



— 2024 —
OFFICIAL OPENING
— CEREMONY —

UNIVERSITY OF
THE FREE STATE

16 FEBRUARY 2024

OPENING ADDRESS BY
PROF FRANCIS PETERSEN
VICE-CHANCELLOR AND PRINCIPAL

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VISION130
Renew and Reimagine
for 2034



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

OPENING ADDRESS BY PROF FRANCIS PETERSEN
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Good morning, Colleagues – Goeiemore – Dumelang – Sanibona

A special word of welcome to the Chancellor of the university (Prof Bonang Mohale), Chair of Council (Mr David Noko), Deputy Chair of Council (Ms Tirelo Sibisi), Council members, my fellow Rectorate members, members of the Senior Leadership Group (deans and senior directors), President of the Institutional Student Representative Council (ISRC) and members of the ISRC, friends of the university, and all staff.

It is an enormous pleasure to address you at the **official opening of the University of the Free State (UFS)**.

Welcome back – I hope you have had a well-deserved break (I know it was short), but that you are ready with renewed energy for 2024.

For those joining the University of the Free State for the first time – a hearty welcome, and I hope you will have a long and rewarding future at the UFS.

Geopolitically, our world is more interconnected, but also more divided and fragmented than ever. Meanwhile, inequality and injustice are reaching critical levels – a serious obstacle to sustainable development. When global norms collapse, so does trust. We have geopolitical turmoil in the world, driven by the wars in Europe and the Middle East, and the tensions between the United States/China. This resulted in market dislocations – supply chain dislocations, and many economies going into recession. Uncertainty and volatility in geopolitics and the global economy are likely to remain for 2024. Inflation is now part of our costs – **we need to think differently and be prudent as a higher education sector, so the University of the Free State is engaging and managing these diverse challenges.**

2024 is the second year of the implementation of our new strategy under the umbrella of *Vision 130*.

Vision 130 – a vision with bold ambitions, a compass that will lead us to 2034 when we will celebrate our 130th anniversary.

Colleagues, this exciting journey is about care, being courageous and having a strong appetite for curiosity, built on the values of *Excellence, Innovation and Impact, Accountability, Care, Social Justice, and Sustainability*.

2023 provided us with initial traction but also identified specific areas where we need to improve to stay on track to deliver on the commitments of *Vision 130*. We have analysed these areas thoroughly and have developed or are in the process of developing specific interventions to get us back on track.

Undergraduate student success and overall student employability have been reset and stabilised post the COVID pandemic, with continued engagement and financial and advisory support/investment from, among

others, the *Kresge Foundation*, the *Department of Higher Education and Training*, and the *Michael & Susan Dell Foundation*. These investments, and the subsequent plans and actions (which were co-created), have allowed us to improve our student success (our student success rate currently stands at 83% – and we have to applaud Prof Francois Strydom and his team in the Centre for Teaching and Learning and all the faculties for their hard work and contributions towards this achievement), student development, and student employability, and is providing a meaningful platform for the scaling of our successes.

Industry and private sector involvement in the Academic Project remains strong through a range of academic advisory boards and a renewed focus of the Department of Career Services. As we continue to improve our understanding and actions on **graduate desirability**, we must develop more platforms and spaces for robust engagement, debate, critical thinking, and exposure to diverse views for and among our students. Platforms such as the *Global Citizen*, the *UFS Thought-Leader Series*, and the numerous public lectures (including the *Vice-Chancellor's Annual Prestige Lectures*) must be used more effectively to stimulate intellectual vibrancy, especially among our students, and to assist in strengthening the **pathway from undergraduate to postgraduate studies**.

At **postgraduate level**, our 2023 results showed a flat growth in postgraduate numbers, with an overall improvement in the other indicators of research output. Although we have seen an increase in multi- and transdisciplinary projects across most of the faculties, more needs to be done to incentivise this area of our research enterprise. We have committed ourselves to strengthening support to the research and postgraduate environment; in addition to the institutional commitment, the *Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation* is also on board to assist with capacity provision. We will be more focused on ensuring that our academic staff have PhDs – the basis of building supervisory capacity, strengthening our research niche areas, attracting and retaining exceptional and productive scholars, postdoctoral fellows, and postgraduate students.

We will further intensify our strategic alliances and co-created projects with universities (local and abroad), the private sector, industry and commerce, foundations, and government – projects such as the one between the UFS and the *South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI)* led by SARChI Chairholder Prof Carlien Pohl-Albertyn; a multi-million rand grant from the *Bristol Myers Squibb Foundation* to develop and implement palliative care services in the Free State, led by Prof Alicia Sherriff and Dr Dalene van Jaarsveld; and Prof Gilbert Matsabisa through the *Indigenous Knowledge Hub*, securing more than R35 million from government. We are particularly proud of Alexandra Howard, a PhD candidate in the Afromontane Research Unit, who received US dollar scholarships from *BAT Conservation International* and the *American Society of Mammalogists*, and who was the recipient of the prestigious 2023 *L'Oréal-UNESCO for Women in Science National Award*.

There has never been a more important time in modern history for great universities to make a full contribution to society. Universities are social institutions and should, through its mandate, impact society positively, and hence the integration of different knowledge systems into the Academic Project is paramount to achieve visibility and impact.

Through our **Scholarship of Engagement**, we must ensure that this becomes an integrated part of the Academic Project, and the *Engaged Scholarship Committee of Senate* (supported by Engaged Scholarship and the Department of Community Engagement) will have its work cut out to direct and lead this critical aspect with faculties.

Digital Transformation, Digitalisation, and the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) are now part of our institutional DNA, supported through our Digitalisation Strategy, which aims to lower operational costs, increase efficiencies, mitigate risks, and streamline decision-making processes. Without a fully capacitated Department of Information, Communication and Technology Services (ICTS), which forms the backbone of the UFS digital infrastructure, we will have a major challenge to ensure a quality, forward-looking Academic Project. This will receive our highest attention for 2024.

The South African higher education sector is currently experiencing major **financial challenges**, varying from funding cuts to the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), the block grant, foundation and earmarked grants, research grants through the National Research Foundation (NRF), and grants for expensive equipment. These challenges also provide us with opportunities – a means of thinking differently, testing our innovation and resilience, and promoting an effective approach to integrating resourcing.

I want to state that the University of the Free State is financially sustainable, but we need to be prudent in our resource management. Last year, we established a Task Team – led by me – focusing on the *recalibration of the UFS budget* to realise the objectives of *Vision 130*. All the actions recommended by this task team will be engaged and discussed at appropriate levels within the university to provide certainty on the manner in which the recommendation of this calibration will be implemented.

With respect to **Institutional Culture** – inclusivity, a sense of belonging, appreciating diverse views – although we have made good progress overall in this regard, we must continue to work hard on it. The Unit for Institutional Change and Social Justice, Department of Human Resources, the faculties, support departments (including the Department of Communication and Marketing) must be more proactive and integrated in their approach, so that we can shift the needle to align our institutional culture with the values of *Vision 130*.

Each year brings us closer to 2034 – and less time to deliver on our committed deliverables and articulated goals.

This is what I am asking of you – within your own sphere of operation – I am asking for a renewed commitment from you to own that space, to understand how your space is connected to *Vision 130*, and to share an unrelenting ambition to deliver on *Vision 130*.

Colleagues – *2024 is the year to intentionally socialise Vision 130 and our strategy throughout the university – at all levels, and hence facilitate its effective implementation.*

Thank you.