

Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities

SUBMISSION

Universities Accord (Australian Tertiary Education Commission) Bill 2025

Education and Employment Legislation Committee

January 2026

About DASSH:

The Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (DASSH) is a network of 350 of Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand's most senior leaders in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities at 45 universities. Our members have direct links to students, professional staff, leaders and executive decision-makers within universities across Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. They play a critical role in shaping curriculum design, skill development and knowledge creation, which are essential to securing Australia's sovereign capabilities as a sustainable democracy. They also contribute towards creating well-informed citizens who strengthen social cohesion and public trust, delivering benefits across the whole of society.

Overview

The Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC) will be a central statutory authority in the Australian government that stewards and drives reform across the tertiary education sector. DASSH members support ATEC as a steward that enables greater coordination, adaptability and harmonisation across the tertiary education sector, and supports the development of long-term capabilities to deliver a healthy and sustainable democracy.

DASSH appreciates the opportunity to respond to the *Universities Accord (Australian Tertiary Education Commission) Bill 2025* (hereafter the Bill). Our members welcome several initiatives introduced in the Bill including:

- A more systematic approach to tertiary education, research and harmonisation through system stewardship.
- The explicit focus of the National Tertiary Education Objective (NTEO) and ATEC on addressing systemic barriers to education.
- The NTEO's framing which recognises the significance of tertiary education in strengthening Australia's democracy, national capabilities and environmental sustainability.
- Elevating First Nations knowledge and access to education through the appointment of a First Nations Commissioner and First Nations Advisory Committee.
- Producing a State of the Tertiary Education System report for each calendar year and a Statement of strategic priorities every two years.
- Pragmatic steps being taken to simplify governance and reporting arrangements across the tertiary education sector.
- Enabling compacts with universities that recognise individual priorities and allow for adequate planning time.

We welcome continued collaboration with ATEC's Commissioners and staff, the Department of Education and other stakeholders to support the effective implementation of ATEC.

Recommendations

DASSH recommends the current bill be amended before it is passed to ensure the ATEC can effectively deliver on its stewardship role and government goals. We have five key recommendations:

1. **An expanded Commissioner model with clearly defined focus areas** to address systemic barriers to education and support government participation and attainment goals.
2. **Strengthen the National Tertiary Education Objective** to clearly articulate higher education's contribution to Australia's national capabilities
3. **Ensure ATEC can access higher education expertise** to support evidence-informed advice and strengthen the interface between government and the tertiary education system.
4. **A proactive advisory role for ATEC** that enables evidence-based advice on its own initiative in support of equity, participation and attainment outcomes.
5. **A data-informed approach to mission-based compacts** that supports diversity, differentiation, equity and sustainable outcomes for education providers.

Expanded Commissioner model

The *Universities Accord Final Report* (hereafter the Report) (2024) recommended ATEC's leadership structure should reflect its role of stewardship across diverse policy areas. This includes "tertiary education, First Nations, equity and regional experience" (2024, p. 234).

The Report recommended ATEC be governed by a Board comprising of the "Chief Commissioner as Chair, two Deputy Commissioners, the TEQSA Chief Commissioner, the ARC Board Chair, a First Nations Commissioner, an Equity Commissioner and the Regional Education Commissioner" (2024, p. 245).

The subsequent *ATEC Implementation consultation paper* proposed to reduce this leadership composition to four Commissioners who "would operate collectively as the Commission" to provide advice to government (2024, p. 3)¹.

The Bill proposes to further scale down the number of Commissioners. This reduces the diversity of the key leadership profile of ATEC and raises questions around whether three Commissioners will be able to adequately deliver on the large scope of ATEC's functions.

The New Zealand Tertiary Education Commission² is a useful comparison. It has seven Commissioners and a governance model that brings together professional, commercial, industry and tertiary education expertise.

The breadth of leadership in the New Zealand model more appropriately reflects the scale and complexity of the tertiary education system it oversees. The New Zealand model illustrates how a larger and more diverse ATEC can strengthen stewardship capacity and enable sustained attention to equity, participation and overall system performance.

DASSH strongly supports and welcomes the appointment of a First Nations Commissioner in the Bill. In addition, consideration of further Commissioner roles with clearly defined focus areas aligned to Government priorities and ATEC's functions would support effective oversight across ATEC's remit.

¹ ATEC Implementation Consultation Paper, 2024, Department of Education, <https://www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord/resources/australian-tertiary-education-commission-atec-implementation-consultation-paper>

² Board of Commissioners, Tertiary Education Commission New Zealand, <https://www.tec.govt.nz/about-us/who-we-are/our-people/board-of-commissioners>

Dedicated Commissioners drawing on a range of expertise would strengthen leadership capacity and system stewardship. An expanded leadership structure would more accurately reflect the demographic composition of Australian society and the diversity of the tertiary education system. This would enable more effective stewardship to improve participation and attainment outcomes aligning with the Report's 2050 goal of increasing overall tertiary attainment to 80% among working-age Australians (2024, p. 2).

Achieving this level of tertiary attainment will depend on promoting greater inclusion of under-represented groups including:

- Students from low socio-economic (SES) backgrounds
- First Nations peoples
- Students from regional, remote and rural areas
- Students with disability

In this context, an expanded Commissioner structure with clearly defined areas of responsibility would better reflect the scope and complexity of ATEC's functions. As demonstrated by the New Zealand Tertiary Education Commission, a larger and more differentiated Commissioner model supports effective stewardship by enabling sustained focus across priority areas.

Strengthen the National Tertiary Education Objective

Section 13 (2) of the Bill states that ATEC must have regard to the National Tertiary Education Objective (NTEO). Its functions should be premised on promoting a "strong, equitable and resilient democracy" and driving "national, economic and social development and environmental sustainability" (Section 13 (1) (a) (b)).

Delivering on the NTEO will depend on the depth and breadth of expertise informing ATEC including strong tertiary education capability drawn from different disciplinary areas. Achieving sustainable outcomes for Australian democracy depends on sustained investment in higher education and in the disciplines that underpin social cohesion, innovation and public trust.

In this context, expertise drawn from the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (HASS) is particularly significant given its close relationship with equitable participation and the development of national capabilities essential for fostering democratic resilience.

As the central statement of purpose for tertiary education, the NTEO provides an opportunity to articulate a clear vision of higher education's contribution to Australia's national capabilities. In its role as system steward, ATEC is well positioned to communicate how higher education supports democratic resilience, social cohesion, innovation and long-term national capability, enabling a coherent and future-focused elaboration of the NTEO.

Section 14 of the Bill explicitly states that "ATEC must have regard to the objective of improving outcomes for persons facing systemic barriers to education, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, persons with disability, persons of a low socio-economic background and persons living in regional Australia".

As steward of the tertiary education sector, the Report recommends ATEC has a responsibility to "improve access and opportunities for historically under-represented cohorts" and ensure that "higher education is affordable" (2024, p. 227).

These provisions underscore the central role of the NTEO in shaping ATEC's stewardship responsibilities particularly in relation to access, affordability and outcomes for under-represented cohorts. Supporting ATEC to operationalise the NTEO through informed leadership and expertise will be important to delivering sustained public benefit outcomes.

Ensure ATEC can access higher education expertise

Strong policy and public administration capabilities are essential but an ATEC staffed only through departmental pathways risks reinforcing separation and missing out on crucial sector knowledge.

Individuals working across the tertiary education system are existing stewards of the sector. This includes higher education leaders, professional staff, academics, researchers, VET providers and teachers. They bring sector knowledge, understanding, insight, practical skills and expertise to the strategies and operations of a complex and multifaceted sector.

Section 22 (1) of the Bill states the staff assisting ATEC are to be APS employees in the Department of Education. Section 23 (1) states that other persons assisting ATEC will be drawn from Agencies, State or Territory governments.

None of the three current Commissioner roles can be adopted by current tertiary education providers as set out in sections 56 (3) (c), 57 (3) (d) and 58 (3) (b). Section 10 also states that ATEC is “prescribed in relation the Department” with a note about ATEC Commissioners as “officials of the Department”.

DASSH welcomes the independence of ATEC Commissioners. It is equally important that the Commission has the capacity to attract and include expertise in higher education and VET alongside departmental staff. This could include individuals with current or recent experience working in universities, VET and other tertiary education providers who could be co-opted or seconded.

Knowledge and understanding of higher education institutional diversity, governance, funding, curriculum design, teaching and learning, and research is crucial for effective system stewardship. This cannot be replicated solely through departmental staffing and experience.

If ATEC is to replace the Higher Education Standards Panel in advising the Minister and TEQSA regarding the Higher Education Standards (Section 11 (e) (f)), the need for sector expertise becomes critical. The proposal to form an Advisory Committee as mentioned in the Bill’s Explanatory Memorandum recognises the benefits of drawing on expertise in drafting and developing (Note 70, p. 26) advice³.

The Australian Research Council (ARC)⁴ provides a useful example of how higher education, departmental and professional expertise can be incorporated within a governance framework. The ARC Board brings together a professional skills base alongside members with higher education and research expertise. This supports informed decision-making and sector confidence.

The ARC Chief Executive Officer⁵ also has an academic background further strengthening the organisation’s capacity to engage credibly with the research and higher education community it serves.

The core purpose of ATEC is system stewardship which brings together policy, funding, regulation and institutional practice in a more coherent and responsive way. To fulfil this role effectively, ATEC should act as a bridge between government and the tertiary education sector.

DASSH encourages ATEC to draw on both higher education and VET expertise within its appointments and workforce. A Commission tasked with delivering a coordinated and harmonised sector will be most effective when it comes to policy capability by including tertiary education sector experience.

³ Universities Accord (Australian Tertiary Education Commission) Bill 2025, Explanatory Memorandum, https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Bills_Legislation/Bills_Search_Results/Result?bld=r7416

⁴ Australian Research Council (ARC) Board, Australian Government, <https://www.arc.gov.au/about-arc/arc-board>

⁵ Appointment of Professor Ute Roessner AM FAA as Chief Executive Officer of the Australian Research Council, Media Release, Australian Government, <https://www.arc.gov.au/news-publications/media/media-releases/appointment-professor-ute-roessner-am-faa-chief-executive-officer-australian-research-council>

Enabling ATEC to include staff with higher education expertise and experience alongside departmental staff would strengthen its ability to understand tertiary education system dynamics and translate policy into operational outcomes. The balance and combination of government and sector experience is critical if ATEC is to deliver a coordinated and harmonised tertiary education system.

Enable ATEC to act proactively

Section 11 (c) (d) limits ATEC's role in providing advice and recommendations to situations where it is "requested by the Minister". This includes advice on improving access and participation, costs in relation to Commonwealth contribution amounts and regulatory streamlining.

Section 11 (f) specifies that ATEC can provide advice and recommendations to the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) "either on the ATEC's own initiative or at the request of the agency".

Taken together, these provisions highlight an important distinction in how ATEC's advisory functions are framed across different parts of the system. There is value in examining how ATEC's advisory, policy and operational functions can remain sufficient and responsive in a complex and constantly evolving tertiary education landscape.

In addition, this section of the Bill's explicit references to higher education rather than tertiary education underscores the importance of higher education policy, funding and regulation within ATEC's remit.

It is important that ATEC has the capacity to act proactively, providing advice and recommendations to the Department and Minister on its own initiative. Deep higher education expertise including institutional and sector experience will be critical to anticipating emerging issues, operationalising policy and reform, and supporting evidence-based advice that advances the NTEO.

A proactive advisory role for ATEC will contribute to long-term national capability building. It enables advice that is grounded in evidence that addresses structural considerations and the needs of the tertiary education system, rather than being shaped by short-term pressures.

The ability to provide advice and recommendations on its own initiative would support ATEC's agility, foresight and effective stewardship. Advice can be framed in the interests of the tertiary education sector, higher education, VET and the NTEO focused on the public good.

This capacity is particularly important in addressing systemic barriers to access and participation to tertiary education and aligning with the NTEO. The Job-Ready Graduates Package (JRG) sees some students pay up to \$50,000 for HASS. This policy is a significant barrier to participation and attainment.

Section 11 (d) (ii) in the Bill enables ATEC to provide advice, "if requested", on the "efficient cost of higher education across disciplines and student cohorts and in relation to the Commonwealth contribution amounts for places in funding clusters".

Commonwealth contributions represent only a partial view of the higher education costing and pricing, and funding system. The Bill is unclear on how student contributions will be addressed.

Equity considerations around student contributions are particularly pronounced in HASS disciplines. In 2024, Society and Culture was the largest study area for domestic Bachelor enrolments and the second largest for domestic postgraduate enrolments.

Almost 31% of First Nations students commencing study in 2024 were enrolled in Society and Culture, making it the largest study area for First Nations students⁶. Recent research shows students with disability were also more likely to choose Society and Culture or Creative Arts over other study areas⁷.

In this context, stewardship requires an approach that supports access and participation across all areas and disciplines of tertiary education, and student cohorts. It requires careful examination of policy settings that may entrench structural barriers or material inequalities.

ATEC's role as a steward of the tertiary education system is central to ensuring that funding, policy and regulatory arrangements operate coherently, advance equity objectives, and contribute to sustainable participation and attainment outcomes across the tertiary education landscape.

A data informed approach to mission-based compacts

Mission-based compacts will be a key mechanism for ATEC's sustained and meaningful engagement with the tertiary education sector. DASSH members welcome the recognition of institutional difference and the capacity for providers to pursue their distinct missions as outlined in section 27 of the Bill.

Compacts provide a structured framework for ATEC to engage with providers and participate in negotiations about how institutional missions contribute to higher education diversity, priorities and student needs (section 27 (28)). This framework is important for supporting accountability and reciprocal relationships between the Minister, Department, Commission and the tertiary education sector.

Section 29 (2) (c) requires ATEC to "consider" the "goals, missions, strategic plan, geographic location and local community" of each provider. DASSH members support the use of mission-based compacts but their effectiveness will depend on their capacity to be sufficiently institution-specific and responsive to a changing landscape. This includes the emergence of new student cohorts and changing participation patterns.

Compacts will be most effective when they recognise differences in institutional mission, scale, geographic context, disciplinary domains and student cohorts, while taking care not to treat current demand as the sole driver of provision. This balanced approach would support institutional differentiation including maintaining access to disciplines that contribute to community outcomes, national capabilities and equitable participation across different regions.

Robust and timely data will be critical to informing the development and operation of mission-based compacts. Proactive and improved data collection across higher education institutions, VET providers and the tertiary system as a whole would enable ATEC to develop compacts that accurately reflect institutional diversity, system complexity and regional variation.

The Bill is ambiguous on ATEC's role in coordinating, integrating and publishing data across higher education, VET and the tertiary education as a whole. There is an opportunity to clarify and strengthen ATEC's data function.

Clearly delineating ATEC's role in coordinating data collection, providing advice on its own initiative and working closely with higher education expertise supports more effective policy design, system planning and accurate pricing of teaching, learning and research activities. This reduces the risk of policy settings

⁶ Higher Education Statistics, Department of Education, <https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/student-data>

⁷ Zajac, T., Stahl, G., Tomaszewski, W., & Xiang, N. (2025). Investigating the relationships between First-in-Family status, equity groups, and university access (Small Grants Research Program final report). Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success, Curtin University, [Investigating the relationships between First-in-Family status, equity groups, and university access](#)

and compacts being developed without sufficient evidence or without adequate planning for anticipated growth and structural change across the sector.

Improved data collection also supports transparency and trust. ATEC is well placed to build confidence across the sector by producing and sharing timely, institution and system-level data, supporting informed decision-making. This capability would complement, rather than duplicate, the roles of the Department and the Minister.

More comprehensive data on the tertiary education system also underpins informed consideration of student contributions and other equity-related settings. ATEC has an opportunity with mission-based compacts to work collaboratively with providers to build Australia's long-term national capabilities and strengthen public trust in the tertiary education system.

For compacts to fulfil this role, they need to be meaningful, evidence-based and reflective of the complex realities facing institutions and students.

Contact details

Ellen Kirkpatrick

Interim Executive Director

office@dassh.edu.au

0421 361 667