

Submission to the Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee Inquiry into the Universities Accord (Opening the Doors of Opportunity) Bill 2026

Opening Statement

As the national voice of university science, the Australian Council of Deans of Science (ACDS) strongly supports the ambition of the *Universities Accord (Opening the Doors of Opportunity) Bill 2026*, to expand educational opportunity and strengthen Australia's higher education system. We see these reforms as an important opportunity to improve equity and student outcomes, and to strengthen Australia's long-term productivity, innovation, national security and sustainability through a stronger scientific workforce.

By enabling more students to enter, succeed in and graduate from university science education, the Bill has the potential to strengthen the scientific literacy and capability that underpins Australia's health, economic resilience, sovereign capability and future prosperity.

However, we have identified two overarching principles that should guide implementation.

- The success of the reforms should be judged by the outcomes they achieve for the students they are intended to benefit.
- Implementation should recognise the distinctive characteristics of university science, including the infrastructure, teaching models and practical learning environments that are essential to delivering high-quality science education.

Building on these principles, this submission offers four recommendations to strengthen the Bill and ensure its ambition translates into stronger student outcomes and enduring national capability.

Recommendations

ACDS recommends that the Committee:

1. **Recognise university science as a strategic national capability:** Implementation should explicitly recognise university science as a strategic national capability and reflect this in planning, funding and evaluation arrangements.
2. **Place the student experience at the centre of implementation:** Focus on supporting students to enter, succeed in, and complete degrees. For science students specifically, this support must recognise—and financially account for—the unique infrastructure and pedagogical requirements of science education.
3. **Strengthen participation, success and leadership for First Nations peoples and other under-represented groups:** Reforms must support increased participation, retention, successful completion and pathways into university for all 'equity groups', but particularly for First Nations students.

- 4. Recognise the distinctive requirements of science education:** Implementation and funding must recognise the laboratory, field-based, technical, infrastructure and workforce requirements necessary to maintain high-quality university science education, as participation grows.

The recommendations set out above are informed by the following four considerations.

1. University science is central to Australia's productivity

ACDS strongly supports the Bill's ambition to expand educational opportunity and strengthen Australia's future workforce. The reforms recognise that increasing participation in higher education is essential to Australia's long-term prosperity and social wellbeing. For university science, however, this ambition has an additional national significance. Science is not simply another field of study. It is a strategic national capability that underpins Australia's productivity, innovation, health, environmental sustainability, sovereign capability, national security and resilience. Students who enter science today become the researchers, teachers, entrepreneurs, technical specialists and industry leaders who address many of Australia's most significant future challenges. In addition, students who study science subjects as elective components of other degrees (e.g. humanities, etc) gain the necessary scientific literacy skills to participate in the important debates that society must engage in.

The Bill presents an important opportunity to broaden participation in higher education, by strengthening Australia's future scientific capability and literacy. This will require implementation arrangements that recognise the distinctive requirements of university science and support students to enter, succeed and progress through their degrees into careers that contribute to Australia's long-term capability.

Australia will require a larger, more diverse and highly skilled workforce to meet future economic, technological, environmental and societal challenges.

- University science underpins national productivity, innovation, advanced manufacturing, health, agriculture, energy, digital technologies, environmental management and sovereign capability.
- Investment in science education should be viewed as a long-term investment in national capability rather than simply higher education participation.
- Expanding participation in university science strengthens national research capability, the innovation system and our workforce.
- The Bill provides an opportunity to align higher education reform with Australia's long-term productivity needs, which are underpinned by scientific skills and scientific literacy.
- Implementation should support increased participation and the sustained development of Australia's future scientific workforce.

2. The student experience should remain central

ACDS strongly supports the Bill's ambition to expand educational opportunity and strengthen Australia's future workforce. It is clear, however, that the success of these reforms should be judged through the experience and outcomes of the students they are intended to benefit.

For students considering studying science, success is being able to access high-quality university science education, participate in laboratory and field-based learning, receive the support needed to

succeed, complete their studies and graduate with knowledge, scientific capability and confidence to contribute to the workforce.

Decisions about planning, managed growth, funding, equity measures and institutional performance should ultimately be assessed by whether they improve students' opportunities to enter, succeed in and graduate from high-quality programs.

University science education has distinctive characteristics that shape the student experience. Practical teaching, laboratories, fieldwork, specialist facilities and technical support are essential elements. Expanding university participation must therefore be accompanied by investment in the educational environments that enable students to benefit from comprehensive hands-on training and thrive.

- Students should be supported throughout their journey from pre-entry preparatory courses to successful graduation.
- Student success should be measured through retention, progression, completion and graduate outcomes, not participation alone.
- Growth in science enrolments should be matched by financial support to universities to provide sufficient laboratory, fieldwork and practical teaching capacity.
- Universities should have the flexibility to provide academic, practical and pastoral support that reflects the distinctive characteristics of science degrees.

3. Strengthen First Nations access and leadership

ACDS welcomes the Bill's emphasis on improving participation and success for groups underrepresented in Australian universities, particularly First Nations students and those from other equity cohorts. We strongly support this objective and see its implementation as an important opportunity to broaden access to university science, strengthen pathways into scientific careers, and cultivate the next generation of leaders.

For First Nations peoples in particular, implementation should support culturally safe learning environments, recognise the importance of partnership with First Nations peoples and communities, and help create stronger pathways into education, research and leadership.

Equitable participation cannot be separated from equitable success. Students entering university from diverse educational pathways often require additional academic and practical support. The success of the reforms should therefore be measured by the number of students who commence university and complete their studies.

- Support increased participation, retention and completion for First Nations and other underrepresented groups.
- Encourage culturally safe science learning environments and implementation approaches developed in partnership with First Nations peoples and communities.
- Recognise the barriers faced by many First Nations students to completing their science degrees, transitioning into their careers and ultimately moving into leadership positions – both in academia and in the wider workforce.
- Ensure Needs-based Funding provides sufficient flexibility to support students from diverse educational and cultural backgrounds.
- Measure success through participation, progression, completion and graduate outcomes rather than access alone.

4 University science education has unique requirements

ACDS supports the Bill's planning and funding architecture, including the Managed Growth Funding System, Needs-based Funding and mission-based compacts. However, successful implementation must recognise that science education has distinctive delivery requirements. High-quality university science education depends on laboratories, fieldwork, specialist equipment, technical staff and digital infrastructure, all of which require sustained investment and long-term planning. These characteristics shape the cost and capacity of science education.

Expanding the number of science (and scientifically literate) graduates is essential to Australia's future productivity, prosperity, environmental sustainability, national security and sovereign capability. However, expanding student numbers without the capacity to maintain a quality science education risk undermining the scientific capability the Bill has the opportunity to strengthen. Implementation should therefore ensure that growth in science enrolments is matched by the investment and planning needed to preserve the quality of students' educational experiences.

- Planning and implementation should recognise the distinctive infrastructure, workforce and delivery requirements of science education.
- Growth in science enrolments should be matched by investment in laboratories, fieldwork, specialist equipment, technical capability and digital infrastructure, and take into account distinctive challenges in science for regional universities.
- Managed growth arrangements should recognise the practical constraints and long planning horizons associated with expanding science education.

Conclusion

ACDS welcomes the Bill and strongly supports its ambition to expand educational opportunity and strengthen Australia's higher education system. We believe it presents an important opportunity to improve equity and student outcomes while strengthening Australia's scientific capability.

For university science, success should be measured by the number of students who succeed in and graduate from university science education, including First Nations students and other under-represented groups.

To realise this ambition, implementation must recognise the distinctive characteristics of science education and the investment required to maintain high-quality learning as participation grows. ACDS therefore encourages the Committee to recognise university science as a strategic national capability and ensure implementation enables Australia to build a stronger, more diverse and highly skilled scientific workforce.

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