership and Collaboration

Perhaps most notably, the KPHA has positioned itself as a national thought leader in short learning and micro-credential development. The establishment of the SLP Forum in partnership with Stellenbosch University and North-West University has created a collaborative platform for dialogue on the future of flexible learning in higher education. The 2025 SLP Colloquium, hosted by the UFS, brought together more than 60 national delegates and international experts such as Dr James Keevy, a global authority on micro-credentials.

Expanding Learning Opportunities and Impact

The KPHA has emphasised professionalisation and lifelong learning, encouraging academic entities to register their SLPs with relevant professional bodies for CPD accreditation. This ensures that offerings not only meet academic standards but also support professional growth and sectoral transformation.

Through strategic governance, technological innovation, and an unwavering commitment to access and quality, the Kovsie Phahamisa Academy exemplifies how universities can transform short learning programmes into engines of inclusivity, relevance, and revenue.

UFS hosts global summit to advance student well-being

Source text: Tshepo Tsotetsi
Photographer: Kaleidoscope Studios

The University of the Free State (UFS) hosted the 2025 Global Student Well-being Summit on its South Campus, gathering more than 20 universities from South Africa and across Africa. Centred on the theme *Co-Creating Student Well-being Strategies from the Student's Perspective*, the three-day event placed students at the heart of the discussion. Delegates from institutions including the University of Zambia, University of Namibia, and Limkokwing University explored challenges such as mental health, academic pressure, inclusion, and identity.

UFS Vice-Chancellor, Prof Hester C. Klopper, emphasised that student well-being demands a collective, cross-border response, while Dr Temba Hlasho, Executive Director of Student Affairs, highlighted its vital role in academic and personal success. Through plenary and interactive sessions, students and staff co-created solutions that align with the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The summit concluded with a strong message: student well-being must be integral to higher education – co-created with students, not for them.

visit the link here

visit the website here

SHORT FILMS, A LONG-TERM GAIN

Text: Gerda-Marié van Rooyen
Photos: Supplied

At first, his use of short films in teaching was purely practical: it saved time. But he soon realised that it might be a more-than-handy tool in his pedagogical toolbox.

"In a jam-packed curriculum such as our Film and Visual Media Honours, a ten-minute film allows for a quick dip into key ideas without compromising the momentum in our classes and schedule," explains Prof Martin Rossouw, Head of the Department of Art History and Image Studies, where he teaches as Associate Professor of Film and Visual Media.

Working with students and short films

He says that short films have become the norm for the Gen Z generation. And this development heralds new opportunities. "The initial convenience of working with short film quickly made way for much deeper insights. In teaching short film, I've come to appreciate how the short film's constraints (limited time, budget, and scope) actually generate creativity. Short films teach us how limitation can be inherently liberating. Less, quite literally, can become more."

Earlier this year, Prof Rossouw attended a conference in Portugal, where he co-organised and presented the workshop *The Short Route/'It's About Time!' – Why the Film Studies Classroom Needs Short Films*. Here, he experienced an inspiring degree of solidarity among short film scholars and experts. "It was a great exchange of ideas, with lots of participation and enthusiasm from the floor. We were all grateful that attendees took real inspiration from the discussion."

He says South Africans are right up there in terms of the exciting work we do and the fresh insights we can bring to the table on the global stage. "We might have our constraints, but this is, after all, the lesson I take from short films: constraints also create opportunities and new ways of doing."

Short films in the long haul

As someone with a longtime passion for short films, Prof Rossouw believes that social media has massively expanded the domain and importance of short film as a cultural form. As he notes, people can appreciate the real value of short film studies as a niche field that is now suddenly addressing a mass cultural phenomenon; it can offer intricate insights into many of the weird and wonderful appeals of something like TikTok filmmaking. "So, say of TikTok what you will, but short films – one way or another – are definitely here to stay. And so too in our classes."

***Prof Martin Rossouw,** Head of the Department of Art History and Image Studies where he teaches as Associate Professor of Film and Visual Media, co-organised and presented the workshop* The Short Route/'It's About Time!' – Why the Film Studies Classroom Needs Short Films. *He says short films are here to stay.*

Eighth Annual KovsieACT Eco-Vehicle Race and launch of Eco-Vehicle 2.0

Source text: Leonie Bolleurs
Photos: Stephen Collett

The 2025 Kovsie ACT Eco-Vehicle Race became an unexpected test of resilience as relentless rain transformed the event into a single 45-minute endurance challenge. Originally planned as a full day of Eco-Vehicle 1.0 and 2.0 races, smart laps, and endurance events, heavy downpours forced organisers to compress the programme into one decisive Eco-Vehicle 2.0 endurance showdown. Still, the atmosphere on the UFS Bloemfontein Campus remained electric on 27 September as students showcased nine months of intensive preparation.

This year marked the debut of the Eco-Vehicle 2.0 prototype, developed through the Skills Programme 2.0, which trains students in sustainability, software engineering, and mechanical and structural design. Teams from all three UFS campuses competed against students from the Central University of Technology (CUT), the University of South Africa (UNISA), and Nelson Mandela University (NMU).

The competition focused on two categories: the Pit Stop award for the best vehicle presentation and recyclable décor, and the Endurance Race for completing the most laps on limited energy. CUT emerged as the overall winner – also claiming the Pit Stop prize – building on their earlier Bluetooth Race victory. NMU won the Best Prepared Car award and dominated the Endurance Race.

The event drew support from stakeholders, including MerSETA, whose funding has sustained both the 1.0 and 2.0 programmes since 2018, and SA Truck Bodies, whose engineers mentored teams. The MEC for Agriculture and Rural Development, Elzabe Rockman, praised the initiative for fostering partnerships and technological innovation.

According to Dr WP Wahl, Director of Student Life, the project has evolved into a powerful skills-development platform that equips students with practical engineering experience and future-focused competencies. Despite the mud and rain, the race underscored student creativity, collaboration, and a shared commitment to sustainable innovation.

PhD student honoured with L'Oréal-UNESCO For Women in Science Award

Source text: Martinette Brits
Photos: Supplied

Runè van der Merwe, a final-year PhD candidate in Zoology and Entomology at the University of the Free State (UFS), has been selected as one of eight recipients of the 2025 L'Oréal-UNESCO For Women in Science National Programme Award. Her research focuses on population ecology and wildlife persistence in small, fragmented reserves – an increasingly critical area for biodiversity management. Van der Merwe's academic path includes a BSc, honours, and MSc completed at the UFS, with earlier studies investigating habitat selection in rodents and niche specialisation in large mammalian herbivores. She is completing her PhD through a joint-degree scholarship with the University of Groningen, examining how large mammals share limited resources and coexist in constrained ecosystems. Van der Merwe aims to continue publishing research that informs conservation strategies and enhances the understanding of species interactions in shrinking habitats.

From the left: ***Prof Vasu Reddy,*** *Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research, Innovation and Postgraduate Studies at the University of the Free State (UFS);* ***Omphemetse Sothomela,*** *2025 University of the Free State (UFS) recipient of the Abe Bailey Travel Bursary;* ***Prof Hester C. Klopper,*** *Vice-Chancellor and Principal of the University of the Free State (UFS); and* ***Dr Molapo Qhobela,*** *Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Strategic Initiatives, International and Institutional Affairs at the University of the Free State (UFS).*

Omphemetse Sothomela receives Abe Bailey Travel Bursary

Source text: Anthony Mtembu
Photos: Stephen Collet

Omphemetse Sothomela, a third-year LLB student at the University of the Free State (UFS), has been selected as one of 16 recipients of the prestigious 2025 Abe Bailey Travel Bursary. He views the achievement as recognition of his persistence, leadership, and the international aspirations he set for himself this year. Inspired by past recipients, he saw the bursary as a chance to broaden his global exposure and step confidently towards his future goals.

According to Prof Vasu Reddy, Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research, Innovation and Postgraduate Studies, Sothomela distinguished himself through outstanding academic performance and impactful leadership beyond the classroom – from Moot Court participation to his roles as a KovsieFM presenter and House Tswelopele mentor. His selection, Prof Reddy noted, reflects his commitment to using law as a tool for transformation.

The 2025 bursary cohort's journey began in Cape Town and continued through the United Kingdom, including London, Oxford, and Edinburgh. For Sothomela, this first international trip provided the opportunity to experience British culture, develop his leadership skills, explore international relations, and establish meaningful global connections.

Alumni

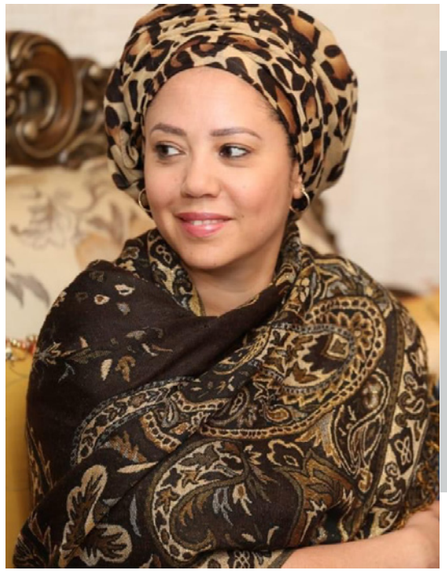
Driven by purpose, inspired by Mzansi's potential

Text: Gerda-Marié van Rooyen
Photos: Supplied

From growing up in communities plagued by economic challenges and barriers to being appointed to advise Deputy President Paul Mashatile on economic matters earlier this year, Gadija Brown has certainly come a long way.

Gadija considers her study years at the University of the Free State (UFS) as formative and precious. "I cherish the academic rigour, the diversity of perspectives, and the lifelong friendships built there. The university instilled in me a sense of purpose; the belief that education is a tool for transformation, not just personal advancement." She says her participation in student initiatives shaped her understanding of leadership and service.

This UFS alumna initially climbed the ranks in the financial sector before switching career lanes almost two decades later. "The transition from banking to politics was fairly seamless, as it was driven by a desire to make a more direct impact on people's lives." However, she often felt, and continues to feel, that systemic change requires being at the policy table to better serve communities.



Not just a title

Gadija worked as an accounting officer in various Free State provincial departments before being appointed as the MEC for Finance in the province. These positions equipped her with a deep understanding of public finance management, intergovernmental coordination, and developmental planning. Her current role requires strategic analysis, policy advising, and coordination.

"I work closely with my colleagues to assess the political and economic implications of policy proposals, engage with role players, and contribute to initiatives that drive investment, industrialisation, and inclusive growth. My ambition has always been rooted in service, rather than titles." She considers her role as a vehicle for change. "My focus is on contributing meaningfully to the province and the country. I remain motivated by the impact that I can make."

Dreaming of the days to come

In 2019, Gadija was nominated as Premier, something she describes as an 'incredible honour'. Would she like to become Premier in the future? "Becoming Premier is not on the list of my career goals, as I never thought of myself as a career politician. However, if a role arises within the public sector or any organisation that aligns with the vision of advancing economic development and social justice, I would embrace it."

Meanwhile, this adviser aspires to an economy that is more inclusive, innovative, productive, and youth driven. "South Africa's potential continues to inspire me. We have the talent, creativity, and resilience required to build a thriving nation."

***Gadija Brown,** Economic adviser for the Deputy President, believes that policy and practical mechanisms are key to tackling the unemployment, inequality, and poverty challenges facing our country. "Seeing how small policy shifts lead to real community change keeps me grounded and focused."*

From waste to designer eyewear

What began as an experiment on the University of the Free State's (UFS) experimental farm has evolved into a community initiative that merges research, sustainability, and social impact. The project, driven by the Department of Sustainable Development, set out to create sustainability across the entire production line – from sheep farming to product development – by finding new uses for wool that would otherwise go to waste.

Students on the farm learn the full cycle of sheep farming – from caring for the animals to shearing. Typically, a portion of the wool, known as 'lox 3' or dirty wool, goes unused. After brainstorming ways to maximise this by-product, the team decided to launch a community project that could generate income and employment opportunities. The process begins with cleaning and carding the wool before spinning it into yarn – a labour-intensive craft that evolved into the creation of felt.

The project's impact grew rapidly, supported by partnerships such as Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM) and the agricultural enterprise OVK, which provided funding, guidance, and motivation. What started slowly soon became a model for combining academic knowledge with practical product development. The initiative has since empowered local women, improving their technical, social, and personal skills. Today, four women are permanently employed to do felting, sewing, and quality control.

Rolene Strauss

To ensure sustainability, the team diversified their offerings by producing vibrant Shweshwe conference bags made from fabric combinations, and even repurposed banners. This creative twist not only reduced waste but also introduced a second income stream that attracted orders from various faculties and businesses. Rolene Strauss, former Miss World and UFS alumna, created a lot of excitement when she ordered holders for her signature eyewear, RS Sunglasses. After being gifted a pencil bag by Prof Hester C. Klopper, UFS Vice-Chancellor and Principal, Rolene contacted Doretha Jacobs, Lecturer in the Department of Sustainable Food Systems and Development, to set the ball rolling. Following their initial meeting, the first order was delivered soon. Hopefully, this is the first of many such partnerships.

Training and knowledge sharing remain central to the project's philosophy. In addition to felting, the team offers workshops on dyeing, eco-printing, sewing, and handmade gifts. Their vision is clear: to build a production line that not only preserves resources but also uplifts communities.

For more information and orders, contact:
Doretha Jacobs
073 231 3985
jacobsd@ufs.ac.za

UFS alumnus joins *Binnelanders* Season 15

Source text: Onthatile Tikoe
Photo: Supplied

University of the Free State (UFS) alumnus Logan W James made his national television debut in *Binnelanders* Season 15, which premiered on Showmax on 4 June 2025. Born and raised in Bloemfontein, Logan's journey from UFS student theatre to the national screen reflects determination, passion, and deep artistic growth. A Grey College old boy and proud Kovsie, he has built a reputation for captivating performances in campus productions such as *Everyman, How to Wuzz*, and *Run for Your Wife*.

Now based in Johannesburg, Logan plays Le Roux Snyman, a motocross-loving thrill-seeker with both boldness and vulnerability. For Logan, the role feels like a 'full-circle moment', as he grew up watching *Binnelanders* with his grandmother. He credits his Bloemfontein theatre background for instilling discipline, authenticity, and professionalism.

Embracing the challenges of the Johannesburg entertainment scene, Logan remains a proud voice for regional talent, proving that perseverance and passion can take Free State artists to national platforms. "If you chase the art, not the spotlight, you'll find purpose," he says.

Millisanté de Wee, *Director at PH Attorneys and founder of the Marcid Mind NPC, flying the UFS flag high in the legal sector.*

Spotlight:

Millisanté de Wee – a trailblazer in law, leadership, and empowerment

Text Godfrey Mabasa
Photo: Supplied

From Upington in the Northern Cape to the boardrooms of Bloemfontein, Millisanté de Wee has travelled a path marked by resilience, purpose, and a strong commitment to growth in her professional and personal life. In 2016, De Wee began her journey in law at the University of the Free State (UFS), pursuing her LLB with a strong desire to join the legal field. During her time at the UFS, she engaged well beyond the classroom.

She rose through the leadership ranks of House Akasia and served as Prime of the women's residence in her final year. Her advocacy spirit blossomed through her roles as Chairperson of Embrace a Sister (NPO) and Community Officer for the UFS Chapter of the Golden Key International Honour Society.

After graduating in 2020, she began her legal career as a candidate attorney at PH Attorneys in Bloemfontein. By March 2022, she became an attorney of the High Court of South Africa. Starting in litigation, she quickly discovered her niche and passion in commercial and corporate law, a field in which she continues to excel.

In a noteworthy achievement, De Wee was appointed as the youngest director at PH Attorneys at the end of 2024 – at just 26 years old. In this role, she develops her entrepreneurial skills, mentors aspiring lawyers, and deepens her expertise in the changing landscape of commercial law.

Her contributions extend beyond the office. In 2023, she founded the Marcid Mind NPC, a non-profit company that educates and empowers women and girls across South Africa. Through this initiative, she creates platforms for meaningful dialogue and action on the critical issues facing women in society, particularly young girls.

She is currently also pursuing a master's degree in Law at the UFS, focusing her research on the legal implications of artificial intelligence in South Africa. Millisanté de Wee exemplifies what it means to lead with purpose. Her commitment to legal excellence, combined with her passion for mentorship and social impact, makes her a rising force in South Africa's legal and social landscape.

Board game delves into hearts

Text: Gerda-Marié van Rooyen
Photos: Supplied

One alumna made it her mission to help children open up to psychologists in a playful, non-threatening way. Judging by the feedback on the Smart Heart board game, she seems to have succeeded in doing so.

Christine Kritzas, counselling psychologist at The LightHouse Arabia and creator of SmartHeart®, says client testimonials constantly affirm the game's value. "A single father discovered through playing SmartHeart® that his son is scared of heights and lonely at break time." This former MA (Counselling Psychology) student who graduated in 2008, says her game gives parents a tool to engage with their child, spending quality time together, and chatting and asking about the child's day, without the child realising how much he is disclosing. "If a concern arises during play, a parent or child can brainstorm to find a solution and allow them to seek professional assistance."

The origins of SmartHeart®

Her lifelong love of board games, combined with a curiosity about people and what shapes them, made creating SmartHeart® a natural and fun venture. The spark came in 2011 through her work with children in play therapy. She recalls, "I was desperate to find fun and non-threatening ways for children to express their feelings and speak about their challenges and issues."

In 2020, Christine and Dr Saliha Afridi, a clinical psychologist and founder of The LightHouse Arabia, partnered to update the original game, deepening its roots in emotional intelligence, expanding its relevance for third-culture kids, promoting cultural humility, and addressing the growing impact of technology on youth.

***Alumna Christine Kritzas** turns play into purpose with SmartHeart®, a board game that helps children express their emotions, build empathy, and open up to caregivers and therapists.*

How it is played

Players move across the board, drawing one of the following cards: Talk-Talk (emotional intelligence-based questions), I feel ... when ... (sharing an experience that led to the feeling represented on the card), or Pic-tales (describing or telling a story about the picture on the card). "There is no right or wrong answer, only the experience as perceived by the person answering."

Looking after her own mental health

Although Christine finds a profound sense of fulfilment in seeing others step into their power and grow into their greatness, she realises the importance of rest and recreation. This expat, who considers herself deeply compassionate, takes a holistic approach to self-care by prioritising, among others, her morning routine. "Looking after myself allows me to be fully present for others." She enjoys a variety of activities, from hot yoga to padel, while making time to connect with loved ones.

And of course, she still favours board games. "My love of play endures, especially backgammon, where I enjoy the thrill of strategy and the shared connection that comes from playing with others."

Increasing the circle through signing

Text: Gerda-Marié van Rooyen
Photos: Supplied

Khethukuthula Mbatha, alumna of the University of the Free State (UFS), recently received the honour of making the National Dialogue accessible to the Deaf. "It reaffirmed why I chose this path – to make sure that everyone, including the Deaf community, has access to national conversations that shape our country."

This business owner of Kwarenge Language Solutions says it is deeply fulfilling to enable Deaf participants. "It's moments like these that remind me that accessibility is not just a technical matter, it's about dignity, belonging, and equality." She says her passion for communication and social justice initially drove her to explore South African Sign Language (SASL), as it creates access and visibility for a community that has long been marginalised.

Speak the language of humanity

Mbatha recommends that hearing individuals include the Deaf community by maintaining eye contact and speaking directly to Deaf individuals rather than to the interpreter. "These gestures show respect." Adding to this, she suggests that institutions could add interpreters and captions at key events, and by integrating Deaf awareness into staff and student training. "Inclusion isn't just about accessibility but also changing mindsets to see Deaf people as equal participants in every conversation."

read article in Sesotho

Building on her studies at Kovsies

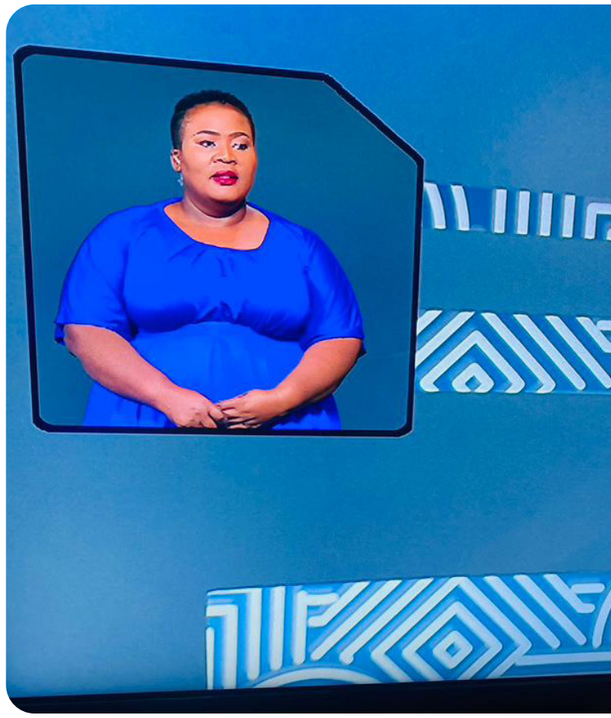
She believes that her studies at the UFS provided the academic knowledge, professional discipline, and ethical foundation that interpreting requires. It prepared her to serve in various environments, from classrooms to conferences, media spaces, and national platforms, and ultimately to starting her own company. Kwarenge Language Solutions was born from a desire to create more access on multiple fronts by offering translation, interpreting, editing, and transcription services. "What drives me most is seeing the impact when someone finally understands or feels understood because of the work we do. It's incredibly rewarding to know that language can connect, empower, and transform.

"Being a UFS alumna reminds me that education is about earning a qualification and using what you've learned to make a difference. The university's values of diversity and human connection continue to guide my journey as I work towards a more inclusive South Africa, one conversation at a time and one sign at a time."

Dreaming of inclusion

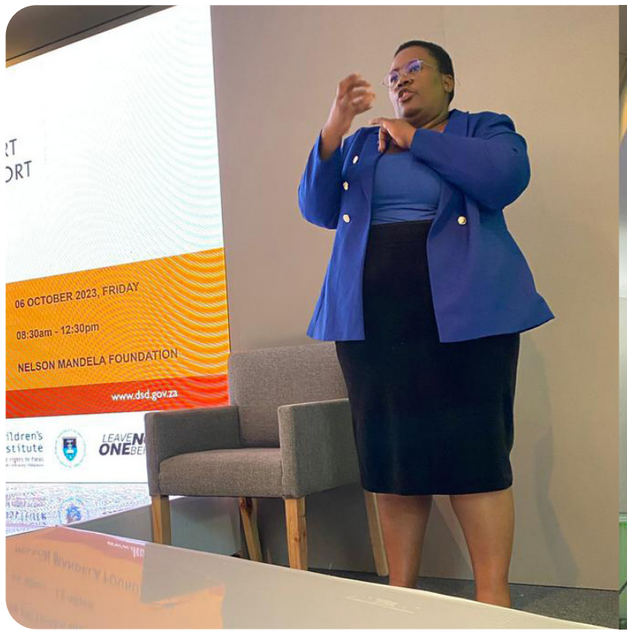
Although South African Sign Language became the official 12th language, there is still a long road ahead. "We need proper implementation, more trained interpreters, SASL teachers, and policies that ensure Deaf learners receive education in their first language. True change will come when recognition leads to real opportunities."

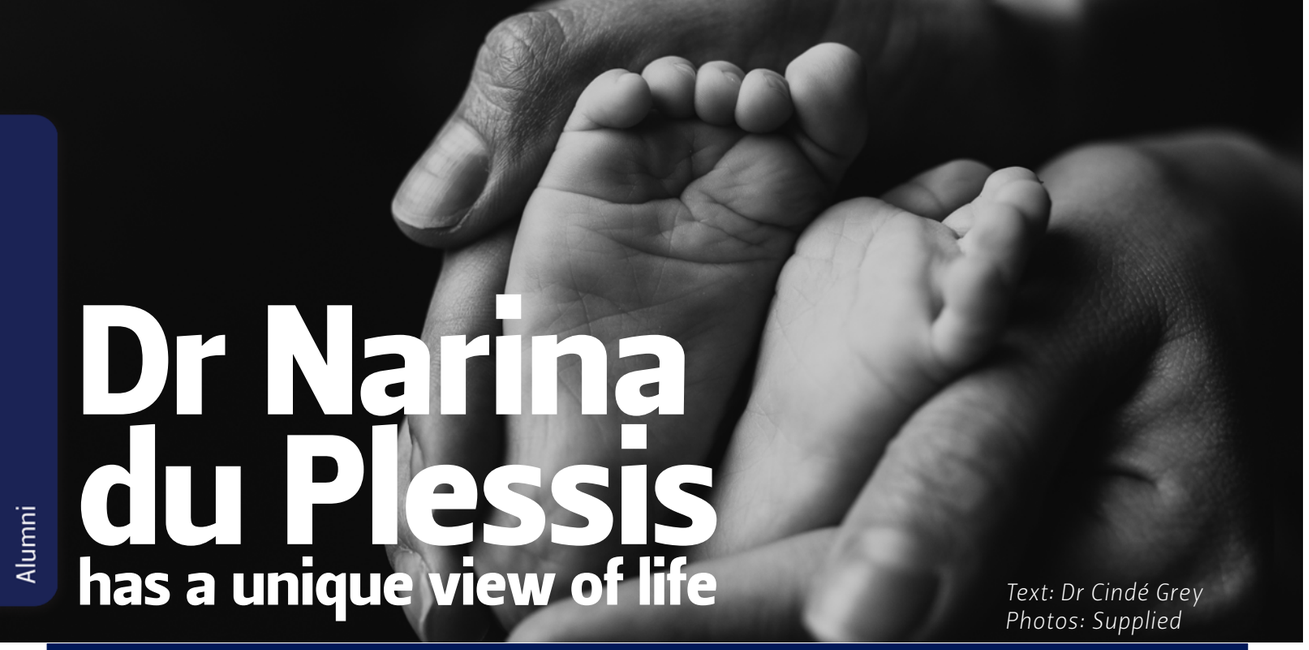
Mbatha hopes to continue mentoring young interpreters and contributing to Deaf empowerment projects. She dreams of Sign Language being fully integrated into our education so that inclusion becomes a norm, not an exception.



listen to the audio here

***Khetha Mbatha** served as a sign language interpreter for the National Dialogue. She says South African Sign Language (SASL) changed her life. "It wasn't just a language, it was a culture, a community, and a way of seeing the world."*





Dr Narina du Plessis
has a unique view of life

Text: Dr Cindé Grey
Photos: Supplied

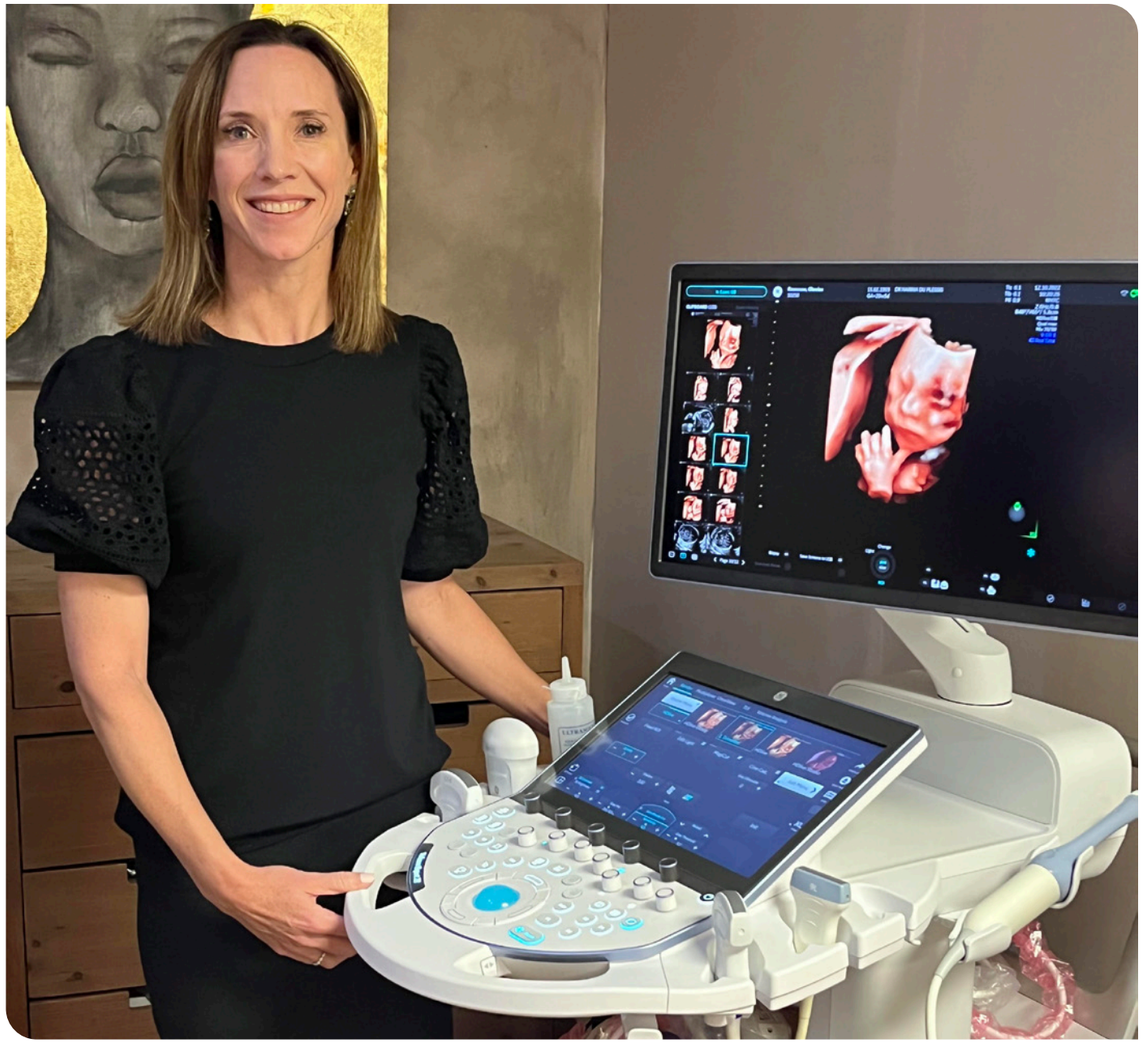
"Seeing a perfectly beating human heart of six by eight millimetres never gets old," says maternal and foetal specialist, Dr Narina du Plessis. Respected both locally and abroad by colleagues and grateful parents, it is fortunate that she did not become the spy she wanted to be as a little girl. She does, however, reveal hidden secrets that few are able to see.

After graduating with an MB ChB from the University of the Free State (UFS) in 2001, Narina specialised in Obstetrics and Gynaecology before subspecialising in Maternal and Foetal medicine, making her one of just a few high-risk maternal and foetal experts. "Everything I do relies on sophisticated technology," she explains, "which has advanced exponentially in the past ten or so years. While the size of the sonar machine I use has decreased, the image quality has improved almost beyond belief. I'm very excited about the next technological evolution in sonography."

While artificial intelligence (AI) is beginning to play a role in diagnosis, it is still a long way from operating autonomously. "It is pretty good at reading a still image, but AI struggles with a moving baby!" she laughs. "They move in unpredictable ways, and it can take quite a bit of fishing before I get the full picture. The hand operating the probe must also be very dexterous and coordinated." But she is enthusiastic about the possibility of a handheld device that may provide specialised scanning options in remote locations.

read article in Afrikaans

Dr Narina du Plessis, Kloof Mediclinic.



Voluson Expert 22 by General Electric.

Despite the progress and possibilities, the probe does not always reveal a perfect little human heart. "Giving bad news is the worst part of my job, but I firmly believe that having the information is better for the parents and the baby. Depending on the complication, we can ensure that the necessary medical support is ready at birth and that parents have sufficient time to prepare for possible outcomes."

Before going into full-time private practice, Narina lectured at the University of Pretoria (UP), "because teaching is in my blood". Both her parents taught in some capacity, and she might pick it up again one day when she is no longer able to steady the probe, she says with a smile. She credits her success to her family, friends, faith, music, sport, and the foundation laid at the UFS.

"We received the best training from the best lecturers – we were fully prepared for whatever a medical career might require of us. Something a lecturer once told us remains my guiding light. He said: You will only ever meet two types of doctors, those you want to be like, and those you don't want to be like. I choose to be like the former – every day."

To show up in the best way for her patients, Narina loves to unwind by spending time with her family, dogs, or bicycle (she has completed the Cape Epic twice!). It is possible to imagine her as an exceptional spy, astronaut, mathematician, or any of the career paths she considered before medicine – either way, she would have made the world a better place.

From the left: ***Godfrey Mabasa,*** *UFS Alumni Relations Engagement Officer;* ***Kagiso Ngake,*** *Coordinator of International Partnerships and Collaborations in the UFS Office for International Affairs;* ***Prof Hester C. Klopper,*** *Vice-Chancellor and Principal of the University of the Free State;* ***Dr Marius Kudumo,*** *Director: Corporate Engagements and International Relations at the University of Namibia; and* ***Patricia Lamusse,*** *acting Senior Director of Institutional Advancement.*

Alumni Connect

Source text: Godfrey Mabasa
Photographer: Supplied

In the heart of Windhoek, UFS Vice-Chancellor and Principal, Prof Hester C. Klopper, hosted a vibrant Alumni Connect evening that celebrated unity, vision, and progress.

The event brought together Namibian alumni from diverse industries to reconnect, share ideas, and strengthen ties with their alma mater.

In her address, Prof Klopper highlighted the UFS' growing presence across the SADC region, particularly through collaborations in mining engineering, environmental sciences, and agricultural development. She emphasised joint research, student mobility, and staff exchanges as part of the university's expanding African partnerships.

Sharing a glimpse of the UFS' exciting future, Prof Klopper introduced key initiatives, including a Transdisciplinary Innovation Hub, a forthcoming Veterinary Science programme, and the UFS Training Academy to build leadership for the digital era.

In Maseru, the Lesotho Alumni Connect event marked an important moment in the University of the Free State's (UFS) continuing efforts to strengthen its global alumni network. Hosted as part of the UFS Alumni Relations Office's broader international engagement initiative, the gathering brought together graduates from across various sectors for an evening defined by warmth, reflection, and reconnection.

Prof Hester C. Klopper emphasised the university's commitment to sustaining lifelong relationships with its alumni. She noted that Alumni Connect engagements provide valuable opportunities for the university to listen, learn, and grow alongside its graduates, ensuring that institutional priorities remain responsive and relevant. Lesotho was recognised as a long-standing and valued partner within the UFS international community, with a shared commitment to mutual learning and collaboration across borders. Leaders of the Lesotho Alumni Chapter described the evening as a 'homecoming', celebrating the enduring values instilled by the university and the continued relevance of the UFS experience in diverse professional and societal contexts.

In Gauteng, the annual Alumni Connect event hosted in Sandton brought together a diverse group of UFS graduates from across the professional spectrum. Set in South Africa's primary economic hub, the event provided a dynamic platform for alumni to reconnect, exchange ideas, and strengthen their ties with the university. The gathering reflected the diversity and reach of the UFS alumni community, showcasing graduates who continue to make meaningful contributions at both local and global levels. The evening also offered attendees the opportunity to engage with university leadership on recent developments, including new academic programmes, infrastructure initiatives, and avenues for alumni participation.

Co-Curricular Hub
drives student development and career readiness

Source text: Lebohang Motshweneng
Photographer: Kaleidoscope Studios

The University of the Free State (UFS) has launched its Co-Curricular Hub to strengthen student development beyond the classroom. The initiative forms part of a student-centred transformation focused on equipping students with leadership, emotional, and professional skills for future success. Managed by the Student Leadership Development Office, the hub unites various UFS support units to offer programmes that enhance employability, well-being, and community engagement. By aligning with UFS graduate attributes, it ensures that students develop as adaptable, socially responsible, and confident leaders who are ready to make a meaningful impact.


Co-curricular Hub launch attendees.

Mock Interviews:
shaping career-ready graduates and tackling unemployment

Source text: Lilitha Dingwayo
Photos: Lunga Luthuli

The University of the Free State (UFS) Division of Career Services hosts the annual Mock Interview Day to prepare senior and postgraduate students for the job market. Evolving from the 2023 Placement Preparation Day, the event equips students with interview experience, confidence, and professional readiness. Held across all three campuses, it involves staff and employers simulating real interviews to improve employability skills. The programme strengthens students' transition from study to work, fostering career confidence, communication skills, and preparedness for future employment opportunities.

Career Week Masterclass:
preparing graduates for success in the first 1 000 days

Source text: Dr Cindé Grey
Photos: Supplied

The University of the Free State (UFS) Career Services hosted its Career Week Masterclass to help students navigate the critical first 1 000 days of their professional journey. Featuring experts from SAGEA, FNB, and Shoprite Checkers, the event explored graduate recruitment trends, employability skills, and strategies for career success. Speakers highlighted the growing importance of LinkedIn and networking, as well as essential 21st-Century skills such as critical thinking, adaptability, and collaboration.


Lungile Koti,
Group Lead: Early Career Talent at Shoprite Checkers.


Cathy Sims,
former Director of the South African Graduate Employers Association (SAGEA).


Joanna Preston,
Head of Young Talent at FNB.

listen to the podcast here

UFS food garden.

UFS FOOD ENVIRONMENT

Source text: Leonie Bolleurs
Photographer: Anja Aucamp

The University of the Free State (UFS) has established the Food Environment Committee (FETC) to promote healthy, sustainable, and inclusive food systems across its campuses. Supported by departments such as Nutrition and Dietetics and Sustainable Food Systems and Development, the FETC uses research and initiatives including vegetable tunnels and food banks to improve access to food. Collaborations with organisations such as Gift of the Givers, Tiger Brands, and the No Student Hungry Programme strengthen the university's commitment to wellness, dignity, and sustainable student support.

Peer Mentor
Programme empowers students

Source text: Vuyelwa Mbebe
Photographer: Lunga Luthuli

Senior undergraduate student peer-mentors.

The University of the Free State (UFS) Peer Mentor Programme, run by the Division of Student Affairs, supports first-time entering students in adapting to university life. Each year, senior undergraduate students are trained as mentors to guide new students through academic, social, and emotional challenges. Using a structured training model and mediated learning techniques, mentors help mentees access resources, build confidence, and develop essential skills. The programme also enhances mentors' leadership, emotional intelligence, and employability, fostering mutual growth and community connection.

LisPod Studio:
Transforming the UFS Library into a digital innovation hub

Source text: Lunga Luthuli
Photographer: Tshepo Tsotetsi

The University of the Free State (UFS) Library and Information Services has advanced its digital innovation through LisPod Studio, a podcasting and multimedia hub designed to enhance knowledge sharing and engagement. The studio provides students, staff, and researchers with hands-on experience in podcast creation, video production, and digital storytelling. Equipped with industry-standard technology, LisPod promotes digital literacy and media skills, positioning the UFS Library as a leading centre for digital scholarship, innovation, and professional development in higher education.

Teaching machines
to think with us, not for us

Text: Leonie Bolleurs
Photo: Supplied

Imagine if artificial intelligence not only helped us think faster but also helped us think better. This is the question that drives Prof Prince Sarpong, Associate Professor in the School of Financial Planning Law at the University of the Free State (UFS). His work explores how humans can engage AI not just as tools, but as partners in thinking – what he calls 'recursive thinking partners'.

Prof Sarpong's research sits at the intersection of corporate finance, psychology, and artificial intelligence. "What ties these domains together is a consistent focus on understanding how people think, decide, and adapt."

From this curiosity emerged the Cognitive Growth Index (CGI), a framework he designed to measure how people interact with AI in ways that support flexibility, resilience, and intellectual maturity. "While the debate often centres on plagiarism and cheating, I wanted to ask: How can AI help students think better?"

Instead of seeing AI as a threat, Prof Sarpong views it as a mirror that reflects how we think. "When used intentionally, it becomes a thinking partner that challenges us, prompts deeper enquiry, and helps us refine our reasoning."

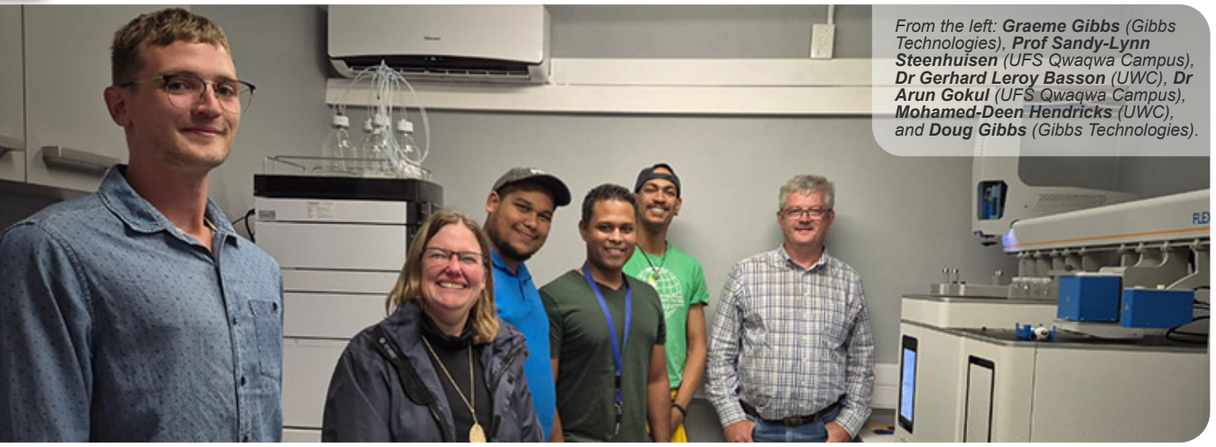
His ideas resonate worldwide; from contributing to a NATO AI training in Istanbul to discussing trustworthy AI at the AI2030 Summit in New York. "At its core, CGI shifts the focus from what we produce to how we think and captures the quality of our engagement with AI systems." He believes this has profound implications for how we live, learn, and lead.

Prof Prince Sarpong, *Associate Professor in the UFS School of Financial Planning Law, explores how humans can engage AI as partners in thinking rather than mere tools.*

State-of-the-art
analytical lab, pioneering research and collaboration

Source text: Precious Shamase
Photo: Supplied

The University of the Free State (UFS) has launched a state-of-the-art analytical laboratory on its Qwaqwa Campus, featuring more than R4 million worth of advanced equipment, including a gas chromatography-mass spectrometry (GC-MS) system and a high-performance liquid chromatography (HPLC) machine. The facility enhances precision research in agriculture, biotechnology, and health sciences, positioning the UFS as a regional hub for analytical services and collaboration.



From the left: ***Graeme Gibbs*** *(Gibbs Technologies),* ***Prof Sandy-Lynn Steenhuisen*** *(UFS Qwaqwa Campus),* ***Dr Gerhard Leroy Basson*** *(UWC),* ***Dr Arun Gokul*** *(UFS Qwaqwa Campus),* ***Mohamed-Deen Hendricks*** *(UWC), and* ***Doug Gibbs*** *(Gibbs Technologies).*

UFS-SANRAL
collaboration expands to boost Maths and Science education

Prof Hester C. Klopper, *Vice-Chancellor and Principal of the UFS (seated, middle);* ***Dr Cobus van Breda,*** *Programme Director: Science-for-the-Future at the UFS (seated, far-right); and representatives of the nine institutions that form part of the Universities Collaboration Initiative.*

Source text: Vuyelwa Mbebe
Photographer: Kaleidoscope studios

The University of the Free State (UFS) has expanded its partnership with the South African National Roads Agency (SANRAL) and nine other universities to strengthen Mathematics and Science education across South Africa.

Central to this collaboration is the Science-for-the-Future (S4F) unit in the UFS Faculty of Education, which develops innovative teaching methods to improve understanding among learners, teachers, and parents. Since 2018, more than 426 000 participants have benefited from these initiatives.

Veterinary degree addresses shortage

Source text: Martinette Brits
Photo: Supplied

The University of the Free State (UFS) is developing a new Bachelor of Veterinary Science (BVSc) degree and a modern veterinary teaching hospital on its South Campus – the second programme of its kind in South Africa. Supported by the Paradys Experimental Farm, the initiative will provide hands-on training in animal care, disease management, and sustainable agriculture - addressing South Africa's severe shortage of veterinarians, which threatens food security and animal welfare. The planned hospital will offer clinical training, community services, and applied research opportunities. Initially, the BVSc degree will be offered within the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences, with plans to establish a dedicated School of Veterinary Science as the programme develops.

Engineering for the future

Source text: Martinette Brits
Photo: Supplied

The University of the Free State (UFS) will introduce its first full engineering degree in 2026 – the Bachelor of Engineering (BEng) in Agricultural and Biosystems Engineering – alongside pioneering MSc and PhD programmes in Ecological and Nature-based Engineering Sciences, the first of their kind in Africa. These qualifications, approved by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) and endorsed by the Engineering Council of South Africa (ECSA) and international ecological engineering bodies, address the global water-food-energy sustainability nexus. The BEng programme combines precision farming, renewable energy, data-driven agriculture, and environmental stewardship to prepare graduates for diverse engineering careers in agribusiness, consulting, and research. The postgraduate degrees focus on designing and restoring sustainable ecosystems, integrating ecological science and advanced technology to tackle challenges such as climate resilience, biodiversity loss, and pollution.

Greener, better, newer buildings across campuses

The continuous infrastructure development across the UFS campuses reflects the university's commitment to sustainable development.

The Frik Scott Library and the Science Education Centre received awards of merit from the South African Institute of Architects (SAIA) and have been further nominated for the National SAIA Awards

Text: Gerda-Marié van Rooyen

From smart buildings that automatically adjust temperature to greener spaces that reduce the university's ecological footprint, University Estates at the University of the Free State (UFS) is reshaping the campuses for the future. Richard Williamson, Chief Environmental Impact Officer in University Estates, says that building upgrades, renovations, and new construction are executed as funding allows, and in line with the building maintenance assessment criteria. The buildings under construction or being upgraded include the Bloemfontein Campus Protection Services boardroom, the Qwaqwa residence precinct, West Campus sports ablutions, South Campus Student Hub, and the Postgraduate Hub (old Frik Scott Library). Some of the renovations can be seen at the Flippie Groenewoud Building, the Provisioning Building, the Equitas Senate Hall, and at the Sasol Library on the second and eighth floors.

He explains that buildings are repurposed as needed, with detailed planning undertaken through the Space Allocation Committee process. "Campus and departmental activities evolve in response to changing needs, including space requirements, and adapt accordingly. An example of recent changes includes the repurposing of certain blocks of Farmovs, where underutilised space was repurposed for other departments."

AI integration or other technological upgrades

Part of renovation and maintenance operations includes embedding buildings with sensors to control temperature, occupancy, light, fire detection, etc., and connecting them via smart systems and/or AI so that systems such as heating, ventilation, air conditioning (HVAC), lighting, security, and fire detection respond in real-time rather than on fixed schedules. "Smart systems and AI algorithms can predict peak energy usage and proactively adjust HVAC or lighting. Sustainability and environmental performance are driving this shift, meaning that buildings are being upgraded to be more efficient, use less energy, and meet targets such as net-zero. Such designs and concepts are also being included in the construction of new buildings."

watch the video here

Environmental Awareness

To embed sustainability in all operations, the department has appointed an environmental impact officer to measure and manage environmental effects/impacts. An environmental management system is being developed to quantify the university's ecological footprint and guide projects to meet clear sustainability objectives.

A 'Green(er) 2026'

In line with the department's environmental awareness deliverable, a 'Green Calendar' is currently being introduced. This highlights key international and national days of environmental and sustainable significance to create awareness among staff and students. "The environmental management system will be fully implemented in 2026, which will both inform and outline how staff and students may contribute to a more sustainable UFS."

watch the video here

One-room magic: the UFS' immersive classrooms redefine learning

Source text: Igno van Niekerk
Photos: Stephen Collett

The University of the Free State (UFS) is revolutionising teaching across its Bloemfontein, Qwaqwa, and South Campuses through pioneering one-room immersive learning spaces. Inspired by an advanced classroom seen at the University of Leuven in 2023, the UFS has partnered with Canada's X2O OneRoom to become the first institution in South Africa to implement this technology. These rooms accommodate 40 in-person and 40 online participants, using large screens, directional audio, and individual cameras to create natural, engaging interaction. Lecturers and students describe the experience as transformative, allowing for seamless connection from anywhere. Unlike traditional platforms where online students are easily overlooked, the one-room model ensures full inclusion, interactive breakout sessions, and smooth participation. Implemented in key areas such as the Business School, Clinical Skills Unit, South Campus teacher training, and the Qwaqwa Campus, the system overcomes the limitations of Zoom or Teams. With user-friendly design and cutting-edge features, the UFS is setting a new benchmark for inclusive, global, and future-ready education.

Sport moments

2025 USSA Winter Tournaments

The University of the Free State (UFS) celebrated the exceptional performances of KovsieSport athletes, coaches, and managers at the 2025 USSA Winter Tournaments. Highlights included the men's hockey team winning the B section and earning promotion to the A section, supported by strong showings across multiple codes: fifth place for men's volleyball, fifteenth for women's volleyball, second place for women's netball, fourth for men's netball, third for Shimla rugby, and second for women's rugby (B1). Additional results included thirteenth place in dance, eighth in women's hockey, and ninth in karate.

Karate

Karabo Khanye, a standout karate athlete from the UFS, has been awarded South African national colours following his exceptional international achievements. Honoured at the National Karate Awards Ceremony in Durban, Khanye earned the recognition after securing two silver medals at the Commonwealth Karate Championships. The award marks a milestone in his career, affirming years of dedication and sacrifice. Shortly after receiving his colours, he successfully defended his U60-kg elite title at the USSA Karate Championships. Khanye's achievements reflect both his personal excellence and the growing strength of the UFS KovsieSport high-performance programme.

World games

Seven UFS athletes and staff members represented South Africa at the 2025 World University Games in Rhine-Ruhr, Germany. The delegation included archer Ignus de Wet and athletes Gabriella Marais (bronze in the women's 100 m), Mthi Mthimkulu (silver medals in the mixed 4 x 100 m relay and men's 4 x 400 m relay), Wernich van Rensburg (silver medal in the mixed 4 x 400 m relay), and Tyla Wasmüth. Kesa Molotsane was the athletics team manager, and Marco Markgraaff was the head coach of the national swimming team.

Cricket

KovsieCricket earned two major honours at the Mangaung Cricket Association AGM, being crowned MCA Premier League Champions for the twelfth consecutive year and named the Best Run Cricket Club in the Free State. Head of KovsieCricket, Rocky le Roux, credited the achievements to the dedication of players, coaches, management, and support staff, noting that strong systems and values attract top talent. Le Roux expressed gratitude to KovsieSport's leadership, grounds staff, and the MCA for their support as the club continues to build a legacy of excellence.

World Athletics Championship

Several Kovsie athletes and alumni have been selected to compete for the Athletics South Africa team at the 2025 World Athletics Championships in Tokyo. Current student Mthi Mthimkulu joined fellow Kovsies Miné de Klerk and world-renowned sprinter Wayde van Niekerk, while former athletes Colette Uys and Victor Hogan also made the squad.

Erich Visser and Stephanus Fano Linde

Gabriella Marais

USSA Track and Field Championships

The UFS secured fourth place at the 2025 USSA Track and Field Championships at Pilditch Stadium, competing against 21 universities. Strong performanes from women athletes included wins and podium finishes by Gabriella Marais, Nicola Gibbon, Lizandré Mulder, and Tyla Wasmüth. Men's standouts included first-place finishes by Mthi Mthimkhulu (400 m), Molifi Mohlomi (800 m), and Wernich van Rensburg (400 m hurdles), with additional podium finishes from Dumisani Motloung and Samkelo Dlamini.

Marco Markgraaff

Tyla Wasmüth

Rugby

Two University of the Free State rugby talents, Erich Visser and Stephanus 'Fano' Linde, have been selected for the Junior Springboks competing at the 2025 World Rugby U20 Championship in Italy. Visser, a Toyota Cheetahs scrumhalf, calls the selection a lifelong dream, while Linde, a powerful eighth man, credits strong coaching and intensive preparation.

Ignus de Wet

Mthi Mthimkhulu

Kovsie Men's Hockey team

Karabo Khanye

Wernich van Rensburg

*From the left: **Xander Snyders,** President: Free State Cricket Union; **Rocky le Roux,** Head of KovsieCricket at the UFS; and **Donavin George,** Mangaung Cricket Association Chairperson.*

Mthi Mthimkhulu

UFS wins Varsity football

The UFS men's football team made history by winning their first-ever Varsity Football title on 2 October 2025, defeating TUT 5-4 on penalties after a tense 0-0 draw at Shimla Park. Backed by a passionate home crowd, the Kovsies showed resilience despite injuries and missed opportunities. Substitute Theko Phinithi scored the winning penalty, securing a landmark victory. The triumph marks a defining moment for UFS sport, inspiring the Kovsie community and cementing the team's place in Varsity Football history.

Photos: Hannes Naudé

Photo: iFlair Photography

Louzanne Coetzee

Louzanne Coetzee, UFS alumna, Sports Coordinator: Parasport at the University of the Free State, and Paralympian, ran her last big marathon with her long-time guide Clause Kempen at the Paris Paralympics in 2024. This uneven and windy course marked Clause's retirement as a guide, ending their partnership on a high note. But Louzanne still had many miles left in her legs, and goals in her heart – it was time to find a new guide.

Shortly after the Paralympics, Louzanne joined the Bloemfontein Striders running club and ran with a couple of club members before meeting Sewie (Jacobus) Sevenster, who showed interest in becoming her long-distance guide. Next up for her was the Mielie half-marathon in Welkom, where Sewie made his debut. "We won the ladies division," Louzanne says, "and afterwards people asked us how long we had been running together … well, the full 90 minutes of the race!" She laughs at the memory of how quickly they adapted to one another. Just nine months later, they lined up for the Berlin Marathon – their biggest race together.

While Sewie and Louzanne do train for races together, she has about five running partners who guide her during daily runs – all of them volunteers. Each guide has their own style, she says, and there are no rules or lists of do's and don'ts they must follow. "Guiding relationships develop organically and naturally – some faster than others, but each one is very special."

Louzanne and her guides have long chats during training runs and get to know each other deeply. "They become my brothers and sisters – we motivate and support each other, but we also joke around a lot! Races are quieter, we conserve energy for running and mostly share race-related information."

The trust bond between Louzanne and her guides is a beautiful added benefit, in addition to being fit and running in different countries across the globe. Working with Sewie not only opened the door to ultrarunning for Louzanne, but "he is also a good example of being an adult!" she says, helping her to enjoy running and not just compete.

Louzanne will run her first ultramarathon with Sewie at the Two Oceans in 2026. "I am definitely aiming to qualify for the LA Olympics and will compete in qualifiers as they come up, if my circumstances allow." Other races on her wish list are the Boston and Tokyo marathons, and of course, the Comrades. There is no slowing down anytime soon for this trailblazer.

Ho atolosa sedikadikwe ka ho saena ka matsoho

Mongolo: Gerdo-Marie van Rooyen
Dinepe: Di fanwe

KKhethukuthula Mbatha, moithuti wa kgale wa Univesithi ya Free State (UFS), o satswa ho tlotlwa haufinyane ka ho etsa hore Puisano ya Setjhaba e fihlellehe ho Batho ba sa Utlweng ditsebeng "E ile ya nkgothatsa hore na ke hobaneng ha ke kgethile tsela ena – ho netefatsa hore e mong le e mong, ho kenyeletswa le setjhaba sa Batho ba sa utlweng ditsebeng, o na le phihlello dipuisanong tsa naha tse bopang naha ya rona."

Monga kgwebo ya Kwarenge Language Solutions o re ho kgotsofatsa haholo ho thusa batho ba sa utlweng ditsebeng ho nka karolo. "Ke dinako tse kang tsena tse nkgopotsang hore phihlello ha se taba feela ya theknoloji, empa e mabapi le seriti, ho ba karolo ya setjhaba, le tekano." O re takatso ya hae ya puisano le toka setjhabeng e ile ya mo susumelletsa ho ithuta Puo ya Matsoho ya Afrika Borwa (SASL), kaha e bula monyetla le ponahalo bakeng sa setjhaba seo e leng kgale se kgelohile.

Bua puo ya botho

Mbatha o eletsa batho ba utlwang hore ba kenyeletse setjhaba sa Batho ba sa Utlweng ditsebeng ka ho dula ba shebane le mahlo le ho bua ka ho toba le motho ya sa utlweng ditsesebeng eseng le mofetoledi, "Mekgwa ena e bontsha tlhompho." Ho phaella moo, o fana ka maikutlo a hore ditsi di ka eketsa bafetoledi le mantswe a ngotsweng (captions) diketsahalong tsa bohlokwa, le ka ho kenya kwetliso ya tlhokomediso ya Batho ba sa Utlweng ditsebeng thupelong ya basebetsi le baithuti. "Ho kenyeletswa ha se feela phihlello, empa hape ke ho fetola maikutlo hore Batho ba sa Utlweng ditsebeng ba bonwe e le barupellwa ba lekanang puisanong enngwe le enngwe."

Ho haha hodima dithuto tsa hae Kovsies

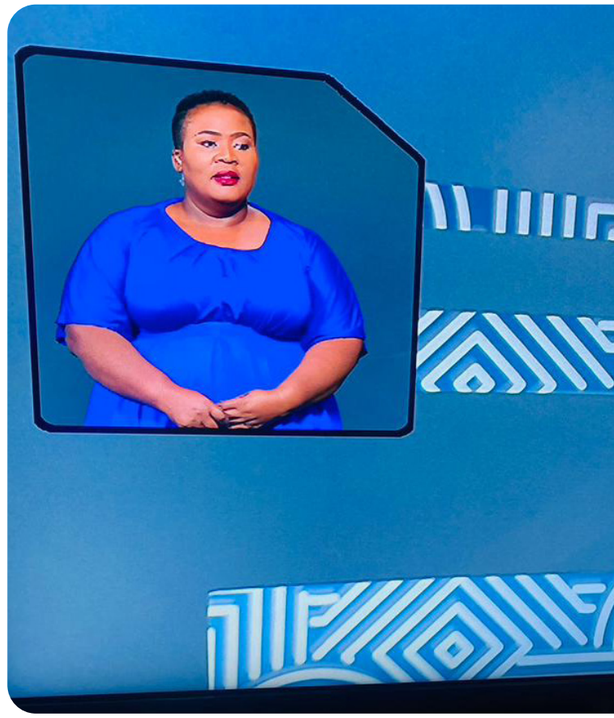
O dumela hore dithuto tsa hae Univesithing ya Free State dimo file tsebo ya thuto, boitshwaro ba setsebi, le motheo wa boithwaro oo mofetolelledi a o hlokang. Dimo lokiseditse ho sebeletsa dibakeng tse fapaneng, ho tloha diphaposing tsa borutelo hoya a dikopanong,dibakeng tsa boraditaba, le sethaleng sa naha, ho fihlela qetellong a qala khamphani ya hae. Kwarenge Language Solutions e hlahile ka lebaka la takatso ya ho bula menyetla e mengata ka ho fana ka ditshebeletso tsa phetolelo, bofetoledi, tokiso le ho ngola mantswe a buwang. "Se nkgahlisang ka ho fetisisa ke ho bona phello ha motho qetellong a utlwisisa kapa a ikutlwa a utlwisiswa ka lebaka la mosebetsi oo re o etsang. Ke ntho e kgotsofatsang haholo ho tseba hore puo e ka kopanya, ya matlafatsa le ho fetola."

"Ho ba moithuti wa kgale wa UFS ho nkgopotsa hore thuto ha se feela ho fumana lengolo, empa ke ho sebedisa seo u thutileng sona ho tlisa phetoho. Ditekanyetso tsa univesithi tsa ho se kgetholle le kamano ya botho di tswella tsa tataisa leeto la ka ha ke ntse ke sebeletsa Afrika Borwa e kenyeletsang bohle, puisano e le nngwe ka nako, le pontsho e le nngwe ka nako."

Ho lora ka ho kenyeletswa

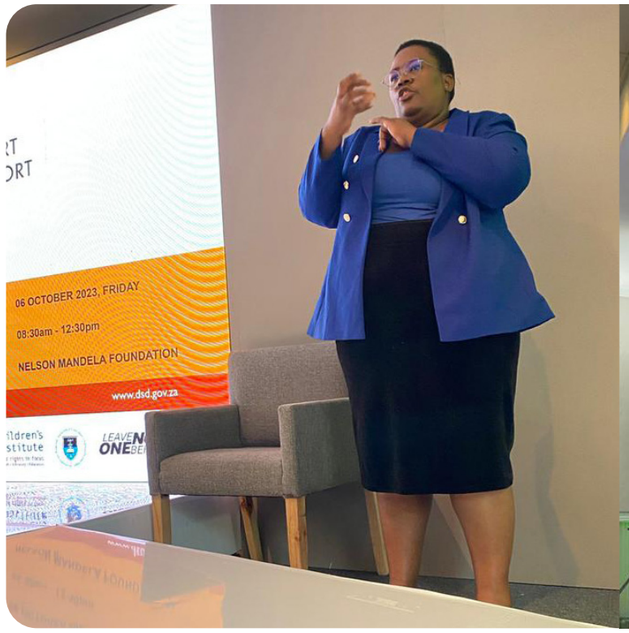
Le hoja Puo ya Matsoho ya Afrika Borwa e se e le puo ya molao ya bo leshome le metso e mmedi(12), tsela e ntse e le telele. "Re hloka tshebetso e nepahetseng, bafetoledi ba kwetlisitsweng haholwanyane, barupelli ba SASL, le maano a netefatsang hore baithuti ba sa Utlweng ditsebeng ba fumana thuto ka puo ya bona ya pele. Phetoho ya nnete e tla tla ha kananelo e lebisa menyetla ya sebele."

Mbatha o labalabela ho tswela pele ho ruta bafetoledi ba batjha le ho kenya letsoho merereng ya ho matlafatsa Batho ba sa utlweng ditsebeng. O lora ka hore puo ya matsoho e kenngwe ka botlalo thutong ya rona e le hore ho kenyeletswa e be tlwaelo, eseng mokgelo.



listen to the audio here

***Khethukuthula Mbatha** o ile a sebetsa e le mofetoledi wa puo ya matsoho Puisanong ya Setjhaba. O re Puo ya Matsoho ya Afrika Borwa (SASL) e fetotse bophelo ba hae. "E ne e se puo feela, e ne e le setso, setjhaba, le tsela ya ho tadima lefatshe."*



Dr Narina du Plessis

het ’n unieke lewensbeskouing

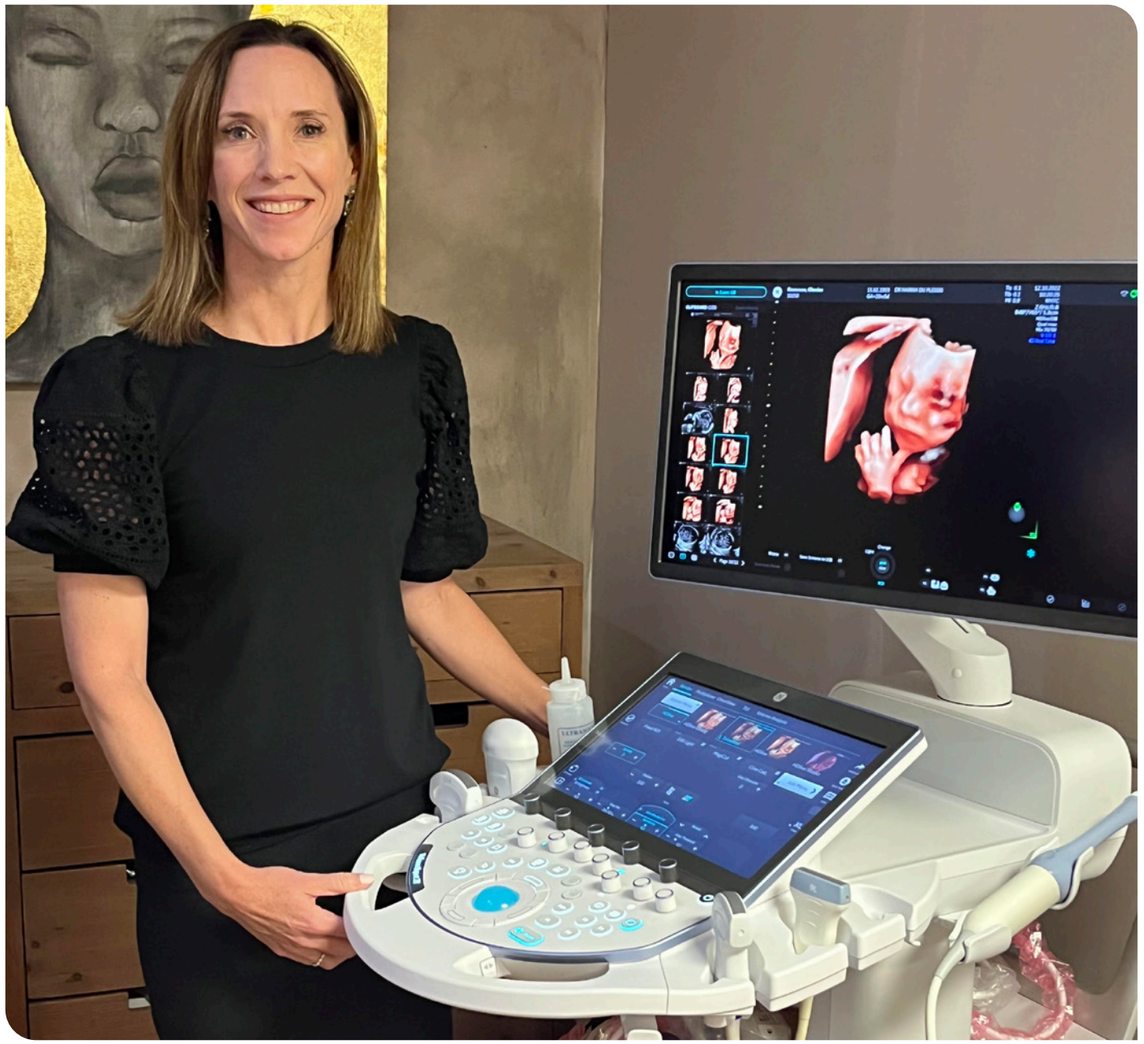
Teks: Dr Cindé Grey
Foto’s: Verskaf

“Om ’n menslike hart van ses by agt millimeter te sien wat perfek klop, is tydloos,” sê moeder- en fetale spesialis, dr Narina du Plessis. Gerespekteer deur kollegas en dankbare ouers sowel plaaslik as in die buiteland, is dit ’n geluk dat sy nie die spioen geword het wat sy as klein dogtertjie wou wees nie. Sy onthul egter wel geheime wat vir min mense sigbaar is.

Nadat sy in 2001 met ’n MB ChB aan die Universiteit van die Vrystaat (UV) gegradueer het, het Narina in verloskunde en ginekologie gespesialiseer voordat sy in moeder- en fetale geneeskunde begin subspesialiseer het, wat van haar een van slegs ’n paar hoërisiko-moeder- en fetale kundiges maak. “Alles wat ek doen, maak staat op gesofistikeerde tegnologie,” verduidelik sy, “wat in die afgelope om en by tien jaar eksponensieel verbeter het. Waar die grootte van die sonarmasjien wat ek gebruik kleiner geword het, het die beeldkwaliteit ongelooflik verbeter. Ek is baie opgewonde oor die volgende tegnologiese evolusie in sonografie.”

Alhoewel kunsmatige intelligensie (KI) begin om ’n rol in diagnose te speel, is dit nog lank voordat dit selfstandig kan funksioneer. “Dit kan ’n stilbeeld redelik goed lees, maar KI sukkel met ’n bewegende baba!” lag sy. “Hulle beweeg op onvoorspelbare maniere en dit kan nogal baie visvang verg voordat ek die volle prentjie kry. Die hand wat die voelstafie beheer moet ook baie vaardig en gekoördineerd wees.” Maar sy is entoesiasties oor die moontlikheid van ’n handtoestel wat gespesialiseerde skanderingsopsies in afgeleë plekke moontlik kan maak.

Dr Narina du Plessis, Kloof Mediclinic



Voluson Expert 22 deur General Electric

Ten spyte van die vooruitgang en moontlikhede, toon die ondersoek nie altyd ’n perfekte klein menslike hartjie nie. “Om slegte nuus te gee is die slegste deel van my werk, maar ek glo vas dat die inligting beter is vir die ouers en die baba. Afhangend van die komplikasie, kan ons seker maak dat die nodige mediese ondersteuning gereed is by geboorte en dat ouers genoeg tyd het om vir moontlike uitkomste voor te berei.”

Voordat sy voltyds met privaatpraktyk begin het, het Narina aan die Universiteit van Pretoria (UP) klas gegee, “want onderwys is in my bloed”. Albei haar ouers het in een of ander hoedanigheid onderrig gegee, en sy sal dit dalk eendag weer opneem as sy nie meer die voelstafie kan vashou nie, sê sy met ’n glimlag. Sy skryf haar sukses toe aan haar familie, vriende, geloof, musiek, sport en die grondslag wat by die UV gelê is. “Ons het die beste opleiding van die beste dosente ontvang – ons was ten volle voorbereid vir wat ook al ’n mediese loopbaan van ons mag vereis. Iets wat ’n dosent eenkeer vir ons gesê het, bly my rigsnoer. Hy het gesê: Jy sal net twee soorte dokters ooit teëkom, dié soos jy wil wees, en dié soos jy nie wil wees nie. Ek kies om soos eersgenoemde te wees – elke dag.”

Om op haar beste te wees vir haar pasiënte, hou Narina daarvan om te ontspan deur tyd saam met haar gesin, honde of fiets deur te bring (sy het die Cape Epic twee keer voltooi!). Dit is moontlik om haar voor te stel as ’n uitmuntende spioen, ruimtevaarder, wiskundige, of enige van die loopbaanrigtings wat sy voor geneeskunde oorweeg het – hoe dit ook al sy, sy sou van die wêreld ’n beter plek gemaak het.

Ukutshiloza kwezinyoni

Kuziveza kanjani izimfihlo zempilo yasezindaweni eziswakeme?

Umbhala ubhalwe: uLeonie Bolleurs
Izithombe zithunyeliwe

Uma abantu abaningi besasuke bezisonge embhedeni, izindawo eziyimiswakama zisuke seziphaphanyiswe umtshingo. Ngaphambi kokuthi ilanga libingelele umhlaba, umnkenenezo wezinyoni usuke usuzwakala uheleza, nokuyikhwaya yemvelo equkethe ulwazi olujulile kunalolu abantu abaningi abalucabangayo. Ngokuka Toka Mosikidi ongumfundi weziqu zobuDokotela (P.hD) emnyangweni Wezilwane Nezinambuzane oPhikweni lwaseQwaqwa, le senzeko sasekuseni siphendula umsindo omuhle ube ulwazi locwaningo oluhlabahlosile.

Ufunda lokhu esikwazi ngokuthi umzwilili wasekuseni, nokusho ukuqonga kwemisindo yezinyoni ngezikhathi zasekuseni. “Kubantu kucishe kuzwakale njengomsindo wobutswitswi nobuwiliwili,” esho echaza, “kodwa ‘kubanikazi bakho’ (nokuyizinyoni zesifazane), kuyinto ehehayo futhi ebalulekile ekutheni izinyoni zesifazane zilalele ecula kahle kulezo zesilisa bese kokheleka uthando.” Ogwini oluseNingizimu, le minkenenzo yasezintatha iba mandla kakhulu ngoMandulo nangoNhlolanja nokuyindlela-kwenza yezinyoni yokuheha ezesifazane nokuqhwaga nokugada izindawo.

Uhlezi eyicuphile imishini yakhe ukuthi iqophe ngaphambi kokuthi kuphume ilanga, eqopha imisindo yokuqala yezinyoni njengoba kuyila zisuke seziqala zitshiloza. Ngokweziqopho zakhe, kwacaca ngokusobala ukuthi izinyoni ezihlukahlukene zicula kanye-kanye ngamaphimbo ahlukahlekene; kuze kube sengathi inyoni nenyoni ibilindele umzuzu othile ngezikhathi zasekuseni.

Ngokuhlaziya okuqoshiwe amahora ngamahora, uToka nethimba lakhe bathola ukuthi imibandela yendalo ikulawula kanjani futhi nini ukuthi njalo njalo izinyoni ziqala ukukhala mangabe kusa. Amazinga okushisa yiwo anomthelela ohamba phambili mawubheka izinyoni ezihlukene ngezigaba ezintathu okuiyinyoni ephuzi, engakhonzile kakhulu amaxhaphozi, kanye nenye ewumancanyana nezikhala kusukela ekuseni kuqala ukushisa nantambama sekuqala ukubanda. Ukuswakama, umoya, kanye nemvula kudala ukukhala kwezinyoni ngezindlela ezinezigaba zazo; uma kuswakeme kakhulu inyoni ephuzi ikhala kakhulu kodwa le enye ekhonze amaxhaphozi ikhala ngakugcina; umoya wenza zikhale kuqala le ethanda amaxhaphosi nale ewumancane; kanti malinetha le ephuzi nencane ziyaphuza ukukhala kodwa zisuke sezikulungele zonke.

listen to the audio here
Dawn Chorus 1

listen to the audio here
Dawn Chorus 2

Nokukhanya kwelanga okubomvu maselishona kube nomthelela, ngoba inyoni yexhaphozi nale encane ziqala ukucula sekuhwalala sekusithela inyanga egcwele, kanti le ephuzi isala ithule ingabi nalutho. “Kuzo lezi zinyoni zonke, ukucula izintatha kwenzeka phakathi nesikhathi esishiwo nokulapho zihlangana khona zibuye zikhale kakhulu masesisondele ekupheleni leso sikhathi,” esho echaza. Lezi zenzakalo zikhombisa ngokusobala ukuthi izinyoni ziqaphelisisa kanjani ukushintsha indlela yokuziphatha maqondana nokuguquka kwesikhathi nendawo ezikuyo, nokucacisa ngokusobala ukuthi ukuguquka kwesimo sezulu kanye nohlobo lwendawo kunamthelela muni empilweni yezilwane yansuko-zonke nemvelo ezindaweni eziswakeme.

Ucwaningo lwakhe luthekela kolunye oluningi oselwenziwe eMnyangweni weZilwane neZinambuzane ngaphansi kobuholi bukaSolwazi Aliza le Roux.

Lolu cwaningo luvule umnyango wokuthi lolu daba lubukwe ngenye indlela ngombuzo ohamba phambili othi: Imitshingo yezinyoni isitshelani ngezindawo eziswakeme izinyoni ezihlala kuzo? Ngoba izinyoni ziyaqaphelisisa ukuthi zikephi futhi eduze kwani, ukushintsha kwemisindo yazo kukhomba izinkinga ezindaweni eziswakeme nesisuke singakaziboni thina bantu. “Amaculo ezinyoni ayakwazi ukumela/ukukhomba okuthile ezindaweni ezingamaxhaphozi,” esho echaza. “Uma kukhona uhlobo olulodwa lwezinyoni noma zingatshilozi ngokukhululeka, kungase kwenzeke ukuthi indawo leyo ingaphansi kwengcindezi yokungcola kwemvelo, ukushintsha kwamanzi kanye nokucekeleka phansi kwendawo.”

NgokukaToka, ukuyokwenza ucwaningo emaqeleni kube nezingqinamba futhi ngeke kukhohlweke kalula. Ukusebenza emaqeleni analezi zindawo eziswakeme kusho kuthi uhamba uze ukhathale, kumele unqamule emanzini ukuze ufike kule ndawo ozoqophela kuyo, kokunye ulahlekelwe imishini ngenxa yemililo yequbuka eshisa izingxenye zendawo. noma kunjalo, lobu bunzima bumenze wazithanda izifundo zesayensi. “Yithina kuphela ebesisebenzisa lolu hlobo lomsindo ukuqapha isimo ohlobweni le ndawo enjeyana,” esho echaza. “Bekungelula, kodwa kube nomvuzo omuhle.”

Ucwaningo lwakhe luhlose ukwethula indlela entsha yokulalela imvelo. Leyo ndlela hleze ingasicathulisa ekutheni siqaphele siphinde sivikele izindawo eziswakeme ezibukekazishabalala eNingizimu Afrikha.