

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

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FROM THE EDITOR

A shared direction taking shape

There are moments in the life of a university when it becomes necessary to pause and take a closer look at what is emerging – not in theory, but in practice.

Across the University of the Free State, there is a growing shift in how we think about our work and its purpose. This is visible in conversations, in priorities, and in the questions that we are beginning to ask more consistently.

These questions increasingly centre on how the university contributes meaningfully to Responsible Societal Futures – through teaching and learning, research, engagement, and the way we respond to the realities around us.

As Prof Hester C. Klopper has emphasised in recent engagements, the direction of the university is not only carried by strategy documents, but also by how it is interpreted and lived out across different roles and spaces.

This edition of *Dumela* offers glimpses into how that shared direction is taking shape across the institution. Some stories are visible in major initiatives and achievements. Others unfold more quietly in classrooms, support spaces, laboratories, and communities.

Together, they reflect a university community that is increasingly focused on work that creates value beyond the institution itself and contributes to a more just, sustainable, and inclusive future. ■

EDITOR
CHRISTELLE DU TOIT

VAN DIE REDAKTEUR

'n Gedeelde rigting neem vorm aan

Daar is oomblikke in die lewe van 'n universiteit se bestaan wanneer dit nodig word om stil te staan en van nader te kyk na wat besig is om te gebeur – nie in teorie nie, maar in praktyk.

Oor die Universiteit van die Vrystaat heen is daar 'n groeiende verandering in die manier waarop ons dink oor ons werk en oor die doel daarvan. Dit is sigbaar in gesprekke, in prioriteite en in die vrae wat ons meer gereeld begin vra.

Hierdie vrae fokus toenemend op hoe die universiteit betekenisvol bydra tot Verantwoordelike Maatskaplike

Toekomst – deur onderrig en leer, navorsing, betrokkenheid, en die manier waarop ons op die realiteite rondom ons reageer.

Soos prof Hester C. Klopper by onlangse geleenthede beklemtoon het, word die rigting van die universiteit nie net deur strategiese dokumente oorgedra nie, maar ook deur hoe dit oor verskillende rolle en ruimtes heen geïnterpreteer en uitgeleef word.

Hierdie uitgawe van *Dumela* bied 'n vlugtige blik op die manier waarop daardie gedeelde rigting regoor die instelling begin vorm aanneem. Sommige verhale is sigbaar in belangrike inisiatiewe en prestasies. Ander ontvou meer stilweg in klaskamers, ondersteuningsruimtes, laboratoriums en gemeenskappe.

Saam weerspieël hulle 'n universiteitsgemeenskap wat toenemend gefokus is op werk wat waarde skep buite die instelling self en wat bydra tot 'n meer regverdige, volhoubare en inklusiewe toekoms. ■

REDAKTEUR
CHRISTELLE DU TOIT

HO TSWA HO MOQOLOTSI

Tsela e arolelanweng, e ntseng e bopa

Ho na le dinako bophelong ba yunivesithi moo ho hlokalang hore re emise, re shebe ka hloko seo se ntseng se hlaha – eseng ka kgopolo-taba feela, empa ka tshebetso.

Yunivesithing ya Free State, ho na le phetoho e ntseng e hola ya tsela eo re nahanang ka mosebetsi oa rona le morero wa yona. E bonahala moqoqong, dinthong tse tlang pele, le dipotsong tseo re qalang ho di botsa ka mokgwa o tsitsitseng. Botjha, dipotso tse na di shebana le hore na yunivesithi e kenya letsoho jwang ka mokgwa o utlokwahalang ho Responsible Societal Futures – ka ho ruta le ho ithuta, dipatlisiso, boitlamo, le tsela eo re arabelang nnete e re potileng ka yona.

Jwalokaha Moprofesa Hester C. Klopper a hatelletse dipuisanong tsa morao tjena, tataiso ya yunivesithi ha e tsamaiswe feela ke ditokomane tsa maano, empa ke tsela eo e hlalotswang le ho phethahatswa mesebetsing le dibakeng tse fapaneng. Kgatiso ena ya *Dumela* e fana ka pono e nyenyane ya hore na tsela ena e arolelanweng e ntse e bopa jwang ho pholletsa le setheo. Ditaba tse ding di bonahala mererong e meholo le dikatlehong. Tse ding di etsahala ka kgutso dikamore tsa ho ruta, dibakeng tsa tshehetso, dilaborating le setjhabeng.

Kaofela, di bontsha setjhaba sa yunivesithi se ntseng

se tsepamisa maikutlo mosebetsing o hlalising boleng bo fetang setheo ka bo sona, mme o kenya letsoho bokamosong bo nang le toka, bo tsitsitseng le bo kenyeletsang bohle. ■

MOHLOPHISI
CHRISTELLE DU TOIT

KUSUKA KUMHLELI

Indlela ehanjwa ndawonye, ithatha igxathu

Kuba nezikhawu empilweni yase nyuvesi lapho kuba nesidingo khona sokuthatha umzuzwana bese sibukisisa lokho okusimamayo – hhayi ngokukuxoxa kodwa ngokubheka imisebenzi ephathekayo.

KwiNyuvesi yase-Free State iyonke, kunoguquko olukhulayo endleni esicabanga ngayo ngomsebenzi wethu nenhloso yawo. Akuhlezi kuyinto emenyazelwayo noma ekhonjwayo, yinto ebonakalayo ezingxoxweni, ezintweni ezibaluleke kakhulu, kanye nasemibuzweni esesiqala ukuzibuza yona manje namanje.

Okugqama kakhulu ukuthi, le mibuzo iqondene ngqo nokuthi inyuvesi isifaka kanjani isandla ekuqhakambiseni Umphakathi Ozimiselayo Wesikhathi Esizayo – ngezimo zokufunda nokufundisa, ukwenza ucwaningo, ukuhlanganyela ngokwezinxoxo, nangendlela esibhekana ngayo nezimo zempilo ezibhekene nathi.

Njengoba uSlz. Hester C. Klopper eke agcizelela ezingxoxweni-kuhlanganyela ezedule, indlela-mgomo yenyuvesi ayilele emibhalweni yezinqubomasu, ilele ekutheni ihunyushwa kanjani futhi iphilwa kanjani ezindimeni nasezindaweni ezehlukahlukene.

Le ngosi ye-*Dumela* ayihlosile ukuzama ukuchasisa le ndlela ngokugcwele. Kunalokho, inika isigabakugabisa sesethulo ekutheni le ndlela ehanjwa ngokubambisana iqala kanjani ukuthatha igxathu kwinyuvesi jikelele. Ezinye zalezi zindatshana zixoxa ngezinto ezibonakala bukhoma. Ezinye zigqama buthule emaklasini, emahhosi abheke imisebenzi yansuku-zonke, emalabhorethi kanye nasemiphakathini.

Sezisonke ziqala ukwakha isithombe senyuvesi egxile emsebenzini oleda ukubaluleka okwedlula isikhungo qobo lwaso ziphinde zilekelele ukwakha iksasa eliqhakazile elibandakanya wonke umuntu. ■

KUBEKA UMHLELI
CHRISTELLE DU TOIT





ABOUT THE COVER

When art makes us pause

The cover features the exhibition *what remains through time, slowness and stillness*. The work explores how art can pause everyday rhythms, encouraging reflection on memory, identity, and the histories that continue to shape society. Read the article on p. 28.



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



What does 'Responsible Societal Futures' look like at the UFS?

By *Christelle du Toit*

A lecturer redesigns a module around case studies from the Free State. A researcher asks how findings can be applied beyond an academic journal. A staff member improves the registration process because a smoother system can change a student's entire experience of university.

Across the University of the Free State (UFS), these everyday decisions are beginning to reflect a clearer institutional direction: connecting academic work more deliberately to the realities people face beyond campus.

The concept of contributing meaningfully to responsible societal futures sits at the centre of the university's strategic vision, but its meaning is becoming visible in practical ways across faculties, support divisions, and research environments.

For Prof Hester C. Klopper, Vice-Chancellor and Principal, the idea is grounded in daily institutional practice rather than broad statements.

"Responsible societal futures are shaped by the choices we make every day – how we teach, how we support students, how we lead, and how we respond to the realities around us," she says.

In some faculties, curriculum renewal initiatives are helping students connect theory to challenges such as healthcare access, sustainability, and food security. In research spaces, academics are increasingly considering application and community relevance earlier in the research process.

There is also growing recognition of the work that happens behind the scenes. Administrative systems, digital platforms, and student support services all influence how effectively students move through the university environment. When these systems function well, they create conditions that allow teaching and learning to succeed.

This broader understanding of institutional impact formed part of Prof Klopper's installation theme last year: *walking with purpose*.

"For me, this is about alignment," she explains. "When teaching, research, and operations support the same institutional direction, we begin to see the effect not only on our students, but also in the communities connected to the university."

The way this takes shape differs across the institution. For some staff members, it is reflected in preparing graduates for changing workplaces. For others, it lies in improving systems, strengthening partnerships, or expanding access to opportunities.

In many cases, this work is already happening across the UFS. What is changing is that it is becoming more visible as part of a shared institutional focus: building a university that connects knowledge, people, and practice in ways that contribute meaningfully to society. 





Prof Francois Strydom, Senior Director:
Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) at the UFS.



Vukona Baloyi, Institutional Student Representative
Council (ISRC): Academic at the UFS.

Click here to visit
the Academy for
Multilingualism website



Click here to visit the
Centre for Teaching and
Learning website



UFS embraces an impactful and responsive teaching and learning approach

By Anthony Mthembu

From accessible translanguaging tutorials made possible by the Academy for Multilingualism in collaboration with the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL), to initiatives that expose students to industry, the UFS' teaching and learning offering has been described as unique by staff, students, and alumni alike.

According to Vukona Baloyi, Institutional Student Representative Council (ISRC): Academics at the UFS, part of what makes the institution's teaching and learning offering unique is its ability to prepare students for the socio-economic challenges they might encounter. Baloyi explained that this is done by cultivating a strong sense of consciousness and accountability. "Students are challenged to engage with issues such as inequality, access to education, and economic participation, while also being equipped with practical skills to address these challenges. This balance between intellectual development and social awareness ensures that graduates are both capable and responsive," he said.

Prof Anthea Rhoda, Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Academic, and Prof Francois Strydom, Senior Director of CTL, echoed these sentiments, highlighting that the UFS has an evidence-based approach to the development and integration of graduate attributes into the curriculum;

these attributes are aligned with the expectation of today's employers.

A key area that distinguishes the UFS' teaching and learning offering is its embedding of the responsible societal futures framework into said offering. According to Prof Strydom, in practice this includes "real-world examples being incorporated into the content of what is presented in modules, as well as access to practical and service-learning opportunities that allow students an opportunity to address challenges facing society".

Therefore, Baloyi explained that this approach creates a learning environment where students are not only consumers of knowledge, but active participants in shaping solutions within their communities.

The Curriculum Renewal Programme (CRP) can also be attributed as one of the initiatives that allow for the successful implementation of the RSF. In fact, Prof Strydom highlighted that the programme empowers academics with a cutting-edge approach to teaching and learning and enables staff to address challenges such as student engagement – and to create significant learning experiences that integrate societal and future challenges. According to Baloyi, it is through this holistic approach that UFS graduates are not only academically competent, but also socially responsible. ■



Prof Anthea Rhoda, Deputy Vice-Chancellor:
Academic.

Photos: Supplied

Behind every published article, successful grant, and completed thesis lies a layer of work that few people ever see. It runs quietly in the background, connecting people, processes, and information.

For Maricel van Rooyen, Project Manager: RIMS and Ethics in the Directorate Research Development, the work centres on a collective effort that enables research to run smoothly across the institution.

"When I explain InfoEd – our service provider – and RIMS to colleagues outside the research environment, I usually describe it as the digital backbone that supports the full research life cycle at the university," Van Rooyen says. "But it only works because of the people behind it."

Prof Vasu Reddy, Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research, Innovation and Postgraduate Studies, says, "Excellent research doesn't happen by chance. It is sustained by people, trustworthy systems, and a culture of shared responsibility working quietly behind the scenes."

The Research Information Management System (RIMS) brings together funding opportunities, ethics approvals, publications, and reporting into one trusted, integrated environment. This has real impact. Researchers spend less time on administration. Managers have access to accurate, real-time insights, and the institution can meet national reporting requirements.

According to Prof Reddy, "RIMS is more than a platform; it is the digital backbone that protects the integrity, credibility, and continuity of research at our university."

"The maturity of RIMS did not happen by accident; it is the result of sustained attention to detail, strong governance, and continuous improvement and support from my Senior Director, Dr Glen Taylor, at DRD, as well as my RIMS team," Van Rooyen notes.

A team that extends far beyond a single office. Collaboration links research administration, IT, finance, libraries, and compliance, ensuring that the system remains stable and continues to serve researchers without disruption.

This shared ownership is also what protects the integrity of the university's research data. Stability is important, particularly when it comes to national reporting and funding. "A stable system ensures that our data is traceable, auditable, and consistent over time," says Van Rooyen, adding that it also builds trust.

At a time when many institutions are facing continuous system disruptions, the UFS approach stands out for its consistency and long-term commitment. Rather than chasing quick fixes, the focus has remained on strengthening a single, integrated platform, with InfoEd playing a key role as the university's service provider. "We committed early on to InfoEd and invested in fully embedding it into the research environment. That consistency and long-term commitment is what allows the system to support the university effectively," she notes.

Looking ahead, the team is exploring how thoughtful innovation, including AI, can further strengthen data quality, reduce administrative burden, and support better decision-making. Van Rooyen says, "The future is about careful evolution. We want to enhance what we have without compromising the stability that people rely on."

Prof Reddy adds, "RIMS, strengthened by thoughtful use of AI, works best because of the people behind it – professionals who safeguard quality, ethics, and continuity in our research enterprise. Our focus remains clear: technology must amplify human expertise, reduce burden, and always serve the researcher with integrity." ■

The people and systems sustaining research at the UFS

By Leonie Bolleurs

Maricel van Rooyen, whose work with the RIMS team supports reliable, integrated research management across the UFS.



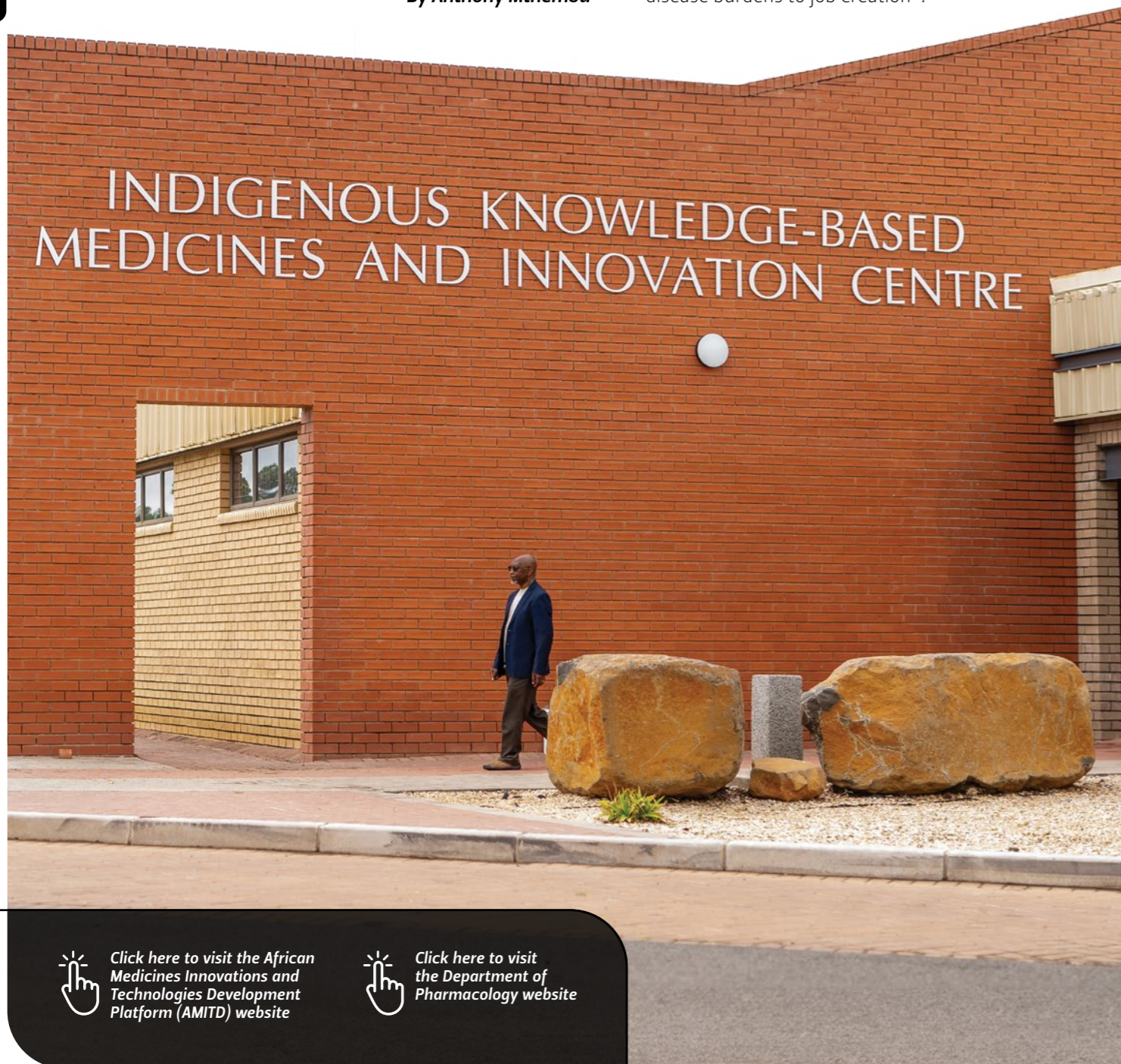


UFS research offering stands out: blending innovation and collaboration

By Anthony Mthembu

Ranked as one of the leading research institutions in South Africa, the University of the Free State (UFS) is recognised for its strength in several research areas.

According to Prof Vasu Reddy, Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research, Innovation and Postgraduate Studies at the UFS, what makes the institution unique is, “our ability to move research from community knowledge, through rigorous science, to products that change lives. Our research doesn’t sit on shelves; it responds to Africa’s most pressing challenges – from disease burdens to job creation”.



Photos: Supplied

- 1 Prof Motlalepula Matsabisa** is spearheading the African Medicines Innovations and Technologies Development Platform (AMITD) to advance indigenous knowledge and traditional medicine research.
- 2 Prof Vasu Reddy** highlights how UFS research responds to Africa’s most pressing challenges and delivers solutions that improve lives.
- 3 Prof Melanie Walker** is leading collaborative research on higher education and human development across sub-Saharan Africa.



as cancer, pain and inflammation, Alzheimer’s, hypertension, and diabetes. In addition, the platform is involved in developing immune-modulating products to aid in the fight against infectious diseases such as pulmonary tuberculosis, and to contribute towards the fight and development of new and better-acting drugs for malaria in the region, among other projects.

A culture of collaboration

Prof Reddy also explained that what distinguishes the UFS is its culture of collaboration in as far as innovation and research are concerned. Prof Melanie Walker, who hold the National Research Foundation (NRF) SARCHI Research Chair in Higher Education and Human Development at the UFS, echoed these sentiments, indicating that “our research group includes participants from across sub-Saharan Africa”. This ensures that completed doctoral work and research projects are making a substantial and significant contribution to African scholarship, as well as to the institution’s impact in the global arena.

With this in mind, Prof Walker explained that the Higher Education and Human Development Research group is currently engaged in critical research. This includes climate and nature emergency, exploring indigenous cosmologies in conversation with capabilities to develop and understand what ecological education in universities could do, and how we think relationally about human and non-human lives. Consequently, Prof Reddy stated that it is through platforms such as these that the UFS produces research that ultimately influences policy and improves lives. ■

In fact, one of the institution’s dominant research areas is traditional medicines and indigenous knowledge systems (IKS), spearheaded by the African Medicines Innovations and Technologies Development Platform (AMITD) within the Department of Pharmacology at the UFS.

A unique research offering

According to Prof Motlalepula Matsabisa, Professor of Pharmacology at the UFS, the platform is involved in “continuous, peer-reviewed, cutting-edge pharmacology research to understand how indigenous medical knowledge and the massive biodiversity can be leveraged to add quality value to society, contribute to formal economies, and provide measurable improvement in the daily quality of life of ordinary people”.

Therefore, some of the research initiatives undertaken by the platform include using traditional knowledge and medicinal plants to create new health solutions and products to fight national priority diseases such



Click here to visit the African Medicines Innovations and Technologies Development Platform (AMITD) website



Click here to visit the Department of Pharmacology website



Imagining responsible societal futures

By Gerda-Marie van Rooyen



What do responsible societal futures look like, and how do we create it? At the University of the Free State, it begins with each of us taking intentional action. To explore this, we asked staff members one defining question: If you could change just one thing in our campus community today to guarantee a meaningful contribution to responsible societal futures, what would it be?

Nikile Ntsababa Registrar

Create awareness about the university's core values, as they promote ethical conduct and serve as a compass for decision-making, actions, and behaviour to ensure alignment with the university's goals and objectives. We cannot foster shared goals, accelerate execution, drive organisational change, enhance performance, and provide stability as leaders without the legitimacy that is derived from ethical conduct aligned with the UFS' core values.

Schalk Malherbe Senior Marketing Officer

If I could change one thing at the UFS, it would be to intentionally build a culture of deep, lived inclusivity – not as a policy, but as a conviction. A culture where every person is truly seen, valued, and accepted beyond race, culture, or background. When people understand their inherent worth and purpose, it transforms how they treat others. A campus rooted in love and respect does not just graduate students; it forms leaders who will build a more responsible, compassionate society.

Prof Munyaradzi Mushonga (PhD) Associate Professor, Centre for Gender and Africa Studies

Walk the talk or stop the talk. It is the only foundation upon which common ground can be built. Saying one thing and doing another is the cancer that is quietly consuming our institution. When we reduce powerful commitments such as research-led, student-centred, accountability, and caring to mere words, we corrupt their meaning entirely – transforming them into empty performance and, ultimately, into sophisticated, well-dressed self-deception.

Bernadine Carson Senior Assistant Officer: Library and Information Services

I would strengthen a culture of sustainability and accountability by embedding environmental awareness, ethical decision-making, and social responsibility into everyday campus life. We can do this through curriculum development, student activities, and operational practices. A university is not only a place to gain knowledge, but also to develop values and awareness of how our actions affect others. By fostering thoughtful, ethical graduates, we prepare them to shape society in positive and meaningful ways.

Dr Blandina Manditereza Lecturer: Childhood Education and Acting Programme Director: Foundation Phase

I would like to stop some circles from underestimating student wellness. Students are currently battling 'acadexiety', compounded by 'univernxiety' – a polycrisis of university systemic pressures. We must all reposition wellness as a proactive pedagogical strategy, integrating empathy and team building into every lecture hall rather than waiting for a breakdown. By prioritising a 'pedagogy of care' through intentional team building, we not only graduate scholars but also responsible citizens, ensuring that they carry a culture of care into the future.

Keamogetse (Kamo) Dipico Senior Officer: Housing and Residence Affairs, Residence Head of House Harmony, and College Coordinator: West College

The rise of social media culture has enabled the spread of false information, with little consequence. The UFS can address this by prioritising intentional educational platforms and initiatives that promote positive social media engagement and awareness of digital footprints. This includes emphasising ethical practices within residence programmes and curricula, while fostering a culture of accountability to reduce cyberbullying and misinformation. Through impactful education and consistent accountability, the university can help ensure a more responsible and ethical future for society. ■





Leading change from the ground up: growing sustainable futures

By Michelle Nöthling



Click to read the Afrikaans version.

There is something tremendously compelling about the way Prof Johan van Niekerk speaks about his work. It is not filled with grand declarations, but rather with a steady sense of purpose – of knowing where things are going, and how to bring people along.

When he stepped into his role as Vice-Dean of Agriculture at the University of the Free State, he made three promises: to strengthen agricultural research, to drive the development of veterinary science, and to ensure that the university's experimental farm becomes financially sustainable. His promises did not remain ideas on paper.

His first promise – an injection into agricultural research – has taken shape through the establishment of seven Agricultural Research Council (ARC) Chairs in collaboration with the Department of Agriculture (DoA), spanning the entire agricultural value chain. What makes this different is the way they work together. "Where one person's research ends, the next person's begins," he says. It is a simple shift, but a powerful one. Instead of working in isolation, researchers are building on each other's work, making the outcomes more relevant, more connected, and ultimately more impactful.

He furthermore spearheaded the development of South Africa's only degree in Food Systems – the first cohort of students completing their studies at the end of 2026. Built from the integration of multiple

disciplines, the programme is shifting how we think about agriculture. It moves beyond the farm, tracing the journey of food all the way to the consumer. "The discipline of Food Systems is not something we simply made up," he explains, pointing to its grounding in global trends and United Nations directives. Closer to home, its impact feels immediate. It is preparing students for roles that did not previously exist.

The second promise, to drive veterinary science, is unfolding through the development of a new School of Veterinary Science – set to become only the second of its kind in South Africa. It is a big step, but also a necessary one. In a country where animal health, food safety, and rural livelihoods are so closely linked, this kind of investment speaks directly to the future.

Then there is the third kept promise: turning the experimental farm into a financially sustainable endeavour. This reflects a broader way of thinking – one where sustainability is not only environmental, but also economic and institutional.

Across all of this, there is a consistent thread. A willingness to break down barriers and rethink how things are done – collaboratively. And perhaps that is what makes his leadership feel different.

In the end, his impact is not only in the programmes he has built, but also in the way they open up new possibilities – for students, for the university, and for more sustainable futures. ■

Prof Johan van Niekerk is leading change from the ground up by strengthening agricultural research, advancing veterinary science, and driving sustainability on the university's experimental farm.

Photo: Stephen Collett

Inside the Isotope Laboratory

By Dr Nitha Ramnath

The Department of Chemistry has recently established a new Isotope Laboratory, dedicated to advancing stable light isotope research and strengthening the university's analytical capabilities in this specialised field.

But what exactly are stable isotopes, and why do they matter? Simply put, stable isotopes are non-radioactive forms of elements that differ slightly in their atomic structure. These subtle differences allow scientists to use them as natural tracers that help uncover the origins, pathways, and transformations of materials in the world around us.

At its core are stable isotopes: non-radioactive forms of elements that differ slightly in their atomic structure. While the difference is subtle, the impact is profound. These isotopes act as natural tracers, allowing scientists to follow the movement and transformation of materials across environmental and biological systems.

Using advanced isotope ratio mass spectrometry (IRMS), the lab analyses elements such as carbon, nitrogen, sulphur, hydrogen, and oxygen. This enables a wide range of research – from tracking nutrient cycles in ecosystems and reconstructing animal diets, to identifying sources of water pollution and verifying the authenticity of food products.

The laboratory is equipped with cutting-edge instrumentation, including a Thermo Fisher Delta Q IRMS system, designed for high-precision analysis of solid, liquid, and gas samples. For now, the focus is on solid samples, specifically nitrogen, carbon, and sulphur, as the team establishes robust analytical methods through careful calibration and validation. As capacity and expertise grow, the lab will expand into more complex analyses, including hydrogen and oxygen isotopes.

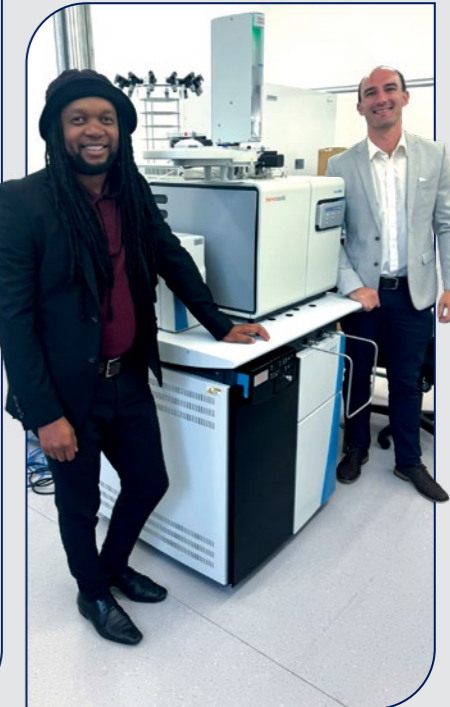
The laboratory will be operated by a dedicated academic team in the Department of Chemistry, comprising Dr Legapa Nkabiti, Lecturer in Chemistry; Dr Dumisani Kama, Senior Lecturer in Chemistry; and Dr Christo van Staden, Lecturer in Chemistry, who will oversee the instrument and drive the lab's day-to-day functioning and research outputs.

Dr Dumisani Kama, (left) and Dr Christo van Staden (right) in the Isotope Laboratory.

The development of the laboratory has been supported by a collaborative and generous scientific community. Colleagues from institutions across South Africa have shared their expertise and guidance, while international visits to leading isotope laboratories have provided valuable practical insights into building and running a successful facility.

Beyond its technical capabilities, the Isotope Laboratory is already proving to be a hub for collaboration. Researchers from across the university are partnering with the lab to explore applications in fields such as ecology, zoology, geology, and environmental science. These collaborations are enabling innovative studies – from understanding animal diets and tracking wildlife movements to investigating ecosystem dynamics.

The laboratory promises to play an important role in fostering interdisciplinary research, producing globally relevant data, and addressing locally significant challenges. In doing so, it positions the university at the forefront of isotope science and opens new possibilities for research and impact. ■



UFS builds momentum in Africa through Kenya engagements

By Christelle du Toit

Questions about graduate employability, curriculum relevance, and research impact shaped recent engagements between the University of the Free State (UFS) and partner institutions in Nairobi, Kenya.

During the visit, UFS leadership met with university representatives, alumni, and industry partners to explore how African universities can respond more effectively to changing social and economic realities.

A recurring theme throughout the discussions was that increased access to higher education must translate into meaningful outcomes for students and communities.

“Access without success and impact is not enough,” said Prof Hester C. Klopper, UFS Vice-Chancellor and Principal.

The conversations focused on practical areas for collaboration, including joint research projects, student and staff mobility, and partnerships linked to sustainability, healthcare, and economic development.

Rather than centring discussions on future intent alone, several engagements explored how existing relationships could move more quickly into implementation.

The visit also created an opportunity to reconnect with UFS alumni based in Kenya. During an alumni engagement event in Nairobi, graduates reflected on how their experiences in Bloemfontein continue to shape their professional work across different sectors.

“Our alumni are ambassadors for the university across the continent,” Prof Klopper said. “Their experiences reflect the value of a UFS education in different professional and social contexts.”

These networks may also create new opportunities for current students through mentorship, industry exposure, and professional connections beyond South Africa.

For academic and professional staff, the engagements opened further possibilities for collaborative teaching, research partnerships, and expanded academic networks across Africa.

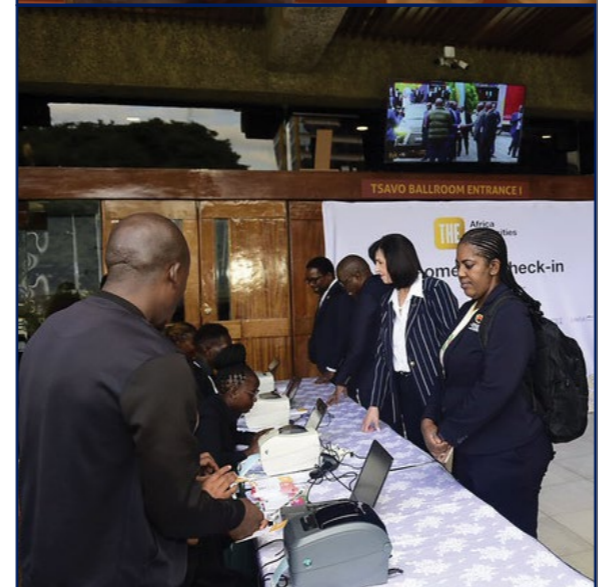
The visit forms part of the university’s broader effort to strengthen its presence on the continent through partnerships that respond to shared challenges and support knowledge exchange across borders. ■



During engagements in Nairobi, Kenya, Prof Hester C. Klopper, UFS Vice-Chancellor and Principal, emphasised that access without success and impact is not enough, highlighting the university’s commitment to partnerships that prepare graduates for real-world challenges.



Photos: Supplied



Forbes Woman Africa award highlights Prof Klopper's vision for universities shaping responsible societal futures

By Christelle du Toit

When Prof Hester C. Klopper accepted the Academic Excellence Award at the 2026 Forbes Woman Africa Awards in March, she used the moment to reflect less on personal achievement and more on the people who shaped her journey.

During the Forbes Woman Africa Leading Women Summit at the Sandton Convention Centre, Prof Klopper said, "As an academic, you never walk this road as a solo flight. I accept this award in honour of my students, my colleagues, and my family who have walked with me."

Prof Klopper, the Vice-Chancellor and Principal, received the award in recognition of her contribution to higher education, nursing science, and academic leadership across Africa.

She traced her understanding of leadership back to her student years in nursing science in the early 1980s.

"I realised very quickly that excellence is not in a title, but a standard of living," she said. "One patient at a time, one student at a time, one decision at a time."

That perspective continues to influence her leadership at the UFS, where student success,

research relevance, and institutional care remain central priorities.

Throughout her address, Prof Klopper repeatedly returned to the importance of collaboration in academic work, emphasising, "Every paper you publish carries the fingerprints of co-researchers, students, and colleagues. The mission has always been to build Africa's capacity, generate our own evidence, and tell our own stories."

Appointed in February 2025 as the university's first woman Vice-Chancellor and Principal, she described the milestone within a broader conversation about leadership opportunities for future generations.

"It is not about being first, but about what comes after us," she said.

With more than 30 years in higher education, Prof Klopper has contributed extensively to strengthening nursing education and health systems across the continent. At the UFS, this focus continues through initiatives linked to student support, academic development, and access to higher education.

At the summit, attended by more than 1 000 delegates from the continent, she welcomed growing recognition of universities as institutions that contribute directly to social and economic development.

"Thank you for seeing universities not as ivory towers, but as engines of change," she said.

For the UFS, the recognition reflects an institutional focus on developing graduates and research that remain connected to the realities facing communities across South Africa and the continent. ■



Photo: Supplied

'Coming in from the cold': Prof Bonang Mohale on why our stories matter

By Siqhamo Hlubi Jama

Graduation is usually a moment to look ahead. This year, the Chancellor, Prof Bonang Mohale, asked the Class of 2025 to do something different: look back.

Speaking at the launch of his autobiography, *Coming in from the Cold*, on the Bloemfontein Campus, Prof Mohale challenged graduates, staff, and guests to reflect on the role of history in shaping the future.

"You cannot build a sustainable future if you do not know where you come from," he said. His message was direct. If stories are not told and preserved, they are replaced. "If you do not tell your children your stories, their stories will be Santa Claus and Valentine's."

The book traces Prof Mohale's journey from his early life to leadership in the corporate world. At its core is a call to reclaim narrative and identity. Drawing on an African proverb, the title reflects a shift from exclusion to belonging, and a deliberate rejection of inherited colonial narratives.

"History teaches us that the stories are always written by the victors, not the vanquished. If you do not write your story, clearly somebody else will."

For the UFS community, the moment was more than just a book launch. The Vice-Chancellor and Principal, Prof Hester C. Klopper, described Prof Mohale's life as closely aligned with the university's vision of building responsible societal futures. "This is a man who leads not for recognition, but for impact. He creates conditions for others to rise," she said.

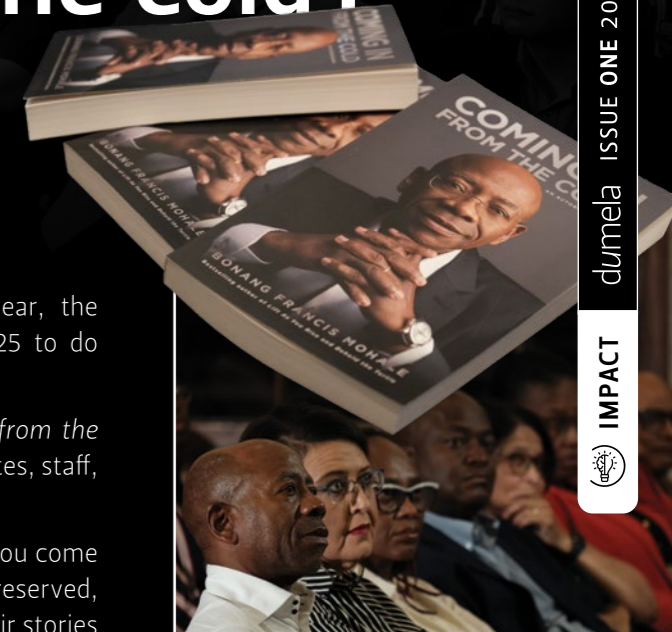
That approach is evident in how Prof Mohale understands leadership. He does not separate economic success from social responsibility. Instead, he argues that inclusion is essential for long-term sustainability.

He shared a practical example from his time as Managing Director of Otis Elevators, where he successfully motivated the company to support employees in buying homes. The result was improved morale and stronger business performance.

For him, empowerment must be tangible. "You cannot say to people, 'pull yourself up by your own bootstraps'. Give them the bloody boots and the bloody straps, then they pull themselves up with those."

As the Class of 2025 prepares for what lies ahead, his message remains clear: leadership begins with understanding where you come from and continues through the daily work of enabling others to move forward. ■

Prof Bonang Mohale and Jerry Laka, Director: KovsieSport, Arts and Culture, during the launch of Prof Mohale's autobiography, 'Coming in from the Cold'.





UFS welcomes Prof Tshehla to drive strategic initiatives, international and institutional affairs

By Lunga Luthuli

Prof Maashutha Tshehla joins the University of the Free State as the Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Strategic Initiatives, International and Institutional Affairs, bringing extensive leadership experience to advance strategy, internationalisation, and innovation while strengthening academic excellence, partnerships, and a cohesive, values-driven institutional culture. In the following conversation with writer Lunga Luthuli, Prof Tshehla reflects on his vision, priorities, and the role he hopes to play in shaping the university's future.

What excites you most about becoming part of the UFS community and contributing to its strategic direction?

What excites me most about becoming part of the UFS community is the opportunity to contribute to an institution that is already highly regarded, while actively working to elevate its academic standing even further. Being ranked among the top eight universities presents both a point of pride and a motivating challenge to strengthen our collective impact through excellence in teaching, research, and social engagement. I am particularly inspired by the fostering of a cohesive institutional culture grounded in common values. I am also excited to contribute to initiatives in health, food security, and education through cross-disciplinary collaboration.

What will be your key priorities in your first year at the UFS?

In my first year, a key priority will be to strengthen and reposition the university's internationalisation agenda by giving focused attention to the Directorate for International Partnerships and Relations, both in structure and functionality. This will involve a comprehensive review of how internationalisation is embedded and operationalised across faculties and divisions, ensuring that it is not confined to a single unit but becomes an integrated, institution-

wide effort. Establishing clear systems, processes, and lines of communication will be essential so that all stakeholders understand the role, structure, and value of the Directorate for International Partnerships and Relations. The upcoming review of the Internationalisation Strategy presents an important opportunity to reimagine the UFS' global footprint and partnerships. Also, we will work collaboratively to develop a coherent and actionable implementation plan that is clearly aligned with Vision 130 and supports broader institutional priorities.

How do you plan to foster stronger internal partnerships and alignment?

I will prioritise structured engagements with academic and professional staff, creating platforms for open dialogue. Collaboration will be co-created, ensuring that faculties and divisions contribute their strengths. This reciprocal approach will enhance alignment, transparency, and shared ownership.

What message would you like to share with staff about your leadership approach and your vision for the university's future?

I strongly believe in leading through understanding, listening not merely to respond, but to genuinely engage with and appreciate diverse perspectives across the institution. Meaningful listening and inclusive engagement are essential for building trust, strengthening collaboration, and enabling effective decision-making. My approach is therefore to create spaces where staff feel heard, valued, and empowered to contribute to the university's shared vision.

Looking ahead, my vision is for the UFS to continue striving for excellence by investing in and supporting both academic and professional staff, as they are central to unlocking the institution's full potential. ■



Photo: Kaleidoscope

Prof Maashutha Tshehla outlines his vision to advance the UFS strategy, strengthen global partnerships, and foster a collaborative, people-centred institutional culture.



Raised in the dusty streets of Jouberton, Klerksdorp – birthplace of Archbishop Desmond Tutu – ambition was part of her DNA. Shaped by Black consciousness, she grew into a woman grounded in purpose, committed to her own success and to uplifting others along the way. This is Prof Deliwe Rene Phetlhu, newly appointed Dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences. “Stories about leaders such as Archbishop Tutu, revered for his stand on social justice, had a big influence on my life.”

“The most important influencers in my life were my grandmother and mother. Both intelligent women – one uneducated and the other with minimal qualifications – but they centred our lives around education. Reading broadly, from comics to novels, was not an option but a must. My grandfather, although not actively involved in the reading spree, brought the books from wherever he could find them,” she says.

Loss, purpose, and perseverance

Prof Phetlhu, who took over the reins on 1 January, has as her main goal for this position a sense of belonging for staff and students; and equally, cohesion with the intent to move the faculty forward as a unit. Together with mentoring young academics to professorship, she is ready to contribute to the success of the already thriving faculty.

Losing her mother during her matric year became a turning point and her motivation. Success was no longer optional, because her mother believed in her. The journey was not without setbacks: after finishing school with Mathematics and Physics, she set her sights on engineering, only to be denied a bursary by a nearby mine simply because she was a girl. You cannot keep a determined, motivated, and ambitious woman down. She has built a career across public health, non-governmental work, and academia.

Today, Prof Phetlhu leads with intention – drawing from every challenge, every lesson, and every person who helped shape her. For her, leadership is about impact, and that impact is most visible in the people she has mentored. “Seeing young academics that I have mentored thrive better than me – that’s my biggest flex,” she says.

As Dean, her days are full, but beneath the demanding schedule lies a clear philosophy. “Listening, observing, asking questions, and doing what is just and fair – not what is popular.” She believes in getting things done, not only for short-term achievement, but also for long-term impact, not for individuals, but for a collective. This aligns with the university's vision statement – particularly, contributing meaningfully to responsible societal futures by all, and not only engaged locally, but also regionally, which means broader perspectives.

Dean of Health Sciences: a woman grounded in purpose, driven to uplifting others

By André Damons

Beyond the title

On difficult days, she leans on faith, reflection, and the belief that effort always matters. “I pray a lot, and I know God has never let me down,” she says. Guided by values of authenticity, honesty, fairness, and humility, she leads, mentors, and navigates challenges with purpose. Outside of work, music and time with family bring ease, and she is most proud of the people her children have become. ■

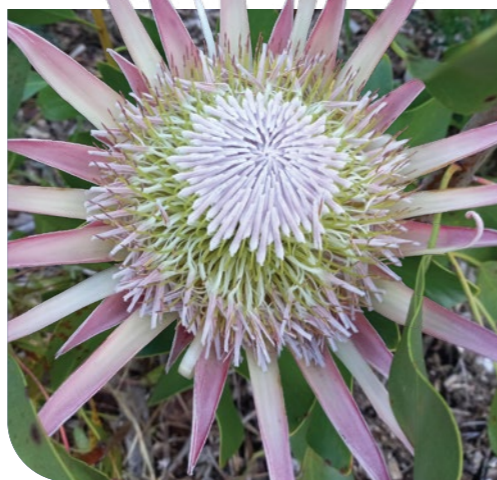
Prof Deliwe Phetlhu leads with intention – drawing from every challenge, every lesson, and every person who helped shape her.



Photo: Supplied



Prof Sandy-Lynn Steenhuisen.



Curiosity and collaboration drive new discoveries in mountain ecology with Prof Steenhuisen as new SARChI Chair



Click here to visit the Department of Plant Sciences website

By Leonie Bolleurs

Curiosity sits at the heart of impactful research. For Prof Sandy-Lynn Steenhuisen, Associate Professor in the Department of Plant Sciences on the Qwaqwa Campus, it drives work that reveals how plants and animals are connected, and how these delicate relationships shift under environmental change.

This same spirit of curiosity is what shapes the university's broader research approach. Prof Vasu Reddy, Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research, Innovation and Postgraduate Studies, agrees: "Curiosity-driven science is where discovery begins – it's how we unlock the hidden connections shaping our natural

world. Research like this shows why collaboration across institutions and borders is essential for tackling complex environmental challenges."

This commitment to curiosity-led, collaborative research is reflected in the national recognition of this work. At the launch of the Decadal Plan-aligned Research Chairs for Historically Disadvantaged Universities, Universities of Technology and Emerging Universities on 16 April 2026, the Department of Science and Technology (DSTI) – in partnership with the National Research Foundation (NRF) – awarded Prof Steenhuisen the DSTI/NRF SARChI Chair in Trophic Ecology.

"I am very excited about the capacity this brings for the work we want to do in our African mountains, and for uplifting the Qwaqwa Campus. In partnership with the Afromontane Research Unit at the university, this will continue to put us on the map in terms of mountain research globally, and position South Africa as a major player in the mountain arena."

When Prof Steenhuisen explains her research to someone outside of science, she keeps it grounded in everyday relationships. "We study interactions between plants and animals and how different disturbances impact those relationships and the environment." These disturbances include invasive alien plants and warming temperatures linked to climate change. Her team also investigates how flowers attract and reward their pollinators, and how these interactions influence evolutionary patterns in plant groups, especially in landscapes sensitive to climate and landuse pressures.

Her fascination with plant-animal interactions began with a sense of wonder that has never faded. "There is still so much to explore. The mountains hold a treasure chest of natural history discoveries."

According to Prof Reddy, "Our mountain ecosystems remind us that small interactions can have big ecological consequences. Impactful research balances deep scientific insight with practical value for conservation, communities, and policy."

Some of Prof Steenhuisen's most interesting findings come from unexpected ecological relationships, including lizard pollination and microbial communities living in nectar. She is especially curious about floral scent, colour, and nectar. "Why would a protea smell like papaya fruit? Or sour milk?" These questions guide her team as they explore how microbes may attract or deter different pollinators.

Her research has direct implications for conservation, land management, and community livelihoods. By uncovering how invasive alien plants alter grazing potential, pollinator communities, and biodiversity in montane grasslands, her work is helping to inform risk analyses and management strategies that balance ecological needs with socioeconomic realities. Her collaborators from the Centre for Biological Control at Rhodes University and the UFS Afromontane Research Unit bring specialised expertise to the work, strengthening the evidence her research provides for decision-makers working to protect vulnerable ecosystems.

She values seeing postgraduate students discover how their work contributes to a bigger picture. Travel, networking, and collaboration are opportunities she encourages, knowing how they build confidence and enthusiasm for careers in ecology.

As the incoming SARChI Chair in Trophic Ecology, she will lead the INTERACT project, which brings together international teams to study interactions across mountain systems in Southern Africa. The project spans multiple elevations and disturbance levels, opening new possibilities for long-term ecological insight and regional collaboration.

"Prof Steenhuisen's appointment as a SARChI Chair recognises scholarship that reveals the hidden connections sustaining our mountain ecosystems. It also affirms the global relevance of curiosity-driven research grounded in collaboration and ecological insight. Her appointment also strengthens the UFS' role as a leader in research that links biodiversity science with real-world conservation challenges," remarked Prof Reddy. ■

UFS staff celebrate academic achievements at Autumn graduation

By Lunga Luthuli

Staff of the University of the Free State (UFS) proudly marked academic milestones during the April graduation, earning advanced qualifications across diverse disciplines, which reflected dedication, innovation, and a shared commitment to excellence in teaching, research, and professional growth.



Dr Jan Blomerus

Programme Director and Actuary: Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences, Department of Mathematical Statistics and Actuarial Science
PhD: *Long-Term Life Insurance Valuations Meet Deep Learning*

My research explores the integration of deep learning techniques into traditional long-term insurance valuation methods. It examines how modern machine learning models can improve the accuracy, efficiency, and adaptability of actuarial valuation processes, particularly in complex, data-rich environments. The study demonstrates how these approaches can complement classical actuarial models, offer improved predictive capabilities, and support more robust decision-making in the insurance industry.

Dr Naledi Filita

Lecturer: Faculty of Education, Department of Languages in Education
PhD in Education (Curriculum Studies):
Sesotho teachers' practices in the implementation of Contextual Teaching and Learning approach in the teaching of poetry

My study examined how Sesotho teachers implement the CTL approach in poetry lessons. The findings show that teachers value CTL for enhancing knowledge acquisition and deepening understanding of Sesotho poetry, but face challenges such as time constraints and limited resources. The study recommends reducing curriculum content load and providing adequate instructional resources to support effective and consistent CTL practices.



Lee-Ann Swanepoel

Senior Officer: UFS Business School | Postgraduate Diploma in Labour Law

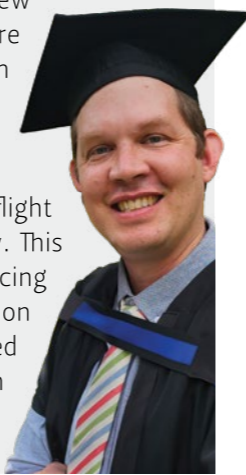
I decided to pursue a Postgraduate Diploma in Labour Law to formalise a long-standing passion for the field. Having already completed two qualifications within the EMS faculty – reflecting my strong interest in general management and economics – I was eager to expand my knowledge into labour law. This qualification allowed me to align my academic background with my interests, and I am proud to now have a formal credential to support this passion. I look forward to continuing my academic journey by enrolling for a master's degree in the near future.



Antoine Fourie

Officer: Professional Services, Department of Physics: Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences | Master's in Physics:
Morphology and diffusion of Cu, Sn, and Zn electron beam evaporated multilayer thin films.

This study aimed to produce a homogeneous CZT precursor layer consisting of Cu, Sn, and Zn. The metal thin films, a few hundred nanometres thick, were deposited using electron beam evaporation, and characterisation was done using auger electron spectroscopy, scanning electron microscopy, and time-of-flight secondary ion mass spectrometry. This CZT layer is the first step in producing a CZTS solar cell, a next-generation solar cell that can be produced locally in developing countries with minimal environmental impact.



Dr Lwazi Genukile

Lecturer: Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, Department of Economics and Finance | PhD in Economics: *The role of financial regulation on financial inclusion and economic well-being in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region.*

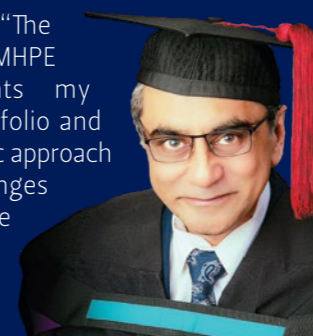
My study examined how financial regulation influences the relationship between financial inclusion and economic well-being in the SADC region. While regulation strengthens resilience, it can also limit institutions' ability to provide services, worsening economic outcomes. Using advanced econometric techniques, the results show that at certain threshold values, regulation and inclusion together discourage improvements in well-being. The study recommends moderating regulatory policies to balance resilience with inclusion, ensuring they enhance rather than hinder economic well-being.

Prof Niren Ray Maharaj

Professor and Head of Department, School of Clinical Medicine | Master of Health Professions Education (MHPE): *The Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices of Health Professions Educators on the Use of ChatGPT for Teaching and Learning*

The thesis constituted an integral component of the degree programme, complementing the coursework requirements. Set within the rapidly advancing artificial intelligence landscape, the study explored the potential role of ChatGPT in health professions education (HPE). While many participants expressed reservations regarding certain aspects of ChatGPT use, the majority demonstrated a willingness to engage in further education and training, recognising that artificial intelligence technology is increasingly becoming an integral part of higher education.

Prof Maharaj said: "The acquisition of the MHPE degree complements my interdisciplinary portfolio and enables a more holistic approach to addressing challenges in healthcare and the training of healthcare professionals."



Dr Luthando Bopheka

Professional Services Officer: Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences, Department of Zoology and Entomology | Doctor of Philosophy with specialisation in Zoology: *Morphology and molecular analysis of trypanosomes from catfish species, Orange-Vaal River system, Free State Province.*

The thesis contributes novel baseline data to African freshwater fish parasitology by integrating morphology, 18S rRNA phylogenetics, and successful *in vitro* culturing of trypanosomes from catfish and the leech vector *Batracobdelloides tricarinata*. The study confirms *Trypanosoma mukasai* as the predominant species, identifies a potential cryptic lineage (*Trypanosoma* sp. A) and establishes direct vector-host transmission in the Free State for the first time.

Dr Lerato Ramphele

Lecturer: Faculty of Education, Department of Childhood Education | PhD in Early Childhood Development and Learning: *Investigating the Professional Development Needs of Early Childhood Educators for Pandemic Preparedness*

My study explored the professional development needs of early-childhood educators in the context of pandemic preparedness. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research identified gaps in current programmes, including limited accessibility, lack of contextual relevance, and insufficient support for inclusive education. The findings highlight the importance of strengthening digital literacy, socio-emotional support, and adaptive teaching strategies, while proposing responsive frameworks to better equip educators for future challenges. ■



Opening doors beyond the page

By Tshepo Tsotetsi

In the Centre for Universal Access and Disability Support (CUADS), Antigone Vorster is doing work that is quietly reshaping both learning and livelihood. As Accessible Study Material Production Coordinator, her role sits at the intersection of access and opportunity.

Her work centres on making study material usable for all students, particularly those with disabilities who rely on adapted formats to engage fully with their coursework. “My work focuses on making study material universally accessible,” she says. “At its heart, this work is about opening doors and ensuring that no student is left behind because of how information is presented.”



Together with her team, prescribed academic content is edited into accessible formats, allowing students with visual, physical, and other impairments to participate on equal footing. This is detailed, often invisible work, but essential to the academic experience of many.

The project took on a new dimension when an early idea did not quite hold. A student editor initiative, though promising, proved difficult to sustain. “While the intention was strong, we soon realised that students, understandably, struggled to commit the consistent time needed alongside their own studies,” Vorster explains.

That moment led to a shift in thinking and a connection with the Free State Association of and for Persons with Disabilities, which introduced her to the Jean Webber Home for adults with severe physical disabilities. Residents were then trained as editors, forming a dedicated team who could contribute consistently while working within their own environment. “It was a turning point for the project,” she says.

More than seven years later, the collaboration continues to grow in quiet but meaningful ways. The residents are not only supporting students they may never meet – they are also building a source of income. “Not only are they helping to transform the academic journeys of students, but they are also able to earn an income while navigating their own physical challenges,” Vorster says.

There is also a deeper layer to the work. “They know they are making a difference, contributing to something bigger than themselves,” she adds. In a space where financial independence is often limited, that sense of purpose carries weight.

For Vorster, the journey has shifted her perspective. “It has opened my eyes to the realities that many people face every day,” she reflects. “It has taught me to pause, to appreciate the small things, and to have a greater awareness of the lives of others.”

In connecting access with employment, CUADS has created more than just a support system. It has built a loop of inclusion that extends beyond campus, where learning and dignity move in both directions. ■

Antigone Vorster, Accessible Study Material Production Coordinator in the Centre for Universal Access and Disability Support, advancing access and opportunity through inclusive learning.

Photo: Supplied

Imagine logging in to prepare exam results, only to find the system frozen, rumours spreading on WhatsApp, and emails promising ‘emergency access’ landing in your inbox. This was the reality during the recent cyberattack on the Canvas learning management system (LMS), which affected institutions worldwide. While the disruption was resolved, it revealed how vulnerable universities are to hybrid threats that combine cybercrime with tactics designed to create confusion and pressure.

Hybrid warfare operates below the threshold of armed conflict, using cyberattacks, disinformation, economic pressure, and legal or administrative disruption to weaken institutions. Universities are attractive targets because they hold large volumes of personal and research data, operate in open, collaborative digital cultures, and carry high reputational visibility. Attacks are often timed to coincide with important calendar events, such as final exams and graduations, amplifying operational disruption, stress, and uncertainty for staff and students alike.

At the University of the Free State, digital resilience is not built solely on technical defences, but also on staff behaviour. Vigilance is key, and even without specialist cybersecurity knowledge, each individual can still play an important role in safeguarding the university.

Staff are encouraged to adopt the following practices:

- Do not reuse work passwords on private systems and make sure to enable multifactor authentication where possible.

- Be wary of fake emails and sharing sensitive or personal information without taking the necessary precautions.
- Rely only on official ICT communications during outages or incidents, and when in doubt, contact a representative directly.
- Avoid forwarding screenshots or speculating on social media, as this can amplify the attacker’s objectives.
- Avoid using ad hoc systems (personal drives, private platforms) that bypass governance and data protection standards.
- Treat any possible data exposure incident as serious.
- Report suspected unusual system behaviour or suspected phishing attempts to ICT Services immediately.

The bigger picture is clear: hybrid threats are designed to test institutional resilience. Resilient institutions maintain calm, coordinated responses, preserve trust through consistent communication, and learn to adapt without normalising crisis behaviour. Cyber Watch is about awareness, discipline, and collective responsibility. For more information on digital security tips and institutional safeguards, feel free to visit the ICTS Wiki Site, accessible via the staff intranet.

By staying alert and informed, we can all help protect the university and our broader society. ■

It is important for the University of the Free State to safeguard its digital environment to remain resilient against hybrid threats.

Protecting the university during hybrid warfare

By Leonie Bolleurs



Attending the first-ever stakeholder engagement breakfast in the Centenary Complex are, from the left: Prof Ylva Rodny-Gumede, Executive Director: Advancement; Anthony Govender, guest speaker; Prof Bulelwa Nguza-Mduba, Deputy Vice-Chancellor: People and Operations; and Susan van Jaarsveld, Senior Director: Human Resources.



Left: Peter van Ket, the South African professional endurance adventurer, speaker, and best-selling author. He was the speaker at the BeBetter, BeFitter 2026 kick-off event

UFS staff attending the two-day Health and Wellness Fair held on the Bloemfontein Campus, which offered a range of health screenings and wellness services.



The Organisational Development team champions staff development and well-being, fostering growth, resilience, and a workplace culture.



UFS wellness initiatives build resilient, engaged, and sustainable workforce culture

By Lunga Luthuli

The university's Division of Organisational Development (OD) is placing employee well-being at the centre of institutional culture through a series of strategic initiatives rolled out in 2026.

According to Burneline Kaars, Head of Organisational Development, these interventions are designed to go beyond once-off activities. "The initiatives were intentionally designed to support a more integrated and strategic approach to employee well-being," she says, adding that the goal is to build "a resilient and sustainable workforce".

Key highlights so far include the Stakeholder Engagement Breakfast, the BeBetter, BeFitter 2026 kick-off, and the OD Programme kick-off. Each initiative targeted a different aspect of well-being, from leadership engagement to physical health and personal resilience.

In addition, the division hosted a Health and Wellness Fair from 8 to 10 April, a staff wellness expo aimed at supporting overall well-being by providing access to a range of health screenings and wellness services. Earlier in the year, on 20 February, a Stakeholder Engagement session focusing on responsible leadership brought together participants to reflect on leadership practices that promote a healthy and supportive work environment.

Staff response has been overwhelmingly positive. The breakfast session was described as 'thought-provoking' and 'personally impactful', with many employees expressing that 'this should not be a once-off conversation'. Meanwhile, the BeBetter, BeFitter programme has gained strong traction for its inclusive approach. "Employees

appreciated that the programme meets them where they are ... and focuses on progress rather than perfection," Kaars explains.

Beyond participation, these initiatives are already influencing organisational culture. "Staff are more likely to feel motivated and engaged when they experience that the institution is investing in their well-being in practical and visible ways," she notes.

Kaars emphasises that participation is key to unlocking the full benefits. "Wellness programmes create the opportunity and the support, but the real impact comes when staff make use of what is available to them."

The division also received a R147 000 contribution from Simeka Health, which will strengthen programmes such as financial literacy, resilience training, and the Staff Well-being Ambassadors initiative.

Looking ahead, staff can expect a dynamic line-up of wellness activities, including sports tournaments and mental health engagements. "Often, it's that first step that makes the biggest difference," Kaars encourages, inviting all staff to take part in shaping a healthier, more connected workplace.

Events that staff can look forward to in 2026 include:

- Overcoming Imposter Syndrome: 22 July 2026
- From Overwhelm to Calm: Understanding Your Nervous System: 9 September 2026
- Mental Health Summit: 18 September 2026
- Men's Roundtable Series (Mental Health): 19 and 26 November 2026



Art, memory, and the work of imagining responsible societal futures

By Christelle du Toit

What histories do we remember – and how do we teach them?

At the University of the Free State, artists and scholars are exploring how art can create space for reflection and help reshape the curriculum. Through exhibitions and discussions, they are examining how creative practice can challenge dominant historical narratives and invite new ways of engaging with South Africa's past.

what remains through time, slowness and stillness – a documentary born from a live art performance and exhibition that were first staged at the Oliewenhuis Art Museum during the Vrystaat Arts Festival in July 2025 – focuses on how art that uses stillness and quiet reflection can encourage deeper thinking about memory, identity, and the stories that shape society.

Dr Anita Venter, a lecturer in the Centre for Development Support, who helped facilitate the engagement along with interdisciplinary artist, Sonya Rademeyer, believes art offers a powerful way to approach complex and often painful histories.

Rather than presenting history as fixed or complete, such artistic work invites viewers and students to reflect on whose voices are present in the curriculum – and whose are missing.

Prof Keith Armstrong, a visiting professor of Arts in the same centre, and a collaborator involved in the initiative, says this reflective process is central to the role that art can play in education. "Art creates a space where we can sit with uncertainty and complexity," he explains. "It helps us ask difficult questions about memory, power, and how knowledge is produced."

These conversations connect closely with the university's broader commitment to building responsible and sustainable societal futures through research, teaching, and engagement.

For Prof Vasu Reddy, Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research, Innovation and Postgraduate Studies, the intersection between art, scholarship, and public reflection is an important part of that vision. "Art plays a critical role in how societies reflect on themselves,"

he says. "It encourages critical thinking and opens spaces for dialogue that can shape more inclusive and responsible futures."

At the UFS, initiatives such as this highlight how creative practice can work alongside academic research to expand the ways in which knowledge is explored and shared. It also reminds us that universities are not only places where knowledge is transmitted, but where it is questioned, reimagined, and sometimes quietly reconsidered.

In the stillness of a gallery or the pause prompted by a powerful artwork, new conversations about history, responsibility, and the future can begin. ■

'what remains through time, slowness and stillness' draws on auto-ethnographic storytelling, a qualitative research approach that uses personal narrative to interrogate broader cultural and political realities. In doing so, it moves beyond autobiography to ask whose histories are preserved, whose are erased, and who decides.

Pictured below is Prof Keith Armstrong.



UFS celebrates new staff and promotions, shaping a stronger academic future

By Lunga Luthuli

The university continues to strengthen its academic and professional community by welcoming new staff members and celebrating colleagues who have recently advanced into new roles. This momentum was highlighted at a staff promotion event held on 25 March in the Wynand Mouton Theatre on the Bloemfontein Campus, where academic leaders and newly promoted staff gathered to mark significant career milestones. Addressing attendees, Prof Hester C. Klopper, Vice-Chancellor and Principal, emphasised that promotion carries a responsibility to mentor others and to shape the future of academia. Below are some of the promotions and appointments made this year.



Prof Mahlako Makhahlela

Prof Mahlako Makhahlela has been appointed Vice-Dean: Research and Postgraduate Studies in the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences, effective 1 April. Bringing more than two decades of experience from the Agricultural Research Council, she has progressed from researcher to research team manager, leading programmes in animal breeding, genetics, and reproductive biotechnologies. Her academic journey includes a PhD from the University of Helsinki, underpinned by a strong commitment to agricultural innovation and food security.

In her new role, Prof Makhahlela aims to strengthen research excellence, expand postgraduate opportunities, and enhance the faculty's global visibility through strategic partnerships and competitive funding. She is also passionate about fostering research that delivers meaningful societal and policy impact. "I am committed to developing the next generation of researchers while ensuring that our innovations drive both local transformation and international policy impact," she said.



Prof Rinda Botha

Prof Rinda Botha from the Department of Public Law has been promoted to Associate Professor, marking a significant milestone in a distinguished academic journey. She began her career at the UFS in 1998 as an assistant in Mercantile Law, later serving as a judge's clerk in the High Court. Her exposure to the legal system inspired a period as a state prosecutor, during which she completed a master's degree in criminal law and discovered her passion for academia.

Following a lecturing role at Vista University and the 2004 merger with the UFS, she joined the Department of Criminal and Medical Law, where she built her career in teaching and research.

Prof Botha is committed to delivering quality teaching and meaningful research, taking pride in seeing students grow and succeed. "I may not change the world, but I can make a meaningful difference where I am," she says. Outside academia, she enjoys adrenaline-filled pursuits, including roller coasters.



Sibusiso Lukhele

Sibusiso Lukhele has joined the university as Deputy Director in the Directorate Research Development, bringing extensive experience in scholarship management, grant acquisition, and higher education support.

Over the course of his career, he has worked with organisations such as StudyTrust, Tshikululu Social Investments, and Naspers, where he focused on developing strategies that supported student success and strengthened pathways into the economy. Prior to joining the UFS, he served as project coordinator in the office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research, Innovation, and Postgraduate Studies at Stellenbosch University.

In his new role, Lukhele is eager to enhance the visibility and impact of UFS research by strengthening local and international funding opportunities and supporting third-stream income initiatives. He is also passionate about simplifying grant management processes to enable researchers to focus on addressing pressing societal challenges.

"I want to help create an environment where researchers are fully supported, and where funders can see the excellence and impact of the work being done at the UFS," he said.



Arthur Maphanga

Arthur Maphanga of the UFS Business School has been promoted to Senior Lecturer, marking a significant milestone in a career shaped by diverse professional and academic experiences. His journey began in military aviation with the Air Force of Zimbabwe, where he developed a strong foundation in systems thinking, leadership, and operational precision.

Transitioning into academia, Maphanga has held roles at several institutions, including the Chinhoyi University of Technology, North-West University, and Walter Sisulu University, contributing to teaching, research, and postgraduate supervision. He holds a PhD in business management and specialises in value and supply chain management, innovation, and leadership in developing economies.

At the UFS, he looks forward to shaping future-ready leaders and strengthening research and industry collaboration. "I see my role as helping to cultivate an ecosystem where ideas are nurtured, challenged, and mobilised to serve society," he says.

Prof Marda Horn

Prof Marda Horn from the Department of Private Law has been promoted to Associate Professor, marking a significant milestone in her academic journey. An admitted attorney, Prof Horn began her career in the UFS Law Clinic, where she gained valuable insight into the social impact of legal practice. Her passion for teaching led her to academia, joining the UFS in 2004.

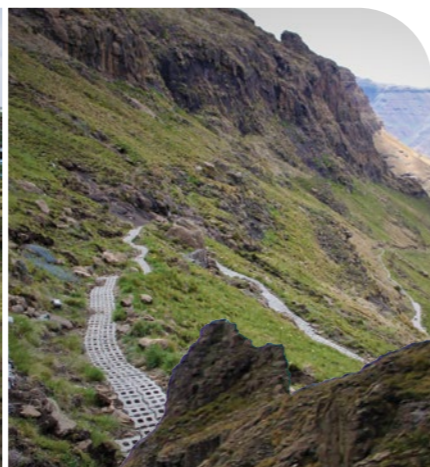
Over the years, she has completed a master's in private law, a master's in higher education, and an LLD, strengthening both her legal expertise and her approach to teaching. She currently specialises in property law, with a focus on sectional title schemes, and serves as acting Head of Department.

Prof Horn is committed to advancing research collaboration and mentoring emerging scholars. "I hope to contribute to a strong, supportive academic environment where colleagues can grow and thrive," she said. ■





Pictured is Prof
Ralph Clark.



UFS Qwaqwa Campus documentary gains global acclaim

By Precious Shamase

Click here to watch the documentary



The Maloti-Drakensberg, central to the UFS Afromontane Research Unit's pioneering work, is now celebrated worldwide through the award-winning documentary 'Mountains of Africa'.

Photo: Supplied

The Qwaqwa Campus is celebrating an international triumph as the documentary *Mountains of Africa: The Drakensberg* scales new heights in global recognition. Extensively featuring the university's Afromontane Research Unit (ARU), the film has transitioned from a scholarly endeavour into an award-winning visual masterpiece, bridging the gap between high-altitude science and public storytelling.

Award-winning visual narrative

Produced by Laurentz Media, the documentary secured a prestigious Silver Award for 2025 at the International Tourism Film Festival Africa (ITFF Africa). This follows its success at the South African Film and Tourism Awards, cementing its status as the definitive narrative of the Maloti-Drakensberg range.

Prof Vasu Reddy, Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research, Innovation, and Postgraduate Studies, highlighted the significance of the achievement: "This international award affirms the global relevance of our mountain research and its impact on society. At the UFS, innovation is not just technological. It is deeply human."

The film serves as a platform for the ARU – the

university's flagship hub for mountain studies – to showcase critical research on alpine plant ecology, climate change, and water security. Prof Ralph Clark, Director of the ARU, noted that the collaboration effectively turns the Qwaqwa Campus' 'living laboratories' into an accessible story for the world, proving that the knowledge generated in Qwaqwa is of a world-class standard.

From the peaks to the skies

The documentary's influence has now reached the global travel industry. In early 2026, it was selected for in-flight entertainment on Ethiopian Airlines, allowing international travellers to witness the unique biodiversity of the region and the pioneering research led by UFS scholars.

As the ARU celebrates its 11th anniversary, this success – alongside the 2025 documentary *Qwaqwa – Place of Barriers and Bridges*, directed by Profs Vasu Reddy and Jared McDonald – underscores the campus' evolution into a research-led, globally impactful institution. The film does more than capture landscapes; it honours the researchers who brave extreme conditions to protect Africa's natural heritage. 🌿

For some researchers, the office comes with thin air, steep slopes, and rapidly changing weather. High in the Maloti-Drakensberg, researchers from the UFS Afromontane Research Unit (ARU) conduct fieldwork among alpine plants and rugged terrain. It is demanding work, but for those involved, it is exactly where they want to be.

Dr Anthony Mapaura, a postdoctoral fellow affiliated with the ARU on the Qwaqwa Campus, has always been drawn to the natural world. His curiosity began long before his academic career. As a child, his father often took him outside at night to look at the stars, hoping to spark an interest in astronomy, but Dr Mapaura's attention was usually elsewhere.

"While he was looking at the stars, I was looking at the ground," he recalls.

That early curiosity eventually developed into a career in conservation biology and plant ecology. Today, it means spending long hours in mountain environments studying how plants and ecosystems respond to environmental change.

Dr Mapaura recently joined colleagues Arni le Roux, Dr Onalenna Gwate, and Mosiuoa Bereng on a field expedition to the Maloti-Drakensberg. Their research focuses on alpine plant ecosystems and how they respond to climate change. Although the research takes place in remote landscapes, the implications extend far beyond the mountains. High-altitude ecosystems influence water systems, biodiversity, and environmental stability across large parts of Southern Africa.

Prof Vasu Reddy, Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research, Innovation and Postgraduate Studies, says research in specialised environments such as the Afromontane



Based on the UFS Qwaqwa Campus, the ARU is a specialised research entity focused on understanding, conserving, and restoring Southern Africa's mountain and highland ecosystems – particularly the Afromontane biome.

region strengthens understanding of how ecological systems are changing. "This kind of work contributes valuable knowledge for the protection of natural systems that support communities and livelihoods."

Based on the UFS Qwaqwa Campus, the ARU brings together researchers studying biodiversity, climate change, and ecosystem resilience in mountain environments. Their work contributes to conservation knowledge while informing environmental management and policy.

For Dr Mapaura, however, the motivation remains deeply personal. "If you want to make money, start a business and be an entrepreneur," he says. "Being a researcher is something that has to be inside of you."

For researchers like him, the mountains are more than just a study site. They are a place of discovery – and a reminder that what happens high up in the mountains can shape life far beyond them. 🌿

Dr Anthony Mapaura.

Studying mountains where they rise

By Christelle du Toit



UFS honours distinguished alumni at 40-year celebration

By Christelle du Toit

The university recently placed alumni achievement at the centre of a milestone celebration, recognising a group of distinguished graduates whose work continues to shape communities, professions, and sectors across South Africa and beyond.

Held in Bloemfontein, the event marked 40 years of impact while bringing together staff, alumni, and university leadership to reflect on what that impact looks like in practice. The Alumni Awards formed the core of the occasion, highlighting graduates who are applying their knowledge in ways that respond to real societal needs.

From education and public service to business and community development, the honourees represent the reach of a UFS education beyond campus. Their stories point to a consistent thread: the ability to navigate complexity, to think critically, and to contribute to environments that demand both skill and adaptability.

Capping the alumni recognition, Prof 'Mabokang Monnapula-Mapesela, Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Academic at Rhodes University, was honoured for her contribution to higher education, particularly in the field of teaching and learning. Her work over the years has helped shape how the university approaches student success and academic development.

Reflecting on the recognition, Prof Monnapula-Mapesela noted the collective nature of academic work. "No academic journey happens in isolation," she said. "It is shaped by colleagues, students, and the broader environment in which we teach and learn."

Speaking at the event, Vice-Chancellor and Principal, Prof Hester C. Klopper, connected the Alumni Awards to the university's broader purpose. "Our alumni carry the university into the world," she said. "Their work reflects the value of what happens here – often years after they have graduated."

The event offered a clear reminder of the long-term nature of impact. The outcomes of teaching, mentoring, and curriculum development are not always immediate, but become visible over time through the work of graduates.

It also highlighted the importance of recognising those who shape that journey from within. Prof Mapesela's contribution speaks to sustained academic leadership, while the Alumni Awards show how that work carries forward into society.

By foregrounding alumni achievement, the celebration reinforced a simple but important idea: the true measure of a university lies in what its graduates go on to do. ■

- 1 Guests arriving at the 40-year alumni celebration in Bloemfontein, marking decades of achievement and impact.
- 2 Prof Hester C. Klopper, Vice-Chancellor and Principal, speaking at the Alumni Awards about the lasting impact of alumni in carrying the university into the world.
- 3 Prof Bonang Mohale addressing guests at the celebration, reflecting on alumni achievement and leadership.
- 4 Guests sharing in the festive spirit of the 40-year alumni recognition event.
- 5 Laurence Tshelang Mahlatsi was named the Chancellor's Distinguished Young Alum of the Year, recognised for his leadership and societal impact.
- 6 Prof 'Mabokang Monnapula-Mapesela, Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Academic at Rhodes University, honoured for her outstanding contribution to higher education.
- 7, 8 The milestone alumni event was filled with atmosphere and celebration, with several live music performances.



UFS multimedia studio driving innovative teaching and learning

By Lunga Luthuli

The Multimedia Content Development and Production (MCDP) Unit is transforming how teaching and learning content is created and delivered across the institution. Based on the South Campus, the studio operates under the Centre for Teaching and Learning within the Blended Learning and Innovation Support Services (BLISS) focus group.

According to Jerry Mtetwa, Assistant Director in the Centre for Teaching and Learning and head of the unit, the roots date back to its earlier identity as the IDEAS Lab. "In 2022, during the UFS' shift to the inclusive multi-campus model, the unit joined the CTL under BLISS as the Multimedia Content Development and Production Unit," he explained.

"The studio was established to enable online distant learning and to create multimedia artefacts for students," said Mtetwa.

Photos: Multimedia Content Development and Production (MCDP) Unit



"Furthermore, the establishment was to afford provincial high school learners an opportunity to learn from subject matter experts through the Internet Broadcast Project."

Today, the studio offers a comprehensive range of services to faculties, departments, and centres. These include video production, podcasting, live streaming, animation, voice-over recording, cinematography, motion graphics, and data archiving. Both in-studio and on-location productions are supported, ensuring flexibility for diverse academic needs.

Mtetwa emphasises the studio's role in enhancing the student learning experience. "The Multimedia Content Development and Production team contributes by creating high-quality visual content, which makes learning comprehensive, engaging, fun, and accessible to students anywhere at any time through multiple platforms and devices," he said.

Equipped with industry-standard technology, the studio ensures professional-grade output. Facilities include a green screen for chroma keying, teleprompters, overhead lighting, and live-streaming capabilities. The team also uses advanced post-production software such as Adobe Creative Cloud, DaVinci Resolve, and Final Cut Pro, alongside professional cameras, lighting, and sound equipment.

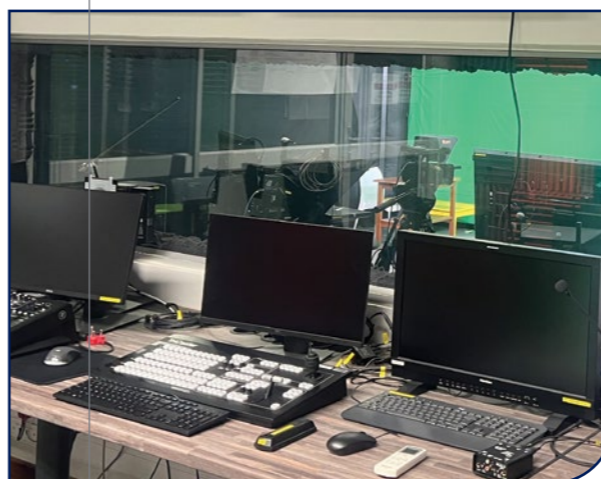
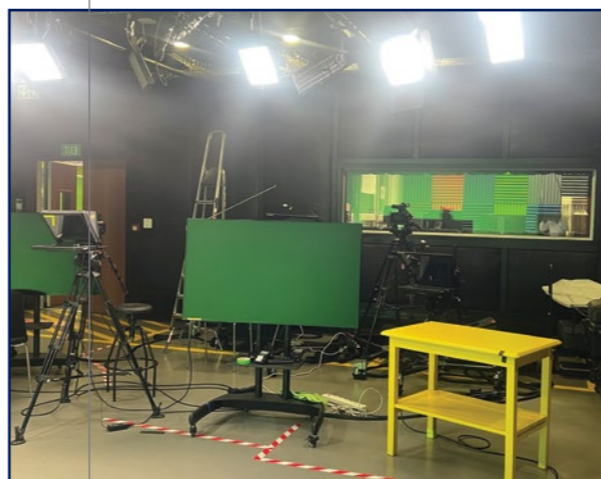
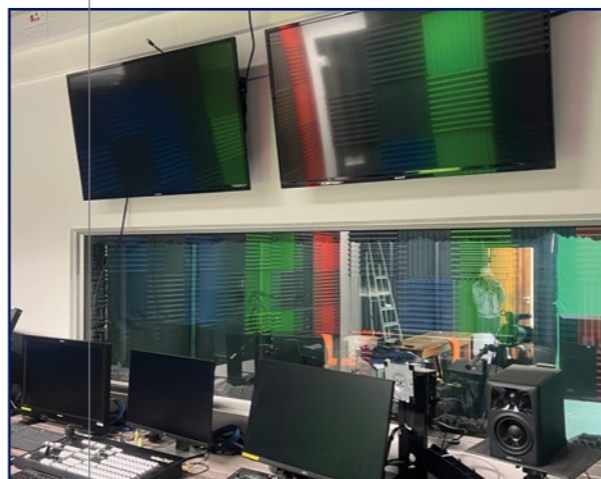
The unit has already delivered several impactful projects, including practical demonstration videos for the Faculty of Health Sciences, a documentary for the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, and academic writing resources for postgraduate students.

Open to all faculties and departments, the studio operates through a structured booking process. Staff members can submit a briefing document outlining their project requirements, after which the production process begins.

Looking ahead, the unit aims to expand its capacity and capabilities. "We would like to improve our facilities, especially by developing an unmanned studio where lecturers can record their material independently and access recordings instantly," said Mtetwa. He also notes the need for additional personnel and enhanced animation expertise to meet the growing demand.

With its forward-looking vision, the MCDP unit continues to play a vital role in advancing innovative, accessible education at the UFS. 📺

The Multimedia Content Development and Production studio on the UFS South Campus is where innovative digital content is created to support teaching and learning excellence. Pictured is Jerry Mtetwa.



The future *mamela!* between the lines

If 2026 has taught us anything so far, it is this: the future rarely announces itself.

It doesn't arrive with a subject line marked *High Importance*. It doesn't fit neatly into a strategy document, waiting to be approved (or 'circulated for further input' – we all know that one). More often, it unfolds quietly, between meetings, between emails, between the lines of conversations we almost miss.

Since January ('n era terug), the University of the Free State has been in motion. Advancing leadership, mentors, employees, and yes – even the campus cats have stepped into vision. Students have returned, carrying expectation, excitement, and a healthy dose of *ke tla bona hore na ho etsahalang* (I'll see what happens). Systems have been refined – more digital, more structured, and occasionally more complex (thank goodness for password managers).

Yet, somewhere in all of this, a question has persisted:

What does a socially responsible future actually look like?

The answer, it seems, is not found in a single defining moment.

It lives in the everyday.

In the lecturer rethinking how to teach in an age shaped by artificial intelligence – ChatGPT with a distinction!

In the researcher choosing questions that matter beyond the page – *ha se feela bakeng sa pampiri*.

In the quiet persistence of improving systems, not just for efficiency, but for fairness, access, and trust.

Even our spaces are shifting. Libraries are no longer only places of silence (*shhh ...*), but places of exchange. Offices are not only where work happens, but where meaning is negotiated – sometimes between two meetings and a lukewarm cup of coffee.

Progress here does not feel dramatic. It feels layered. Incremental. Human.

And maybe that is exactly the point.

A responsible future is not built in bold declarations. It is built in small decisions, repeated with intention. *Butle-butle*. Step by step.

So, we listen. *Re a mamela*.

We adjust. *Ons pas aan*.

We continue. *Re tswela pele*.

Because the future we are trying to reach is not ahead of us.

It is already here, unfolding quietly, *tussen die lyne*, in the work we do every day.

Love
'Mela



Prof Grey Magaiza's vision for Phuthaditjhaba

By Precious Shamase

Prof Grey Magaiza is redefining the relationship between academia and society by transforming Phuthaditjhaba into a 'living laboratory' for community development. His work moves beyond traditional study, focusing on how research can act as a catalyst for responsible societal futures and long-term regional impact.

Phuthaditjhaba as a living laboratory

For Prof Magaiza, Phuthaditjhaba is not just a location, but a dynamic environment of socio-economic transition. By studying its shifting demographics and evolving settlement patterns, his research identifies how service delivery and local resilience can be strengthened.



Prof Grey Magaiza envisions Phuthaditjhaba as a 'living laboratory' for inclusive community development and responsible societal futures.

Central to this is a 'with, not on' philosophy, ensuring that traditional leadership and royal houses are co-creators of the research process.

This deep community integration ensures that the work remains grounded in local protocols and inclusive participation, creating a foundation for sustainable development that survives long after a specific project's funding ends.

The impact of this approach is already evident. Following a landmark national conference, the University of the Free State (UFS) has emerged as a central hub for community development training in South Africa. This has led to high-level academic outputs, including a special journal and a forthcoming book, while also fast-tracking the professionalisation of the sector through the Professional Board for Community Development.

On a personal scale, the research translates into improved lives. Prof Magaiza's work with local youth has seen participants transition into community activists, tackling critical issues such as teenage pregnancy and health, and demonstrating the power of participatory research to build individual capacity.

Shaping responsible futures

Looking ahead, Prof Magaiza sees a significant shift towards micro-entrepreneurship and the adoption of green technologies, such as solar power, in the informal market. By advocating for structural transformations – such as reliable water and electricity – his work aims to turn survivalist activities into thriving, formalised enterprises.

Reflecting on this mission, Prof Prince Ngobeni, UFS Qwaqwa Campus Principal, states: "Prof Magaiza's work embodies our commitment to being a research-led institution that does not sit in an ivory tower. By aligning scholarly excellence with the lived realities of Phuthaditjhaba, we are ensuring that our campus serves as a beacon of hope and a driver of genuine societal transformation."

As these projects scale, the goal remains clear: creating a future where communities are not just protected by social welfare, but are also economically active, socially empowered, and environmentally sustainable. ■

Across several communities in the Free State, the handover of the Sustainable Food Systems Short Learning Programme is marking a shift from training to long-term impact. What began as a skills development initiative is now visible in households where people are actively growing their own food and strengthening their ability to support themselves.

Launched in May 2025 by the Directorate Community Engagement, the programme was designed to equip communities with practical, low-cost skills to improve household food production and build self-reliance. Developed and facilitated by Thabo Olivier from Let's Grow Food, the training focuses on accessible, environmentally friendly methods such as water-wise gardening, composting, and the use of recycled materials.

During recent visits to communities including Van Stadensrus, Wepener, Dewetsdorp, Botshabelo, Soutpan, and Bloemfontein, the directorate observed how the programme is being carried forward in different contexts. The handover sessions, held from 17 to 19 March 2026, offered a closer look at how participants are applying what they have learned.

What stood out was not only the presence of established gardens, but the way participants spoke about them. These spaces have become part of daily routines, reflecting both practical use and personal commitment.

Dr Karen Venter, Head of Service Learning in the directorate, reflected on the visits: "These gardens have clearly become more than just part of a training programme. They have been personal and purposeful sustainable food production spaces that now form part of everyday family life."

Participants showed a clear ability to adapt techniques such as composting, water-wise gardening, and the use of available materials to suit their own environments. Across communities, this has translated into improved access to fresh produce, lower household food costs, and growing confidence in managing food production at home.

The handover phase does not mark an end, but rather a continuation. Participants are taking responsibility for maintaining and developing their gardens, building on the foundation established during the training.

For Bishop Billyboy Ramahlele, Director: Community Engagement, the impact reaches beyond food production. "The gardens may be rooted in soil, but what truly took root was care, confidence, dignity, and hope."

As the programme expands, its strength lies in its practical approach and the emphasis on ownership. By equipping communities with accessible skills and encouraging people to work with what they have, it supports households in becoming more self-reliant.

In this way, the programme contributes to a broader vision of impact – one where communities are better positioned to sustain themselves and shape their own futures in a responsible and lasting way. ■



Community members during a Sustainable Food Systems Short Learning Programme handover session.

Communities take ownership of sustainable food systems

By Martinette Brits

Small-scale gardens contributing to stronger, more self-reliant communities.

Click to read the Sesotho version.





Beyond the surface: how sustainability is taking shape at the UFS

By Michelle Nöthling



Photos: Supplied

It hums quietly as the sun catches its glassy surface. It moves beneath your feet through hidden pipelines. It sits, almost unnoticed, in a recycling bin or a tap that shuts off just a little sooner than expected. But once you start looking for it, you begin to see it everywhere.

For Richard Williamson, Environmental Officer in University Estates, this is exactly the point: sustainability, built slowly and deliberately into the everyday life of the university's three campuses.

Energy is where this shift is most visible. Across all campuses, solar farms have become a defining feature of the landscape, steadily feeding renewable energy into the system. It is a practical approach. "Solar is the easiest one to implement and tie into the grid," Williamson explains, "and it's already reshaping how the university consumes energy." Over time, this has contributed to a steady decline in overall energy intensity, signalling more efficient use of power across a growing footprint.

Water, however, tells a more layered story – one that moves between infrastructure and everyday behaviour.



Million-litre reservoirs across campuses help stabilise supply during interruptions, while new systems are being introduced to detect leaks early and reduce losses.

Yet, the story of water is also found in the details. More than 300 tap aerators, 110 metered taps, and 234 waterless urinals have been installed to reduce consumption in subtle but meaningful ways. Across campus, 111 filtered water fountains now offer accessible drinking water – encouraging students and staff to refill rather than rely on single-use plastic bottles.

Then there are the sports fields. Since January 2026, those on the Bloemfontein Campus have been irrigated using grey water – more than 33 000 kilolitres in just three months – transforming what was once waste into a valuable resource. "It's very exciting ... it's going to have huge savings," Williamson says.

Waste, perhaps more than anything else, reveals the human side of sustainability. Systems are being put in place – white paper recycling programmes, e-waste collection points, and plans for more structured recycling – but their success depends on participation. New ideas, such as reverse vending machines, are being explored to make that participation easier, even rewarding.

Beyond the day-to-day, a bigger vision is taking shape. On the Qwaqwa Campus and the South Campus, sustainability is not just about improvement – it is about reimagining what a campus can be. The goal is self-sufficiency: energy systems that sustain themselves, water systems that operate independently, and waste systems that close the loop.

This vision is echoed at leadership level. "At the University of the Free State, we provide an environmentally clean and safe place that promotes sustainability for responsible societal futures," says Prof Bulelwa Nguza-Mduba, Deputy Vice-Chancellor: People and Operations.

Perhaps that is what makes this work so powerful. Not a single breakthrough moment, but a steady accumulation of change – measured in kilolitres saved, watts generated, and habits reshaped.

Because here, sustainability is not a distant goal. It is already part of how the university lives. ■

Africanisation and responsible societal futures: finding our own voice

By Igno van Niekerk



Photos: Supplied

Prof Yvonne du Plessis facilitated a Direction, Alignment, and Commitment workshop at the UFS Business School, with Prof MacDonald Kanyangale present among academic leaders and programme directors.

There is significance in the moment when an institution pauses to reflect on its identity in a meaningful and deliberate way. This was evident in the UFS Business School towards the end of 2025, when a decision was made to pursue an African-centred direction.

Although Africanisation is a widely used concept in higher education, its meaning is often interpreted differently across institutions. What distinguishes the Business School's approach is the decision to define Africanisation within its own context. This process reflects a commitment to clarity, ownership, and purposeful action.

Under the leadership of Prof MacDonald Kanyangale, the Business School has positioned itself within a broader understanding of Africa that considers geography, history, challenges, and opportunities. The focus is not only on including African perspectives, but also on shaping teaching, research, and engagement from an African standpoint. This includes developing leaders who are responsible and enterprising, and who are able to contribute meaningfully to organisations and society.

The Direction, Alignment, and Commitment workshops, facilitated by Prof Yvonne du Plessis, provided a structured platform to translate this intent into action. These sessions brought together academics, researchers, and programme directors to build a shared understanding and to establish a clear roadmap. The discussions were informed by key frameworks such as the African Union's Agenda 2063, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, and the Principles for Responsible Management Education in Africa. In doing so, global priorities were considered alongside local realities.

This alignment speaks directly to the concept of responsible societal futures. Such futures are not shaped through the adoption of external models alone, but through contextually relevant thinking and practice. Business schools in Africa face the responsibility of preparing graduates who are globally competent while remaining responsive to local needs.

The UFS Business School's Africanisation initiative reflects a considered response to this responsibility. It is not an inward-looking approach, but one that contributes to the broader field of management education. By grounding its work in African realities while remaining globally connected, the Business School is positioning itself to play a meaningful role in shaping future-focused, responsible leadership. Prof Kanyangale echoed that the UFS Business School's strategic direction is to become a *future-driven leader in responsible and enterprising management scholarship and practice*.

In this way, Africanisation becomes a practical and forward-looking strategy, rooted in context and aligned with the vision of building responsible societal futures. ■



SciLytica Lab redefines impact at the UFS

By Martinette Brits

The university's SciLytica Lab is entering a new chapter – transforming from a specialised anti-doping facility into a hub for advanced analytical science, industry collaboration, and innovation.

Previously known as the South African Doping Control Laboratory (SADoCoL), the lab has earned international recognition within the global anti-doping community. However, increasing regulatory demands and financial pressures have made it difficult to sustain this model.

“The transition to SciLytica marked a strategic shift, reflecting a broader focus and a commitment to applying advanced analytical expertise across industries in a flexible, sustainable model,” explains Crystal-Anne Barkhuizen, Assistant Director: Quality Management and Assurance of the SciLytica Lab.

Now repositioned within the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences, SciLytica has expanded its scope to serve both the university and external partners through advanced analytical services.

“SciLytica is an ISO/IEC 17025-certified laboratory that provides quality analytical testing services across a wide range of industries, including the chemical, clinical, pharmaceutical, supplement, occupational health, and drugs-of-abuse sectors,” says Barkhuizen.

The laboratory specialises in trace-level detection and compound quantification, analysing substances such as anabolic steroids, cannabinoids, narcotics, stimulants, and other toxicological compounds. Supported by advanced technologies, including GC-MS/MS, LC-MS/MS, and high-resolution mass spectrometry, SciLytica delivers precise, reliable data for research, regulatory compliance, and product development.

Cutting-edge instrumentation enables the SciLytica Lab to analyse complex samples with exceptional precision. Crystal-Anne Barkhuizen is pictured on the far right.

“A key strength is its ability to screen large numbers of compounds simultaneously – between 450 and 750 per method, and up to 1 200 compounds per sample through combined analyses,” notes Barkhuizen. This capability positions SciLytica as a trusted analytical partner, supporting industry with product development, regulatory compliance, and specialised testing.

“SciLytica plays an important role in supporting the university's third-stream activities by translating its scientific expertise into market-responsive analytical services. These services generate external income, support research commercialisation, and reduce reliance on traditional funding sources,” says Barkhuizen.

Beyond industry impact, the lab strengthens the university's research environment and supports student development through hands-on training. “Through short learning programmes, internships, and research placements, students gain access to a real-world analytical environment and advanced technologies,” adds Barkhuizen.

Close collaboration with academic departments enables postgraduate research, publication opportunities, and skills development that are aligned with industry needs.

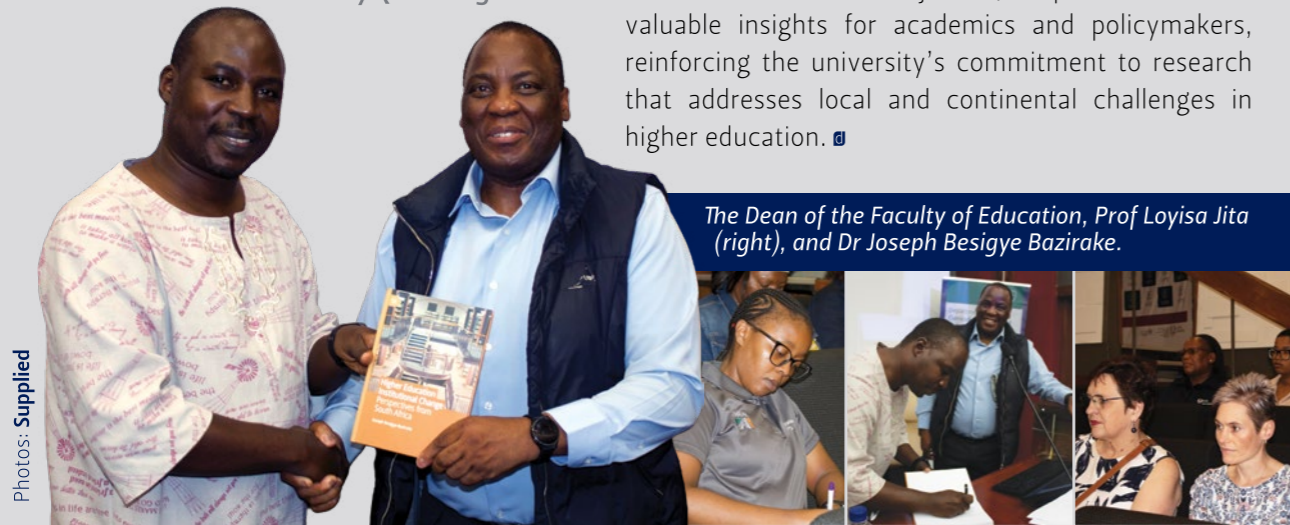
Future plans include extending its activities into areas such as veterinary and pesticide testing, as well as expanding services in supplement testing and community-focused drug testing. ■

Rethinking institutional change in higher education

By Queen Sigebedu

This semester, the Faculty of Education celebrated the launch of *Higher Education Institutional Change: Perspectives from South Africa* by Dr Joseph Besigye Bazirake. Based on his doctoral study, the book explores transformation in higher education, highlighting it as a continuous process shaped by both policy and institutional culture. It introduces key concepts such as the distinction between institutions and organisations, and ‘paths of departure’ as opportunities for change. Emphasising decolonisation and social justice, the publication offers valuable insights for academics and policymakers, reinforcing the university’s commitment to research that addresses local and continental challenges in higher education. ■

The Dean of the Faculty of Education, Prof Loyisa Jita (right), and Dr Joseph Besigye Bazirake.



Photos: Supplied

Christopher Rawson takes the helm at the UFS Law Clinic

By Tshepo Tsotetsi

Christopher Rawson steps into the role of Director of the Law Clinic with a grounded understanding of what the work demands. His career is closely tied to clinical legal practice, where student learning is shaped not in lecture halls alone, but through direct engagement with the legal realities faced by surrounding communities.

“It is both an honour and a significant responsibility,” he reflects, “to take on a role at the intersection of legal education, access to justice, and community engagement.”

Under his leadership, the clinic is sharpening its dual focus: preparing students for the profession while extending meaningful legal support to those who need it most, with an eye on both immediate needs and broader systemic impact. ■



Photo: Stephen Collett

Christopher Rawson has been appointed Director of the Law Clinic.

When foot-and-mouth disease (FMD) risks in the region forced precautionary restrictions on the University of the Free State Paradys Experimental Farm late last year, students and researchers lost access to one of the university’s most important practical training environments. A proactive vaccination drive is now enabling the farm to reopen these activities responsibly, restoring hands-on learning and research opportunities.

The first phase of vaccinations began on 2 March, targeting 654 animals – including 154 dairy cattle, 200 beef cattle, and 300 sheep – with booster doses scheduled according to veterinary protocols. Foot-and-mouth disease is a highly contagious viral disease affecting cloven-hoofed animals such as cattle, sheep, goats, and pigs. Although it poses no risk to human health, outbreaks can have serious economic consequences due to production losses and livestock movement restrictions.

Precautionary measures introduced in November 2025 limited access to the farm and suspended the movement of research animals. As a result, undergraduate practical sessions were halted, and postgraduate animal trials were paused.

Vaccination drive restores teaching and research on Paradys Farm

By Martinette Brits

Veterinary and farm teams involved in the foot-and-mouth disease vaccination programme on the Paradys Experimental Farm.



For the Department of Animal Science, restoring access to the farm is essential for student training. “Animal Science students need to have their feet on the ground – actually feet in the mud among the animals, while working with them,” said Prof Errol Cason, Head of the department. Vaccinating the herd allows the farm to reopen safely for both undergraduate training and postgraduate research.

The vaccination process is overseen by Dr Stephan Wessels, a Bloemfontein-based private veterinarian responsible for herd health on the farm. The vaccine targets strains prevalent in the Free State, helping to ensure effective immunity within the herd.

The restrictions have also affected the farm’s community engagement activities. Farmers’ days, workshops, and short courses – including wool processing training presented on the farm – were temporarily suspended due to biosecurity risks.

According to Johan Barnard, farm manager, the farm’s location near communal grazing areas and major livestock transport routes increases potential exposure, making strengthened biosecurity measures important as the farm continues to support agricultural training, research, and engagement with the farming community. ■

Dr Stephan Wessels administers a foot-and-mouth disease (FMD) vaccine to a dairy cow on the Paradys Experimental Farm.



Humanities at the forefront of innovation and impact

By Tshepo Tsotetsi

The Faculty of The Humanities is buzzing with activity – from global leadership roles to creative projects on campus and national recognition in the arts. Recent highlights show how the faculty is shaping conversations, building connections, and celebrating achievements that reach far beyond Bloemfontein.



Photo: Supplied

Building creative connections across borders

The Department of Fine Arts continues to build a growing creative exchange with Red Clay Studio in Tamale, Ghana, founded by internationally acclaimed artist Ibrahim Mahama.

Over the past two and a half years, this collaboration has seen staff members undertake residencies in the studio, opening up space for experimentation, shared learning, and artistic

research across contexts. The exchange has also expanded through visiting collaborators from Red Clay, including contributions to the Richmond Land Art Project at MAPSA in the Karoo. What emerges is a sustained dialogue between practices and places – one that strengthens how the department connects artistic creation, research, and international collaboration within its work.

Sam Pasotti, Ibrahim Mahama, Khadidja Iddi, Manuela Nebuloni, Selom Kudjie, Johandi du Plessis-Kleynhans, and Adelheid von Maltitz at Red Clay Studio in Tamale, Ghana – pictured during the continued creative exchange between the UFS Department of Fine Arts and Red Clay, which brings together artistic practice, research, and international collaboration.

Street poetry brings language to everyday campus life

Across the Bloemfontein Campus, poetry is now part of everyday life through the Street Poetry project led by the Faculty of The Humanities. Colourful panels in Afrikaans, English, Sesotho, and isiZulu have been placed in shared spaces where students walk, meet, and pause between classes.

The project is led by Dr Mathilda Smit, Lecturer in Afrikaans and Dutch, German and French. It invites readers to engage with language in a simple way, sometimes immediately clear, sometimes prompting curiosity and conversation.

Street poetry transforms shared campus spaces into moments of reading, reflection, and connection across languages.



Photo: Charl Devenish

Department of Drama and Theatre Arts celebrates wins and nominations at 2026 kykNET Fiëstas

The Department of Drama and Theatre Arts has been recognised at the 2026 kykNET Fiëstas – held in March 2026 – which celebrates South African live performance and visual arts for work produced in 2025.

The department recorded strong success, with two wins. Senior Lecturer Dr Chris Vorster received the award for Best Performance in a Comedy for *Gebou soos Steffi Graf* and was also nominated for Best Comedy and Best Solo Performance. Alumnus Jefferson J Dirks Korkee won the award for Best Supporting Actor for *Huis van Sand*.

Further nominations included Best Achievement in Children's and Youth Theatre for *Rooikappie en die Drie Varkies* and *Dimpho and the Catfish*, reflecting the department's broad creative reach and collaborative spirit across staff, students, and alumni. ■

- 1 Dr Chris Vorster, Senior Lecturer in the Department of Drama and Theatre Arts at the University of the Free State.
- 2 Jefferson J Dirks Korkee, alumnus of the Department of Drama and Theatre Arts.



Photos: Supplied



The air on the Qwaqwa Campus was alive during a landmark exhibition titled *Brushstrokes of the Eastern Free State*. The event brought together five local visual artists, transforming the university into a gallery of regional identity, with a focus on bridging the gap between rural creative talent and the formal economy.

“The Brushstrokes exhibition exemplifies how research and innovation can intersect with community development and engagement, creating pathways for rural artists to share their ideas, practice, and access to stimulate broader markets. Celebrating heritage through art – from *Ditema* motifs to *Village Games* – undoubtedly enriches academic spaces with lived experience and indigenous knowledge,” remarked Prof Vasu Reddy, Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research, Innovation and Postgraduate Studies.

Art and opportunity

Thabang Mokoena, Assistant Officer in the Centre for Global Change (CGC), explained that the initiative aimed to open up market access for visual artists, support local creative businesses, and enable direct entry into the university space for sales and professional growth.

Selecting the artists was no small feat. With Qwaqwa boasting a strong pool of talent, the final group included artists already collaborating with the university, as well as a tribute to late alumnus Mpho Mafika.

The exhibition brought lived experiences and indigenous knowledge into the academic space, featuring *Ditema*, traditional Basotho visual motifs; the *Kgomo (Cow) Collection*, symbolising wealth and heritage; and *Village Games*, artworks depicting local childhood traditions.

One of the featured artists, Vanessa Majoro, presented a body of work titled *Celestial Static V*. Her collection

explores the human connection to the cosmos. “I wanted to create a body of work that consists of several fragmented pieces that can exist on their own but still form a cohesive visual story,” Majoro shared.

Balancing passion with financial instability

The event was further enriched with a keynote address by Ntsane Mopeli of the Thabo Mofutsanyana Community Arts and Culture Centre. His talk, *Livelihoods of Rural Visual Artists in the Eastern Free State*, shed light on the harsh realities that many practitioners face.

He highlighted that while artists are important keepers of traditional knowledge, they often navigate ‘patchwork livelihoods’, balancing passion with financial instability. He pointed to challenges including limited market access, the rise of AI, and the ‘rural factor’ – geographic isolation that limits access to major art hubs.

The success of ‘Brushstrokes’ has already sparked talks of making the exhibition an annual event. With the ‘soil now prepared’ for deeper community engagement, the organisers are hopeful that continued funding will allow this initiative to grow, further strengthening the bond between the university and the vibrant pulse of the Eastern Free State. ■

Thabang Mokoena, Assistant Officer in the Centre for Global Change, played a key role in organising the ‘Brushstrokes of the Eastern Free State’ exhibition, creating opportunities for local artists to connect with the university.



Photos: Supplied

‘Brushstrokes of the Eastern Free State’ debuts on the Qwaqwa Campus

By Precious Shamase

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