



SENATOR THE HON TIM AYRES
MINISTER FOR INDUSTRY AND INNOVATION
MINISTER FOR SCIENCE

MS25-001539

Prof. Xavier Barcons
ESO Director General
European Southern Observatory Headquarters
Karl-Schwarzschild-Strasse 2
85748 Garching bei Munchen

Dear Professor Barcons

On behalf of the Albanese Government, I would like to convey our appreciation for Australia's opportunity to participate as a Strategic Partner in the European Southern Observatory since 2017. I recognise the astronomy capabilities and collaborative opportunities this has provided to the Australian astronomy sector. This partnership has also allowed Australian astronomers to contribute to global astronomy research efforts.

After careful consideration, Australia has decided not to pursue European Southern Observatory membership. The Government values our close relationship with European nations in science and research. We consider there are other opportunities to deepen that relationship, and we look forward to exploring those opportunities further.

Australia remains committed to the current Strategic Partnership and ensuring this delivers value for both the European Southern Observatory and the Australian astronomy community.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'T Ayres', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

TIM AYRES
02/04/2026

Director General



European Organisation for Astronomical Research in the Southern Hemisphere

Garching, April 30, 2026
ODG021-26/lcf

Senator the Hon Tim Ayres
Minister for Industry and Innovation
Minister for Science
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia

Your letter MS25-001539 from 2 April 2026

Dear Minister Ayres,

Thank you for your letter outlining the Australian Government's position regarding its future engagement with the European Southern Observatory (ESO). We appreciate the careful consideration given to this matter.

ESO acknowledges the Government's recognition of Australia's participation as a Strategic Partner since 2017 and the significant contributions made by the Australian astronomy community. The Strategic Partnership has supported productive collaboration and strengthened links with ESO Member States, as evidenced in [Australian Professor Richard Holden's case study published in March 2026](#) and Australian leadership of a world leading Astronomical Instrument ([MAVIS](#)) currently under construction for the most productive telescope in the world.

While fully respecting the Government's decision-making process, I wish to record ESO's disappointment at the decision not to pursue membership at this stage. ESO has consistently regarded Australia as a highly valued partner, with a world-class astronomy community and strong alignment with ESO's long-term scientific and strategic objectives. From ESO's perspective, the case for deeper engagement remains compelling.

We note the Government's intention to pursue other opportunities to deepen science and research relationships with European nations. We would welcome hearing from you should any opportunities be identified that may involve ESO.

In this context, ESO would be grateful if the Government were able to nominate an appropriately authorised official to liaise with ESO on the practical arrangements, timing, and implications associated with the conclusion of the Strategic Partnership. Such a contact would assist in clarifying matters including the implications for observing time commitments and for projects with Australian involvement beyond the end of the Strategic Partnership.

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Director General



European Organisation for Astronomical Research in the Southern Hemisphere

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Please be reassured that ESO remains committed to the current Strategic Partnership and to continued constructive engagement with Australia.

I would welcome the opportunity to discuss these matters further.

Yours sincerely

Prof. Xavier Barcons

Defensive Q&As regarding decision on ESO Membership

These defensive Q&As are intended to support responses to queries received by the department from stakeholders (including the astronomy community) and the media, as appropriate. They are not to be publicly shared.

1. Why has Australia decided not to pursue ESO membership?

The decision not to pursue membership considered a range of factors, including the costs and benefits of ESO membership, alternative investment priorities, , existing science investments and the broader economic and budget context.

The views and expertise of the Australian astronomy community were also carefully considered.

The government's focus is on advancing the national interest and building a stronger, more coherent research and development system that delivers greater impact from public investment.

2. Does this mean Australia is stepping back from global astronomy collaboration?

Australia will continue to collaborate on global-scale astronomy projects like the Square Kilometre Array, of which Australia is a host country. Since 2021, the Australian Government has invested approximately \$554.0 million in the SKA project. The Australian Government has committed a further \$182.0 million to 2029–30 with an ongoing approximate allocation of \$35.0 million a year beyond 2030 for the life of the SKA project.

3. I might now have to leave Australia to continue my research. Are there any alternative opportunities available for me and other researchers to continue our work here?

We recognise the decision to not pursue membership of ESO is not the outcome that many in the astronomy community had hoped for. However, the costs and benefits of various investments need to be weighed in the face of many calls on the budget. We recognise it may raise questions or uncertainty for individual researchers.

Australia remains committed to advancing astronomy and global scientific collaboration. Australian astronomers and industry will continue to have access to the existing \$129.2 million strategic partnership arrangement until late 2027, when the current 10-year arrangement ends. We expect Australian research institutions will continue to build and leverage relationships with overseas partners, including on access to specific research infrastructure.

4. How will this decision impact existing projects?

Current projects and collaborations will continue as planned. The decision affects future membership arrangements, not ongoing commitments. Australia's Strategic Partnership with the European Southern Observatory remains in place until its expiry in mid-2027, which enables our world-class researchers to continue to maximise the benefits of the Australian Government's investment.

5. What does this decision mean for access to ESO facilities post-2027?

Australian astronomers will still be able to work as collaborating scientists on projects led by foreign institutions that are using ESO telescopes, but would be unable to lead work themselves.

6. Would Horizon Europe Association provide access to research infrastructure?

Yes. Recent media stating that Australia will not have access to infrastructure through Horizon Europe is incorrect. Australian researchers will have access to research infrastructure, including major scientific equipment and facilities where access is granted as part of the funded projects. It is true that Association to Horizon Europe will not deliver direct access to ESO telescopes.

7. Who can I contact if I have more questions?

For media enquiries: mediateam@industry.gov.au

For stakeholder inquiries: OpticalAstronomy@industry.gov.au