



The University of the Free State: Embracing our Developmental Mandate



Over the past few decades, there has been a definite shift in the role of public universities, seeing that it has evolved from an almost exclusive focus on academics to a more society-focused role. This includes embracing our development function – not only internally in relation to our staff, students, and institutional operations, but also externally, extending to our region, our country, and our continent. An undeniable and very important part of South African universities' mandate is to make a positive difference in the communities we serve. This includes embracing transformation, inclusivity, and diversity, as universities strive to be microcosms of the kind of community that we want to see in the broader society.



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Reaching out to communities through engaged scholarship

At the University of the Free State (UFS), Engaged Scholarship is the vehicle we have elected to perform this very important public service role. In addition to Teaching and Learning and Research, Engaged Scholarship forms one of our three core strategic pillars. In essence, it is all about linking the best of the research, teaching, and learning skills of staff and students to specific learning and development needs of society. Almost all our academic courses have a service-learning component, where students apply what they have learned in and with communities. In this way, we are able to co-create new knowledge with our community-based partners, and to find innovative, sustainable solutions to pressing societal needs.

Holistic student support initiatives

With the introduction of free tertiary education for students from low-income families in South Africa a few years ago, higher learning opportunities have to a great extent been opened up to communities that have previously been excluded. For us as tertiary institutions, this has resulted





in an important shift from focusing on solving the 'access' issue, to the question of how we ensure the 'success' of our students. At the UFS, we have developed a range of high-impact student support initiatives that holistically address the needs of the diverse student population on our three campuses. Our consistently high institutional success rate can be directly attributed to these initiatives.

Research conducted by our Department of Nutrition and Dietetics a few years ago, indicated that almost 60% of our student population suffered from food insecurity. Our No Student Hungry Bursary Programme was subsequently implemented, ensuring that this very basic need was taken care of, and that affected students received much-needed psychosocial support. Students are consequently allowed to focus on their studies without worrying about their next meal, thus increasing their chances of excelling academically and ultimately obtaining their degrees.

The academic success initiatives developed by our Centre for Teaching and Learning have earned us international recognition. These include language and literacy development and well-supported tutorial programmes. We are also playing a leading role among South African universities in the field of academic advising, where students' educational paths are aligned with their career dreams. Assisting students to identify a vocation that they are passionate about and well suited for, is a vital prerequisite for thriving in the workplace.

Our Department of Student Counselling and Development provides psychological support in the form of individual sessions and workshops that address a variety of issues that students often grapple with, such as time management, self-acceptance, and relationships. When it comes to overcoming language barriers, our Academy for Multilingualism is doing ground-breaking work to develop unique multilingual pedagogic strategies. On top of that, we have various peer support initiatives, focusing on developing leadership qualities and fostering involvement in different spheres of university life among our students.

Focus on entrepreneurship

High unemployment is a harsh reality all over the African continent. In South Africa, the unemployment rate is currently at 35,3%, with youth unemployment estimated at 66,5%. It is widely agreed that entrepreneurship development is a vital strategy to combat this. Along with aspects such as Critical Thinking, Community Engagement, and Ethical Reasoning, Entrepreneurial Spirit forms part of our envisaged graduate attributes, with our curricular and co-curricular programmes structured to inculcate these qualities in our students. One of the vehicles for this is the UFS Student Success Skills module, a compulsory module for students from all study fields, aimed at providing support and strategies to assist them in successfully transitioning to higher education. In addition to providing students with academic success skills, the module also develops entrepreneurship and employability from the first year.





Collaboration leading to development opportunities

Collaboration with a wide variety of stakeholders from industry, the private sector, and government, is a key concept that allows us to identify workplace needs and make the most of employment and development opportunities, assisting us to continuously adapt our programmes to stay relevant and deliver sought-after graduates who adhere to the requirements of the world of work.

The UFS has various highly valued industry partners offering support in the form of bursaries and internships. We have instituted Faculty Advisory Boards made up of members from industry and government, ensuring that our curricula in our various study fields stay abreast of the latest developments. Our Interdisciplinary Centre for Digital Futures further extends our developmental pursuits by initiating projects with a multidisciplinary approach, combining social, natural, and digital sciences to find solutions to relevant societal needs.

Among our projects that encapsulate our society-focused role, is the Agribusiness Transformation Programme, whereby black commercial farmers and sustainable black-owned businesses in the Free State are identified and incorporated into a developmental programme leveraging expertise, skills, and infrastructure from the UFS and strategic business partners.

Getting involved in feeder schools

For institutions of higher learning to provide effective education, it is often imperative to get involved with the schools that provide them with students. Various UFS school support initiatives have not only contributed to the Free State's excellent 2021 matric pass rate of 85,7%, but also to making it the top-achieving province in South Africa for the third year in a row. Initiatives include our Internet Broadcast Project, where lessons in certain subjects are broadcast from the UFS South Campus to around 71 000 learners in more than 80 different schools every week. The popular Science-for-the-Future initiative features different school programmes, targeting not only gifted learners who excel in Natural Sciences, but also involving teachers and even parents in workshops where the mysteries of Science and Maths are unlocked. We also reach out to school principals in our region, assisting them with managerial training and skills.

Embracing indigenous knowledge systems and internationalisation

At the UFS, incorporating indigenous knowledge and internationalisation are opposite sides of the same coin – both constituting vital parts of our research strategy, as they underscore our commitment to producing research and developing curricula that are locally relevant, globally competitive, and connected to multiple knowledge paradigms. In our quest to deliver research that has industry and social impact and real-world application, we not only embrace and expand local indigenous knowledge systems, but also recognise the value and encourage the widening





of researchers' international networks, as well as luring the brightest academic minds from around the world to our campuses, with a special focus on the African continent.

Future vision

The UFS is successfully developing an ecosystem where the institution, the private sector, industry, commerce, government, and communities co-create and collaborate to provide human-centred solutions, which are digitally supported to respond to the challenges of society. We have developed a comprehensive *Digitalisation Plan* to find the best way of using information and communication technology as a tool for enhancing learning, research, collaboration, and decision-making.

We plan to roll out more unique academic support programmes and use our experience obtained during our shift to emergency online tuition over the past two years, to advance online and blended learning pedagogical systems in the rest of the country and the continent.

The UFS is increasingly embracing a 'glocal' approach to development – having a global mindset and reach, but simultaneously accommodating the culture, ideals, and needs of our local communities. We plan to grow our highly internationalised character by further widening and improving our international collaborations, translating it into opportunities for local growth and development, within the ambit of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.

About the Author

Prof. Francis William Petersen is the Rector and Vice-Chancellor of the University of the Free State. Previously, he has been the Deputy Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cape Town; Dean: Engineering and the Built Environment at the University of Cape Town; Executive Head: Strategy at Anglo American Platinum; Executive Vice-President: Research and Development at Mintek; and Head of the Department of Chemical Engineering at the Cape Technikon (now the Cape Peninsula University of Technology). Prof Petersen has extensive experience of management at various levels within the university and industry sectors. He is a non-executive director on the Boards of the Fruits Unlimited, Bigen Africa and Stone Three Digital and several others. He is a recipient of the Ernest Oppenheimer Memorial Trust and Cape Technikon Researcher of the Year Awards. He holds BEng in Chemistry, MEng in Metal, and PhD in Engineering from Stellenbosch University. **Physical Address:** 205 Nelson Mandela Drive | Park West, Bloemfontein 9301 | South Africa P.O. Box 339 | Bloemfontein 9300 | South Africa | www.ufs.ac.za

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