

Strategic plan

2024–2028



Approved by the SARUA General Meeting on 23 May 2024

Preface

“We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

– Martin Luther King Jr

We are pleased to present SARUA's strategic plan for 2024–2028, marking a critical milestone for our Association. Since 2018, the Association has engaged in an intensive renewal process to develop a clear and compelling value proposition supported by effective governance and operational systems, as well as sound capabilities for communication and information management. These are the essential building blocks for a dynamic new phase, captured by the concept of 'SARUA 2.0', in which the Association will draw on the *Power of the Network* to serve as a catalyst to support higher education innovation, inclusivity, resilience and responsiveness amongst its members.

This plan presents initiatives through which the SARUA network intends to contribute to regional development and societal impact and strengthen institutional capacity amongst our members. The plan is grounded in four strategic focus areas (SFAs): knowledge co-production, leadership and professional development, institutional quality management and the digital transformation of higher education. Alongside these focus areas, the development of a regional higher education database serves as a vital tool to enhance and support the Association's role in regional development. The strategic framework and balanced scorecard that are presented in the appendices to this strategic plan articulate how these SFAs provide for the transformation of our strategic vision and goals into tangible, actionable objectives.

Since 2018, the Association has progressively established a track record as a reliable project partner in the SADC. We have strengthened our relationships with our network members, the SADC Secretariat and international and regional development partners. As a recognised partner in AU-EU collaborative initiatives, SARUA has learned the power of global partnerships, and we carry this knowledge into the plan. We also continue to position the Association as a strategic voice in south-south-north dialogues.

There is much to be done in this next phase of SARUA's development. We invite all our stakeholders to join us on this journey of excellence, innovation and resilience in shaping the future of our regional higher education system.

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Outgoing Executive Director
May 2024

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ABBREVIATIONS

AAU	Association of African Universities
AU	African Union
ACU	Association of Commonwealth Universities
Agenda 2063	Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want
CoP	Community of practice
Covid-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
EU	European Union
HAQAA	Harmonisation of Quality Assurance and Accreditation in African Higher Education
HEI	Higher education institution
RISDP	Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan 2020–2030
RUA	Regional Universities Association
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SARUA	Southern African Regional Universities Association
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SFA	Strategic focus area
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
VC	Vice Chancellor

Executive Summary

This strategic plan marks an important milestone in the development of the Southern African Regional Universities Association (SARUA). As the Association's first formal strategic plan, it represents the culmination of an intensive process of organisational renewal. During this time, the Association has focused on the development of a sound governance and operational framework linked to a set of strategic goals and focus areas that define the scope for a growing portfolio of programmes and projects. SARUA is a network that is open to all higher education institutions (HEIs) in the Southern African Development Community (SADC), including public and private providers, as the sector depends on the contributions of a diverse range of institutions with different educational missions. Our strategic purpose is to draw on the *Power of the Network* so that the Association may function as a representative and dynamic membership organisation that makes a significant contribution to regional development.

Based on our strategic purpose, SARUA's value proposition is grounded on the principle of broad-based collective action, through which the regional higher education community works together to create a developmental agenda that is authentic to the context of the SADC. Our value proposition supports coordinated collaboration and the creation of synergies to foster innovation, inclusivity, resilience and responsiveness amongst our network members, so that as a peer-led network we may effectively address the complex and interrelated challenges facing higher education today. We intend to foster dialogue through collective sensemaking, policy advocacy, participative knowledge co-production, leadership and professional development, institutional quality management and digital transformation. SARUA acts as a trusted partner in regional projects and intends to actively explore opportunities for offering services to enhance effectiveness and efficiency in the regional higher education system. We value collaboration, equity, inclusivity, innovation, integrity, quality and transparency as guiding values in our collective work.

Our value proposition leads to the formulation of our six strategic goals, that progressively move through three layers from effective governance, and operational and communicative systems (strategic goals 5 & 6) to a more inward focus on higher education development (strategic goals 3 & 4), leading to an outward focus on society (strategic goals 1 & 2). By implementing these strategic goals, SARUA aims to contribute to the advancement of higher education and societal transformation within the SADC region and beyond.

We give effect to our strategic goals through four SFAs that will guide our initiatives and programmes from 2024 to 2028. These SFAs comprise:

1. *Knowledge Co-Production*: Collaborative creation and dissemination of knowledge focusing on regional development.
2. *Leadership and Professional Development*: Providing effective capacity development opportunities to higher education institutions within our network.
3. *Institutional Quality Management*: Supporting our network members to develop and implement quality management systems that engender excellence, responsiveness and effectiveness.
4. *Higher Education Digital Transformation*: Leveraging digital technologies for improved learning and teaching, research and administration.

Alongside these focus areas, SARUA employs two strategic enablers, namely the development of a regional higher education database and operational excellence and sustainability. This combined programmatic framework encourages universities' engagement with society, fosters leadership and professionalism, promotes institutional quality management and utilises digital technology in various aspects of institutional ecosystems.

While these focus areas, and the strategic enablers that support them, guide our current actions, they are adaptable and should evolve to meet future needs. As such, we will subject them to regular review. However, we are confident that together they provide a robust foundation for the Association's programmes in the next phase of its development.

1. Introduction: Process Followed in the Development of the Strategic Plan

SARUA has engaged in a strategy development process. Its aim has been to conceptualise and formulate SARUA's role within the context of international and regional trends that impact on the higher education system within the SADC. This process, involving the executive director and the SFA leaders, culminated in the formulation of a draft strategic plan in August 2023.

The consultative process around the further development of the strategic plan has consisted of the following steps:

- An online information meeting, in which the members of the SARUA network, the SADC Secretariat and regional higher education associations and regional development agencies were invited to participate (held on 29 August 2023). This event attracted 59 registrations.
- A consultative process with members of the SARUA network during September 2023 by means of an online survey. Network members were invited to give inputs on the draft strategic plan, after which the plan was revised, and a second draft was developed in January 2024.
- A third draft was developed in April 2024.
- Discussion at the SARUA Executive Committee meeting on 22 April 2024.
- Submission of the strategic plan for approval to the meeting of Association's General Assembly on 23 May 2024.



2. The Road to Renewal

In the SADC Protocol on Education and Training (1997), SADC member states recommended the creation of an association of university vice chancellors to enhance cooperation and collaboration in university education and training and research and development.¹ However, it took several years for this recommendation to gain traction. In September 2003, the South African Universities Vice Chancellors' Association (SAUVCA) organised a regional conference in order to discuss the establishment of a Regional Universities Association (RUA), envisioned to foster collaboration and development in the higher education sector across SADC countries. The regional conference built upon the initiatives of the *Zambezi Forum on Higher Education*, a World Bank-funded programme aimed at promoting essential institutional actions for modernisation and change management in higher education across Eastern and Southern Africa.

The vice chancellors who attended the conference expressed unanimous support for the formation of an RUA and mandated a technical committee to carry out the various functions required for establishing the Association. Subsequently, in March 2004, a regional consultative conference was organised by SAUVCA, the World Bank and the University of Zambia, aiming to advance the work of the technical committee and to integrate the Zambezi Forum on Higher Education into the process for the establishment of the RUA. The conference emphasised the pressing need for HEIs in the SADC to effectively respond to the region's challenges, recognising the pivotal role of higher education in regional growth, stability, good governance and overall quality of life for citizens.

The deliberations at the conference led to a consultative process with the Association of African Universities (AAU) and the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) for the establishment of an RUA specifically for the SADC. Following the 11th General Conference of the AAU in February 2005, vice chancellors from 29 universities in 14 SADC countries gathered to discuss the formation of an association that would serve their interests and promote their common purposes. An executive committee was elected and entrusted with advancing the establishment of the Association.

In 2007, SARUA was officially founded with a primary mandate to revitalise and develop leadership and institutions of higher education in the Southern African region, enabling them to effectively address the developmental challenges of the SADC. The objectives of SARUA were formulated as fostering a regional identity for higher education, facilitating collaboration and partnerships, identifying key areas for strategic research, enhancing leadership knowledge and capacity, and advocating for the higher education sector's voice in regional and national development agendas.

During its initial years from 2007 to 2012, with substantial funding support from the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, SARUA experienced solid growth, reaching a membership of 61 universities across 15 SADC countries by 2012. However, the termination of funding from the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the end of 2012 meant that the Association became dependent on membership fees as its primary source of income from 2013 onwards. Subsequent to 2012, institutional membership declined significantly, which contributed to the sustainability challenges that the Association faced. At the start of 2018, the executive committee appointed a new executive director, with a mandate to lead a process of organisational renewal.

Slowly, but with conviction, SARUA has embarked on a process of renewal since 2018. While this road has been challenging and uncertain, it has been led by an unwavering belief that the Association has a vital role to play in the regional higher education system. We have focused on re-establishing trust, rebuilding our membership base, strengthening our governance and operational systems, and diversifying our revenue streams. This phase, in which the primary focus has fallen on organisational renewal, is now drawing to a close. SARUA 2.0 marks the start of a new phase, in which the Association's focus will fall more on networking and collaboration that builds impact and capacity, especially through communities of practice and special interest groups across defined SFAs.

SARUA 2.0 signals our commitment to building a vibrant network that works collectively to make a difference in the SADC.

¹ SADC Protocol on Education and Training, Article 7(D)(g).

3. SARUA 2.0: The Power of the Network

Through our strategic plan, we express our commitment to support regional development within the framework of the SADC Vision 2050, with its overarching goals for regional integration and socioeconomic and human capital development. With its 16 member states, and approximately 390 million people, the SADC faces significant challenges in the achievement of its vast potential. Limited access to health services and widespread food and nutrition insecurity – aggravated by the pandemic and climate change – pose severe risks. High poverty rates have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, leading to significant job losses. Inequality within the region is also staggering, with a mix of high-income and low-income countries and reports ranking many SADC nations among the most unequal in the world. Our regional higher education sector must engage more deeply with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as formulated in the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals, *Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want* and regional development plans (*the SADC Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan (RISDP) 2020–2030* and the *SADC Industrialisation Strategy 2015–2063*).

Our higher education sector should also engage in a process of curriculum reform. In the SADC, a predominantly young population grapples with high unemployment rates, partially due to poor participation in vocational training, as well as low gross enrolment ratios in tertiary and vocational education. Curriculum reform should promote student retention and ensure that educational programmes are responsive to the regional and national context and to skills needs. The changing world of work, frequently referred to as the ‘fourth industrial revolution’ demands that higher education curricula should support the development of digital literacy, technological competence and communicative, ethical and entrepreneurial skills. Furthermore, HEIs must become partners in lifelong learning relationships, requiring the development of innovative approaches to educational provision, such as micro-credentialling and the development of appropriate quality assurance systems to recognise diverse forms of learning achievement.

In harnessing the power of our network to respond to the challenges of our context, we are guided by two foundational concepts. The first concept – the ‘engaged university’ – calls upon HEIs to establish effective relationships with the societies and communities within which they are embedded to contribute to human and social development.

The second concept – ‘Education 5.0’ – represents a forward-thinking approach that leverages digital technology to support student-centred learning, interdisciplinary collaboration and futures literacy. As implemented in the diverse national contexts of the SADC region, Education 5.0 places a strong emphasis on cultural heritage and diversity, indigenous knowledge and economic modernisation. By embracing these tenets, Education 5.0 encourages an approach that not only addresses current issues but also prepares our institutions and students for multiple future scenarios.

We interpret these concepts from various perspectives, which are reflected in the formulation for our strategic purpose, value proposition and strategic goals.

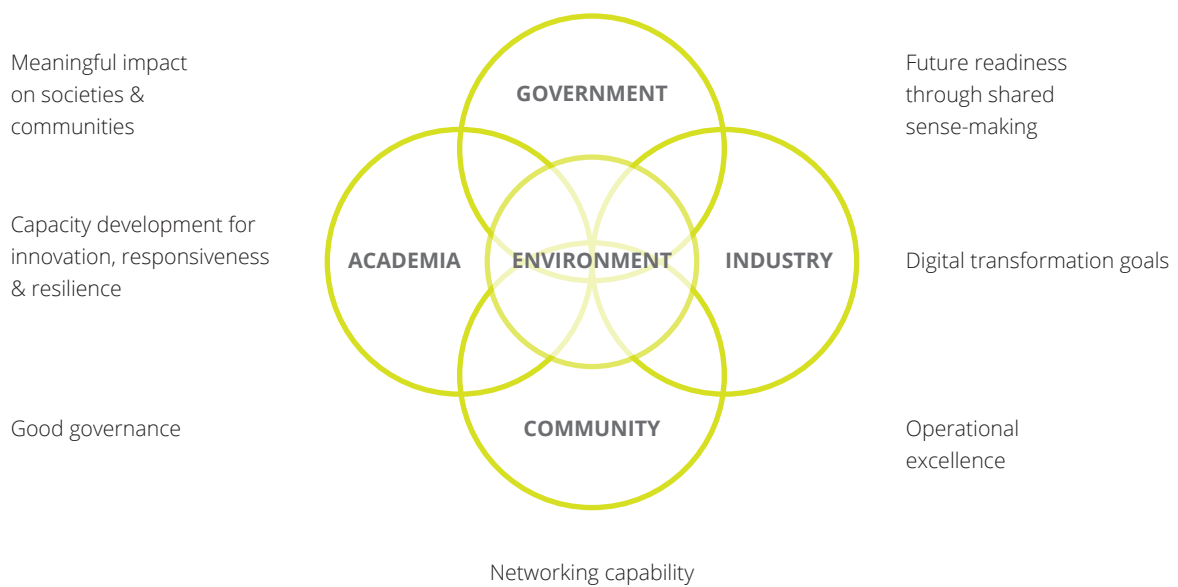
- We will cultivate a culture of innovation amongst our network members, so that they may be responsive to the evolving needs of their students and the societies in which they are situated. We will do this through shared foresight and sense-making activities that engage with the complexities of the evolving higher education environment and anticipate future challenges. Our emphasis on the digital transformation of higher education forms part of this future-oriented focus.
- As highlighted by a recent UNESCO report, higher education should be transformed for global sustainability.² A future-oriented higher education system in the SADC should promote lifelong learning, flexible learning pathways, inclusive access, robust systems to support student success and inter- and transdisciplinary approaches to address the SDGs as they are formulated at a global, continental and regional level. It should promote approaches to quality management that enable institutions to plan and implement new educational approaches, such as blended or hybrid learning, and to embed sustainability into the curriculum. Reliable data on student demographics and participation and success in both higher education and technical and vocational training (TVET) is essential for informed decision-making.

² UNESCO (2022): Knowledge-driven actions: Transforming higher education for global sustainability, and UNESCO (2022): The futures of higher education.

- HEIs in the SADC should belong to multi-sectoral networks. Thus, our reference to the *Power of the Network* points primarily to SARUA’s capability as a network but also to the need for institutions to embrace their civic role and engage in knowledge co-production through partnerships. We adopt the quintuple helix model within a futures-oriented framework, allowing us to articulate our value proposition to diverse stakeholders. We will continue to strengthen our relationship with the SADC Secretariat and will work with our network partners to learn how the regional higher education system can enter into productive multi-sectoral partnerships that contribute to regional development.

Drawing on our strategic goals as set out in Section 5 of this Plan our commitment to multi-stakeholder relationships may be depicted as follows:

SARUA illustrates the interconnectedness of its value proposition & strategic goals with these stakeholder constituencies



The strategic differentiator of SARUA 2.0 lies in the Association’s unique ability to serve as a bridge, connecting HEIs within the SADC region, fostering collaboration among them and partnerships with other stakeholders. By facilitating partnerships and engagement among HEIs, and promoting multi-sectoral partnerships, SARUA aims to drive regional development and create a collective impact that addresses societal challenges and promotes sustainable growth within the SADC region.

4. Strategic Direction: SARUA's Purpose, Value Proposition and Guiding Values

Our proposed new strategic direction is premised on the *Power of the Network*, which through principled, peer-led, collective action, connects HEIs in the SADC for regional resilience, responsiveness, innovation and inclusivity. SARUA will cultivate a peer-led network, which will serve two key purposes:

1. To collaboratively address carefully selected regional grand challenges, while also exploring multiple future scenarios that can impact on these challenges.
2. To build the regional higher education sector's capacity to adapt not just to the current environment but to future shifts, particularly those arising from technological changes, social dynamics and global developments.

The *Power of the Network*: Towards a strong, responsive higher education system for innovation, inclusivity, resilience and sustainability in the SADC.

4.1 STRATEGIC PURPOSE

Based on our understanding of the current higher education context within the SADC, and the regional constituencies that it serves, SARUA defines its strategic role in the regional higher education system in terms of the following overarching vision and mission statement:

Our Vision:

SARUA aims to be a dynamic and inclusive peer-led network that facilitates sustainable, evidence-based higher education impact in the SADC region.

Our Mission

To foster collaboration, innovation and excellence through peer-led programmes and activities to support regional development and to navigate opportunities and challenges in a rapidly changing HE environment.

We give effect to our vision and mission statement through our strategic goals and SFAs as set out in further sections of this Plan.

4.2 VALUES

SARUA is led by the following values:

Collaboration: By working together and sharing ideas, practices and resources, we foster a stronger sense of unity, common purpose and cooperation within our region.

Equity: We embrace a regional higher education system that addresses barriers that may stand in the way of equitable participation and representation amongst staff and students, such as educational background, gender, socio-economic status, language, geographical location and special needs.

Inclusivity: We recognise and appreciate the value of diversity and actively encourage and celebrate the unique contributions of our regional institutions to our network.

Innovation: We foster a culture of creativity, resilience and adaptability to effectively address the opportunities and challenges that higher education in our region faces.

Integrity: We are committed to treating others with fairness, respect and courtesy, and we strive to be a trusted and reliable partner in the regional higher education sector.

Quality: We strive to excel in all that we do, and we continuously reflect on our work to identify opportunities for improvement and innovation.

Transparency: We commit ourselves to promoting the open and critical exchange of ideas to foster an environment where diverse perspectives can be shared and debated constructively.

4.3 VALUE PROPOSITION

SARUA's value proposition serves as a broad framework to guide our programmes and activities, which we unpack into our strategic goals and SFAs.

Collective Sense-making & Policy Advocacy

- Forge a strong relationship with the SADC Secretariat, advocating for globally relevant and locally attuned educational policies.
- Host webinars, workshops and forums for dialogue among academics, administrators and industry professionals to anticipate trends and challenges.
- Commission research and briefing papers to provide strategic foresight for higher education.
- Cultivate a 'glocal' mindset, integrating global best practices with local needs.
- Foster diversity, gender equality and intercultural understanding through the development of inclusive approaches to governance, conducive policies and practices, professional development, inclusive curricula and regional mobility opportunities.

Engagement for Regional Impact

- Commitment to participative knowledge production: Foster collaborative research and knowledge-sharing initiatives that engage regional stakeholders and address local challenges.
- Conceptualise and implement initiatives for optimal contribution to regional development.
- Trusted regional project partner: Establish and maintain a reputation as a reliable and effective partner in regional projects.

Capacity-building

- Develop accountable leaders with ethical decision-making skills.
- Develop capacity to integrate sustainability principles into institutional policies and practices.
- Create an inclusive and collaborative space for innovation and capacity-building.
- Encourage the exchange of best practices amongst SADC HEIs.
- Leverage digital technologies for innovation, resilience and effectiveness.

Communities of Practice

- Cultivate collaboration within communities of practice to promote the exchange of ideas, explore innovative approaches and develop practical resources such as case studies and guidelines.
- Encourage cross-institutional research and practical projects to solve real-world problems, thereby deepening the expertise within these communities of practice.

Economies of Scale

- Offer third-party services such as shared IT platforms, digital tools and information services to enhance efficiency and support member institutions.

5. Strategic Goals

SARUA translates its vision, mission and value proposition into a strategic direction consisting of a set of six strategic goals. These goals form a multi-level framework that progresses from foundational internal capabilities, as articulated in goals 5 and 6, to enhancing the capacities of our network members through goals 3 and 4, and ultimately culminates in societal impact via goals 1 and 2. With a focus on operational excellence as a cornerstone, SARUA seeks to build upon the organisational renewal strategies outlined in Section 2 of this Plan, in order to holistically and innovatively strengthen the quality and impact of higher education across the SADC region. Each of these goals is intrinsically tied to the next.

Goal 1: Collective action and engagement for regional impact

SARUA aims to act as a catalyst, bringing together HEIs in the SADC region to collaboratively address regional challenges such as climate change, healthcare and human, social and economic development. Through collaborative projects and forums, SARUA promotes interdisciplinary collaboration and participatory approaches to knowledge production, with a special focus on sustainable development and community engagement.

Goal 2: Foresight and sense-making for future-oriented responsiveness

SARUA encourages innovative and forward-thinking approaches to teaching, learning, research and administration within HEIs in the SADC region. Through workshops, webinars and research publications, SARUA supports foresight and sense-making activities that identify emerging trends, technological advancements and societal needs, thus equipping member institutions to embrace new opportunities and navigate challenges.

Goal 3: Leadership and professional development for resilience and responsiveness

SARUA is committed to empowering its network members to thrive in a changing environment. It provides leadership and professional development opportunities to foster a culture of continual learning. This advances educational practices and structures that are agile, innovative and responsive to evolving needs and challenges, while also being socially and educationally inclusive.

Goal 4: Digital transformation for effectiveness and innovation

SARUA acknowledges the critical role of digital transformation in the modern educational landscape. We are committed to guiding our member institutions in the adoption and effective implementation of digital tools and strategies to enhance teaching and learning, bolster research and innovation capabilities and optimise administrative systems. Special attention will be given to ensuring equitable access to digital resources.

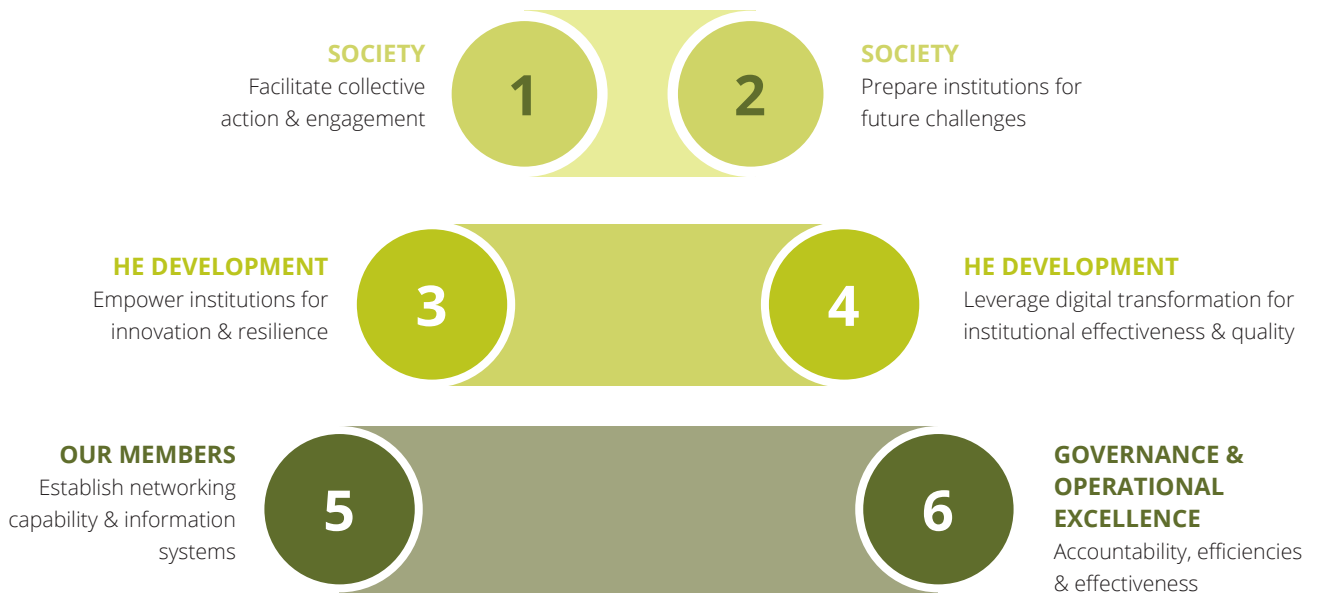
Goal 5: Enhanced networking capabilities and information systems for stakeholder engagement

SARUA aims to create a vibrant network ecosystem by deploying advanced, secure communication and information systems. These systems are designed to strengthen network relationships and promote awareness of our activities, while exploring collaborative platforms for continuous knowledge exchange. The development of information systems includes the creation of a database of HEIs in the SADC region to support evidence-based planning and policy development.

Goal 6: Accountable governance and operational excellence

SARUA aims to foster a culture of good governance and operational effectiveness and efficiency through the adoption of effective policies, best practices and the implementation of robust internal business processes. It aims to ensure accountability to its stakeholders and streamline operations, optimise resources and achieve organisational objectives efficiently.

SARUA strategic goals



6. Strategic Focus Areas

The SARUA SFAs present a broad framework within which SARUA gives effect to its value proposition and strategic goals. The first two focus on positioning the regional higher education sector for societal impact and the development of higher education innovation, resilience and inclusivity, while areas three and four focus on the capacity to design and sustain effective, responsive and efficient institutional ecosystems, facilitated by digital technology. Foundational to all our focus areas is the development of a regional higher education database that collects, analyses and disseminates relevant data and information about the higher education sector in the region. Operational excellence and sustainability are the prerequisites upon which our SFAs depend.

Each SFA falls under an SFA leader and consists of specific programmes and projects. Additionally, each SFA facilitates communities of practice aimed at promoting sustainability and fostering longer-term programme impact.



6.1 KNOWLEDGE CO-PRODUCTION

This SFA emphasises the growing significance of universities' engagement with society, within the broader context of sustainable development. It aligns with key initiatives including the United Nations' Global SDGs, the African Union's Agenda 2063, and SADC Vision 2050, as well as other continental and regional plans.

The SFA adopts a best practice approach to collaborative, transdisciplinary, action-oriented research that brings different knowledge systems and methodologies together to address societal issues. This multi-sectoral approach, in which communities, industry, government, civil society and HEIs fully engage, intends to address sustainable development challenges through teaching, research, innovation and community impact, with the aim to contribute towards an inclusive, prosperous and resilient region.

6.2 LEADERSHIP AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

This SFA promotes continuous learning and futures thinking for institutional resilience and innovation. SARUA offers webinars, develops opinion pieces and commissions research to integrate a future-oriented perspective into institutional governance, leadership and planning, aiming to support our network members in making strategic foresight a standard element in institutional decision-making.

In leadership, SARUA provides specialised training on university governance, leadership and management. In professional development, capacity opportunities focus on new pedagogical approaches and research methodologies for future scenarios linked to digital transformation and sustainability challenges.

We aim to guide network members in crafting relevant internationalisation strategies, tailored to our region's cultural, economic and educational landscapes. This involves aligning academic plans, curricular frameworks and policies with present and future regional realities, and fostering collaborative innovation within a future-oriented framework.

6.3 INSTITUTIONAL QUALITY MANAGEMENT

This SFA assists SADC HEIs in establishing robust internal quality management systems aligned with international standards. We support our network members in developing student-centred frameworks to ensure the relevance and quality of educational offerings.

SARUA aligns with the objectives outlined in the SADC Protocol for Education and Training (1997), including staff and student mobility, and credit recognition and transfer. Reflecting the 2022 UNESCO World Higher Education Conference, we emphasise the importance of agile, affordable and quality higher education in building trust and credibility within the sector. We recognise that these frameworks provide the basis for student mobility and credible systems for credit recognition and transfer.

Over time, and with appropriate capacity, SARUA intends to assist its network members to provide opportunities for student mobility based on robust internal quality management systems.

6.4 HIGHER EDUCATION DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

This SFA empowers SADC HEIs to leverage digital technologies effectively. SARUA will support its network members in integrating digital technologies into their educational ecosystems to facilitate innovative approaches to learning and teaching, foster research innovation, support the provision of effective student services and optimise their administrative and operational systems.

6.5 STRATEGIC ENABLERS

6.5.1 Regional Higher Education Database

The development of the regional higher education database will provide SARUA, its network members and other stakeholders with a comprehensive, integrated and standardised database. By providing access to information and statistics on the regional higher education landscape, it will improve decision-making processes at both institutional and regional levels. It also will support academic planning, as well as inter-institutional collaboration.

Finally, the development of the regional higher education database during the period of this strategic plan intends to develop the capabilities of the regional higher education sector for data collection and analysis.

6.5.2 Operational Excellence and Sustainability

Operational excellence and sustainability provide the essential platforms for SARUA's programmes and projects. SARUA will implement streamlined and efficient internal business processes across all its functional areas, linked to strategies to ensure long-term financial sustainability, including diversified funding sources and prudent financial management practices. SARUA will establish clear and effective communication channels and stakeholder engagement mechanisms to foster transparency, collaboration and feedback loops. The effectiveness of implemented initiatives and systems will be reviewed on a regular basis, with adjustments as necessary to uphold operational excellence and sustainability.

7. Conclusion

In a region as vast and diverse as the Southern African Development Community, with its 16 member states and a burgeoning population of 390 million, the challenges we face are both substantial and complex. From the urgency of tackling youth unemployment and working poverty to addressing glaring gaps in vocational training and skills development, the region is at a critical juncture. However, the SADC region thrives on its untapped potential. The future holds significant opportunities to address these challenges effectively, especially through economic modernisation, and educational and technological innovation. We embrace the Agenda 2063 and the SADC 2050 Vision as our north star, recognising our unique opportunity to contribute to sustainable socioeconomic development, good governance, peace and deeper regional integration. We intend to pave the way for HEIs across the SADC to be not just responsive but also proactive in their quest for excellence and innovation.

The core of our strategy lies in optimising the *Power of the Network*. This is not merely a catchphrase but a principle that brings to life our focus on collective, purposeful action. Through joint sense-making, participative knowledge production and sharing best practices, the SARUA network aims to play a constructive role in aligning the higher education sector more closely with the SADC's long-term objectives. The goal? To harness the strength of our network, not only to address immediate concerns but to lay the groundwork for future generations to inherit a higher education landscape that is both resilient and forward-looking.

We invite you, our stakeholders, to work with us to unlock the untapped potential of the SADC region, so that together we may build a brighter future.

8. Acknowledgements

SARUA wishes to acknowledge the following for their engagements and valuable inputs towards SARUA's re-envisioning: the SARUA Executive, SARUA constituents (member universities, collaborators and affiliates), the SADC Secretariat and SARUA internal stakeholders.

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Appendix 1: SARUA Strategic Framework

Note: This strategic framework will be complemented by a strategic implementation plan that sets out responsibilities, key performance indicators and timelines.

Strategic Goal 1 Collective action and engagement for regional impact

Strategic Objectives	Activities	Outcomes
<p>Objective 1 To support members of the SARUA network in aligning their core academic activities with the global UN SDGs as well as with continental and regional development plans.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop a profile of the involvement of SADC HEIs in the SDGs. Align this profile to the SDG themes of people, prosperity, planet, peace and partnership. Perform a gap analysis to identify needs and overlaps in terms of the contribution of the regional higher education sector to sustainable development. Develop a framework to assist SADC HEIs to plan, implement, monitor and review their contribution to sustainable development, as formulated by the SDGs and continental and regional development plans. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Profile (baseline document) on the SADC higher education system's contribution to the SDGs. Framework to support SADC HEIs in contributing to sustainable development at the regional level.
<p>Objective 2 To build capacity in our higher education system for knowledge co-production that leads to impactful change.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish a community of practice (CoP) for higher education engagement among SADC HEIs. Develop guidelines and resources to assist HEIs in the SADC to contribute to societally impactful research. Establish a SARUA CoP or special interest group for climate change and sustainable development. Update the curriculum materials on climate change mitigation and adaptation on a regular basis. Provide continuing capacity development opportunities for the offering of formal and non-formal programmes on climate change mitigation and adaptation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> CoP for higher education engagement established. Framework for societally impactful research. Guidelines and resources for participatory knowledge production Capacity-building opportunities for participatory knowledge production. Updated climate change curriculum materials. Capacity-building opportunities for the use of SARUA climate change materials in formal and non-formal programme provision.
<p>Objective 3 Build capacity for inter- and transdisciplinary approaches to the creation and sharing of information and knowledge.</p>	<p>Build institutional capacity:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> For the design, delivery and quality management of inter- and transdisciplinary academic programmes. For the conduct of inter- and transdisciplinary research. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Frameworks and guidelines to support inter- and transdisciplinary approaches for knowledge production.
<p>Strategic Enabler The SARUA repository on climate change and sustainable development.</p>		

Strategic Goal 2
Foresight and sense-making for future-oriented responsiveness

Strategic Objectives	Activities	Outcomes
<p>Objective 1 To promote thought leadership within the SARUA network to engage with higher education trends and regional opportunities and challenges.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify important trends in higher education at a global, continental, and regional level and promote critical dialogues that assess their implications for HEIs in the SADC. • Participate in an annual inter-regional dialogue series that promotes inclusive exchanges on higher education for example, through south-south-north dialogue. • Conduct benchmarking activities in relevant fields. • Design and host interventions such as critical conversations, workshops and webinars on relevant higher education trends. • Hosting of an annual thought leadership series on important higher education trends in the SADC by network members. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Annual critical dialogue series. • Annual thought leadership series. • Briefing documents, reports and other studies on key higher education trends within the SADC that may lead to the provision of capacity-development opportunities.
<p>Objective 2 To promote research and information dissemination on the regional higher education system.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invite representatives of national ministries, and other planning and regulatory bodies, as well as HEIs, to present analyses of the national HE systems for which they are responsible or within which they function. • Develop profiles of national higher education systems in a phased approach, gathering relevant information on policy, planning and regulatory frameworks at the country level. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Profiles of national higher education systems. • Trend analyses of the SADC HE system based on national analyses.
<p>Objective 3 Develop formal relationships to establish SARUA's role in representing the voice of the regional higher education sector in regional development.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conclude a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the SADC Secretariat, recognising SARUA's role in representing the voice of the regional higher education sector in regional development. • Establish agreement with regional development agencies as appropriate. • Establish agreements with other regional higher education associations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal MoU between SARUA and the SADC Secretariat. • Formal agreements between SARUA and regional development agencies. • Formal agreements with regional higher education associations and networks.
<p>Strategic Enablers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification and use of a diverse range of higher education experts (including race/gender/age/background) within the SARUA network to contribute to inter-regional dialogues and critical conversation series. • Technological platforms and language solutions that support interaction and collaboration. 		

Strategic Goal 3
Leadership and professional development for resilience and responsiveness

Strategic Objectives	Activities	Outcomes
<p>Objective 1 To identify, design and manage capacity development interventions to enrich HEIs in selected areas of concern.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To determine the capacity-development needs of SADC HEIs in areas relating to higher education leadership and management, institutional quality management and other relevant areas. • Generate reports detailing the findings of needs analyses conducted in SARUA's SFAs, focusing on higher education leadership and management, institutional quality management and other emerging fields. • Provide capacity development opportunities for leadership and professional development. • Provide ongoing capacity development opportunities in institutional quality management, inter alia as part of the HAQAA3 initiative. • Ensure quality assurance of capacity-development programmes and activities, including feedback from participants. • Review and update capacity-development programmes on an ongoing basis. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishment of a higher education leadership and management programme. • Continuation of capacity development opportunities in institutional quality management. • Regular review and updating of capacity development programmes.
<p>Objective 2 Establish communities of practice and/or special interest groups in SARUA's SFAs as appropriate.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish structures such as steering groups and/or a CoP to guide the development of SARUA's approach to leadership and professional development. • Establish a CoP for institutional quality management. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish steering group and/or CoP for leadership and management development. • Established steering group and/or CoP for professional development. • Established CoP for institutional quality management.
<p>Strategic Enablers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify institutions and colleagues within the SARUA network to contribute to capacity-development opportunities. • Identify funding mechanisms to support the provision of capacity-development opportunities. • Identify and collaborate with regional and international development partners to support capacity-development opportunities. • Training materials to support capacity-development programmes. 		

Strategic Goal 4
Digital transformation for effectiveness and innovation

Strategic Objectives	Activities	Outcomes
Objective 1 SARUA framework for digital transformation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a framework for the digital transformation of higher education in the SADC. • Identify international and regional partners with whom SARUA may collaborate in its programme for digital transformation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concept document on SARUA's approach to digital transformation.
Objective 2 Develop a state of play report on digital transformation amongst members of the SARUA network.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct a situation analysis, including faculty, students and administrators, on the needs and implications of the digital transformation of higher education amongst members of the SARUA network. • Develop a report on the state of play for the digital transformation of higher education in the SADC higher education sector. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State of play report on digital transformation amongst the members of the SARUA network.
Objective 3 Develop and implement a strategy to support SARUA's programme for digital transformation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop resources, such as training materials, guidelines, and templates, to assist institutions in their digital transformation plans and processes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capacity-building programme for the digital transformation of higher education in the SADC developed and implemented. • SARUA digital maturity framework developed. • Conduct digital maturity assessments amongst members of the SARUA network.
Objective 4 To establish a SARUA CoP for the digital transformation of higher education.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appoint a representative steering group to oversee the implementation of SARUA's programme for digital transformation in higher education. • Establish a SARUA CoP, with relevant special interest groups, for digital transformation in higher education. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A functioning CoP for digital transformation.
Strategic Enablers		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify institutions and colleagues within the SARUA network to contribute to capacity-development opportunities in digital transformation. • Identify funding mechanisms to support the provision of capacity-development opportunities in the area of digital transformation. • Identify and collaborate with regional and international development partners to support capacity-development opportunities in digital transformation. • Training materials to support capacity-building programmes. 		

Strategic Goal 5

Enhanced networking capabilities and information systems for stakeholder engagement

Strategic Objectives	Activities	Outcomes
<p>Objective 1 Develop and execute a stakeholder engagement system to enhance comprehensive constituency engagement, thereby enhancing the delivery of quality services.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop and implement a CRM (customer relationship management) system specifically designed to capture and manage stakeholder information, interactions and feedback. • Ensure regular updates and maintenance of the CRM system to keep the data accurate and relevant. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tailored communication platforms to support projects and communities of practice. • Improved member satisfaction through the ability to provide high quality services that align with their expectations. • Enhanced responsiveness to member enquiries, requests and concerns.
<p>Objective 2 Establish and execute a comprehensive communications strategy to enhance engagement, highlight SARUA's initiatives and showcase member activities throughout the network.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop and curate a dynamic website as a primary source of information for SARUA stakeholders and constituencies. • Sustain an engaging and impactful social media presence, utilising various platforms to effectively communicate SARUA's mission, achievements and member contributions. • Create and distribute regular newsletters and activity updates to network members, providing them with timely information on SARUA's initiatives, events and opportunities for collaboration. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Up-to-date, information rich SARUA website. • Regular newsletters and project updates to members of the SARUA network. • Effective management of social media presence.
<p>Objective 3 Develop a regional higher education management information system that provides quantitative and qualitative information to support data-driven decision-making and meet diverse data needs.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify and collect quantitative data at the national and institutional levels on higher education participation, inclusion, equity, science and innovation and funding. Ensure appropriate demographic categories are considered. • Design and develop a technical platform that provides easy access to regional higher education statistics, allowing stakeholders to retrieve and analyse relevant data efficiently. • Establish a process for regular updates to the regional higher education management information system, ensuring that the data remains current and accurate. • Seek external funding to support the operations and maintenance of the regional higher education management information system. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An approved manual for the classification of regional higher education statistics. • A reliable and up-to-date higher education information system. • User-friendly access to the higher education information system. • Strengthened capacity for knowledge-sharing on regional HE statistics based on a common platform for higher education information.
<p>Strategic Enablers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A reliable and functionally well-designed technical customer relationship platform. • An approved annual communication plan. • Elegant SARUA website. • Clearly defined roles and responsibilities for the provision and collection of regional higher education information. • Sufficient funding to maintain the higher education database. 		

Strategic Goal 6
Accountable governance and operational excellence

Strategic Objectives	Activities	Outcomes
Objective 1 Establish and maintain an effective governance framework for the Association.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review and enhance SARUA's constitution to ensure transparency, accountability, inclusivity in membership and effective decision-making. Develop and implement governance policies and procedures (Finance, HR, Information Governance) that align with best practices and regulatory requirements. Conduct regular meetings of the SARUA Board. Conduct annual external audits to ensure compliance with requirements for financial and fiduciary accountability. Prepare and present annual reports to the Association's General Assembly providing comprehensive information on SARUA's activities, achievements and financial status. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enabling constitution. Clear and well-implemented governance policies and procedures in the areas of Finance, HR and Information Governance. Regular meetings of the SARUA Board to facilitate effective governance. Approval of audited annual financial statements and annual reports at annual meetings of the General Assembly. Regular submission of annual reports to South African Department of Social Development.
Objective 2 Develop and implement an operational plan for SARUA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish key performance indicators and monitoring mechanisms to track SARUA's performance against strategic objectives. Develop a detailed implementation plan with clear milestones, timelines and accountability mechanisms. Implement effective monitoring and evaluation processes to assess SARUA's progress towards strategic goals and objectives. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improved coordination and efficiency in SARUA's operations. Effective monitoring and evaluation of the achievement of strategic goals and objectives.
Objective 3 Improved operational effectiveness and efficiency.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continuously assess and streamline internal processes and workflows to improve operational efficiency. Implement effective project management practices to ensure timely delivery of key initiatives and activities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improved operational efficiency, resulting in cost savings and resource optimisation. Timely delivery of key initiatives and activities, ensuring SARUA's ability to meet strategic objectives and project commitments. Enhanced coordination and collaboration among teams, leading to improved cross-functional efficiency. Increased stakeholder satisfaction due to efficient and effective delivery of services and initiatives.
Objective 4 To develop SARUA as a digitally enabled virtual network.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop and implement a digital transformation strategy to support SARUA's digital communication and collaboration platforms as the basis for its operations as a network association. Identify opportunities for automation, digitisation and optimisation of administrative tasks to enhance productivity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhanced digital communication and collaboration platforms facilitating connectivity and knowledge-sharing. Improved accessibility of SARUA information resources and services. Increased efficiency and productivity through digitisation and optimisation of administrative tasks.
Objective 5 Ensure the financial stability of the Association through rigorous financial management.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify and implement diversified revenue streams (e.g. membership, project funding and services) to generate a sustainable income base for SARUA. Focus on growing membership to achieve a critical mass of active members, contributing to the financial stability of the Association. Implement rigorous fiduciary and financial management. Build an adequate financial reserve as determined by the SARUA financial policy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Diversified revenue streams to reduce dependency on a single funding source. Achievement of a critical mass of membership contributing to the Association's financial stability. Implementation of rigorous fiduciary and financial management practices ensuring responsible resource allocation and accountability. An adequate reserve fund consisting of one year of operational funding requirements.
Objective 6 Foster a conducive organisational culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide training and professional development opportunities for SARUA staff to enhance their skills and knowledge. Foster a learning culture within SARUA through knowledge-sharing, mentorship and collaboration. Strengthen staff engagement and motivation by recognising and rewarding high performance. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhanced skills and knowledge of SARUA staff through training and professional development opportunities. Establishment of a learning culture within SARUA, promoting knowledge-sharing, mentorship and collaboration. Strengthened staff engagement and motivation through recognition and rewards for high performance.

Appendix 2: Balanced scorecard

Balanced Scorecard for SARUA's Strategic Plan (2024–2028)



- 1.** To facilitate collective action & engagement towards innovation based on sensemaking & foresight:
Leadership and professional development | Capacity development | Sensemaking
- 2.** To strengthen the network's capacity to foster relationships & manage information effectively:
CRM system implementation | Communication strategy | Regional Higher Education Information system
- 3.** To empower institutions for innovation & resilience through developmental support actions:
Engagement for regional impact | Communities of Practice | Policy advocacy
- 4.** To ensure operational excellence & sustainability through robust governance, efficient internal processes, people & technology:
Governance framework | Operational efficiency | Financial sustainability

Balanced Scorecard in support of SARUA's Strategic Plan (2024–2028)

	1. Learning & growth	2. Enhanced networking capabilities & information for stakeholder engagement	3. Members & stakeholders	4. Internal systems & mechanisms
Objective	To facilitate collective action & engagement towards innovation based on sensemaking & foresight	To strengthen the network's capacity to foster relationships and manage information effectively.	To empower institutions for innovation & resilience through developmental support actions	To ensure operational excellence and sustainability through robust governance, efficient internal processes, people and technology.
Initiatives	Leadership and professional development: Implement specialized capacitation programmes to embolden the HEIs, with a focus on university leadership, governance, QA and management.	CRM system implementation: Develop and implement a Customer Relationship Management system to manage stakeholder interactions and feedback.	Engagement for regional impact: Facilitate collective action projects addressing regional challenges.	Governance framework: Review and enhance governance policies to ensure transparency and accountability.
	Capacity development: Offer capacitation programmes, webinars, opinion pieces, and research to integrate future-oriented perspectives and practices into HE success, institutional planning and decision-making.	Communication strategy: Establish a dynamic website and social media presence to disseminate information, engage and network stakeholders.	Communities of Practice: Establish and support communities of practice for sharing best practices and fostering collaboration.	Operational efficiency: Streamline internal processes and implement project management best practices. Recruit a diversity of human resources aligned to SARUA demography.
	Sensemaking: Promote collaborative research initiatives addressing regional development issues (SDGs, leadership, evolving technology and regional developments).	Regional Higher Education Information system: Develop a comprehensive database to support data-driven decision-making and academic planning.	Policy advocacy: Advocate for educational policies that are globally relevant and locally attuned through webinars, workshops, and research.	Financial sustainability: Diversify revenue streams and maintain rigorous financial management practices.
Measures	Number of leadership capacitation programmes with specific target areas, collaboratively conceptualised and implemented.	CRM system usage statistics (e.g., number of interactions logged).	Number of regional impact projects initiated.	Compliance with governance policies and procedures.
	Participant feedback and satisfaction scores from capacitation programmes. And other engagements.	Website traffic and social media engagement metrics.	Participation rates and outcomes from communities of practice.	Efficiency metrics (e.g., project completion rates, cost savings).
	Increase in collaborative research projects within the network.	Data quality and user satisfaction with the higher education database.	Policy changes influenced by SARUA's advocacy efforts.	Financial health indicators (e.g., revenue diversification, reserve fund levels).
Targets	Conduct at least 10 leadership development engagements annually.	Achieve 100% CRM system adoption by staff and key stakeholders.	Launch 1 regional impact projects annually.	Achieve 100% compliance with governance policies.
	Achieve an 85% satisfaction rate in participant feedback.	Increase website traffic by 20% annually and maintain active social media engagement.	Achieve a 50% participation rate from member institutions in communities of practice.	Improve project completion rates by 15% annually.
	Initiate 3 new collaborative research projects per year.	Ensure 95% data accuracy and user satisfaction with the database.	Influence at least 1 major policy changes per year through advocacy efforts.	Maintain a financial reserve covering one year of operational funding requirements.

