

13 February 2026

Universities Australia Chief Executive Officer Luke Sheehy

Opening statement | Inquiry into the Universities Accord (Australian Tertiary Education Commission) Bill 2025 and a related bill

Check against delivery

Thank you, Chair and committee members, for the invitation to appear today.

I do so in my capacity as Chief Executive Officer of Universities Australia, representing Australia's 38 comprehensive universities.

Let me begin by being very clear about our position on this legislation.

Universities Australia supports the establishment of an Australian Tertiary Education Commission.

We support the objective of long-term stewardship, and we want this reform to succeed.

But for that to happen, the bill before the Parliament must be strengthened.

Our recommendations are measured and practical.

They do not ask too much of government or the taxpayer.

They simply ask for the settings required to make the ATEC effective, and there are six of them.

First, the ATEC must be properly staffed.

Two full-time and one part-time commissioner is not sufficient to steward reforms of this scale and complexity.

A body charged with guiding system-wide transformation needs depth, capacity and continuity commensurate with its mandate.

Second, the ATEC must be able to publish its advice and recommendations without ministerial approval.

An expert advisory body adds value through frank, transparent advice.

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Filtering its output undermines confidence in its independence and ultimately in its usefulness to government, the sector and the public.

Third, the ATEC must be able to initiate its own research and inquiries.

If it can only examine issues at the Minister's direction, it risks becoming reactive and political.

The Australian Universities Accord final report proposed a body that can look ahead, identify emerging challenges and provide proactive stewardship – not one confined to the issues of the day.

Fourth, the ATEC needs a full mandate on university funding.

Limiting its role to Commonwealth contributions alone constrains its ability to provide comprehensive, system-level advice and risks entrenching the very funding settings that are saddling students with excessive debts.

Funding works as a whole-of-system architecture, not in silos.

Fifth, the ATEC should control its own staffing and consultancy arrangements.

To deliver credible, high-quality advice, it must be able to secure the right expertise at the right time.

Capability cannot be an afterthought for a body of this importance.

And sixth, there should be guardrails on mission-based compacts.

The proposed model appears to give the government unprecedented influence over university operations without adequate parliamentary oversight.

This risks narrowing institutional diversity, dampening innovation and ultimately weakening system performance – the opposite of what the Accord envisaged to future-proof Australia for the challenges ahead.

Mission-based compacts should be designed in collaboration, not in isolation.

These are our core asks.

They go directly to independence, capability and credibility – the foundations of effective stewardship.

Let me explain why this matters.

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Australia's universities educate more than one and a half million students each year.

They drive research and innovation.

They anchor communities across the country – in our cities and in our regions.

And through this work, they make Australia more prosperous, capable and secure.

That's why universities matter.

It's why this bill matters.

This legislation stems from the Universities Accord, the most comprehensive higher education review in a generation.

The Accord, released in 2024, recognised a simple reality: a system of this size and complexity cannot be managed through short-term fixes.

It needs long-term stewardship.

That's how the ATEC concept emerged – not as a regulator or controller, but as a steward providing independent, expert, system-wide advice.

We supported that vision then and we support it now.

We understand the government's goals: a more coherent, responsive and evidence-based system.

This is a sensible ambition, and we want to see it realised.

But stewardship only works if it is credible and credibility depends on independence and capability.

That is where the bill needs strengthening.

Importantly, this is not just Universities Australia's view.

Submissions to this inquiry show broad agreement across the sector.

Support for the ATEC.

Support for stewardship.

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Support for long-term planning.

And at the same time, wide consensus that the bill can be improved.

Regional universities have said it.

So have research-intensive and technology-focused universities.

So has the National Tertiary Education Union.

Different missions.

Different priorities.

But the same conclusion.

We all want a better resourced ATEC that can initiate its own work, publish independent advice and draw on deep expertise.

On research, the message is equally clear.

Research and research training are national assets and must be central to the ATEC's remit.

A tertiary steward cannot ignore half the system.

And on boundaries, clarity matters.

The ATEC should guide the system, not regulate it.

We already have a regulator.

Chair, we want this reform to succeed.

We want an ATEC that endures and earns the respect of future governments.

But longevity requires strong foundations.

This Parliament can lock those in now: independence, expertise and credibility.

With those foundations, the ATEC can be transformational.

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Without them, it risks being incremental and Australia's higher education system is too important for incrementalism.

Our universities stand ready to work constructively with government and Parliament, in good faith and in the national interest, to strengthen this bill.

Because this is bigger than universities.

It's about students, skills, innovation and research – and ultimately Australia's competitiveness, security and prosperity.

That's why we must get this right.

Thank you, and I'm happy to answer your questions.

ENDS

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