

Submission to the Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee *Inquiry into the Universities Accord (Opening the Doors of Opportunity) Bill 2026*

30 July 2026

1. ATN Universities backs the Accord's goals which will contribute to a more productive, resilient and fair society

ATN Universities represents Australia's most applied universities: Curtin University, Deakin University, RMIT University, the University of Newcastle and the University of Technology Sydney. Our members are industry-connected and technology-oriented, and we work together to solve Australia's biggest challenges. ATN members teach significant numbers of students from low-socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds and students from regional communities and First Nations students that this Bill directly affects. ATN educates 16% of all Australia's First Nations students, 16% of ATN students are from low SES backgrounds and 15% are from regional and remote areas.

Australia's long-term productivity, sovereign capability and social mobility all depend on more Australians successfully completing tertiary qualifications. The Bill should therefore be assessed not only as higher education legislation, but as nation-building legislation.

The Universities Accord laid out the need for a strengthened and growing tertiary education system and set goals for wider access to Australians facing disadvantage. The Bill's explanatory memorandum says that achieving these goals is the ambition of this Bill. The Senate's work now is to support achieving these goals in a robust way that will stand the test of time to promote more opportunity and a stronger future economy.

ATN supports the Government's goal of expanding opportunity and wants safeguards that provide certainty for universities, protect students from disruption, protect student choice, align funding with actual demand and support needs, distinguish non-compliance from justified demand responsiveness, and ensure government-controlled processes do not unfairly penalise providers.

2. ATN supports institutional autonomy in meeting the Bill's aims

Australian universities have a strong track record in lifting access for regional and socially and economically disadvantaged students. That is a strength to build on.

ATN Universities cautions against measures within the Bill that undermine institutional autonomy. The Section 36-65 amendment which affords the Minister the power to directly determine provider-specific grant conditions is concerning. This condition may compromise the capacity of universities to meet the fundamental aims of the Bill by subjecting the provision of Commonwealth Grant Scheme funding to potential secondary objectives.

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ATN Universities is concerned by the uncertainty surrounding the Bill's promised growth in access and attainment. We note the Bill impacts competition and collaboration between providers with implications for a joined up tertiary system. Further, the framework is prescriptive without matching funding certainty or incentives to partner within the sector to achieve common access and attainment objectives.

Introducing Ministerial discretion for individual universities without publication or Parliamentary discretion is potentially dangerous. These reforms can only work if decisions can be seen, challenged and relied upon to plan beyond the next 12-month cycle. ATN Universities encourages parliamentary scrutiny be applied to significant decisions, backed by an obligation to publish decision-making criteria and rationales.

These powers will be held by ministers and governments not yet elected, and the test is not how the current Minister would use them, but what a future government could do with them unchallenged.

Amendments to the Bill should strengthen transparency and accountability so that universities can account for more stability in our long-term planning; essential if we are to properly address the big challenges facing Australia.

3. The test ATN applies: does the Bill open the doors it names?

ATN seeks to test the Bill against the wider economic factors according to our three advocacy pillars: productivity, resilience and fairness.

Productivity

The Bill should operationalise the Government's broader ambitions for productivity growth. The Bill's Total Allocation Pool caps domestic places but sets no reliable floor on growth places, creating unknowns and the possibility that opportunity can be quietly reduced. **ATN recommends a legislated floor of student places to support Australia's productivity growth.**

The certainty gained by a floor of student places included in the Bill supports the Government's broader productivity reform agenda, including implementation of the Australian Universities Accord, Future Made in Australia and the Strategic Examination of Research and Development (SERD) and its ambition for world-leading AI regulation, all of which recognise workforce capability, research and innovation as foundations of long-term productivity and national resilience.

ATN's *Productivity solutions paper: building a stronger, fairer economy for Australia* sets out the challenge of equipping Australians with the skills to thrive in the 21st century economy. ATN Universities is committed to delivering industry-relevant, lifelong learning to Australians at all stages of their careers. ATN member universities educate a significant share of Australia's future workforce in areas critical to productivity, wages growth and service delivery.

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ATN member universities educated more than 26,000 (20%) of domestic bachelor graduates in 2024 nationally. This includes 37% of architecture graduates, 32% of engineering graduates, 28% of information technology graduates, and 27% of creative arts graduates. These fields are not only central to addressing long-term challenges in housing supply, infrastructure delivery, digital capability and workforce resilience but critical in driving economic growth and enhancing social cohesion.

Resilience

A diverse mix of universities with different institutional missions gives depth and flexibility. Resilience depends on maintaining depth in capability across regions, industries and institutions. This is a national strength; it should be assured at the legislative level. ATN universities support resilience by turning opportunity into work-ready, industry-connected graduates.

The Government has stated that the ATEC will consider universities' missions in the allocation of student places. **ATN asks that university missions being considered in the allocation of places be defined and visible in the Bill**, so applied and regional universities can grow to meet demand and be assured they'll be judged on what they are for. ATEC should be required to weigh each university's mission, including applied and industry-connected outcomes, alongside other measures, and to do so under criteria that is subject to parliamentary scrutiny rather than criteria set at a more operational level.

ATN wants to ensure that its industry-connected learning and work-integrated learning approaches that build the operational reality of a joined-up tertiary system are sustained. ATN members are leaders in industry co-designed qualifications, structured VET-to-degree credit pathways, and earn-and-learn models that dissolve the boundary between study and work. We have moved toward integrated delivery: dual-sector structures at RMIT, guaranteed articulation at Deakin, microcredentials pilots at UTS, workforce-embedded pathways at Newcastle, and industry-led qualification design at Curtin. Collectively, ATN Universities demonstrates that a joined-up tertiary system is achievable at scale and in priority sectors.

Fairness

Fairness is achieved when talented Australians can participate and succeed regardless of background, strengthening both social mobility and national prosperity. Expanding access is how Australia grows the skilled workforce needed to lift productivity across the economy.

ATN considers that the Bill's proposed definition of Low SES is problematic as it is defined based on the time when enrolled in the unit rather than the course, which means an individual can change their eligibility for support over time.

While the definition of whether a person is of a low SES background is referred to the Needs-based funding Guidelines, Section 39-25(1) requires that to be an eligible equity student based on low SES status "at the time the person enrolls in the unit, the person is from a low socioeconomic background" (rather than at the time they enrol in their course). ATN's preference is that this statement should

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align with previous and more accurate definitions of using 'first address by SA1'. This is not related to address at time of enrolment in the unit because first address by SA1 is the definition used in Mission based compacts and in previous policy and datasets; is more accurate (avoids the undercounting associated with students who move from low SES areas to higher SES areas such as metropolitan Melbourne to study) and is stable over the course of a student's enrolment.

The Bill also sets base amounts for needs-based funding but leaves the multipliers and the who-benefits rules to guidelines. The real value of the equity promise is unknown today and changeable tomorrow.

4. ATN's headline ask is to make the Bill deliver its promise with certainty

The Bill's title makes a promise – to open the doors of opportunity by increasing access to tertiary study, particularly for currently underrepresented cohorts such as First Nations students and individuals from low socioeconomic background and regional or remote communities. Key questions the Committee needs to consider are:

- Does the Bill actually guarantee that access?
- Does that access build the workforce and regional capability the economy needs, or just move places around?
- Does the Bill support these additional students to successfully move through their courses and achieve their study goals?

On ATN's reading the answers are not yet assured. Nothing in the Bill requires growth in places: the growth allocation is a power the commission may use, not a duty it must meet (s.30-25(3) and (4)). Putting the settings into legislation or legislative instrument will provide much better assurance that additional students will get the access they were promised over the long term.

Don't leave the Bill's promise to guidelines. The Committee should recommend elevating promises of student growth and access to low-SES, First Nations and regional students so they hold up over a longer cycle and recognise the different missions of the universities that predominantly serve those students so applied and regional universities can pursue their missions with certainty.

5. Conclusion

ATN Universities invites the Committee to further collaboration to address these issues and enable the Bill to be passed in a version which assures the policy intent; to enable a growing and increasingly accessible higher education system.

ATN member universities can also provide the Committee with direct evidence of how these provisions will operate for the students the Bill names.

ATN Universities requests the opportunity to appear at a hearing, to speak to the Bill's implications beyond the sector for productivity and resilience in our economy and society.

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