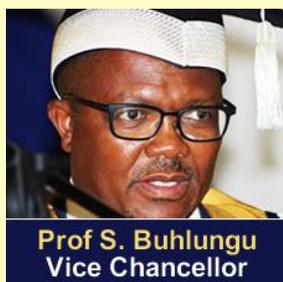




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**Prof S. Buhlungu**  
Vice Chancellor

## **OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE 2017 ACADEMIC YEAR AND WELCOME TO STUDENTS AND STAFF,**

2 February 2017, Alice (3 February 2017, East London)

Good morning students, staff of the University of Fort Hare.

1. It is a singular honour for me to welcome all of you a day after I assumed duties at the University. I would like to welcome all administrative, support services and academic staff back after the summer break. Welcome also to those members of staff who joined the University at the beginning of this year. I hope your experience of working here will be a pleasant one. I also want to welcome all returning students at all levels of the academic programme. Most importantly, I wish to extend a warm welcome to our new students. Congratulations for making it through our selection and admission processing. In 2016 we received about 30 000 applications for first year admission and only 3 896 were admitted and registered.
2. Before I proceed with the rest of my address I want to pay tribute to the outgoing Vice-Chancellor, Professor Mvuyo Tom for laying the foundations upon which we will build the future. I'm also grateful for his generosity with this time for 10 days in January for a thorough hand-over process with me.
3. I also want to extend my gratitude to Professor Gilingwe Mayende who acted as Vice Chancellor for the month of January 2017.
4. This year marks the beginning of the second century for the University of Fort Hare. It is a great honour for me to be entrusted with the task of leading the University for the first five years of its second century. Council met on the 27 January and adopted the new Strategic Plan for the period 2017 to 2021. The plan is titled "Beginning our Second



Century". The Communications division will ensure the Plan is accessible to all members of the University and I urge you to familiarise yourself with its contents so that we know who is accountable for which actions. The Plan identifies four Transformation Values – Integrity, Excellence, Ethics and Innovation. Ladies and Gentlemen, I wish to undertake to be guided by these values in my own conduct and to hold all other members to respect and honour these values.

5. The context in which we start is the following:
  - a. Poor performance by our school education system, especially in our province,
  - b. Poverty and inequality continues to grow with devastating consequences for the communities from which we draw our students and staff,
  - c. Turmoil in higher education triggered by rising costs and underfunding of Universities,
  - d. Competition among Universities for funds, students and staff,
  - e. Pressures to internationalise,
  - f. Decay in local government, especially small towns such as Alice,
  - g. Poor Living conditions for many of our students.

In addition, the University of Fort Hare has to contend with long distances between our campuses. All of the above impact on and shape the way in which we conduct teaching, learning and research in the University. This means that we as the University community have to hold hands with other stakeholders – the municipal authorities, various arms of the provincial government, the national government, the private sector, donors and our alumni – to make this one of the leading centres of higher education in the country and the continent.

6. But we will be building on the successes achieved in 2016 and in recent years.
  - a. The 2016 academic year ended smoothly and all examinations were written. In a context where several universities did not complete the semester and end of year exams, this is a significant achievement by UFH.
  - b. UFH has a strong tradition of dialogue and engagement among stakeholders, especially students, labour and management. This is an important strength that we should not lose.



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- c. In recent years there has been consistent improvement in the financial position of the institution. This is crucial for the future well-being of the institution and all of us have an obligation to ensure that this improvement is sustained.
- d. In recent years UFH has registered strong performance in teaching and research, something that bodes well for the current and future standing of the institution.
- e. The completion of the Student Village in Alice resulted in the addition of nearly 700 beds on that campus. This has gone a long way towards alleviating the pressure for student accommodation in Alice. Similarly, the major refurbishment of residences in Alice has gone a long way towards improvement of the living conditions and well-being of students on that campus.
- f. The new Faculty of Health Sciences that was launched in 2016 has started operating as a stand-alone faculty in 2017 under Professor Eunice Seekoe as acting dean. We will take the process forward later this year by initiating the appointment process for the substantive dean of the faculty.

For these and numerous other successes we owe gratitude to the outgoing VC, Professor Tom, his senior management team, Council, deans and the UFH community at large.

- 7. The purpose of the University is to teach and to do research (build knowledge). UFH has been doing this for 100 years and in that time it has been the crucible in which leaders were groomed. These leaders have excelled in various fields including politics, academia, business, the professions, the civil service and civil society and are to be found throughout the country and in many countries on the continent.

In the second century of the University UFH will no longer be judged merely on its history. It is going to have to also distinguish itself as a place of excellence in teaching and research in a context where there are stronger competitor universities in the country.

We as a University have to work hard to dispel and disprove the perception by outsiders that we are a weak and struggling university. To do this we have to do things differently and double our efforts to ensure that excellence is not a mere slogan but a reality that all our staff and students experience.



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For us to achieve excellence in teaching and research we have got to ensure that our administrative and management systems and processes have integrity. All members of the University have to be accountable for their responsibilities in their respective areas of operation.

#### 8. Invitations to Dialogue by the UFH Community:

It is too early for me to present you with a set of wishes and expectations, let alone a plan on how we should do things in the future. In the next 6 months I will meet with all sectors and groups and hear what they expect of me and senior management. I will also use those interactions to outline my own approach and how I believe we can achieve the goals of the Strategic Plan.

In the meantime, I wish to share with you my initial impressions on some of the things we need to address. Most importantly, I want to take this opportunity to invite members of the University community to engage with me and with one another in an open and constructive dialogue on some issues that I have identified. The list of issues I have identified is based on my initial observations, briefings I have had with colleagues and documents I have read in recent weeks and is not exhaustive by any means.

- a. Our **communication and marketing leaves a lot to be desired**. We do not seem to be optimising the opportunities arising out of our iconic status and the reach of our communication efforts seems to be extremely limited. In addition, I do not believe that we are doing enough to communicate the good news and achievements of the institution in the current period. The website is in dire need of revamp and renovation. We also do not seem to be optimising the powerful communication and marketing possibilities presented by social media. All of this has got to be addressed urgently.
- b. The **physical look of the campuses, particularly the grounds and lawns, appears to be poorly maintained**. This seems to be more the case in the Alice campus, yet we have a contractor responsible for gardening and related services. In my academic life I have done research on the physical conditions of and living conditions in mine compounds. University grounds and student residences have



got to be different and better than mine compounds and have to be conducive to teaching and learning by young people.

- c. The refurbishment of residences and other buildings in Alice campus is impressive. However, a closer examination shows that ***there are places where workmanship and aesthetics of the refurbishment leave much to be desired.*** This raises an incredibly important point about the management of contracts and the monitoring of the quality of services we source outside. I also invite members of the University community to help identify and report instances and cases of poor workmanship and maintenance of University buildings.
- d. I will uphold and protect ***the right of all members of the University to protest*** in order to raise their concerns and to hold management accountable. But we need to reach consensus about what is acceptable protest and what is not. This debate is not only for students and workers, it is for all of us, including those that are impacted by protest actions. I will initiate discussions with student organisations and other sectors about this issue. I should also add here that the debate on forms of protest is not the monopoly of students and workers, it is a debate that should involve all members of the University. During periods of protest all members of the University get affected and it is important to hear what they think.
- e. ***An Ethos of Service:*** We need to build and strengthen the ethos that we as management, administrators, support services workers and even student leaders are here to serve. It is imperative that we treat all those we serve with dignity and respect at all times.
- f. Despite the improved performance in research and post-graduate training, such ***performance continues to rest on the shoulders of a few academics and post-graduate supervisors.*** This is going to have to change. Every academic has to be research active and contribute to the productivity of the University. Likewise, every member of the academic staff should be involved in the supervision of post-graduate students, particularly at masters and doctoral levels.



- g. Our ***alumni relations remain an area of severe weakness***. Since the news of my appointment I have received congratulatory messages from many alumni, many of who expressed frustration with the lack of activities that involve them. Many are concerned about the future of our University and would like to contribute to efforts to regenerate and strengthen it. However, they believe there are no avenues for their involvement and others fear that financial contributions may end up being used for purposes other those intended. This is a serious indictment of the University and I will be raising this with it with the alumni affairs division as a matter of urgency.
- h. I am aware that there have been animated debates about ***the multi-campus situation at UFH, especially in relation to Alice and East London***. The potential for fragmentation and inefficiencies as a result of the long distance between Alice and East London continues to worry me. But I take comfort from the fact that the position of Alice as the main campus is undisputed. I will therefore spend most of my time at the main campus in Alice. For this purpose, the Vice Chancellor's residence in Alice is being renovated and I will use it as a residence and as a place for University meetings and functions.
- i. Despite UFH's reputation as a training ground for political leaders, ***the University's contribution to public discourse remains extremely weak***. Researchers and academics who dominate public debates and whose research informs these debates tend to come from about four or five of the country's universities and UFH is not among them. It is also the case that research and public discourse about the Eastern Cape is often dominated by researchers from other parts of the country or even from outside the country.
- j. The ***decrepit condition of Alice makes it difficult for it to fulfil its role a University town***. The University of Fort Hare is therefore poorly served in several respects – poor services such as electricity and water, severe shortage of housing for students and staff, shortage of amenities such as hotels, restaurants and recreational services, absence of decent schools for children of staff and students – and this makes the University and the town unattractive for academic and administrative staff as well as students. It is imperative that we work jointly with



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the municipal authorities, provincial and national government to join hands to regenerate the town. Equally important is the involvement of the private sector by investing in residential property and in the provision of services and amenities that are essential in a University town.

- k. Finally, the ***links of the University to the surrounding communities seems to be limited***. Indeed, it would appear that the pressures of poverty and inequality in communities on the one hand, and the financial and other difficulties facing the University have resulted in inward-looking orientations on both sides. It is my view that a significant proportion of the research conducted by the University should address itself to the issues experienced by the communities in the municipalities and the province as a whole. I look forward to hearing from each faculty what they are doing in this regard.
9. Colleagues and students, I invite all of you to debate these issues so that together we can map the forwards the second century of the University of Fort Hare. I consider it a privilege that I have been appointed at this exciting, some would say daunting, time of the University's history. I look forward to working with you over the next five years.
10. With these few words I welcome you all to the 2017 academic year and wish you all the best in your endeavours.

**Prof Sakhela Buhlungu**

**Vice-Chancellor**

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