

Pre-Budget 2024-25 submission

29 January 2024

The Australian Technology Network of Universities (ATN) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Albanese Government's 2024-25 Budget.

This Budget will be crucial for Australia's ongoing economic recovery and transformation. It should provide the Government's vision and roadmap for our response to skills, employment and industrial opportunities and challenges.

A cohesive and informed approach will be a culmination of landmark reports and initiatives like the Universities Accord, National Skills Agreement, Employment White Paper, Jobs and Skills Roadmap and Migration Strategy.

Each element of this significant policy work underway has called for a more joined-up, whole-of-system approach to meet Australia's current and future skills needs. This will require our higher education, VET and migration systems to dynamically complement each other.

Maximising Australia's growth and productivity will rely on providing more opportunities for all Australians to get the education and training they need for secure, high-value jobs. Australians, regardless of their background or postcode should have access to these opportunities – for almost everyone this requires a post-school qualification.

All Australians will need access to lifelong learning post-secondary education so they can fully participate in society and the workforce. Lifelong learning is needed to fulfill the ambitions and plans of Australians and businesses now and into the future. More needs to be done to ensure the benefits are more evenly shared across all communities and regions in Australia.

Recommendations

ATN makes the following recommendations aimed at preparing Australia's economy for current and future challenges and driving this change through Australia's post-secondary education system.

ATN recommends that the Government should:

- 1. In its response to Universities Accord, ensure we build on the successful implementation of the Priority Actions from the Interim Report, while minimising the growing costs of compliance.**
- 2. Develop a whole-of-government strategy to promote universal access to post-secondary education for all Australians.**
- 3. Support the success of students in post-secondary education through a participation fund and improved conditions during work placements to ameliorate placement poverty.**
- 4. Elevate the voices of Australian and international students in the Housing Accord and adopt evidence-based approaches to ensure students can access safe, affordable and reliable homes.**
- 5. Adequately fund universities to deliver evidence-based programs that maximise the success of students from equity groups.**

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Recommendation 1: In the Government’s response to Universities Accord, ensure we build on the successful implementation of the Priority Actions from the Interim Report, while minimising the growing costs of compliance.

Universities Accord Interim Report	ATN recommendations for further action
<p>Priority Action 1</p> <p>Extend visible, local access to tertiary education by creating further Regional University Centres (RUCs) and establish a similar concept for suburban/ metropolitan locations.</p>	<p>Re-establish a higher education infrastructure fund with an explicit equity and access mission to build on proven need and demand demonstrated by Suburban and Regional University Study Hubs.</p>
<p>Priority Action 2</p> <p>Cease the 50% pass rule, given its poor equity impacts, and require increased reporting on student progress.</p>	<p>Prioritise the creation and sharing of accessible, relevant and timely data, especially around equity and multi-agency data.</p>
<p>Priority Action 3</p> <p>Ensure that all First Nations students are eligible for a funded place at university, by extending demand driven funding to metropolitan First Nations students.</p>	<p>Invest in preparatory, enabling and post-study support to assist working age First Nations students to make full advantage of demand driven funding.</p>
<p>Priority Action 4</p> <p>Provide funding certainty, through the extension of the Higher Education Continuity Guarantee into 2024 and 2025, to minimise the risk of unnecessary structural adjustment to the sector. Interim funding arrangements must prioritise the delivery of supports for equity students to accelerate reform towards a high equity, high participation system.</p>	<p>Support the equity and access efforts of universities continuing to meet student demand despite capped Government funding.</p>
<p>Priority Action 5</p> <p>Through National Cabinet, immediately engage with state and territory governments and universities to improve university governance, particularly focusing on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • universities being good employers • student and staff safety • membership of governing bodies, including ensuring additional involvement of people with expertise in the business of universities. 	<p>Foster future university leaders by investing in professional development and recognising and rewarding practice, expertise and leadership.</p>

Recommendation 2: Develop a whole-of-government strategy to promote universal access to post-secondary education for all Australians.

A post-secondary strategy will focus the Government's goals of creating more opportunities for more Australians and coordinate meaningful action across portfolios including education, training, employment, social services, health, housing and industry.

It will be a beacon and mechanism for cooperation between federal, state and territory governments, education and training providers, schools, unions, employers, child care and disability service providers and community organisations.

It will ensure that strategies for women's economic and social participation and equality are shared and enacted across all areas of work and life. Likewise for strategies tackling social, economic and educational disadvantage, promoting regional and rural development, and empowering people with disability.

All Australians will need access to post-secondary education and support so they can fully participate in society and secure the new and emerging jobs being created. While participation in university has improved over recent decades, more needs to be done to ensure the benefits are more evenly shared across all communities and regions in Australia.

Recommendation 3: Support the success of students in post-secondary education through a participation fund and improved conditions during work placements to ameliorate placement poverty.

Despite some improvements over the decades, it remains a challenge for many students to access post-secondary education. As ATN universities are well aware, these challenges do not stop once students earn and gain entry – attrition rates are higher and retention rates are lower for many important student groups.

Many students face challenges such as personal and family obligations, illness and disability, housing stress, managing work and study, navigating university as a first-in-family student and long commutes to campus. These challenges often coincide and have a compounding effect especially for students that have experience of multiple educational disadvantages.

Australia's world class income contingent loan system helps make university affordable, but students are still faced with immediate and unavoidable study and living costs that are not covered by the system. Students deserve help to stay in post-secondary education and make the most of their opportunities – the personal benefits go without saying and the public benefits will be higher productivity, increased participation, increased tax revenues and more effective investment in education.

Many of the professions that are national priorities and in demand – including teachers, nurses and clinical psychologists – require placements while studying.

This is an important part of their development as professionals and a chance for them to practise and hone their skills, but it also means giving up the opportunity for paid work. This affects disadvantaged students the most while we also need their lived experience of disadvantage in their professional capacity – these students deserve additional support.

The availability of placements is also crucial to supporting more students and graduates in these courses.

Recommendation 4: Elevate the voices of Australian and international students in the Housing Accord and adopt evidence-based approaches to ensure students can access safe, affordable and reliable homes.

The voices and concerns of students are too often lost in a complex web of government jurisdictions, education providers and other service providers.

Safe, affordable and reliable homes are essential for both Australian and international students. Their success is dependent on feeling they belong and having a safe place which they can call home to enable them to focus on their education.

International students are particularly vulnerable being away from their home and support network. They face additional challenges in economic insecurity, social isolation, language barriers and culture shock.

Evidence and data-based approaches are particularly important to cut through any misinformation and drive sensible policy for an emotionally charged issue. This will be crucial to delivering on the Government's Migration Strategy.

Recommendation 5: Adequately fund universities to deliver evidence-based programs that maximise the success of students from equity groups.

A high priority should be placed on funding and supporting the learning needs of under-represented students.

These costs can be significant, as demonstrated in a [recent study](#) that determined that full-time low SES students are four to six times more expensive to support. The study suggested that the average annual cost of a low SES undergraduate student full-time enrolment was AUD\$109,430, compared with the average cost for medium and high SES students at AUD\$17,360.

ATN supports a block funding approach to support the learning needs of students, rather than a completely formula-driven financial loading. Without support for capacity building, outreach and success, we risk shifting the existing student load around the sector rather than expanding the cohorts.

The fundamental issue is the additional cost to those universities who are doing the hard work to improve participation and attainment of under-represented groups – including First Nations people, lower socio-economic groups, people with disability and those from rural, remote and outer suburban communities.

Funding should recognise and be linked to this aspect of university missions. It is one of the parameters along which diversity in the sector should occur.

Further enquiries should be addressed to:

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