

UNE STRATEGIC PLAN

2026-2035

Connecting Individual Aspirations
to Community Outcomes

Acknowledgment of Country

The University of New England respects and acknowledges that its people, courses and facilities are built on land, and surrounded by a sense of belonging, both ancient and contemporary, of one of the world's oldest living cultures. In doing so, UNE values and respects Indigenous knowledge systems, recognising them as a vital part of Australia's knowledge capital.

We recognise the strength, resilience and capacity of the Aboriginal community and pay our respects to the Elders past, present and future.

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Foreword

Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor

The current operating context for universities globally is characterised by dynamic change – policies, funding, purpose and relevance in a new age of learning technologies.

In response, the University of New England Strategic Plan 2026–2035 invites us to return to what has always made UNE distinctive: a deep commitment to learners, communities and our people. It sets out an ambitious and proudly unconventional future for Australia’s first regional university, grounded in our founding purpose of expanding access to education and strengthening regional communities.

This Strategic Plan responds confidently to the challenges and opportunities of a rapidly changing world, and reaffirms our role as a university shaped by, and for, the communities we serve. It sets out a future in which UNE works alongside communities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups, industry, government and partners as a trusted collaborator, embracing new ways of learning, leading in digital and AI-enabled education, and strengthening regional and Indigenous partnerships.

We have committed by stating specific short- and longer-term measurable objectives; making work for our people more enjoyable, respecting academic freedom and resetting the ways we operate. We will create a new university inside UNE to enable delivery of our broader undertakings for learners and communities.

Underpinned by a shared commitment to kindness, accountability, connection and boldness, and a renewed focus on excellence in teaching, research and governance, this Strategic Plan charts a hopeful, inclusive and purposeful path forward. One that ensures UNE continues to help individuals thrive and communities flourish for generations to come.

We thank our communities, alumni, staff and students for all your interest and input to this new strategy and look forward to delivering it collectively. Together we can achieve the outcomes outlined, for those who entrust us with their studies, and the communities that rely on our connection. To be the university that does what others cannot or will not do, ensuring that geography is no barrier to aspiration and that communities thrive through the power of knowledge. A better future for all.

Dr Sarah Pearson
Chancellor

Professor Chris Moran
Vice-Chancellor and CEO

Our history shapes our future

Connection with Country

The University of New England (UNE) was founded on Country that has been stewarded for millennia by its Traditional Owners, the Anēwan People. Their knowledge systems, and their growth and transmission across generations, represent profound and enduring intellectual and spiritual traditions. In the modern New England North West, much traditional knowledge and associated pedagogies have been disrupted due to colonisation.

Modern history

UNE was founded at a time when university education was only available in capital cities, to those who could afford it. Unconventionally, our ethos was accessible education for all. UNE remains true to its roots and is committed to being a university of universal opportunities.

UNE's foundations were unconventional by design. Our early leaders established distance education not as a compromise, but as an innovation borne from a desire to serve the community's unique needs. UNE designed and delivered education through paper, post and intensive residential experiences to those who wanted education and were prepared to work to achieve it. For 70 years, UNE has delivered new thinking and graduated global leaders across a wide array of disciplines and professions, providing fresh underpinnings for the prosperity of rural economies and communities globally.

Throughout these formative decades, UNE developed a research culture integrated with the needs of regional economies and communities, and closely connected to teaching.

Our history has delivered us a distributed physical presence, with a focus on Armidale (with significant facilities in Sydney and Tamworth and portals for learner access across the region), a strong college leadership environment and a distance learning capability and track record that is second to none.

Today, we face new challenges that demand the same tenacity and innovation that our founders demonstrated. It is imperative that we address matters of colonisation and academic freedom and acknowledge multiple ways of knowing and being. We will collaborate with our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, their leaders and people to realise their right to education. In the political, public and media arenas, we must address misperceptions of universities as anachronisms and the existential threats to higher education. To do this, we must transition not just our strategy but our operating model. We must channel the same courage, vision and willingness to challenge conventions as shown by UNE's founders, to create a university that has never been seen before.

Our context

UNE's current operating environment is complex and presents both risks to be addressed and opportunities to be embraced, outlined here as a series of strategic issues.

Social license to operate

Universities across the globe are facing significant erosion of public trust, partly due to perceived gaps between institutional priorities and community needs. A range of issues have arisen that portray universities in a negative light. This has resulted in what has become labelled as a crisis in their social license to operate. Because of this, an emerging movement is questioning the value of universities, despite compelling evidence that those holding Bachelor's degrees have life advantages¹. This is no doubt due, in part, to the increasing cost of degrees to students and taxpayers and the perceived lack of university focus on teaching and student outcomes.

Sector leaders have been criticised for failures of governance, financial management, inadequate responses to diversity, sexual harm, discrimination and racism, and unsustainable approaches to the international student market. The result has been a series of government inquiries into university governance and calls for greater regulation via the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Authority (TEQSA). We acknowledge our shortcomings and have responded with ongoing reform programs.

Changes and volatility in the policy settings for international students have created an imperative for UNE to reimagine its international student strategy. We have an opportunity to differentiate ourselves by delivering international education and university interactions based on mutually beneficial relationships rather than agent transactions.

UNE is a public institution focused on the public good. There is scope to widen the delivery of public value to stakeholders. As a regional university, UNE has more to offer communities than degrees and research projects by virtue of our proximity, and a responsibility to promote more and deeper engagement. This strategy provides us with an opportunity to be bold and deliver meaningful services that improve the outcomes for our community members. We are ready to embrace our role as a leading civic institution to support our communities to address significant global issues, such as climate change, resource scarcity and fragile social systems. UNE will meet challenges to social license by acknowledging our shortcomings and embracing our role in helping individuals to realise their dreams and communities to thrive. Intentional design for institutional diversity will support UNE's learner cohort, research agenda and vision for our future.

¹OECD, Education at a Glance 2024: Australia, 2024, www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2024/09/education-at-a-glance-2024-country-notes_532eb29d/australia_de49e105/7cd500b6-en.pdf; Australian Government Department of Education and Training, Estimating the public and private benefits of higher education, 2016, www.education.gov.au/higher-education-reviews-and-consultations/resources/estimating-public-and-private-benefits-higher-education

The Australian education policy context

The Universities Accord² reform agenda promises fundamental changes through the Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC), which could alter institutional autonomy. UNE already meets the future performance indicators the Minister for Education has accepted from the Accord for all Australian universities.

The positioning of a small number of large, geographically and historically privileged universities in their response to insufficient funding per domestic student has resulted in an imbalanced sector. To restore balance, the government will manage growth and reset funding based upon the needs of individual students. These policy innovations will partially meet the additional costs of operating regionally and allow us to continue to serve our cohort of equity, regional and remote students, and our mature part-time learners. We have successfully supported these cohorts for 70 years and those that must grow to meet the government targets. However, Commonwealth funding changes will not cover our full operating costs. Other sources of revenue must be sought to deliver a thriving and sustainable university.

New knowledge technologies

The rapid advancement of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and digital technologies raises competitive threats to conventional universities. To remain as critical national infrastructure, universities must immediately adapt. The rapid global dissemination of AI presents an opportunity to rethink conventional learning models. Learners with access to technology with AI are ~50% of the global population (with regional variability). Corporations with AI models are eyeing the global education market. We acknowledge that not all academics embrace AI and we respect their academic freedom not to do so. For those institutions that opt in, the combination of knowledge creation and sharing by discipline experts controlling (not just “in”) the AI loop will be a competitive advantage that corporations cannot match.


As one of the world’s first distance education universities, UNE has a track record for developing and deploying multiple learning models and technologies to meet variable learner demand and the varying outlook of academics. Our knowledge credibility, agility and intellectual integrity, combined with a bold digital strategy, means UNE is ahead of the pack and we need to remain there.

² www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord/resources/final-report



Strategy objectives

UNE's Council has clearly articulated the objectives that a new strategy for UNE must meet for us to thrive into the future. UNE must be the architect of its own destiny, reinforce its deep regional embedding and bring people together. We have undertaken a period of intensive engagement across stakeholder communities to better understand how UNE can best serve its people and places. This engagement made it clear that UNE needed an explicit vision and purpose for how it would seek to become unconventional once again.



Stakeholders and collaborators

Throughout the consultation process, we have sought to improve our understanding of stakeholders and their needs and expectations of us. **UNE can overcome the significant pressures we are facing by better developing our capacity to grow existing partnerships, and to create new relationships, networks and alliances. UNE will lead where necessary and collaborate where most beneficial across our ecosystem, which includes stakeholders, collaborators and the parent UNE entity.**

Learners and Alumni

UNE has unmatched excellence in learner experience. We aim to ensure this continues and is extended to many more learners.

We take pride in this record and recognise that too few of the learners we admit complete their studies. UNE is determined to see learners as future leaders. UNE has some 140,000 alumni spanning ~150 countries globally. We aim to reconnect with these remarkable people and restore our association that brings benefits to all.

Communities

Those in regions with whom we have relationships. We seek better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples by listening and collaborating.

Over time we have distanced ourselves from our communities, many of whose members are staff and graduates. Internationally, we have an underdeveloped strategic approach to relationships. We are determined to re-make relationships that should exist between a regional university and its communities, near and far.

Staff

Those who strive to deliver value with excellence and derive a sense of purpose and pride in the success of others.

Distance has developed between leadership and other staff, resulting in challenges to UNE's culture and potential achievements. We acknowledge this recent history, cognisant that we must address workloads and the lack of a clear strategy. UNE can thrive with mutual respect and a jointly agreed vision.

Partners

Businesses (our local economy is a collection of small and medium-sized businesses), agencies and community institutions.

UNE has some deep and long-term partnerships. However, we acknowledge that we can be more receptive and responsive when working across the business community. We aim to ensure that our existing partnerships continue to thrive and grow over time.

Our Constellation

UNE has controlled entities with various governance arrangements that have not been coherently aligned to a single purpose.

While each has enjoyed success, we envisage a future where they combine with the parent entity to form a single constellation around a common purpose.

Governments

Local, state and federal, and their related regulatory and associated agencies.

UNE has excellent government relationships and embraces its advocacy role for regional Australia.

Local governments are key to the University and its ambitions and impacts. We look forward to developing deeper partnerships around our joint aspirations for regional prosperity.



Vision Purpose Values

Vision

UNE was founded in 1938 as Australia's first regional university. We were to do what the conventional universities could not, or would not do for communities distant from metropolitan centres.

Today, consistent with our heritage, UNE has the vision **to be an unconventional university that excels at connecting individual aspirations to community outcomes.**

Purpose

Consultation has reinforced that the core purpose of a university is knowledge. This does not diminish the wider importance of data (the things measured), information (the analysis and modelling of data) and wisdom (making good decisions and planning for the future). To be defined as a university, it is necessary to meet minimum benchmarks for world-level performance in research. Hence, the creation of knowledge must be part of our purpose and has been core to UNE's success since its creation. The foundation of learning is sharing knowledge, and from our inception we have been a learner-focused institution.

Therefore, consistent with our vision and history, the purpose of the University of New England is **to support individuals and communities to thrive by creating and sharing knowledge.**

Values

Our values and behaviours provide a platform for developing the initiatives and connections through which we deliver on our Vision and Purpose. Working together, committed to our future, requires that we share and commit to a common set of values.

Groups of UNE staff came together, facilitated by volunteer staff convenors, to derive a new set of core values to guide our behaviour. They embody expectations of ourselves, one another and our stakeholders.





Community Collaborations

Our Approach

This Strategic Plan sets out a bold and different future for UNE. It identifies a new way of working with communities – we call this *Community Collaborations* – and a range of improvements to our foundational functions, and the outcomes we need from them, for future success.

UNE proposes a new, unconventional approach: to operate as an “interface institution” supporting Community Collaborations globally. We will succeed through a range of means, including embracing the lives of our learners and applying commercial rigour to some of our endeavours. This will position UNE as a leader in connecting individual and regional aspirations to educational and community outcomes. It will also support our financial sustainability.

Rural communities often suffer from a “tragedy of institutions”, in which services are not available because of institutional failures. Each of the institutions in a region, i.e., government, businesses and not-for-profits, have limits to their scope of purpose, resources and responsibilities. This results in the prevalence of unsolvable “wicked”³ problems, e.g., the provision of services such as health care, which is taken for granted in cities.

To ameliorate the tragedy, we propose recasting UNE as an “interface institution”. This is an institution with longevity, which has the people, knowledge resources, business capabilities and strategic intent to fill the gaps that exist between other institutions. It provides the interface for collaborations to develop – with other institutions and between existing components of a community.

Today, UNE is distant from some communities and potential partners. As a trusted collaborator, UNE is well positioned to foster a variety of partnerships. Our connections require flexibility rather than deterministic, controlling or fixed approaches. Across our many areas of expertise, we must be humble and learn how to succeed by operating differently. We need to deepen collaborations, position ourselves as leaders and deliver initiatives.

³ Wicked problems exist in complex systems and are characterised by the actors within them having different values, which prevent achieving solutions via negotiation. Complex systems consist of interacting parts in which the interactions between the parts are non-linear, i.e., a small change in one place can create a large change in another part of the system.

Live and Work to Learn

We will provide commercially established arrangements that give our learners “wrap-around” support that aligns with their personal and professional aspirations, local service needs and the long-term growth of rural human capital.

Upholding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights to education

Informed by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, we will move beyond offering the opportunities of education and embrace the Indigenous-informed co-design of initiatives. This will position the University as a support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to access and realise lifelong education goals that meet their aspirations.

Resilient Regional Relationships

We will focus on our relationships near (New England North West and Australia) and far (international) and on the major global challenges that unite us. We wish to have relationships that can recover from shocks and capitalise on opportunities.

Each relationship will have at its core at least one of the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Regions of tomorrow

UNE has historically been a leader in applying technology to learning and industry. Rural regions should not be second in line for technological advances that boost businesses and regional economies. We will provide support for regional businesses near and far (particularly small and medium-sized ones) to succeed with new technologies, particularly Artificial Intelligence.

Renewable Energy Zone alliances

The New England Renewable Energy Zone is unique in having a university at its heart. We will partner to assist with the issues of today, e.g., the co-existence of productive agriculture and energy systems. We will also work to pilot and develop industries of the future that use available renewable power to maximum effect.

Foundational Excellence

Our stakeholders are seeking significant changes to what UNE represents and delivers. The Australian community, university staff and political leaders demand that universities listen to the discontent being expressed and respond.

We acknowledge that some aspects of our operations – both externally visible and internal – require fundamental change. Our Strategic Plan acknowledges the need for improvement and identifies priorities for achieving it. Our Vision, Purpose and Values provide a collective sense of meaning and urgency to guide delivery.

UNE's first Vice-Chancellor, Sir Robert Madgwick, declared that UNE students were here to become leaders.

It was assumed they would show self-discipline in achieving their learning goals and it was the institution's role to develop their leadership capacity. In this strategy, we expect that achieving Foundational Excellence is analogous – we simply must do it to provide opportunities for more individuals to meet their aspirations and for us to deliver community outcomes. Accountability for foundational excellence is achieved by adhering to our Foundational Principles and meeting our measurable and timebound Foundational Objectives (see Delivering the UNE Strategic Plan 2026-2035).

In the immediate future, meeting these principles and objectives can only be assured through transition. A new UNE Operating Model⁴ will be required to achieve cultural and financial stability and to deliver services to our communities and learners. UNE must build and maintain operational excellence.

Foundational Principle 1:
Academic freedom is core to the existence of UNE and meeting our purpose.

The centrality of academic freedom

In an era in which the very existence of universities is being questioned, UNE maintains academic freedom as central to institutional excellence.

Foundational Principle 2:
UNE must be safe for all learners – physically, digitally, psychosocially and culturally.

Our learners, their environment and outcomes

UNE must be a safe environment, and we must have learning offerings that meet the needs of learners, industry, our partners and society. We must continue to attract more learners and better support them to complete their degrees. College leadership culture and the physical and learning infrastructure for distance and on-campus learners must meet changing expectations.

⁴ UNE's Operating Model is the alignment of our people, offerings, processes, technologies and controlled entities into a high quality, effective and efficient (slim) knowledge creation and sharing delivery system. It integrates our physical campuses and digital platforms. It defines how we operate commercial services that generate revenue and deliver community benefits that can be reinvested in teaching, learners, research and community impact.

Foundational Principle 3:

UNE will be renowned for the quality of its research partnerships, which will create greater critical mass and broader research impact.

World-class research

Australian universities must meet world-level research standards across at least half their fields of education. UNE has a long history of research excellence and collaboration but aims to become more active in research.

Foundational Principle 6:

UNE can only provide an enjoyable work environment and deliver the community and learner needs articulated in this Strategic Plan with a significantly improved Operating Model.

Operational fitness

UNE rates itself as highly inefficient (~10% of staff rate efficiency as good) and must transition to a new Operating Model to achieve a step change. Our physical infrastructure requires an overarching plan and adequate resourcing.

Foundational Principle 4:

UNE must be a safe, enjoyable and productive work environment for all.

Staff satisfaction

UNE cannot operate well, let alone transition to a new Operating Model and optimistic future unless people can attend work as their true selves, enjoy their work environment, are well and know they deliver meaningful outcomes.

Foundational Principle 7:

Financial sustainability is an outcome of a well-executed strategy rather than an objective in its own right.

Governance

The Commonwealth Government has accepted the final report of the Expert Council on University Governance⁵, which sets out expectations for university governance. UNE accepts these findings.

⁵ Final Report and Principles. (Accessed 17 November 2025) www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord/resources/expert-council-university-governance-final-report-and-principles

Foundational Principle 5:

UNE will meet the expectations set by the Government in relation to university governance.

Financial sustainability

For UNE to be the architect of our own future, decision making must be underpinned by effective and innovative financial stewardship.

The shape of UNE

UNE is and will continue to be an institution centred physically on the New England North West. Our main physical campus will be in Armidale, with an important and growing community and physical presence in Tamworth. In Armidale, we must consolidate campus infrastructure and begin the significant process of retiring infrastructure that is end-of-life. We also need to invest in new infrastructure to attract learners and partners to a new future of learning and discovery. This will include improvements to the farms and the introduction of new knowledge technologies and experiences. We envisage developing our campus surroundings to create a thriving local community embedded in its beautiful natural environment. We also aim to attract appropriate related businesses to establish experimental pilot facilities and other presences on our campus.

In Tamworth, our foundation campus and new building will be completed and become a thriving hub of regional education, partnering and community engagement. It will be a modern portal to the UNE distance education portfolio and provide a nucleus for the development of new courses and learning opportunities that capitalise on the strengths of Tamworth. As the city's arts and entertainment precinct develops around our campus, we expect to include accommodation, commercial services and entertainment opportunities. Further, we plan to become involved in Tamworth residential and community developments as a focus of several of our Community Collaborations. Our Tamworth regional relationships will be a template for the development of other regions near and far.

Across the New England North West, we will continue to provide physical portals for learners at distance who benefit from access to resources and social interaction with others. Opportunities exist for UNE to collaborate with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to explore various ways to more deeply integrate on-Country learning and knowledges into our University.

UNE has always had a greater population of distance learners than those on campus. We expect this to continue and to further develop our virtual experiences and leading utilisation of knowledge technologies. Many of our distance learners originally came from Western Sydney because, in the 1950s and 1960s, there were fewer pathways to established metropolitan universities for them. Later, UNE began servicing this important cohort by providing a physical presence in Parramatta. UNE has recently invested in strengthening this campus, improving teaching facilities and increasing staff numbers. We now have a modern and thriving environment that we intend to steward over the period of this Strategic Plan.

As indicated through our Community Collaborations, UNE intends to have more of its distance learners embedded in their future professions in rural communities throughout their learning journey. This means that, over time, UNE will become embedded within its regions in such a manner that transcends our physical campuses. As indicated previously, UNE will operate seamlessly and effectively in these new interfaces. Somewhat analogous to city universities, where the surrounding residential and commercial activities become indistinguishable from university buildings and activities, UNE will be indistinguishable from its surrounding rural cities, regions across Australia and around the globe.

How our unconventional future meets your needs

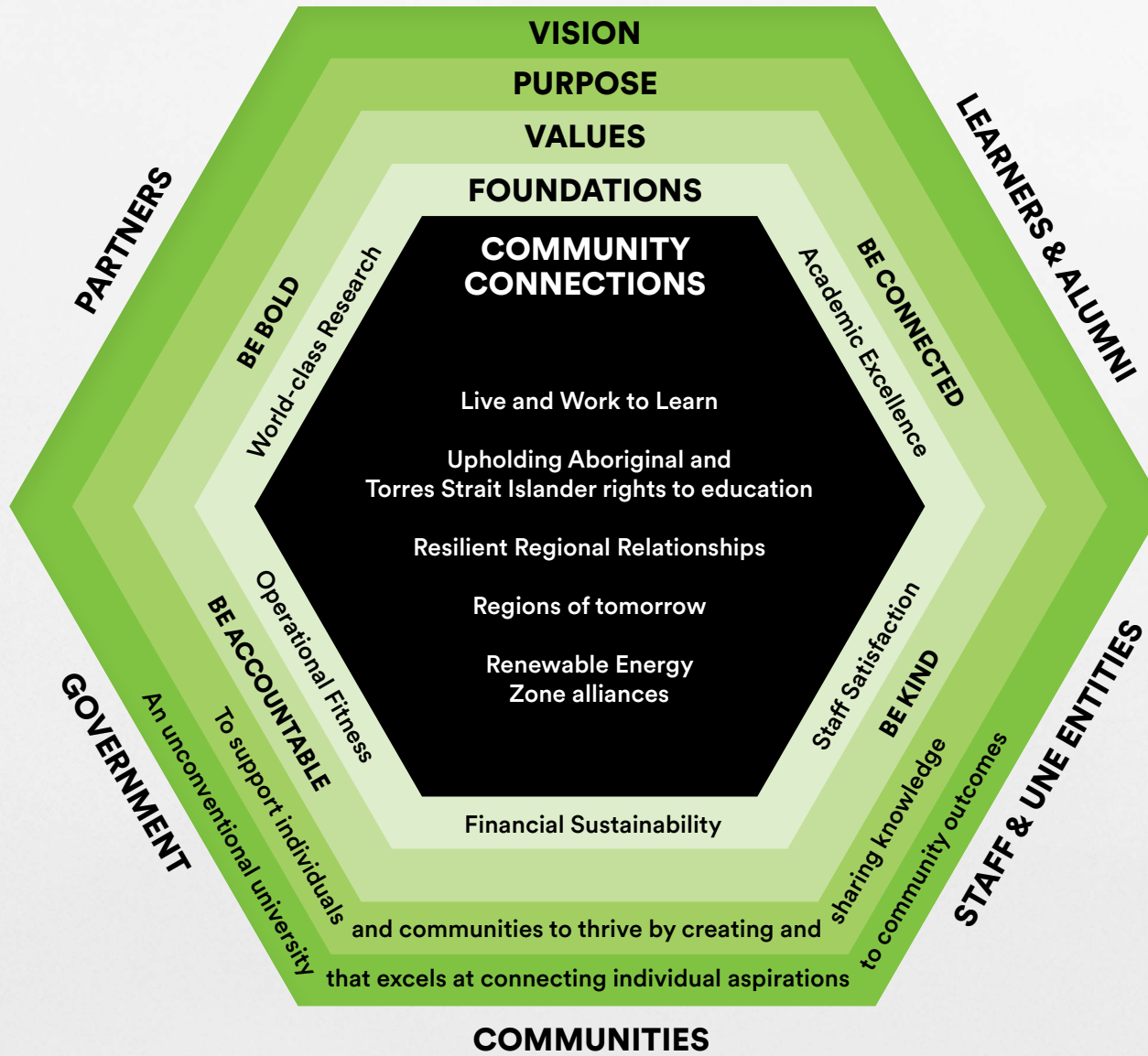
In concluding the description of our Strategic Plan, we pose a core (and ongoing) question to the reader: Does this plan and its delivery demonstrate that UNE has listened to your needs and reflected them in our planning?

Of course, not all desires can be met, and those that are represented cannot all take the same level of precedence. Our plan should be the centrepiece of a dynamic and evolving process that continues to direct us towards more effective ways of meeting our vision while staying true to our purpose.

This strategy represents more than institutional change – it embodies our commitment to being the university our communities need us to be. By connecting individual aspirations to community outcomes through deep, immersive relationships, we honour UNE’s unconventional heritage while creating a sustainable, impactful future.

We will measure our success not just in financial terms or student numbers, but by the prosperity of our regions, the achievements of our graduates, the wellbeing of our staff and the strength of our communities. This is our unconventional promise: to be the university that does what others cannot or will not do, ensuring that geography is no barrier to aspiration and that communities thrive through the power of knowledge.

The transition from today’s UNE to the UNE of tomorrow begins now. Together, guided by our values and driven by our purpose, we will write the next chapter of Australia’s first regional university – a beacon for regional higher education worldwide – and thereby deliver our vision.



This Strategic Plan was developed through extensive consultation with staff, students, communities and stakeholders throughout 2024-2025. It reflects our collective commitment to UNE's unconventional outlook and our shared responsibility for the communities we serve.

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