

ATN Universities Productivity Commission Submission 2025

10 June 2025

Key takeaways:

1. The existing Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) system acknowledges students' achievements when undertaking further study; however various barriers and inconsistent application can prevent students from fully realising its benefits.
2. This review should not be seen in isolation and should draw on work being done based on the Strategic Examination of Research and Development (SERD), the Universities Accord and other reviews.
3. A cohesive, student-focused tertiary system that values all forms of learning will enable lifelong learning, smoother student pathways, and a stronger workforce.
4. Policy settings must support start-ups and scale-ups through education and training

The Australian Technology Network of Universities (ATN Universities) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Productivity Commission's consultation on *Pillar 2: Building a skilled and adaptable workforce* and strongly supports the Productivity Commission's key priorities in enabling lifelong learning for a dynamic labour market. We represent Australia's most industry-engaged institutions: Curtin University, Deakin University, RMIT University, The University of Newcastle, University of South Australia, and University of Technology Sydney.

The existing Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) system acknowledges students' achievements when undertaking further study; however various barriers and inconsistent application can prevent students from fully realising its benefits

Existing credit transfer and recognition of prior learning (RPL) systems allow students to port their existing experience into course credits in the higher education (HE) sector. However, this frequently relies on ad hoc assessments or agreements between universities and other providers, with varying requirements for granting credit. This creates inconsistency, confusion and barriers for students, particularly when transitioning between VET and HE, or between providers without agreements in place. Without clear guidance or confidence in consistent recognition, students may not apply for RPL or may underestimate the value of their prior learning or experience. These limit the effectiveness of the system, resulting in duplicated learning, extended study periods, and additional costs. It also disproportionately disadvantages students without existing social capital, who often find RPL processes harder to navigate. This fragmentation imposes unnecessary inefficiencies across the sector and undermines the student experience.

ATN Universities has taken practical steps to resolve these issues. ATN member universities have a formal credit transfer agreement in place across members, providing students with clarity and consistency within our network. Multiple member universities of the ATN are also engaged in a pilot to create a nationally consistent approach to RPL between universities. Such work is essential to save time and effort for prospective students and staff. Our universities have developed formal delivery and articulation agreements with TAFE partners in each state and offer integrated VET–HE programs and

info@atn.edu.au
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joint qualifications. These partnerships and practice demonstrate ATN Universities' leadership and experience in making credit transfer and RPL work in practice.

A truly integrated tertiary system that supports lifelong learning needs to value all forms of learning equally, including professional, informal and non-formal experience, alongside formal qualifications and units. Expanding credit for such learning can significantly lower barriers to study for mid-career workers and non-traditional learners. Government efforts to improve RPL should focus on collaborating with experienced providers, like ATN Universities, to design scalable and user-accessible solutions.

This review should not be seen in isolation and should draw on work being done based on the Strategic Examination of Research and Development (SERD), the Universities Accord and other reviews

The Productivity Commission should avoid duplicating the many existing reviews recommending productivity-enhancing reforms. It should instead build on existing work and focus on implementation. The proposed National Skills Passport is an essential enabling infrastructure requirement for a harmonised and effective lifelong learning system. There are also initiatives in train that could unlock new approaches to mapping credit pathways, including Jobs and Skills Australia's work on the National Skills Taxonomy and pilot work on mapping skills with tertiary curricula. Some ATN member universities, such as the University of Newcastle, are also participating in a sector-wide pilot led by My eEquals to develop a national system for credit and RPL recognition. While the project is still in development, it reflects growing sector momentum toward harmonised solutions. The Commonwealth's SERD and the Universities Accord are likewise core to raising productivity in the university sector and for future workforce preparation. Revisiting and acting on the recommendations of the 2019 Australian Qualifications Framework Review, as further developed by RMIT's 2023 *Meeting Australia's Future Skills Needs* report, would also advance these reforms.

A cohesive, student-focused tertiary system that values all forms of learning will enable lifelong learning, smoother student pathways, and a stronger workforce

Realising this vision requires a tertiary system that not only values different forms of learning, including informal or on the job learning, but also supports students to navigate the system. It also needs to be backed by national coordination and smart investment. The Commonwealth should provide targeted support and coordinate efforts across states and territories. For example, a National Skills Passport would streamline processes and reduce administrative burdens.

Innovative models that trial new forms of course delivery and design should be supported and scaled up to test integrated approaches. Broader adoption will depend on evidence about the impact of these models, and a clearer understanding of the investment required to implement them at scale.

Policy settings must support start-ups and scale-ups through education and training

ATN member universities are the most engaged with partner industries along the value chain, and the business lifecycle. This includes filling a critical gap in the economy: nurturing start-ups and scale-ups through education, training, networks and support to access capital. This has provided essential transfer of entrepreneurial skills, and real economic and social benefits through the creation of new businesses and jobs. The interdependency between universities and industry means broader policy settings have a major impact on the education sector, especially energy policy. Thus, as industry transforms and workforce needs evolve, it is critical that governments include education providers in

solutions to retrain existing workforces and feed the future pipeline of skilled workers. It is imperative that governments support scale-ups and start-ups through favourable tax settings, financial incentives, and targeted program investments that support the development of a skilled and productive workforce.

ATN Universities is committed to working with the Productivity Commission to drive reforms that strengthen Australia's tertiary system and lift productivity. We look forward to contributing further following the expected August release of the Commission's interim report.

Further enquiries should be addressed to:
Office of the Executive Director
Australian Technology Network of Universities
info@atn.edu.au