

Submission to the 2025 Commonwealth Reform Roundtable ATN Universities

25 July 2025

Key recommendations for departments to deliver within their existing resources:

1. Scale up pilots of proven education models so that the tertiary education sector can prepare more learners of all backgrounds for modern work
2. Modernise our research and development (R&D) ecosystem to strengthen Australia's economic resilience and sovereign capabilities in areas of national priorities
3. Leverage existing expertise in transnational education to diversify income and strengthen budget sustainability

As Australia's most industry-engaged university grouping, the Australian Technology Network of Universities (ATN Universities) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Commonwealth's Reform Roundtable. Our member universities, Curtin University, Deakin University, RMIT University, The University of Newcastle, University of South Australia and University of Technology Sydney, specialise in workforce development, applied research, and global education partnerships.

Our submission addresses the Roundtable's three priorities: lifting productivity, building economic resilience, and strengthening budget sustainability. We propose the use of existing funding envelopes to support the expansion and scaling of proven solutions. Our proposals are people-centred, fiscally responsible, and grounded in proven national impact.

1. Scale up pilots of proven education models so that the tertiary education sector can prepare more learners of all backgrounds for modern work

ATN member universities are national leaders in work-integrated learning (WIL), lifelong learning, and higher education-vocational education and training (VET) partnerships. Our members are already piloting programs that test the next generation of tertiary education qualifications.

The recommendations below reduce friction in the labour market, increase workforce mobility, and generate long-term productivity dividends. They can take place with existing resources of the Department of Education and the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations:

- **Roll out a pilot of the National Skills Passport** to support modular, stackable learning and faster reskilling
- **Scale up recognition of prior learning models**, delivering cost-effective reforms based on existing ATN-TAFE pilots, to reduce duplication and accelerate transitions
- **Enable greater participation in WIL for small and medium enterprises** through brokerage and co-funding models, and working with university groups to create 'access points' for upskilling
- **Focus on equity within the forthcoming needs-based model**, prioritising funding to students who have experienced educational disadvantage rather than narrow equity categories to compound that funding's impact, and include outreach activities where there is evidence this widens participation in higher education
- Leverage mission based compacts to **incentivise and reward education innovation** that drives productivity and impact by addressing the evolving workforce and skill needs of priority industries

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2. Modernise our research and development (R&D) ecosystem to strengthen Australia's economic resilience and sovereign capabilities in areas of national priorities

ATN member universities have demonstrated real-world demand for our R&D activities, attracting more income from leveraging our intellectual property through patents and commercial outcomes. We also attract more research income from industry than Commonwealth competitive funding, the only university group to achieve this. We are partners in four of six Trailblazer projects and are leaders in cybersecurity, clean energy, and design.

The reforms below deliver greater return on public research investment and de-risk critical supply chains through local capability and targeted knowledge translation. They can be undertaken with the existing resources of the Department of Education, the Department of Industry, Science and Resources, and the Australian Research Council:

- **Modernise research performance metrics** to better reward industry collaboration, commercialisation and community outcomes alongside academic impact
- **Provide coordination and strategic support for place-based precincts** across priority sectors such as clean energy and the Net Zero transformation, recycling, defence, digital and tech
- **Reform tax settings to incentivise greater university-industry R&D partnerships** and enterprise creation, particularly in priority fields like AI, robotics advanced automation and biotechnology

3. Leverage existing expertise in transnational education to diversify income and strengthen budget sustainability

ATN member universities operate the most extensive offshore campus network in the sector, with 11 campuses in 10 countries. ATN member universities scored the highest on average for International Staff in the 2026 QS World Rankings. Our success in transnational education (TNE) can support a more sustainable, diversified international education sector.

These reforms reposition education as a global capability export that supports economic diplomacy and revenue diversification; they can be undertaken with the existing resources of the Department of Education and Austrade:

- **Co-develop a new international education strategy** that aligns with migration and trade policy, focusing on skills mobility, economic diplomacy and diversity
- **Expand partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly Southeast Asia** through government-university consortia and by leveraging ATN member universities' excellent regional academic networks
- **Support TNE growth and foster stability** through coordinated messaging and policy alignment between the Department of Education, Austrade and other Commonwealth stakeholders

Government should focus on partnerships that scale solutions that work

Successful delivery of these reforms and programs will support a more skilled, adaptable workforce, research systems aligned to industry needs, and expanded global influence and economic resilience. We stand ready to help implement these reforms through proven partnerships across government, industry, and community.

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