



Australian Council of Deans of Science Strategic Plan 2026–2030

1. Introduction: Responding to a Changing Landscape

Australian university science sits at the centre of national capability. Our graduates power the workforce, our research contributes directly to Australia’s productivity, prosperity and innovation system, and our staff provide leadership on issues that matter to every sector of society.

At a time of geopolitical uncertainty, technological disruption and productivity challenge, university science is not simply a sectoral concern — it is national capability infrastructure. Sustained investment in science education and research underpins sovereign capacity, economic resilience and Australia’s global competitiveness.

Universities operate in a rapidly evolving environment shaped by shifting student pathways, changing expectations of research investment, accelerating digital transformation, and increasing public scrutiny. These shifts present both challenges and opportunities for university science.

The Australian Council of Deans of Science (ACDS) brings a national perspective grounded in the realities of scientific leadership, complementing and strengthening other voices across the science and higher education landscape.

Defining ‘University Science’

University science is a core part of Australia’s research and innovation ecosystem, spanning undergraduate and postgraduate education through to discovery, applied research and translation. This integrated ecosystem spans, pedagogy, and curriculum design, through to the full spectrum of scientific inquiry — from undergraduate students and early-career researchers to internationally renowned professors — and the translation of discoveries into practice. Unlike science conducted in industry or government laboratories, universities carry the unique responsibility of embedding and applying world-class research directly into the experience of teaching and learning. Our education and outreach activities help create a scientifically literate community.

Audience

This Strategic Plan provides a shared framework for action for ACDS member representatives. It guides how ACDS supports Deans of Science (or equivalent)¹ in their leadership of university science education and research, and informs partners across government, industry and the broader science community of our role, priorities and the unique contribution of university science to Australia’s future. The Plan does not set directions for universities themselves; rather, it guides how ACDS will support Deans in their leadership of university science education and research.

¹ The nominated representative must be a senior academic leader with institutional responsibility for science — for example, an Executive Dean, Dean of a Faculty, College, or School of Science, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Science), or another equivalent senior role.

Purpose

The purpose of this Strategic Plan is to provide a framework to guide the work of the ACDS Executive Committee on behalf of its members and for their benefit. The Strategic Plan aligns ACDS activities with member priorities, strengthens accountability, and ensures the Council's work delivers meaningful outcomes for its members and the sector.

The Strategic Plan addresses current and future challenges and opportunities for university science as well as opportunities in science and higher education policy. It defines ACDS's unique role at their intersection, sets clear priorities, and identifies the drivers of success.

In doing so, it commits ACDS to building enduring trust with First Nations communities, by embedding reconciliation and shared knowledge as cross-cutting principles across all Goals. Equally, this Strategic Plan fosters and empowers a commitment to promoting diversity, equity and inclusion across university science.

2. Vision and Mission

Vision

An Australia that trusts, values and invests in university science as a foundation of national prosperity, and benefits from its contributions to education, research and leadership.

Mission

To champion university science by:

- Driving best-practice in education and research.
- Supporting Deans and emerging university science leaders.
- Advocating for science in all sectors including government, industry and business, and higher education.
- Highlighting the benefits of university science to society, and to creating a better future for all Australians
- Embedding inclusivity and equity in all we do, including respect for and collaboration with First Nations communities.

Our Strategic Goal 2030

By 2030, ACDS will be recognised across Australia as the trusted national voice for university science — influencing policy, shaping public understanding, and strengthening Australia's research, innovation and workforce capability.

3. Who We Are

The Australian Council of Deans of Science (ACDS) is the national peak body representing science in Australian universities – the voice of university science. Our member representatives include Executive Deans, Pro Vice Chancellors, Deans, Associate Deans, and other senior university leaders across the full spectrum of scientific disciplines including, but not limited to the broad areas of:

- Agricultural and food sciences

- Biological and life sciences
- Biomedical and behavioural sciences
- Earth and environmental sciences
- Mathematical and computational sciences
- Physical and chemical sciences.

In some cases, our member representatives are responsible for all STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields in their institution, as well as other disciplines. Our approach to support and advocacy reflects this broad remit.

The core sciences provide the foundations for all the above fields and underpin Australia’s economy, workforce, and innovation system.

Diversity of Member Institutions

ACDS brings together Deans (or equivalent) from the majority of Australia’s universities.

Our members deliver science education and research in the disciplinary areas outlined above, and represent universities of varied sizes, missions and organisational structures—regional and metropolitan, research-intensive and teaching-focused, and those with strong industry alignment and community engagement.

This breadth provides ACDS with a uniquely comprehensive national perspective across the university science landscape.

4. Strategic Goals 2026–2030

The Strategic Goals set out where ACDS will focus its efforts over the next five years. Each goal addresses specific challenges identified by members and stakeholders, explains why they matter, and defines objectives to guide action. These goals are mutually reinforcing – progress in one strengthens all others. Together, they shape a confident, inclusive, and impactful future for university science. Collectively, they provide a roadmap for strengthening university science education, research, leadership, and First Nations inclusion across Australia’s universities.

ACDS Strategic Plan 2026-2030: A conceptual Ecosystem²



² Draft graphic for illustration. Subject to possible revision.

Goal 1: Champion Teaching & Learning Leadership

The national challenge: Declining public trust in science and awareness of the value that university science contributes to society, a lack of signalling about the types of jobs that science graduates can enter, declining domestic enrolments, evolving models for the BSc and other science degrees, inconsistent levels of mathematics education among undergraduate students, variable AI literacy, increasing demand for workforce skills, and growing pressure on staff who teach — and the need to attract international students to science degrees, as a contributor to sustainability and global influence.

Why it matters: University Science teaching underpins a science-literate, mathematically-capable and skilled workforce and is a visible expression of our public value. It also builds the global reach and reputation of Australian science education and professional programs that develop a science-enabled workforce for the future.

The opportunity for ACDS: Continue to convene and connect science educators and leaders through communities of practice, showcasing best practice, and demonstrating and enhancing the importance and value of university science education and training. Showcase and shape standards for science learning outcomes in collaboration with other professional bodies.

Objectives:

- i. **Strengthen** national leadership in curriculum, pedagogy and assessment by connecting educators and shaping expectations of university science learning outcomes.
- ii. **Build** scalable communities of practice that connect educators, share best practice, and enhance teaching and learning capability.
- iii. **Advance** inclusive pathways and university science education by listening to the needs of First Nations peoples and supporting culturally safe, high-quality science education.

Goal 2: Strengthen Pathways for Research & Research Translation

The national challenge: Declining R&D investment compounded by structural changes in university funding and ageing research infrastructure, misapprehensions among policymakers about the critical importance of foundational research, persistent barriers to research translation, and uncertain career pathways for HDR students, and early and mid-Career Researchers.

Why it matters: University science – encompassing foundational and applied research – is essential to tackling Australia’s most pressing national and global challenges. It is a core part of the nation’s research and innovation ecosystem, contributing to capability, productivity and environmental stewardship. As such, university science functions as a foundational pillar of Australia’s innovation system — integrating education, discovery, translation and public engagement in ways that no other part of the science ecosystem can replicate. Foundational discovery and applied research are not separate endeavours but part of a continuous system that generates new knowledge, translates it into application, and ultimately delivers economic and societal benefit.

Universities are the primary home of research, and their capacity to sustain it is essential to Australia’s innovation system and long-term research translation. Much of the discovery research that enables downstream application, including commercialisation and policy impact, is conceived, conducted and sustained within universities.

The opportunity for ACDS: Convene and strengthen communities of practice among research leaders in science faculties — fostering collaboration and the exchange of knowledge and strategies

to address contemporary challenges in research and its translation, leadership, infrastructure, and early-career researcher pathways. Provide coherent national messaging that articulates the importance of university research across the discovery – applied – translation continuum, and positions university science as a central driver of Australia’s productivity growth and innovation performance.

Objectives:

- i. **Champion** the essential role of university research – foundational and applied – and its impact, value and contribution to society and innovation.
- ii. **Strengthen** university science research leadership by convening communities of practice that share best practice and address challenges in research culture, capability and translation.
- iii. **Explore and leverage** partnerships that improve research leadership and translation, and support HDR and early-career pathways, including partnerships that support First Nations researchers and strengthen inclusive and culturally informed research environments.

Goal 3: Build Influence Through Strategic Engagement and Communication

The national challenge: Limited awareness of ACDS outside universities, uneven recognition of the unique challenges of delivering science education, and fragile public trust in institutions.

Why it matters: Student aspiration, visibility and trust are critical to sustaining influence and investment. Science underpins technological and societal progress and provides the evidence base for decisions that protect Earth’s critical life-support systems. Realising these benefits depends on clear, effective communication of the role and value of university science to the public and key stakeholders.

The opportunity for ACDS: To use our unique voice to shape national narratives that highlight the societal value, impact and outcomes of university science education and research. To do this by strengthening and extending our influence, including through purposeful partnerships and collaboration. To contribute to national policy reform that strengthens the long-term sustainability of science education and research.

Objectives:

- i. **Shape** a compelling national narrative that demonstrates the value and impact of university science as a central contributor to Australia’s research, innovation and workforce systems, including the importance of First Nations knowledges, perspectives and leadership.
- ii. **Expand** engagement and communication with ACDS stakeholders in universities, government, industry and like-minded organisations to advance shared science priorities and build a unified, authoritative voice for science advocacy in Australia.
- iii. **Drive** partnerships that extend ACDS’s reach, and support and contribute to coordinated responses to emerging issues in university science, including through respectful engagement with First Nations organisations and communities where appropriate.

Goal 4: Strengthen First Nations Partnerships and Engagement in University Science

The national challenge: Underrepresentation of First Nations students, staff and leadership in science faculties, and inconsistent embedding of First Nations perspectives and knowledges in science teaching and research.

Why it matters: First Nations knowledges enrich science by strengthening its relevance and integrity and creates trust and social licence essential for enduring partnerships. Ensuring that First Nations peoples are equal stakeholders in all aspects of the science system is fundamental to equity, self-determination and reconciliation. Meaningful inclusion in university science education and research strengthens knowledge, capability, and impact for First Nations peoples, communities, and Australia's scientific future.

The opportunity for ACDS: Partner with First Nations peoples to shape a more inclusive, equitable and excellent university science sector. ACDS can amplify leading practice, strengthen pathways, support First Nations science leadership, champion co-design, and foster a strong and sustainable national cohort of First Nations scientists.

Objectives:

- i. **Partner** with First Nations peoples as leaders in knowledge creation, listening and responding to their needs and priorities to co-design culturally strong, safe, and inclusive university science education and research.
- ii. **Collaborate** with First Nations leaders and communities to guide ACDS strategy, elevate sector-leading practice, and advance First Nations science leadership.
- iii. **Support and help grow** a strong, visible and connected national cohort of First Nations scientists through leadership development, collaboration and opportunity.

5. Our Approach

ACDS exists to serve its member universities and the broader Australian community. In delivering programs, activities and events in support of our strategic goals, we are committed to providing expertise for a better tomorrow for the whole community, and to embedding inclusivity, equity and diversity in all its forms across university science education, research, and leadership, including respect for, and collaboration with, First Nations communities.

With a small Executive Support team³ and a modest budget, we focus on what matters most to our mission, aligning human and financial resources to maximise impact.

6. Implementation and Impact

ACDS will develop a dedicated Implementation Plan to translate this Strategic Plan into action and to track progress over time. The Implementation Plan will outline the structured processes for planning, reporting and review, and will include a clear framework for assessing performance against each Strategic Goal.

Each Goal will be supported by a concise set of high-level indicators and targets that define what success looks like over the five-year period, complemented by more detailed measures for the objectives that monitor progress across the core areas of activity contributing to each Goal. These indicators will reflect internal engagement and capability building, as well as ACDS's contribution to national policy influence, public trust, research sustainability and workforce outcomes.

³ The Executive Support Team consists of part-time personnel remunerated through honoraria. It includes the Executive Director, the Director of the ACDS Teaching & Learning Centre, the Director of the ACDS National Research Network, the Director of Strategic Communications and Engagement, the Policy and Engagement Manager, and the Finance Officer.

ACDS will remain attuned to emerging challenges and opportunities across the university science landscape, adapting its initiatives and priorities in response to member needs, sector shifts, and national developments. This agility ensures that ACDS remains relevant, responsive, and forward-looking.

Specific initiatives required to advance our objectives will be defined through annual operational plans, which will specify the actions, responsibilities, outputs and short-term performance measures for each year.

As initiatives evolve in response to member needs and the national context, the annual plans will provide flexibility, while the Strategic Goals and their associated measures ensure continuity, clarity of focus, and a clear line of sight from ACDS activities to their intended impact.

Our approach to implementation is program-based, outcome-driven, and focused on initiatives that deliver the greatest value for members.

7. Governance

The ACDS is governed by its Constitution, which provides the framework for accountability, decision-making and representation across the membership. Within this framework, the Executive Committee is responsible for setting the strategic direction of ACDS and for approving, overseeing and monitoring the Strategic Plan and its implementation.

Members of the Executive Support team are appointed by, and accountable to, the Executive Committee. Under the leadership of the Executive Director, and in support of the direction set by the Executive Committee, the Directors and the Policy and Engagement Manager explore, coordinate and support potential activities within their respective portfolios, and contribute to the implementation of agreed priorities. They operate within the framework and parameters set by the Executive Committee, including as articulated in this Strategic Plan.

The Annual General Meeting (AGM) provides an opportunity for member universities to consider and shape the Strategic Plan and its implementation. Progress on the Strategic Plan will be reported regularly to the Executive Committee and the wider membership to ensure transparency, accountability and integrity in delivery.

Governance will be maintained through:

- Oversight by the ACDS Executive Committee, accountable for implementation, progress, and alignment with member priorities.
- Annual Executive Committee workshops to review achievements, set forward directions, and adjust priorities.
- Regular consultation with members to ensure the Strategic Plan reflects sector needs.
- Regular reporting against strategic goals, objectives, priority initiatives and business-as-usual activities.
- Periodic review of the portfolio of initiatives, with clear criteria for continuation, adaptation, or retirement.
- Attention to financial sustainability, including sponsorship and alternative membership models.

Conclusion

This Strategic Plan positions the ACDS to thrive in a changing landscape. It affirms our unique role as the national voice for university science faculties and sets ambitious goals to strengthen members' capacities in respect of science education, research, engagement, and First Nations participation.

Through clear strategic goals, strong drivers, and transparent governance, ACDS will build trust, amplify the voice of university science and ensure that university science continues to underpin Australia's prosperity, resilience and capacity to address the great challenges of our time.