

Joint statement: support for the Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC) and stewardship of the higher education system

Achieving the Universities Accord and a fairer education system for the future

As the Federal Parliament considers the legislation to establish a new Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC) this week, we commit to engage constructively and support a new Commission to improve the stewardship of the tertiary education system in the best interests of students and communities across the country.

The establishment of the ATEC is a critical recommendation of the Universities Accord, which set an ambitious long-term agenda to increase tertiary participation and equity, to ensure that all Australians have the skills they need for the future.

Business as usual will not deliver the Accord – we need a new form of stewardship to deliver a fairer system, innovative models of collaboration and managed growth targeted to the areas of greatest need.

In our submissions on the draft legislation currently before Parliament, we have recommended key amendments to strengthen the ATEC and ensure it can deliver this stewardship role. These include:

- the appropriate independence and capability to ensure that the ATEC can deliver on its legislated functions, including the ability to commission research and provide advice on its own initiative (“own motion powers”) within protocols agreed with government;
- aligning the objects of the Act and the functions of the ATEC, including the ability to advise on the cost of higher education to students, as well as the cost to government.

The creation of the new ATEC is a major reform of the tertiary education system and it is critical that we get it right. We want the bill to pass and will engage proactively to ensure that the legislation is as strong as possible. Decisions made over the next five years will determine our ability to meet the ambitious 2050 goals of the Universities Accord.

Our universities strongly support the vision of the Accord, to set Australia up for the future and to drive knowledge, skills, productivity and inclusive economic growth. We support the focus on students and on breaking down the barriers that lead to persistent under-representation of particular student cohorts and communities.

Our institutions, located in suburban and regional communities across the country, were established to expand access and to ensure that all Australians have the opportunity to share in the benefits of higher education, research and innovation.

We are proud to serve high numbers of first-in-family students, Indigenous students, students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds and from regional and rural Australia, as well as other groups under-represented in higher education, such as students from migrant families.

We support the establishment of the ATEC and believe it can play a valuable role in improving collaboration in pursuit of shared goals, for the benefit of current and future students, universities and the communities they serve.

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