



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

Vision 130 launch address by Prof Francis Petersen, Rector and Vice-Chancellor

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Wow, I should say wow! Dumelang, sanibona, goeienaand, good evening, welcome to this launch of Vision 130. In 2034, the University of the Free State will be celebrating its 130th birthday, and as a university community over the past year to a year and a half, we had discussions, deliberations to ask the question – what should the University of the Free State look like in 2034?

We assessed the strength, the opportunities, all of the things that we have as a university through our experiences, which ultimately culminated in the conceptualisation of Vision 130. To be able to drive that energy and that passion among the leadership but also the governance structure of the university, we have had lots of engagements at Council level, and I can tell you that the energy and the enthusiasm that we found among Council members have been fantastic, and at the Council meeting in September of this year, Council approved Vision 130.

The basis of Vision 130 is really to reposition the University of the Free State, to strengthen the University of the Free State in terms of excellence, but also in terms of the impact that the university should have on its society, and I define society in the broader sense. We will do this by conducting cutting-edge research, but also by providing knowledge, re-imagined knowledge to produce graduates who are globally competitive – and that, really, is the foundation of our Vision 130. You might ask, but Vision 130, that's about 12 years? Yes, you are correct; it is 12 years, and we will divide the implementation of that vision into two sets of strategic plans.

A six-year plan or two six-year plans – we'll be able to drive the implementation of that vision. This Vision 130 should really provide a level of certainty, a level of not

to be agile, to be flexible, because we recognise that the world outside will also change over the next 12 years, and we must have the flexibility to effect those changes in our strategy.

Vision 130 articulates some bold steps; we would like to see the University of the Free State among the top 600 universities globally by 2034. We want to see the University of the Free State as a top-tier university, among the top five universities in South Africa. We would also like to see an institution, a university that leverages the good of the past, the experiences that we have built over the past six years. We should also recognise that we are not a six-year-old institution; actually, as we stand here today and tonight, we are 118 years old. So, how do we utilise that experience to provide an institutional culture that is welcoming, that is inclusive, that is diverse, so that everyone – student, staff, visitor, stakeholder – who comes to the university or engage with the university, feels a high sense of belonging.

We could probably look back over the past six years and ask the question, what has the University of the Free State achieved? What we have achieved, we have only achieved through the contribution of our staff and also our students, and I am recognising them this evening. There are a couple of key things that we are going to focus on from the past five to six years. We are going to make sure that our processes, our systems that we engage with are up to date, but also the policies – that guides are in place and that policies exhibit the sort of values and culture that we want to be as a university.

We have also done a lot of work in the area of governance, but a lot of work needs to be done in the area of student success and undergraduate teaching. We have selectively focused quite heavily on our research areas, and we have built those research areas to the level where we are publishing in high-quality journals. We have actually increased our research output over the past few years. Coupled with that is the increase in graduate students, the increase in our A-rated scientists, and also the fact that we can work with more sectors of the economy.

We have also invested in the university in terms of physical infrastructure, as you could see on our three campuses – the Bloemfontein Campus, South Campus, and Qwaqwa

Campus. But we have also invested quite heavily in digital infrastructure. I believe that where we are as a university – through what we have achieved over the past couple of years as a university in good standing – it is a university on an upwards trajectory. For the first time this year, we participated in two ranking systems, the Times Higher Education as well as the Impact ranking. The Times Higher Education has put us in the range of 801 to 1 000, and we are currently among the top eight universities in South Africa. So, the foundation has been laid – not perfectly, not 100% – but the foundation has been laid for us to embark on and usher in a new time zone upwards, that's the galaxy, and in that new phase we want to take the university more outwards.

Our focus is going to be on internationalisation – internationalisation of everything we do. We want to make sure that we produce global citizens through our graduates. We will be participating with institutions of excellent standing globally, both at undergraduate level and postgraduate level. We are probably going to focus a little bit more on our research agenda, where internationalisation will play a key role. In our first six years of the strategy – because I did say we are going to have a second six years as well – in our first six years, we are going to focus on four goals that will hopefully help to usher us as a university into the new frame. The goals centre around quality, impact, and also partnerships. We are going to create and continue to create an environment where staff and also students will have the ability to innovate, will have the ability to think out of the box, to be flexible in what we do, but to couple that with accountability and with trust. That's the environment we would create, and that is our second goal.

We want to produce and achieve a more diverse community of staff and students, because we believe that through diversity, we will strengthen what we do as an institution. This is also going to be linked in our goal number 3 and goal number 4, which is really coming back to the values that we exhibit as a university – the values of accountability, excellence, care, innovation, sustainability, and social justice. This is the six values that we would like to take forward in everything that we do. As a university, we are saying to ourselves that we would not be able to achieve what we set out in Vision 130 if we don't have sustainable partnerships. I am talking about partnerships in our city, in our province, in South Africa, on the continent, and the globe. I want to say – not in a narrow way – that the University of the Free State is for

the Free State first, but it is also for South Africa, for the continent, and for the globe. Therefore, this takes into account the fourth goal of our vision, and I think it is going to be a wonderful journey.

I don't want to go into too much detail about the boldness. I talked about where we would like to be in the rankings; we are going to try to move towards having a 70/30 split in our undergraduate and our postgraduate ratio by 2030 – 70% undergraduate, 30% postgraduate. We are working with our academic staff to obtain doctoral degrees; we are aiming for at least 75% of our academic staff to have doctoral degrees, and at the moment there are faculties that are very close to that.

We are also going to say to our non-academic staff – whatever you do, you should do that to the best of your ability; you should be at the top of your game. Therefore, trying to acquire qualifications in higher education in the support domain is also going to be immensely critical. So, guests this evening, we would like to say that all of you here in the audience are friends of the university; we can probably call you stakeholders of the university – I often say that our staff and our students are the university, but I also want to include the broader stakeholder forum that we have here this evening, as well as those who couldn't make it this evening. If you feel in your heart that the University of the Free State is the place you would like to be associated with and you would like to work with, I invite you this evening to take our hands so that we can realise Vision 130.

To our staff and our students in the audience this evening – during my tenure in the first five years, I said that our role is merely that of custodians. We are custodians of this wonderful institution, and if we can just lay one brick to make the institution better, we have succeeded as a student and we have succeeded as a staff member. Vision 130 is going to be much bolder than that. Vision 130 expects you – I wouldn't like to use the term demand – expect you to not only add one brick, but two, three, four bricks so that we can take the institution from where it is at the moment to where we should be as the University of the Free State: a top-tier university, internationally well-known, positioned to produce absolute fantastic graduates, global citizens, and an institution that should be recognised at every forum where we are represented. I would like to welcome you all to this new future, the future of the University of the Free State. I thank you.