# MEDIA RELEASE

## AUSTRALIA RISKS LOSING GLOBAL EDGE IN ASTRONOMY WITH ESO DECISION

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Australia risks falling behind in global science, advanced manufacturing and innovation following the Government's decision not to pursue membership of the European Southern Observatory (ESO), a step backwards at a critical moment for the nation's productivity ambitions.

The decision comes just weeks after the release of the Ambitious Australia report, which called for a step-change in national R&D investment, and on the same day as the launch of Artemis II, a powerful demonstration of what sustained investment and long-term vision in science can achieve.

STA President Jas Chambers said the timing of the decision sends mixed signals about Australia's commitment to global scientific leadership.

"At a time when Australia should be leaning into global collaboration, advanced manufacturing strengths and ambition, this decision risks pulling us in the opposite direction," Ms Chambers said.

"The Ambitious Australia report sets out a clear case for strengthening our Research, Development and Innovation system, lifting our national effort and enhancing Australia's economic complexity. Walking away from ESO membership so soon after sends a deeply concerning signal."

Australia has benefited from a long-standing strategic partnership with ESO, giving local researchers access to world-leading facilities including the Very Large Telescope and opportunities to collaborate on cutting-edge instrumentation and technology development. Indeed, our know-how from ESO work is being used to ensure NASA can communicate with the Artemis II mission.

Ms Chambers said choosing not to seek full membership once our current partnership ends in 2027 would mean losing access to the next generation of global research infrastructure, including the Extremely Large Telescope, and the economic and workforce benefits that flow from it.

"Access to world-leading infrastructure drives innovation, supports advanced manufacturing, and builds the highly skilled workforce Australia needs – and is capable of providing – to compete in a technology-driven global economy."

Australia's astronomy sector already contributes an estimated $330 million annually to the economy and plays a critical role in developing advanced engineering, data science and high-tech capabilities.

Ms Chambers warned the decision risks undermining these gains by cutting off pathways for industry and researchers to participate in globally significant projects and supply chains.

"By stepping back from ESO, Australia risks losing not only scientific leadership, but the broader economic and industrial benefits that come with it. Our ESO partnership has led to millions of dollars of manufacturing contracts and numerous advanced fabrication jobs."

She said the decision also threatens the future pipeline of Australian STEM talent, particularly in optical astronomy, where access to next-generation facilities is essential. Currently, more than 100 highly skilled Australian engineers support our astronomy capability. Without certainty about the future post ESO, Australia risks losing talent and industry capability that will be almost impossible to restore.

"If Australia loses access to the world's leading and some of our largest telescopes, we risk seeing our best and brightest researchers, engineers, data scientists and technicians take their skills overseas," Ms Chambers said.

STA is calling on the Government to provide a clear investment pathway for Australian optical astronomy and ensure Australia remains connected to global research infrastructure and partnerships that underpin long-term growth.

"The launch of Artemis II is a powerful reminder of what ambition in science looks like when it's backed by sustained investment and vision," Ms Chambers said.

"Australia has the talent and capability to be part of that story – but only if we choose to invest, collaborate and lead."

***About Science & Technology Australia***

*Science & Technology Australia is the nation's peak body representing more than 235,000 scientists and technologists. We're the leading policy voice on science and technology. Our flagship programs include Science Meets Parliament, Superstars of STEM, and STA STEM Ambassadors.*

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