

13 February 2026

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

Opening statement from Vicki Thomson, Chief Executive, The Group of Eight

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Committee.

The need for an Australian Tertiary Education Commission is not in question.

The sector has been without an independent authority to guide government policy for decades – since the abolition of the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission in 1988 under the Dawkins reforms.

That absence has come at a cost. It has contributed to decades of inconsistent policy and unintended consequences for both students and universities.

The Go8 strongly supports the ATEC - in principle and in practice - as recommended by the Universities Accord.

Australia's higher education sector needs an independent authority with the standing to provide frank, fearless and evidence-based advice to Government.

We have proposed a small number of commonsense amendments in the interests of ensuring ATEC can deliver for the Government and the sector.

If agreement on these improvements cannot be reached, the Government should still be allowed to proceed - because **the sector will not be better off without ATEC**.

However, the legislation as it stands does not yet deliver the ATEC that the Group of Eight and indeed the broader sector had expectations for.

First, autonomy and **independence are critical**.

ATEC must be empowered to provide genuinely independent advice.

It must act as a trusted adviser to government, comparable to respected and independent statutory bodies such as the Productivity Commission, Jobs and Skills Australia and the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

That means it must be able to initiate its own policy and research work, rather than acting solely at the direction of the Minister, and it must be able to publish that work without ministerial approval.

Without this, ATEC risks becoming just another layer of bureaucracy - another compliance burden - rather than a source of stewardship and reform.

It should reduce the regulatory load, not add to it.

Second, **ATEC must be properly resourced.**

The legislation should guarantee minimum standards of access to staff, data, resources and services so that it can develop deep expertise and fulfil its mandate effectively.

Third, **research must be central to ATEC's remit.**

University research drives innovation and national productivity.

Yet research and research training are not explicitly recognised as core, embedded elements of ATEC's powers and functions. That omission is deeply concerning and must be addressed in the legislation.

Fourth, **ATEC must be empowered to consider student contributions.**

It must be able to examine the balance between Commonwealth and student contributions and to recommend appropriate funding clusters and rates.

Students already bear a significant share of the cost of their education – some more than others.

If we are serious about equity, **Job-Ready Graduates must be reviewed.** In practice, it has entrenched inequity, particularly for humanities and social sciences students, at a time when we need these disciplines to better understand our society, inform public policy, and strengthen civil society.

Finally, the sector needs **clarity on ministerial powers to cap domestic or international student places**, which remains unclear in the Bill.

In closing, the Go8 strongly supports ATEC, but we must get it right.

This legislation will shape Australia's higher education system for decades. With genuine independence, proper resourcing and a clear mandate that values both teaching and research, ATEC can restore public confidence and deliver the reform envisaged by the Universities Accord.

Bold structural reform is needed — and **ATEC must be empowered to deliver it.**

***Check against delivery*