

# TOWARDS UFS VISION 130

Renewal and Reimagination for Greater Impact

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



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

# 1. CONTEXT

Universities are important institutions for the development of individuals, societies, and economies. As centres for innovation, research, dissemination, and application, the impact of a university is felt both locally and globally.

The world faces many complex interrelated challenges, including economic disparities, food insecurity, environmental degradation, climate change, and political instability. In South Africa, growth, unemployment, poverty, and inequality have been persistent areas of concern.

These challenges place an increased expectation on universities, whose role has expanded significantly over the past few decades.

This is certainly so in South Africa, where universities are expected to play an important role in providing skills, building the economy, solving persistent social problems, and transforming our post-apartheid society.

Against this background, the University of the Free State (UFS) commits to continuously renew itself to ensure the retention of our vitality and relevance. Beyond merely seeking to survive current and future changes, the UFS aims to continue to grow and extend its influence and impact locally, regionally, and globally.

This document – Vision 130 – is an elaboration of the strategic intent to reposition the institution for 2034, when the University will commemorate its 130th anniversary. Given its duration, Vision 130 provides stability and clarity for planning and decision making, while still leaving scope to promote adaptation and agility.



## 2. UFS VALUES

The UFS subscribes to values 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, 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, listening, 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.

### 3. INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE

The UFS strives to be an institution where diverse people feel a sense of common purpose and belonging, and where the symbols and spaces, systems and daily practices all reflect a commitment to openness and engagement. We respond to the needs of the local community, while participating in global knowledge production. We engage actively with our colonial and apartheid legacies and recognise the common humanity and the universal nature of the intellectual endeavour.

The UFS is a place for scholarly deliberations, and as such, our culture will be characterised by shared and competing views, agreements, and disagreements of constructive and critical engagement where ideas are discussed, contested, improved, and implemented.

To this end, the institutional culture will mirror the University's values of excellence, innovation, accountability, care, sustainability, and social justice. This culture requires values that are not only professed but are put into action in our strategising, teaching, research, as well as in our local and global engagements.



## 4. THE VISION OF THE UFS

### *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.

**Research-led** emphasises the parity between research, teaching, and learning for impact, with the expressed intention to significantly increase the UFS' research capacity and capability.

**Student-centred** commits us to promoting the learning experiences, academic support strategies, and other forms of assistance that respond to the various needs, aspirations, and social backgrounds of the diverse student community.

**Regionally engaged** reflects our intent to ensure that our knowledge contributes to the development of the Free State, South Africa, and the African continent.

**Globally competitive graduates and knowledge** refers to excellence and our intent to produce knowledge and graduates that make an impact on global and local platforms.



## 5. TENETS OF VISION 130

Vision 130 lays the foundation for the goals, objectives, and activities of the medium-term strategic plans of the University. This section sets out three of the key elements that form that basis.

1. **Academic excellence, quality, and impact**
2. **Maximum societal impact with sustainable relationships**
3. **A diverse, inclusive, and equitable University**

### 5.1 ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE, QUALITY, AND IMPACT

We will strengthen our reputation among our peers and in society as a University of excellence. We will do this through the excellence of our scholarship, by enhancing our knowledge networks, and by highlighting the University's academic achievements and research impact. For this reason:

- We will make bold choices to develop and invest in academic programme offerings of the highest quality that are sustainable and that provide 21st century graduates with meaningful pathways to personal and regional development.



- We will recruit and retain internationally recognised academics in fields relevant to the UFS' local, national, and international context. Promising young postdoctoral scholars with established academic records will be appointed to ensure that all academic staff are research active. We will equally increase the proportion of academic staff with PhDs who are research active, as well as increase the citation impact of their research. Our aim is that 75% of academic staff will have doctoral degrees by 2034. We are committed to significantly increasing the number of research chairs and establishing a few internationally benchmarked centres of research excellence.
- We will recruit internationally, nationally from the pool of top matriculants, and locally from the top performing Free State students, with a view to creating a platform for a strong cohort of graduate and postgraduate students.
- We will use knowledge impact as an important barometer of excellence, referring to advances in understanding, interpretation, methods, theory, application, and related advances that bring about positive change within and/or across disciplines and fields. We acknowledge that knowledge impact cannot simply be a quantitative measure, as it varies by discipline; however, it remains important for the University.
- We will participate in global ranking systems that measure the academic standing of the University, including the employability of our graduates, for benchmarking and visibility as well as to reflect on progress over time.



## 5.2 MAXIMUM SOCIETAL IMPACT WITH SUSTAINABLE RELATIONSHIPS

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 UFS is embedded in broader society – be it locally, nationally, regionally, or globally – through scholarship and academic thought leadership. The measure of the impact of our scholarship, research, learning and teaching, will be informed by the extent to which we contribute to the development of the Free State and South Africa. For this purpose, our aspirations should speak to pressing local societal needs and dilemmas. Beyond our commitment to aspire for maximum societal impact, we will embark on an institution-wide process to identify and confirm our unique and distinctive focus that will distinguish the UFS from other universities.

We also intend to ensure that our knowledge contributes to the development of the African continent and the Global South. We will thus foster relationships with universities and other partners to advance this. It will require an emphasis on expanding research networks to include scholars from across the world, including the African continent. The exposure to a wide diversity of approaches and cutting-edge thinking will contribute to an improvement of the work that our scholars deliver.





Our commitment to societal impact will require a purpose-driven focus on relevant and cutting-edge research, as well as preparing 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, as well as become good citizens, future leaders, and stewards of the environment.

In terms of knowledge generation, we therefore aim to emphasise advancing knowledge that has a positive impact on society. For this reason, our knowledge production, comprising teaching, learning, and research, will add to society across various spheres, including social, economic, and environmental. We intend to use the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a primary lens for assessing such societal impact.

Global research is increasingly characterised by strong and large research collaborations. This includes inter-, multi-, and transdisciplinary teams working on new and important areas of research. It encompasses work across 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 subject-field international leadership.

The cross-disciplinary research excellence will be complemented by the provision of high-quality undergraduate and postgraduate degree studies, which provide meaningful pathways for personal and societal development. In this context, the UFS will be a selection University of choice, meaning that admission to all programmes will be based on merit selection beyond the minimum threshold and specific targeted selection of excellent University entrants.

The above requires sustainable institutional planning and structuring, including the University's size and shape, based on the best possible resource allocation.



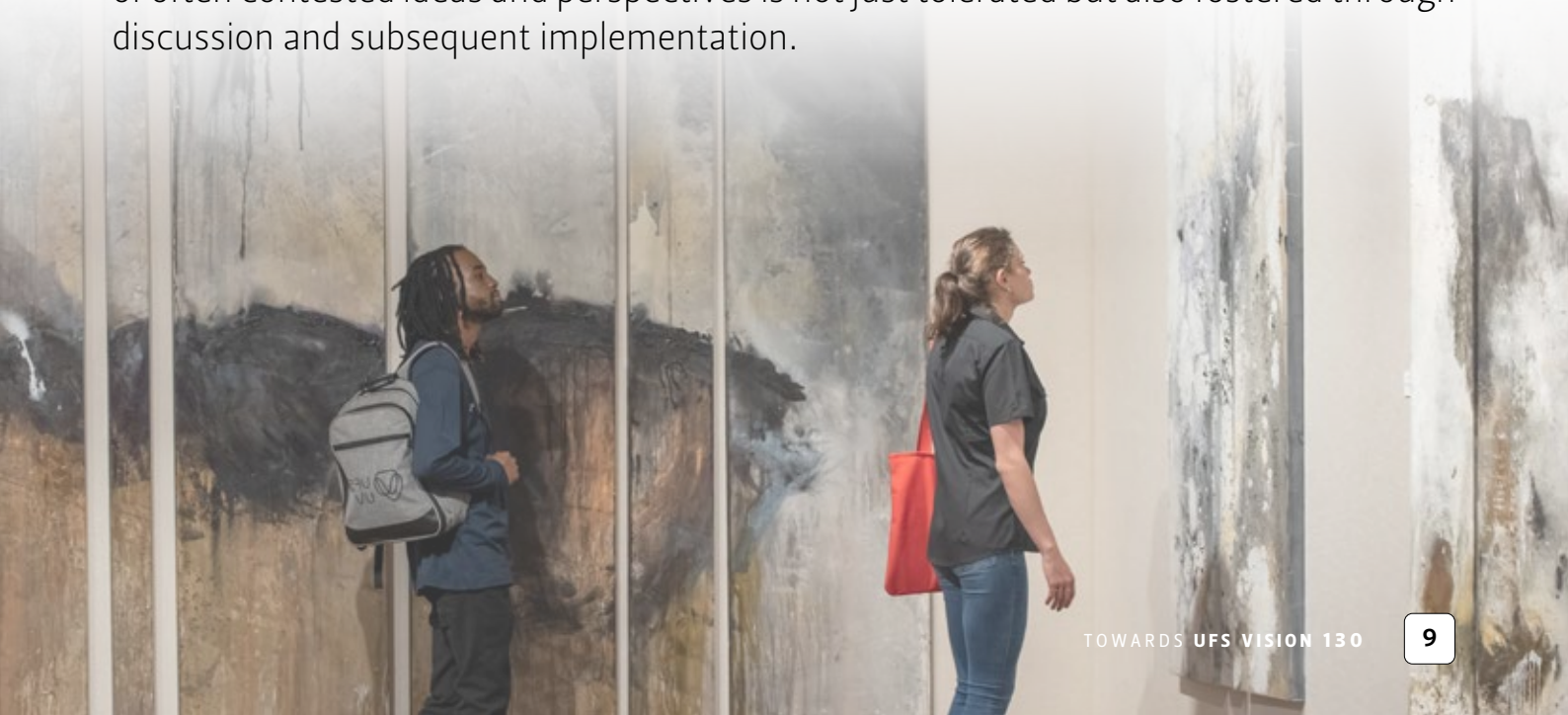
### 5.3 A DIVERSE, INCLUSIVE, AND EQUITABLE UNIVERSITY

Diversity and inclusivity are hallmarks of our culture and 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, as well as epistemic diversity of ideas, perspectives, and methodological approaches.

**Students:** We will recruit and retain the best students from diverse backgrounds in all disciplines and at all levels. Particular attention will be paid to ensuring racial, socio-economic, gender, capability, and epistemological diversity. This will require the UFS to enable a wide range of expressions and student-life experiences by being student-centred. This means that we will commit to promoting learning experiences, academic support strategies and structures that respond to the needs, interests, aspirations, and social backgrounds of a diverse student community. All of this commits us to provide a social learning environment that invites, welcomes, and challenges the best students to achieve their full potential.

**Staff:** Intersectionally diverse and internationally well-connected staff offer a greater variety of possibilities to engage with problems and issues in ways that can enhance innovation capabilities across the University. We commit to significantly improving the equity profile of the professoriate by 2034, while also balancing this with a commitment to increasing the intellectual diversity of our staff. We will particularly aspire for gender parity in all leadership positions within the University, especially in academic leadership.

**Epistemic diversity:** We are committed to encouraging a diversity of ideas and perspectives complementing the ethos of excellence and achievement. The University recognises that diversity goes together with a commitment to inclusivity, equity, and social justice. We therefore also commit to creating a culture of care and a vibrant space for, and acceptance of, constructive and critical engagement; where a diversity of often contested ideas and perspectives is not just tolerated but also fostered through discussion and subsequent implementation.



## 5.4 IMPLICATIONS FOR EXECUTION

**Size and Shape:** The vision of a research-led, high-impact University has implications in terms of research staff – and more critically – research and postgraduate students. This will require significant adjustment from us to achieve our aspiration to be a research-led University. In this regard, we will align our size and shape with our vision by operating within an upper limit of 35 000 students and by adapting the undergraduate to postgraduate student ratio towards a 70:30 ratio by 2034. The University will review and revise the relative proportions of student enrolments across all knowledge domains and faculties, as well as sites of learning. Part of this review will result in the differential growth of programmes and reduction in others where growth has been unsustainably high.

**Partnerships:** To realise this vision, we will need to reflect deeply on the value attached by our partners in society to our graduates, research, knowledge, and capabilities. To this end, we will make the necessary adjustments in the design and delivery of our academic programmes and the research we undertake, to ensure that our graduates and knowledge outputs have a high appeal to the local and global markets, resulting in meaningful social and economic impact.

**Organisational systems and processes:** Another critical success factor to realise Vision 130 is appropriate, effective, and efficient institutional systems and policies. We will review systems and policies to enable institutional agility and efficiency. We will make the necessary adjustment to student admission and progression, staff appointment and promotion requirements, and associated processes to enable us to recruit the best students and scholars from diverse backgrounds. Our management of risk will be commensurate with our commitment to being an innovative University.



**Resourcing:** The pursuit of quality in this vision will also be evident in the way we manage our financial resources and maximise the value of investments and assets. We will thus work with government, corporate and international partners towards sustainable, predictable, and adequate resourcing of our vision. In addition, we commit to ensuring that funds are invested equitably for maximum impact, and as such, priority will be given to developing a resourcing model and investment and innovation framework that will deliver on this agenda. Similarly, we will make bold decisions concerning the size and academic and financial viability of our faculties, academic structures, programmes, and support structures to ensure that they have adequate capacity and capability as well as other resources to sustainably, responsibly, and pro-actively fulfil our aspirations.

**Technology:** As a University, we have committed ourselves to digitalisation in a digitally heightened world and at the threshold of a decade that will see digitalisation revolutionising higher education. We thus recognise technology as pivotal in the development of new methods of support, engagement, and interaction with our partners and stakeholders internally and externally. We therefore commit to making maximum use of new and emerging technologies to enhance the quality of learning, teaching, research, and business processes. Technology will also enable greater internationalisation by allowing scholars at universities anywhere in the world to become part of the everyday experience of UFS staff and students.

**By 2034, the UFS will be recognised and acknowledged by peers and society as a top-tier University in South Africa. Our goal is to be ranked by appropriately chosen global ranking systems among the top five universities in South Africa and among the top 600 globally.**



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