



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

PROOF

BILLS

**Universities Accord (Australian Tertiary
Education Commission) Bill 2025,
Universities Accord (Australian Tertiary
Education Commission) (Consequential
and Transitional Provisions) Bill 2025**

Second Reading

SPEECH

Monday, 30 March 2026

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

SPEECH

Date Monday, 30 March 2026	Source Senate
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Questioner	Responder
Speaker Walsh, Sen Jess	Question No.

Senator WALSH (Victoria—Minister for Early Childhood Education and Minister for Youth) (19:14): I thank all senators for their contributions to the debate. The Australian Universities Accord was the biggest and broadest review of the higher education system in 15 years. It says that, in the years ahead, more jobs are going to require people with more skills. It says that 60 per cent of Australians working today have a qualification and that that number will need to increase to about 80 per cent by 2050. This means we need more people going to TAFE and more people going to university. The Universities Accord says the only way this will happen is if we break down two big barriers. The first of those is the barrier that has been built up between the vocational education system and the higher education system; the second is the barrier that stops young people from poor families, outer suburbs and regional Australia from going to university.

That's what these bills before us are all about. They formally establish the Australian Tertiary Education Commission, the ATEC. They set out the ongoing responsibilities of the ATEC: to provide independent, expert advice; to negotiate compacts with individual universities; to get the higher education sector to work more like a system; and to support the vocational education and higher education systems to work more closely together. Its job will be to drive the long-term reform we need across the tertiary education system to deliver better outcomes for students and meet Australia's current and future skills needs. Establishing the ATEC is a key recommendation of the Australian Universities Accord. It is the next important step to real and lasting reform, and to making tertiary education better and fairer. It will also continue to deliver on reforms recommended by the Universities Accord.

From their inquiry into these bills, the Senate Standing Committee on Education and Employment acknowledged broad stakeholder support for the establishment of the ATEC. The government notes the additional recommendations by Australian Greens senators as part of this inquiry, including those related to the Morrison government's Job-Ready Graduates scheme. As minister Clare has said: 'We're taking this one step at a time... there is more work to do... we have never ruled out reform here. It's all about what you do first.'

The government notes other recommendations from the Australian Greens senators in the standing committee report into these bills, including the ATEC being able to initiate and publish advice, expanding the National Tertiary Education objective, action against racism and support for marginalised communities, having appropriate expertise and capability, advising on research and research training, processes to change the threshold standards and clarifying any overlap with TEQSA.

The government also notes the additional comments and recommendations made by Senator Pocock. Some of these are similar to recommendations made by Greens senators, so I refer Senator Pocock to my earlier comments. The ATEC will negotiate individual compacts with universities and negotiate the content of those individual compacts with each university. Introducing further merits review processes in relation to Senator Pocock's amendments could unnecessarily delay actions to resolve a suspended compact.

On staffing arrangements, there will be a memorandum of understanding between the Department of Education and the ATEC to ensure clarity of operational arrangements. Senior ATEC staff will be made available by the secretary following consultation with ATEC commissioners. The secretary's power to engage staff, contractors and consultants can be delegated to the ATEC's executive director. ATEC staff will undertake their roles at the direction of commissioners. They will be able to recruit staff using standard APS recruitment processes, including merit-based selection.

I acknowledge Senator Pocock has put forward amendments including on the number of commissioners, and I thank him for his contribution to strengthening the ATEC. The Australian government also appreciates the support of many stakeholders for the establishment of the ATEC. These bills let us to deliver the ATEC in legislation. This is real, lasting reform, and it's disappointing but not surprising that the coalition have opposed the reform. The ATEC will make our university system stronger. I commend the bills to the Senate.

The ACTING DEPUTY PRESIDENT (Senator Ciccone): The question is the second reading amendment moved by Senator Faruqi on sheet 3712 be agreed to.

A division having been called and the bells being rung—

Senator Faruqi: Since time is limited for this debate, we're happy to have our support for the amendment recorded and not have a division, if others are keen to do the same.

The ACTING DEPUTY PRESIDENT: We will cancel the division and recorded in favour of the noes. The noes have it, but we will record the Greens's support for Senator Faruqi's amendment.

Question negatived.

Senator Faruqi: by leave—I record the Greens's support for the amendment.