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UOW submission to the Inquiry into the Universities Accord (Australian Tertiary Education Commission) Bill 2025 and Consequential and Transitional Provisions Bill 2025

January 2026

SUMMARY

The University of Wollongong (UOW) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry into the Universities Accord (Australian Tertiary Education Commission) Bill 2025 and the Universities Accord (Australian Tertiary Education Commission) (Consequential and Transitional Provisions) Bill 2025. We support the establishment of an Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC) as a steward of a strong, cohesive and equitable tertiary system, and we endorse the broad direction of sector advocacy led by Universities Australia (UA), particularly its emphasis on independence, expertise and system stewardship.

As a regional, multicampus university with a distinct global footprint, UOW presents a unique perspective shaped by the communities we serve. A large proportion of our students come from backgrounds traditionally underrepresented in higher education and therefore ensuring that university education remains affordable and accessible is a fundamental concern for UOW. For this reason, ATEC's role in pricing, costing and long-term funding settings is critical. Courses must remain within reach for students from poorer regions, in terms of both cost and volume of places, if Australia is to meet the Accord's equity ambitions and expand participation among those historically left behind.

Alongside affordability and access, regional universities are significant economic and social contributors to the communities they serve. UOW is a deeply engaged public asset, that contributes to the public good and delivers economic and social benefit through impactful education and research. For 50 years, UOW has demonstrated its local impact by delivering education in areas of demand, strengthening community partnerships, boosting regional workforce capabilities, and growing vibrant innovation ecosystems. These contributions must form a core component of ATEC's stewardship mandate. To be effective, ATEC must assess the broader public value universities create, rather than defaulting to enrolment figures or compliance-based indicators that fail to capture our real impact.

We encourage the Government to develop an ATEC model that:

- Builds a sustainable, evidence-based funding framework grounded in real teaching and research costs, with pricing settings that keep higher education affordable for regional and low-SES students;
- Measures and values education and research geared towards the public good, including innovation and community contribution, beyond enrolment figures or compliance metrics;
- Ensures independence of decision making at arm's length from government;
- The appointment and resourcing of Commissioners with strong regional and equity expertise; and



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- Provides guidelines on strategic, system-level planning and coordination of degree programmes, aligned to national skills priorities
- Establishes clear stewardship of research, innovation, pricing and long-term funding sustainability.

BACKGROUND

The University of Wollongong (UOW) is a leading regional university serving a diverse population across metropolitan, regional, rural and remote locations. We operate nine domestic campuses and four offshore teaching locations, each serving distinct community needs. Our Vision 2035 and Strategic Plan 2030 commit us to thinking global, acting local and delivering impact through partnership. This mission is aligned with the Accord's focus on equity, productivity and sustainability. Our strategic pillars of world-ready education, research excellence, regional and global engagement, and organisational resilience position us to contribute directly to national priorities in skills, health, sovereign capability, clean energy, advanced manufacturing and innovation.

UOW has:

- A high proportion of students from low-SES, regional, remote, first-in-family and other underrepresented equity cohorts;
- Nationally recognised student success and graduate outcomes;
- Research strengths in advanced manufacturing, materials engineering, energy futures, allied health, aged care innovation and translational medical research;
- Established clinical partnerships that train doctors and health workers for regional, rural and remote Australia;
- Teacher education programs and early childhood initiatives that contribute significantly to national teacher workforce supply, particularly in regional communities; and
- A proven innovation ecosystem in education and in research that supports new ventures and regional economic growth.

As such, UOW is well positioned to advise on how ATEC can serve the national interest while enabling regional universities to deliver public good at scale.

SECURING THE SECTOR'S LONG-TERM VIABILITY

ATEC must be empowered to safeguard the sector's long-term financial viability, as this is the foundation upon which all other Accord ambitions depend. Sustainable funding underpins equity and affordability for students, the capacity of regional universities to meet community need, the strength of Australia's research system, and the broader public good universities deliver. Without a stable and evidence-based funding framework, neither participation targets nor national workforce and productivity objectives can be achieved.

To fulfil this function, ATEC must have the authority to analyse the real costs of teaching and research across disciplines and regions, advise on funding adequacy and sustainability, model demographic, economic and workforce trends, oversee managed growth and institutional diversity, and coordinate pathways between VET and higher education. A funding model grounded in real costs and future demand is essential if regional universities are to remain accessible to low-SES and underrepresented students and maintain the programs, placements and research capacity that support national priorities.

Strengthening long-term viability is therefore not a discrete issue but a prerequisite for the reforms discussed in the following sections of this submission.



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ATEC should be explicitly empowered to provide guidelines on strategic, system-level planning and coordination of degree programmes, aligned to national skills priorities and long-term societal needs. This includes protecting and sustainably funding disciplines that are critical to Australia's future such as humanities and languages — even where student demand or short-term financial viability is weak, to ensure national capability, resilience, and intergenerational benefit.

ENABLING TERTIARY HARMONISATION

UOW has previously advocated for the government to break down barriers between universities and TAFE, with the intention to create a more seamless tertiary system that improves credit transfer and recognition of prior learning and streamlines regulation for dual-sector providers. UOW College (operated by UOW's subsidiary UOWGE) delivers Academic Pathways Programs, English Language, and Vocational Education and Training courses and is underpinned by a comprehensive student support framework designed to help our students succeed in their studies. UOW is also proud of its strong and long-standing relationship with TAFE NSW.

We would welcome any efforts by the government to support greater opportunities for dual-sector collaboration and tertiary harmonisation. The current structure of two tertiary regulatory bodies (TEQSA and ASQA) is a considerable impediment to creating a seamless tertiary education system. The current system creates a disjuncture evidenced for example, first, in universities and the VET sector providing Diplomas and Bachelor degrees, accredited under different frameworks, with the similar challenge arising in providing academic credit when students seek to transition or provide combined education experiences and credentials. Consideration could be given to having a single regulatory body instead to address these complex matters.

EQUITY REQUIRES AFFORDABILITY

UOW serves a student population that includes a high proportion of learners from low-SES, regional, remote, first-in-family and other underrepresented equity cohorts, many of whom face systemic and structural barriers to participation. As reflected in sector consultations, a central function of ATEC must be to lead costing and pricing reform that ensures higher education remains affordable, particularly for equity cohorts.

The current Job-Ready Graduates (JRG) model imposes irrational price distortions and exacerbates inequity. UOW strongly supports the repeal of the JRG. Costing and pricing must be a priority function of the Commission.

Equity cannot be achieved without addressing affordability. ATEC must have the authority, expertise and data access to advise government on: real and different costs of delivery across disciplines, regions and student cohort profiles; student financial stress; placement affordability (particularly in health, teaching and social work); and long-term student and workforce demand forecasts (driven by real-time, system-wide data).

RECOGNISING AND MEASURING PUBLIC GOOD

The Accord Final Report and the ATEC Bill emphasise managed growth and system coordination. UOW maintains that public good must underpin ATEC's mandate, with mechanisms that recognise the social, economic and community impact universities deliver beyond enrolments. ATEC should explicitly value universities' contributions to national workforce capability, sovereign industry development, regional renewal and educational equity.



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UOW delivers public good at scale across health, education, industry and community. We're building the critical pipeline of teachers, nurses and allied health professionals to meet unprecedented demand. Through our Graduate School of Medicine, we train doctors who overwhelmingly serve regional and rural communities, tackling severe workforce shortages. Our teacher education programs, including the Early Years Accelerated Program, strengthen the teaching workforce in disadvantaged and regional areas.

Beyond health and education, UOW leads nationally in battery technologies, hydrogen and steel innovation, medical devices and advanced materials – research driving sovereign capability and powering the Illawarra's clean energy and industrial transformation. Through iAccelerate, we help grow startups and small businesses, fuel regional entrepreneurship and create jobs. These examples show the breadth of universities' public good and why ATEC must be equipped and resourced to measure and support this impact.

A key pillar of UOW's social impact is our regional campus network in the Shoalhaven, Southern Highlands, Eurobodalla, and Bega Valley. These campuses deliver skilled graduates in nursing, teaching and business, with new doctor training programs in the Shoalhaven and Southern Highlands. The complexity and cost of operating regional campuses must be factored into ATEC's funding decisions.

ATEC must also be empowered to drive innovation across the system, not simply administer mission-based compacts. Compacts should recognise institutional distinctiveness; support differentiation and innovation; enable tailored regional responses; and incorporate public-good indicators beyond enrolment numbers. Compact templates should explicitly include research translation and partnerships, contributions to regional workforce need, innovation and entrepreneurship, health and aged-care workforce pipelines, student success and equity outcomes, and broader community and cultural impact.

INDEPENDENCE WITH THE RIGHT EXPERTISE

ATEC must be truly independent, operating at arm's length from government and empowered to provide unfiltered, evidence-based advice. The Bills, as drafted, do not sufficiently guarantee that independence. UOW recommends that ATEC be independent, expert, transparent, data-driven and report directly to the Minister. Current provisions risk ATEC becoming an extension of the Department, for example where mission-based compacts could become compliance tools rather than strategic partnership instruments.

UOW also reinforces UA's view that Commissioners must possess substantial and diverse higher education expertise. As suggested in UOW's 2024 submission in response to the establishment of an Australian Tertiary Education Commission, we maintain that in addition to a First Nations Commissioner, an Equity Commissioner, a Regional Commissioner and an overarching Innovation Commissioner are essential to ensure future focus and address the specific needs of underrepresented groups and regional communities. These roles will ensure that the ATEC's policies and initiatives are inclusive and equitable, promoting access and success for all students.

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