

Dear Members of the UFS Staff,

I would like to begin this first message of 2016 to you with best wishes for the academic year 2016. I trust you had some rest and time with families and that you are energised to continue doing great work at the university with all the challenges and opportunities ahead of us. Most importantly, may this year also be a period of growth and fulfilment in your career wherever you might find yourself working on the three campuses.

As you might know from the media, South African universities are likely to encounter continued protests from students around access to higher education, including the proposal for free education and the insourcing of workers from contracted organisations. I would like to share with you three simple standpoints on protests on our campuses.

- It is our sincere commitment and pledge to listen to our students and workers at all times. This is what we have been doing since the end of 2015 and every day since the opening of the university in 2016. We talk to find common ground, to share information, to assist students and workers as much as we can, and to ensure non-disruption of the campuses.
- It is the right of students to protest in a democracy and the university defends that right in principle and practice.
- It is not the right of students to act violently or to disrupt university events or classes. We trust our student leadership not to impinge on the right to learn of other students and to respect university events and processes at all times. The university leadership has no choice but to act if any individuals, whether our own students or people from the outside threaten the people or property or processes of the university.

It is important to remember that we have more than 30 000 students on our campuses. We have a responsibility as university to ALL our students, to the parents who have made huge sacrifices to bring their children to pursue degrees, to our academic and administrative staff, to our workers, to our alumni who pride themselves on their university, to those who invest millions in the university from the private sector and as individuals, and to government which funds higher education. There are many constituencies to which the university leadership has a solemn responsibility, and we take that obligation seriously.

Now, the most immediate issue for students is funding those who are academically capable, but lacking funds to study. This is what we have already done:

- We have allowed for free applications for first-year students, thereby enabling poor students to not fall at the first financial hurdle, namely applying to university.
- We have raised more than R65 million from foundations, the private sector and other agencies to supplement funds from NSFAS (government aid in the form of bursaries and loans). This takes up a significant amount of managerial time, but we do this because we do not want to turn away a deserving student.

- We have created a staff fund where UFS employees can also contribute to student funding. Please consider doing so again to enable more students to register.
- We have launched a R100 million Bursary Fund led by the Vice-Chancellor to raise funds exclusively for student finances between January and September 2016. This is an important drive and at the top of my list of priorities for this year.
- We have allowed for the waiving of the registration free of R950 for first-time Honours degree students, and free tuition fees for research Master's and PhD students (full-time and part-time students qualify).
- We are working with the Premier, the Honourable Ace Magashule, to expand the number of students funded in partnership between the university and the province.

All these efforts are being undertaken to increase access for academically strong students in financial need. Beyond these actions, we place the university at serious risk with any financial commitments we cannot afford. We need to pay staff and keep basic operations in place. We need to upgrade computers and maintain our (mainly overseas) journal subscriptions against a falling Rand. We need to compensate for the drought and retain top professors. We invested in the building of more residences and the upgrading of campus security. All of this is done against an annual decline in government subsidy in real terms.

I will keep you updated on a regular basis as we manage through these difficult times on a day to day basis. By the way, it is not true that the UFS will only start in July 2016 if the protest continues. This message, which is being distributed on the social media platforms, is a vicious rumour. In the meantime, we hope and trust that our student leadership continues to display the kind of discipline over the greater student body that does not disrupt the Academic Project of the University of the Free State.

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**Vice-Chancellor and Rector**  
**University of the Free State**