

**CURTIN
STUDENT
GUILD**

**Submission to the Senate Education and
Employment Legislation Committee inquiry
into the Universities Accord (Australian
Tertiary Education Commission) Bill 2025
and related consequential and transitional
provisions bill**

January 2026



Acknowledgement of Country

The Curtin Student Guild pays respects to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members of our communities. It acknowledges the Wadjuk people of the Noongar Nation and the Wongutha people of the North Eastern Goldfields, the first peoples of the land where the Student Guild operates. This is stolen land that was never ceded.

Alternative Formats

This submission can be made available in alternative accessible formats upon request to hello@guild.curtin.edu.au

Summary of recommendations

1. The legislation should expand the number of Part-Time Commissioners to include individuals who are, or were recently, students and staff of higher education institutions, and legislate Student and Staff Advisory Committees that include their respective unions and a diverse representation of backgrounds.
2. The legislation should ensure that all the decisions of the Commission are transparent and contestable, publicly available, and meaningfully summarised.
3. ATEC should be required to independently consult students and their representative organisations when developing, negotiating or reviewing mission-based compacts.
4. The legislation should recognise well-funded independent student unions as critical in the efforts to improve outcomes within higher education and require ATEC to work to assess and enhance independent student representation when developing, negotiating or reviewing mission-based compacts.
5. The legislation should explicitly protect services delivered by independent and democratic student unions and prohibit the use of mission-based compacts to circumvent, redirect or constrain the funding of student organisations.
6. The legislation should mandate the protection of academic freedom, student rights, and staff rights, and prohibit the use of funding arrangements or mission-based compacts as mechanisms for political pressure or institutional coercion.
7. Any framework that caps international student numbers should explicitly acknowledge and address the risk of racial discrimination and scapegoating, require meaningful consultation with international students and their representative organisations, and include safeguards to ensure that international students are recognised and treated as valued members of Australia's academic and community life.
8. ATEC should not be empowered to cap international student numbers, or allocate maximum commencing international student places, unless and until a comprehensive and standalone legislative framework is enacted that clearly defines the purpose, scope, safeguards, transparency requirements, and limits of any such power along with substantial replacement public funding.
9. The legislation should explicitly prohibit the use of mission-based compacts, funding incentives, or system planning advice as indirect mechanisms to restrict student choice, including through course closures, enrolment steering, or the narrowing of discipline offerings without meaningful consultation with students and staff.
10. The legislation should be amended to provide ATEC with an explicit mandate to advise on the repeal and replacement of the Job-Ready Graduates Package with the goal of improving access to education through universal free education.
11. The legislation should be amended to provide ATEC with an explicit mandate to advise on the expansion of Paid Placements with the goal of having all placements be paid a liveable wage.
12. ATEC should be required to treat funding levels, casualisation, staff-student ratios, workforce stability, and staff working conditions as critical determinants of teaching quality, student support, and equity outcomes, and ensure these factors are explicitly addressed within mission-based compacts.

Introduction

The Curtin Student Guild was established in 1969 to provide essential services, represent the interests of and advocate on behalf of the students at Curtin University. In 2026, the Curtin Student Guild will represent the common interests of around 60,000 students in Perth, Kalgoorlie and worldwide.

The Guild welcomes the opportunity to submit to the Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee inquiry into the Universities Accord (Australian Tertiary Education Commission) Bill 2025 and related consequential and transitional provisions bill.

This legislation represents one of the most significant changes to higher education governance in decades and will create a powerful system steward with long-term influence over funding, planning and institutional behaviour that will have affects on millions of students and the broader community. This moment needs to fix long-standing structural problems that have prioritised efficiency, markets, and short-term political goals over access and equity. The decisions made now and the final legislation that passes Parliament will shape who can study, what they can study, and under what conditions for years to come. ATEC must be designed to serve the public interest and the Australian community beyond electoral cycles.

ATEC presents an opportunity that must be seized but this committee must offer careful amendments to the Bill for ATEC to achieve its full potential. Students and staff are central to the functioning of universities but are too regularly excluded from system-level decision-making. Without strong representation, transparency and safeguards, ATEC risk becoming technocratic and detached from lived experience. Mission-based compacts, if poorly constrained, could undermine student services, academic freedom and genuine choice. Proposals to cap international students risk politicisation, racism, and further instability unless handled carefully. Cost remains a major barrier to participation and this reform should be used to move toward free, accessible education.

In this submission, the Curtin Student Guild argues for a system that is democratic, transparent, equitable and focused on long-term national benefit. The Guild would welcome opportunities to further assist the work of the Committee in shaping Australian higher education for decades to come.

Governance, Representation and Transparency

The ATEC will be a powerful system-level body with a significant influence over funding, planning and the behaviours of higher education institutions which will be directly felt by students and staff. Without embedding, structurally, student and staff representation, there is a real risk that the ATEC becomes detached from lived-experience and overly technocratic. History shows us that past reforms without meaningful participation tend to prioritise managerial efficiency over educational outcomes, students and staff are not “stakeholders” in the traditional sense, they are the people who make universities function on a daily basis. Strong governance of ATEC requires diversity of perspectives, including those with immediate, direct experience of studying and working in higher education.

The ATEC’s legitimacy will depend on trust from students, staff and the broader community, this won’t be achievable if decisions are opaque, inaccessible, or communicated only through technical or insider language. Transparency is especially important given ATEC’s advisory role to the Minister and its influence over mission-based compacts. Students and staff need to be able to see how decisions are made, what evidence is relied upon, and how competing priorities are balanced within the recommendations made and in the compacts. Contestable

and publicly available decisions reduce the risk of politicisation and negative outcomes and clear summaries will allow those affected to understand and engage with reforms that shape our higher education system.

Recommendation

The legislation should expand the number of Part-Time Commissioners to include individuals who are, or were recently, students and staff of higher education institutions, and legislate Student and Staff Advisory Committees that include their respective unions and a diverse representation of backgrounds.

Recommendation

The legislation should ensure that all the decisions of the Commission are transparent and contestable, publicly available, and meaningfully summarised.

Mission-Based Compacts and Institutional Safeguards

Mission-based compacts, by influencing priorities, funding decisions and trade-offs of institutions, will be powerful tools that directly impact upon the students and staff of Australia's higher education institutions. Without clear guardrails, compacts risk becoming top-down and politicized tools rather than the collaborative planning mechanism that it is envisioned to be, and that presents many opportunities to improve higher education. If compacts are negotiated only between governments and university executives, important perspectives are excluded underlying the importance of genuine consultation with students and staff before decisions are settled in compact negotiations.

Independent student unions, like the Curtin Student Guild, are critical in student wellbeing, advocacy, and access to support. Where student organisations are underfunded, weak or non-existent, student outcomes can be significantly weakened, particularly for equity cohorts. It is known that funding arrangements can influence behaviour, notwithstanding explicit directives and there is a risk that compacts of funding conditions could be used to pressure institutions or silence dissent. Academic freedom, student rights and staff rights depend on institutions and their relevant unions being able to operate without political or financial coercion and the Guild believes that compacts require safeguards to ensure that they can't be used to undermine independent representation or restrict criticism.

Recommendation

ATEC should be required to independently consult students and their representative organisations when developing, negotiating or reviewing mission-based compacts.

Recommendation

The legislation should recognise well-funded independent student unions as critical in the efforts to improve outcomes within higher education and require ATEC to work to assess and enhance independent student representation when developing, negotiating or reviewing mission-based compacts.

Recommendation

The legislation should explicitly protect services delivered by independent and democratic student unions and prohibit the use of mission-based compacts to circumvent, redirect or constrain the funding of student organisations.

Recommendation

The legislation should mandate the protection of academic freedom, student rights, and staff rights, and prohibit the use of funding arrangements or mission-based compacts as mechanisms for political pressure or institutional coercion.

Protecting Student Choice and International Students

It is crucial to recognise that decisions or policies that restrict enrolments, narrow offerings or shape what kind of courses an institution can offer are often present as technical or neutral but have real consequences. Decisions about who can study, what they can study, and where they can study shape the purpose of higher education. Where choice is limited through funding pressures or political/governmental pressure, students with fewer financial resources or geographic flexibility are the first to lose options. Students choose their educational institution based on a few factors that directly influence their outcomes and success. Feeling secure, comfortable and supported are often more important in a student's decision of where to study than rankings, prestige or status, this is especially true for equity cohorts. Planning that prioritises system efficiency over student aspiration risks undermining access and equity which is why the Guild believes that, within ATEC, student choice should be treated as a public interest issue, not an inconvenience to be managed.

The Guild is deeply concerned by the way in which international students are increasingly being discussed in political and media debates as a problem rather than as people that contribute a lot to our community. Linking international student numbers to housing and migration pressures from across the political spectrum has contributed to increased public resentment, radicalised narratives and racism which has real consequences for student safety, belonging and wellbeing. Policies that cap or control international students do not operate in a neutral social context and have lasting real-world effects on students and Australian higher education more broadly. Any approach to international student numbers should actively avoid reinforcing exclusion, scapegoating or discrimination and must be informed by the voices and experiences of international students themselves.

Recommendation

Any framework that caps international student numbers should explicitly acknowledge and address the risk of racial discrimination and scapegoating, require meaningful consultation with international students and their representative organisations, and include safeguards to ensure that international students are recognised and treated as valued members of Australia's academic and community life.

Recommendation

ATEC should not be empowered to cap international student numbers, or allocate maximum commencing international student places, unless and until a comprehensive and standalone legislative framework is enacted that clearly defines the purpose, scope, safeguards, transparency requirements, and limits of any such power along with substantial replacement public funding.

Recommendation

The legislation should explicitly prohibit the use of mission-based compacts, funding incentives, or system planning advice as indirect mechanisms to restrict student choice, including through course closures, enrolment steering, or the narrowing of discipline offerings without meaningful consultation with students and staff.

Addressing Underlying Structural Problems

The Accord and establishment of ATEC represents a rare opportunity to reset how Australian higher education operates, moments such as these don't come often and shape systems for decades. The Guild believes that this reform should and can be used to build stability and fairness beyond short political cycles and that an approach of this nature will benefit the Australian community for decades to come. The decisions made now will determine whether higher education becomes more or less accessible over time. As such, ATEC's role as a steward of the higher education system should be permanently oriented toward long-term community benefit, not temporary policy fixes.

Cost remains one of the most significant barriers to participation in higher education. Debt, price signalling, housing pressures and cost of living influences who studies, what they study, and whether they can complete their degree. A system that relies on individual debt or unpaid placements undermines equity and limits opportunity but free education reflects the principle that access to learning should not depend on personal wealth or background. If ATEC is to steward a system in the public interest it needs to be empowered to challenge funding models that entrench exclusion.

Furthermore, the Guild sees ATEC as an opportunity to undo decades of casualisation, increasing staff-student ratios and reducing support which are being experienced by students through overcrowded classes, long lines for student services and limited access to staff. A sustainable system requires stable public investment and secure, supported educators and professional staff. Long-term stewardship means addressing these foundations and not just managing their consequences.

Recommendation

The legislation should be amended to provide ATEC with an explicit mandate to advise on the repeal and replacement of the Job-Ready Graduates Package with the goal of improving access to education through universal free education.

Recommendation

The legislation should be amended to provide ATEC with an explicit mandate to advise on the expansion of Paid Placements with the goal of having all placements be paid a liveable wage.

Recommendation

ATEC should be required to treat funding levels, casualisation, staff-student ratios, workforce stability, and staff working conditions as critical determinants of teaching quality, student support, and equity outcomes, and ensure these factors are explicitly addressed within mission-based compacts.