

ACDS response to the ATEC Statement of Strategic Priorities 2027-28 consultation paper

The Australian Council of Deans of Science (ACDS) is the national peak body representing science in Australian universities. We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the ATEC statement of strategic priorities. Our submission focuses on areas where the experience and perspectives of university science leaders can make a particular contribution.

Q1. Do the draft outcomes meaningfully reflect progress towards the National Tertiary Education Objective and ATEC's legislated goals?

The proposed outcomes provide a strong foundation, but would be strengthened by greater emphasis on capability, infrastructure, research and international competitiveness.

- The First Nations outcome should extend beyond participation and completion to include Indigenous-led research, knowledge systems, community partnerships, cultural capability and pathways into scientific leadership.
- The outcome on equitable access should recognise that laboratory-intensive and field-based disciplines face distinctive participation barriers arising from equipment, placement and fieldwork requirements. Many science disciplines require opportunities for face-to-face learning.
- The outcome on graduate capability should place greater emphasis on preparing graduates for future workforce needs, particularly in science, technology, artificial intelligence (AI) and other rapidly evolving disciplines, as well as addressing current key skills shortages in Australia across a number of STEM sectors.
- There is also value in explicitly recognising foundational science and discovery research, alongside immediate workforce needs and emerging technologies.
- The outcome on research and knowledge should emphasise research training, higher degree by research participation and the uptake of PhD-level graduates by industry as critical elements of national skills capability.
- It should also acknowledge the need for an adequate foundation of fundamental research to support the currently stated objectives beyond the short term.
- The outcome on system quality, diversity and resilience should reference the infrastructure required for high-quality teaching and research in the science disciplines, including laboratories, scientific equipment, digital capability (including AI) and shared facilities.
- The outcomes should acknowledge Australia's position and reputation as a leader in high-quality education and research within the global higher education system, recognising and enabling international engagement and collaboration as essential to excellence and competitiveness.

Q2. Do the draft priorities appropriately reflect the key areas that ATEC should focus on throughout 2027 and 2028?

The priorities are broadly appropriate but require sharper focus, longer-term perspective, clearer implementation pathways and stronger international ambition.

- The priorities should be framed within a longer horizon (perhaps five years), recognising that educational reform, research development and workforce planning occur over extended periods. (The priorities should sit with a stable longer-term strategy, with continuity across successive statements.)
- The proposed Performance Framework will be critical to identify practical actions, indicators and measures of success so institutions can understand what progress looks like. Ideally, this will be designed in consultation with and iterative feedback from the sector. The Performance Framework should recognise and reward contributions from institutions to shared teaching, facilities and research training, so that the measures reinforce the collaboration we are encouraging.
- There should be a smaller number of priorities to provide greater clarity and focus for the tertiary sector. (For example, there is overlap between Equity and A Joined-up Tertiary System, to the extent that the second is a subset of the first, albeit viewed from more of a systemic rather than individual lens. These two could be retained as distinct priorities, but we encourage clearer connections between them. Equally, collaboration might be considered as a cross-cutting approach to be enabled rather than as a distinct priority.)
- Some of the current priorities appear to reflect existing and core activities rather than specific new actions required. In addition, some priorities address current government focus rather than establishing long-term strategic goals for higher education and adjacent policy development.
- The equity priority should recognise the importance of addressing equity and access across all levels of education including graduate research training. Students and graduate degree candidates should be enabled to reach global recognition in their fields regardless of where they attend university.
- The quality teaching priority should recognise the importance in science and related disciplines of research-active teaching staff and technical staff, and the unique science teaching capability that underpins quality teaching. This priority should also emphasise support for educator training which includes upskilling needs associated with the scaling of AI-enabled learning and teaching. It should support curriculum and assessment practices that develop and demonstrate student learning, including in the context of AI-enabled learning and teaching, drawing on established discipline-based frameworks such as the ACDS-endorsed Science Threshold Learning Outcomes.
- Although the Quality Teaching priority does mention 'learning' in the sub-heading, consider changing this name to Quality Education so as to remove any perception of a didactic approach.
- The joined-up tertiary system priority should consider activators and incentives to enable deliberate pathway progression and harmonisation and collaboration between vocational education and higher education sectors that would support equity access and future study and career opportunity.
- The priorities should recognise foundational science and maths as national capabilities that underpin other disciplines, professions and industries and enable responses to needs that cannot yet be anticipated. Sustained support for science education and discovery research is essential alongside research directed towards identified national challenges.
- The research priority should explicitly seek to enable international research partnerships, particularly with strategically important partners in Europe, the Americas and the Asia-Pacific region.

- An important goal should be to move towards covering the full cost of research (as mentioned in the Accord) otherwise we will continue to have a system where other activities cross-subsidise research and reduce the capacity to address the remaining ATEC priorities.
- The collaboration priority should encourage sector-wide approaches to low-volume disciplines, shared facilities, collaborative doctoral training and coordinated responses to address workforce shortages, especially in areas supporting Australian sovereign capability, including emerging technologies and priority areas. Incentives are needed to address the up-front costs which currently limit collaboration. Such incentives should ensure that non-metropolitan universities can collaborate in a way which increases rather than decreases equity.
- ATEC should include an explicit focus on maintaining and renewing institutional teaching and research infrastructure, recognising its importance to quality, access and national capability.

Q3. Are the proposed priorities practical and useful in enabling providers to reflect their unique missions and operating contexts?

The priorities provide useful flexibility, but clearer implementation guidance and recognition of institutional diversity are required for impact.

- The priorities should allow institutions to demonstrate different pathways to success, recognising that mission, scale, geography and disciplinary strengths vary considerably.
- The ACDS supports the intention to encourage mission-based differentiation while maintaining common system outcomes, enabling institutions to contribute according to their distinctive capabilities.
- The mission-based compact model tends to address short-term funding questions, while longer-term infrastructure needs and cross-institutional collaboration remain significant practical challenges.
- Practical guidance should clarify how these high-level priorities will be reflected in mission-based compacts, in tangible performance indicators and in manageable and appropriate reporting expectations.
- The priorities should recognise the operating realities of laboratory-based disciplines, in which teaching quality and research excellence are critically dependent upon specialist staff, facilities and technical support.
- The framework should be aligned with related national initiatives, including research ([Ambitious Australia](#)), infrastructure ([National Research Infrastructure roadmap](#)), skills and capabilities ([Australian Academy of Science](#)) and innovation strategies, to avoid fragmented signals to institutions.

Summary

Overall, the ACDS recommends further thought be given to:

- long-term capability building (at least 5 years),
- support for and equitable access to research and research training,
- investment in infrastructure (including digital infrastructure) for teaching and research in science and related disciplines,
- mechanisms to incentivize and enable collaboration across universities (nationally and globally) and to partner with industry and business
- science workforce development, and

- strategies to support Australia's international standing in research and higher education in a globally competitive marketplace.

The ACDS is the national voice of university science, representing Deans of Science and equivalent leaders across Australian universities. Our membership spans diverse institutional settings and science disciplines, including agricultural and food sciences; biological and life sciences; biomedical and behavioural sciences; earth and environmental sciences; mathematical and computational sciences; and physical and chemical sciences.

Our Strategic Plan 2026–2030 recognises the interconnected contributions of science education, research and translation, and the importance of advancing First Nations peoples and science. These contributions align with the ATEC strategic priorities to help develop the future workforce including researchers and technical professionals, and connect knowledge with applications for the benefit of Australians and the world.

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