



ECU Sport Framework 2024 – 2026

A Guiding Framework for Leveraging Sport

Why a Sport Framework?

Edith Cowan University (ECU) acknowledges the potential for sport to assist in delivering and contributing to ***our purpose of enriching lives and transforming society***.

Sport serves as a powerful community builder and a facilitator to improve physical, mental, and social health. Sport is also a global industry that employs our graduates and is a key stakeholder for academic, research, and community engagement.

Given these intersections, the ECU Sport Framework will provide a deliberate and focused approach for sport delivery and engagement to support the University purpose.

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Background

As ECU embarks on its inaugural Sport Framework, we should first reflect on our history of engagement with sport that ranges from community involvement and industry partnerships to the proud representation of our students at local, national, and international sporting events. Further, with alumni excelling in the global sports industry and a current ranking within the top 50 for sport-related subjects according to the QS World University Rankings by Subject, our influence on and through sport is evident.

However, changing societal attitudes towards sport participation and expectations of sporting organisations call for an evolved approach. In addition, we recognise the growing trend towards commitment-free, unstructured, and inclusive sport options as well as shifts in societal values and the increasing diversity of the Australian population. These changes require contemporary approaches alongside an update of our traditional structured sport delivery and sport-related partnerships.

In the Sport Framework, we will adopt a '*sport and development*' approach, broadening the term "*sport*" beyond merely competitive activities. Hereafter, sport will be defined as follows, in line with the United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Sport for Development and Peace:

"Incorporated into the definition of 'sport' are all forms of physical activity that contribute to physical fitness, mental wellbeing, and social interaction. These include play; recreation; organised, casual, or competitive sport; and Indigenous sports or games."

How will the ECU Sport Framework support our decision-making?

The ECU Sport Framework serves as a reflective tool, guiding us to prioritise the responsible and effective use of sport and sport-related partnerships to enhance the student experience, create social change, enhance our global relationships, and unite and connect local communities.

Therefore, the intent is to facilitate sport and sport-related decisions that are aligned and coordinated, while still agile enough to adapt to available resources and emerging opportunities.

In this way, the framework directs plans, projects, and partnerships toward achieving the following targeted Goals and Priorities of the University.

Goal 1: Delivering an exceptional student experience for success in work and life

Priority 3. Graduates empowered to succeed

Priority 4. Promoting equity, diversity, and excellence

Goal 2: Undertaking impactful world-class research

Priority 8: Highly valued higher degree by research graduates

Priority 9. Partnerships for research

Goal 3: Leading the sector in internationalisation

Priority 11. Global relationships

Goal 5: Securing our future

Priority 22: Social change imperatives

Priority 23: Financial sustainability

What is the ECU Sport Framework 2024-2026?

The Sport Framework objectives are aligned under three pillars:

**Informal Sport
and Activation**

**Formal Sport and
Elite Athlete
Program**

**Connected To
and Through
Sport**

Pillar 1: Informal Sport and Activation

Informal Sport: Using a broad definition inclusive of social or unstructured sport, played outside formal clubs, including lifestyle, leisure or action sports that range from yoga, walking and cycling to bouldering and slacklining to skateboarding and surfing.

Activation: Utilising sport as a vehicle to liven spaces, foster inclusive environments, and broadly seek to improve physical, mental, and social health on campus.

Objectives:

1. Using sport to strengthen our sense of belonging on campus and to the ECU community by leveraging the benefits of informal sport to engage diverse communities and create environments that are vibrant and inclusive.
 - 1.1. **Community & Engagement:** Foster a sense of community by creating avenues for social interaction and collective activity through sport on campus, active transport, and community events.
 - 1.2. **Accessible & Inclusive:** Develop programs and spaces that are accessible and encourage participation across diverse communities.
 - 1.3. **Adaptable:** Design spaces and activities that align with participation trends seeking commitment-free activity, fun and convenience, sporting pathway for people of all abilities.

Pillar 2: Formal Sport and Elite Athlete Program

Formal Sport: Organised sports teams, clubs and events that are structured.

Elite Athlete Program: A program of support for elite current and former or transitioning athletes, coaches, and officials that are ECU students.

Objectives:

2. Formal sport and programs designed and structured with strong governance and support to maximise student experience, improve graduate outcomes, and enhance University reputation.
 - 2.1. **Community & Engagement:** Foster deeper connections, inclusivity, and a sense of belonging among students and staff through organised sports, clubs, and events.
 - 2.2. **Advocacy & Leadership:** Utilise the unique skill sport develops through microcredit Alling and leverage athletes as ambassadors for ECU, enriching both the university environment and the broader community.
 - 2.3. **Sustained Connection:** Establish enduring relationships between athletes, leaders, alumni, and the ECU community to facilitate engagement beyond the academic experience.

Pillar 3: Connected To and Through Sport

Connected To: directly engaging with our sport-related academic programs, researchers, sport on campus (see formal and informal sport) or to the sport industry.

Connected Through: a form of using sport as the vehicle, where we connect our students, staff, and alumni *through* sport but for another end goal such as community engagement, in support of a social change imperative or to expose others to ECU as is common with sport sponsorships.

Objectives:

3. Prioritising sport and sport-related partnerships as a vehicle for social change that can impact our local community and improve our international reputation.
 - 3.1. **Inclusion:** Leverage the power of sport to advance social change initiatives of gender equality, social inclusion and to combat discrimination which reflect the values and commitments of the University.
 - 3.2. **Local connection:** Utilise the connection created through sport and sport-related partnerships to maximise community well-being, enhance our sense of belonging and prioritise relationships that unite and connect our local communities.
 - 3.3. **Global impact:** Enhance relationships with sport partners that have international and global reach and aim to leverage the intersection of education and sport to advance social change initiatives, expose ECU to future international students and partners and develop our students into responsible global citizens through sport.



Pillar Evidence-Based Justification

Pillar 1: Informal Sport and Activation

One significant trend in sports participation is the stabilisation of organised sports participation concurrent with a rise in informal, non-organised sport ¹. Australian University sport strategies have often focused on organised sports, which is warranted given their stable participation rates. However, the emergence of non-mainstream sports like skateboarding and bouldering, alongside societal expectations for more inclusive, commitment-free, and outdoor options, necessitates a broader strategy. Planning to actively support informal sport participation is needed and can help deliver key health and social priorities ² important to society as a whole but also to our University Goals and Priorities. To be an Australian University including an explicit pillar of their strategy targeting informal sport is a creative approach to address a gap and align with emerging trends and expectations. The need for activities to restore campus and student engagement is highlighted in multiple reports as we support the on-going effects from the COVID-19 pandemic and the reduced social health that resulted. Sport has been called upon as a key pillar by the UN to be a powerful catalyst for such a recovery ³. Further, our ECU City campus provides the perfect platform to implement programs that support *“the spontaneous coming together to play, creative use of public space and a range of convivial practices, generate a sense of urban belonging”* identified in outdoor informal sport engaged in urban environments ⁴. For all these reasons, our first pillar includes a focus on informal sport and activation.

Pillar 2: Formal Sport and Elite Athlete & Leaders Program

Australian and international evidence confirms that student participation in club sports enhances the overall student experience by fostering a sense of belonging, a deeper connection to the institution, and increased future employability ⁵⁻⁷. Additionally, elite athlete programs add value to the institution and offer students mentorship, leadership, and advocacy opportunities. Consequently, this pillar, ubiquitous across all University sport approaches and will also be a key part of our Sport Framework. These structured settings enable the University to harness sport for these multi-faceted benefits, while also offering opportunities to use organised sport for targeted engagement of our international students or prioritised groups while promoting inclusive sports environments and opportunities.

Pillar 3: Connected To and Through Sport

Directly connecting prospective students to sport-associated academic and research programs is vital, constituting the "connected to" aspect of our Sport Framework. In contrast, the "connected through" approach involves using sport as a vehicle for brand exposure and stakeholder engagement, commonly executed through sport sponsorships and partnerships. In this context, the University carries associated obligations to ensure responsible, aligned, and effective usage of sport to connect with future students, current students, and alumni. The use of sport to connect our communities should prioritise equity, diversity, inclusion, and environmental sustainability in alignment with ECU values and commitments.

Critically, the alignment to social responsibility is not separate from financial sustainability. For example, research shows that fans of women's sports tend to have a stronger emotional connection to sponsors and are more likely to support social change initiatives ⁸. Given our namesake and values, alongside recent evidence in Australia that women's sport outperform men's properties in brand awareness, brand consideration, customer conversion and have exceptional return on investment ⁹, it becomes evident that prioritising partnerships or sponsorships in women's sports aligns with both our values and financial goals.

Furthermore, when we aim to engage with and connect to the school-leaver market, insights into their distinct patterns of sport consumption, participation, and fan preferences ^{1,10} suggest that diversifying our University's sponsorships or partnerships to encompass non-traditional sports like surfing, skateboarding, sport climbing, martial arts, or extreme sports could offer a unique point of distinction, supported by evidence.

Methodology and Consultation Process

The development of the current Sport Framework occurred between November 2022 to September 2023. The phases of the development included the following:

January 2023 – April 2023:

- Interviews with university executives and directors
- Engagement with ECU Guild and ECU Sport and Fitness
- Review of ECU sport sponsorships and partnerships
- Review current sport-related academic program offerings and research
- Review of sport for student experience delivery (including ECU Guild and ECU Sport and Fitness Centre)

Desktop review of:

- Australian University sport strategies, “The Future of Australian Sport. The second report: Megatrends shaping the sports sector over coming decades” (December 2022)¹
- United Nations General Assembly Report of the Secretary General on “Sport: catalyst for a better, stronger recovery for all” (July 2022)³
- The Social Return on Investment of Structured Sports Participation in Western Australia a Report Commissioned by SportWest¹¹
- Understanding Elite-Student Athlete Experiences with University Supporting Services Report by UniSport Australia (2019)⁶

Leveraged existing information and feedback:

- ECU Student Services and Facilities (SSAFE) results (2021)
- Risks and Opportunities in the School Leavers Market report by Business Growth and Development (2021)
- Understanding university decision making: Voice of non-ECU students by Painted Dog Research (2022)

March– April 2023:

- Consultation with UniSport Australia on Sport Delivery Agents
- Audit of University-controlled SSAF funding allocation to sporting activities
- Review, benchmarking and SWOT analysis of current sporting clubs structure at ECU at ECU Guild, ECU and externally affiliated sporting clubs intended for student participation
- SSAF, Sport and Sporting Clubs Presentation to University Executive

May – July

- Engagement and surveying Vice-Chancellor Student Forums
- Sport Framework Workshop I (Range of student, alumni and staff)

September – October

- Sport Framework draft revisions and review by stakeholders

November

- The ECU Sport Framework’s Senior Executive sponsor is the **Deputy-Vice-Chancellor (Students, Equity and Indigenous)** and Executive sponsor is the **Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Sport)**. The Sport Framework was endorsed by the University Executive and Vice-Chancellor on 22 November 2023.

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