

POLICY SUBMISSION

15 JANUARY 2026

UNIVERSITIES ACCORD (AUSTRALIAN TERTIARY EDUCATION COMMISSION) BILL 2025

Science & Technology Australia thanks the Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee for the opportunity to contribute to its [inquiry into the Universities Accord \(Australian Tertiary Education Commission\) Bill 2025](#).

Science & Technology Australia is the peak body for the nation's science and technology sectors, representing nearly 150 member organisations and more than 235,000 scientists, technologists, engineers and STEM educators. We connect science and technology with governments, business and the community to advance science's role in solving some of humanity's greatest challenges.

Key points

- Science & Technology Australia is concerned that while the Bill states the proposed Australian Tertiary Education Commission's (ATEC) powers will extend to university research and research training (i.e. higher degree by research (HDR) and other post-graduate students), there is insufficient clarity in the proposed legislation and no evidence of sufficient capability or resourcing built into the ATEC to properly support university research.
- Despite the Bill's references to 'research training' Science & Technology Australia has been advised that HDR and post-graduate students will initially not be in scope for the ATEC's activities.
- While the Bill includes guidance for the Minister and ATEC to consult with other relevant Commonwealth Government portfolios, key portfolios and activities relevant to university research have been overlooked, compromising ATEC's strategic capacity and future opportunities. This is particularly important in light of potential major changes that may arise from the Strategic Examination of R&D recently delivered to the Government, with its public release and Government response pending.
- Resourcing the ATEC with staff provided by the Department of Education, at the Secretary's discretion, is unlikely to deliver the ATEC the intended autonomy and independence, nor certainty of adequate resourcing to perform its required functions.

Science & Technology recommendations

1. If the ATEC is to 'enable the delivery of... internationally competitive research and research training', the Bill must be amended to include:
 - a. provisions for a dedicated Research Commissioner to oversee and support ATEC's consideration of university research and research training
 - b. the various – and complex – functions that are required to support university research, research training and supports, research infrastructure and the research workforce must be included in Section 11.
2. The ATEC Bill should include more comprehensive guidance on the required breadth of ATEC's engagement with Australia's broader R&D sector (i.e. Government portfolios, agencies,

programs and/or relevant Boards, Councils and Advisory Groups) that is necessary to ensure university research is properly supported and delivers maximum benefit for the nation.

3. The ATEC should be established as a statutory entity with a governance structure that would deliver the appropriate level of autonomy and independence, including the ability to recruit and employ its own staff as per the needs determined by the Commissioners.

University research neglected in the Bill

Included in the Objects of this Act (Section 3(1)(b)) is the objective for ATEC ‘to strengthen the higher education system to enable the delivery of quality teaching and learning and internationally competitive research and research training’.

However, the legislation remains vague, or rather, completely omits any further mention of how the ATEC will support university research and researcher training, including at the HDR-student level. The functions listed in Section 11 of the Bill do not include any research-focussed functions or responsibilities.

This is a serious oversight, as it will be extremely difficult – if not impossible – for ATEC to perform its stewardship role for the higher education sector without giving due attention to universities’ role to perform research for the national benefit. ATEC will be unable to make comprehensive analysis and assessments of universities without having a sufficient level of insight and consideration for research. Further, universities’ ability to deliver high-quality undergraduate teaching and education is deeply dependent on the research within faculties and its staff.

University research infrastructure is another critical consideration that the Bill has completely overlooked. ATEC must have an eye to how research infrastructure funding underpins critical university research functions and capabilities, and how these capabilities are deeply connected to other aspects of Australia’s R&D landscape.

Science and Technology Australia Recommendation

1. If the ATEC is to ‘enable the delivery of... internationally competitive research and research training’, the Bill must be amended to include:
 - a. provisions for a dedicated Research Commissioner to oversee and support ATEC’s consideration of university research and research training
 - b. the various – and complex – functions that are required to support university research, research training and supports, research infrastructure and the research workforce must be included in Section 11.

Alignment with broader R&D landscape

The legislation (Section 15(2)(b)) sensibly notes that the Minister must consult with the Research Minister (if the Minister is not responsible for research) and the Science Minister (if the Minister is responsible for Science) when setting ATEC’s strategic priorities pertaining to research. This is a sensible inclusion that will support whole-of-government/cross-portfolio thinking and decision-making, which is essential to robust strategic policy for the higher education and research sectors.

However, the legislation fails to note the importance of other portfolios that are also highly relevant to both university education and research, namely the Health, Defence, Environment and Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry portfolios.

Additionally, the legislation fails to account for any recommendations (and subsequent implementation thereof) from the Strategic Examination of R&D final report, which is currently with the Government for consideration. Implementation of the report’s recommendations will likely have far-reaching impacts across the R&D sector, including university research. The ATEC must be sufficiently resourced and connected with the broader R&D sector to ensure it is properly supported and delivers maximum benefit for the nation.



Science and Technology Australia Recommendation

2. The ATEC Bill should include more comprehensive guidance on the breadth of engagement with Australia's broader R&D sector (i.e. Government portfolios, agencies, programs and/or relevant Boards, Councils and Advisory Groups) that is necessary to ensure university research is properly supported and delivers maximum benefit for the nation.

Staffing and resourcing

Given ATEC's important role in carrying out the National Tertiary Objective in Section 13, and the objects listed in Section 3 – all of which will be critical to underpin Australia's university sector and its crucial role in supporting economic development, national prosperity and wellbeing – it is surprising that the ATEC will not have the capacity to recruit or employ its own staff. Rather, the bill states in Section 22(1) that 'staff assisting the ATEC are to be APS employees in the Department whose services are made available to the ATEC by the Secretary...'

While there might be administrative considerations that make this approach simpler and less burdensome with respect to employment contracts and agency bureaucracy, it also runs the risk that the ATEC may be constrained in resources and staff capability. This could compromise ATEC's ability to properly fulfill its functions, pending on the level of resourcing and skills the Department is able to deliver.

This approach also does not support the independence and autonomy for ATEC that would be in line with the sector's expectations.

Science and Technology Australia Recommendation

3. The ATEC should be established as a statutory entity with a governance structure that would deliver the appropriate level of autonomy and independence, including the ability to recruit and employ its own staff as per the needs determined by the Commissioners.

Please do not hesitate to be in contact if the Committee requires any further information, or would like Science & Technology Australia to appear at a public hearing on behalf of the sector.

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