



## ACDS Statement on European Southern Observatory (ESO) Membership

The recently released *Ambitious Australia* report from the Strategic Examination of Research and Development provides a series of recommendations for strengthening Australia's research, development and innovation system. It recommends "...sustained support for Australia's world-class foundational research base.", noting that "Without strong and consistent investment in knowledge creation, Australia risks losing its competitive edge in global discovery and eroding the foundation needed to transform innovation into enduring economic prosperity."

It is very disappointing, therefore, that on Thursday April 2<sup>nd</sup> 2026 the Australian Government informed Australia's astronomical research community that it had decided to *not* proceed with membership of the European Southern Observatory (ESO) when the current 10-year strategic partnership arrangement concludes in mid-2027.

The Australian Council of Deans of Science (ACDS) is the national voice for science education and research across Australian universities, we deeply understand the contribution that university science makes to Australia's knowledge base, STEM workforce capability, innovation performance, and long-term national strength. Astronomy has long been one of Australia's areas of international research strength. In the 2018 Excellence in Research for Australia evaluation undertaken by the Australian Research Council, 14 of the 16 universities assessed in astronomical and space sciences received the highest rating "well above world standard", a greater number than in any other field of research. To put this in a sporting context, astronomy is for research like swimming is for Olympic sport, an area in which on the international stage Australia performs exceptionally well considering its population.

Astronomy is a foundational science which some may argue is not important in delivering economic benefits to Australia. However, a recent report by UNSW economist Richard Holden finds that Australian astronomy delivers \$330M per year to the economy, building high-skill employment, technological innovation, and global collaboration. At a time when Australia is looking to improve economic complexity and build its STEM workforce to meet projected future demands, the decision not to proceed with membership of the ESO will limit the opportunities for the current generation of early and mid-career researchers, with flow-on adverse effects on sovereign capability and into undergraduate physical and mathematical sciences at Australian universities.