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Australian Academy of Science submission on *Universities Accord (Australian Tertiary Education Commission) Bill 2025 and a related bill*

The Australian Academy of Science (the Academy) welcomes the opportunity to provide advice on the University Accord (Australian Tertiary Education Commission) Bill 2025 and a related bill (the bill).

The Academy strongly supports the functions of the ATEC to provide advice to improve higher education access and participation by persons who experience structural barriers, which can help promote diversity in fields such as science, technology, engineering and mathematics. The Academy also sees an important role for ATEC in supporting national coordination and strategic planning of the capabilities and skills that align with Australia's national needs.

The Academy makes the following recommendations:

- Refine the language in the bill to strengthen ATEC's mandate to provide independent, proactive, responsive advice to government and enable ATEC to draw expertise from across the higher education and research sector.
- ATEC's responsibilities should include monitoring sovereign capability across all STEM, humanities, arts and social sciences for Australia.
- The National Tertiary Education Objective (NTEO) must recognise the vital role of universities in expanding knowledge through engaging in research.
- The Australian Government should continue to pursue actions to improve diversity in STEM by implementing the recommendations of the 2024 Pathways to Diversity in STEM Review.

The Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC) must be empowered to provide proactive, responsive advice, drawing on a range of expertise from the higher education sector

Effective stewardship of the higher education system requires the inclusion of current, deep expertise from the sector and for ATEC to be empowered to provide proactive advice to the education minister. Currently, the language in the ATEC Bill implies that ATEC should only provide advice "on request by the Minister".

The language in the bill should be refined to give ATEC the authority to provide proactive, responsive advice to government, enhancing the independence of the Commission and ability to meet its objectives. Part of this anticipatory approach should include monitoring Australia's capability needs across all STEM, humanities, arts and social sciences, identifying critical gaps and emerging disciplines. This evidence should inform the Reports and priorities in Division 3 of the bill e.g. the State of the System report and strategic priorities. The *Australian Science, Australia's Future* initiative undertaken by the Academy provides an example[1]. Australia's Learned Academies convene deep expertise across the range of disciplines in Australia and are well-placed to provide independent evidence and advice.

ATEC's governance and staffing arrangements should allow it to recruit outside of the Australian Public Service and draw on a diverse range of institutional, research, teaching and governance experience to enhance its capacity to provide evidence-based guidance to government and

stakeholders based on deep expertise, experience and networks, promoting effective coordination and collaboration and strengthening confidence in its mandate.

The central role of higher education institutions in Australia's research capability must be recognised and strategically supported

The Academy recommends that the Bill explicitly recognises the central role of fundamental research carried out within Australia's universities as a public good, with long time horizon benefits that cannot be fully realised through uncertain, short-term and declining investment.

Fundamental science and research infrastructure are foundational to Australia's capacity to generate new knowledge, respond to emerging challenges, and drive economic and social prosperity.

This requires multi-year commitments of long-term and stable funding to allow institutions and researchers to strategically plan and pursue ambitious scientific agendas and development. Long term strategic investment in research and infrastructure underpins both disciplinary excellence and interdisciplinary responsiveness to challenges facing society including public health threats and climate change and are essential to maintaining Australia's competitiveness and research capability. Being at the forefront of knowledge through research also means that students who pursue higher education are equipped with the latest knowledge in their chosen field.

Given the vital role of many tertiary education institutions in Australia's national research capability, the NTEO must recognise the twin roles of universities in expanding knowledge through engaging in intellectual pursuits of research and critical inquiry, as well as centres of teaching and learning.

Implement holistic reforms of higher education funding built upon recommendations of the Universities Accord and Strategic Examination of Research and Development (SERD)

A diversified, fit for purpose and sustainable funding model is required to balance public investment in teaching and research with competitive research grants, partnership funding and other income streams.

The Academy anticipates the Denholm Review (the outcome of the independent review of Australia's R&D system (SERD)) will recommend the Government reverse the decline in Australia's R&D investment and implement measures to alleviate some of the burden of indirect costs of research. Australia requires strategic policy to recognise the importance of R&D as a nationally significant strategic asset with the ability to grow the economy, strengthen national security and improve intergenerational wellbeing.

The challenges of Australia's current university research funding system are discussed in the Universities Accord Final Report, in particular the gap in support for indirect costs of research, leading to a reliance on tuition-derived revenue that undermines the stability of Australia's research system. Addressing this challenge requires close coordination between the Australian Government, ATEC, universities and the research funding councils to implement the outcomes of the Universities Accord and forthcoming SERD recommendations to improve Australia's R&D system. These actions would support a sustainable research ecosystem capable of long-term planning and impact whilst improving transparency and delivering maximum value on public investment.

ATEC's functions to support accessible and well-supported tertiary education should promote diversity in STEM

The equity focus of ATEC to consider barriers to disadvantaged groups in accessing tertiary education is an important directive and should be informed by ATEC's research and data as part of the equity and access objectives.

Raising diversity in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) disciplines is a national challenge recognised by federal and state governments. The Academy is supportive of the role of ATEC to provide advice to improve higher education access, participation and outcomes for individuals facing systemic barriers, which can promote diversity in areas such as STEM. Access to quality, inclusive STEM education is critical to producing a workforce capable of participating in a knowledge- driven economy and addressing complex societal issues.

Measures to improve access and participation for underrepresented groups will strengthen Australia's future research innovation and enhance national capability. The Australian Government should continue to pursue actions to improve diversity in STEM by implementing the recommendations of the 2024 Pathways to Diversity in STEM Review[2].

ATEC's role in national coordination, planning and vision for the capabilities Australia needs

There is significant opportunity for ATEC and the mission-based compacts to support strategic coordination of capabilities and skills, and growth in the graduates Australia will need for our future.

In 2025 the Academy conducted a capability analysis of Australia's science system to meet future challenges aligned with the government's Intergenerational Report, *Australian Science, Australia's Future*[1]. It provides an informative overview of the graduates Australia will need to meet our unique challenges. The capabilities most in demand include data science, materials science, biotechnology, epidemiology, geoscience, climate science, artificial intelligence and agricultural science.

To discuss or clarify any aspect of this submission please contact Lauren Sullivan, Science Policy and Advice Manager at science.policy@science.org.au.

References

1. Australian Science, Australia's Future: Science 2035 – full report | Australian Academy of Science. https://www.science.org.au/supporting-science/australian-science-australias-future-science-2035-full [Accessed 9 January 2026].

2. Pathway to Diversity in STEM Review final recommendations report | Department of Industry Science and Resources. https://www.industry.gov.au/publications/pathway-diversity-stem-review-final-recommendations-report [Accessed 9 January 2026].