

MEDIA RELEASE

21 April 2026



ACU partners with MacKillop Family Services on PhD scholarship to address abuse in schools

Australian Catholic University (ACU) has launched a new PhD scholarship to address a growing number of safeguarding challenges – including a large increase in student-on-student physical and sexual abuse in schools nationwide.

The industry-funded scholarship is supported by MacKillop Family Services and will explore how schools can improve student safety through prevention and early identification.

The Institute of Child Protection Studies’ Deputy Director Associate Professor Tim Moore said that much of the safeguarding research completed to date focussed on complying with new standards and systems, but there is a need to find ways to deal with emerging issues in a school setting.

“Schools are facing issues they haven’t encountered before. The rates of adult abuse of children in schools has decreased over time, but we’ve seen, for example, a large spike in the number of peer-to-peer issues. This covers a range of abuse, including violence in relationships or sexual harassment,” he said.

“Since the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse people have become more aware of some of the risks that organisations, particularly schools, need to manage.

“In light of the new technologies, we’re seeing a whole range of issues – kids are taking images of their classmates to create AI generated pornography, for example. There are a whole lot of things confronting schools and keeping on the front foot is a key challenge.”

The successful candidate will be able to embed their research within an industry setting and MacKillop Family Services will give them access to a rich practice environment of practitioners, school partners and professional learning teams.

The industry PhD will help build whole-school cultures of safety, strengthen student voices and embed trauma-informed, inclusive and healing-centred approaches. It will also allow research into ways schools can better recognise the early signs of harm or distress.

MacKillop Family Services Director of Policy and Research Dr Nick Halfpenny said intervening early in a school setting is vitally important.

“Schools can’t afford to compartmentalise responsibility for child safety. They need to make sure that all staff are equipped to respond to a disclosure of an issue effectively,” he said.

Supervision of the PhD will be led by Associate Professor Moore who said the opportunity is a unique blend of theory and practice, and offers a chance to create tangible change.

“They’ll be surrounded by practitioners, teachers, people who are living this day-to-day and they’ll get a better sense of whether or not teachers and schools can use these strategies,” he said.

“One of the exciting things is that our partnership with MacKillop Family Services means the student can start doing work from day one that will create real change.”

[Applications](#) for the PhD scholarship close 11 May 2026.

For more information about ACU’s Strengthening Safeguarding Capability in Schools PhD, visit the ACU Graduate Research School [website](#).

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