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16 March 2026

Dear Dr Honae Cuffe,

RE: SCU's Faculty of Education response to the Decadal Plan for Australian Education Research 2026-2035

The Faculty of Education at Southern Cross University (SCU) welcomes the development of a Decadal Plan for Australian Education Research and strongly supports its intent to articulate a shared national vision, strengthen research capacity, and enhance the contribution of education research to policy, practice, and social futures. As a regional university with a strong commitment to equity, sustainability, and community engaged scholarship, SCU is well positioned to contribute to — and benefit from — a coordinated, long term national research agenda.

Below, we have addressed the three overarching questions and each of the four priority areas.

Key Areas and Issues for Future Education Research (Question 1)

Aligned with the NSW Council of Deans of Education (NSWCDE) Grass Roots Research Strategy (2023), future education research priorities must be justice oriented, place responsive, and systemically connected across sectors. Consistent with national consultations and grassroots agenda setting, we identify five interrelated areas of priority:

1. **Justice, equity, and inclusion across the life course:** Research must continue to address entrenched educational inequities shaped by geography, socio economic status, Indigeneity, disability, language background, and access to services. For regional universities such as SCU, this includes sustained attention to rural, regional, and remote contexts, and to early

childhood education and care (ECEC), school, and tertiary transitions as sites of cumulative disadvantage or opportunity. National strategies must explicitly address the persistent metropolitan–regional divide in research funding and leadership. This includes targeted support for regional universities to lead Category 1 grants, build research teams, and participate equitably in national and international collaborations.

2. ***Indigenous educational sovereignty and knowledge systems***: Future research must move beyond inclusion towards genuine partnership, co-design and Indigenous led research agendas. This includes examining curriculum, pedagogy, workforce development, and research governance through Indigenous epistemologies, and supporting long-term, large-scale programs of research rather than ad hoc short term project funding.
3. ***Education workforce sustainability and professional futures***: The current workforce crisis across early childhood education and care (ECEC), schooling and higher education requires research that is longitudinal, interdisciplinary and policy connected. Priorities include teacher attraction and retention, professional experience ‘placement’ capacity, ITE course effectiveness in teacher/profession readiness, professional identity, workload, well-being, career pathways, and the conditions needed for educators — including academics — to engage in research informed practice. Sustainable research requires time, stability, and succession planning. Immediate gains could be achieved through more realistic workload models, targeted support for early and mid-career researchers, and recognition of diverse research roles (including education focused and practice embedded researchers).
4. ***Climate, sustainability, and education for uncertain futures***: Education research must engage more explicitly with climate change, environmental justice, and sustainability, including how education systems prepare learners to live ethically and responsibly in conditions of planetary uncertainty. This is an area where education research intersects strongly with national and international research priorities (including the United Nations Sustainable Development 2030 Goals) yet remains underrepresented in competitive funding.
5. ***Research quality, plurality, and impact***: Education research must be better supported to inform policy in nuanced and responsible ways. This requires mechanisms that value dialogue, translation, and trust, rather than privileging narrowly defined ‘what works’ models or outsourcing research to intermediary organisations. There is a need to protect methodological and theoretical diversity in education research, particularly in the face of narrowing definitions of ‘evidence’. High quality education research must remain capable of addressing complexity, context, and values, and of informing practice and policy without reducing education to technical interventions. Long term advancement depends on research infrastructures that enable collaboration across early childhood, schooling, and higher education, and between universities, systems, communities, and policy agencies. This

includes data sharing frameworks, ethical partnership models, and sustained funding for collaborative research programs.

The following mechanisms are likely to be most effective in addressing these issues:

1. ***An inclusive national research agenda***: The Decadal Plan must reflect the diversity of institutions, communities and research traditions that form the Australian education research community. Uniform approaches risk reinforcing existing inequities and marginalising regional, Indigenous, and practice-based research.
2. ***Targeted investment aligned to national priorities***: Education research should be more clearly aligned with national science and research priorities — including climate action, community well-being, and Indigenous knowledge systems — while retaining autonomy over research questions and methods.
3. ***Capacity building rather than competition alone***: Competitive funding must be complemented by mentoring for Category 1 grants, support for transdisciplinary research, and succession planning for research leadership.
4. ***Broader conceptions of impact and value***: The Decadal Plan should promote context sensitive understandings of impact, including community benefit, policy influence, professional learning, and long-term social change, particularly for research conducted in regional and disadvantaged communities.

Steps to drive short-term and long-term advancement

Short-term gains will be driven by improved data access, workforce stabilisation (including placement) and targeted equity focused interventions grounded in early childhood, sustainability, and regional education strengths.

Long-term advancement requires structural reform: integrated data systems, sustainable workforce and research pipelines, harmonised national frameworks and a coherent tertiary system that recognises regional universities as central to Australia’s education future.

The table below summarises these short and long-term actions

Area	Short-term actions	Long-term actions
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Strengthen Data, Evidence and System Coordination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce barriers to data sharing across sectors and jurisdictions, with particular focus on regional and rural contexts where fragmentation and delays are most acute. • Strengthen cross sector collaboration through shared pilots, professional learning and evidence translation-mechanisms linking universities, education systems, ECEC services and communities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a coherent national education research architecture with aligned priorities, shared data protocols, and large-scale partnerships, explicitly resourcing regional universities as leaders in national research programs.
Stabilise and Grow the Education Workforce	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expand targeted incentives for ITE students and early career educators, including paid placements, debt relief, increased sector placement capacity, and regionally tailored supports. • Strengthen mentoring, induction, and workload relief, recognising retention depends on well-being, professional support, and manageable workloads. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop nationally recognised professional learning pathways valuing specialist expertise (e.g. inclusive education, Indigenous education, sustainability and climate change education, and regional leadership). • Build a sustainable education research and academic workforce by addressing casualisation, supporting mid-career researchers and strengthening HDR pipelines, particularly in regional universities.
Advance Equity and Inclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prioritise targeted, evidence informed interventions for vulnerable children, disadvantaged schools, and regional and remote communities. • Strengthen family engagement and well-being supports to address attendance decline, learning disengagement, and mental health related- barriers. • Expand inclusion supports and targeted funding for learners with disability across ECEC, schooling, and higher education. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reform school funding to deliver genuine needs-based equity, particularly for public schools serving disadvantaged communities. • Embed Indigenous leadership across research, curriculum, and workforce development through Indigenous led agendas and sustained partnerships.
Modernise ECEC, Schooling, VET and Higher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support quality improvement for ECEC services rated “Working Towards” or “Not Yet Assessed” in the National Quality Standard, particularly in disadvantaged and remote communities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop sustainable university funding models that support research capacity, educational quality, and community engaged scholarship,

Education Systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen ITE professional experience placement opportunities and research across all sectors. • Strengthen ITE research with a focus on profession readiness. Specifically, examine ITE programs, including course length, assessment and professional experience, and its impact on profession readiness. • Strengthen well-being, academic and financial supports in higher education to reduce attrition for equity cohorts. 	<p>reducing over-reliance on international student revenue.</p>
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Most effective mechanisms to address aims of the Decadal Plan (Question 3)

The Decadal Plan will be most effective where mechanisms connect systems, build long-term capability, and enable place responsive, equity focused education research. As a regional university with deep engagement across ECEC, schooling, VET, and higher education, SCU emphasises mechanisms that reduce fragmentation and strengthen the research–policy–practice nexus.

1. **A Nationally Coordinated Research Architecture that Includes Regional Leadership:** Establish a coherent national research architecture that moves beyond ad hoc projects to shared priorities and sustained collaboration across ECEC, schooling, VET and higher education. This should include cross sector priorities, harmonised ethics and data processes, and large-scale programs that position regional universities as leaders and co designers of national research agendas, including through Centres of Excellence aligned to regional strengths.
2. **Integrated, Accessible and High-Quality Data Systems:** Deliver modern, integrated data infrastructure that supports both system level analysis and place-based decision making. This includes longitudinal datasets spanning education sectors, consistent national definitions, stronger linkage with health and social data, and transparent, timely access for researchers through robust governance frameworks—particularly critical for regional planning and early intervention.
3. **Strong Research–Policy–Practice Partnerships Grounded in Communities:** Enable sustained collaboration between researchers, policymakers, educators, and communities through co-designed research agendas, embedded evaluation in reform initiatives, and strong knowledge translation mechanisms. National intermediaries (e.g. AERO, ATLC) should be complemented by university led translation grounded in professional learning and educator voice.

4. ***Sustainable Workforce Pipelines for Research and Education***: Stabilise and grow the education and education research workforce through strengthened HDR pathways, secure academic career structures, reduced casualisation, and nationally recognised professional learning frameworks. Workforce sustainability must integrate strong induction, mentoring and retention strategies, particularly in regional contexts.
5. ***Embedded Indigenous Leadership and Community Led Approaches***: Place Indigenous leadership at the centre of education research, policy, and governance through Indigenous led, community driven research, culturally responsive methodologies, and long-term capability building partnerships rather than short term projects.
6. ***Improved Funding Models and Long-Term Investment***: Align funding with the Decadal Plan's ambition through sustained investment in education research, targeted funding for national priorities (including early childhood, sustainability, and workforce reform), more equitable funding across sectors, and explicit support for research translation and impact.
7. ***Mechanisms to Support Tertiary System Integration***: Strengthen coherence between VET and higher education through national stewardship, harmonised pathways and shared research and evaluation frameworks to support evidence informed system reform.

Priority 1: Justice, quality, and equity for all

Policies and practices that constrain equity and justice for all (Question 4)

Policies that are needs-based and motivated by social justice and educational equity principles are enabling. These policies direct additional resourcing to the equity groups who face the highest socio-economic disadvantage. Australia needs bipartisan and long-term education policies, rather than isolated intervention or reactive policies that are merely political point-scoring that cease to exist when governments change political parties. Such policies and practices are constrained by the following:

Funding gaps and inconsistent implementation: Funding models are far too complex and lack transparency and flexibility based on local contexts. For example, it is acknowledged in the *Australian Universities Accord – Final Report* (February 2024) that regional universities are disadvantaged in many for the government funding formulas, despite best intentions. Additionally, deficit-based discourses that either frame policies or are present as undertones within frameworks pathologise communities and groups. For example, 'Closing the Gap', while admirable, ignores the systemic drivers of inequality.

Limited parity of participation: Recognising diversity in the learners' needs through inclusive education policies enable a parity of participation. These are based on individual and community

collective responsibility rather than being focused on deficit frameworks that target individuals. Child rights-based approaches, grounded in the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*, position children and young people as rightsholders and active participants, ensuring they have a meaningful say in decisions affecting their learning and educational experiences

Access to quality childcare and schooling enables equity and justice: Inequitable fee-paying structures are most detrimental to those already adversely affected by economic disadvantage. For example, the marketisation and school choice policies, framed as giving parents a choice, deepen inequity. Such policies create tiered schooling systems based on socio-economic segregation, often delineated by geographic postcodes. This further concentrates economic disadvantage through under-resourced and under-funded schools and infrastructures such as technology and transport systems. The OECD Policy Brief on *Childcare Affordability in OECD Countries* (2020) suggests that systems that do not support universal access to childcare and schooling further advantage individuals, families, and communities with greater financial, social, and cultural capital.

High stakes accountability practices and standardised testing: While useful to ascertain areas of improvement, such practices and policies can be weaponised (cf *Gonski Review 2.0*, 2018). Nations such as Australia tend to use these measures (e.g., NAPLAN, PISA) to call out perceived poor educational performance. They do this without acknowledging and addressing the structural causes. In turn, naming, blaming, and shaming individual schools stigmatises teachers and students, disproportionately impacting economically disadvantaged schools and locations.

Rhetoric: The equity and justice components of current education policy frameworks tends to be a broad rhetorical commitment to equity and justice. Policies are siloed and are not integrated across education sectors and jurisdictions and more broadly, they are not always consistent or integrated with other government support services.

Teaching workforce: The teaching workforce is experiencing significant shortages, coupled with the intensification of teachers' work and the de-professionalisation of teachers and teaching undermine equity and justice. Such teacher shortages also extend to professional experience placement shortages. Research clearly shows that hard to staff schools (often already in economically disadvantaged locations), are adversely affected by the teacher shortages. These locations tend to have high staff turnover rates and reduced access to experienced teachers. Government policies pay lip service to this issue and are resolute in maintaining their existing policies, refusing to review these. For example, the Graduate Diploma of Teaching which has the potential, when well executed and supported by government policies, can help address the teaching workforce shortages.

Focus areas to improve quality and equity for all learners (Question 5)

Improving quality and equity for all learners requires that education research be explicitly grounded in principles of equity and justice and oriented toward meaningful public benefit. All publicly funded research should include demonstrable and accessible research-translation components, ensuring that the benefits of Commonwealth and state investment extend beyond scholarly publication to inform practice and policy. This requires more authentic and sustained collaboration between researchers, practitioners, and policymakers, with policymakers remaining accessible, consultative, and responsive to those working directly in teaching and research contexts. Priority areas for investigation include rigorous evaluation of initial teacher education programs — examining their composition, effectiveness and duration while moving beyond narrow and poorly conceptualised performance metrics — as well as teaching labour-market analysis, workforce forecasting, and research into teacher attrition. Despite substantial investment in teacher shortage and retention initiatives, limited system-level change suggests a need for more critical, evidence-informed approaches. There is also a compelling case for reassessing the cost-effectiveness of large-scale standardised testing regimes, such as NAPLAN, given the significant public expenditure involved and the potential to redirect resources toward schools and the teaching workforce. Further priorities include pedagogies that support diverse learners and varied learning contexts, evaluation of the Australian Curriculum Version 9, and research into digital technologies and artificial intelligence, particularly their implications for teaching and learning and the ethical use of data and AI within education systems.

Systematic changes required to embed Indigenous (First Nations) perspectives and practices into learning frameworks (Question 6)

Improving outcomes for Indigenous learners requires authentic consultation and shared decision-making with Indigenous communities, grounded in respect for sovereignty, knowledge systems, and self-determination. Nationally agreed standards and principles, aligned with the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration, must be supported by dedicated and sustained funding to ensure meaningful implementation rather than symbolic commitment. A strong focus on cultural safety and equity is essential and must extend beyond narrow reliance on standardised test scores to incorporate broader, culturally grounded measures of success. Frameworks such as *Culturally Nourishing Schools* (Prof Kevin Lowe) provide a valuable foundation for re-orienting funding models and school initiatives towards strengths-based, community-led approaches. Central to this work is the recognition and protection of Indigenous data sovereignty, ensuring that data relating to Indigenous peoples is governed, interpreted, and used in ways determined by communities themselves.

Benefits of integrated approach to research across sectors, disciplines, and institutions (Question 7)

An integrated approach to research across ECEC, schooling, VET and higher education offers significant benefits for quality, equity, and system coherence. Greater integration would strengthen consistency across sectors, reduce duplication, and address the current fragmentation across disciplines and institutions that limits the effectiveness of education research. Importantly, integrated research supports more fluid learner transitions by promoting continuity across educational stages, reducing student stress and anxiety, and helping to mitigate inequality—particularly for Indigenous communities, learners with disability, migrants, and those in rural and remote contexts — by ensuring shared access to research insights and outcomes. Cross sector and cross disciplinary integration also enable more innovative, “out-of-the-box” thinking, fostering multidisciplinary solutions to complex educational challenges that cannot be addressed within siloed approaches. Additionally, an integrated research framework can strengthen initial teacher education and ongoing professional learning by aligning theory, practice, and system needs, supporting profession-ready graduates and sustained workforce development. Initiatives such as Southern Cross University’s *Reimagining Teacher Education (RiTE)* project, which partners schools and the university, illustrate how integrated research can enhance teacher preparation while strengthening connections between research, practice, and policy.

Priority 2: A prepared and well-supported education workforce

Attract and retain teachers and educators (Question 8)

A well prepared and well supported education workforce depends on sustained, respectful, and strategic investment that recognises teaching as a complex, high skill profession. Attracting and retaining teachers and educators requires ongoing funding arrangements that are stable and accessible, without excessive compliance requirements that add to administrative workload. Accountability and transparency must support quality and improvement rather than further burdening the workforce. Central to workforce sustainability are worldclass remuneration and conditions across all education sectors, alongside clear and credible career progression pathways that allow highly effective teachers to remain in classrooms while advancing professionally.

Workload reduction — particularly administrative workload — is critical and requires a fundamental rethinking of schooling structures, especially in the context of emerging digital technologies and Artificial Intelligence. Policies must avoid practices that dehumanise the profession, including

excessive surveillance, performative accountability measures, and erosion of professional autonomy. Improving workforce stability also depends on elevating the public status of teachers, strengthening community understanding of teachers' work and reinforcing trust in professional judgement.

Targeted strategies are needed to broaden entry into the profession, including expanded scholarships for those entering teaching and for priority groups such as Indigenous peoples, individuals from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and those in rural and remote communities. The sector can also learn from alternative provision schooling models, where multidisciplinary teams — including youth workers, social workers, well-being staff, and other specialists — support teachers and learners through small class sizes and targeted, relational approaches. Research in this area demonstrates the value of collective, wraparound models for supporting both teacher retention and student engagement.

A strong leadership development and professional learning are essential, including enrichment programs and formal credentials designed by teachers for teachers, offered at low or no cost. These initiatives must be underpinned by robust, forward-looking workforce data and forecasting to inform planning and prevent recurring shortages. Where such data has been lacking, the longstanding warnings of teachers and their unions must be taken seriously as a critical source of system intelligence.

Support and retain those from diverse backgrounds (Question 9)

Supporting and retaining educators from diverse backgrounds is essential to achieving the Decadal Plan's commitments to equity, national capability, and responsible system stewardship. In addition to the workforce measures outlined in Question 8, education systems must ensure that schools are physically and psychologically safe workplaces for both educators and learners. This requires active, system level action to prevent and address antisocial, racist, and gendered behaviours that disproportionately harm educators from marginalised groups and undermine workforce sustainability. Failure to address these conditions represents a structural risk to capability, retention, and equity. Creating inclusive education systems therefore demands clear accountability, strong leadership, and sustained investment in cultures of respect, safety and belonging, recognising diversity as foundational to a high-quality and resilient education workforce.

Priority areas for evaluation in education practice (Question 10)

Priority areas for evaluation in education practice should focus on identifying what effectively improves equity, quality, and system performance across sectors. This includes rigorous evaluation of practices and interventions aimed at reducing inequities associated with socioeconomic status, disability, geography, and Indigenous identity, with particular attention to inclusive education

approaches, disability adjustments, and targeted supports for vulnerable learners. Systemwide workforce challenges also require evaluation of induction, mentoring, professional learning, recruitment and retention strategies across early childhood education and care, schools, VET, and higher education, to determine what genuinely supports workforce stability and sustainability. In early childhood education, priority should be given to evaluating quality improvement efforts in services rated *Working Towards* the National Quality Standard, alongside programs responding to rising developmental vulnerability. Further evaluation is needed of literacy and numeracy strategies, well-being initiatives, differentiation practices, and the educational and equity impacts of largescale assessment regimes such as NAPLAN. Finally, attention should be given to assessing well-being supports, online and blended learning models, and strategies that improve participation, engagement, and retention for equity cohorts across the education system.

Priority 3: Cross-sector collaboration and shared understanding and knowledge

Effective ways cross-sector research helps address challenges (Question 11)

Cross-sector research is most effective when it connects systems, data, and people to generate actionable evidence that improves equity, workforce sustainability and learner outcomes across early childhood education and care, schooling, VET, and higher education. A key mechanism for achieving this is the development of a nationally coordinated research architecture, built around shared priority agendas that cut across sectors and are supported by Centres of Excellence, harmonised participation processes, and consistent data access frameworks. Such structures reduce duplication, align investment, and enable research findings to be translated into policy and practice more rapidly and coherently.

Effective cross-sector collaboration also depends on integrated data systems that support longitudinal, cross-system analysis. Linking existing administrative and survey datasets across education sectors—and with health and social services—enables tracking of learner pathways, transitions, and outcomes over time. Standardising definitions and streamlining researcher access are essential to addressing current gaps, inconsistencies and time lags that limit evidence-informed decision making.

Finally, cross-sector research achieves greatest impact when research–policy–practice partnerships are embedded from the outset. Codesigning research with educators, leaders, communities, and policymakers, alongside the use of rapid cycle pilots with clear scaleup pathways, helps ensure relevance and uptake. National translation bodies such as AERO, alongside the proposed Australian Teaching and Learning Commission, play a key role in supporting this work, particularly when

complemented by strong university-led partnerships that connect evidence directly to classrooms, services, and systems.

Benefits of joined-up approach to research (Question 12)

A more coordinated and joined-up research ecosystem that links sectors, disciplines and institutions would deliver substantial benefits for the education workforce across all career stages. An integrated national research approach would strengthen workforce development by generating robust evidence on recruitment, retention, professional learning, and career progression—particularly critical in the context of workforce shortages, changing role structures, and the growth of teaching-only and contract positions. Improved coordination across research communities would also enable more systemic responses to workforce pressures, with shared data and collaboration across ECEC, schools, VET and higher education supporting better workforce planning, addressing inequities, and informing targeted interventions in high need contexts. Cross-sector and cross-disciplinary knowledge exchange would further enrich professional learning and capability development, drawing on insights from health, well-being, community services, and industry to address increasingly complex learner and societal needs. A joined-up approach would also support the identification and scaling of effective multiprofessional collaboration models, including those from alternative education settings, enabling more holistic learner support while reducing undue burdens on educators. Stronger integration between education research, practice and policy would accelerate evidence translation into classrooms and institutions, improving consistency, confidence, and impact across the system.

Priority 4: A world-class connected research capability

Capabilities and relationships required to enable educational research impact (Question 14)

Achieving a high-impact education research ecosystem over the next decade requires a coherent and connected national research capability supported by strong pipelines, enabling infrastructure and enduring partnerships. This includes strengthened HDR pathways and sustained investment in research aligned with national priorities, alongside advanced capability in rigorous evaluation, data integration, and knowledge translation. These capabilities must be underpinned by harmonised national data frameworks and accessible cross-sector datasets that support timely, high-quality analysis. Equally critical are genuine research–policy–practice partnerships, cross-sector and cross-disciplinary collaboration, and strong international linkages to ensure research is codesigned with end-users and translated effectively into policy and practice. Together, these capabilities and

relationships form the foundation of a coordinated, future-focused national research architecture capable of delivering meaningful and equitable impact across the education system.

Research training approaches that work (Questions 15)

Current approaches to research training in Australia build on a solid foundation of rigorous scholarly expertise and a longstanding commitment to developing a connected research pipeline. Recent reform directions — including innovation in HDR models and recommendations to improve Research Training Program stipend conditions — signal growing recognition of the need to strengthen training quality and better support emerging researchers. However, the Decadal Plan identifies persistent system level constraints that limit the effectiveness of these approaches. Declining HDR enrolments, reduced investment in education research, and increasingly fragmented academic career structures — particularly the expansion of teaching only and short-term contract roles — are eroding the viability and attractiveness of research careers. These pressures are compounded by limited access to funded research opportunities, uneven supervision quality, and restricted access to high-quality data. Collectively, these challenges weaken Australia’s capacity to develop, retain and sustain a diverse and highly skilled education research workforce capable of driving long-term educational improvement.

National approach (Question 16)

A national approach can significantly strengthen the impact of education research by establishing a coordinated research architecture that aligns cross-sector priorities, supports national priority focused programs (including Centres of Excellence), and harmonises participation and data access frameworks to enable timely integration of education, health and social datasets. Impact will be maximised by strengthening the research–policy–practice nexus through codesigned research agendas, embedded evaluation, and dedicated translation mechanisms that support synthesis and scaleup. Renewing the research pipeline is also essential, requiring improved HDR conditions and clear mobility pathways across ECEC, schools, VET, and higher education. Finally, nationally brokered partnerships — linking jurisdictions, systems, industry, communities, and Indigenous organisations, and connecting Australian researchers with international networks — will deepen collaboration, enhance comparability, and accelerate the consistent movement of evidence into policy and practice.

Kind regards,

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