

SUBMISSION

ATN Universities Submission – Australian Tertiary Education Commission Bills 2025

22 January 2026

Key messages:

1. ATN Universities supports the broad direction of Universities Australia's submission on the Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC) bills.
2. ATN Universities emphasises three key areas, which in part align with, and in part complement, the direction and sentiment of the Universities Australia submission:
 - i. The ATEC's independence should be strengthened with dedicated staff accountable directly to Commissioners to deliver credible system stewardship.
 - ii. The ATEC should include "at least three" part-time Commissioners, to enable a larger Commission that contains a mix of skills and experience to steward the whole tertiary education sector.
 - iii. In setting expectations for the ATEC, the Minister should ask Commissioners to ensure they coordinate with existing research agencies, schemes and processes to support a coherent research system.

The Australian Technology Network of Universities (ATN Universities) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the *Universities Accord (Australian Tertiary Education Commission) Bill 2025* (the Bill). ATN Universities supports the intent of the Australian Tertiary Education Commission (the ATEC) as a key Accord reform to strengthen system stewardship across the tertiary sector.

1. ATN Universities supports the broad direction of UA's submission on the ATEC bills

ATN Universities developed this submission in alignment with Universities Australia's direction and in consultation with our member universities. We offer these additional observations to support the Education and Employment Legislation Committee's consideration of how the legislation can best deliver a credible, independent and coherent system steward.

2. We seek to emphasise three key areas, which in part align with, and in part complement, the direction and sentiment of the Universities Australia submission:

i. The ATEC's independence should be strengthened with dedicated staff accountable directly to Commissioners to deliver credible system stewardship

Section 10 of the Bill establishes the ATEC as part of the Department of Education for *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013* purposes, with the Secretary as the accountable authority and Departmental staff supporting the Commission (ss 22–24). The Bill also restricts the ATEC's ability to publish its own advice without Ministerial approval, and the Ministerial Statement of Tertiary Education Priorities (s 15) is not disallowable.

Strengthening independence is essential for ATEC to provide trusted, evidence-based advice across the tertiary system. ATN Universities supports UA's position that the ATEC must be able to operate at arm's length from government, with greater structural autonomy, transparent publication arrangements and the ability to recruit

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specialist expertise. This includes the capacity for ATEC to initiate work and publish advice without Ministerial veto.

ii. The Bill should provide for “at least three” part-time Commissioners, to enable a larger Commission that contains a mix of skills and experience to steward the whole tertiary education sector.

The Bill provides for a small Commission of only two full-time and one part-time Commissioners (s 9). A Commission of this size is vulnerable to decision-making constraints, particularly given the likelihood of conflicts of interest across a diverse tertiary system. If one or more Commissioners must be recused from a matter, the ATEC may be left limited in its ability to make well-considered decisions or maintain continuity of governance.

ATN Universities recommends amending section 9(c) of the Bill to read “at least three Commissioners” (and consequential amendments to other sections referring to the part-time Commissioner), creating a minimum of five Commissioners and allowing the Minister to expand that number if necessary. The ATEC must have the capacity to operate reliably, manage conflicts appropriately, and represent the breadth of expertise required for system stewardship.

iii. In setting expectations for the ATEC, the Minister should ask Commissioners to ensure they coordinate with existing Commonwealth research agencies, schemes and processes to support a coherent research system

The Bill references research only at a high level and does not define how ATEC’s stewardship role will interact with existing research agencies or various Commonwealth research schemes. For example, the Strategic Examination of R&D (the SERD) recommendations are expected to influence arrangements significantly for Commonwealth support for research, a core activity of universities that is difficult to untangle from other issues that ATEC has a direct remit over. Without clear delineation, there is a risk of fragmentation between education stewardship and research system reform.

ATN Universities recommends explicit coordination mechanisms between ATEC and other Commonwealth research agencies and schemes, to enable Australia’s R&D, research workforce, innovation capacity and research training settings to develop coherently and not in parallel silos. ATN Universities further notes that the Bill’s statutory two-year review of the ATEC provides an appropriate opportunity to assess how ATEC’s role should evolve once the implications of the SERD are fully known.

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About ATN Universities

ATN Universities members are Curtin University, Deakin University, RMIT University, The University of Newcastle and University of Technology Sydney, as well as 2026 observer member Swinburne University of Technology. Our members specialise in workforce development, applied research, and global education partnerships. We educate one in five domestic students and one in six onshore international students, graduating nearly 50,000 Australians annually. We employ more than 22,000 staff with an annual turnover of \$7.2 billion.