



**UNSW**  
SYDNEY

# UNSW Societal Impact Framework

Our shared, anchoring purpose, and  
commitment to improve life on Earth.





# Acknowledgement of Country

UNSW respectfully acknowledges the Bidjigal, Biripai, Dharug, Gadigal, Gumbaynggirr, Ngunnawal, and Wiradjuri peoples, on whose unceded lands we are privileged to learn, teach, and work. We honour the Elders of these Nations, as well as broader Nations that we walk together with, past and present, and acknowledge their ongoing connection to culture, community, and Country.

*"This artwork 'Between the land and water' was designed in 2024 for UNSW by Dennis Golding, a Kamilaroi/Gamilaraay artist from the northwest of NSW who was born and raised on Gadigal land (Redfern, Sydney)."*



## Contents

Introduction	2
Our local and global context	4
UNSW Societal Impact Framework	6
Our ambition: Societal Impact Goals	10
Our impact stories: 75 years of progress	14
A foundation for a UNSW-wide theory of change	20
UNSW Strategy: Progress for All	26
Evaluation: Impact Indicators	30
Acknowledgements	33



# Introduction

The role of universities and their impact on society and the environment is far-reaching and lifechanging. We are places of progress, where knowledge meets action.

Since UNSW was established in 1949, we have been guided by our distinctive purpose: to advance public good. Today, in 2025, we reaffirm our commitment to expansive and inclusive impact.

This year, we launch our inaugural **UNSW Societal impact Framework** which is at the core of the *UNSW Strategy: Progress for All*. Together, these outline our roadmap for the next decade and equip us for the next 25 years as we strive for collective progress.

We developed the Framework with the ambition of amplifying the impact of our groundbreaking research, quality education, engagement with our stakeholders and community, and governance as a leading global university. We aspire to build on our outstanding foundations and improve society and the environment for current and future generations.

The Framework's Impact Focus Areas are four of the nine strategic pillars in the UNSW Strategy. These Impact Focus Areas connect some of the most pressing socioeconomic, environmental and health challenges of our time with areas where UNSW is uniquely placed to have significant impact locally and globally.



The Impact Focus Areas are:

- **Accelerating the transition to a sustainable society and planet**
- **Advancing economic and social prosperity**
- **Enabling healthy lives**
- **Strengthening societal resilience, security and cohesion**

The Framework also acts as a guide for decision-making, expanding our networks, developing partnerships, and opening new doors to funding opportunities. It informs how we will evaluate our impact and creates a shared understanding of the breadth and depth of our impact on society.

It is through our *UNSW Strategy: Progress for All* that the ambitions of the UNSW Societal Impact Framework will be realised.

# Our local and global context

The UNSW Societal Impact Framework exists in the context of some of our most pressing local and global socio-economic, environmental, and health challenges.

Here is a snapshot of local and global issues that require a multi-sector approach and presents opportunities for UNSW to find solutions to improve our societies for current and future generations locally and globally, based on our strengths and capabilities.

## Environmental trends

- The socioeconomic effects of climate change on local and global communities are increasing. Globally there is an increase in climate-induced migration, and governments, communities and individuals are facing rising costs due to the impacts of natural disasters around the world.
- The shift towards renewable energy production and use is on the rise, but without a corresponding decrease in global greenhouse gas emissions.
- Biodiversity loss is accelerating and threatens planetary health and our ability to combat climate change.

## Health trends

- Global populations are ageing, and population growth is slowing across most developed and several emerging economies, including China.
- Insufficient progress has been made on health issues affecting those facing greatest inequality, especially Indigenous Australians.
- Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) cause most deaths globally. The top five are cardiovascular disease, cancer, chronic respiratory diseases, diabetes and kidney disease, with behavioural factors like an unhealthy diet and physical inactivity being a main contributor.
- Mental health concerns are rising globally and were accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Infectious diseases are spreading more rapidly around the world, fuelled by climate change, rapid urbanisation, and changes in land-use.

## Socioeconomic trends

- Inequality has increased in most advanced and emerging economies, and was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and progress towards equality is insufficient.
- Economic growth globally is slowing, and the rate of future growth per year is projected to halve.
- There is growing global geopolitical instability and concerns around resource security such as food and water security which was heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic.







Sculpture by artist Bronwyn Oliver, titled Globe, at UNSW Sydney, 2002. Photography: Richard Freeman.

# UNSW Societal Impact Framework

In our 75-year history, UNSW has contributed immensely to society through a myriad of innovations and activities.

Our contributions include, but are not limited to, solar photovoltaics technology, infectious disease elimination and control, restoration of endangered species and habitat, transforming waste materials into value-added products, human rights and international refugee law, and improving access to justice, social and economic policy.

# The UNSW Societal Impact Framework

The inaugural UNSW Societal Impact Framework sets out to connect us to the most pressing challenges of our times and the areas in which UNSW can have unique and significant impact.

By concentrating our efforts in four Impact Focus Areas that reflect current public issues, we will strengthen our leadership as a local and global driver of positive societal change.

The Impact Focus Areas are:

- Accelerating the transition to a sustainable society and planet
- Advancing economic and social prosperity
- Enabling healthy lives
- Strengthening societal resilience, security and cohesion

At its core, the Societal Impact Framework commits us to embed Indigenous peoples' ways of knowing, being and doing in our activities to improve society across all our Impact Focus Areas.

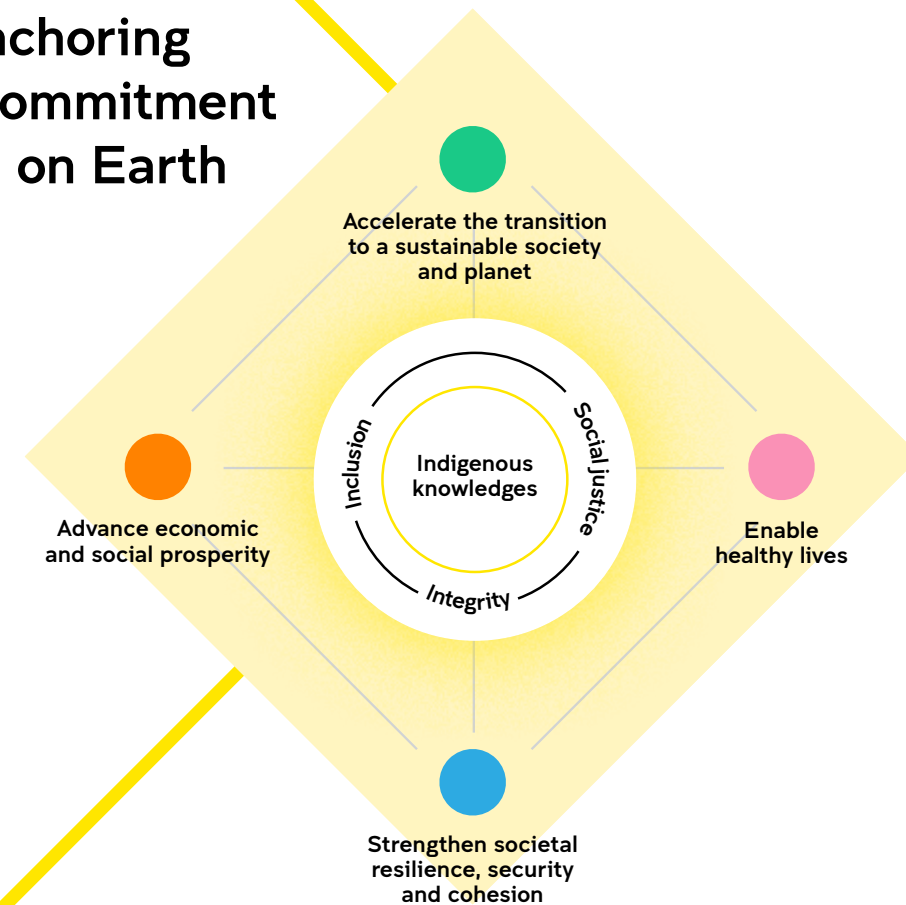
Through this we demonstrate a significant commitment to Incorporate Indigenous Knowledges, and to leadership and advocacy for Indigenous rights, aspirations, self-governance, education, and community-led outcomes.

Indigenous knowledges provide a unique and holistic insight into land management and environmental resilience, health, community wellbeing, and more. Indigenous peoples have a deep understanding and knowledge that has the potential to change our approaches, enhance innovation, and drive advancements that benefit society.

The Framework also includes cross-cutting themes that guide us, and like Indigenous Knowledges, are embedded across all our Impact Focus Areas. These are:

- Inclusion
- Integrity
- Social justice

## Our shared, anchoring purpose and commitment to improve life on Earth







# Our ambition: Societal Impact Goals

# Societal Impact Goals

Our Impact Focus Areas have accompanying Societal Impact Goals that reflect the societal change we would like to see achieved locally and globally. These goals require multi-sector contribution and we are ambitious in our intention for UNSW to make a significant contribution to these collective goals for major positive societal impact.

The goals are adopted from local and global targets including the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

## **Accelerate the transition to a sustainable society and planet**

1. Achieve net-zero emissions by 2050.
2. Restore 30% of ecosystems in areas of particular importance for biodiversity to improve planetary health.
3. Reduce waste generation by 30% through prevention, recycling and reuse.

## **Enable healthy lives**

1. Increase healthy lifespans of all Australians by two years, and those in underrepresented and minority populations in Australia and the region by three years.
2. Reduce by one- third premature mortality from non-communicable diseases.
3. Achieve health equity for priority populations.

## **Advance economic and social prosperity**

1. Reignite productivity growth in line with the national agenda.
2. Reduce at least by half the proportion of all peoples of all ages living in poverty.
3. Increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 25–64 who are employed to 62%.
4. Increase low-socioeconomic participation in tertiary education to 20.2% and reach parity by 2050.

## **Strengthen societal resilience, security and cohesion**

1. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.
2. Ensure Australia's sovereign capability by advancing expertise, new technologies, and sharing knowledge.
3. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all; and ensure sustainable food production and resilient agricultural practices.

For the full list of references, visit [unsw.edu.au/societal-impact](https://unsw.edu.au/societal-impact)



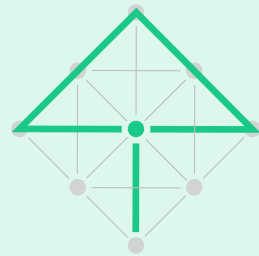


# Our impact stories: 75 years of progress

## Societal impact is in our DNA

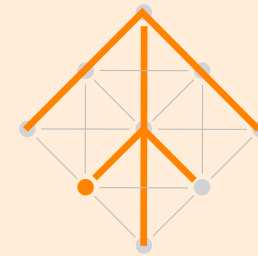
We take immense pride in our University's history. For 75 years UNSW has been making a positive difference through our education, research and community engagement. It's on these foundations that this strategy is built, reaffirming our founding purpose for societal impact. Here are some examples of ongoing programs against each of our impact focus areas that are already making a significant difference in advancing progress for all.

## Accelerate the transition to a sustainable society and planet



- UNSW is leading advancements in **photovoltaic technology**, with UNSW-developed solar cell technology contributing to more than 90% of the world's solar panels.
- **UNSW's SMaRT Centre** is developing innovative environmental solutions for waste challenges, transforming waste materials into high value products and significantly reducing landfill and carbon emissions.
- The **Laboratory Efficiency Assessment Framework (LEAF)** program is advancing sustainability in laboratories, preventing 640 tonnes of CO2 emissions and fostering environmental awareness in the scientific community.
- **Living Seawalls** is substantially enhancing biodiversity in urban marine environments and promoting sustainable coastal development with more than 21 locations across Australia and six other countries.
- UNSW conservation scientists are successfully **restoring platypuses** to the Royal National Park after an absence of decades.
- **iFire** is using AI-driven visualisations to transform our preparation for and response to extreme fires.
- **Sunswift** students and researchers are designing and building the next generation of prototype electric car.
- **Project Halophyte**, in collaboration with the University of South Pacific, is undertaking the most significant mangrove regeneration project ever attempted in Fiji.
- The **Trailblazer for Recycling and Clean Energy (TRaCE)** is fast tracking net zero, moving circular economy and clean energy technologies out of the lab and into Australian manufacturing.

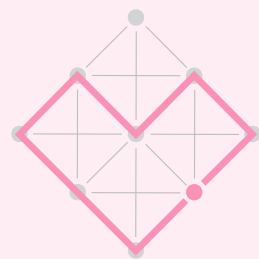
## Advance economic and social prosperity



- The **Gateway Admission Pathway and Program** is expanding access to students historically under-represented in higher education.
- UNSW actively supports Indigenous constitutional recognition and self-determination, making sizeable efforts to raise national awareness and to support the **Uluru Statement from the Heart**.
- **UNSW Tax & Business Advisory Clinic** is providing vital support to financially vulnerable individuals and small businesses, supporting more than 300 clients since 2019, amounting to more than 1500 hours of free tax advice annually.
- **Matraville Education Partnership** is enhancing outcomes for students from diverse and low-socioeconomic backgrounds, fostering a culture of academic excellence.
- The **Poverty and Inequality Partnership** between UNSW and the Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS) is informing evidence-based policies to tackle poverty and inequality more effectively.
- **New Wave by UNSW Founders** is empowering women to develop entrepreneurial skills and launch startups, with more than 650 women creating 245 startups to date, with female founders at UNSW now twice the industry average.
- The UNSW designed and implemented program **STEP UP: Playconomics** leverages gamified learning to offer accredited university courses to Australian high school students.
- **Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law** undertakes rigorous research on the most pressing displacement issues in Australia, the Asia-Pacific region and around the world.

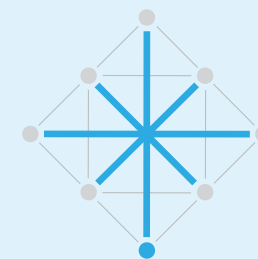


## Enable healthy lives



- **UNSW RNA Institute** links and expands multidisciplinary teams in RNA biology, RNA chemistry and RNA medicine to solve complex scientific challenges from cancer treatments to diagnostics to agriculture.
- The **Kirby Institute** plays a leading role in responding to and eliminating infectious diseases including a major contribution to informing health policies and vaccination strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The Kirby Institute is working in partnership with Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance to **advance cervical cancer elimination in Papua New Guinea**.
- The **National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre** is making significant contributions towards addressing the complex challenges associated with drug and alcohol use in contemporary society.
- **UNSW Ageing Futures Institute** is optimising ageing for individuals and society, including work to develop and evaluate a free, public dementia risk calculator, and recommendations for risk reduction.
- The **GeneEQUAL** program is designed to enable the development and delivery of a world-leading inclusive genomic model of care for people with intellectual disability, involving more than 750 users globally.
- The **Centre for Social Research in Health** is working in partnership with community organisations, policymakers and clinicians to document community knowledge of HIV-related behaviour and literacy regarding prevention and treatment.
- A new heart transplant technique – **Heart in a box** – pioneered by UNSW is reducing waiting lists for patients for heart transplants in Australia.
- **Kingsford Legal Centre Health**, part of the Law & Justice Faculty at UNSW, offers free legal advice to patients as part of a Justice Health partnership run with the Prince of Wales Hospital and the Eastern Suburbs Mental Health Service.
- **Black Dog Institute**, a UNSW affiliated institute, is having an impact in the mental health space through its translational research on mental health across the lifespan.

## Strengthen societal resilience, security, and cohesion



- **UNSW Canberra** is bolstering Australia's defence and material prosperity, training more than 15,000 defence and non-defence civilians.
- **Defence Trailblazer** is working with the University of Adelaide to strengthen Australia's sovereign defence capabilities by commercialising new technologies and solutions, and developing specialised knowledge and skills for the future defence workforce.
- The **Australian Human Rights Institute** generates research-based solutions to protect human rights, dismantle inequity and foster a culture of accountability.
- The **UNSW Disability Innovation Institute** is playing a pivotal role with the ARC Centre of Excellence in Automated Decision-Making and Society to understand the positive and negative impacts of intelligent technologies for the world of disability.
- The **Refugee Trauma and Recovery Program** and **Addi Moves** are making life-changing contributions to the wellbeing of vulnerable populations, having provided free counselling to more than 500 refugees and asylum seekers.
- UNSW is leading **Quantum computing technology** research with the aim of creating the world's first commercially viable quantum computer.
- **Yuwaya Ngarra-li**, UNSW's community-led partnership with the Dharriwaa Elders Group, is working to improve the wellbeing, social, built and physical environment and life pathways of Aboriginal people in Walgett through collaborating on evidence-based initiatives, research and capacity building.
- UNSW is working with the National Fisheries Authority of Papua New Guinea (PNG) to build food, nutrition and income security in PNG through the **'Fish for Prisons'** and **'Fish for Schools'** programs.

# A foundation for a UNSW-wide theory of change





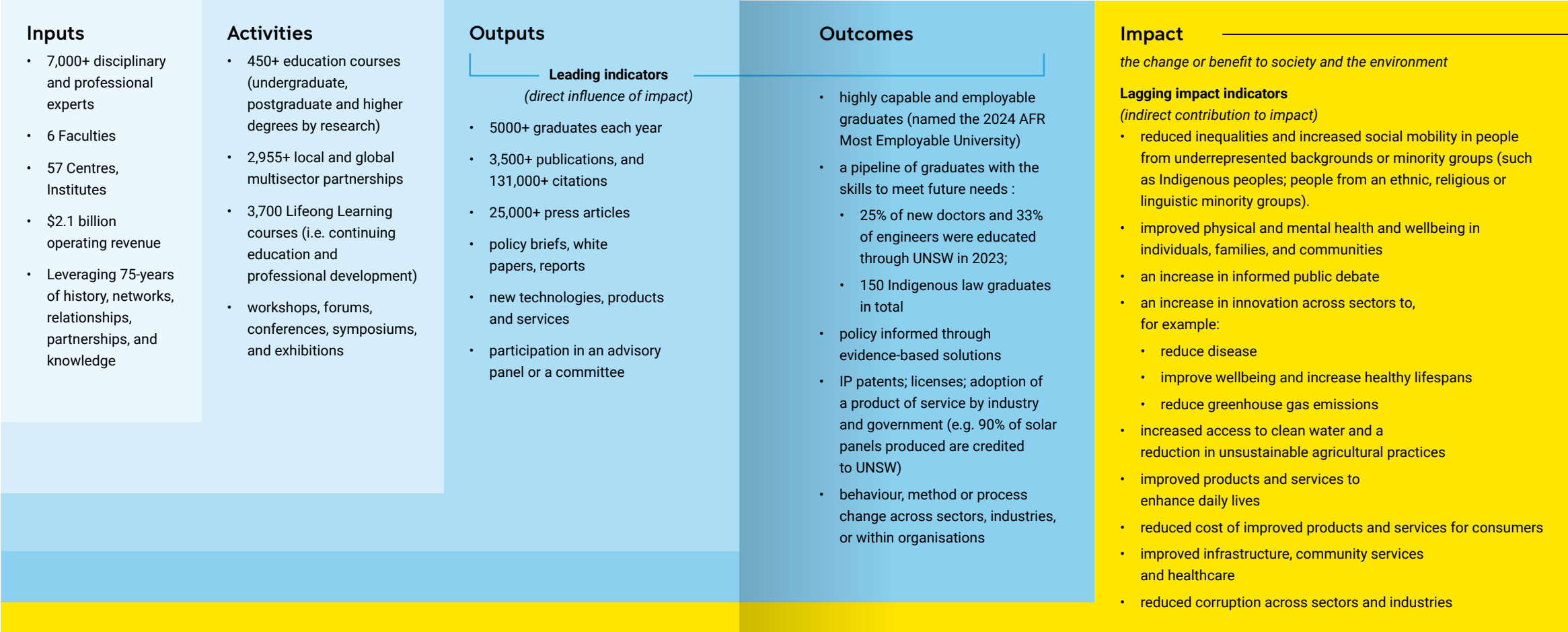
# Our contribution to societal impact

Our UNSW activities contribute to societal impact through a myriad of ways. This table outlines the foundations for a UNSW-wide theory of change, to be developed as we implement our Societal Impact Framework over the next 10 years as part of the UNSW Strategy: Progress for All. We strive to amplify our impact on society and improve lives for current and future generations in the areas that matter most.

How each activity contributes to societal impact	Core university "activities"			
	Research	Education	Engagement	Operations and Governance
	Generating new knowledge or discoveries	Empowering current and future generations	Developing partnerships and collaborations to advance societal progress	Enhancing employee and community wellbeing
	Commercialisation and distribution of improved products and services	Preparing students for the job market and creating a pipeline of graduates with the skills to meet future needs	Convening actors to advance challenging and complex issues (convening power)	Improving and sustaining the natural environment of our campuses
	Informing public understanding and debate	Reducing inequalities and promoting equity	Designing with the needs of the people and community at the centre	Promoting sustainable and ethical practices e.g. reducing carbon footprints
	Advising government and improving institutional decision making	Fostering social, environmental, and civic responsibility	Advocating and raising awareness of issues (e.g. storytelling through multimedia content)	Practicing effective governance
	Improving a behaviour, method, service, process, or standard	Enhancing student experience and wellbeing (social and emotional)	Strengthening democratic societies by rebuilding trust and supporting the public's ability to make informed decisions about information sources	Encouraging collaboration to improve problem solving and boost employee morale

# Sample impact logic model

An Impact Logic Model demonstrates impact through cause and effect. This example shows how UNSW inputs and activities can lead to societal impact. This logic model can be applied to various UNSW activities.



- Contributes to progressing our Impact Focus Areas
- Accelerating the transition to a sustainable society and planet
- Advance economic and social prosperity
- Enable healthy lives
- Strengthen societal resilience, security and cohesion



## UNSW Strategy: Progress for All

UNSW community, 2025





# How the SIF intersects with the UNSW Strategy: Progress for All

The UNSW Societal Impact Framework is intrinsically linked to the UNSW Strategy. This diagram outlines how we will work towards achieving our ambitions for positive societal impact through our UNSW Strategy: Progress for All. This is one example of how our Impact Focus Areas connect to our Strategic objectives. Full details can be found in the UNSW Strategy: Progress for All.

< Platypus Reintroduction Project in the Royal National Park, Sydney: a multi-organisation initiative collaboration between UNSW, WWF-Australia, NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, and Taronga Conservation Society.

Impact Focus Area	Advance economic and social prosperity
Societal Impact Goals <i>our contribution to progressing societal impact</i>	Increase low-SES participation in higher education to 20.2% and reach parity by 2050 (Australian Universities Accord)
UNSW Strategic objectives <i>–how we will achieve our societal impact ambitions through our UNSW Strategy. This is one of the objectives under this Impact Focus Area in the UNSW Strategy.</i>	<p>Offer lifelong education for our learners that enhances lives, promotes career success and empowers every individual for societal impact, by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• providing accessible education and support structures to advance social mobility and long-term success,</li><li>• scaling our lifelong learning opportunities for alumni networks and partner organisations,</li><li>• broadening opportunities for people from diverse backgrounds to learn at UNSW through inclusive, co-designed offerings.</li></ul>
Measuring progress <i>(example)</i>	<p>An increase in graduation rates from under-represented communities and minority groups</p> <p><small>*measured by Aus Govt. Dept. Of Education Equity Performance Data</small></p>





# Evaluation: Impact Indicators

Wild Deserts, a 10-year initiative to reintroduce locally extinct mammals to Sturt National Park in north-west NSW. A partnership between UNSW Sydney, Ecological Horizons, Taronga Conservation Society and NSW National Parks.

As outlined in the UNSW Strategy: Progress for All, we will evaluate and measure our contribution to societal impact through leveraging existing and capturing new insights on:

- The societal impact of our work in our four Impact Focus Areas, and
- The societal change in the areas described in our Societal Impact Goals over time.

We will use impact indicators such as the below to evaluate and showcase the overall societal impact of our work:

## **Quality of life:**

individuals or communities impacted by our activities,

## **Sustainability and sustainable development:**

improvements to our environment or society,

## **Policy and influence:**

knowledge transfer and exchange, advocacy and engagement

## **Scholarly outputs:**

traditional method of measuring impact from an academic standpoint,

## **Commercialisation:**

products, services and methodologies adopted by industry.



# Acknowledgements

The inaugural UNSW Societal Impact Framework was informed by consultation with over 1,200 UNSW stakeholders from our vast community, cross-sector research into best practice, recommendations from UNSW strategic initiatives and the ongoing work throughout 2024 to develop the next 10 year UNSW Strategy.

In 2024 we consulted with more than 750 academic and professional UNSW staff, 450 current students, local and global subject matter experts, alumni, and over 60 partners from industry, government and non-profit organisations. Dedicated sessions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, students and community organisations were also held.

More than 30 consultation sessions were held at UNSW Kensington, UNSW Canberra (ADFA), the State Library of NSW, and the National Portrait Gallery in Canberra. Online sessions were available for staff, students, and partners located in regional areas and internationally.

The UNSW Societal Impact Framework is a vital input into the next UNSW Strategy: Progress for All and provides the foundation for UNSW to increase its societal impact over the next 10 years and beyond, towards our centenary in 2049.

We acknowledge and thank our all our staff, students, partners, and alumni who contributed and provided their expertise and counsel throughout the process of development of the inaugural UNSW Societal Impact Framework.

This was a collective effort to ensure collective progress for all.



## Learn more



Projects featured received support from multiple sources, including The Australian Research Council, and this is gratefully acknowledged.

Cover image: Living Seawalls shortly after installation at Sawmillers Reserve, Sydney.  
Photography: Alex Goad