# UFS STRATEGIC PLAN

2023 TO 2028

VISION130
Renew and Reimagine
for 2034

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







# UFS STRATEGIC PLAN 2023 TO 2028: Renewal and Reimagination for Greater Impact

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# FOREWORD BY THE RECTOR AND VICE-CHANCELLOR

Vision 130 marks the beginning of a new and exciting journey for the University of the Free State (UFS) and its people, including our staff, our students, alumni, partners, and communities. The Council approved the continuation of our current vision statement through which the UFS aspires to be a research-led, student-centred, and regionally engaged university that contributes to development and social justice through the production of globally competitive graduates and new knowledge.



This continuation provides for stability and continuity while retaining the commitments that we have made towards transformation. At the same time, Vision 130 recognises the need for us to continuously renew ourselves to ensure the retention of our vitality and relevance. Beyond merely seeking to survive current and future challenges, the UFS aims to continue to grow and extend its influence and impact locally, regionally, and globally.

By 2034, the UFS intends to be recognised and acknowledged by its peers and society as a top-tier University in South Africa. Our goal is to be ranked among the top five universities in South Africa and the top 600 globally by appropriately chosen global ranking systems. This builds on the work done over the past five years, which set the base for the planned leap forward. In particular, it allows us to build on the hard work we have invested in stabilising and enhancing our processes, procedures, and systems.

The next six years will position the UFS as a responsive institution that is regionally and globally recognised as a quality contributor of research and educational opportunities that attracts high-calibre students and scholars. This can only be achieved when we harness our distinctive strengths, embrace our diversity, and promote a culture of responsible leadership and stewardship of the University's resources.

As a university, we do not function in isolation but as part of a national and global sector. Therefore, we need to be outward-looking and future-oriented. We need to ensure that we are well-networked and collaborate on the continent and with the rest of the world.

This 2023 to 2028 strategic plan prioritises our goals and objectives towards Vision 130. While we continue to promote an affirming transformational lived experience for staff, students, and our communities, the strategy is geared towards greater visibility and impact and strives to be the University that impactfully supports societal development.

Together, we live our shared vision and values to establish the UFS as a university of choice that produces desirable graduates and impactful scholarship to address regional and global challenges and promote sustainable futures.

### **CONTEXT**

In September 2022, the University Council adopted Vision 130, which sets out the strategic intent to reposition the institution towards 2034, when the UFS commemorates its 130th anniversary. While Vision 130 is futuristic, it provides stability and clarity for planning and decision-making, leaving scope to promote change and agility.

Vision 130 commits the University to strengthen its reputation among its peers and society as a university of excellence. It states that the UFS' ultimate intent is to be acknowledged as a university that impactfully supports societal development. Aspiring for maximum societal impact is thus a defining characteristic of the University.

The commitment to societal impact will require a purpose-driven focus on relevant and cutting-edge research, as well as the preparation of globally competitive graduates who understand the local context, with appropriate attributes, skills, and knowledge to enable them to stand out, enter the economy, shape society, become good citizens, future leaders, and stewards of the environment. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will be a primary lens for assessing such societal impact.

Global research is increasingly characterised by strong and large research collaborations. Complex problems faced by societies locally and globally also require multi- and transdisciplinary teams. This necessitates work across academic departments and faculties, as well as with other national and international research groups, to produce research outputs with internationally benchmarked knowledge and societal impact and recognition, resulting in international subject leadership.

The UFS Strategic Plan 2023 to 2028 sets out the goals, objectives, and aspirations over the next six years. These will be disaggregated into activities and measurable performance indicators in a three-year rolling Annual Performance Plan (APP).

## **VISION**

The UFS aspires to be a research-led, student-centred, and regionally engaged university that contributes to development and social justice through the production of globally competitive graduates and knowledge.

# **MISSION**

The University's ultimate goal is to impart and generate new knowledge that impactfully supports societal development.

### **VALUES**

The UFS subscribes to a set of values, explicated below, that shape and inform our culture and provide a framework for our actions and decisions. Our values are realised through the conduct of the wider University community.

- **Excellence**: We are committed to pursuing excellence in every aspect of university life. We look at excellence as an idea that is more than a benchmark, more than a goal, more than a distant destination. In the context of the academic project, excellence is the foundation of rigour in our scholarship, including the advancement, imparting, and the application of knowledge. It informs our learning and teaching, research, wider engagement, as well as our management and governance processes.
- **Innovation and impact:** The University's ultimate goal is to be a University that impactfully supports societal development. We value and encourage creativity and strive to identify, question, and challenge the status quo. Our knowledge will continue to contribute to the development of the Free State, South Africa, and the African continent and to advance global knowledge and understanding.
- Accountability: We recognise our obligation towards our students, staff, stakeholders, society in general, and the global knowledge community. To this end, we will be stewards of good governance who are accountable, responsible, and dutiful in our actions. We will be conscientious in our utilisation of the financial and physical resources of the University as well as concerning our impact on the wider environment.
- **Care:** We are committed to creating circumstances that are not only conducive to high-quality teaching, learning, and scholarship, but doing this in ways that emphasise the well-being and happiness of the University community. We are therefore committed to caring for ourselves, our fellow humans, and the natural environment. We seek a new citizenship and new ways of belonging to the UFS that are premised on respect, inclusivity, and empathy.
- Social Justice: In the pursuit of social justice, we seek to advance the values of human dignity through ethical and transparent institutional responsiveness. We interpret social justice within the South African historical context to entail an emphasis on inclusiveness, the reduction of inequality, and the creation of opportunities and pathways out of poverty and dispossession. Our commitment to social justice is our call to everyone to build on the productive foundations laid by all, and to build new structures in the pursuit of truths and practices that will grant human dignity to everybody.
- **Sustainability:** We commit to ethical and responsible stewardship of all institutional resources, processes, and practices to ensure operational, financial, environmental, and societal sustainability. Further, we aspire to live in harmony with our environment, and this will influence all our choices and decisions.

### **BUILDING ON THE ACHIEVEMENTS OVER THE RECENT PAST**

Strategic planning provides the opportunity to reflect on what has been achieved over the previous strategy period, to take stock of what has become operational, and to reset the strategic priorities needed to create meaningful and sustainable change over the next period.

The past five years saw significant progress, particularly foregrounding policies, procedures, and systems to position undergraduate learning and teaching. The UFS is attracting higher-performing students and has done well in increasing its students' success and throughput, as well as fostering graduateness and improving student safety and health. Its contribution to providing the country with graduates in scarce skills areas has also increased, particularly in architecture, medical sciences, and sustainable agriculture. These increases indicate success in ensuring curricular relevance and graduate employability, which continues through ongoing efforts to renew and transform the curriculum. This has been coupled with coordinated efforts around the student experience, academic quality enhancement, learning analytics and student tracking, and graduate attributes, which provides for a holistic approach to student development.

Furthermore, the University has invested in its teaching and learning staff, including a renewed emphasis on academic qualifications, with systems in place for staff development, recognition, and reward. At the same time, a process of curriculum renewal has been put in place. The work on curriculum transformation and student development is continuing and has been embedded as a fundamental component of the learning and teaching process.

The UFS has also done well regarding its contribution to local, regional, and global knowledge, particularly in increasing research impact and uptake. The quality of UFS research output is improving, evidenced by increased research output in international journals. Research productivity has improved in terms of both numbers of publications and per capita research outputs (including postgraduates). The number of leading researchers at the UFS is increasing, and the identified research areas of strength and distinctiveness are developing through an increase in focused resource allocation. The research endeavour supports the University's financial sustainability, evidenced by an increase in contract research.

The efficiency and effectiveness of UFS governance and support systems have improved in the past five years, mainly through increased capacity for managing the policy environment, increasing student representation in institutional governance, and improving the integration of data systems and the credibility of management information. These have been underscored with investments in infrastructure, including both information technology and physical infrastructure. Here, processes have been put in place for continued improvement and upgrading of processes, procedures, and infrastructure.

In relation to positively impacting society using the lens of the SDGs, the UFS has done well in terms of moving beyond disciplinary boundaries. Collaborative research is embedded in key strategy documents, multidisciplinary research is emphasised in the research strategy, and faculties have incorporated interdisciplinary research at varying levels. The UFS is expanding into other ways, such as targeted increased student enrolments, recognition of the diversity by transforming the language of instruction, curriculum reform, and increased publications in open access journals in line with our commitment to the global open science movement.

The UFS recently joined the Times Higher Education World University and Impact Rankings, and the 2023 rankings show that the UFS is on par with well-regarded national peers.

The previous strategy period also placed a strong emphasis on the Integrated Transformation Plan with its focus on systems and processes. Work on systems, policies, procedures, and practices forms the basis for the next step in the evolution of the University. While much of the work of the past strategic period is continuing, it has indeed become imbedded within the operational structures of the University. These continuing activities will therefore not find expression in the Strategic Plan 2023 to 2028 or the APP but will still receive the required attention to sustain and build on the investments made over the past five years, as these investments form a foundation for the next strategic period.

### STRATEGIC FOCUS OVER THE NEXT SIX YEARS

The strategic focus over the next strategy period is on excellence, visibility, and impact. A strong thrust will be on raising the research and internationalisation profile of the University. This will involve reviewing the academic project to encourage multi-disciplinarity and the concomitant policies. Furthermore, this will be supported by our increased emphasis on internationally benchmarked peer assessment. We will further put in place the relevant systems and processes to facilitate impact and enhance our reputation. Ethical and empowering leadership will also be a focus to ensure that the University culture becomes more conducive to excellence and to the academic project.

Emphasis will also be placed on freeing up resources to reinvest in research and innovation. This will require a review of the efficiency of academic programmes, reviewing the academic and support structures, and investing in academic leaders and managers that will be needed to facilitate and enable this new direction.

These strategic priorities have been delineated in the following four goals:

- Goal 1: To improve our academic excellence, reputation, and impact.
- Goal 2: To promote an environment of agility, flexibility, and responsiveness based on

trust and accountability.

Goal 3: To advance a transformational institutional culture that demonstrates the

values of the UFS.

Goal 4: To promote stewardship and prioritisation of institutional resources for

strategic intentž

These goals have been translated into strategic objectives with aspirational expectations by 2028 as outlined below. In addition, these objectives will be translated into activities with performance indicators in the UFS Annual Performance Plan, which represents the compact between the University Council and the Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation.

### THE UFS STRATEGIC PLAN 2023 TO 2028



### Goal 1:

# To improve our academic excellence, reputation, and impact.

Excellence, reputation, and impact are inextricably bound and mutually reinforcing; for this reason, the University continues its commitment to pursue excellence in every aspect of University life.

In Vision 130, excellence is treated as an institutional value, which in the context of the academic project, is the foundation of rigour in scholarship, including the advancement, imparting, and the application of knowledge.

In the research context, this entails an emphasis on visibility and impact. The University embeds itself within national and international scholarly communities and strengthens its partnerships with industry and the world of work.

In the context of learning and teaching, the University has made big strides in the success and employability of our graduates. The focus now turns to the desirability of our graduates and their ability to make a lifelong societal impact.

# Objective 1.1: Placing increased emphasis on research that advances societal and knowledge impact.

Vision 130 shifts the emphasis to research impact, embracing both knowledge and societal impact. In this context, Vision 130 identifies the need for a greater focus on collaborative research, research that is able to attract large-scale funding, and niche areas where the University is seen to be a national and global leader. For research to be sustainable, research teams need to attract funding on a scale that covers both the research cost and its contribution to the University's overhead.

By 2028, we will aspire to increase the budget allocated to the research endeavour, make significant contributions to the Sustainable Development Goals, and increase the number of highly productive, internationally competitive research groups.

# Objective 1.2: Ensuring the quantity, quality, and diversity of academic staff with renowned global reputation.

Research excellence rests on the quality of the researchers, the quality of the research teams, and above all, the quality of the leadership of those teams. Vision 130 states that we will recruit and retain internationally recognised academics in fields relevant to the UFS' local, national, and international context. Equally, it asserts the need to recruit and retain promising postdoctoral scholars with established academic records, and to increase the proportion of academic staff who have doctoral qualifications and are research active. It commits to significantly increasing the number of research chairs and establishing internationally benchmarked centres of research excellence. All this requires principal researchers to be able to lead, coordinate, and motivate groups of productive scientists. These principal researchers will need to be recognised internationally as leaders in their field.

By 2028, we will aspire to increase the number of principal research leaders in specific fields, leading researchers and scholars, as well as collaborations with targeted international institutions. At the same time, we will increase the proportion of academics who are research active.

# Objective 1.3: Ensure that our academic offerings and practices produce desirable and successful graduates.

Over the past five years, there has been emphasis on student success and throughput, graduateness, and employability. Vision 130 remains committed to these goals with an enhanced focus on excellence. A key indicator of excellence will target graduates who are more than employable; the UFS graduate should rather be desirable. Desirability indicates that our graduates are sought after and that they are seen as exceeding the quality of being merely employable. Graduate attributes are expected to include the ability to contribute to society and the economy, to solve complicated and unforeseen problems and operate in new contexts, not just in the immediate future but over a lifelong career.

By 2028, we will aspire to improve the desirability of UFS graduates and increase postgraduate enrolments as a share of the total enrolments.

### Risks

The new step-up to excellence will require the University to mainstream the gains made, but at the same time to significantly re-engineer the approach to the academic project. The emphasis on increasing publication numbers, placing minimum requirements on academic staff who do not publish, and pushing those publishing to publish more will not be sufficient to deliver societal impact, recognition, or excellence. The shifts in approach to the undergraduate, postgraduate, and research endeavours will need to be carefully steered by all levels of academic leadership. Furthermore, the areas of research intensity will require selective and purposeful investments of a significant scale in relation to the University's annual turnover.

### Goal 2:

# To promote an environment of agility, flexibility and responsiveness based on trust and accountability.

Organisations that are innovative and that are seen as leaders in their field are expected to be agile, flexible, and responsive. Its members are expected to move decisively, operate autonomously, and make decisions quickly. This typically works in a framework of trust and of retrospective accountability and can be seen as different aspects of the same organisational practice.

As the University continues to recruit and retain leading academics with international reputations, it needs room to focus on scholarship, innovation, and excellence. Similarly, as we attract good students, we need to provide an environment that is safe, supportive, and conducive to pursuing excellence. In this context, professional and support staff are an integral part of the academic project as strategic enablers through professional engagement and collective contributions. This inclusive approach requires a level of shared trust and accountability as delivery of the academic project requires coherent and complementary contributions.

The University affirms its continuing commitment to good governance and proactive management; where the risk is commensurate, preference will be given to governance that relies on transparency, accountability, and trust.

# Objective 2.1: Ensure the policies, systems, processes, and practices are appropriate, effective, and efficient.

The increase in researchers with international reputations, top graduate students and postdoctoral fellows will necessitate an increasingly enabling support structure. A reputation for being a university that is responsive to the needs of the academic project requires an environment where processes are simplified, and decisions are at the appropriate level of delegation.

By 2028, we will aspire to streamline the approval process, reduce the time to make decisions, and target measures to improve our staff members' satisfaction with institutional policies, processes, and procedures.

# Objective 2.2: Ensure appropriate academic structures as well as management and leadership capacity.

There is recognition that aspects of our academic departmental structures are fragmented and disjointed. Historically, departmental structures in many faculties have been based on traditional academic disciplines. This has resulted in many departments with a suboptimal number of academics to deliver on the academic project. This is both inefficient from an academic and a management perspective; it fails to provide the academic depth, diversity, and pedagogical relationship needed to promote academic excellence.

By 2028, we will aspire to improve the knowledge strength and structure, composition, and scope of academic departments, review the rationale of very small departments, and improve the seniority of the academic leadership.

# Objective 2.3: Leverage the use of digital technologies, business intelligence, and analytics to enable evidence-based decision-making.

The academic project evolves through targeted interventions and decision-making. As the levels of delegation are increased, it is important for decision-making to become more transparent and responsive. Both in the research and in the learning and teaching space, this is facilitated by the digitisation of information and tools for rapid, devolved, evidence-based decision-making.

Evidence-based decision-making has been hampered in the past five years by incomplete and at times disconnected information on finance, staffing, students, learning spaces, and infrastructure. Information systems will be engineered for completeness, integrity, and accuracy, and will be made accessible for the purpose of evidence-based decision-making through business intelligence tools. These tools will allow all decision-making to be informed by data and analytics.

By 2028, we will aspire to increase the application of business intelligence tools by University managers and work towards integrating information systems with a view to better and faster decision-making.

### Risks

The required agility of decision-making represents a change in philosophy towards a greater emphasis on transparency and oversight. This is in line with a culture where academics, in particular, are expected to be bold, to hold themselves personally accountable, and to rely on transparency rather than approval for the actions that they undertake. It requires the encouragement of autonomous thinking at all levels of the organisation, while still setting boundaries around risks that are existential.

# **Goal 3:** To advance a transformational institutional culture that demonstrates the values of the UFS.

A culture that is informed by the values of the University is critical for an institution that aspires to excellence, visibility, and impact. The University will become a vibrant space for constructive and critical engagement where ideas are discussed, contested, improved, and implemented, while simultaneously demonstrating the value of human connectedness, respect, and solidarity across social and historical divides. We thus desire an institutional culture that lives the University's values of social justice, care, and dignity and incorporates our continuing quest for excellence, innovation, and quality.

As we recruit and retain the best students from diverse backgrounds, including racial, socio-economic, gender, and epistemological diversity, we will ensure that the UFS is welcoming to all. This commits the UFS to provide a social-learning environment that invites, supports, and challenges staff and students to achieve their full potential. In addition, we remain committed to significantly improving the equity profile of academic staff by 2034. In this regard, we will especially aspire for gender parity in the professoriate and in all leadership positions within the University.

# Objective 3.1: Creating a vibrant space for, and acceptance of, constructive and critical engagement.

The University aspires to become a place where ideas are discussed, contested, improved, and implemented in a culture of civil, robust engagement. We are committed to creating circumstances conducive to high-quality learning, teaching, and scholarship, and doing this in ways that emphasise the University community's well-being. Epistemological diversity is a prerequisite to academic excellence, as much as a diversity of ideas and approaches is equally important across the non-academic part of the University. Climate surveys will be used periodically to look at progress in terms of how people engage.

By 2028, we will aspire to advance an institutional culture and climate that encourages robust engagement.

# Objective 3.2: Become an institution of choice for exceptional students, academics, and support staff.

Vision 130 requires the University to recruit and retain internationally recognised academics in fields relevant to the UFS' local, national, and global context. This is intended to create the reputation required to attract top students and support staff. Promising postdoctoral scholars with established academic records will also be appointed to ensure the sustainability of the academic project. This will require the University to become an institution of choice, where top professionals are looking to the UFS as a place where they can thrive and excel.

By 2028, we will aspire to establish a reputation for excellence and impact among our external stakeholders, improve graduate and undergraduate students' satisfaction with the University, and increase the number of high-performing matriculants and postgraduate students who choose to enrol at the UFS.

### Objective 3.3: Become a home for staff and students from diverse backgrounds.

Over the past years, as the University set out to recruit top scholars and renowned academics, it began to develop the reputation of being an institution from which high achievers tended to leave; a reputation of good people not staying. To retain exceptional staff, postgraduate and undergraduate students, the University has to become an institution that is viewed as supportive and one where the quotidian activities enhance the academic project. To this end, all staff and students should have a sense of belonging to the University. The UFS will recruit and retain the best students in all disciplines and at all levels, and hence our diversity will extend to students with a family history of tertiary education and first-generation students.

By 2028, we will aspire to an institutional culture and climate that creates a sense of belonging for all and improves the retention of excellent staff and students.

# Objective 3.4: Improvement in the equity profile of academic leadership.

Diversity and inclusivity are hallmarks of our commitment to social justice. The UFS is a place for competing views within the context of inclusivity and excellence. The UFS pursues diversity among its students and staff, including epistemic diversity of ideas, perspectives, and methodological approaches. Particular attention will be paid to ensuring racial, socio-economic, gender, capability, and epistemological diversity.

By 2028, we will aspire to improve the equity profile of the professoriate while enhancing intellectual diversity. Particular focus will be placed on gender parity in all leadership positions within the University, especially in academic leadership.

### Risks

There is a perceived tension between excellence and equity that needs to be managed by the academic leadership, in particular our ability to embrace new cultures and perspectives. The University has a long-standing and very strong institutional culture that is difficult to change. Both excellence and social justice must be prioritised as institutional values. An enabling culture is a prerequisite to achieve excellence, visibility, and impact.



# **Goal 4:**To promote stewardship and prioritisation of institutional resources for strategic intent.

Resources include the people, academic and research spaces, physical infrastructure, technology, and finance. It is the University's responsibility to make sure that it uses the limited resources provided to maximum impact.

Our commitment to strengthening postgraduate studies and research, reducing the emphasis on undergraduate studies, is changing the dynamic within faculties and departments. The focus on research will require a shift in responsibilities, workloads, and funding mechanisms in order to support the greater emphasis on the advancement and application of knowledge. In many universities, it is the undergraduate programmes that subsidise postgraduate studies.

For this reason, we will make bold decisions concerning the size and viability of our academic departments and programmes to ensure that they have adequate academic capacity and other resources to sustainably, responsibly, and proactively offer appropriate programmes and qualifications. We will further ensure that resources are allocated equitably across all campuses of the University.

### Objective: 4.1: Ensure the efficiency of the non-academic support structures and systems.

The manner in which the University operates, makes provision for a diverse complement of skills and competencies, including academic, professional and support, and service staff. As we move forward, we have to take advantage of current as well as emerging technologies to improve efficiency. This requires investment in people and infrastructure. Hence, there is a need to periodically review our processes to promote greater synergies and alignment with the strategic intent of the University.

By 2028, we will aspire to improve the efficiency of the support structures and functions for the academic project, and to target specific high-impact processes to digitise for greater responsiveness.

# Objective 4.2: Ensure the principles of resource investment to enable academic excellence with particular emphasis on research and postgraduate studies.

A research-led University requires investment to be research productive. This includes the need to create an environment conducive to innovation, supportive of emerging scholars and graduate students, and welcoming to visiting students and staff. Our investment choices must therefore drive our aim to promote academic excellence, visibility, and impact. Investing in these priorities will result in attracting excellent students, lucrative research contracts, fruitful relationships with industry, alumni, and other strategic partners, and ultimately improving the long-term sustainability of the University.

By 2028, we will aspire to increase investment in postgraduate infrastructure and research centres of excellence, improve the satisfaction of researchers, postdoctoral fellows, and graduate students at the UFS.

# Objective 4.3: Increase our research and innovation competiveness.

Institutional research income should reflect the University's efforts towards a 30/70 distribution between postgraduate and undergraduate enrolments by 2034. This will not be reflected in the government's research output grant, which is currently inadequate to support the costs and overhead contribution of a research-led environment. For this reason, it will be necessary to attract sustainable research funding, possibly in the form of large, self-sustained research centres.

By 2028, we will aspire to increase research income with an emphasis on research grants, commercialisation, and targeted contract research.

# Objective 4.4: Ensure the efficiency of academic programmes, offerings, and academic support systems.

In many universities, undergraduate programmes subsidise postgraduate programmes. The excellence of the postgraduate programmes provides the prestige that in turn attracts high-calibre undergraduate students to feed the postgraduate and research pipeline. On the other hand, the University currently offers many modules, some of which are below the sustainability threshold, many of which are offered by part-time staff. These modules may be using the resources that could be invested in the new focus on postgraduate studies and research. A workload analysis, sustainability review, and a review of the staffing is expected to point to a process that will allow the release of financial resources over time. Operating at a surplus will relieve the current pressure on funding that the University is experiencing.

By 2028, we will aspire to review the viability of academic modules, programmes, and departments to enhance academic strength and coherence.

### Risk

The changing landscape requires the University to holistically review its resource mobilisation and distribution processes to reach equilibrium between its strategic intent and ability to broaden the resource channels and the allocation thereof. The inability of the University to restructure its financial envelope will impact effective execution. This will require a coordinated appetite to right-size non-academic staff and the academic offering to release resources and capacity, which may be reallocated to align the institution with its Vision 130. Furthermore, resistance to change and to a realignment of the UFS towards the academic project will prevent the University from optimising its resources for future returns and strategic investment.

# **IMPLEMENTATION OF STRATEGIC PLAN 2023 TO 2028**

The implementation of our strategy will focus on the key drivers to realise Vision 130, and this will require strategic choices. The APP 2023 to 2025 is a strategic vehicle to assist in executing our choices. It is important to be mindful that there are always continuing activities that sustain the operations of the University but are not foregrounded in the APP.

The APP is reviewed on an annual basis, and it remains the prerogative of the University to carefully consider the activities that find expression in the APP. Structures are in place to monitor and evaluate the progress made and to facilitate requisite reporting both internally and externally.



