

Australian Catholic University

Submission to the Australian Government
Australia's draft National Science and Research
Priorities

September 2023

ACU response to *Australia's draft National Science and Research Priorities*

(Submission made online through web portal)

- 1. The draft priorities intend to identify specific challenges facing the country that will require multidisciplinary and multisector efforts to address. Do they achieve this objective? How can we improve them?*

Australian Catholic University (ACU) agrees the draft priorities address the specific challenges Australia faces, and that a multidisciplinary approach will allow First Nations knowledges to be represented across the priorities, as well as ensuring involvement of humanities and social sciences (HASS) researchers in emerging technologies and artificial intelligence (AI) which have social and ethical dimensions.

However, ACU recommends a greater emphasis on national and international partnerships which will be critical to achieving these priorities at scale. The draft document recognises this: “As a mid-sized economy, Australia does not have the scale or population to do everything. International partnerships will be important” (p. 11). However, this importance may need to be further emphasised to ensure the co-design of research programs in which partners share in the mission, as demonstrated by the European models in Appendix 2.

This is particularly the case for smaller universities and/or those that operate in regional areas. ACU, for example, has strong institutional links into our communities, where purpose-driven research can elevate local priorities at a national and global scale. ACU’s recent investment in research and health infrastructure and services for communities in Western Sydney (e.g., the STEM Centre of Education Excellence at ACU’s Strathfield campus) is an example of such a shared model that can attract international and industry research partners, alongside government and universities.

Regarding the guiding principles (p. 14), ACU endorses them but recommends they be broadened to include and/or reflect:

- the role of both HASS and STEM disciplines in informing a holistic approach to the national priorities; and
- the vital role that smaller universities play in animating Australia’s future research agenda, through strong local and mission-based partnerships.

ACU is committed to research that fosters the wellbeing, opportunity and participation of all, with a particular focus on the care economy and the role of education in addressing workforce challenges and creating thriving communities.

ACU’s research aligns especially with draft priority two – “Supporting healthy and thriving communities” – and three – “Enabling a productive and innovative economy.” However, ACU’s work also develops the fourth priority – “Building a stronger, more resilient nation” – which is necessarily underpinned by HASS research on human flourishing, democratic resilience and the social fabric crucial for building tolerant societies.

2. *Feedback stressed the need to work in partnership with First Nations people to embed First Nations knowledge and knowledge systems in the way we address national challenges. How might governments and the science and research sector best work with First Nations people to achieve this objective?*

ACU strongly agrees with the feedback of the critical importance of working alongside and learning from Indigenous peoples and knowledges and knowledge systems to inform and address national challenges.

An example of First Nations informed research at ACU is the work undertaken through ACU's Institute for Positive Psychology and Education "Indigenous Game Changers" program. The program involves a partnership of leading Australian and international Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers to identify and replicate Indigenous Australians' well-being to enable them to attain positive educational and life outcomes. Another example is ACU's 2023 thematic review to identify strategies and priorities in supporting our research and research training, which considers Indigenous research and researchers.

The best way for greater involvement of First Peoples in the science and research sector is to ensure the former have a strong "voice" in the deliberations of the latter.

3. *The draft priorities provide a range of critical research paths. How could we refine these research paths, for example, to address immediate challenges?*

More data and research on developing a skilled workforce is of relevance to all priorities, and especially the second – “Supporting healthy and thriving communities”. Workforce development is often considered an enabler or pre-requisite of the priorities. However, ACU considers it should also be recognised as a subject of research enquiry itself, given its importance in the context of severe skills shortages the country faces.

The second priority also requires some further development of its critical research paths to address immediate challenges. ACU recommends adding to this priority’s critical research areas the following topic: “Advances in the development of care economy models and delivery of high-quality care models and support”.

Finally, ACU notes the opportunity for research that focuses on government funding reaching institutions that are multi-site and provide high quality regional offerings. This ensures capabilities from different geographic areas can be better leveraged to each other’s benefit to address national priorities.

4. *How would you implement the priorities in your organisation or setting? What mechanisms would support implementation?*

ACU will play to its strengths in developing the priorities, particularly through our strong stakeholder engagement and unique links to the challenges faced by local communities and specific stakeholder groups.

Smaller universities such as ACU are often the best vehicle for researching such social challenges and translating findings into impacts that may be useful.

However, in developing the priorities, ACU would like to see a greater congruence, involving better linkages across all areas of government and industry, to influence research translation in universities. The national priorities need to go beyond basic research, to evolve better strategies to support research translation and transfer to industry or practice, all of which require different research and training approaches.