



• PRACTITIONER ESSAY · HIGHER EDUCATION

Reimagining strategy in a world universities *didn't plan for.*

The 2030 plans were written for a world that no longer exists. A practitioner's account of the questions Australian universities are quietly returning to.

— ACKNOWLEDGEMENT



— COUNTRY

Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung— *Kulin Nation*

— PLACE

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We acknowledge the lands on which Australia's universities *sit, teach, research, and learn.*

CoreBridge Advisory acknowledges the **Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung People** of the Kulin Nation as the Traditional Owners of the lands on which our practice is based, in Narrm — and the many First Peoples of the lands across which Australia's universities sit, teach, research, and learn.

We pay our respects to Elders past and present, and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples whose governance traditions continue to hold relational accountability across generations.

This paper concerns the future of Australian universities. The oldest continuous knowledge institutions on this continent are **First Nations**. The questions of self-determination, of trust, and of the long horizon — which run through this work — are sharper because of governance systems that take these things as given. We name that debt at the front of this paper because every page that follows sits inside it.

Sovereignty was never ceded.

NARRM · MELBOURNE · MAY 2026

– CONTENTS NINETEEN PAGES · TEN CHAPTERS · THREE INSTRUMENTS

The argument advances in *ten chapters*, anchored by three instruments of CoreBridge IP.

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– HOW TO READ THIS PAPER

Begin at the *standfirst*. Stop at the framework. Return for the four shifts.

A practitioner essay, written from inside the work. The three instruments (chapters 3–5) are the load-bearing logic; the four shifts (chapter 7) and six decisions (chapter 9) are how they land in practice.

– THREE PIECES OF COREBRIDGE IP

The Governance *Tension* Framework. The Twenty-Year *Horizon*. The Sustainability *Frame*.

A diagnostic, a horizon, and a sustainability test. Presented with attribution throughout. *In development.*

— OPENING STANDFIRST

The 2030 plans were written for a world that *no longer exists*.

A practitioner's account of the questions Australian universities are quietly returning to — and a way of thinking about them that sits with complexity rather than flattening it.

Universities have spent more than a decade planning to that milestone. Precincts envisioned. Offshore campuses seeded. Research targets locked in. As we edge closer, a quieter question is surfacing across leadership tables: *what comes after?*

It deserves more than a refresh. The thinking that shaped the last cycle — linear, controlled, goal-driven — does not fit the moment we are in. The landscape is messier. More fragile. More charged with consequence and possibility. For those of us who care about what universities mean to Australian society, the stakes of the next chapter are considerable.

I have spent the better part of two decades inside this sector. I see the pressures up close: funding constraints, political headwinds, regulatory shifts, the demographic cliff, geopolitical complexity. I also see the depth of purpose inside these institutions. **Leaders who want their universities to matter beyond rankings and revenue.**

Benjie-Etta Norman

Founder, CoreBridge Advisory. Partner to universities, government, and purpose-driven institutions on strategy, governance, and reform.

— THE THESIS

Strategy is not the answer. Strategy is the quality of the *questions* an institution is willing to hold.

— WHAT FOLLOWS

Eight short chapters. One framework. Six recurring decisions. Written for vice-chancellors, provosts, council members, and the senior teams who carry the weight of the next cycle.

The Australian moment is structurally *different*.

The next wave of strategy will be written under pressure that is unlike anything in recent memory. It demands a different approach from the one that produced the 2030 plans.

The Australian higher education sector is under pressure that is unlike anything in recent memory.

Government has set ambitious attainment targets while the funding model that would support them remains unresolved. A new regulatory commission is reshaping the landscape. International student caps have introduced a level of government control over what was, until recently, the sector's most reliable growth engine.

At the same time, universities are being asked to do more. **More regional delivery. More equity access. More workforce alignment. More research translation. More civic engagement.** More, with less, under tighter scrutiny.

This is the environment in which the next wave of strategy will be written. It demands a different approach from the one that produced the 2030 plans.

— FIVE PRESSURES, AT ONCE

Funding model · Attainment targets without a settled funding mechanism.

Regulation · A new commission reshaping the sector landscape.

International caps · Government control over the most reliable growth engine.

Demographic shift · The traditional post-school cohort beginning to decline.

Geopolitics · Diplomatic recalibrations arriving mid-cycle.

More. With less. Under tighter scrutiny.

Sameness is *not* a strategy.

One of the most striking features of the 2030 cycle was how similar university strategies became. In the next wave, that has to change.

The same language. The same metrics. The same strategic pillars — global impact, research excellence, student success, digital transformation. The result was a sense of alignment, and a flattening.

Too often, the unique character of each institution — its location, its history, its community, its particular strengths — was buried deep in the subheadings. In the next wave of strategy, that needs to change.

Every university must be clear about what it alone is positioned to deliver. Not framed as exclusivity, but as *integrity*. Some will lead in regional transformation. Others in research themes aligned with pressing global missions. Some will thrive through integration with TAFE and VET. Others through deep industry partnerships, cross-sector collaborations, joint ventures. For many, the opportunity lies in lifelong learning, civic engagement, or social innovation.

Whatever the form, the impact needs to be distinct, defined, and brought to the front. Not buried in a paper. Articulated in plain language. Measured in ways that are visible and real — not just to government, but to students, staff, partners, and communities.

In the next chapter, sameness is not a strategy. Distinctiveness is.

— BENJIE-ETTA NORMAN

— A DIFFERENT TEST

What is this institution *alone* positioned to deliver?

Not exclusivity. *Integrity*.
Articulated in plain language.
Measured in ways that are visible and real — not just to government, but to students, staff, partners, and communities.

Three forces. One *core*.

A diagnostic instrument for public-purpose decisions. It does not tell the board what to decide. It tells the board what conversation it is having.

I have been developing a piece of thinking with two colleagues whose work spans governance, education leadership, and public-purpose strategy. We call it the **Governance Tension Framework**.

It started in a different place. We built it as a governance lens for not-for-profit boards and public-purpose organisations working in complex advocacy environments. But the more we have worked with it across sectors, the more I have come to see how directly it speaks to the challenges facing universities.

The framework rests on a simple observation. Every public-purpose organisation operates at the intersection of three forces: the **external environment**, **community voice**, and **best practice**. At the centre sits *trust*. Along every edge runs tension.

These forces are not theoretical. They are the things that keep vice-chancellors, provosts, and council members awake at night. They are the reason board papers get complicated and strategy sessions run long.

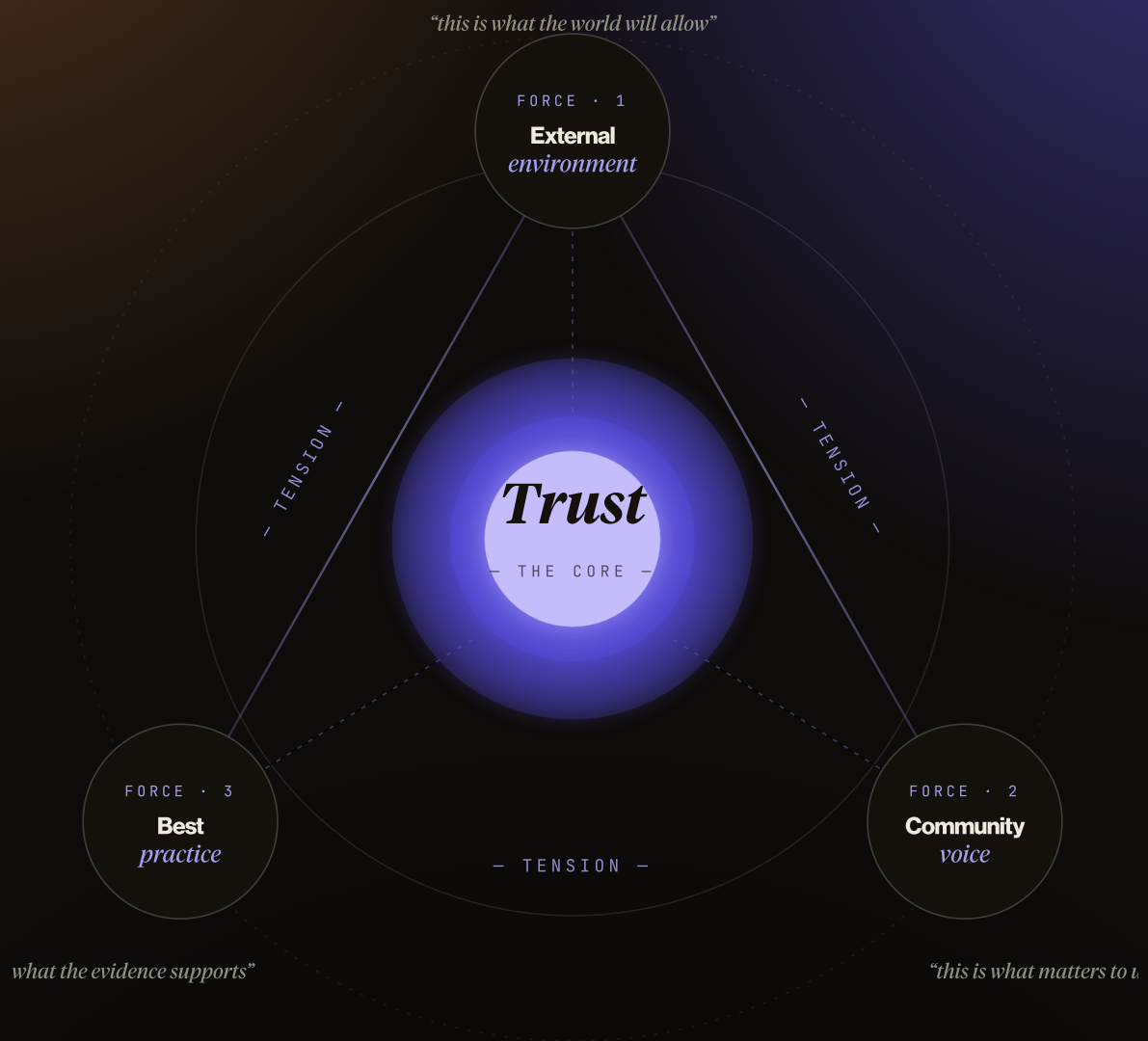
Each force is legitimate. Each is essential. The governance challenge does not emerge when they align — that is the easy part. It emerges when they pull in different directions, which they do, often.

A university, uniquely, has to hold all three at once — across teaching, research, and engagement — with different weight at different moments depending on the decision at hand.

— THE FRAMEWORK, IN A SENTENCE

Trust is both the *outcome* of getting the balance right, and the *precondition* for being able to hold the tension at all.

The framework does not resolve the tension. It makes it visible.



Trust at the *centre*.

The outcome of holding the balance, and the precondition for being able to hold it.

Three *forces* at the corners.

External environment, community voice, best practice.

Tension along every *edge*.

Not a problem to resolve. A condition to govern.

How the tensions show up *here*.

Three forces, pulling in different directions, inside one institution — and one country.

The **external environment** signals constraint: international student caps, managed growth funding, tighter regulation, political scrutiny.

Community voice calls for something different: greater access, more flexibility, deeper engagement, stronger regional presence, real inclusion.

Best practice may point toward investment in research infrastructure or pedagogical reform, while the fiscal reality makes that investment feel impossible.

The natural instinct, in any organisation, is to lean into one force and let the others recede. A government tells you to cap enrolments, so you comply and stop listening to community. Evidence tells you a program is not working, but the politics of changing it are too hard. Community calls for transformation, but the budget says hold steady.

It is precisely this instinct — to lean into one force and let the others go quiet — that puts long-term sustainability and voice at risk.

*Different organisations weight these forces differently, and that is as it should be. A university, uniquely, has to hold **all three at once**.*

A community health service or advocacy body will naturally centre community voice. A research institute will ground itself in evidence. A peak body may orient toward the external environment because that is where its influence sits.

A university — across teaching, research, and engagement — cannot choose. Trust sits at the centre because it is both the outcome of getting this balance right and the precondition for being able to hold the tension at all. When trust is present, a board can have difficult conversations about trade-offs. When trust breaks down, the forces collapse into each other and the institution loses its footing.

The framework does not resolve the tension. It makes it *visible*. In my experience, that visibility is what allows leaders to govern with greater clarity, hold competing demands more honestly, and make choices they can stand behind.

The discipline of building for 2046.

Funders ask the question. Governments ask it. Communities ask it. Why do you exist? Most institutions are no longer answering it well.

Universities have learned to answer in financial and managerial terms — student numbers, research income, ranking trajectories. Hospitals answer in patient throughput. NGOs answer in programs delivered. These are not bad answers. They are simply *not answers to the question being asked*.

The question is being asked at the level of **purpose**. The institutions losing social licence in 2026 are largely the ones still answering at the level of *operations*.

A Twenty-Year Horizon is a discipline for answering it properly. It is not a vision statement. It is not a forecast. It is not a strategic plan extended by another fifteen years, or a financial projection with optimism added, or aspirational poetry about world-leading anything.

It is a single articulation of what an institution exists to make true in the world by 2046 — written with enough specificity that it shapes every shorter document, strategic plans, business cases, board papers, implementation gates, for the next twenty years.

*Twenty years is a generation. Long enough to force **purpose** thinking. Short enough that the people who inherit the institution are still recognisable.*

— THE CHOICE OF HORIZON

What do we want the *next generation* to inherit?

The framework asks at the right horizon — past the funding cycle, before the abstract long-term — at the generation that will live with the choices being made now.

*Not a philosophy.
A method.*

Three tests. Skip one, and it *dissolves into rhetoric*.

A horizon survives twelve months of operational pressure only if it can pass three tests. A beautiful sentence on a slide that no one references again is not a horizon — it is decoration.

— TEST 1

The *Absence* Test

The institution has succeeded so completely that the structures it built are no longer needed in their current form. *By 2046, this university is no longer organised around twentieth-century disciplines. It is organised around the long-horizon questions only an institution with its endowment and time signature can hold — and around the First Nations governance instruments that brought Country, kin and knowledge into the operating logic of the academy.* Success looks like the world having changed, not the institution having grown.

— TEST 2

Institutional *specificity*

If two institutions could make the same statement, neither has done the work. A horizon should be unwriteable by any other institution without becoming an obvious copy. *Globally recognised. Student-centred. Research-intensive.* Any university could write that. None of those words constrain a choice.

— TEST 3

The *Inheritance* Test

Every shorter document must inherit the horizon. Reading any single page of a strategic plan, business case, or board paper, can the reader reconstruct the 2046 picture? If not, the horizon is not actually live in the institution. It is *decorative*.

A university that knows what it is building for in 2046 can make peace with what it is not pursuing in 2027. That is the discipline. That is the work.

Sustainability is the question. *Finance* is one of eight answers.

Most universities answer in one dimension. They build a financial case, weigh it, present it to the board, and call that sustainability. It is part of the answer. It is not the whole answer.

<p>— DIMENSION 1</p> <p>Financial</p> <p>Does this generate revenue, manage cost, or attract funding? Named first because it fails most <i>visibly</i>.</p>	<p>— DIMENSION 2</p> <p>Mission</p> <p>Does this advance the institution’s purpose? Distinguishes a university from a commercial training provider.</p>	<p>— DIMENSION 3</p> <p>Reputational</p> <p>Does this build or protect institutional credibility?</p>	<p>— DIMENSION 4</p> <p>Capability</p> <p>Does this build or maintain the capacity to do the work?</p>
<p>— DIMENSION 5</p> <p>Partnership</p> <p>Does this strengthen the relationships the institution needs to operate?</p>	<p>— DIMENSION 6</p> <p>Social <i>licence</i></p> <p>Does this build or protect community permission for the institution to exist as it is?</p>	<p>— DIMENSION 7</p> <p>Regulatory</p> <p>Does this comply with, or help build, the regulatory frame the institution relies on?</p>	<p>— DIMENSION 8</p> <p>Workforce</p> <p>Does this sustain the people who do the work?</p>

Each dimension scores positive, neutral, or negative — with a sentence explaining the mechanism, not a tick in a box.

Four profiles a board can *hold*.

The conversation is no longer “is this profitable?” It becomes a sharper, more honest one.

PROFILE 1

Sustained

Activities that run positive or strongly neutral across all eight dimensions. The institution keeps doing them — they **earn their place**.

PROFILE 2

Mission-sustained *loss-leaders*

Lose on Financial and gain on the others. Accepted **deliberately** because the other gains compound.

PROFILE 3 · DANGER

Financially-sustained *drift*

Make money while eroding mission, reputation, or social licence. The **most dangerous category** — they look like wins on the books.

PROFILE 4

Insufficient

Lose on multiple dimensions and gain on none. Should be **wound down**.

Three sustained activities, two loss-leaders held deliberately, one drift activity to discuss, one to stop. A sharper conversation. A more honest one.

From strategic plans to strategic *presence*.

What if strategy was not a document at all? What if it lived in how we listen, who we invite into the room, the questions we choose to prioritise?

Strategy beyond 2030 may be less about horizon documents and more about a **culture of noticing** — paying attention to weak signals, early shifts, and the lived realities of students, staff, and communities. Building what we might call *strategic presence*: the institutional ability to sense, interpret, and respond in real time. Not just on a five-year cycle.

This does not mean abandoning planning. It means complementing it with something more responsive. The external environment is moving faster than any strategic plan can anticipate. Ministerial directions, funding shifts, geopolitical recalibrations — they do not arrive neatly at the midpoint of a planning cycle.

The institutions that can respond with both speed and integrity will be the ones that thrive.

Strategic presence is the institutional ability to sense, interpret, and respond— in real time.

— TWO HORIZONS, HELD TOGETHER

The plan · A direction. A commitment to a future the institution is choosing.

The practice · The capacity to read the signals that arrive between cycles.

Four shifts the next decade *demands*.

Not a methodology. A reorientation. Each shift names a habit of the last cycle and the discipline that must replace it.

— SHIFT 1 · OF PURPOSE

From **performance** → **to purpose**

The pressure to perform has rarely been greater. Universities are benchmarked, ranked, and audited against an ever-growing list of metrics. But in the scramble to show impact, are we still making space to ask: *impact for whom? to what end?*

Purpose creates constraints. It forces choices. It means saying no to opportunities that are financially attractive but purpose-misaligned. It means measuring things that are harder to measure: trust, belonging, community health, civic contribution. In my experience, the institutions clearest on purpose are also the ones that find it easiest to make difficult strategic choices. Purpose does not make decisions easier. It makes them **clearer**.

— SHIFT 2 · OF GLOBAL POSTURE

From **global scale** → **to global ethics**

Transnational education, offshore campuses, global networks. None of these are new ideas. But the geopolitical and ethical context they operate within has changed. Australia's reliance on a narrow band of international student source countries adds real vulnerability.

It is no longer just about where we operate. It is about *how*. Who benefits? Who bears the risk? Who decides? This is where the framework becomes particularly sharp. International strategy sits at the point where all three forces pull hardest. The universities that can hold all three will build strategies that **endure**.

From control, to *capability*. From competition, to collective *stewardship*.

— SHIFT 3 · OF METHOD

From control → to *capability*

Traditional strategy seeks to contain risk. Predict. Simplify. Direct. But the systems universities are part of now are not tame. They are complex, interdependent, volatile.

The regulatory interventions of the past two years represent a level of government involvement in university operations not seen in decades. What if the goal was not control, but the muscle to sit with ambiguity, scenario plan, and adapt with integrity when the unexpected arrives — because it always does? The institutions that build the capacity to hold **multiple possible futures at once** — preparing rather than predicting — will be far more resilient.

— SHIFT 4 · OF POSTURE

From competition → to *stewardship*

The sector has long been positioned to compete — for students, grants, partners. But the biggest questions ahead — climate, equity, AI, inclusion, belonging — do not sit neatly inside institutional boundaries.

What if strategy became a shared practice? Stewarded together across the sector, rather than guarded institution by institution? Regional ecosystems of learning and care. Ethical data sharing. Common platforms for credentialing, research, social inclusion. *Not utopian. Practical.*

Coordination requires trust. And trust is built through the deliberate balancing of competing forces — not through top-down directive or market competition alone.

Community *is* the strategy.

Universities exist because communities need them. That sounds obvious. But it is remarkable how often the community dimension is treated as an afterthought.

It is remarkable how often the community dimension of university strategy is treated as an afterthought — a stakeholder engagement plan bolted onto the side of a strategy written without it. **Community is the reason the institution is there in the first place.**

Regional universities are often the largest employer in their town. They run the health clinics that train the nurses who staff the local hospital. They offer the pathways that give first-in-family students a shot at something different. Take the university out of that picture and the community feels it immediately.

Metropolitan universities carry a different version of the same truth. They anchor precincts. They connect migrant communities to opportunity. They train the teachers, social workers, engineers, and allied health professionals that cities depend on. Strategy beyond 2030 starts from a different place: not *what does our strategy say to community?* but *what does our community need from us?*

The universities that will matter most in the decades ahead are the ones their communities cannot imagine losing.

— NOT BECAUSE OF RANKINGS. BECAUSE OF THE DIFFERENCE THEY MAKE.

Six decisions worth *holding*.

Beyond the framework, six decisions I see leaders returning to in conversation after conversation. Each deserves its own piece. Here, the headline.

<p>1.</p> <p>Research</p> <p>Reliance on competitive grants creates incentives that can undermine the very collaboration and risk-taking that great research requires. Beyond 2030, each university needs to be honest about where its research contribution is <i>most needed</i> and most impactful. The one-size ideal of research excellence serves no one well.</p>	<p>2.</p> <p>Education</p> <p>The traditional post-school cohort is beginning to decline. Growth will come from life-long learning, mid-career transitions, and populations historically underserved. Teaching for uncertainty, justice, and complexity will mean redesigning systems that have served institutions well but may not serve communities <i>well enough</i>.</p>	<p>3.</p> <p>Enterprise</p> <p>Enterprise has been treated as a commercial layer added to the university. The institutions that will thrive treat it as a <i>mindset</i> — adaptive, collaborative, oriented toward impact — embedded across research, teaching, and community engagement rather than bolted on.</p>
<p>4.</p> <p>Alumni</p> <p>Alumni are often viewed through the lens of advancement and fundraising. They are also holders of memory, wisdom, critique, and continuity. The relationship can become more textured and reciprocal — a <i>community of practice</i> and shared purpose, not just a mailing list.</p>	<p>5.</p> <p>Impact</p> <p>Universities talk about impact but often measure it at a single level: publications, rankings, funding secured. A more layered approach would capture <i>grassroots, institutional, national, and global</i> policy contribution — and make sense of how they connect.</p>	<p>6.</p> <p>Culture</p> <p>Every university has a values statement. Most have a cultural framework. The question is whether values live in the daily rhythms of the institution — in hiring, teaching, decision-making, partnerships — or only <i>on the wall</i>.</p>

– THESIS

Strategy is not the answer. Strategy is the quality of the *questions* an institution is willing to hold.

Universities are among the oldest and most enduring institutions in human civilisation. They have survived plagues, revolutions, wars, and technological upheavals. They will survive this moment too. But survival is not the aspiration. The aspiration is to remain essential.

The next chapter will not be written from the outside. It will be written by the people who show up every day inside these institutions, making impossible choices with imperfect information and extraordinary purpose.

This is the work I care about most. Not because I have the answers — because I believe the questions deserve to be held with the *seriousness and depth* they demand.