



Our Core Curriculum

A central expression
of our mission as a
Catholic university

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Mission

ACU's Core Curriculum is a central expression of our mission as a Catholic university, a mission that is grounded in a distinctive intellectual inheritance.

While all our coursework programs contribute to our Catholic character, our Core Curriculum is a space that gives an especially active expression to this inheritance. It makes available to students key aspects of the Catholic tradition in its intellectual depth and breadth and seeks to inspire practical social engagement in this light.

Core Curriculum units complement and enrich students' vocational studies and speak to the university's mission in educating the whole person. They build students' thinking and communication skills, foster empathy and an expanded critical perspective on the contemporary world and inspire them to make a positive difference in their communities.

Our Core Curriculum provides students with a distinctive educative experience and promotes their personal growth and understanding of their interconnectedness with all living beings. It encourages them to act with empathy, work for justice, lead with dignity, and cultivate the common good.

Our curriculum has a focus on both the global and the local. In seeking to build deeper intercultural understanding, it is enriched by the perspectives of ancient cultures whose people have cared for our lands and waterways for thousands of generations, and whose living cultures are to be "cherished" in their own right (*Fratelli tutti*, 148).



Vision 2033

In reflecting the key themes of our Strategic Plan 2023–33 (Vision 2033), our Core Curriculum is focused on elements that animate ACU’s mission more generally: i.e., flourishing lives, thriving communities and ethical futures.



Flourishing lives

Accordingly:

- Core Curriculum units assist students to learn about and reflect upon what it is to be a human being, taking seriously the intellectual, moral and purposeful dimensions of human flourishing, focusing on the conditions of human dignity and wellbeing.
- They provide a strong communal focus, allowing students to consider the conditions of healthy thriving societies and the means by which the common good can be realised.
- Each of the units, in their own way, consider a range of contemporary themes, social issues and ethical challenges, informed by historical perspectives, but with a strong future-orientation that is focused on realising positive change. Indeed, ACU’s Core Curriculum invites students – in partnership with staff – to be creative contributors of the future (“giving birth to the future”) in their local and global communities (Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, 53).

This ethical vision of thriving individuals and communities is one that our Core Curriculum unpacks in a variety of ways that are at once intellectual, spiritual and experiential – combining digital,

classroom and community-engaged interactive learning. As such, it is an expression of our commitment to providing our students with a distinctive, dynamic and broadening educational experience that enriches their vocational formation in a higher education context.

As Vision 2033 makes clear:

- the provision of a “holistic education” for our students is one of the key planks of our mission, in which “the growth of the whole person” is prioritised (Focus 1)
- the commitment to help students “foster a sense of global responsibility” (1.4), to “promote the importance of ethical practice in all aspects of life and work” (5.3) and paying close and critical attention to “the effects of global progress and change on individuals, communities and environments” (5.4).

These strategic goals are central to the revitalised model of our Core Curriculum. Indeed “enhancing our Core Curriculum” is one of the explicit aims of Vision 2033, along with the kindred goals of “expanding our student leadership and community engagement programs” (1.3). Across these dimensions, the dialogue between understanding and impact is central.



Thriving communities



Ethical future



Graduate attributes

The alignment of our Core Curriculum with the mission of the university is also seen in the way that students are provided with exemplary opportunities to fulfil ACU's graduate attributes:

1. Insight

Our Core Curriculum helps students to grow in the search for truth and meaning, guided by the traditions of our past, and oriented towards a flourishing common future.

2. Empathy

Core Curriculum studies enable students to connect with a diversity of people and cultures, locally and globally, joining with Australia's First Peoples to cultivate shared understandings of Country and new ways of belonging together.

3. Imagination

The Core Curriculum trains our students to think critically and creatively; to imagine, inspire, and enable a better future for each person and for all communities.

4. Impact

Our Core Curriculum prepares students to lead change based on solidarity and fraternity, grounded in the principles of human dignity and the common good.

The Ecclesial context for our Core Curriculum

Ex Corde Ecclesiae

Our Core Curriculum is nourished by a long line of Catholic teachings about the role of the Catholic university as an authentic expression of the mission of the Church in the contemporary world. Works such as *Gravissimum educationis*, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, *Veritatis gaudium*, *Populorum progressio*, *Laudato Si'*, and *Fratelli tutti* provide ample guidance in this area.

Imbued with the spirit of Vatican II, Pope Paul VI's *Gravissimum Educationis* (1965, 10) emphasises the need for the Catholic tradition of thought to be brought into active dialogue with all manner of studies that pursue “questions that are new and current”, with the end of establishing a “pervasive influence of the Christian mind in the furtherance of culture”.

This thought is echoed in the opening lines of John Paul II's *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (1990), where we are reminded that the Catholic tradition was pivotal at the foundation of the very idea of a university in medieval Europe:

“Born from the heart of the Church, a Catholic University is located in that course of tradition which may be traced back to the very origin of the University as an institution. It has always been recognized as an incomparable centre of creativity and dissemination of knowledge for the good of humanity.”

Along with ACU's broad curriculum across all its specialist areas, our Core Curriculum ensures that our university continues to stand explicitly within this tradition, providing creative opportunities for new academic and community-engaged learning “for the good of humanity”. It provides our students with a range of mind-broadening and humanly-enriching options that sit very well with such an understanding of a Catholic university that aims to encourage “a fruitful dialogue between the Gospel and culture” (43).



Theology and philosophy

The custodianship of ACU's Core Curriculum by the Faculty of Theology and Philosophy is best understood in light of the faculty's own purpose.

The faculty was established "to serve the university through its theological and philosophical research, scholarship, community engagement and teaching", thereby contributing to an integrated understanding of the Catholic intellectual tradition and the application of that understanding to contemporary discourses.

This engagement with the wider work of the university is crucial. Accordingly, embodying "a kind of universal humanism" (as Pope John Paul II puts it in *Ex Corde*), ACU's curriculum is "completely dedicated to the research of all aspects of truth", and it "does this without fear but rather with enthusiasm" (4). Indeed, for John Paul II, a Catholic university needs to provide students with the means of understanding present challenges in light of an ancient tradition of thought that can help interpret the present:

In the world today, characterized by such rapid developments in science and technology, the tasks of a Catholic University assume an ever greater importance and urgency (7).

To this end, the disciplines of theology and philosophy play a central role in dialogical engagement with other areas of learning:

Interdisciplinary studies, assisted by a careful and thorough study of philosophy and theology, enable students to acquire an organic vision of reality (20; see also Veritatis Gaudium 4c).

Our Core Curriculum is thus a key part of ACU's commitment to dialogue and a "culture of encounter", along with a genuinely global perspective (*Veritatis Gaudium* 4b, 4d).

Our students

It is important to translate this general vision of a "culture of encounter" that should characterise Catholic universities in general into a specific ACU context.



Our undergraduates are drawn from a range of backgrounds, with a rich diversity of beliefs, experiences, traditions. They come from urban, suburban, regional and rural parts of our country. Some are First Nations peoples, and others have heritages that reach beyond Australia to other continents. It is out of this diverse context that our students challenge us to offer a Core Curriculum that:

- allows for choice and self-discovery
- provokes thought
- engages hearts and hands as well as minds
- is relational, with a practical edge
- is led by expert staff who are passionate about the units they teach
- provides clear points of applicability to vocational studies.

Aims and objectives

Given this overall rationale, our Core Curriculum has a series of aims/goals/objectives:

- It aims to **inspire** students to think and learn about matters of personal interest, by providing a range of coursework units from which to choose.
- It looks to help students **engage intellectually** in more sophisticated ways with major contemporary issues, helping them gain a sense of **historical context** for current circumstances and predicaments and **engage practically** with communities at points of need.
- It offers students a variety of ways into new understanding and appreciation of **Catholic** traditions of thought and value across a wide range of areas, providing them with opportunities to explore, examine and debate with this tradition, and apply learnings in communal contexts.
- It aims both to enrich and broaden students' university experience by having them **engage** in big contemporary social questions and challenges, while also making available to them some key elements of the **Catholic** tradition of thought and value as resources with which to engage such issues.
- While animated by a theological and philosophical core, it aims to encourage a broad **humanities** approach that is open to practical impact.
- It seeks to enrich student understanding in a way that sends them back to their primary areas of study in their courses with **new eyes** and a broadened sense of human beings in community, in historical context.



What type of Core Curriculum?

Given these aims, a particular kind of Core Curriculum has been developed in response.

Internationally, there are many different models of Core Curricula (or “general education”), all of which involve students in learning about matters of importance beyond their immediate focus, specialisation and/or career training.

Some Core Curriculum models adopt a ‘Great Books’ approach (such as the University of Chicago Liberal Arts Education program, or St John’s College, Annapolis). Some instead specifically emphasise civics and global citizenship, and/or professional ethics. Others emphasise the development of transferable skills that have utility in the contemporary workplace. A few mandate studies specifically in Catholic theology and mission. Still others simply require that students undertake ‘breadth courses’ so as to ensure their graduates are not overly narrow in their undergraduate education.

ACU’s Core Curriculum is to be distinguished from each of these models, even while sharing some of the ambitions of each, in a specific, integrated and accountable way. Ours is also distinguished by linking our Core Curriculum coursework units to community-engaged learning that is to be distinguished from vocationally-specific work-integrated learning.

ACU’s Core is not a Great Books program. Our students are drawn from diverse programs with diverse needs from across the university. Nonetheless, our Core units make available to our students *challenging, accessible and well-scaffolded* extracts from some key works that have helped shape our contemporary world, and which are also key to the intellectual tradition of Catholicism.

ACU’s Core is not simply about civics and global citizenship. Nonetheless, our units touch on key aspects of social life and citizenship, good governance, and the role of individuals and societies to prioritise the common good. They draw upon Catholic perspectives (such as those outlined across more than a century of Papal encyclicals) that provide a values-centred set of principles for a just society that enhances human dignity. Our integrated community-engaged learning unit unfolds quite organically from such perspectives.

Nor is ACU’s Core simply about professional ethics. Nonetheless, Core units address key matters of ethical importance, informed by the broad intellectual tradition of Catholicism. In some units, this is achieved in a direct and explicit way, and in others by examining specific contemporary issues and bringing to them perspectives on the sources and expression of ethical value, and the questions and challenges they raise. Such matters are addressed in concrete ways in community engagement experiences.

ACU’s Core is also not simply about developing transferable skills. Beyond industry application alone, our Core is about enabling our students to learn

new things and expand their intellectual horizons accordingly. Nonetheless, Core units do embed (in learning outcomes and assessment) an emphasis on critical thinking (analysis, evaluation, application), problem solving, communication, cultural competency, information literacy, teamwork and creativity. In this way, the units maintain industry/career relevance, honed by integrated community engagement, while also contributing to ACU’s broader goals around graduate attributes.

ACU’s Core is not simply about Catholic doctrine or mission. As a broad-based educational experience for students, our Core’s focus is not a narrowly catechetical exercise. Nonetheless, themes and key elements central to the Catholic theological tradition are found across all units, in ways that are differently inflected depending on the nature of the unit. Given ACU’s mission as a Catholic university, it is essential that our students have an experience of the breadth and depth of Catholic thought, its relevance for contemporary issues, and of the practical implications in concrete human communities.

Finally, our Core is not simply about breadth requirements for their own sake. Breadth alone, without purpose, doesn’t serve the ends for which we strive in our Core Curriculum. Nonetheless, our Core ensures that ACU students have choice, and the opportunity to experience reading, thinking and discussing outside their own immediate professional career-focused direction, expanding their education in a broad, holistic and community-engaged sense.

In sum: By drawing on aspects prioritised in diverse models of Core Curricula internationally, ACU’s Core offers students an integrated program of elective coursework studies and community-engaged learning that provides a range of benefits in terms of both personal development and professional competencies.



Core Curriculum unit structures: content domains and skill development

The various structural features of ACU's Core Curriculum flow from its rationale, aims and curriculum type. Again, there is a clear coherence here with recent Church documents about Catholic Higher Education.

Our Core Curriculum offers students a significant level of choice in allowing them to select preferred areas of study and community engagement experiences. However, this choice does not come at the expense of overall curriculum coherence. Even amongst the diversity of our coursework offerings, there are a range of key features that all units share. Students select from a suite of units that provide them with a range of different 'windows' on a common tradition of thought that is rich and diverse. All units provide students with an experience of the core value or 'heart' [*kardia*] of the Catholic intellectual tradition.

To ensure that all coursework units remain anchored in a variety of elements of the Catholic tradition, all of them must demonstrate that they directly address:

- 1. 5 key content domains**
- 2. 5 key transferable skill domains**

1. Content domains

Each coursework unit in our Core Curriculum addresses specified themes, in ways that are appropriate given the specific unit topic area.

The five unit content domains are:

1. Humanity and personhood
2. Society and community
3. Historical perspective
4. Ethics
5. Faith and reason

No single coursework unit fulfils all of five domains to comparable depth. Each has one or two main foci. Nonetheless, each presents its central theme in a way that touches on all five content domains in a substantive way.

In addressing these content domains, the units strike a balance between new ideas and practical application, integrating them throughout. Thus, all units include a twin focus on:

1. *understanding* to provide students with new and refined perspectives on familiar problems
2. *impact* to encourage students to apply ideas in an engaged community perspective.

It is in the confluence of understanding and impact that the unity of purpose of our Core Curriculum is seen, spanning both coursework and community engaged learning units.

In addressing the content domains, unit thematic diversity is a feature of our suite of 100 and 200 level coursework units. All units focus on a small number of key texts (usually text extracts) that are historically important and continue to have great contemporary relevance. The units themselves are regularly reviewed, with curriculum renewal being undertaken over a regular cycle.

As mentioned above, such an approach, that offers a diversity of topics in relation to key contemporary issues in the context of a curriculum befitting a Catholic university, is suggested directly in a series of Papal encyclicals.

In Ex Corde Ecclesiae, for example, Pope John Paul II recommends the 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 ... 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 (32, 45).



More recently, in *Laudato Si'* (2015), Pope Francis recommends the urgency of studying a very wide array of contemporary matters in light of the Gospel, since “nothing in this world is indifferent to us”, and “everything is connected” (3, 91). This includes such inter-connected issues as:

- pollution, waste and the throwaway culture (20–22);
- water security (27–31); the loss of biodiversity (32–42);
- urban planning, housing and transport (147–55);
- the decline in the quality of human life and the breakdown of society (43–47);
- global inequality (48–52);
- technology (102–105);
- globalisation and the technocratic paradigm (106–114);
- the mystery of the universe; (76–83);
- the dialogue of religion and science (199–201);
- the crises of anthropocentrism (115–121) and practical relativism (122–23);
- the importance of work and employment for human dignity (124–29);
- intergenerational justice (159–62);
- the deep connectedness of environmental, economic and social ecology (137–42);
- spirituality and ecology (228–32);
- care for indigenous cultures and traditions (146);
- the common good (156–68);
- community and society – living well with others (203–08);
- the politics of environmental protection (164–75);
- balancing national and local needs (176–81);
- the dialogue between politics and economics with a view to human development (189–98).

Inspired by such lists of worthy topics, our revitalised Core Curriculum has the challenge of providing a well-structured, diverse and compelling program of studies across both 100 and 200 level units, in which students will have the opportunity to study some such topics.

At 100 level, we offer a range of introductory units that explore key theological and philosophical themes in the Catholic intellectual tradition that both introduce key ideas as well as apply them in practical ways.

Building on such 100 level units, 200 level units are more issues-based, offering a focus on relevant topics and contemporary problems.



2. Transferable skill development

Similarly, while diverse in thematic focus even as they deal with common content domains, ACU's Core Curriculum also focuses on the development of a common set of key skills through formative exercises, classroom activities and assessment learning outcomes.

Specifics differ from unit to unit, but major domains include:

1. critical thinking skills (e.g., analysis, evaluation)
2. creative application and problem-solving skills
3. teamwork skills
4. communication and information literacy skills
5. cultural competencies.

The development of these skill domains is central to the regular and substantial in-person seminars that are a feature of our Core Curriculum coursework units. This involves varied on-campus in-class activities in which students work both individually and collaboratively.

These transferable skill domains are a primary way in which Core Curriculum units contribute to the achievement of ACU graduate capabilities, which include both discipline and applied knowledge; both learning autonomy and collaborative skills; community mindedness (including Indigenous cultural capability); higher order critical thinking and problem-solving skills; information and digital literacy; and oral and written communication skills.

There is a strong consonance between the development of such skills and the ethical vision (and implied pedagogy) of *Laudato Si'* in its unwavering emphasis on constructive dialogical engagement among those who may see things quite differently. In the context of "a variety of opinions" (60–61), the importance of debate and dialectical discussion is to the fore here.

This dialogical emphasis provides compelling inspiration for the regular on-campus seminar discussion classes that are built into the scheduling of ACU's Core Curriculum coursework units and is enacted in a practical way through the community engaged learning experiences. Such activity is central to the learning objectives of these units, and it is here that the art of engaged and respectful dialogue is developed.

This spirit of dialogue is seen also in the embeddedness of a diversity of ways of knowing into our units, including Australian Indigenous knowledges. Our Core Curriculum is enriched by the perspectives of these ancient cultures. It is through authentic engagement with First Nations' perspectives – and those of other cultures more generally – that genuine development of skills in cultural competency become possible.

ACU's Core Curriculum contributes towards our university's goal of forming graduates who are skilled in listening carefully, thinking critically, learning from others, and responding clearly, respectfully and authentically. As such, it makes a substantial contribution to higher education "for the good of humanity" (*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, Introduction).



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