

Ethical Partnerships Policy

Section 1 - Purpose

(1) Australian Catholic University (ACU) is a mission-driven institution in the Catholic tradition. It is committed to engaging in ethical partnerships to achieve shared objectives and to support innovation and impact. At times, certain engagement and partnership opportunities may present moral or ethical challenges that could compromise the University's integrity or else carry reputational risks inconsistent with ACU's Mission, values, vision, strategic direction and risk appetite. The purpose of this Policy is to provide guidance to decision makers around the establishment of ethical partnerships at ACU.

Section 2 - Scope

(2) This Policy provides guidelines relating to the formation of ethical partnerships by ACU. To that end, these guidelines should align with the requirements of the ACU Ethical Considerations Policy. It should also be read in conjunction with the [Educational Partnerships Policy](#); the [Non-Education External Collaboration Policy](#); the [Risk Appetite Statement](#); and Statute 13 - Freedom of Speech, Intellectual Freedom and Academic Freedom

(3) This Policy relates to national and international partnerships formed by ACU with external parties.

(4) This Policy applies across all areas of the University.

Section 3 - Definitions

(5) In this Policy, the following terms are defined as follows:

Term	Definition
Approver	The staff member at the appropriate delegation level to approve commercial Activities, as defined in the Delegations of Authority Policy and Register .
Partnership	Any formalised relationship with an external party (entity or individual), including but not limited to: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• funding arrangements• service agreements• research agreements• consultancy or commercial activity• outbound sponsorships• academic collaborations• consultancy or commercial activity• academic collaborations• strategic partnerships• research training partnerships• letters of intent, memorandums of understanding and similar documents.

Section 4 - Process for Determining Partnership Suitability

(6) While ACU will actively pursue partnerships with a view both to serving the common good and to enhancing the University's Mission, in conjunction with standard due diligence requirements, the Approver must also be alert to whether a proposed partnership carries any additional ethical or reputational risks.

(7) ACU takes a principles-based approach to determining the suitability of any potential partnerships that is informed by the Catholic tradition's long-standing criteria for cooperation with others. This approach is intended to:

- ensure adaptability to changing trends, attitudes and circumstances that balance risk and opportunity
- allow for prudential decision-making in the light of the purpose of the engagement and the relationship between the activities of ACU and of the other party, given the prospective benefits and possible harms of the cooperation, including any risk of scandal
- allow for informed input from relevant stakeholders and subject matter experts
- maximise ACU's opportunities while ensuring that partnerships are consistent with ACU's Mission, values, vision and strategic direction
- Facilitate alignment with [Statute 13 - Freedom of Speech, Intellectual Freedom and Academic Freedom](#), the [Risk Appetite Statement](#) and other relevant policies and procedures.

(8) The Approver will assess potential partnerships on a case-by-case basis, considering:

- a. whether the primary purpose of ACU's partnership is good and worthwhile
- b. whether, according to Catholic teachings and ACU's values, the activity of the other party involves any unethical or morally problematic conduct
- c. whether ACU's cooperation with the other party is intended to endorse or assist any unethical or morally problematic activity, and as such would constitute "formal cooperation" in that other party's unethical activity
- d. whether ACU's cooperation with the other party provides any incidental, though unintended, assistance to the other party's unethical or morally problematic activity, and so would be "material cooperation" in the unethical activity
- e. whether, in the case of incidental and unintended "material" cooperation with another party's unethical or morally problematic activity, the benefits of doing so are preferable to the harms occasioned, including the harm of giving scandal to others.

By testing a proposal against these criteria, the Approver will be able to determine whether the proposed partnership would involve "formal cooperation" in the unethical conduct of another, which is not permitted; or "material cooperation" with the unethical conduct of another, which may be permissible, depending on its various benefits and harms.

Section 5 - Applying these Principles

(9) It follows that, in applying these principles, Approvers should, where relevant and possible, consider the reputations and ethical practices of the potential partners. This may include evaluating whether potential partners are engaged with, or invested in, organisations or activities that do not align with ACU's values, Catholic moral teachings or which would otherwise pose a risk to the University's reputation.

(10) There are situations of presumed formal cooperation in which ACU will not, under any circumstances, enter a partnership. Based on legal and regulatory risk, this includes partnerships that:

- are inconsistent with ACU's obligations under the [Modern Slavery Act 2018 \(Cth\)](#) and the ACU 2022 Modern Slavery Statement
- involve bodies or individuals subject to Australian or United Nations Security Council autonomous sanctions regimes, as implemented under the [Autonomous Sanctions Act 2011 \(Cth\)](#) and the [Autonomous Sanctions Regulations 2011 \(Cth\)](#)
- pose unacceptable foreign interference risks, as outlined under the University Foreign Interference Taskforce Guidelines and ACU's own national security compliance practices
- involve entities engaged in providing or encouraging the taking of innocent human life.

(11) In short, all partnerships must align with Catholic teachings and ACU's Mission, vision, values and strategic direction, and they must not pose a significant reputational risk to the University, nor give scandal to others. Approvers should conduct additional due diligence for partnerships that represent heightened risks, and carefully consider their overarching value to ACU's research, commercialisation efforts, students, staff and the communities in which we operate.

(12) Where alignment with this policy is not immediately clear, or a decision on a proposed partnership cannot be reached, the matter should be escalated in accordance with the Delegations of Authority Policy and Register (or other relevant policy or procedure). In some cases, the advice of Catholic ethicists and/or the local Bishop should be sought, especially if a partnership is likely to prompt media discussion.

Section 6 - Heightened Risks

(13) Only in "exceptional circumstances" should consideration be given to "material cooperation" with organisations implicated in:

- human rights violations
- animal welfare/rights violations
- unethical labour practices or violations of workers' rights
- pseudo-scientific or anti-academic practices, or the intentional promotion of misinformation
- serious environmental violations
- criminal activity.

Examples of exceptional circumstances might include:

- where cooperation is the only way to gain humanitarian access or to document injustice by which to advocate and support legal redress and/or reconciliation and restorative justice
- material cooperation to significantly improve welfare/rights violations or provide scientific scrutiny on efforts to establish and enforce higher welfare protocols
- supply-chain auditing to improve workers' rights
- knowledge generation and capacity building to improve past practices
- remediation science and/or rehabilitation initiatives.

Partnerships in these exceptional circumstances should involve only activities that are incidental to the unethical conduct of the other party (i.e., "material" in nature); proportionate to the good that can be obtained; engaged in only once reasonable alternatives have been ruled out; limited and transparent; and subject to ongoing due diligence and review.

(14) Additional care should be exercised when considering partnerships with organisations that:

- facilitate or promote gambling

- manufacture or sell products widely recognised as harmful to health (e.g., alcohol, tobacco, vapes, etc.)
- manufacture, sell or purchase arms and weaponry.

Since, in most of these cases, the primary activity of the other party is unethical, a partnership with ACU would only be permissible if ACU's activity does not endorse or assist that unethical activity but is instead directed to a properly ethical goal that is distinct from the unacceptable activity of the other party. Approval will therefore require a determination and explanation – in the light of the criteria above – as to why the proposed partnership involves “justified material cooperation” with an entity with which ACU would not otherwise choose to be associated.

Section 7 - Partnerships with Defence

(15) In all its endeavours, ACU advocates for peace and the dignity of the human person.

(16) The University recognises the necessity for Australia to uphold its interests and protect itself and its allies through military means. As such, ACU acknowledges the important roles played by the Australian Defence Force (ADF), the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) and other defence related organisations in safeguarding Australia, promoting security, undertaking aid and humanitarian operations, and supporting the health and welfare of current and ex-serving personnel.

(17) In light of these considerations, the University may engage with Defence-related organisations where the proposed partnership activity is compatible with ACU's Mission, vision, values and strategic direction, and where it meets the criteria for justified material cooperation. This is likely to include partnerships relating to:

- dual-use goods
- digital technologies
- policy and ethical practice
- improving the physical and psychological health and wellbeing of current and ex-serving personnel and their families
- supporting the transition of ex-serving personnel and their families from Defence into civilian life
- support of the veteran service sector.

(18) ACU draws a distinction between combat effectiveness and combat readiness/resilience, the latter being issues of veteran health and wellbeing, clearly aligning with the University's Mission, vision, values and strategic direction.

Section 8 - Review

(19) Unless otherwise indicated, this Policy will still apply beyond the review date.

Section 9 - Associated Information

(20) For related legislation, policies, procedures and guidelines and any supporting resources please refer to the Associated Information tab.

Status and Details

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Responsible Executive	Abid Khan Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research and Enterprise)
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