

INSPIRING UFS STAFF

# dumela

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



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

NOVEMBER 2025 – ISSUE TWO





## FROM THE Editor

### Innovation that inspires impact

In this issue of *Dumela*, the University of the Free State puts a spotlight on innovation, and that it is more than just a concept – it is a culture that shapes how we teach, learn, lead, and serve. From across our three campuses, we celebrate stories that capture the inventive spirit that drives our university forward. It extends beyond the university walls.

From cutting-edge research honoured at SARIMA to transformative campus projects redefining sustainability, UFS staff continue to pioneer solutions that leave a lasting impact. With the Faculty of Law's 80-year journey, the ten-year milestone of the Afromontane Research Unit, and the new approaches to wellness, sustainability, and learning, our colleagues are shaping a more connected, compassionate, and forward-thinking institution.

As we wrap up the year and look forward to 2026 and beyond, guided by the UFS' North Star – responsible societal futures – our innovation is anchored in creating positive change that serves justice, sustainability, and humanity. May these stories remind us that innovation is not just about new ideas – it is about courage, collaboration, and care in pursuit of meaningful impact.

**Dumela!**

EDITOR  
**LUNGA LUTHULI**



## VAN DIE Redakteur

### Innovasie wat impak inspireer

In hierdie uitgawe van *Dumela* plaas die Universiteit van die Vrystaat die kollig op innovasie, en die feit dat dit meer as net 'n konsep is – dit is 'n kultuur wat vorm gee aan die manier waarop ons onderrig gee, leer, lei en dien. Ons vier verhale oor ons drie kampusse heen wat die vindingryke gees vasvang wat ons universiteit vorentoe dryf. Dit strek verder as bloot die universiteitsgrense.

Van baanbrekersnavorsing wat by SARIMA vereer is tot transformerende kampusprojekte wat volhoubaarheid herdefinieer, gaan UV-personeel voort om oplossings te vind wat die weg baan vir 'n blywende impak. Met die Fakulteit Regsgeleerdheid se 80-jaar-lange reis, die tienjaar-mylpaal van die Afromontaannavorsingseenheid, en die nuwe benaderings tot welstand, volhoubaarheid en leer, gee ons kollegas vorm aan 'n meer samehangende, deernisvolle en vooruitdenkende instelling.

Waar ons die jaar afsluit en vorentoe kyk na 2026 en verder, gerig deur die UV se Poolster – verantwoordelikemaatskaplike toekomste – is ons innovasie geanker in die totstandkoming van positiewe verandering in diens van geregtigheid, volhoubaarheid en menslikheid. Mag hierdie verhale ons daaraan herinner dat innovasie nie net gaan oor nuwe idees nie – dit gaan oor moed, samewerking en omgee in die strewe na betekenisvolle impak.

**Dumela!**

REDAKTEUR  
**LUNGA LUTHULI**

## HO TSWA HO Moqolotsi

### Boqapi bo susumetsang tshusumetso

Kgatisong ena ya *Dumela*, Univesithi ya Free State e beha lesedi hodima boqapi, le hore ha se mohopolo feela – ke setso se bopang tsela eo re rutang ka yona, re ithutang, re etella pele, le ho sebeletsa. Ho tloha dikampong tsa rona tse tharo, re keteka dipale tse hapang moya wa boqapi o susumetsang univesithi ya rona ho ya pele. O fetela ka nqane ho marako a univesithi.

Ho tloha diphuputsong tsa morao-rao tse hlomphuweng ho SARIMA ho ya ho merero ya khamphase e fetolang tlhaloso ya botsiiseho, basebetsi ba UFS ba tswela pele ho bula tsela bakeng sa tharollo tse siyang tshusumetso e sa feleng. Leeto la dilemo tse 80 la Faculty of Law, sehopotso sa dilemo tse leshome sa Afromontane Research Unit, le mekgwa e metjha ya bophelo bo botle, botsitso, le thuto, basebetsi-mmoho le rona ba bopa setsi se kopaneng haholwanyane, se nang le kutlwelo-boholoko, le se nahanang ka pele.

Ha re phethela selemo, mme re lebela 2026 le ho ya pele, re tataiswa ke North Star ya UFS – Bokamoso bo nang le boikarabelo setjhabeng – boqapi ba rona bo thehilwe ho theeng phetoho e ntle e sebeletsang toka, botsitso, le botho. E se eka dipale tsena dika re hopotsa hore boqapi ha se feela ka mehopolo e metjha – ke ka sebetse, tshebedisano-mmoho tlhokomelo ho phehelleng tshusumetso e nang le moelelo.

**Dumela!**

MOHLOPHISI  
**LUNGA LUTHULI**

## KUSUKA Kumhleli

### Inqubekela phambili egqugquzela umthelela omuhle

Kule ngosi ye-*Dumela*, iNyuvesi yase-Free State iveza ukugqama kwayo kwinqubekela phambili futhi akusikho nje ukuzisholo igama ngoba nakhu limnandi – inqubekela phambili yayo yile esiyisikompilo eliveza isithombe sokuthi sifundisa kanjani, sifunda kanjani, siholakanya futhi sinikezela ngezimfuno kanjani. Kuwo wonke amakhempasi esikhungo sethu, sibungaza izindatshana ezikhombisa ubuhlakani – nokuyibo obuqhubela inyuvesi yethu phambili. Akupheleli emagcekeni ayo kuphela, kepha nangaphandle.

Kusuka kucwaningo oluhlomule kuyo yonke imikhakha olutuswe kwi-SARIMA kuya ezinhlelweni zamakhempasi zoguquko ezibikezela ukulondolozeka kwesikhungo, abasebenzi be-UFS bayaqhubeka nokusungula amacebo/izixazululo eziletha umthelela oyohlala emlandweni. Sibala uhambo lweminyaka engamashumi ayi-8 lweKolishi lwezoMthetho (Law), kuze ekuqhakazeni kwesiKhungo sezoCwanningo i-Afromontane, kanye nemihlahlandlela emisha kwezempilo, ukulondolozeka, kanye nokufunda, ozakwethu bakha isikhungo esinensebenzo-ndawonye, esinakekela ngesizotha, nesinamasu anenqubekela phambili.

Njengoba sisonga unyaka sibheke kozayo nakweminye elandelayo, siholwa yiNkanyezi yoMhlaba yase-UFS's North Star, inqubekela phambili yethu isezimisweni zokuletha uguquko olunomthelela omuhle oluzobhekelela izimfuno zezokulingana, ukulondolozeka, kanye nobuntu. Sengathi lezi zindatshana zingasikhumbuza ukuthi inqubekela phambili ayiqondene nje namasu kuphela – kodwa iqondene nokugqugquzeleka, ukubambisana, kanye nokunakekela emuzamweni wokufinyelela kwisigaba esinobuyoninco.

**Dumela!**

KUBEKA UMHLELI  
**LUNGA LUTHULI**



## ABOUT THE COVER

## An upgrade that invites you in

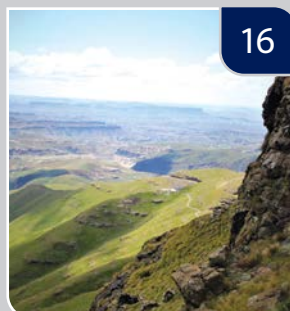
Bathed in golden sunset light, the newly upgraded garden space next to the Equitas Building offers a peaceful retreat for staff and students. With waterwise landscaping and inviting seating areas, the space reflects the university's commitment to sustainability and wellbeing.



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## The Dumela editorial team

consists of staff from the Department of Communication and Marketing as well as representatives from faculties, departments, and campuses of the UFS.

COVER PHOTO | Supplied

# DRD shines locally and globally in a year of research excellence

By Jacky T

The UFS Directorate Research Development (DRD) continues to set the standard in advancing research excellence, innovation, and institutional visibility. Over the past year, the directorate has achieved significant milestones that underscore the UFS' commitment to building a dynamic, globally competitive research environment.

One of the highlights of the year was the Platinum Award for Good Financial Grant Practice (GFGP) accreditation, placing the university among a select group of institutions recognised for excellence in research governance and financial compliance.

The directorate also showcased its expertise and leadership at the Southern African Research and Innovation Management Association (SARIMA) conference, where the team delivered the highest number of posters and chaired the most sessions.

Dr Glen Taylor, Senior Director of Research Development, was honoured with SARIMA's prestigious Distinguished Contribution to the Research Management Profession Award – recognition of his leadership and enduring impact in shaping research management in Southern Africa. His award was the 'cherry on top' of an already outstanding showing by his team. Individual DRD members also excelled, further amplifying the university's reputation:

- Willem Kilian presented on *data integrity*, reinforcing the importance of reliable systems in advancing world-class research.
- Maricel van Rooyen chaired a session on *research support and visibility*, highlighting best practices that enhance the reach and impact of the UFS scholarship.
- Dr Taylor chaired a session on *innovation and entrepreneurship*, sharing insights on building research ecosystems that enable knowledge translation.
- Charelise van Staden presented a poster on the *#Rsoboot initiative*, showcasing innovative approaches to research support.
- Mandy Jampies presented a poster on the UFS' *Platinum GFGP accreditation*, exemplifying how recognition at institutional level translates into knowledge sharing on international platforms.
- Mpho Mashamba presented a poster on the *Central Research Fund (CRF) process*, demonstrating the UFS' leadership in advancing equitable and transparent research funding.

Adding to the recognition, Mandy Jampies was selected to serve on the SARIMA committee, ensuring that the UFS will continue to play a strategic role in shaping the regional research and innovation management agenda.

Reflecting on the year's achievements, it is clear that the DRD team has not only excelled individually, but also collectively positioned the university as a national and continental leader in research development. Their efforts embody the institution's Vision 130, driving impactful research that responds to societal needs while building systems that meet global standards of excellence. 

*Celebrating a year of success, the Directorate Research Development team continues to raise the profile of UFS research.*

Photo: Stephen Collett





# UFS Women's Breakfast 2025 inspires hope and connection

By Dr Cindé Grey

The Callie Human Centre was transformed into a bustling train station on Friday 22 August 2025, as more than 1 200 guests boarded the metaphorical BeBetter, BeLieve train for the annual UFS Women's Breakfast – a signature event hosted by the Division of Organisational Development (OD).



Photos: Gino Harmse

From the moment guests stepped into the venue, they were immersed in a beautifully detailed train-themed experience. Station signs, vintage luggage décor, and train-ticket invitations set the tone for the morning. Breakfast was served 'en route' through a symbolic South African journey – from bunny chow in Bonnievale to coffee in Koffiefontein. "We always aim to create an experience that speaks to both heart and mind," said Burneline Kaars, Head of OD. "It's about believing in ourselves, in the future, and in each other."

The highlight of the morning was guest speaker **Vanessa Goosen**, whose story of betrayal, imprisonment, and redemption left the audience deeply moved. Wrongfully imprisoned in Thailand while pregnant, Vanessa shared how faith, perseverance, and self-belief carried her through 16 years behind bars. Her message resonated deeply with the event's theme: Sometimes you board the wrong train, but it can still take you to the right destination.



Guests enjoyed a morning of inspiration, connection, and hope at the 2025 UFS Women's Breakfast, hosted by the Division of Organisational Development in the Callie Human Centre.

This year's breakfast was the largest in its history, welcoming UFS employees, sponsors, and invited guests. Platinum sponsors – including MTN, BestMed, Jonsson Workwear, and Creative Kilowatt – played a vital role in supporting the event, allowing OD to continue creating a world-class experience. Entertainment was provided by Anslin Gysman, *The Voice SA* finalist, whose soulful performance added rhythm and emotion to the morning.

For many, the morning was not just a social event but a reminder of why spaces like this matter. "People are not productivity machines," said Kaars. "We need moments of joy, reflection, and connection to remind us that we are part of something meaningful." As the train metaphorically pulled into its final station, guests left inspired, renewed, and hopeful. The BeBetter, BeLieve journey may have ended, but the message will continue to echo through the corridors of the UFS, encouraging every woman to keep believing in her destination, no matter how winding the tracks may be. ■





### Gernus Terblanche:

*Student Life and Assistant Researcher in the Division of Student Affairs*

Through the UFS ACCESS programme, Terblanche has helped drive an innovative approach to engaged scholarship by using experiential, transdisciplinary learning to address societal challenges. "One impactful change was the creation of sustainable livelihood projects, including our vermiculture and post-natural, egenerative building initiatives that integrate academic and indigenous knowledge with real-world learning." He says this model has not only fostered student innovation and social responsibility, but also strengthened community resilience, demonstrating how universities can co-create transformative solutions for shared growth and sustainable development.



### Adv Shirly Hyland:

*Director: Kopsie Phahamisa Academy, Short Learning Programmes*

The Kopsie Phahamisa Academy (KPHA) at the university is transforming lifelong learning through innovation, governance, and strategic partnerships. By developing the Short Learning Programme Management System (SLPMS), expanding funding networks, and professionalising short courses, the KPHA is driving access, quality, and financial sustainability. Its digital marketing, national collaborations, and leadership in micro-credentialing position the UFS as a pioneer in flexible, socially responsive education that bridges academia, industry, and community development across South Africa and beyond.

# Impact and innovation are in our DNA

By Gerda-Marié van Rooyen

Innovation and impact are one of the bedrock foundations of the UFS, ensuring that the institution remains steadfast and relevant in a challenging and ever-changing national higher education landscape. Some staff members understand this and adhere to this Vision 130 value in the following ways:



### Gerben van Niekerk:

*Student Experience and Media Manager*

This go-getter is the driving force behind the KopsieX initiative, which ushered in a new era of student communication with pride and energy. "We replaced the traditional, one-way newsletter model with an integrated, multi-platform digital ecosystem," he explains. "This innovation harnesses data-driven insights to deliver personalised, timely, and relevant information through each student's preferred channel. The result is greater student engagement, higher open and click-through rates, and students who are better informed and equipped to succeed. KopsieX has truly transformed the way the university connects with its students."

### Nkosi Robson:

*Lecturer: Department of Communication Science, Qwaqwa Campus*

Robson introduced structured 'discussion classes' in Persuasive Communication (COMM1544) – a large first-year module that never had tutorial support. These sessions encouraged dialogue and instant feedback after lectures, boosting pass rates to above 92%, with many students achieving distinctions in 2024. "Beyond numbers, students said the classes helped them overcome fear and participate confidently, and one wrote to me, 'for the first time I could participate in lectures and suppress my fears.' This innovation transformed performance, engagement, and confidence."



### Faith 'Cavil' Bhoodoo:

*Residence Head and Academics Coordinator: Residence Life*

Bhoodoo launched two pioneering initiatives as Residence Head of House Roosmaryn – a student-run tuck shop and paid sports promotions. The latter embeds UFS graduate attributes and cultivates entrepreneurship, adaptability, and workplace readiness. "The profits generated by the tuck shop fund employed student stipends monthly. The Varsity Sports promotions led to students working with the Proteas in 2025. These innovative models combat poverty, provide practical experience, and enhance employability, ensuring that graduates thrive in evolving socio-economic environments. I remain committed to expanding innovations bridging education with meaningful impact."

### Prof Loyiso Jita:

*Dean and SANRAL Chair in Science and Mathematics Education*

The Faculty of Education now offers postgraduate studies across the three campuses by simultaneously taking advantage of both synchronous technologies and the flexibility of our academics to travel between the three campuses. "In addition – for the 400+ research master's and PhD students – we have divided them into 11 research groups that meet at least once a month for support and engagement. This has enabled us to offer more than 50 research support workshops for the master's and PhD students in a year, resulting in improved quality research and high graduation rates."





# Building belonging through innovation

By Michelle Nöthling



Click to read the Afrikaans version.

Have you ever watched someone come alive when they talk about work that they love? That joy is unmistakable in Nico Janse van Rensburg, Senior Director of Facilities Planning at the university, as he describes the latest architectural developments transforming all three campuses.

“Our new SRC offices on the Bloemfontein Campus are a particular point of pride,” Janse van Rensburg says. The once-familiar Roosmaryn dining hall has been reimagined into a contemporary office space for the SRC and Student Governance Office, designed with optimal space usage and universal accessibility in mind. Acoustic panels offer privacy, while the layout reflects a modern approach. “Through this development,” he adds, “we want to show students that we hold them in high regard.”

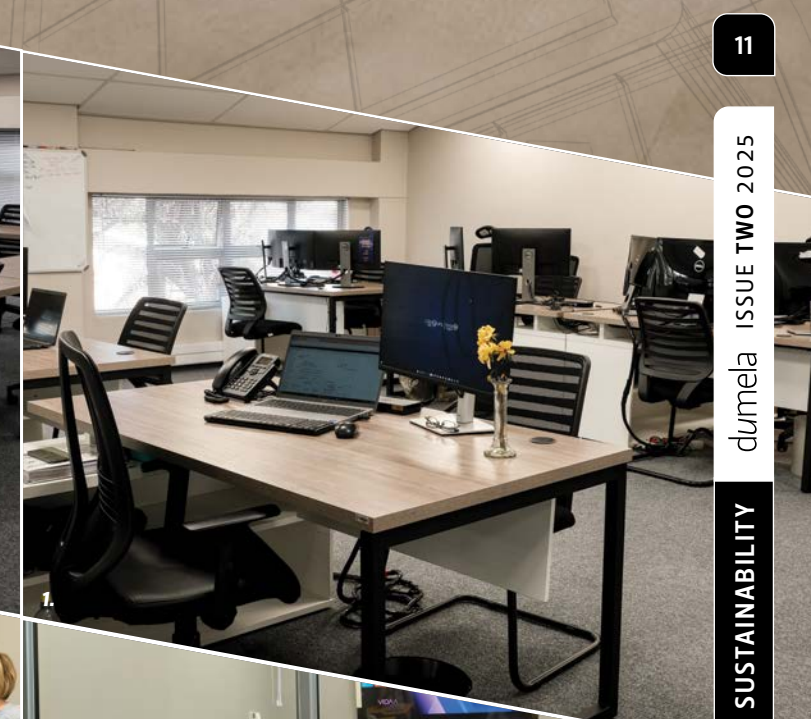
Another standout project is the renovation of the Provisioning Building, which houses Supply Chain Management. By raising the roof by just one metre, an entire new floor became available – complete with elegant offices and a boardroom. It is a simple yet inventive use of space that speaks to the university’s culture of innovation.

Over at the Faculty of Health Sciences, the old Frik Scott Library in the Francois Retief Building has been reborn as the Postgraduate Hub. The space now features a comfortable lounge that encourages conversation, private study booths, staff and administrative offices, and intimate lecture rooms equipped with portable screens and a 3-D printer. Outside the lift, an intricately carved Cecil Skotnes artwork lends a striking touch.

On the South Campus, creativity takes centre stage in the repurposed Isifundo E lecture hall. One half is



1.



1.



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Photos: Stephen Collett

A one-metre roof lift in the Provisioning Building unlocks a full new floor – now home to modern offices and a boardroom for Supply Chain Management.

1

The micro-teaching venue on the South Campus is now an education space, featuring a two-way mirror for live feedback during teaching practise.

2

The Roosmaryn dining hall has been reimagined into a contemporary office space for the SRC and Student Governance Office, designed with optimal space usage and universal accessibility in mind.

3

now a dynamic Student Incubator Space – a bright, collaborative environment where students can grow entrepreneurial ideas, host presentations, and engage with industry partners. The other half houses the new Micro-Teaching venue for the Faculty of Education, complete with a two-way mirror for real-time observation and feedback during teaching practise.

Meanwhile, on the Qwaqwa Campus, the Division of

Student Affairs has moved into its own purpose-built home featuring offices, reception, a boardroom, and staff facilities. Plans are also underway to expand the campus clinic as well as a new Postgraduate Hub that will serve as a centre for academic growth.

Across all three campuses, these projects share one purpose: to create spaces that do not just function – they speak of belonging, innovation, and respect. ■



# Faculty of Law celebrates 80 years of shaping justice and innovation

By Tshepo Tsotetsi

Eighty years ago, in 1945, the UFS Faculty of Law opened its doors with a single mission: to nurture ethical, skilled, and socially conscious legal professionals. Eight decades later, that mission continues to define the faculty's work as it celebrates a proud legacy of impact, innovation, and transformation.

Situated in the heart of Bloemfontein – the judicial capital of South Africa – the faculty has long been at the centre of the country's evolving legal landscape. From its earliest graduates who went on to serve in high courts to today's globally connected scholars, the faculty's influence reaches far beyond its classrooms.

According to Prof Serges Kamga, Dean of the Faculty of Law, the faculty's enduring relevance lies in its commitment to evolving with the times. "The faculty has understood the need to foster student centredness. To this end, it emphasises the need to bridge the gap between theory and practice through its collaboration with the courts, the Office of the Public Prosecutor, law firms, and the legal fraternity as a whole," he says.

Over the years, the faculty has strengthened its global and national impact through numerous partnerships, including agreements with the Albie Sachs Trust, the B-BBEE Commission, and the United Nations. In 2024, two major initiatives were launched: the Africa Reparation Hub and the Disability Rights Unit, both aimed at advancing justice, inclusivity, and social accountability.

The faculty is also home to six NRF-rated researchers and a member of

the Academy of Science of South Africa, reinforcing its role as a research-led hub of legal innovation. The annual Kovsie Moot Court Competition, now in its 20th year, has become a defining tradition, offering first-year students the rare opportunity to argue before judges in the Supreme Court of Appeal.

Most recently, the UFS Law Clinic was admitted as a friend of the court in a major case before the Supreme Court of Appeal – a milestone that reflects its active contribution to justice and community engagement.

Looking ahead, Prof Kamga says the faculty's focus is on the intersection of technology and law. "We have started programmes on artificial intelligence and the law; we will strengthen these programmes, foster interdisciplinary collaboration, and strongly advance collaborative innovation and global integration by creating dynamic spaces where students tackle society's most complex challenges," he explains. "Our goal is to ensure that innovation serves humanity's highest aspirations."

From nurturing legal minds to shaping the future of justice, the UFS Faculty of Law stands as a beacon of excellence – celebrating 80 years of legacy, leadership, and learning. ■



1. Leaders and legal minds gather at the Faculty of Law's 2025 Albie Sachs Prestige Lecture.
2. Launch of the Disability Rights Unit, which promotes inclusivity in law.
3. The Faculty of Law has signed an MoU with the B-BBEE Commission, strengthening its commitment to economic transformation in South Africa.
4. On 26 February 2025, the Faculty of Law and the NPA Free State signed an MoU to launch In the Shadow of the Prosecutor, a pioneering initiative offering Law students practical prosecutorial experience.

Photos: Born2Shoot

# Health Sciences wins top honours at 2025 Fleet Safety Awards

By Reuben Maeko

The UFS drove off with top honours at the 2025 Fleet Safety Awards, hosted by MasterDrive – being named both the Best Organisation in the Medium Commercial Vehicles (MCV) category and the Overall Best Organisation across all categories.

The awards recognise organisations, fleet managers, and drivers who go the extra mile to promote safer roads across Southern Africa. For the UFS, the recognition highlights its strong commitment to safety and responsible transport management, says Siyabonga Sikakane, Fleet Coordinator in the Faculty of Health Sciences. "In addition to receiving a trophy and certificate, we were also awarded R20 000, which will be directed towards Corporate Social Investment (CSI) initiatives."

The awards did not stop there. Moses, one of the university's professional drivers, received the Road Warrior Award in the MCV category, along with a certificate and a prize of R5 000 for his exceptional driving performance and commitment to safety. Sikakane himself was also named among the top three finalists in the Best Fleet Manager (MCV) category, earning a finalist certificate in recognition of his leadership in promoting safe and efficient fleet operations at the UFS.

"This recognition means a great deal to us as a university," said Sikakane. "It reflects the dedication, teamwork, and professionalism of everyone involved in the management of our fleet – from our drivers and technical staff to our administration and leadership. Safety is not just a policy for us; it is part of our operational culture." ■

The UFS takes the wheel as Best Organisation (MCV Category) and Overall Best Organisation at the 2025 Fleet Safety Awards.

Photo: Supplied



Ten days at sea, storms crashing around you, the endless horizon stretching in every direction – and in the middle of it all, learning to conduct cutting-edge marine research alongside leading scientists. This was the reality for Nicolle Loader and Azil Coertzen, two postgraduate researchers from the Centre for Mineral Biogeochemistry (CMBG) and the Department of Geography at the UFS, during SEAmester VIII.

Alongside 40 other South African and international students, they set sail from Cape Town Harbour aboard the SA Agulhas II. SEAmester, combines traditional classroom lectures with hands-on marine research.

From the moment they set sail, Nicolle and Azil were immersed in a programme that blends lectures, assignments, and practical research activities.

SEAmester not only provided technical training but also opened doors for collaboration and future research. On-board scientists highlighted gaps in knowledge about microbial life around Marion Island and Antarctica. With access to the CMBG's new ZE5 flow cytometer, Nicolle and Azil now hope to document oceanic microbial life, enabling comparisons over time to understand the effects of climatic events.

The programme also emphasised communicating science to the public. Nicolle notes, "Often scientists are not able to easily communicate their work to the general public, but it is important to do so to ensure the appropriate changes are made to help mitigate the effects of human-induced climate change."

Nicolle reflects, "I have always known that I loved the ocean, but this programme opened my eyes to the various opportunities available, whether as a postgraduate student or a science communicator." ■

# SEAmester VIII: transforming research and resilience at sea

By Martinette Brits

Nicolle Loader and Azil Coertzen participated in SEAmester VIII aboard the SA Agulhas II.

Photo: Supplied





# Dr Sekitla Makhasane's journey from classroom to campus leadership

By Precious Shamase

The UFS Faculty of Education on the Qwaqwa Campus is delighted to introduce Dr Sekitla Makhasane as its new Assistant Dean. Dr Makhasane brings a wealth of experience and a passionate dedication to the field, culminating in a career trajectory that began far from the lecture halls of higher learning.

His professional path initially lay in basic education, where he served first as a teacher and later as a deputy principal. His initial decision to further his studies – enrolling for a BEd Honours and subsequently a Master of Education at the University of KwaZulu Natal – was driven purely by a desire to advance his understanding of education management.

Dr Sekitla Makhasane says his father's constant encouragement to pursue education so that his children would not be 'labourers' like him, inspired a lifelong belief in the power of learning to open new possibilities.

Photo: Supplied

However, as he progressed, an academic spark ignited. Inspired by the sentiment often attributed to Nelson Mandela, that "After climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb," Dr Makhasane embraced the path of research. A fortuitous opportunity – the university waiving PhD tuition fees – allowed him to 'just finish' his studies. During this time, he also lectured undergraduates on an ad hoc basis, a role that solidified his interest in academia. It was at this juncture that Dr Makhasane decisively chose to remain in higher education, leaving his basic education career behind.

Before his appointment, Dr Makhasane excelled as a programme coordinator for various academic programmes, including the Bachelor of Education (Senior Phase and Further Education and Training Phase) and the Postgraduate Certificate in Education. He was also the academic Head of Education Management, Policy and Comparative Education. His leadership potential was recognised in January 2024 when he was asked to act as Assistant Dean following the promotion of the previous incumbent. After a competitive application and interview process, we are proud to confirm his official appointment to the role.

Dr Makhasane credits his father – a man who worked in the mines and only reached Grade 4 – as his greatest mentor. His father's persistent encouragement for his children to get an education, so as not to be 'labourers' like him, instilled a powerful vision of future possibilities through learning.

Outside the office, the new Assistant Dean enjoys unwinding with gardening and a strategic game of chess. His dedicated, student-focused approach was perhaps best illustrated during COVID-19, when a concerned student wrote him an email that read, "Dear sir, I have learned that you have passed on, I hope this is not true. I am sending this email so that you can confirm. You are one of my best lecturers and I am writing this email very disheartened." What really happened was that another staff member with the same surname had passed away. 📧



The university is strengthening campus safety through the evolving BSafe Campaign, led by Protection Services in collaboration with the Department of Communication and Marketing. What began as a small awareness drive has grown into a multi-stakeholder programme that has garnered national attention and positioned the UFS as a leader in campus safety.

Reflecting on the campaign's development, Noko Masalesa, Senior Director: Protection Services, says the initiative is now central to the department's awareness efforts. Internal partners across UFS departments, alongside SAPS, private security, and community forums, played a vital role in driving the campaign forward. According to Masalesa, this collective approach has had a measurable impact. "The campaign had a positive effect, initially seen through an increase in reported incidents, as students became more aware of the importance of reporting crime," he says. "This allowed us to better understand the challenges students face and to deploy private security to assist with off-campus safety. Today, we are seeing a decline in incidents – especially those that can be prevented."

One of the campaign's standout successes came in 2023 when the UFS was featured on *Crimewatch*, leading to the launch of the SAPS Learning Environment Safety Framework in 2025, which was hosted at the university. "This was a significant

achievement that showcased our commitment to staff and student safety while earning national recognition," Masalesa notes.

The campaign has also improved the way incidents are reported and handled. Recent efforts to raise awareness about identifying suspects and vehicles have already led to successful arrests. Masalesa emphasises, "It is crucial that incidents are reported immediately – not only to Protection Services, but also to SAPS. If it is not reported to SAPS, it is as if the crime never happened, and no action can be taken."

Central to the BSafe message is personal responsibility. "Safety starts with YOU," Masalesa stresses. "Do not leave valuables unattended – would you leave R10 000 in cash on a desk? Stay alert, avoid risky situations, and report suspicious behaviour immediately."

Looking ahead, Protection Services will build on the campaign's success through new initiatives, including collaboration with the Criminology Student Association for evidence-based interventions, a review of the Student Safety and Security Collaboration Forum, and campus-specific crime risk assessments, particularly off campus.

Masalesa concludes, "Teaching and learning cannot take place in an environment where people feel unsafe. Our role is to help maintain a safe environment that supports learning and success." 📧



Click to read the isiZulu version.

## Building a culture of safety: the evolution of the UFS BSafe campaign

By Lunga Luthuli

Noko Masalesa reflects on the national impact of the UFS BSafe Campaign – a collaborative safety initiative that continues to evolve through student engagement, strategic partnerships, and evidence-based interventions.





# A decade of discovery:

## The ARU's journey of innovation and impact

By Precious Shamase

The Afromontane Research Unit (ARU), nestled within the UFS Qwaqwa Campus, celebrates its 10th anniversary this year, marking a decade of dedicated innovation and impact in the field of mountain research.

### Foundational pillars

The ARU's mission is to be a world-class centre for inter- and transdisciplinary research, training, and community engagement focused on the Afromontane region, which includes the iconic Maloti-Drakensberg Mountain range. "Our vision is a future where mountain systems and their inhabitants thrive through sustainable management, informed by robust science. We are founded on the principle that the environmental, social, and economic challenges facing these unique high-altitude environments require integrated solutions that bridge the gap between academia, policy, and local communities," says Prof Ralph Clark, Director of the ARU.

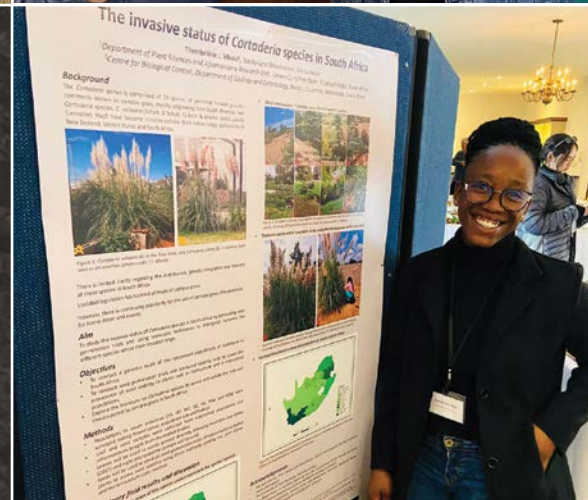
In line with the theme of innovation and impact, the ARU's journey has been defined by pioneering work. "Innovation is seen in our development and application of advanced techniques, such as remote sensing and GIS mapping to monitor delicate alpine ecosystems, and the establishment of long-

term ecological monitoring sites – true 'living laboratories'. We have also pioneered transdisciplinary research methodologies, integrating natural science (ecology, hydrology) with social science (sociology, economics) to create a holistic view of mountain challenges," he continues.

The ARU's impact spans the local, national, and international stages. Locally, the unit work directly with communities, providing science-based advice on sustainable water and land management, contributing to food security, and empowering local stakeholders through training. Nationally, the research informs South African conservation policy, particularly concerning protected area management and biodiversity preservation in the Drakensberg. Internationally, the ARU is a leading voice for mountain research in Africa, collaborating with institutions across the globe and contributing vital data to global assessments of climate change vulnerability in mountain regions. Prof Clark says the ARU's outputs have contributed to more than 150 publications and the training of a new generation of scientists and conservationists.

Looking ahead, the ARU is poised for even greater growth and impact. "We aim to expand our digital innovation by integrating big data analytics and artificial intelligence into our environmental monitoring.

Our focus will pivot further towards climate change adaptation and resilience, particularly for mountain communities that are most vulnerable to extreme weather events and biodiversity loss. By strengthening our partnerships across the African continent and amplifying the voices of mountain dwellers, the ARU will continue to innovate and deliver research that is not only scientifically excellent, but also deeply relevant and actionable, securing a sustainable future for the Afromontane," notes Prof Clark.



### Congratulatory message

Prof Cias Tsotetsi congratulated the ARU on ten years of transformative research, saying that the impact of the ARU's achievements is evident in the benefits extended to both its staff and student body. He highlighted the ARU's role in directly contributing to the university's strategic Vision 130 – the aspiration to become a research-led institution – by supporting numerous staff members to achieve their PhD qualifications through the University Staff Doctoral Programme (USDP) in Mountain Research. Other milestones include the establishment of South Africa's first Alpine Research Base, international funding, and the inclusive SAMC2022 and 2025 conferences, which brought together academics, policy makers, and traditional leaders. d

The ARU is celebrating ten years of innovation and impact in mountain research and community engagement this year.





# UFS academics now lead two major theological societies in Southern Africa

By Vuyelwa Mbebe



Photos: Supplied

The Faculty of Theology and Religion is honouring a historic milestone regarding its relationships with two national theological societies: for the first time in history, both the Old Testament Society of Southern Africa (OTSSA) and the New Testament Society of Southern Africa (NTSSA) are being chaired by members of the UFS faculty.

Prof Lodewyk Sutton, Head of the Department of Old and New Testament Studies, is now the Chairperson of the OTSSA, and Dr Nina Müller-Van Velden, Lecturer in New Testament Studies, is the newly appointed Chairperson of the NTSSA. These appointments mark a significant step in strengthening the national and Pan-African profile of the UFS as a hub of theological excellence.

## New era in New and Old Testament Societies

Prof Sutton says he is honoured and excited about his new role at the OTSSA, which was established in 1957. He hopes to expand the society's continental collaboration and strengthen its role in connecting South African scholars to global conversations in Old Testament and Semitic Studies. "My hope is that our scholarship not only remains academically excellent but also meaningful to society, addressing questions of justice, reconciliation, and community building," he said. He hopes to use his term to focus on growing inclusivity, fostering mentorship, and extending networks across Africa to ensure that Old Testament scholarship continues to evolve and thrive.

Dr Müller-Van Velden is the second and youngest woman to chair the NTSSA since its founding in 1965. She hopes that under her leadership the society will continue to champion mentorship, diversity, and interdisciplinary dialogue. "My goal is to foster a community known for its inviting attitude towards postgraduate students and emerging scholars and to introduce a more intentional mentorship system for junior colleagues," she said. The society is known for promoting research excellence through its Postgraduate Affiliation of the NTSSA initiative and its Student Development Fund.

## Advancing Vision 130

Both leaders believe that their roles align strongly with the UFS' Vision 130 strategic intent, particularly in advancing academic excellence, visibility, and societal impact. "It is inspiring to be part of a department where both societies are now chaired, a first in the faculty's history," Prof Sutton said.

The NTSSA annual conference is set to be hosted at the university in 2026, bringing scholars from across Africa and abroad to Bloemfontein. Dr Müller-Van Velden says the conference will further elevate the university's research profile.

*For the first time ever, both national theological societies, the Old Testament Society of Southern Africa and the New Testament Society of Southern Africa, are chaired by UFS academics. Pictured are Prof Lodewyk Sutton and Dr Nina Müller-Van Velden.*

You may have noticed that the UFS website is getting a major facelift. But this is not just a cosmetic touch-up. Elmada Kemp, Manager of Digital Communication in the Department of Communication and Marketing (DCM), explains that this is a full web re-engineering project. According to her, the current website – which had its last substantial update in 2015 – no longer meets modern usability, security, or strategic communication needs.

"While the 2025 upgrade to Sitefinity 15.2 fixed some urgent system issues, it also highlighted deeper structural and performance problems. This redesign is aligned with the UFS' Vision 130 and our evolving digital strategy to support excellence, innovation, and global engagement. The new website will be a critical enabler of transparency, stakeholder engagement, and institutional agility," she states.

## Making things simple and personal

The goal is a website that is intuitive and easy to navigate. For staff, this means faster access to systems, policies, and internal tools. For students, finding programme information, applying for admission, or checking academic resources will be much simpler. "Ultimately, it reduces friction in daily interactions and strengthens the digital user journey for both staff and students," says Kemp.

Mobile responsiveness is a key focus of the design, recognising that most users access university content via mobile phones. Moreover, the website will also feature smarter search and filtering functionality as well as faculty-specific portals. "We are also including analytics tools, AI-based personalisation, and improved search engine optimisation (SEO) to ensure content is discoverable. Multimedia content,

interactive calendars, and dynamic programme listings will make it more engaging too," Kemp adds.

Accessibility and inclusivity are central to the redesign, which will fully comply with WCAG 2.1 AA standards (internationally recognised guidelines that ensure websites and digital platforms are usable by people with disabilities). Features such as readable fonts, proper contrast, screen reader compatibility, and keyboard navigation ensure that everyone can use the site. "With these improvements, we aim to deliver a smooth, equitable experience for all users," Kemp notes.

## An 18-month process of precision and care

DCM didn't just decide everything from the top down; they consulted staff along the way. Faculties and departments are responsible for keeping their own information on the website up to date, following a clear process for doing so. The Digital Communication team will provide training and support, while also inviting staff to help test the new website to make sure the platform remains dynamic, accurate, and inclusive.

Staff and students can share feedback or suggestions via <https://ufsweb.co/web-surv-a> or scan the QR code.



"As both content owners and end users, their input is vital to ensure that the structure, language, and content meet actual needs," says Kemp. According to her, the design and development process will span approximately 18 months, ensuring that each phase, from research and planning to design, development, testing, and launch, is handled with precision and care.

For any web-related or social media requests, whether it's updating information or reporting a problem, staff can use the Unit for Digital Communication's service portal.

# UFS website gets a full makeover to make life easier for staff and students

*A bold digital leap: the UFS envisions a future-ready, mobile-first website powered by AI and designed with the end user in mind.*



# Celebrating service, passion, and purpose

By Igno van Niekerk

This year's Long-Service Awards function celebrated more than just years on a calendar; it honoured dedication, passion, and the quiet strength of commitment. "There is something profoundly powerful about choosing to stay," said Prof Hester C. Klopper, UFS Vice-Chancellor and Campus Principal. "Long service reflects loyalty, resilience, and a belief in the value of what we build together."

These awards remind us that excellence is not built overnight but through countless moments of service, care, and purpose. As colleagues gathered to recognise their peers, the atmosphere was filled with gratitude and pride, a fitting tribute to those who have helped shape the UFS story over the years.



PROF CJ HUGO



PS MPHANA



ML OLIFANT



PROF B VISSER



PROF P BURGER



AE VAN DER MERWE



A DU PREEZ



M WOUDA



SJ VAN JAARSVELD



L STEYN



PROF CH POHL-ALBERTYN



PROF J ROSSOUW



DR E VAN DER WATT



DR M DU TOIT



ME MATABANE



PROF JM REYNEKE



L RUST



RI RAMONGALO



ML ROSSOUW



LE KHALATA



PROF BJ JANSEN VAN RENSBURG



DR J COETZEE



MM NDAMOYI



PROF HC SWART



PROF BC VILJOEN



FM WESI



PROF A HUGO



S VAN HEERDEN



L ACKERMANN



PROF HG VISSER



AJ FOURIE



AS ENGELBRECHT



MJ VAN ZYL



I BASSON



RJ SONNEKUS



E SNYMAN-VAN DEVENTER

40 YEARS

35 YEARS

30 YEARS

25 YEARS



# with a heart

## Turning maize into a *superfood with a heart* By Leonie Bolleurs

**W**hat if the secret to better health, food security, and sustainability in local communities could start with a simple maize kernel?

This is the question driving Dr Alba du Toit, who heads the ARC/DoA/UFS Chair: Innovative Agro-Processing for Climate-Smart Food Systems in the Department of Sustainable Food Systems and Development at the university. Together with her team, Dr Du Toit is bringing research to life in the most delicious way, through a recipe book featuring nixtamalised maize – an ancient process that makes maize more nutritious, versatile, and climate smart.

“This project transforms abstract science into something tangible, delicious, safe, and nutritious,” says Dr Du Toit, adding that the most rewarding part was seeing research come to life in very basic kitchens.

### From science to supper

The inspiration behind the book came from a shared commitment between the UFS, Grain SA, the Technology Innovation Agency (TIA), and the Department of Science and Innovation (DSI) to improve nutrition and food security in local communities.

Nixtamalisation, first used in Mexico thousands of years ago, involves cooking maize kernels in water and slaked lime before soaking and rinsing them. This simple process boosts calcium, improves protein quality, removes toxins, and unlocks nutrients such as niacin (Vitamin B3) and the amino acid, tryptophan (protein), which prevent malnutrition. It also gives maize a softer texture and better flavour, perfect for cooking or baking.

And yes; it can even be done at home using ordinary dried maize kernels.

The first edition of Dr Du Toit's recipe book, released in 2022, featured 17 recipes and was used by Grain SA to train thousands of rural women across Limpopo, Mpumalanga, and North West. They learned how to nixtamalise maize and prepare home-cooked meals, baked goods, and beverages, empowering them with both knowledge and confidence.

Popular recipes included traditional favourites such as umqa/isijingi (pumpkin and masa) and umfino (spinach and masa), alongside family favourites such as vetkoek, scones, flapjacks, and umdoko (mageu).

Now the team is working on an expanded edition with 35 recipes, professional photography, and contributions from students and community members who are already practising nixtamalisation. Divided into sections on basic masa products (a soft dough), meals, baked goods, and beverages, the book aims to make nixtamalisation accessible to home cooks everywhere and to showcase how traditional food and modern science can come together beautifully.

### Beyond the kitchen

For Dr Du Toit, this is about more than food. “It's about empowering people to connect their cultural eating habits while embracing innovation and watching that spark of curiosity turn into confidence and pride,” she says.

By unlocking the nutritional power of maize, and soon indigenous grains such as sorghum and cowpeas, nixtamalisation could help South Africa take a big step towards Zero Hunger – Goal 2 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

Because sometimes, real change starts with what is on your plate. 🌽

*Dr Alba du Toit (front, second right) and her team in the Department of Sustainable Food Systems and Development are behind the creation of a new recipe book featuring nixtamalised maize.*





At the university, innovation continues to shape how academic excellence translates into societal impact. In the Department of Nutrition and Dietetics, Dr Elmine du Toit, Senior Lecturer in the department, is leading this transformation through her creative and impactful approach to work-integrated learning (WIL). WIL is a model that connects classroom theory with real-world application.

Dr Du Toit coordinates the Lifestyle Kitchen project, an entrepreneurial learning experience that puts final-year students in charge of running a kitchen as a business. Each group of students receives R7 000 and three weeks to design, prepare, and sell meals to staff and students. Under her supervision, the students manage every aspect of the process – from recipe selection and budgeting to marketing, customer service, and quality control.

“The purpose of the project is to teach students how to run their own business after graduation,” Dr Du Toit explains. “They learn teamwork, financial management, and how to deliver quality products while serving the university community.”

The project also encourages innovation and creativity. Students have developed themed menus for events

## Learning by doing shapes the future of dietetics

By Vuyelwa Mbebe

Fourth-year Nutrition and Dietetics students put their skills to the test by creating a nutritious meal for the Cheetahs rugby team.



such as Spring Day, baked cupcakes, sold hotdogs, and even introduced dombolo, a traditional South African steamed bread, which became a customer favourite. The success of the dombolo extended beyond campus, as students later included it in a recovery meal prepared for the Toyota Cheetahs rugby team.

Through partnerships like these, Dr Du Toit integrates sports nutrition education into the WIL framework, allowing students to design meals and provide nutritional guidance to professional athletes. This year, the students were able to design meals for the Cheetahs rugby team. “We combine the food service aspect of meal preparation with the science of sports nutrition,” she says.

This innovative approach aligns seamlessly with the UFS' Vision 130, which emphasises academic excellence, visibility, and societal impact. “We create learning experiences that respond to the diverse needs and social backgrounds of our students,” notes Dr Du Toit.

By merging entrepreneurship, community engagement, and academic rigour, Dr Elmine du Toit's work exemplifies innovation through experience, and this prepares UFS graduates to thrive as both professionals and changemakers. ■

Photos: Supplied

## Mental Health Summit reminds UFS community that self-care is a shared journey

By Jacky T

As the final stretch of the academic year approaches and deadlines mount, fatigue and emotional strain can quietly take hold. Recognising this, the Division of Organisational Development hosted a Mental Health Summit on 3 October 2025 under the theme *Be Better: From Awareness to Action*.

The event brought together staff from across campuses in a spirit of compassion and reflection, creating space to pause, listen, and share. “This is a self-care session,” said Burneline Kaars, Head of Organisational Development, at the opening of the summit. “We want to find out how we can support you and give you the resources you need to take better care of your mental health.”

The summit's keynote address, delivered by Felicia Goosen, set the tone for an honest and uplifting morning. A youth wellness counsellor and confidence coach, Goosen shared her remarkable story of



resilience – from being born in a prison in Thailand to becoming a voice of empowerment and healing. Her message to staff was simple yet profound: *embrace vulnerability, take ownership of your healing, and remember that strength grows through openness*.

Guided by Dr Ronel Kleynhans, Lecturer in the Department of Industrial Psychology, the programme flowed seamlessly between expert insights and heartfelt stories. Each speaker unpacked the impact of trauma and recovery at different stages of life:

- Anthea Jansen, Lecturer in the Department of Occupational Therapy, explored how early trauma affects both physical and emotional development.
- Mmathapelo Letsholo, a social worker in private practice, spoke about navigating instability through family disruption and relocation.
- Janine Scholtz, educational psychologist, discussed the recognition and response to signs of distress in middle childhood.
- Dr Munita Dunn-Coetzee, Director of the UFS Health and Wellness Centre, reflected on identity, loss, and recovery during adolescence and young adulthood.

The discussions were both grounding and inspiring, affirming that mental health is not a solitary concern but a collective responsibility. Initiatives like these strengthen the UFS community's commitment to holistic wellness, helping each person not only to be aware, but to *be better*. ■

Panel discussion during the UFS Mental Health Summit held on 3 October 2025, where experts shared insights on promoting mental wellness in the workplace and beyond.





# UFS Leadership 2.0 Series: building inclusive and ethical leadership for the future

Dr Cindé Grey

The university continues to invest in the growth and development of its leaders through the Leadership 2.0 series, a flagship programme hosted by the Human Resources Division of Organisational Development (OD). "This initiative provides a platform for reflection, learning, and practical engagement on key leadership themes that shape the university's culture and strategic direction," says Burneline Kaars, Head of OD.

The 2025 series began on 18 June with a session on ethical leadership, facilitated by Prof Prakash Naidoo, former Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Operations. With the guiding theme *Discover the essence of challenges*, the session brought together directors and senior managers to explore the principles of moral leadership, integrity, and the practical realities of leading in complex, changing environments. Prof Naidoo highlighted the importance of becoming role models, inspiring bold teams, and sustaining positive workplace cultures. Attendees were encouraged to embrace openness, transparency, and engagement, while contributing to the greater good. Reflecting on South Africa's leadership crisis, participants valued the opportunity for meaningful dialogue about what it means to lead ethically in higher education today.

The second instalment, held on 30 September, focused on inclusive

leadership under the theme *Building Bridges, Laying Tracks, Leading with Inclusion*. Leadership coach and managing director of Inspiro, Nimmita Maharaj, facilitated the workshop, drawing on more than two decades of experience in career development, change management, and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) strategy. The interactive session unpacked the business case for inclusion, the impact of bias, privilege, and power in decision-making, and practical lessons from case studies. Leaders were encouraged to reflect on their own strengths and to commit to fostering more inclusive practices across the university.

The final session of Leadership 2.0 in 2025, *Systems Thinking*, was presented by Dr Morné Mostert on 14 November. By engaging staff in honest reflection and equipping leaders with practical tools, the university is cultivating a new generation of ethical, inclusive, and resilient leadership to meet the challenges of higher education and beyond.

Prof Prakash Naidoo (1.) and leadership coach Nimmita Maharaj (2.) joined UFS senior managers at the Leadership 2.0 ethics session to explore ethical leadership, inclusive practice, and the power of transparency.



Photos: Tshepo Tsotetsi

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# Mokete Tsotetsi ushers KovsieFootball men's team into winning season

By Anthony Mthembu

KovsieSport at the university recently appointed Mokete Tsotetsi on a three-year contract as the Head Coach of the KovsieFootball men's team. Tsotetsi, a former professional player who coached for more than a decade before joining the UFS, describes this new role as both a challenging and great experience. "One of the challenges I experienced was that I came into the team not knowing a single player, but given my driven nature, this was a challenge I was willing to embrace," said Tsotetsi.

## Being part of the winning team

Tsotetsi explained that he assumed his new role just days before the start of the 2025 Varsity Football championship. Therefore, he expressed, "It was a lot of work in a short period of time, as we were trying to achieve the objective before us. Obviously, I had to push the boys, instil my philosophy as a coach in them, and allow an opportunity in which I could understand them as individuals, and they could understand me."

As such, under the leadership of Tsotetsi, the UFS won the 2025 Varsity Football championships against Tshwane University

Mokete Tsotetsi, Head Coach of the KovsieFootball men's team at the UFS.

of Technology (TUT) with a score of 5-4. This historic first-time win took place on 2 October 2025 at Shimla Park in Bloemfontein. Tsotetsi, who expressed pride in the team for their performance, indicated that the win also provided him with the opportunity to bond more easily with the team. In addition, he described the victory as a statement – a way for football teams at other universities to start viewing the KovsieFootball men's team differently.

## What the future holds

Even though the team secured this win so early in his term as head coach, Tsotetsi indicated that there are several goals he still wants to achieve with the team. Firstly, the primary goal after this win is to continue working hard to defend the championship. In addition, he explained that he aims to push the team so that they can become some of the best student-athletes in the country. "I want these young men to become better athletes so that they can go on to play professionally on a national and international level. Furthermore, I want to continue motivating them to do well in their academics," he said.



Photo: Stephen Collett



# 2025 Learning and Teaching Conference

## boasts the highest number of abstracts

By Anthony Mthembu

Innovative and impactful; this is how some attendees described the annual Learning and Teaching Conference hosted at the university in September under the theme *Innovating the future of higher education: Sustainability and quality in learning and teaching*.

Reflecting on the success of the event, Tiana van der Merwe: Director of the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) at the UFS, indicated, "I was excited to see the attendance figures for both face-to-face and online sessions, and I do believe that anyone who attended would have several key take-aways and would have been inspired to try something new in their teaching." In addition, she highlighted that this year's conference received the highest number of abstracts ever, and the quality of the papers was excellent.

### Impact and innovation

According to Van der Merwe, impact and innovation were significant sub-themes in discussions throughout the conference. One indicator of this

was the panel discussion on *Incorporating Service-and Work-Integrated Learning: Preparing students for the future*, facilitated by Prof Francois Strydom, Senior Director of the UFS CTL. As part of the panel discussion, Dr Arno van Niekerk, Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences (EMS) at the UFS, for instance touched on the way in which he ensures that service-learning projects are mutually beneficial for both students and community members.

Therefore, he referenced a project he is working on with his students, called *banking the unbanked*, where the students first go to banks to enquire about offerings such as bank accounts for low-income individuals, among other things. With this information, the students head to communities with questionnaires aimed at sparking conversations with community members regarding their knowledge of the financial sector. "So, as this knowledge empowerment happens, the students become the bridge between the bank and community members," said Van Niekerk.

In addition, Van der Merwe referenced Prof Mike Perkins, Associate Professor and Head of the Centre for Research and Innovation at the British University Vietnam (VNM), who served as one of the keynote speakers for the conference. Van der Merwe said that Prof Perkins' perspective on artificial intelligence (AI) in assessments was an opportunity to "reflect on our assessment practices, and it has inspired us to rethink what we are doing in this age of AI".

### Leaving a lasting impression

Given all the sessions that took place during the conference, Van der Merwe indicated that she hoped those in attendance were inspired to try new and innovative teaching techniques and technologies in the classroom. ■



Click here to visit the Learning and Teaching Conference website



This year's Learning and Teaching Conference inspired fresh thinking around sustainability, quality, and impact in teaching. With record attendance and a dynamic programme - including service-learning initiatives, AI in assessment, and impactful keynote contributions - the event left participants inspired to rethink and reimagine their teaching practices.



## mamela! Inflatable pools and victory goals

Once the year breaks into November, 'Mela is usually ready to assemble the inflatable pool. And this year? There's absolutely nothing different. Don't take it the wrong way, 'Mela had a great season in 2025, but after all the hustle and heart (and rocks and rolls), there has to be time for bliss, balance, and a lot of Vitamin D.

This year, bliss is well earned, mos! 'Mela is delighted to be part of a community that continues to redefine what success looks like.

The Kopsie Varsity Football team gave it their all, securing the 2025 Varsity Football championship, tjo! The campus spirit could've powered the Shimla Park floodlights. Even the dassies tried to do the wave. But it wasn't just about trophies and tackles. Across our campuses, students, academics, support staff, and researchers have each played their part in making this year unforgettable. There's been brilliance in labs, breakthroughs in offices, and bravery in lecture halls.

Let's not forget the new chapters we have added to this year's UFS story. The university officially launched the International Institute of the Arts (IIA) - a creative platform that boldly connects global artistry, academic excellence, and critical dialogue in the heart of the Free State. Not long after, we celebrated the launch of the Giraffe Research Centre (GRC) - a conservation initiative that reminds us that our curiosity reaches far beyond the classroom, and sometimes straight into the open Free State fields. Even closer to home, a clowder on campus finally got some official recognition: the furry felines who silently supervise our sidewalks. That's right! The UFS has formalised its Feral Cat Programme, showing that care at Kopsies doesn't stop with people. Our feline friends are now part of a managed, compassionate campus ecosystem. And if you haven't met them yet, chances are they've already judged your parking from afar.

And while graduation gowns are being prepped, leaf blowers are pushing away leaves of the past on campus plains, and staff WhatsApp groups are suddenly all about year-end functions, the UFS keeps moving with grace, purpose, and plenty of pride.

'Mela is excited to see what 2026 will bring! But before we jump ahead, let's savour where we are: under the shade of the Free State treeline, proud of what we've achieved, and ready to breathe for a minute.

So, whether you're tackling a report or floating in the inflatable pool - do it with joy, intention, and SPF 50.

Rest well, Kopsies. 2025 delivered.

Love,  
'Mela



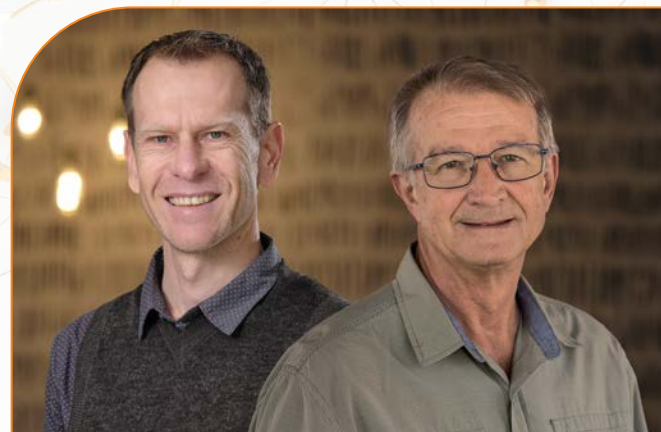


# UFS staff earn seats at the table and bring real-world impact with them

By Dr Nitha Ramnath

Staff members are making their mark beyond campus with recent appointments to national and international advisory boards and councils.

**Prof Wilna Oldewage-Theron** (Co-Chair: Agro-Processing for Climate-Smart Food Systems in the Department of Sustainable Food Systems and Development) was appointed to the Nestlé Foundation Council in Switzerland. Describing the appointment as one of the highlights of her career, she said it is a privilege to contribute to the foundation's mission of advancing human nutrition research in low- and middle-income countries. "This role allows me to translate years of research into impactful global action and capacity building for young scientists," she noted.



**Dr Hendri du Plessis** (Department of Quantity Surveying and Construction Management) and **Thomas Stewart** (Department of Urban and Regional Planning) was appointed to the Advisory Board of the Central University of Technology's Department of Built Environment. Reflecting on his appointment, Dr Du Plessis describes the opportunity as both an honour and a platform for collaboration between academia and industry. "We need more cross-pollination of ideas within the built environment," he said. Stewart, an experienced urban planner views his appointment as both an honour and an opportunity to learn from and contribute to a diverse community of scholars and practitioners. Stewart believes that South Africa represents a "real live urban planning laboratory," offering immense potential for contextually grounded, forward-thinking planning solutions.



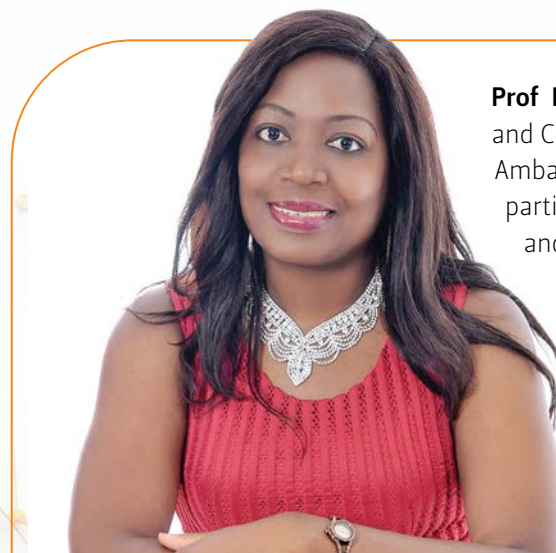
**Dr Mart-Mari Els** (Department of Quantity Surveying and Construction Management) is the only academic appointed as a member of the South African Regional Advisory Board (RAB) of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS). This prestigious role places her at the heart of global standards in the built environment.



**Prof Mogomme Masoga** (Dean: Faculty of the Humanities) and **Prof Nompumelelo Zondi** (Vice-Dean: Research and Postgraduate Studies in the Faculty of the Humanities) have been appointed as Ministerial Board Members of the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS). This position, a proud moment for the UFS and a nod to their leadership, will give them the opportunity to help shape national decisions on how the humanities and social sciences are taught and supported in South Africa.



**Prof Kahilu Kajimo-Shakantu** (Department of Quantity Surveying and Construction Management) was appointed as a Construct Africa Ambassador as part of their "African Leaders in Construction" to participate in strategic initiatives, as well as in thought-leadership and capacity-building activities. She says, "Being appointed as a Construct Africa Ambassador is both an honour and a responsibility. It provides a platform to influence positive change, foster collaboration, and contribute to building sustainable infrastructure across Africa."



**Prof Vasu Reddy** (Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research and Internationalisation) was appointed Chair of the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) Press Editorial Board. Under his leadership, the press will continue to champion rigorous, transformative scholarship rooted in Africa, upholding the highest standards of editorial integrity while amplifying African and Global South perspectives in academic publishing.

**Prof Paul Grobler** (Department of Genetics) was re-elected to the Southern African Wildlife Management Association (SAWMA) Council. He views this appointment as both an honour and a responsibility to strengthen the connection between science and practical wildlife management across Southern Africa.



# When words

By Leonie Bolleurs

How often do you find yourself nodding along in a conversation while your mind races through your to-do list or your phone buzzes nearby? You are not alone. According to Dr Munita Dunn-Coetzee, Director of the Health and Wellness Centre at the UFS, staying truly present in a conversation has become a real challenge.

"I think we can all agree on 2025 being a year like no other. There have been major global and national events, as well as several altering decisions made in higher education. Perhaps you have experienced significant challenges in your personal journey – loneliness, financial difficulties, personal loss, or illness," she reflects.

## From hearing to understanding

"When one must navigate so many things to remain afloat in life, the question can be posed whether we still connect with others, with our community, with our people? Does it not become a linear focus on survival?"

*Dr Munita Dunn-Coetzee, Director of the UFS Health and Wellness Centre, believes that true connection begins with active listening.*

# get lost in the noise

We live in a noisy world, overflowing with emails, voice notes, WhatsApp groups, and endless scrolling. "We live in a world that overcommunicates – social media (TikTok, Telegram, Instagram), emails, more important emails, phone calls, WhatsApp messages, WhatsApp groups, and for some of us, texts and Facebook. I want to applaud you if you are keeping up with half of these messages!" she comments.

But all that noise takes its toll. Dr Dunn-Coetzee says research shows that information overload strains our relationships and weakens our ability to connect meaningfully. "Employees do not have the energy to engage, listen, and connect. Employees are hearing one another, not listening," she explains.

So, what is the difference? "Listening is one step ahead of hearing," she says. "Listening is difficult because it takes energy, whereas hearing is merely an involuntary response to sound." As leadership expert Simon Sinek puts it, "Hearing is listening to what's said. Listening is hearing what isn't said."

Active listening, says Dr Dunn-Coetzee, is a skill worth practising. "When you listen actively, you give the speaker your complete, undivided attention to truly understand their message. You also ask clarifying questions ... and very important, you put your cellphone far away when you are actively listening."

## How listening can change everything

Beyond improving communication, active listening helps rebuild trust and is a valuable tool to rebuild work relationships. "Perhaps your team at work is going through a rough patch and not communicating well? Try active listening ... team members feel valued and understood," she says.

She ends with a reminder: "The ability to understand, connect with, and respond to others is becoming a key differentiator in the workplace. Start today by reflecting on how well you listen in your daily interactions. Developing these skills now will not only improve your relationships but also position you for success in the future of work." ■

# UFS celebrates 20 years of sign language interpreting and inclusion

By Onthatile Tikoe

The university marks a significant milestone this year – 20 years of South African Sign Language (SASL) Interpreting Services. This celebration reflects two decades of innovation, dedication, and a commitment to fostering a more inclusive academic environment for Deaf and hard-of-hearing students.

According to Martie Miranda, Head of the Centre for Universal Access and Disability Support (CUADS), the journey began in 2005 when a Deaf student registered at the university and requested interpreting support from the then Unit for Students with Disabilities (USD). "The USD had to appoint a South African Sign Language Interpreter (SASLI) on contract to assist the student with lectures and communication," Miranda recalls. By 2009, the number of Deaf students had increased to five, leading to the appointment of the first full-time interpreter.

## From early challenges to institutional change

The introduction of SASL interpreting services was not without challenges. Initially, spoken language interpreter services operated through the Unit for Language Facilitation and Empowerment (ULFE). However, as Miranda explains, the USD soon recognised the need to treat SASL as an equal language, ensuring that Deaf students received equitable access to interpretation and support.

In 2015, the UFS revised its Language Policy to formally include SASL, making it one of only two South African universities to do so. "This was a landmark moment for inclusivity," Miranda notes. Over time, the service has evolved through various administrative structures and now resides within the Academy for Multilingualism, supported by CUADS to ensure seamless coordination for students.

Beyond accessibility, SASL interpreting has played a transformative role in shaping attitudes towards Deaf culture at the UFS. "The presence of interpreters has normalised the use of sign language and fostered a deeper understanding of Deaf culture among students and staff," says Miranda. This visibility has encouraged community building, policy development, and greater appreciation for diversity.

CUADS and the Academy for Multilingualism work closely together to ensure that Deaf students receive full academic and social support – from classroom interpretation to engagement with student life. Over the years, the interpreting service has expanded to include interns and community interpreters, demonstrating the UFS' continued commitment to capacity building and sustainability.

Miranda proudly reflects, "Every time a Deaf student graduates, it is a moment of pride for CUADS."

## A call to embrace inclusivity

As the UFS celebrates two decades of SASL interpreting services, Miranda encourages the campus community to continue advocating for inclusion. "Sign language is more than a communication tool, it is a gateway to understanding and respect," she says. "By embracing it, we create a university where everyone is valued, heard, and empowered to succeed." ■

*Marking two decades of dedicated service, the university honours its commitment to accessible education for Deaf and hard-of-hearing students through South African Sign Language interpreting.*



# Business School strengthens global networks by hosting distinguished international scholars

By Tshepo Tsotetsi



1. From left: Prof Vasu Reddy (UFS Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research and Internationalisation), and Prof Beatrice van der Heijden.

2. Prof Conor Vibert and Prof Nicolene Barkhuizen.

The Business School strengthened its global networks by hosting three distinguished international scholars during July and August: Prof Peter Rosseel (KU Leuven, Belgium), Prof Beatrice van der Heijden (Radboud University, the Netherlands), and Prof Conor Vibert (Acadia University, Canada). The visits highlighted the school's growing reputation as a hub for international collaboration, innovation in management education, and thought leadership in a rapidly changing world.

Prof Peter Rosseel is renowned for his expertise in organisational learning, transformation, and change management. His work helps leaders navigate uncertainty and build organisations that adapt and grow amid disruption. During his visit, he shared insights on how learning organisations can remain agile in the face of complexity, inspiring UFS Business School participants to view change as a driver of innovation rather than a challenge to stability.

Prof Conor Vibert from Acadia University's Fred C Manning School of Business specialises in business strategy, competitive intelligence, and the intersection of digital technology and organisational life. Known as an educational innovator, he has transformed business education through online platforms, video case studies, and interactive tools. His engagement with UFS students and staff has offered valuable perspectives on how technology is reshaping leadership and strategic thinking in the digital age.

Prof Beatrice van der Heijden is a globally recognised authority on career development, employability, and sustainable careers. Her research bridges continents and disciplines, influencing both theory and practice in HRM and career studies. Among her many honours are her membership of the Academy of Europe (2019), her election to the Royal Holland Society of Sciences and Humanities (2022), and her knighthood in the Order of the Lion of the Netherlands (2021) for her contributions to science and society. The UFS Business School also celebrated her recent Academy of Management Award, affirming her as one of the leading voices in global HRM and career research. Her visit reflected a commitment to fostering inclusive, future-ready workplaces that drive long-term impact.

Through these academic exchanges, the UFS Business School continues to advance knowledge that is both world-class and socially relevant. Reflecting on the significance of the visits, Prof Nicolene Barkhuizen, Director of the UFS Business School, said: "Welcoming world-class scholars such as Profs Rosseel, Vibert, and Van der Heijden is a milestone for our school. Their thought leadership enriches our community, stimulates dialogue between global and local contexts, and ensures that our students and executives are exposed to the very best of contemporary scholarship. This is central to our vision of developing adaptive leaders who can thrive in today's fragile world."

# A heart that heals: Dr Deepa Alexander's love for helping children

By André Damons

For Dr Deepa Alexander, every smile from a child is a reward far greater than any accolade she may receive at work. As a paediatrician with an interest in endocrinology, her days are full of challenges, yet at the end of each one she finds joy, purpose, and gratitude.

"The love for my work and knowing that I can help people, especially children, not only makes me happy and gets me out of bed every morning – it is also my way of serving God," she says with heartfelt sincerity.

## Finding her calling

Dr Alexander, Senior Lecturer in the UFS Department of Paediatrics and Child Health, and Head of the clinical unit of Tertiary Paediatrics at the Universitas Academic Hospital, first stepped into paediatrics as an intern and never looked back. From there, her path led her to the fascinating and demanding world of paediatric endocrinology.

This relatively new specialty is filled with rare conditions, complex cases, and constant challenges – exactly the kind of environment where Dr Alexander thrives. "I think this field chose me."

Most of her day is spent with young patients battling endocrine disorders, diabetes, metabolic conditions, and unusual, rare diseases. Beyond her clinical work, she teaches and mentors students, supervises research, and manages a busy paediatric ward and outpatient department. It is a demanding role, but one she embraces wholeheartedly.

Although medicine is her calling, Dr Alexander is a woman of many passions. Her faith in God guides her steps, while her family and friends keep her grounded. She nurtures her garden with 'green fingers', finding

peace among plants and soil. She cares deeply for animals and the environment, loves travelling to discover new cultures and cuisines, and even finds time to play the flute and explore interior design.

But there are moments of heaviness too. "Thinking about how this world can sometimes be an awful place, and how people can be cruel to animals and children keeps me up at night," she admits. That same compassion, however, is also what fuels her work and makes her presence so comforting to the families she serves.

Organised, focused, and goal-driven, Dr Alexander could easily have followed another ambitious path – perhaps as an aeronautical or chemical engineer. Yet, destiny had something else in mind, and in her, medicine found not just a skilled doctor, but a heart that heals with love, faith, and determination.

## Living with purpose

At her core, Dr Alexander is more than just a doctor. She is a teacher, a mentor, a believer, a nurturer, and above all, a source of hope for countless children and their families. Her story reminds us that healing is not only about medicine, but also about compassion, service, and a heart deeply committed to making the world a gentler place.



Photo: Stephen Collett

Dr Deepa Alexander brings warmth and unwavering compassion to every child she treats.

He is not quite sure whether he chose neurosurgery or whether it chose him. What he does know, however, is that the field – defined by its complexity, precision, and profound impact – felt like a natural fit. It is a place where science, skill, and compassion meet.

Prof Anton van Aswegen, Head of the Department of Neurosurgery at the UFS and the Academic Hospitals Complex, says neurosurgery suits his personality. “I’m someone who strives for perfection.”

In his current role, Prof Van Aswegen provides both academic leadership and clinical oversight, ensuring the highest standards in patient care, teaching, and research. It is a dynamic mix of responsibility that requires dedication, adaptability, and an unwavering sense of purpose.

### Passions

Although no two days are the same, a typical day for him starts at 04:20 with a trip to the gym, followed by ward rounds, consultations, surgeries, and academic responsibilities. He also engages in strategic planning, departmental meetings, and mentoring students

and registrars. His passions run deep – quality neurosurgical care, adolescent oncology, mentoring young doctors, and building health-care systems that serve both patients and professionals.

According to Prof Van Aswegen, he finds inspiration in the words of Mother Teresa: “Work is love made visible.” It is a quote that resonates with him. “It reminds me that passion isn’t just about what we do – it’s about how we do it. It’s about showing love through the work we offer to others.”

While he introduces himself simply as Anton, the work he does is anything but ordinary. He is motivated by the opportunity to make a meaningful difference – to heal, to teach, and to push the boundaries of a demanding discipline. The weight of responsibility, complex cases, student development, and systemic health-care challenges keep him up at night. It stays with him long after he leaves the hospital.

Prof Van Aswegen describes himself as a committed professional, a lifelong learner, and someone deeply rooted in integrity, empathy, and excellence. “I try to lead with purpose and serve with heart,” he says.

## Precision, passion, and purpose: the story of Prof Anton van Aswegen

By André Damons

### More than medicine

While his professional life is demanding, Prof Van Aswegen makes time for what brings him joy: his family, his community, and creative outlets that feed his spirit. “I enjoy spending time with my loved ones and supporting causes that matter – especially those related to adolescent oncology,” he says, referring to his continued involvement with the Adolescent Oncology Unit at the National Hospital.

When he is not in surgery or the classroom, Prof Van Aswegen finds balance in music, nature, and creative pursuits. “I enjoy making jewellery – not because I’m good at it, but because it’s grounding to create something with your hands,” he says. He also enjoys writing, classical music, and history, and jokes that he is “a very enthusiastic but very average cyclist.”

“Teaching has always been close to my heart, and I’ve always been curious about how things work, how systems fit together.” That same curiosity continues to drive his work today. Whether it is understanding a complex surgical case, mentoring a student, or finding new ways to improve health-care delivery, Prof Van Aswegen approaches each challenge with thoughtfulness, energy, and heart. ■

## Two tree-planting initiatives strengthen sustainability roots at the UFS

By Martinette Brits

Jeminah Seqela from Food and Trees for Africa demonstrates proper tree planting techniques during the launch of the Greener SA project at the Paradys Experimental Farm.

Tree planting at the university represents far more than beautification – it symbolises growth, learning, and a shared responsibility towards a sustainable future.

### Growing climate-resilient futures

At the Paradys Experimental Farm, the UFS hosted the launch of the Greener SA initiative, which forms part of the Transforming African Agricultural Universities to Meaningfully Contribute to Africa’s Growth and Development (TAGDev 2.0) programme. It focuses on improving higher agricultural education through better training, research, and innovation; creating equal work and entrepreneurship opportunities for young women and men in agriculture; and supporting climate-smart farming. Implemented through RUFORUM and the MasterCard Foundation, this 10-year initiative spans 12 African universities, with national impact in South Africa and continental reach across partner institutions.

Led at the UFS by Prof Jan Willem Swanepoel, the project seeks to establish a long-term, integrated approach to tree planting that not only restores ecosystems but also enhances agricultural productivity and empowers youth. Over the next five years, approximately 400 000 trees will be planted across agricultural and community sites in South Africa, with the Paradys Experimental Farm serving as both a demonstration hub and training site. The trees being planted include a diverse mix of indigenous species – such as karee, wild plum, and yellowwood – alongside fruit-bearing and fodder trees that contribute to food security, livestock nutrition, and ecosystem resilience.

“This project demonstrates how we can use agricultural education and research to respond meaningfully to climate challenges while creating economic opportunities,” said Prof Swanepoel.

Partnering with Food and Trees for Africa, the Department of Agriculture, and the Empact Group – which sponsored the first 100 trees planted during the launch – the initiative brought together students, staff, youth leaders, and community members.

### Seeds of hope on the Bloemfontein Campus

University Estates hosted a tree-planting ceremony on the Bloemfontein Campus as part of National Arbour Week. Richard Williamson, Chief Environmental Impact Officer in University Estates, said “The initiative aligns with the university’s commitment to greening the campus, enhancing biodiversity, and creating a healthier, more resilient environment for students, staff, and visitors.”

The event was led by Prof Hester C. Klopper, Vice-Chancellor and Principal, and Susan van Jaarsveld, acting Chief Operations Officer. Williamson said, “Including Prof Klopper and Van Jaarsveld gave top leadership an opportunity to also be part of such greening initiatives. It was also symbolic, as trees represent growth and hope for the future; a lasting reminder of the legacy they will leave at the UFS.”

The white karee (*Searsia pendulina*) trees selected for planting were chosen for their resilience and suitability to the local environment. “This tree also has a strong resilience to drought and wind, along with its attractive growth habit, and this makes it a popular choice for landscaping at the university,” said Williamson.

“The trees that were planted at this event will contribute to improved air quality, support local habitats, reduce stormwater runoff, and create shaded spaces on the Bloemfontein Campus,” he added. ■



# Bridging theory and practice through innovation; shedding light on Micro Classes

By Dr Nitha Ramnath

The South Campus has introduced an innovative Micro Classes initiative to enhance the practical training of student teachers in the Department of Childhood Education. The idea emerged after the department's relocation, which highlighted the absence of suitable facilities for hands-on teaching practice. Recognising the urgency to bridge this gap, the classes were introduced to simulate authentic classroom environments where students can apply theory to practice.

What makes this initiative particularly innovative is its interactive, small-group design, which mirrors real classroom dynamics. Students have the opportunity to teach lessons, reflect on their performance, and receive immediate feedback from peers and lecturers, all before entering actual school settings. This approach cultivates confidence, adaptability, and professional competence among aspiring teachers.

"The initiative has already received enthusiastic support from students and campus structures alike. During visits by the Teaching Practice Directorate and the Student Council, the project was lauded for

its forward-thinking approach and tangible benefits," highlighted Prof Thutukile Jita, Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education. Student participation has been exceptional, with full attendance recorded during training sessions. Many expressed that the micro classes effectively bridged the gap between university learning and the realities of the classroom.

Early outcomes indicate a notable improvement in lesson planning, classroom management, and learner engagement skills among participants. School mentors have also observed that students from the UFS demonstrate greater readiness for teaching placements compared to before the introduction of microteaching.

Sustainability remains at the heart of the project. The micro classes are now an integral part of the teaching practice programme, with expansion and enhancement already underway across the Bloemfontein and Qwaqwa Campuses. By institutionalising this model, the UFS continues to lead innovative educational practices that prepare future teachers not only to teach, but also to inspire. ■

According to Prof Jita, the micro classes were lauded for its forward-thinking approach and tangible benefits.

Pictured is Princess Morafo, Coordinator of the Foundation Phase Programme.

Photo: Stephen Collett

When Dr Gladys Belle took on the challenge of becoming a first-time principal investigator (PI) while still a postdoctoral researcher, she had little idea that the experience would redefine her understanding of research, leadership, and innovation. Now appointed as a contract researcher in the Centre for Mineral Biogeochemistry (CMBG), she reflects on a journey marked by growth, adaptability, and a commitment to creating meaningful impact.

## Stepping into leadership

For Dr Belle, stepping into the role of a PI for the Water Research Commission (WRC) project was about more than managing research – it was about embracing the unknown and learning to lead with purpose.

## Dr Gladys Belle on innovation and impact in research

By Onthatile Tikoe

Photo: Supplied

"Managing a medium-sized project for the first time pushed me well beyond my comfort zone," she explains. "I quickly realised that research is not only about experiments and data, but about people, systems, and the collective pursuit of meaningful impact."

This openness to new experiences became a foundation for innovation in her work. With mentorship from Prof Paul Oberholster, Dean of the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences, Dr Belle has learned to move beyond self-imposed limits and explore every opportunity for growth. Her curiosity has led her to develop new skills in proposal writing, budgeting, and collaboration – skills she describes as essential to transforming ideas on paper into real-world impact. "Each new project teaches me something different," she says. "It's never just about the science; it's also about how we grow as people through the process."

For Dr Belle, innovation is not confined to laboratory discoveries. It begins in the way researchers plan, communicate, and work together. "Innovation in research management is less about what we find and more about how we operate," she says. "It involves finding smarter ways to plan and adapt and creating an environment where new ideas can flourish." By fostering collaboration and encouraging her team to think creatively, she has seen innovation become part of her team's everyday rhythm, where curiosity and confidence thrive side by side.

## Lessons for the future

Her research on pharmaceuticals of emerging concern during the COVID-19 pandemic reflects both scientific and social impact. The findings contribute to improved water quality management and inform policy and public awareness around safe medicine disposal. Through collaboration with experts across disciplines, her project has enhanced technical skills, built research capacity, and inspired young scientists to see themselves as agents of change.

Reflecting on her journey, Dr Belle notes, "Leadership is not about control; it is about connection. When your team understands why the work matters, innovation and impact follow naturally." ■

Dr Gladys Belle, contract researcher in the Centre for Mineral Biogeochemistry.





# Audrey Maringa's work preserving the past, inspiring the future

By Igno van Niekerk

When Audrey Maringa received news that she had been awarded the CODESRIA Indigenous and Alternative Knowledge Fellowship, she knew it was more than just an academic opportunity. It was a chance to bring long-overlooked histories and healing traditions into the spotlight.

The fellowship, offered by the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) in partnership with the Mastercard Foundation, honours the legacy of the late Ghanaian intellectual Dr Sulley Gariba, who passionately advocated for the recognition of African knowledge systems. Over the course

of seven months, fellows like Audrey participate in induction workshops, fieldwork, and dissemination activities designed to strengthen partnerships between academics and custodians of indigenous knowledge.

For Audrey, the fellowship connects with her own research focus. "In Zimbabwe, there is a rich but largely undocumented history of how communities have relied on their indigenous knowledge in health and healing, particularly in the treatment of sexually transmitted diseases such as syphilis," she explains. While existing medical histories often emphasise colonial health-care systems and Western biomedicine, Audrey's work restores African voices and agency to the narrative.

Her research shows that African communities were not merely passive recipients of colonial medicine, but active practitioners of their own pharmacopoeia that continues to support well-being today. By placing indigenous healing practices at the centre of historical study, Audrey aims to broaden understanding of Zimbabwe's medical past and inspire future scholarship on other conditions such as cancer and HIV/Aids.

The CODESRIA AFRIAK Fellowship is innovative not only in its subject matter but also in its method. By encouraging collaboration across disciplines and engaging communities as co-producers of knowledge, the programme challenges the traditional model of research. "One of the most meaningful insights for me," Audrey shares, "was hearing Dr Godwin Murunga, CODESRIA's Executive Secretary, emphasise the importance of treating indigenous knowledge bearers not just as participants relegated to a footnote, but as equal partners in knowledge creation."

The fellowship has also provided her with the chance to connect with scholars, scientists, and representatives from indigenous forums, offering a broader view of how indigenous knowledge is applied beyond health and healing. These exchanges, Audrey believes, are essential to shaping research that is both academically rigorous and socially relevant.

Looking ahead, Audrey hopes her work will contribute to preserving African heritage while influencing modern health systems to integrate indigenous practices. "I want people to recognise the importance and efficacy of indigenous knowledge," she says. "By valuing it, we not only protect our cultural heritage, but also create space for more holistic approaches to health and well-being."

Audrey's journey is a reminder that knowledge, in all its forms, has the power to heal, connect, and transform. ■

Research by Audrey Maringa shows that African communities were not merely passive recipients of colonial medicine, but active practitioners of their own pharmacopoeia.

Photo: Stephan Collett



Photos: Stephen Collett



## What's for lunch?

By Gerda-Marié van Rooyen

Food is fuel. And it is all the better if it is healthy food. Thanks to the various cuisine options available on all three UFS campuses, there should be no reason for anyone to skip lunch or wolf down something with little nutritional value.

Bloemfontein staff can enjoy a healthy lunch at a different venue every day of the week. Each of the various dining halls (at the Faculty of Health Sciences and House Abraham Fisher) has a different meal of the day available. This includes meat, starch, and vegetables at R60 per plate. Regular takeaway standards such as fish and chips and hamburgers are also available. Those with a meaty appetite can feast on ribs or chicken wings. Best of all, no one needs to book in advance, says Ilze Nikolova from Housing and Residence Affairs, who is overseeing catering on the Bloemfontein and South Campuses.

The Bloemfontein Campus-based

Awela Restaurant features an updated menu tailored to customers' latest food preferences. "For breakfast, guests can select from both light and hearty dishes, while lunch features a rotating selection of wholesome traditional and contemporary fare," says Tokelo Modise, Head Barista and Assistant Officer at Awela. The menu also accommodates calorie-conscious diners with lighter meals, grilled proteins, fresh salads, and vegetarian choices. "Awela is more than just a restaurant – it is a warm, welcoming place that blends quality meals, excellent service, and an atmosphere where guests can relax, network, and recharge," Modise adds.

The Thakaneng Bridge is home to Treats, WOW Food, Steers, and Outliers, among others. The latter offers a variety of smoothies, shakes, ice creams, and coffees. "I once enjoyed the best ice cream I've ever had (at Outliers). It's something different," says Sibongile Mongane, Senior Assistant Officer in Short

**No staff member should settle for a dull lunch – the Thakaneng Bridge and campus dining halls serve up flavour, variety, and something for every craving.**

Learning Programmes. Wow Food offers a diverse selection of fast-food options. Here, customers can order and pay using an automated system.

Dining@Kovsies on the South Campus caters to students and staff, including vegetarians and those with other food requirements. These options range from a vegetarian burger to meat-free wraps.

Dumelo Thakeli, owner of the Dining Hall on the Qwaqwa Campus, says for only R45 per plate, customers will be served with an option of three meats, two starches, two vegetables, and a salad. Other options include beef, fish, chicken, and pork plates, tripe, bunny chows, and cold treats such as fruity tubes. ■





# From purpose to impact:

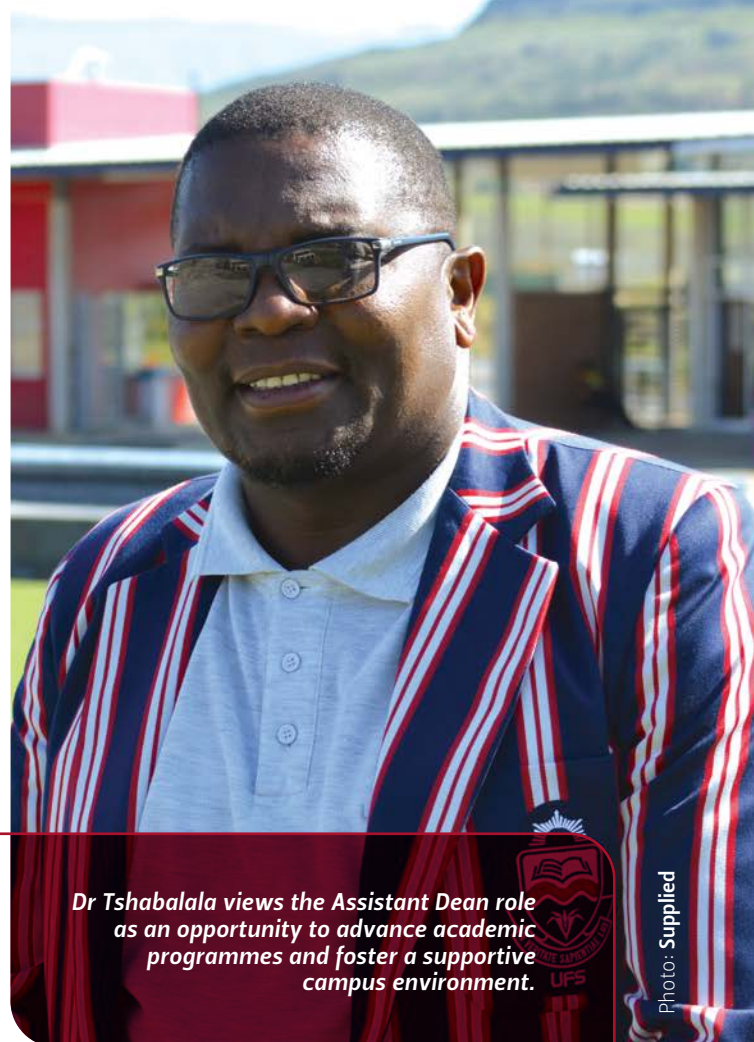
## Dr Tshabalala's journey to help students thrive

By Precious Shamase

The UFS Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences (NAS) on the Qwaqwa Campus is thrilled to introduce its newly appointed Assistant Dean, Dr Kamohelo George Tshabalala. Dr Tshabalala steps into this leadership role, bringing a wealth of experience and a deep-seated commitment to student success, academic excellence, and inclusive campus development. His appointment heralds an exciting new chapter for the faculty, reinforcing the UFS' dedication to quality education and institutional growth.

Dr Tshabalala's journey to higher education administration is rooted in a desire "to make a positive impact on students' lives and contribute to the growth and development of academic institutions". This passion has been the driving force throughout his career, which has seen him excel in various roles that are crucial to the student experience.

His preparation for the role of Assistant Dean is comprehensive, drawing on diverse expertise across the academic landscape. He has experience in academic advising, working closely with students on course selection, degree planning, and career exploration to help them achieve their goals. Furthermore, his involvement in student affairs, including work on student organisations and mentorship programmes (such as the Faculty Student Council), demonstrates a commitment to enhancing student engagement, retention, and overall success. A key asset is his background in academic staff development, where he collaborated with faculty members on the Curriculum Renewal Programme, focusing on designing and implementing innovative curricula, pedagogies, and assessment strategies.



Dr Tshabalala views the Assistant Dean role as an opportunity to advance academic programmes and foster a supportive campus environment.

Photo: Supplied

Dr Tshabalala's inaugural goals align with a holistic vision for academic excellence and student success. His priorities include building strong relationships across campus, supporting programme development, and enhancing engagement, retention, and graduation rates. He is especially focused on academic staff development, student support, and fostering diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Recognising challenges such as mental health and inclusive campus culture, he plans to meet regularly with student leaders, support student organisations, and implement programmes that reflect the university's mission.

He plans to support the well-being and development of lecturing staff by providing resources, fostering a collaborative environment, and recognising and rewarding excellence for outstanding contributions to teaching, research, and service.

Beyond his professional life, Dr KG – as he is fondly known among his peers – is a vibrant individual with a passion for music, hiking, soccer, and reading. Professionally, he is unwavering in his commitment to advancing academic excellence, diversity, and inclusivity. The faculty and the campus are confident that Dr Tshabalala will be an instrumental leader in achieving the faculty's shared goals and ensuring a thriving future for all students and staff. We extend a hearty welcome to him in this new and exciting chapter. ■



# How the CGC transforms communities through innovative and impactful research

By Leonie Bolleurs

The Centre for Global Change (CGC) on the Qwaqwa Campus has grown in just a few years into one of South Africa's leading global change centres, addressing pressing environmental and social challenges while training the next generation of researchers. Today, 43 students, including honours, master's, PhD, and two postdocs, are engaged in CGC-linked projects, making the CGC at the UFS the largest student cohort among South Africa's five centres for global change. According to Prof Patrick Otomo, Director of the CGC, staff has also expanded significantly.

He explains that it was a deliberate choice to make community engagement central to every student project. All centre-led projects must include a strong research component, since the CGC is first and foremost a research hub.

Mycofiltration for clean water, led by Dr Sanele Mnkandla, is one such project. It uses thatching straw and the common oyster mushroom, *Pleurotus ostreatus*, to filter harmful chemicals from contaminated water in laboratory and field trials. In time, an upscaled version of the mycofilter will be applied to rainwater harvesting in local communities.

This project, led by Dr Sello Sele in partnership with Prof Jiwnath Ghimire from Iowa State University (USA), shows how access to safe, reliable, and affordable transport affects academic performance and well-being. Insights drawn from students' lived experiences

will be used to design more inclusive and supportive solutions.

In another project with Prof Ghimire, Dr Katlego Mashiane is guiding research that uses satellite imagery and GIS tools to assess water quality in mountainous river systems. By comparing image-based analysis with physical samples, the project aims to refine remote sensing technologies to create sustainable and cost-effective water monitoring methods, reducing the need for traditional field testing.

The Green Steps Initiative adds an energy focus to the CGC's portfolio. In partnership with Green X Engineering a (Stellenbosch University) business research hub company, smart meters were recently installed in three local

schools to track the schools' energy use in real time. The data enables schools to cut electricity costs, boost efficiency, and reduce their carbon footprint through sustainable interventions.

The project, Brushstrokes of the Eastern Free State, examines how rural visual artists in the Thabo Mofutsanyana district use art to interpret and respond to social challenges. This initiative culminated in an exhibition at the Nelson Mandela Hall on the Qwaqwa Campus.

From water filtration and transport to art and energy efficiency, the CGC demonstrates how research rooted in community needs can be both innovative and impactful, leading to lasting change. ■

Students and researchers from the Centre for Global Change are working with local schools on the Green Steps Initiative, a project linking classroom learning to real-world energy solutions.





# UFS staff shine at SAUSSWA Annual Sports Competition in Gqeberha

By Igno van Niekerk

If you were anywhere near Nelson Mandela University in Gqeberha during October, you would have felt the buzz, and no, it wasn't just the sea breeze. The inaugural South African Universities Staff Sport and Wellness Association (SAUSSWA) Annual Universities Staff Sports Competition brought together colleagues from across the country for four days of energy, competition, and camaraderie.

Representing the UFS was our very own UFS Staff Sports Association (UFSSSA), a proud team comprising largely service workers – 76% of its members hail from Protection Services, University Estates, and Housing and Residence Affairs. With three sporting codes on our plate – volleyball, netball, and soccer – our athletes carried the Kopsie spirit onto the courts and fields, giving it their all against some tough opposition.

And tough it was. Ten universities took part, including Nelson Mandela University (our gracious hosts), Sol Plaatje University (last year's volleyball champions), Central University of Technology, University of Limpopo, the University of Fort Hare, CPUT, UWC, DUT, VUT, and UJ. Each team came prepared, but the UFS athletes rose to the challenge – pushing hard in every match, building on last year's proud second-place finish, and proving once again that Kopsie staff can compete with the best at national level.

But this tournament was never just about medals. For many, the real prize was the chance to travel, meet colleagues from other universities, and benchmark

*UFS staff bring home pride and spirit after the SAUSSWA Annual Sports Competition in Gqeberha.*

experiences in a relaxed and supportive environment. As interim Chairperson MJ Vezi put it: "These games created an opportunity for our staff members to interact with colleagues from other universities and connect in the safe space of sport."

The value of this annual tournament goes beyond the scoreboard. It is about wellness, camaraderie, and celebrating the diversity and talents of staff who may not always get the spotlight. It is also about encouragement – Vezi and the team continue to call on more UFS staff to join UFSSSA, so that even more sporting codes can be represented in future tournaments.

For just R50 per month, UFSSSA membership provides staff with access to sporting and recreational activities, as well as the opportunity to represent the UFS colours on a national stage. And judging by the spirit on display in Gqeberha, the journey is only just beginning.

Here's to stronger teams, healthier lifestyles, and many more shared victories to come! 🏆