

ACU Research Themes

Discussion paper June 2022

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1. Introduction

[ACU's Research and Enterprise Plan 2022-2023](#) commits the university to the development of broad, mission-driven research themes that can be readily understood by end-users and the wider community. The plan calls for consultation with internal and external stakeholders to “identify up to five programmatic themes which articulate the university’s commitment to creating a better future for humanity.”

The Research & Enterprise team have prepared this discussion paper to set the context for the consultation process. It recaps the case for research themes and canvasses ways the themes might be deployed. It then outlines the guiding principles that will inform the development of the themes, including:

- ACU’s mission
- Church literature such as *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, *Laudato si’* and *Fratelli Tutti*
- Key issues facing the human condition – where is the greatest need and opportunity to make an impact?
- ACU’s areas of strength – how do our existing disciplines and research strengths map to societal issues? How could we evolve these in the years ahead?
- What research themes do peers focus on? Where and how should ACU be distinctive?

The Research & Enterprise team will be hosting staff consultations in person and online in June and July. Section 9 (Consultation process and next steps) lists the dates and locations. We want to hear what you and your teams think the themes should be, how they should be defined, and how the concept of research themes should be deployed at ACU.

The insights and outputs of the consultation process will inform a position paper that articulates a recommended set of themes for ACU. The paper will go to the university executive for consideration and will be a key input into the forthcoming development of the new ACU strategic plan.

We trust this discussion paper will help you in thinking about research themes at ACU. We look forward to working with you to imagine and define what those themes should be.



Professor James McLaren
Interim Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research and Enterprise)

2. What are research themes?

Research themes are a mechanism used by many universities to signal the focus of their research endeavours as an institution. They are often used to inform internal funding priorities. For example, universities with defined research themes might allocate seed funding to research projects that align to their themes. Research themes are also frequently a way to define societal and planetary issues that require cross-discipline collaboration – and to foster multi-disciplinary efforts aligned to the issues. Each of those points is relevant to ACU as we consider why and how to deploy research themes specific to our institution.

Research themes exist on a spectrum of different approaches. Some universities articulate discrete topic areas rather than issues or themes. Curtin University, for example, defines 14 research areas, which include topics such as: agriculture and environment; biomedical and clinical science; business, society and community; chemical science; and defence.

Other institutions, such as Deakin University, set out targeted issue-based impact themes: improving health and wellbeing; designing smarter technologies; enabling a sustainable world; advancing society and culture; building safe and secure communities. The University of Melbourne is another example of this type. Melbourne’s research strategy is centred on three ‘Grand Challenges’: understanding our place and purpose; fostering health and wellbeing; and supporting sustainability and resilience.

ACU’s goal is to harness the latter approach – that is, to define issue-focused, multi-disciplinary themes.

3. Why do we need research themes at ACU?

As a Catholic university, ACU is committed to research that improves the lives of all, especially those in greatest need. Research themes are an expression of ACU’s ‘impact through empathy’ mission and an enabler of it. Professor McLaren has articulated three specific goals of implementing research themes at ACU, to:

- Provide clarity for end users and the wider community regarding the nature of ACU’s distinctive contribution to society
- Enable mission-focused dialogue and joint endeavours across discipline areas
- Foster the fundamental connection between research and learning.

The ambition of the Research and Enterprise Plan is to foster all five components of the research ecosystem:

- Knowledge creation (for example, fundamental research);
- Translation and impact (research translation that delivers social, cultural and economic benefits);
- Partnerships (with academic institutions, industry, government and the wider community);

- Culture and environment (vibrant academic culture, research-informed curriculum and student programs);
- Capability and capacity (in particular, the development of higher degree research students, early and mid-career researchers).

Defining institution-wide research themes will not achieve these goals by itself; but it should provide a framework that anchors and enables this ecosystem.

4. How will we deploy research themes at ACU?

We have yet to define exact mechanisms through which we will deploy research themes at ACU. That is one of the goals of the consultation process: to get staff input into this question. Initial discussions in the Research and Enterprise portfolio and with ACU leaders have centred on the following:

- Profiling – Research themes will guide the way ACU’s research activities are presented publicly, for example, on the ACU website, social media channels, and key institutional publications
- Funding priorities – The allocation of strategic funds to seed research projects/programs would be focused on activities and issues that align to the research themes
- Learning and teaching – Use research themes to guide the future development of the curriculum and strengthen the nexus between research and teaching, for example, by informing the design and range of choices available to students for their community engagement activities
- Multi-disciplinarity – Provide a framework and mechanism to bring together cross-discipline teams focused on creating a positive impact on issues related to the themes
- Partnerships – Steer the types of partners ACU seeks to work with and inform the framing of partnership discussions. This should include a particular focus on the ‘Enterprise’ side of the new Research and Enterprise portfolio, that is, supporting discussions and linkages with potential industry and funding partners.

The identification of research themes is recognition that to effectively address large scale social issues requires multi-pronged approaches. At the same time, it is important to state that having research themes does not mean diverting or restricting existing research activities, or diminishing specific areas of interest of individual academics.

We look forward to hearing your thoughts on how best to deploy research themes at ACU.

5. Defining research themes at ACU – and how you can help

(a) Design principles

The Research and Enterprise team have articulated five design principles to guide and inform the definition of research themes at ACU. The themes:

- Must come from and, in turn, **express the mission and vision of ACU** (in truth and love, supporting the dignity of the human person and the common good; the flourishing of society, especially of those in need; through faith and reason create future opportunity, foster innovation, and embrace ethics)
- Must **be public facing and future orientated** (create meaningful change at a societal level and a positive impact on key issues facing the human condition now and in the future)
- Must **build on existing strengths but not be discipline specific**
- Must **ensure a distinctive footprint in what is a crowded marketplace**
- Must **be inclusive and sustainable** (all ACU's discipline areas must be able to contribute to, and benefit from, engaging with one or more of the themes; the themes must enable direct links between research, enterprise, and student-facing activities of the university)

A further design consideration is to maximise the impact of ACU's limited resources. This might mean opting for a smaller number of themes, for example, three themes. The Research and Enterprise Plan calls for 'up to five programmatic themes' but leaves the final number of agreed themes open. We welcome staff feedback on this question.

(b) Ex corde Ecclesiae

Ex corde Ecclesiae emphasises the importance of deploying a multi-disciplinary approach to tackle global and societal issues in the mission of a Catholic university.

“A Catholic University will be able to help the Church respond to the problems and needs of this age... Included among its research activities, therefore, will be a study of serious contemporary problems in areas such as the dignity of human life, the promotion of justice for all, the quality of personal and family life, the protection of nature, the search for peace and political stability, a more just sharing in the world's resources, and a new economic and political order that will better serve the human community at a national and international level.”

Ex corde Ecclesiae [32]

“In its attempts to resolve these complex issues that touch on so many different dimensions of human life and of society, a Catholic University will insist on cooperation among the different academic disciplines, each offering its distinct contribution in the search for solutions”

Ex corde Ecclesiae [35]

Ex corde Ecclesiae envisages that Catholic universities weave modern technology and indigenous perspectives into their work:

“In particular, it is recommended that by means of appropriate studies, the impact of modern technology and especially of the mass media on persons, the family, and the institutions and whole of modern culture be studied deeply. Traditional cultures are to be defended in their identity, helping them to receive modern values without sacrificing their own heritage, which is a wealth for the whole of the human family. Universities, situated within the ambience of these cultures, will seek to harmonize local cultures with the positive contributions of modern cultures.”

Ex corde Ecclesiae [45]

(c) *Laudato si’* and the UN Sustainable Development Goals

The *Laudato si’* encyclical sets out the most pressing issues facing the human condition and the planet, from poverty, inequality and injustice through to loss of biodiversity and the degradation of Earth’s natural resources. The United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are the global blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all. Both the *Laudato si’* and the SDGs call for a more equitable, inclusive and sustainable world.

ACU has embraced the 17 SDGs to deliver a better and more sustainable future for our common home, aligned to the *Laudato si’* encyclical. We encourage you to reflect on *Laudato si’* and the SDGs as you consider the issues that we should focus on as an institution.

(d) *Fratelli tutti*

Fratelli Tutti, Pope Francis’s third encyclical, calls for renewed local, national and trans-national social friendship centred on the human dignity of all people. It is a rebuke to new forms of selfishness and conflict – economic, social, political, in the physical realm and digital.

Fratelli Tutti calls for a fundamental reshaping of human relationships and the economic, social and political norms that govern human interaction. Pope Francis asserts the need for “a better kind of politics, one truly at the service of the common good” [*Fratelli Tutti*, 154] and reiterates his call from *Laudato si’* for “a politics which is far-sighted and capable of a new, integral and interdisciplinary approach to handling the different aspects of the crisis” [*Fratelli Tutti*, 177].

(e) Your role

The design principles are clear and *Ex corde Ecclesiae* supports a multi-disciplinary, issues-based approach to research. However, the range of issues presented in *Laudato si’*, the SDGs and *Fratelli Tutti* are far broader than the capacity of ACU. We will need to carefully consider where to focus our institutional resources and the energies and talents of our people.

Section 9 (Consultation process and next steps) provides the dates for a series of townhall discussions and an ongoing, online discussion forum. We are keen to hear your voice on the areas where you think ACU can make the greatest impact in the years ahead. In addition to potential themes and the labels/names we might attach to them, we’re seeking input on how

we might articulate and define each of the themes and how they might be most effectively deployed within ACU.

6. Mapping themes to impact: What are the most pressing local and global issues?

Globally, the period from 1980 to 2020 saw dramatic reductions in global poverty and human degradation, driven particularly by sustained rises in per capita incomes in China and, to a lesser extent, India. Per capita incomes declined on average in sub-Saharan Africa in the period 1980 to 2000, but from the turn of the century there, too, incomes started to rise. As a result, the period 2000 to 2020 saw substantial improvements in livelihoods across most of sub-Saharan Africa. In many respects, the human condition has improved substantially in recent decades – at least at an aggregate level.

And then the pandemic hit.

As the UN Secretary-General writes in the 2022 SDG Progress Report¹:

As the world enters the third year of the COVID-19 crisis, the catastrophic effects on people's lives and livelihoods and on global efforts to realize the Sustainable Development Goals is now beyond dispute.

Despite continued data gaps at national and sub-national levels, the present report shows that years, or even decades, of development progress have been halted or reversed... an additional 75 million to 95 million people will live in extreme poverty in 2022 compared to pre-pandemic level. Billions of children significantly missed out on schooling and over 100 million more children fell below the minimum reading proficiency level and other areas of academic learning... Women have also been disproportionately affected by the socioeconomic fallout of the pandemic, struggling with lost jobs, increased burdens of unpaid care work and domestic violence.

The world is also witnessing the highest number of violent conflicts since 1945, with approximately 2 billion people living in conflict-affected countries by the end of 2020. Refugees were at the highest absolute number on record in 2021 and forced displacement has continued to occur and even grow.

At an Australian level, the OECD's human wellbeing framework centres on 11 dimensions:

- Education
- Jobs
- Income
- Safety

¹ UN Secretary General, *SDG Progress Report (2022) – Advanced Unedited Version*. Downloadable at sdgs.un.org/goals

- Health
- Environment
- Civic engagement
- Accessibility to services
- Housing
- Community / social connection
- Life satisfaction

Australia has performed well, at an aggregate level, on many indicators within those domains, even into the pandemic. Life expectancy has risen, rates of violent crime have fallen, employment has grown, and access to services such as digital connectivity have increased.² On other measures, Australia has performed poorly, for example, housing affordability and homelessness, wealth inequality and social connection.³

Aggregate measures hide disproportionate living standards across the community. Many indigenous communities, for example, still suffer from health and socio-economic outcomes well below those of the nation as a whole.⁴

Other wellbeing frameworks include spirituality, connection to country, and culture.⁵ In the ACU Sustainability Report 2020, the institution asserted our commitment to the *Laudato si'* and the SDGs. The report included mapping of key themes within *Laudato si'* to the SDGs, captured in the table below.

We commend this framework to you and your teams as you consider potential areas of focus for ACU's research themes.

² Various data sets including: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Australia's health 2020: Health across socioeconomic groups snapshot data tables; ABS Crime Victimization Survey, Australia; ABS Labour Force Survey, Australia; and The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2021, prepared by RMIT and Swinburne University of Technology on behalf of Telstra.

³ Various data sets including: Homeless Population, OECD, 2021, oecd.org/els/family/HC3-1-Homeless-population.pdf; Productivity Commission, Report on Government Services 2021, Part G, Section 19: Homelessness services (Total clients with need for accommodation); ABS Census of Population and Housing, Australia; ABS General Social Survey, Australia; ABS Household Income and Wealth, Australia.

⁴ Commonwealth of Australia, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Closing the Gap Report 2020 and Productivity Commission, Closing the Gap: Annual Data Compilation Report, July 2021.

⁵ See, for example, the 'Soulful City' framework of the Canadian city of Edmonton (urbanwellnessedmonton.com/soulful-city).

Figure 1. Laudato si' and the UN SDGs⁶

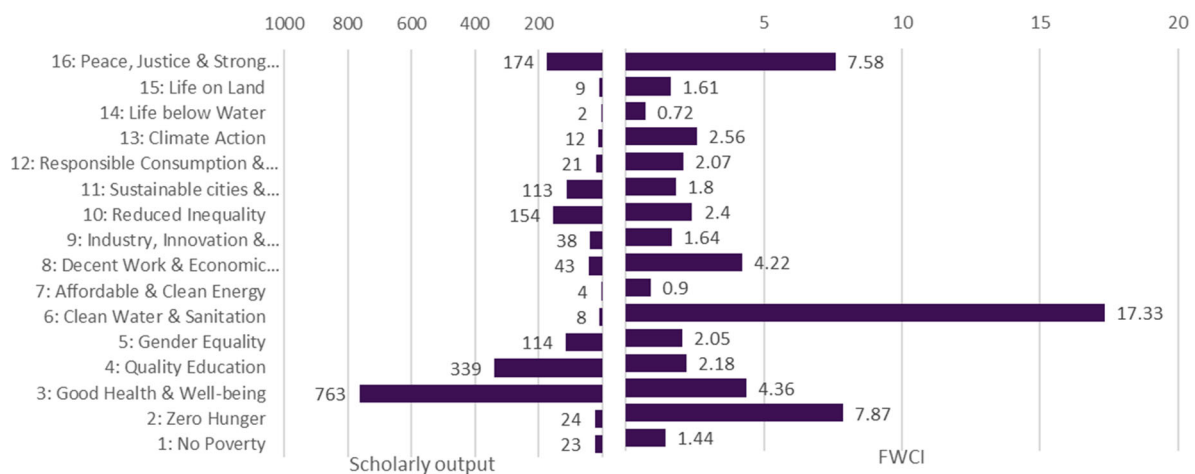
<i>Laudato si'</i> themes	UN Sustainable Development Goals
Shared humanity and our common home	   
Tackling pollution and climate change	   
Clean, safe water for all	  
Biodiversity and protection of natural ecosystems	 
Health, education and social cohesion	   
Human dignity and the common good	   
Inclusive economic and labour markets	   
Sustainable urban environments	  
Local, national and international dialogue	   
Institutions, legal and regulatory frameworks	  

⁶ Source: ACU Sustainability Report 2020

7. Mapping themes to ACU: What are ACU’s existing areas of strength?

ACU’s Library Services and Research Office has recently mapped ACU’s published research to the UN SDGs, using Elsevier bibliometric data. The chart below shows ACU’s contributions to each of the SDGs and their Field-Weighted Citation Impact.

Figure 2. ACU scholarly output by SDG and Field-Weighted Citation Impact (FWCI): 2017-2021⁷



ACU’s output aligns most strongly with SDG 3 Good Health and Well-Being, but the institution’s academics have also produced substantial research outputs linked to SDGs 4 (Quality Education), 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions), 10 (Reduced Inequalities), 5 (Gender Equality), and 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities).

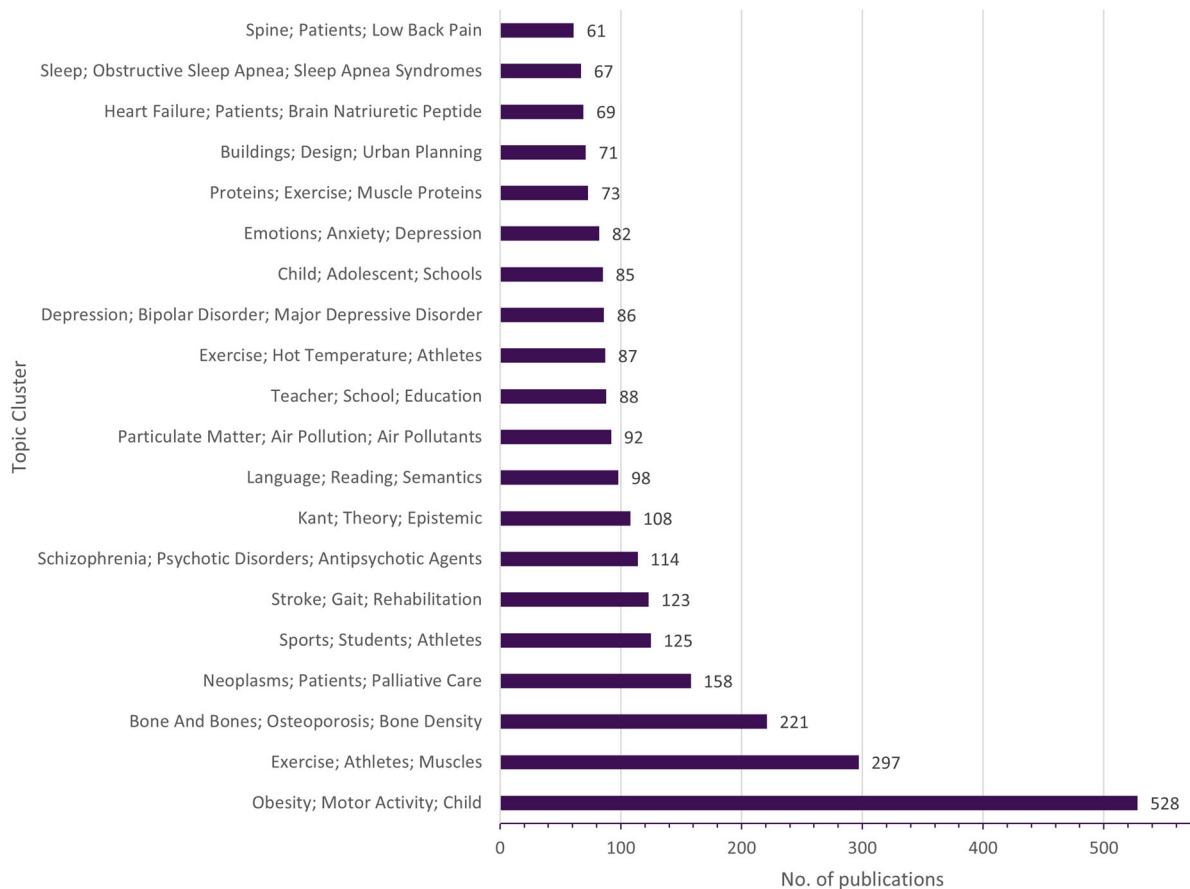
The high FWCI of publications aligned to SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation) is based on a small publication set and is therefore subject to skewing by outlying publications. ACU has a high FWCI in SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), another domain with few publications. In the SDGs where ACU has a large output, the FWCI is highest in SDG 16 and 3.

At an overall level, ACU published 5871 scholarly outputs (articles, reviews, conference papers, and chapters) from 2017 to 2021. On average, each publication has 16.8 citations: the total citation count for the publication set being 98,606 (May 19, 2022). Over 20 percent of those publications are in the Top 10% Citation Percentile, and 43% are published in the Top 10% Journal Percentiles (SciVal, May 2022).

ACU’s research maps to 509 topic clusters. Figure 3 shows the top 20 clusters in terms of research output over the period 2017 to 2021.

⁷ Analysis of data retrieved from the SciVal Analytics Platform, May 2022, prepared by Sharon Lind, Senior Librarian, Research Support.

Figure 3. ACU top 20 topic clusters by volume of research output (number of publications): 2017-2021⁸



In developing an agreed set of institutional research themes, we do not need to cleave exactly to our existing areas of strength, but the themes should build on and be informed by those pillars. The themes should also enable and encourage the evolution of new areas of strength, aligned to or extending from existing ones.

The research themes should also lend themselves to building industry connections, research partnerships, and growth in grant funding. ACU's research income has declined in recent years, both in terms of Category 3 income (industry funding) and overall. We need to build our research profile, resources and funding – and the themes should support that agenda.

8. Exemplars from the sector: What themes have peers elected to focus on?

Many universities have adopted a focused set of research themes; many have not. ACU believes that research themes will enable the next evolution of the university's research endeavours, maximise its impact and profile. We should have a distinct voice, but it would be unrealistic to expect we can find unexplored research domains. The SDGs and grand

⁸ Analysis of data retrieved from the SciVal Analytics Platform, May 2022, prepared by Sharon Lind, Senior Librarian, Research Support.

challenges facing the human condition animate universities and academics across the globe. Moreover, the issues require close collaboration across universities, government, civil society and the private sector. *Ex corde Ecclesiae* emphasises the importance of cooperation in common research projects amongst Catholic and non-Catholic Universities, as well as with other research and educational institutions, both private and governmental [*Ex corde Ecclesiae* 45 and Article 7].

So, our challenge as an institution is to define research themes that may well overlap with those at other universities but within which we can carve out distinct areas of strength, collaboration and impact.

We present here some exemplars from Australian universities that have committed to a set of research themes – not an exhaustive list, but an example of the types of issues peer universities have elected to focus on.

Deakin University	La Trobe University	Western Sydney Uni.
Five Impact Themes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Improving health and wellbeing - Designing smarter technologies - Enabling a sustainable world - Advancing society and culture - Building safe and secure communities 	Five research themes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sustainable food & agriculture - Resilient environments & communities - Healthy people, families & communities - Understanding & preventing disease - Social change & equity 	Four research themes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Education and work - Environment and sustainability - Health and wellbeing - Urban living futures and society
Charles Sturt University	Murdoch University	Victoria University
Three interdisciplinary, interlocking ‘spheres’: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Resilient People - Flourishing Communities - Sustainable Environments 	Three themes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Food security - Health Futures - Sustainable development 	Six interdisciplinary research themes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Building resilient & inclusive communities - Effective teaching & learning practices for diverse populations - Enabling healthy & active populations - Enhancing high performance in sport - Enhancing the evidence base for public policy - Supporting industry responses to change

At a larger scale, the University of Melbourne has articulated eight multi-disciplinary 'hallmark research initiatives' alongside its three Grand Challenges ('understanding our place and purpose'; 'fostering health and wellbeing'; and 'supporting sustainability and resilience'). The eight hallmark research initiatives are quite specific:

- Affordable housing
- Anti-racism
- Bioinspiration
- Creativity and wellbeing
- Future food
- Indonesia democracy
- Wildfire futures
- Work future

We also note University College London, which has adopted a 'Grand Challenges' approach similar to the University of Melbourne. UCL's six Grand Challenges are:

- Global Health
- Sustainable Cities
- Cultural Understanding
- Human Wellbeing
- Justice & Equity
- Transformative Technology

9. Consultation process and next steps

There will be multiple opportunities, including workshops and online discussions, for ACU staff to contribute to the conversation about identifying the themes. We will also seek input from key external stakeholders, industry partners and alumni. At the conclusion, a summary of the proposed research themes, including the supporting rationale and plan for implementation, will be submitted to the Vice-Chancellor's Advisory Committee for consideration.

ACU staff are strongly encouraged to participate and share their ideas in one of four townhall meetings and in our online forum.

Townhalls

- North Sydney: Wednesday 29 June, 12–1pm, Peter Cosgrove Centre, Level 18
Tenison Woods House

- Melbourne: Tuesday 12 July, 12–1pm, Rooms 420.2.21AB, Level 2 The Mary Glowrey Building (MGB)
- Brisbane: Thursday 14 July, 12–1pm, The Gaudete Centre, Level 3 Mercy Building
- Online townhall via Teams: Thursday 21 July, 12–1pm

Please register for a townhall meeting by email to eo.dvcr@acu.edu.au with your name and which townhall you will attend.

Online consultation forum

In addition to the townhall events, we will conduct an open, online discussion forum to allow for extended, collaborative engagement over several weeks across the whole university. Further details about the online forum will be shared in the Staff Bulletin and on Workplace.

10. Further reading

- [Ex corde Ecclesiae](#)
- [Laudato si'](#)
- [Fratelli Tutti](#)
- [United Nations Sustainable Development Goals](#)