

ACDS Annual Conference October 2025: Summary Report

Overview¹

The 2025 ACDS Annual Conference marked the Council's thirtieth anniversary and brought together Deans, senior academics, policy leaders, and partners from across the science and higher-education sectors. Over a two-day program participants explored the role of university science in national innovation, education, and inclusion, with sessions spanning productivity, defence, research funding, Indigenous knowledge, and future system reform.

Key Sessions and Issues

ACDS President, Professor Jacqui Ramagge, opened the conference by honouring three decades of ACDS leadership and collaboration. She challenged members to build on that legacy by defining the next decade of purpose: positioning university science as both educator and innovator, and ensuring the sector remains relevant to national priorities while grounded in academic excellence.

Opportunities and Challenges for Science – Professor Tony Haymet, Chief Scientist of Australia

Professor Haymet's keynote set the tone for the conference, describing science as a national strategic asset essential to Australia's prosperity and sovereignty. He emphasised the dual mission of universities — discovery and education — and warned that the nation must resist false trade-offs between fundamental and applied research. Haymet urged government and sector leaders to ensure the forthcoming SERD Review delivers meaningful reform, sustained investment, and a coherent national approach to science and innovation.

He called for long-term commitment to research infrastructure, a diverse and well-supported workforce, and strong international engagement. His underlying message: the nation's capability to meet future challenges depends on trusting and resourcing its scientists.

Dr Catherine de Fontenay – Productivity Commission

Dr de Fontenay linked productivity growth directly to knowledge creation, arguing that scientific research is the foundation of national competitiveness. She cautioned that Australia's fragmented innovation policies undervalue the role of basic research, and that better coordination between education, R&D, and workforce policy is essential.

She highlighted that reforms can lead to innovation if they increase incentives to innovate and that the role of universities in innovation includes training researchers, creating a fertile environment for research both basic and applied, and facilitating commercialisation regardless of whether they retained a share in spin-offs.

¹ Elements of this report were developed with the assistance of generative AI.

Innovation is diffuse and can be adopted from anywhere. Things we could do to help include improving business access to universities and ensuring the quality of our graduates. It was acknowledged that both require up-front and ongoing investment.

Dr de Fontenay urged universities and government to treat discovery research as productivity infrastructure, not discretionary expenditure. She emphasised that a strong science system drives both social progress and economic efficiency — a theme echoed throughout the conference.

A key comment she offered is that increases in productivity only arise from innovation.

Luke Sheehy – Chief Executive, Universities Australia

Luke Sheehy outlined the higher-education sector's transition toward greater system coordination under the Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC) and the increasing need to develop sovereign capability. He positioned science faculties as leaders in this reform, noting their dual role in producing research and skilled graduates. Sheehy called for universities to present a clear, collective narrative about the value of science to national priorities and to align advocacy across disciplines and sectors. He spoke about funding pressures, workforce challenges, and the need for renewed investment in teaching and research capability. His key message was that universities must speak with one voice to secure sustainable policy and funding settings.

Strategic Communications and Engagement Panel

This session explored how ACDS can amplify its national influence through purposeful communication.

Professor Brian Yates emphasised that ACDS has a strong reputation within the science community but must now broaden its visibility and influence beyond academia. He outlined the importance of a strategic communications approach that articulates the value of university science to government, industry, and the public.

Adjunct Professor Natalie Chapman highlighted the role of storytelling and audience connection in science communication. Drawing on her industry experience, she argued that impact depends on clarity, authenticity, and tailoring messages for different audiences. She encouraged ACDS to use accessible narratives and partnerships to demonstrate how university science delivers real-world outcomes and national benefit and for universities to be strategic and leverage their Industry Advisory Boards.

Dr Laura McKemmish explained how UNSW's high school outreach program, SciX, engages students in quality research projects, mentored by university researchers. She illustrated how researcher-led outreach can incentivise students to engage in science and encouraged universities to work to a portfolio of engagement activities rather than succumb to the temptation of developing bespoke activities for individual stakeholders. Laura identified 6 Principles for developing outreach activities. They should be: excellent, equitable, sustainable (specifically budget-neutral, subsidise low-SES), scalable, reproducible, and targeted.

Professor Tanya Monro – Chief Defence Scientist of Australia

Professor Monro emphasised the growing interdependence between scientific capability and national security. She described the Department of Defence's partnerships with universities as crucial to developing technologies and skills for Australia's strategic future. Collaboration, she argued, must be based on trust, transparency, and shared goals — mission-oriented science that

addresses real-world challenges while sustaining curiosity-driven discovery. Her address reinforced that investment in STEM education and research underpins both innovation and national capability, with 75% of DSTG employees having STEM skills. Building the next generation of problem-solvers requires a long-term pipeline of talent connecting education, research, and industry. She said Australia can probably support a dozen Defence Science Centres for collaboration with universities, some of which are already in existence or being developed and talked about *The Art of the Possible*.

Professor Ute Roessner – CEO, Australian Research Council

Professor Roessner outlined current reforms to the national competitive grant program, which aim to strengthen transparency, equity, and diversity in research funding and assessment. She reaffirmed the ARC's commitment to supporting both fundamental and applied research, emphasising that curiosity-driven inquiry remains vital to national innovation. She discussed efforts to improve interdisciplinary collaboration and to highlight research impact while maintaining academic integrity. Roessner's remarks resonated with ACDS's mission to promote excellence across the full research spectrum and to foster a culture of inclusivity and fairness within science.

Three Deans' Panel – Institutional and National Perspectives

Chaired by ACDS Executive Committee member Prof. Mark Osborne (RMIT University) and involving fellow Exec committee member, Professor Troy Farrell (QUT), as well as Professors Robyn Murphy (La Trobe) and Fran Sheldon (Griffith), the panel offered insights into the realities of leading science faculties under financial and structural constraints. They described pressures on research funding, the erosion of teaching capacity, and the challenge of sustaining the HDR and postdoctoral pipeline. Despite these issues, discussion was forward-looking, with consensus around the need for a coordinated national strategy for science education and research.

Deans called for recognition of teaching innovation alongside research excellence and for mechanisms that support collaboration rather than competition between institutions. The session reinforced the importance of ACDS as a collective voice for science leadership and a trusted intermediary between universities and government.

Gala Dinner – Professor Chennupati Jagadish, President, Australian Academy of Science

At the 30th Anniversary Gala Dinner in the Shine Dome, Professor Jagadish reflected on Australia's place in the global science community and the importance of international partnerships. He congratulated ACDS on three decades of leadership connecting science education and research, and urged continued collaboration among AAS, ATSE, STA, and ACDS to build a unified national science voice. Jagadish celebrated the dual purpose and therefore strength of universities as educators and in driving research, calling for continued investment in both.

His address concluded the day on an optimistic note, reaffirming the central role of university science in shaping Australia's future and underscoring that, amid growing policy emphasis on research translation and commercialisation – R&D – there can be no "D" without "R."

Science Education: Past, Present and Future – Professors Liz Johnson and Susan Howitt

Professors Liz Johnson, former Director of the ACDS Teaching and Learning Centre, and Susan Howitt, the current and retiring Director, reflected on three decades of change in science education,

charting the shift from traditional discipline-based teaching toward inquiry-led and interdisciplinary learning. They argued that science degrees must prepare graduates for diverse pathways — research, industry, policy, and community engagement — rather than a single linear career.

They also urged greater attention to curriculum renewal and the importance of embedding First Nations perspectives and diverse in university science teaching. Recognition and reward for teaching leadership, they said, remain critical to sustaining innovation in learning and pedagogy.

Professor Mary O’Kane – Interim Chief Commissioner, ATEC

Professor O’Kane outlined ATEC’s vision for a coherent tertiary system linking education, research, and workforce development. She encouraged ACDS to play a leadership role in shaping science’s position within this framework and to advocate for policy coherence and evidence-based planning. O’Kane urged science leaders to see ATEC as a partner in coordination and strategic foresight to ensure that scientific capability remains a national priority across all education and research settings. She expressed a willingness to work across government portfolios so that initiatives with costs in one portfolio and benefits in others could be properly appreciated and said she was work to ensure collaboration across universities could take place without undue fear of falling foul of the ACCC.

Indigenous Knowledge and IP in University Science: Professor Kelly Menzel and Dr Kate Mueller

Director of the ACDS National Research Network, Professor John Bartlett, chaired the panel, which took the form of an informal yarning session. Speakers outlined frameworks for culturally safe engagement with First Nations peoples and respectful partnerships with Indigenous communities. They challenged institutions to move beyond symbolic inclusion toward the co-creation of knowledge and policies that support Indigenous researchers and students. Delegates heard that meaningful change requires leadership commitment, adequate resourcing, and long-term relationships, and that embedding First Nations knowledges enriches science — broadening its methods, deepening its ethics, and enhancing its relevance to society.

Strategic Planning

ACDS Immediate Past President, Professor Melissa Brown, reviewed the development and major achievements of the 2021–2025 ACDS Strategic Plan, including the establishment of the ACDS Teaching & Learning Centre and the National Research Network. She also identified areas for further progress as work begins on the next 2026–2030 Strategic Plan. Her session set the stage for an interactive lunchtime workshop, where delegates refined four proposed goals for the new Strategic plan: Teaching & Learning Leadership, Research & Translation, Profile & Engagement, and First Nations Engagement.

Workshop discussions underlined the value of these four goals, while emphasising the need to broaden the definition of science education, strengthen interdisciplinary research, and embed inclusion and measurable impacts across all aspects of ACDS’s work.

Key Themes Emerging from the 2025 ACDS Annual Conference

In her closing reflections, Professor Ramagge identified several cross-cutting themes emerging from the conference, including the need to strengthen the science education pipeline and the recognition of teaching leadership; to sustain fundamental research as the foundation of research translation; to build trust and visibility through strategic communication; and to embed First Nations perspectives

and inclusion across all areas of ACDS activity. In addition, the following overarching themes emerged:

- **Dual Mission of Universities:** Teaching and research are critical and mutually reinforcing — a dual mission that defines and distinguishes ACDS.
- **Value of Fundamental Research:** National research policy must balance translation and commercialisation with support for discovery research — there is no “D” without the “R.”
- **Workforce and Capability:** Investment in people — students, educators, and researchers — is essential for national innovation.
- **Inclusion and Partnership:** Authentic engagement with First Nations peoples across teaching, learning, and research, together with co-design and collaboration will underpin the next era of university science.
- **Communication and Visibility:** our sector could do better at articulating the unique value of *university* science and its role in solving national challenges.

Tony Willis,

ACDS Executive Director

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