2026 Annual Conference and Satellite Activities

Key Themes and Insights[1]

The Australian Council of Deans of Science (ACDS) 2026 Annual Conference, held at the Australian National University on 27–28 October, brought together university science leaders with contributors from government, research, industry and education. Satellite activities on 26 October extended opportunities to explore digital tools and data to provide insights for the HE sector and science education and promotion of STEM in schools (in the ACT).

Across the conference, discussion connected changes in tertiary education and research policy with practical questions about teaching, research leadership, partnerships and national capability. A recurring message was that *university* science has a substantial contribution to make—and that realising this contribution requires stronger connections, understanding and collaboration between institutions, disciplines, sectors and communities.

This summary draws together the principal themes from the available session records and presentation materials. It highlights contributions from speakers and discussions without treating proposals raised at the conference as agreed ACDS positions or commitments. The lunchtime strategic planning workshop is addressed in a separate analysis.

The main conference attracted 51 participants, including 26 representatives from 21 ACDS member universities, with university-affiliated Executive Committee members included in that total. Across the associated events, 18 people attended the Google workshop, 16 joined the site visit and 45 attended the conference dinner. Further details of participation are at **Annex 1**

1. University science as a foundation of national capability

The conference reinforced the breadth of university science's contribution: educating future science professionals, generating knowledge and foundational research discoveries, supporting innovation and providing independent evidence in the public interest.

In her opening remarks, **Jacqui Ramagge** emphasised that the case for university science extends beyond immediate commercial returns. Discovery creates possibilities before their applications are apparent, while independent research supports standards, regulation and scrutiny. Strong disciplinary knowledge also enables graduates to evaluate evidence and exercise judgment in a changing technological environment.

In his **conference dinner address, Bill Shorten** connected science and research with productivity, sovereignty, jobs and public benefit. He challenged universities to make their expertise more visible and accessible to government, industry and communities. His argument combined a call for more sustainable research investment with an expectation that universities demonstrate their contribution and examine how their own practices could improve. He also advocated for expansion of opportunities and approach to extend, promote and enable lifelong learning and tertiary education, via engagement or re-engagement in both vocational and higher education across career and working lifespans and with strong consideration of equity access.

Jane O'Dwyer similarly argued that innovation should be treated as central economic policy. Drawing on the Cooperative Research Centres experience, she highlighted the importance of sustained collaboration, research-capable businesses and the people who carry knowledge between organisations and emphasized the

[1] This summary was developed with AI assistance, drawing together conference session notes with PowerPoint slides and other presentation materials where available.

development of people and of strong industry-academic relationships as the enduring outcomes of CRC activities

Together, these contributions supported a broad account of national capability: one that values discovery, education, translation and public-interest research, and explains how these functions reinforce one another. They also pointed to the value of involving industry and community partners in communicating the benefits of university science.

2. Responding to a changing tertiary education and research system

Presentations on tertiary education stewardship and research funding reform highlighted significant changes in the environment in which science faculties and universities operate.

Barney Glover's address on the Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC) described an emerging approach centred on institutional missions, negotiated compacts, managed growth and equity. He encouraged universities to provide candid accounts of their circumstances, including unsuccessful initiatives and barriers requiring government attention to best inform ATEC's understanding of priorities and challenges across the sectors. For science leaders, this raised questions about how disciplinary strengths and institutional priorities connect with national capability.

Domestic research training enrolments was a particular concern. Barney identified flat or declining domestic doctoral participation as a sovereign capability issue and invited evidence about barriers and potential responses. The discussion connected participation with completion, student experience and the visibility of research career opportunities.

Ute Roessner's presentation on Australian Research Council reforms outlined a renewed emphasis on early-stage (foundational) research, simpler funding arrangements and fewer consolidate schemes and support for researchers and collaboration. She stressed that generating new knowledge is itself a legitimate national benefit. Proposed changes to assessment, support for higher-risk ideas and application participation limits via a points system for investigators (with points committed at time of application) would require institutions to reconsider how they advise researchers, assemble teams and plan and prioritise applications. She also outlined the ongoing quarterly roll-out of new schemes through 2027 and 2028.

The **Deans' Council Presidents panel**, involving Jacqui Ramagge, Terry Haines, Tim Finnigan and Stewart von Itzstein, placed these changes within a wider discussion of shared disciplinary pressures. Panellists explored cooperation around research strengths and infrastructure, alongside the practical challenge of agreeing priorities across councils with different member needs as well as the opportunity for Deans Councils to lead on focused and strategic advocacy on initiatives relevant to their members and their Faculties and students

A common implication was the need for informed, coordinated engagement with reform. Science leaders can contribute evidence about how policy settings affect teaching capacity, research careers and the sustainability of disciplines, while identifying where collaboration can strengthen capability.

3. Teaching, learning and leadership in an AI-rich environment

Artificial intelligence featured across the satellite workshop, opening remarks and teaching and learning discussions. The central educational question was how universities sustain deep understanding and critical thinking and assure learning as powerful tools become widely available.

The **pre-conference Google workshop** demonstrated applications of Gemini, NotebookLM and connected datasets for teaching, research and university leadership. Participants also examined cognitive offloading,

plausible errors, environmental impacts and data governance. The discussion underscored that the ability to use AI does not replace the disciplinary understanding needed to assess its output.

Jacqui Ramagge's opening remarks developed this point further: universities must consider what students need to understand and do when machines can perform an increasing range of procedures. Conceptual knowledge, verification, ethical responsibility and critical judgment remained central.

In the **teaching and learning session, Michelle Harvey** explored implications for curriculum, assessment and graduate capability. Practical and observed assessment offer opportunities to demonstrate learning, but changes must also account for workload, coordination, accessibility and equity. Her presentation connected AI with broader concerns about student engagement and competing external demands and responsibilities, student belonging and the continuing and growing need for professional development for educators.

Within the same session, **Jeff Shimeta** examined the role of middle leaders in turning institutional direction into workable practice. His account of "leading from the middle" highlighted the importance of translating broad policies, acknowledging uncertainty, involving academics in developing responses and testing changes through manageable steps. Deans' trust, support and resourcing materially affect these leaders' capacity to act.

These contributions point towards a continuing role for ACDS in sharing practical approaches across institutions. The value lies in helping science educators interpret change, examine evidence and develop approaches that enhance teaching practice and which sustain and improve student learning and experience and that are accompanied by retention of disciplinary standards and integrity of qualifications.

4. Strengthening pathways into science and connections with work

Several sessions examined science participation as a connected pathway extending from school through university to employment, research and lifelong learning.

Simon Collier's presentation on the Australian Curriculum distinguished national curriculum intentions from students' classroom experiences. Teacher shortages, out-of-field teaching (especially of mathematics), resources and professional development influence how science is taught. Substantive variation in experiences (including access to varying physical facilities) also means that students with apparently similar qualifications may arrive at university with different preparation.

Simon invited university science leaders to identify where school learning aligns with tertiary expectations and where gaps have significant consequences. Discussion highlighted opportunities for school partnerships, curriculum engagement and teacher preparation grounded in substantial disciplinary study.

Brett Hall extended the pathway discussion into industry and working life. Employers need technical expertise alongside analytical thinking, adaptability, curiosity and judgment. He argued for education models that better accommodate people already in employment, including flexible learning, work-based pathways notably exemplified by examples in South Australia and movement between vocational and higher education.

Bill Shorten also challenged rigid distinctions between university and trades and encouraged greater recognition of work and life experience. Both contributions presented broader participation and lifelong learning as matters of workforce capability as well as equity.

Research-trained people formed another important connection. Jane O'Dwyer described doctoral and postdoctoral researchers as mechanisms through which businesses develop the capacity to understand and use research. Brett's discussion of internships highlighted the need for suitable projects, mentoring, clear expectations and workable arrangements between partners, including opportunity for standardizing workplace learning agreements across institutions, to better enable ready engagement (and less bureaucracy) for industry partnering with multiple institutions.

Across these sessions, pathways depended on relationships and practical support. Making careers visible, helping partners navigate institutions and addressing administrative barriers were recurring considerations.

5. Building effective partnerships and supporting research leadership

The conference explored how national networks and external partnerships could create benefits beyond those available through individual institutions.

Jane O'Dwyer's account of the **Cooperative Research Centres experience** emphasised beginning with a problem that partners cannot solve alone. Effective collaboration requires substantive end-user involvement, strong leadership and early attention to governance, intellectual property, publication and timelines. Its benefits include durable relationships and organisational capability, as well as products and commercial outcomes.

John Bartlett's presentation on the proposed ACDS Research and Research Translation Centre introduced potential options for how a virtual national community could support research leaders between National Research Forums. Possible functions included sharing practice, supporting incoming Associate Deans Research, strengthening external connections and communicating the contribution of discovery and translation.

Discussion focused on where the Centre could add distinctive value and focused activity working alongside discipline societies and university services. Cross-institution leadership support, interdisciplinary connections and a collective voice emerged as possible strengths; the activity program and resourcing remained matters for development.

Marcel Dinger's presentation on Falling Walls offered a specific example of a potential collective collaborative opportunity and one that is timely in the context of engagement via Horizon Europe by Australia. He outlined exploratory possibilities for an Australian science presence in 2027, associated with the anniversary of Australia–Germany diplomatic relations. The discussion considered international visibility (for Australian university science) and partnership development, while recognising that format, funding, responsibilities and benefits would need further examination.

These sessions suggested a useful test for future initiatives: whether collective participation creates a clear additional benefit, meets an identified need and can be supported with realistic resources.

6. First Nations partnerships, inclusion and organisational change

The conference connected participation in science with deeper questions about relationships, institutional practices and whose knowledge shapes education and research.

Craig Ritchie's presentation explored the "spaces in between" disciplines, people, places and knowledge systems. He argued that strengthening First Nations participation requires attention to science's questions, curriculum and community connections, alongside students' preparation and critically consideration of the differing perspectives and contexts of First Nations knowledge principles and knowledge transmission over long generational timespans.

His contribution challenged approaches that add Indigenous content while leaving underlying arrangements unchanged. Practical requests included involving Indigenous scientists and Elders from the outset as curricula are being developed, recognising community engagement as serious work and sharing successful connections between schools, communities and first-year teaching.

The satellite workshop also identified First Nations ownership and authority over Indigenous data as responsibilities relevant to digital tools and connected datasets. Jacqui Ramagge's **Year in Review** situated ACDS' First Nations work within an ongoing process of listening, relationship-building and co-design.

Janin Bredehoeft's presentation on women's progression in science examined a different set of institutional barriers. She showed why entry-level representation does not ensure their equitable retention and advancement. Contracts, workload allocation, promotion practices, informal encouragement and workplace culture can shape outcomes beneath favourable aggregate figures. She also highlighted the confounding impacts of intersectional demographic factors requiring approaches that do not (just) consider gender alone.

Her practical message was to examine local evidence, listen to staff, identify specific barriers and assess whether changes improve outcomes and to iteratively review outcomes of action to continuously identify who is still not being supported by actions taken to address inequity.

Across these distinct contributions, a shared leadership challenge was evident: participation initiatives need to be supported by attention to the systems and everyday practices that determine people's experiences, opportunities and influence.

7. Focused advocacy and collective influence

A strong recurring message was the value of choosing a small number of clearly defined priorities and pursuing them consistently.

Bill Shorten directed this challenge explicitly to ACDS, encouraging science leaders to agree on a small number of significant issues and communicate and advocate for them repeatedly. He emphasised achievable stepwise progression to more ambitious goals, and the importance of working with allies and directing messages that resonate government priorities and everyday benefits across society.

The **Deans' Council Presidents panel** provided practical perspectives on advocacy. Examples highlighted the importance of combining credible evidence, a specific policy proposal, timely engagement and an understanding of the decision-making environment. Panellists supported collaboration while recognising the limited capacity of small peak bodies.

Within the **communications and engagement session, Will Grant** examined how evidence reaches policy through multiple institutions, relationships and formal and informal channels. He emphasised precise contributions to identifiable problems and relationships developed before an issue becomes urgent. He also encouraged greater recognition of successful engagement and the capability required to undertake it.

Brian Yates reviewed the extensive breadth of ACDS communications, engagement and advocacy, while **Sue White** invited consideration of audiences, priorities and investment. Discussion favoured issue-specific messages, member talking points, stronger visibility of work undertaken on members' behalf and purposeful alliances.

Taken together, these contributions linked influence with organisational discipline: clear priorities, credible evidence, establishing and sustaining ongoing relationships and practical opportunities for members to contribute.

Looking ahead

In his closing reflections, **Mark Osborn** brought together the conference's emphasis on collaboration, people and purposeful advocacy. He acknowledged the pressures affecting university science and the wellbeing of those delivering it, while encouraging leaders to act on opportunities arising through policy, technology and partnerships.

The **lunchtime strategic planning workshop** provided a complementary opportunity for members to develop ideas across ACDS' four strategic goals. Its findings are presented separately to support further consideration.

Across the conference, several considerations emerged for the year ahead: sustaining disciplinary knowledge while responding to AI; strengthening education and research pathways; building partnerships with clear mutual value; supporting inclusive institutions and effective leadership; and concentrating collective advocacy where ACDS can make a useful and distinctive contribution.

These insights provide a basis for continued discussion with members and for ACDS strategic and operational planning. They represent directions for consideration rather than an agreed program of new commitments.

Annex 1

Participants in the 2026 Annual Conference and Satellite Activities

The table below lists participants alphabetically by surname and records the activities they attended.

Name	University / organisation	Participation
John Bartlett	ACDS	Conference; Workshop; Site visit; Dinner
Juliey Beckman	Australian National University	Conference; Dinner
Cameron Begley	Spiegare Pty Ltd	Conference; Dinner
Michael Blumenstein	Flinders University	Conference; Dinner
Krishna Boyapati	Australian Public Service	Conference
Janin Bredehoeft	Science in Australia Gender Equity (SAGE)	Conference
Natalie Chapman	gemaker	Conference; Dinner
Simon Collier	Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA)	Conference; Site visit; Dinner
Marcel Dinger	University of Sydney	Conference; Dinner
Fiona Dyer	University of Canberra	Conference; Workshop; Dinner
Troy Farrell	Queensland University of Technology	Conference; Workshop; Dinner
Jasmine Fellows	Refraction Media	Conference; Dinner
Tim Finnigan	Australian Council of Engineering Deans / Western Sydney University	Conference; Dinner
Alex Galland	Google	Conference; Workshop; Dinner
Annette George	University of Western Australia	Workshop; Site visit
Patty Gilchrist	Google	Conference; Workshop; Dinner
Chris Goodman	NGIS Australia	Conference; Dinner
Will Grant	Australian National University	Conference; Workshop; Site visit
Sheida Hadavi	Australian Research Data Commons	Conference; Dinner
Terry Haines	Australian Council of Deans of Health Sciences / Monash University	Conference; Dinner
Brett Hall	Australian Industry Group	Conference; Dinner
Michelle Harvey	ACDS	Conference; Dinner
Rachel King	University of Southern Queensland	Conference; Dinner
Andy Martin	University of Melbourne	Conference; Workshop; Site visit; Dinner

Name	University / organisation	Participation
Alexander Mikheyev	Australian National University	Conference; Workshop; Dinner
Robyn Murphy	La Trobe University	Conference; Workshop; Site visit
Jane O'Dwyer	Cooperative Research Australia	Conference; Dinner
Mark Osborn	RMIT University	Conference; Workshop; Site visit; Dinner
Enzo Palombo	Swinburne University of Technology	Conference; Dinner
Grant Palmer	Federation University Australia	Conference
Jacqui Ramagge	James Cook University	Conference; Dinner
Craig Ritchie	Ngarra Group	Conference; Dinner
Alison Rodger	Australian National University	Conference
Ute Roessner	Australian Research Council	Conference; Dinner
Sven Rogge	University of New South Wales	Conference; Dinner
Stas Shabala	University of Tasmania	Conference; Dinner
Rajeev Sharma	Deakin University	Conference; Workshop; Site visit; Dinner
Fran Sheldon	Griffith University	Conference; Dinner
Jeff Shimeta	RMIT University	Conference
Bill Shorten	University of Canberra	Conference; Dinner
Megan Smith	Charles Sturt University	Conference; Dinner
Nikki Stanford	Adelaide University	Conference
Paula Taylor	Australian Science Teachers Association	Site visit; Dinner
Randeep Toor	Google	Conference; Workshop; Site visit; Dinner
Temuulen Tuguldur	Google	Conference; Workshop; Site visit; Dinner
Kym Turnbull	ACT Education Directorate	Site visit; Dinner
Martin Van Kranendonk	Curtin University	Conference; Dinner
Raju Varanasi	Google	Workshop; Site visit
Stewart Von Itzstein	Australian Council of Deans of Information and Communications Technology / Adelaide University	Conference; Dinner
Sally Wagnon	National Youth Science Forum	Conference; Dinner
James Wallman	University of Technology Sydney	Conference; Dinner

Name	University / organisation	Participation
Ronald White	James Cook University	Conference; Dinner
Rachel Whitsed	Charles Sturt University	Conference; Workshop; Site visit; Dinner
Tony Willis	ACDS	Conference; Workshop; Site visit; Dinner
Brian Yates	ACDS	Conference; Workshop; Site visit; Dinner

Activities: Conference, 27–28 October; Google Workshop, 26 October; ACT Academy of Future Skills Site visit, 26 October; conference Dinner, 27 October.

There were 55 individual participants across all activities: 51 attended the conference, 18 the Workshop, 16 the Site visit and 45 the Dinner. Participants attending multiple activities are counted once in the overall total.