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Stakeholders endorse UFS's vision and strategy

University receives international recognition for uniqueness of study and research model

Results from a perception audit commissioned by the University of the Free State (UFS) in February 2014, indicate that 86,14% of its internal and external stakeholders agree with the institution's stated vision, while an average of 81,99% of stakeholders endorse its values and 81,28% agree with its goals.

The study was commissioned by the university's Department of Communication and Brand Management and conducted by an external firm of independent researchers. It was aimed at determining internal and external stakeholder understanding and endorsement of university strategy, as well as tracking core reputational indicators and perceptions.

"I am thrilled to see in the results of the perception audit the enormous pay-off to the hard work of my staff and students at changing fundamentally the perception of the UFS as a prime destination for a degree that meets the highest standards in education and for a place of higher learning where human relations matter more and more," says Prof Jonathan Jansen, Vice-Chancellor and Rector of the UFS.

"One of the objectives of the study has been to re-enforce the university's commitment to stakeholder engagement and to its core values of academic excellence and human reconciliation. Findings from the study also provide the institution an opportunity to determine the communication and engagement needs of stakeholders," says Lacea Loader, Director: Communication and Brand Management at the UFS.

In terms of reputational indicators, ethics of leadership, academic staff and support personnel ranked the highest at 79,97%, while employability of UFS graduates in terms of perceived value of a UFS qualification, and leadership qualities, life skills and institutional leadership effectiveness in terms of vision, visibility and consultation, both rate at more than 79%.

In terms of the stated values of the University of the Free State, high academic standards were ranked by 90,11% of stakeholders as the most important ranking value of the UFS, while student leadership was ranked second at 82,07%.

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Transformation and inclusion, as two of the strategic goals of the UFS, was rated at 77,47% and 78.33% respectively, while the overall reputation index perceived by stakeholders, is 77,82%.

In terms of contributory reputational variables, ethics of leadership, academic staff and support personnel ranked the highest at 79,97%, while employability of UFS graduates in terms of perceived value of a UFS qualification, and leadership qualities, life skills, as well as institutional leadership effectiveness in terms of vision, visibility and consultation both rate at more than 79%.

Stakeholders rate the visual appeal of the university's campus environment and infrastructure at 86,97%, accessibility at 83,40%, sporting facilities at 79,56%, and safety on all three campuses at 75,69%.

"Two similar audits were conducted in the last ten years; in 2005 and 2008 after the Reitz incident. Although a direct comparison of findings would not be psychometrically rigorous due to differing research modelling and sampling methods, there is a strong indication that the perception of our stakeholders has shifted," says Loader.

Reputational indices measured in 2005, indicated a 66% confidence level in the university's reputational indicators. In 2008, this level dropped to 42%, while it has reached 77,82% in the 2014 study.

In 2005, academic excellence measured 64,51%, in 2008 a similar variable measured 75,2%. In the 2014 study this dimension has been tracked at 77,35%.

The study was conducted among a representative sample of 23 stakeholder groupings. Quantitative and qualitative methodology was used in the survey construct, while the research was administered electronically through two customised research websites. The actual returns numbered 2 381. Over 600 pages of open-ended comments were received in the qualitative methodology, indicating a high level of stakeholder engagement with the institution.

Rigorous research modelling set a benchmark of 75% and above as the standard for advocacy for the university, indicating understanding of and support for each variable tested," says Loader.

The uniqueness of the study and the research model developed for the project has recently received international recognition from the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC). The prestigious Jack Whittmer Research Award will be presented to the university on 9 June 2014 during the Excellence Awards Gala of the association's world conference held in Toronto, Canada.

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The UFS will be the first tertiary institution in Africa to receive this prestigious award.

"It is a great honour to be recognised by our international peers for the communication programmes initiated to position one of the oldest and most respected higher education institutions in South Africa among its stakeholders," she says.

"I am not surprised, therefore, that the Department of Communication and Brand Management would win this prestigious international award for its world-class efforts at measuring stakeholder perception in the very demanding world and pressing challenges facing universities today," says Prof Jansen.

The Jack Whittmer Award is made to an entry into the association's Gold Quill Awards that reflected outstanding research commissioned or developed by a communicator and was instrumental in ensuring the success of a communication programme.

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