



# University of the Free State

## STRATEGIC PLAN

### 2015–2020

UNIVERSITY OF THE  
FREE STATE  
UNIVERSITEIT VAN DIE  
VRYSTAAT  
YUNIVESITHI YA  
FREISTATA



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# ACRONYMS

AP	Admission points
CHET	Centre for Higher Education Transformation
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
DRD	Directorate for Research Development
DST	Department of Science and Technology
DVC	Deputy Vice Chancellor
FTE	Full-time equivalent
HEI	Higher education institution
NBT	National Benchmark Test
NRF	National Research Foundation
NSFAS	National Student Financial Aid Scheme
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PG	Postgraduate
SET	Science, Engineering and Technology
T&L	Teaching and Learning
UG	Undergraduate
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
VC	Vice Chancellor

## FOREWORD

The UFS 2015–2020 Strategy is built on the UFS 2012–2016 Strategic Plan in two ways. First, the 2012–2016 Strategic Plan set out the long-term vision for the University of the Free State (UFS) as well as its mission. The academic project, the human project and the support services foundation, as the axes for the UFS’s development and institutional definition, constitute the strong basis shaping and supporting the new strategy for the period 2015 to 2020. Second, the new strategy builds on the achievements of the goals set out during Prof Jonathan Jansen’s first term as Vice Chancellor (VC). The difference between the two strategies is simple. The 2012–2016 Strategy provided the UFS with a common purpose and project that set the institution into motion on a long-term path of development. The 2015–2020 Strategy takes a medium-term view focused on deepening certain aspects of the change already achieved and on ensuring the sustainability of the academic project. This implies that the 2015–2020 Strategy is more “managerial” and sharper in terms of short- and medium-term goals and objectives. However, the 2015–2020 Strategy is still inspired by the same vision that allowed the UFS to imagine a different future five years ago.

## 1. Vision and Mission

A university recognised across the world for excellence in academic achievement and in human reconciliation.

The University will pursue this vision by its mission:

- Setting the highest standards for undergraduate and postgraduate education.
- Recruiting the best and most diverse students and academics into the University.
- Advancing excellence in the scholarship of research, teaching and public service.
- Demonstrating in everyday practice the value of human togetherness and solidarity across social and historical divides.
- Advancing social justice by creating multiple opportunities for disadvantaged students to access the University.
- Promoting innovation, distinctiveness and leadership in both academic and human pursuits.
- Establishing transparent opportunities for lifelong learning for academic and support staff.

## 2. Values

The five core values of the University represent deeply-held commitments that inform every policy and steer every action. These values underpin both the academic project and the human project of this University.

### 2.1. Superior scholarship

The University places the highest premium on superior academic performance. This implies high standards for entrance and appointment into the university, and high standards for performance once inside.

### 2.2. Human embrace

The University has established the reputation of being a place where campus struggles are engaged and behaviour transformed through human embrace. Students and staff are taught to live with differences of race, gender, class, (dis)ability, sexual orientation, culture, language, national origins, and any other, not through the injunction to tolerate but through engagement with difference. The leadership of the University, at all levels, seeks to model such behaviour through everyday decision-making that includes matters of student access, staffing equity, crisis resolution, residence accommodation, curriculum design, classroom teaching, sporting arrangements, and more.

### 2.3. Institutional distinctiveness

The University prides itself on doing things differently, and teaches staff and students to go beyond the common wisdom and the prevailing orthodoxy. It is the University's belief that intractable problems cannot be resolved by trying the same old approaches, and that academic competitiveness is only possible through new and creative methodologies. In project reviews, this question matters: how is this proposal different from and better than what already exists at other universities?

## 2.4. Emergent leadership

The University prides itself on creating future leaders and views the formal qualification as only part of the university experience and only part of student development. The University invests heavily in creating an environment where leadership is nurtured and where future leaders are given the opportunity to grow. Leadership is what sets apart a Kopsies graduate from his or her peers; future leaders are expected to understand their responsibility to society and the environment.

## 2.5. Public service

It is important to the University that students learn the value of public service through both their formal degree studies and voluntary work in surrounding communities. It is especially important in one of the poorest provinces of the country that the striving for academic excellence co-exists with the quest for public service; in fact, for the UFS the giving of oneself in devotion to those in need is a mark of excellence. The spirit of public service, which the university seeks to inflame in each student, is a quest that is in many ways counter-cultural at this stage in the history of the country.

## 3. Reflecting on progress

The UFS has been in existence since 1904. In its 110 years it has changed its identity, the composition of its student body and its relationship to society in many ways. The UFS moved from being a small English-medium college to being a small Afrikaans-medium university, and from this to become a medium-size parallel language institution functioning across three campuses. The UFS student body changed from being exclusively white to having a majority of black student enrolments in a demographically and culturally diverse student body. Finally, from being an institution supporting a politically exclusive project, the UFS has become a democratic institution open to a broader community and to the world.

Since 2009 the UFS has been focusing on the development and implementation of an academic turnaround strategy. The Strategic Plan of the University 2012–2016 was organised around three themes: the academic project; the human project; and the support services foundation. Despite the necessary analytical differentiation the interface between these three areas of pursuit has informed the UFS's understanding of the academic enterprise as a whole. While the different aspects of the strategy have been implemented concurrently, the first two years of implementation were particularly focused on the human project.

2013 and 2014 marked a turning point in the implementation of the UFS Strategic Plan 2012–2016. Foundational work in both the academic and human projects was completed with good results and the institution was ready to move towards the deepening of change in all environments and towards a more detailed monitoring of its performance. Our efforts to deliver on the goals of the academic project have started to bear fruit and the University has improved its performance in relation to most of its key performance indicators. The UFS human project is being recognised nationally and internationally for both its sophistication and its boldness and we find our student body and the overall social environment in our campuses showing signs of maturity and togetherness in



dealing with issues of diversity and social justice. The support services foundation has also improved the quality and outcomes of its administrative processes as well as the kind of institutional information on which to base decision-making and to plan for the future.

Despite these achievements the UFS is conscious of the need to accelerate and deepen the process of change initiated in 2009. Out of the 2013 top management strategic retreat emerged 14 projects aimed at achieving the long-term sustainability of the academic project and making the University more competitive by showing each year more clearly how it creates value for its students, staff and external stakeholders. In 2014 the VC was reappointed for another five-year term starting 1 July 2014; this has been marked by an even more focused set of targets designed to spur the achievement of academic excellence. This renewed focus on academic excellence does not mean that the UFS will be paying less attention to the human project. It means that the UFS is now in a position to look at the interface of the human and the academic projects. Thus, the 2015-2020 Strategy is purposefully built on the conceptual basis and achievements of Prof Jansen's first term.

## 4. UFS profile

The UFS's 30 969 students (2014 figures) are distributed over three campuses – Bloemfontein, Qwaqwa and South Campuses – and seven faculties, in decreasing size of enrolments: Education, Humanities, Natural and Agricultural Sciences, Economic and Management Sciences, Law, Health Sciences, and Theology. The UFS is fundamentally a contact mode university, but it offers distance education to approximately 19% of its student enrolments. The majority of our enrolments are at undergraduate level (71%); 7% of our students are enrolled for Master's degree study and 2.1% for doctoral level study. Most of our enrolments are in the humanistic disciplines (humanities, social sciences, law, and education: 53.8%); 30.6% of our students are enrolled in science, engineering and technology (SET) disciplines, and 15.6% in commerce. Our annual number of graduates has been growing steadily with a total of 6 726 graduates in 2013. Eight percent of our students received NSFAS bursaries in 2014 and 15% are accommodated in university-sponsored residence halls.

Since 2010 the UFS has increased the admission points (AP) needed to enter university programmes and it is believed that this, combined with a series of other interventions, has had generally a positive impact on the UFS's success rates. Despite the UFS enrolling better performing students in terms of school marks, in the 2014 cohort only 34.9% of the students performed at the proficient level in the academic literacy domain of the National Benchmark Test (NBT), 13.6% in quantitative literacy, and a particularly concerning 9.6% in mathematics. In the area of teaching and learning the University has, through a number of targeted interventions, improved its success rate at undergraduate level to 77.4% in 2013, which brings the institution closer to the national average of 80%.

The majority of the UFS's students are black (70% in 2014) and female (61% in 2014). The changes in the demographic profile of UFS students have had a considerable impact on the distribution of students by language of instruction. The UFS is a parallel medium university (Afrikaans and English) but a growing

number of students, including a considerable proportion of students with Afrikaans as their home language, choose English as the medium of instruction. This creates a pedagogic hurdle for students and staff as English is a second or third language for both parties.

#### Box 1: A Note on the Nature of University Data

The majority of UFS data is captured by various support and academic departments on the PeopleSoft system. Operational data is available at any time, but is valid only for the date and time that it was extracted, since operational data can change from hour to hour. Audited data for the current year is only available at the end of July of the next year. Any data for the current year that is used before August of the next year is therefore estimated figures. The scheduling of graduation ceremonies affects the accuracy of graduate data. For example, students who complete their qualifications in 2012 but receive their qualifications at the July (Master's and doctoral) and September (undergraduate and postgraduate below Master's) 2013 ceremonies will not be recorded in the 2012 data, since the ceremonies take place after the external audit of data (in June every year). People data (i.e. staff and students) is available as headcounts or as full-time equivalents (FTEs). One headcount represents one person (staff member or student), irrespective of the time they spend working or studying at the university or, in the case of students, the credit value of their enrolment. In the case of a student, the FTE value is a numerical designator for the credit load of the student. This value is based on the number and weighting of the modules (courses) for which the student is registered. In the case of a staff member, the FTE value represents the full- or part-time employment status of the staff member – for example, a full-time staff member works 40 hours per week and is therefore allocated one FTE; a part-time staff member who works 30 hours per week is allocated 0.75 of an FTE.

We had 995 permanent academic staff in 2014 and a total permanent staff complement of 2 521 people. The share of our permanent academics who hold doctoral and Master's qualifications has been increasing steadily in recent years. From 2012 to 2014 this share increased from 70.0% to 86.5%, and the share of academic staff with doctorates increased from 33.1% to 40.7%. The relationship between the doctoral qualification and research productivity has led the UFS to focus on improving the qualifications of its staff

members as well as on increasing its numbers of postdoctoral fellows and doctoral students.

The benchmarks developed by the Centre for Higher Education Transformation (CHET) in 2010 classified the UFS as a medium knowledge production university. These are universities that are neither research-intensive nor exclusively focused on undergraduate teaching and learning. In this respect one of the UFS's greatest challenges is to develop a more defined identity and the benchmarks that it needs to achieve to be excellent within its niche. The UFS is actively improving the quantity and quality of its research function; and to this end we established in 2013 a separate DVC: Research portfolio, which is supported by the Directorate for Research Development (DRD).

A targeted reward system at the UFS has resulted in a steady increase in the quality of our research function in terms of the publication of scholarly articles in internationally indexed journals – 58.2% of our publication output units of 2012 were generated from articles published in journals in this category. Even though the UFS has managed to increase the size of the research function in terms of the number of research output units and to maintain relative stability in terms of units produced per academic, the extent to which the University achieved the normed research output determined by government has decreased significantly from 102.3% in 2009 to only 74.4% in 2012. This is due to the recent addition of the research productivity of an institution as a factor which determines this norm. Since the level to which the institution achieves the norm determines the research output subsidy which it receives, failure to achieve the norm has a significant impact on financial sustainability.

Although progress is slower than desired, the UFS is moving on a positive trajectory on various fronts. More targeted interventions, already introduced in 2014, will be part of the 2015–2020 Strategy to ensure that the UFS continues moving towards becoming a research-led institution.

## 5. Contextualising the strategy

All higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa, and public universities with a strong research orientation in particular, operate across the policy and strategic domains of higher education and science and technology. In these two environments new strategic documents have mapped out goals that are aligned with the priorities identified in the National Development Plan. This section provides in broad strokes some of the wider context issues that the UFS takes into account in planning for the medium and long term.

*The White Paper for Post-schooling and Training*, 2013 redefined the position of universities in the post-schooling system and their interface with the technical, vocational education and training sector. Important for the purposes of this Strategic Plan, the White Paper set ambitious targets for the expansion of the higher education sector in terms of access by 2030, its demographic diversity and its performance. The White Paper gave new impetus to the importance of distance education in the expansion of access to higher education. This has been supported by a new policy on distance education that lifts the embargo on distance education provision at contact education universities. It is important to note in this regard that, although the size of the NSFAS funds available to support poor students has grown exponentially, this growth is still insufficient to meet the needs of all students eligible to enter universities. This puts enormous financial, social and political pressure on all public HEIs – a situation which might be further complicated by possible changes in the management and administration of the grants themselves.

A review of the funding formula for universities has made a series of recommendations that, if accepted by government, would have important consequences for the financial position of institutions like the UFS, with a large number of students enrolled in education and humanities programmes.

In the area of science and technology the expansion of doctoral enrolments and graduates, particularly in the area of science, engineering and technology, is being flagged in all three policy documents. The expansion of the country's research capacity through a number of interventions by the Department of Science and Technology (DST) and the National Research Foundation (NRF) constitutes yet another set of national goals that have a direct impact on the UFS.

All these national developments have to be read against the backdrop of the ever growing demand for international competitiveness, comparability and portability of degrees and the steady process of internationalisation (and globalisation) of some universities. Technology is transforming the higher education environment in relation to both its core functions and its managerial capacity. At the same time the supranational institutions such as the OECD, UNESCO, and the World Bank play a role in the diffusion and globalisation of policies and trends in higher education. While being on top of international developments is of essence for any HEI that wants to be taken seriously, it is not always necessary or appropriate to accept and adopt all trends.

Reading carefully the local and global environment to position the institution appropriately, to establish beneficial relationships and partnerships, to find the distinct focus that differentiates similar institutions among themselves, is a particular challenge in this context and one to which the UFS is happy to rise.

## 6. Institutional priorities

The UFS Strategic Plan 2015–2020 will build upon the previous strategy by refining the institutional priorities that are based on the human and academic projects and the support services foundation. (1) The UFS will advance **the academic project** by strengthening and enhancing the university's academic reputation; (2) it will extend **the human project** by improving the equity profile and diversity of its staff; and (3) it will fortify the **support services foundation** by strengthening and enhancing the university's financial sustainability.

These three priorities are intertwined. Given the manner in which the government subsidy works and the extent to which the UFS is dependent on this source of income, there is a fundamental connection between the university's performance in academic terms and its financial sustainability. At the same time the UFS believes that diversity is a precondition for the quality of intellectual outputs in both teaching and learning and research; increased equity and diversity in our staff thus is a necessary element to improve our academic standing.

## 7. Strategic goals and objectives

Based on these institutional priorities the UFS will pursue the following strategic goals and associated objectives in the next five years.

### Goal 1: Improve our academic reputation

#### Objective 1.1: Increase student success

**Strategy 1.1.1: Improve the quality and effectiveness of teaching and learning at undergraduate and postgraduate level.**

A success rate of 50% will be expected of all modules. This does not mean that the academic standards for modular performance are being lowered; in fact, we have raised our academic entrance standards in general and in specific programmes. Every head of department, with the support of the dean, has to ensure that the full range of academic support and development efforts are put in place to ensure that students, once enrolled at the university, pass at acceptable levels and graduate on time. The human and financial costs of poor success rates and low throughput are too large for the individuals concerned and for the sustainability of the University itself; the UFS can no longer lag behind the other public universities with similar student profiles but with higher success and throughput rates.

**Strategy 1.1.2: Implement strategic management of enrolments to achieve academic sustainability.**

Specific targets for undergraduate enrolments will be negotiated with each faculty. Meeting these targets is necessary to achieve financial and academic viability (also see Objective 3.1). They are informed by the norms set by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) for each university, our specific enrolment commitments (including SET and scarce skills specific targets), and careful calculations about faculty and institutional

finances. The Health Sciences Faculty is the only faculty that more or less reaches its enrolment target but even here there are some recent shortfalls in the allied health disciplines that we will address as well as a desire to increase the intake for the MBChB.

Similarly, faculties will have postgraduate enrolment targets. The growth in Master's and doctoral students is an absolute priority, and it is clear that aggressive recruitment outside South Africa must be pursued given the weak pipeline from undergraduate to postgraduate studies in the national system.

### **Objective 1.2: Improve the University's research outputs**

#### **Strategy 1.2.1: Improve research quality.**

Academic reputation is very dependent upon the quality of research produced by an institution. The UFS needs to improve the quality of its research outputs, which we currently measure by the editorial policies of academic publishing houses and scholarly journals. Universities that are of similar size to the UFS in terms of its academic staff complement publish 70% to 90% of their scholarly journal outputs in carefully selected, high quality international journals. The UFS published only 63% of its journal outputs in such journals in 2013. Not only is this a decrease from 66% in 2012; this share was also significantly lower than the national average (72%), and only six of the 23 public HEIs performed worse than the UFS in this regard.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Strategy 1.2.2: Increase research productivity.**

UFS institutional data shows that 47% of academics are unproductive, adding little to research outputs. These academics, as far as research is concerned, contribute nothing to the academic reputation or the financial viability of the University (also see Goal 3). Every academic in the University is required to produce one research publication per annum; in 2009 our agreed-on norm with the DHET was 1.25 units

per permanent academic, which includes units generated through doctoral and research Master's graduates. In 2010 the norm was increased to 1.41 units, and to 1.7 units in 2011. The UFS has not achieved these targets since 2009 and subsequently the norm has been lowered to 1.5 units. We must move the University to meet and exceed this norm within the next three years.

### **Goal 2: Improve the equity and diversity of staff and students**

#### **Objective 2.1: Improve staff equity**

##### **Strategy 2.1.1: Implement strategic management of academic staff appointments to improve the equity profile of the academic workforce.**

Progress on equity has been slow both in ordinary academic appointments and in the leadership of academic departments. More than 70% of UFS's academics are white with very little change in recent years. We have not been very committed or imaginative in how we use the opportunities available to the University in the annual retirement or resignation of a significant number of academics from the University. The constraints of finances and the talent pool that confront all South African universities can no longer serve as an excuse given the lost opportunities.

#### **Objective 2.2: Improve student equity**

##### **Strategy 2.2.1: Decrease the gap between black and white student success rates.**

Equity is not limited to demographic representation. Despite having made significant inroads in terms of black access to higher education, measures of student success indicate that the UFS remains inequitable in academic terms. For example, in 2013 the module success rate for black students was 12% below that of white students. This also means that low throughput – high attrition and extended time-to-degree – affect black students in larger

<sup>1</sup> Source: Report on the evaluation of the 2013 universities' research outputs, presented by Sandile E J Williams at the Research Output Evaluation Panel Meeting, 10 November 2014

numbers than white students<sup>2</sup>. The UFS can no longer hide behind factors beyond its control – such as the failures of the school system and students’ socio-economic inheritance – as justification for resigning ourselves to continued academic inequity.

### **Goal 3: Achieve financial sustainability**

#### **Objective 3.1: Reduce the UFS’s dependence on tuition fees**

The UFS has been working for some time on a greater integration of its academic and support services planning. We have made considerable progress in this regard. During the period 2015–2020 we hope to achieve a much greater alignment between academic planning, finances, HR and physical planning. We expect to implement a viability model for academic departments as well as to develop a model to calculate and manage the carrying capacity of the university. From a strict financial point of view we will implement the following strategies aimed at reducing our dependence on student fees:

##### **Strategy 1.1.2: Implement strategic management of enrolments to maximise our government subsidy in terms of teaching input and output.**

Strategic management of enrolments is discussed under Objective 1.1.

##### **Strategy 1.2.2: Increase research productivity to maximise our government subsidy in terms of research output.**

Research does not only affect academic reputation. It also has the potential to make a significant contribution to the University’s annual government subsidy income. However, the UFS must achieve the research output norm set by the DHET in order to maximise income from this funding source (also see Objective 1.2).

##### **Strategy 3.1.1: Increase third stream income from advancement activities, research and innovation, and short learning programmes.**

The highest ranking universities in South Africa have in common that their largest source of income is not government subsidy or tuition fees. The UFS has the capacity to increase its own third stream income by attracting external funding through (a) its advancement function, (b) its research enterprise, and (c) its offering of short learning programmes. In terms of the research enterprise, this includes funding for research – in the form of research contracts and grants – as well as the commercialisation of research products, processes and services.

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<sup>2</sup> For example, 56% of black 2007 first-year students had not yet graduated by 2013, compared to 39% of white students in the same cohort.



## 8. Strategic success factors

The UFS has identified 10 critical elements that drive its Strategic Plan 2015–2020 and without which the strategy cannot be successful. These success factors have been articulated as follows:

1. Attract excellent and diverse undergraduate students.
2. Attract excellent and diverse postgraduate students.
3. Increase the quality and quantity of research outputs.
4. Attract and retain highly qualified and diverse academic staff.
5. Increase the quality and quantity of teaching outputs.
6. Integrate processes, management and information.
7. Deepen institutional transformation.
8. Achieve financial and operational sustainability.
9. Attract and retain highly qualified and diverse support staff.
10. Establish and maintain appropriate infrastructure.

The strategic success factors are essential for the UFS to achieve its goals and they form the basis of the institutional risk register. For example, a lack of depth of institutional transformation, and a failure to achieve and maintain financial and operational sustainability, will render impossible the improvement of student and staff equity and academic reputation. In the same way, in order to achieve financial sustainability, the University must increase the income that it generates from high volumes of high quality research outputs; it must attract and retain diverse and highly skilled support staff members; it must be supported by the appropriate infrastructure; and it must succeed in integrating all processes, management systems and information systems that support its business.

The relationship between the strategic success factors and the priority areas and goals of the UFS Strategic Plan 2015–2020 is illustrated in Figure 1.

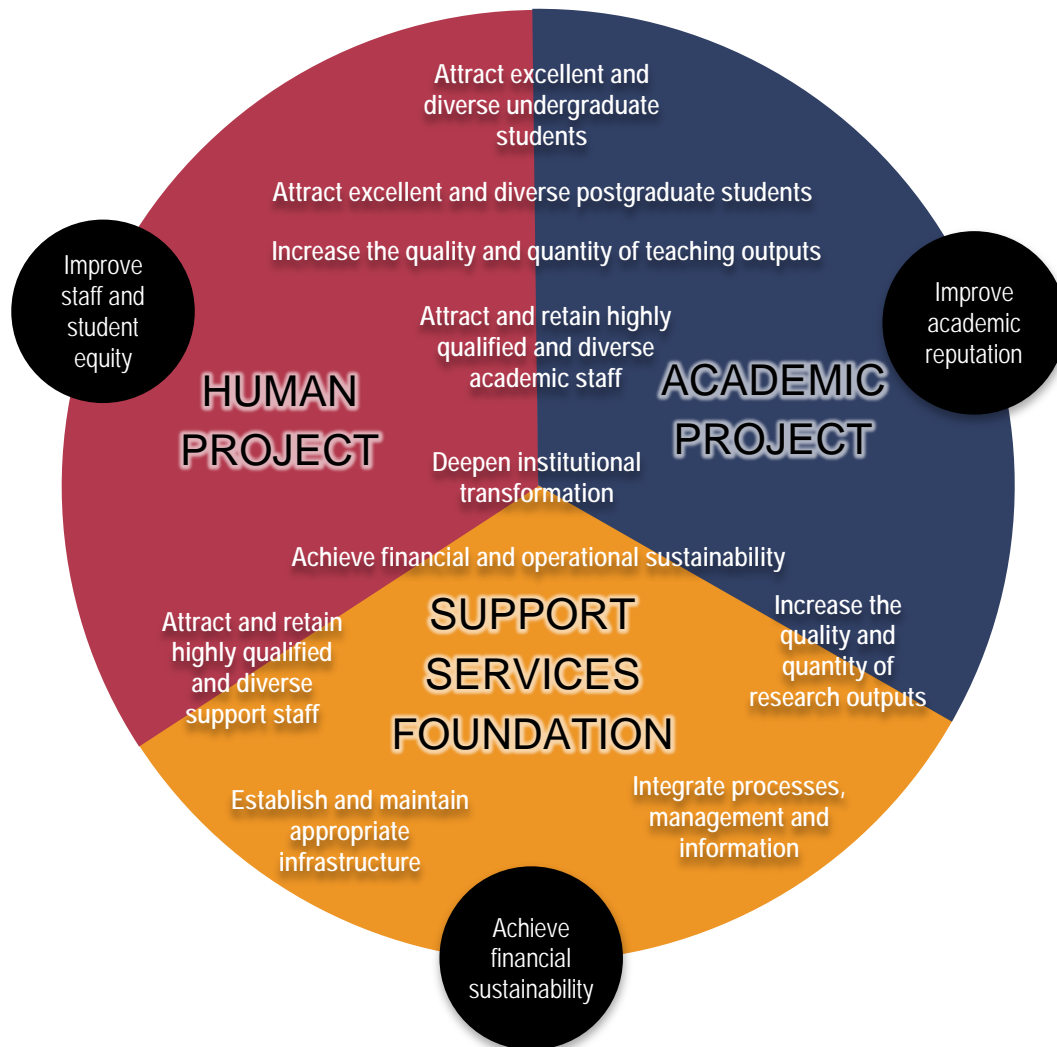
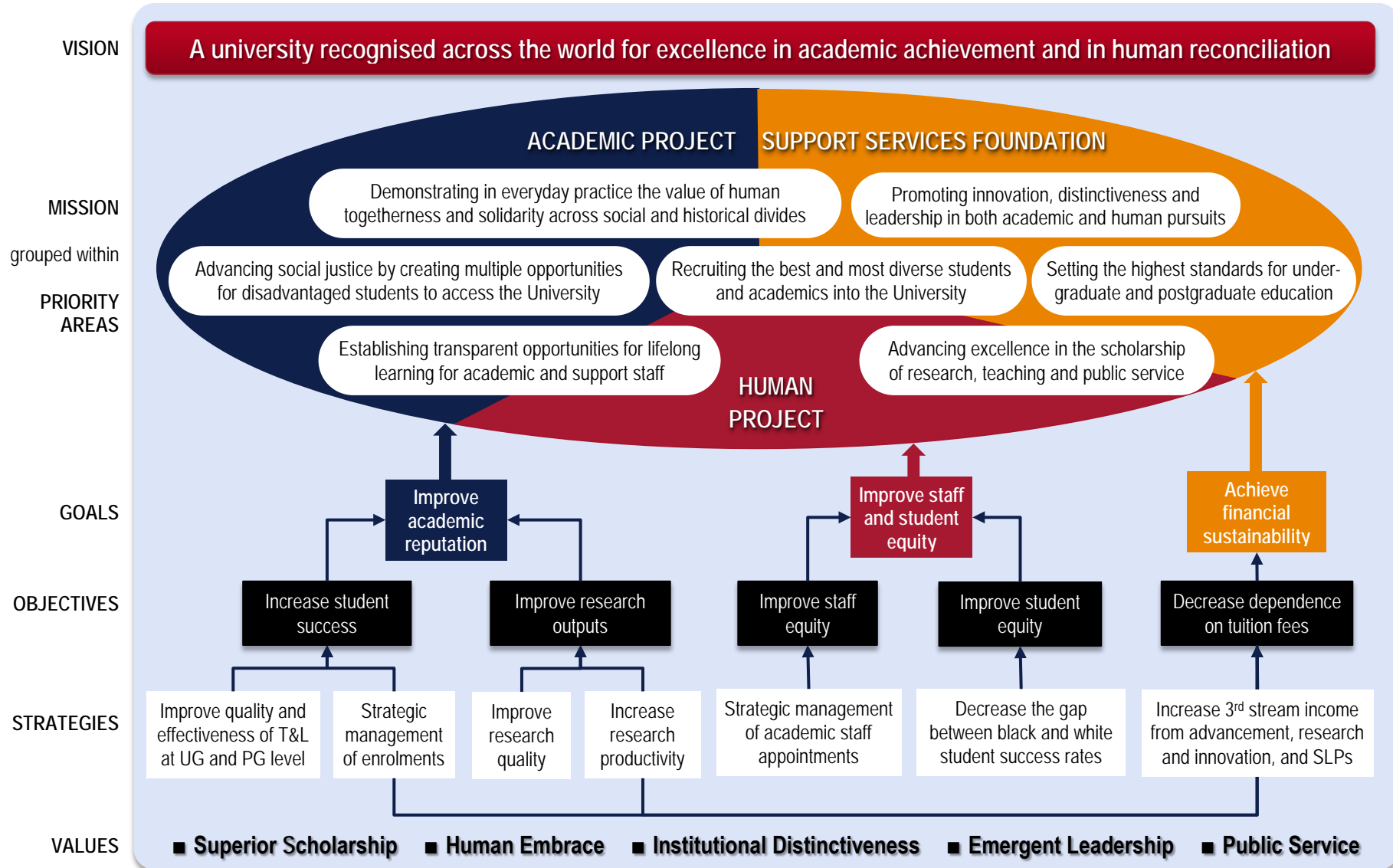


Figure 1: UFS strategic success factors in relation to the priority areas and goals of the UFS Strategic Plan 2015-2020



## Annex 1: Map of the UFS Strategic Plan 2015–2020



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