

Mr Gerry McInally – Committee Secretary
Senate Education and Employment Committees
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Mr McInally,

Re: Universities Accord (Australian Tertiary Education Commission) Bill 2025 and related consequential and transitional provisions bill

Thank-you for the opportunity to respond to the Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee Inquiry relating to the recently introduced *Universities Accord (Australian Tertiary Education Commission) Bill 2025*, and *Universities Accord (Australian Tertiary Education Commission) (Consequential and Transitional Provisions) Bill 2025* (together, **ATEC legislation**).

RMIT University supports the vision of an independent, transparent, evidence-informed ATEC, which guides the system in developing and supporting collaborative, innovative and inclusive models of tertiary learning to drive positive system-change for our learners and communities.

ATEC can only fulfil its potential if empowered to advance the Universities Accord's bold ambitions—driving growth, expanding learner pathways, and co-designing solutions across universities and TAFEs, which are uniquely placed to deliver together. This is critical for aspirations across Australia's regions and with our neighbours in the Asia Pacific.

RMIT actively demonstrates how dual-sector providers support collaboration and innovation for inclusive, productive outcomes. ATEC has a key opportunity to scale these outcomes across the broader tertiary system. Accordingly, RMIT recommends:

1. That the ATEC legislation establish a clear, long-term vision for the Australian *tertiary* education system – across both vocational and higher education – which enables and encourages diverse learners to pursue education and training as lifelong learners.
2. That in order to achieve its core purpose (and as a key operating principle), ATEC must encourage, support and enable innovation across a harmonised tertiary education system; informed by co-designed solutions with key beneficiaries to address our shared social, workforce and industry challenges.
3. That ATEC be sufficiently resourced with broad expertise from across the tertiary education system – including sufficient Commissioners with VET and dual-sector experience – to drive the next phase of reform and embrace the critical learning opportunities that can be leveraged across the tertiary education system, particularly at its inflection points (VE-HE)
4. That ATEC steward the system by championing the role of tertiary education in developing the preparation for learning, skills and knowledge pathways, and inclusive learning and innovation that is critical for the development of our communities and the diverse aspirations of our learners

Delivering the Accord's vision for an inclusive, responsive tertiary education system for Australia's future

1. That the ATEC legislation should establish a clear, long-term vision for the Australian *tertiary* education system – across both vocational and higher education – which enables and encourages diverse learners to pursue education and training as lifelong learners.

The driving vision for ATEC is for a tertiary stewarding body for the whole tertiary education system, and to implement the changes required to deliver and support the long-term participation goals across a growing, fit-for-purpose tertiary system. To achieve this vision, as originally outlined in the Australian Universities Accord, ATEC should be implemented as a truly tertiary body from the outset. It must also have a clear, independent vision for how this system will develop over time, backed by data and visibility of student pathways in and across all sectors of the system.

In the delivery of its functions, ATEC will be guiding diversity, equity and collaboration across the system. It will therefore require transparent and well-signalled processes for its consultation and decision-making, and clear objectives for both immediate and long-term system innovation.

There must be a sufficient number of Commissioners with diverse experience across dual-sector and VET provision to manage the task at hand, with resourcing and expertise to deliver both the quality and innovation required. This must be led by a clear definition of what 'stewardship' means in practice as a commitment to all Australians in delivering the National Tertiary Education Objective.

The gradually receding remit of ATEC's role from an independent but comprehensive body for the whole tertiary system, diminishes the impact required for such an important reform opportunity for tertiary education in Australia. A limited version of the ATEC, as defined by the current draft legislation, would be a missed opportunity for generational change – not just for our current school-age learners entering tertiary education for the first time in the coming years – but for the existing current 'working-age' population who may have limited or incomplete tertiary study.

RMIT welcomes the specific mentions within ATEC's functions to report on inclusion and access for people experiencing barriers to education. The broader focus of ATEC's remit however must centre the lifelong learning goals (through, for example, driving a national lifelong learning strategy) of tertiary education for individuals as they move between learning, work, and up-skilling at different times in their lives.

ATEC must look not only at school-leaver cohorts when reporting on access and barriers, but also to understand the barriers for those with diverse learning, work and life experiences, and those facing intersectional barriers (including care and family responsibilities, interrupted previous learning, financial debt pressures, on top of established categories of disadvantage) to participating in tertiary education. ATEC must also demonstrate how equity measures and supports (such as Needs-based Funding) can enable the best learning outcomes for these learners.

A harmonised, collaborative system to drive innovation at scale

2. That in order to achieve its core purpose (and as a key operating principle), ATEC must encourage, support and enable innovation across a harmonised tertiary education system; informed by co-designed solutions with key beneficiaries to address our shared social, workforce and industry challenges.
3. That ATEC be sufficiently resourced with broad expertise from across the tertiary education system – including sufficient Commissioners with VET and dual-sector experience – to drive the next phase of reform and embrace the critical learning opportunities that can be leveraged across the tertiary education system, particularly at its inflection points (VE-HE).

Innovation and system-change opportunities must be a key aspect of ATEC’s role, and this requires an independent, core tertiary remit.

As Australia’s largest dual-sector institution, RMIT University is uniquely placed to see the opportunities and possibilities of a more joined-up, harmonised tertiary system across both vocational and higher education. At RMIT, we are pursuing innovative learning models (including our dual VE and HE [degree apprenticeship](#) in Mechanical Engineering) which do not currently fit within existing funding or departmental structures, yet provide positive examples of alternative and high-quality skilling pathways for more diverse learner cohorts.

The Tertiary Harmonisation measures announced in last year’s budget have offered opportunities across different departments and government bodies to plan and outline potential harmonisation activities – including through the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR), Jobs and Skills Australia (JSA) and TEQSA/ASQA. However these activities could generate a far higher impact if led with co-designed and collaborative input from institutions who are already leading this work ‘on-the-ground’, including dual-sector providers across the country, and by an ATEC that has legislated responsibility to steward the system, rather than some of its component parts.

The intention for ATEC’s independence from one particular department within the government was important for this very reason: it could have clear visibility and lead coordination without being limited to the existing ways of working within the system. This is also why having sufficient expertise across all areas of tertiary education – including TAFE and dual-sector experience – is important for its Commissioners and the guiding objects as established by legislation. This must also extend to ATEC’s resourcing and capability level.

ATEC has an opportunity to drive system change by bringing together diverse parts of the system and make innovation a feature and goal for providers, industry, and different parts of government to work together. We have seen how government bodies such as JSA can use its data tools and analysis to highlight innovative pathway opportunities across job roles and curricula across sectors. ATEC has the opportunity to encourage piloting of these pathways, while using its expertise and analysis functions to test, learn and iterate models before recommending widespread implementation across the system at scale.

Outlining education's role for learners and our communities

4. That ATEC steward the system by championing the role of tertiary education in developing the preparation for learning, skills and knowledge pathways, and inclusive learning and innovation that is critical for the development of our communities and the diverse aspirations of our learners

There is a need to reflect the lifelong and ongoing role of tertiary education in the development and aspirations of our communities. The National Tertiary Education Objective (NTEO), as recommended in the Accord, reflects the government's broader objectives for the directional outcome of tertiary education. However, ATEC must centre education, learners and their experiences – for learning of all types, modes, and levels – in its guiding objectives and mission for tertiary system and its future within our economy. The NTEO in Section 13 of the legislation, outlines:

The *National Tertiary Education Objective* is the objective for tertiary education in Australia to:

- (a) promote a strong, equitable and resilient democracy; and
- (b) drive national, economic and social development and environmental sustainability.

ATEC should have a clear definition of its practical responsibilities to align and deliver the NTEO, and how this will be actioned through activities such as mission-based compact negotiations and reform agendas. To ensure academic freedom and institutional diversity, ATEC must also be clear in its independence and ensure the NTEO does not limit or constrain the broad scope of program offerings that institutions deliver across disciplines, locations and learning modes.

It is important that tertiary providers play a key role in supporting the strength of our democracy, especially one which is diverse and equitable. RMIT has played a key role during [important points in Australia's history of work](#) over the last 130 years, and continues to innovate and collaborate with industry to support and encourage the development of our workforces in critical industry priority areas. This is part of RMIT's founding mission and current strategy.

It must be recognised however that the types of future-focused skills and knowledge required for our national development goals do not stem from only one mode or form of learning, at a particular AQF level, or from a singular field of study.

Tertiary education plays a key role in our national development – and the way this develops most effectively and efficiently is through combinations of knowledge, skills and experiences. This includes human-centred and durable skills and values demonstrated through leadership, creativity, strategic thinking, critical judgement, ethical reasoning, emotional intelligence and collaboration. Valuing Indigenous perspectives and skills around diversity, inclusion and civic capabilities is critical for driving the democratic resilience highlighted in the legislation.

These combinations drive innovative thinking, but will look different for every student as they develop their own pathways through learning, work and life experiences. ATEC must reflect and support the real ways that learners are choosing to access tertiary education – including through

modular, stackable learning forms (which may build to a full award qualification) and through combinations of vocational and university experiences.

The new Mission-based Compact process led by ATEC will be a formative opportunity for institutions to highlight and shape their role, both across the broader tertiary system as well as within their local communities. ATEC should encourage inclusive innovation and learning as part of this negotiation process with providers.

Diversity and flexibility of learning pathways across the system, including for providers and its students, is a strength that must be encouraged to achieve the democratic equity and resilience outlined in the NTEO. The ATEC, as a whole, must be independent in its governance and objectives to support this, and value the role of quality education across a broad scope of disciplines and program designs.

RMIT University supports the vision of an independent, informed, and transparent ATEC which guides the tertiary education system in developing and supporting collaborative, innovative and inclusive models of tertiary learning to drive positive system-change for our learners and communities.

Thank-you for the consideration of this submission.

RMIT University
19 December 2025