

ACDS Submission on *A More Joined-up Tertiary System*: Response to ATEC Discussion Paper

Introduction

The Australian Council of Deans of Science (ACDS), the voice of university science in Australia, welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of a more joined-up tertiary system.

ACDS supports the broad objectives of the discussion paper and the development of a tertiary system that strengthens educational outcomes, workforce capability, productivity and social prosperity.

ACDS brings together Deans of Science (or equivalent) from most Australian universities. Our members lead science education and research across a broad range of disciplines and represent diverse institutions, including research-intensive and teaching-focused universities, regional and metropolitan campuses, and several dual-sector universities. Collectively, they bring extensive expertise in tertiary pathways, industry engagement, lifelong learning and workforce development.

ACDS supports reforms that place people, opportunity and lifelong learning at the centre of the tertiary system. We also support the paper's recognition that VET and higher education are distinct sectors with complementary strengths. A more joined-up ('harmonised') system should build on, rather than diminish, the diversity of institutional missions across Australia's tertiary system.

We support reforms that strengthen science leadership, research and innovation capability, high-quality teaching and equitable participation, including for First Nations Peoples and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds who are the first in their family to participate in tertiary education.

Science occupies a distinctive position within Australia's tertiary system. University science faculties educate the future workforce, undertake a substantial share of Australia's research and innovation, and maintain the foundational disciplinary capability that underpins future industries, emerging technologies and national resilience. University science therefore offers a distinctive perspective on how a more harmonised tertiary system can support the economy and society while sustaining Australia's long-term capacity for discovery, innovation and growth.

The key messages of this submission are:

- Australia should pursue stronger connections across VET, dual-sector institutions and other university types in ways that enables improved access pathways, enables lifelong learning and critically reduces and removes equity barriers to participation in tertiary and higher education.
- Reform should build on the distinct strengths and complementary roles of VET providers, dual-sector institutions and universities, while preserving the diversity of institutional missions across the tertiary system.
- Reform should support workforce needs as well as a national future-ready capacity across research, innovation and translation that underpins Australia's future security and prosperity.

Scope of this submission

ACDS has focused on the consultation questions most relevant to the contribution of university science and we have concentrated on areas where science faculties/colleges can provide a distinctive perspective.

Responses to Select Consultation Questions

Q2 What are the tangible actions that can be achieved through the Roadmap to support parity of esteem between the VET and higher education sectors?

ACDS supports the discussion paper's objective of promoting 'parity of esteem' between the VET and higher education sectors. In our view, this means recognising their distinctive strengths and complementary and synergistic roles—not implying they should perform identical functions.

VET providers and universities, including dual-sector institutions, each make different but equally valuable contributions to 'learners', employers, communities and the nation. A more integrated tertiary system will foster greater collaboration and mutual understanding across sectors, while safeguarding the diversity of institutional missions that underpins their strengths and missions.

The Roadmap must explicitly acknowledge these complementary purposes: VET builds occupational and technical capability and competencies, while universities contribute to professional formation, research, innovation and advanced disciplinary capability, including developing key capabilities in critical thinking, while building the pipelines of the future workforce. Australia's future prosperity relies on the strengths of both sectors.

Q8 What are the challenges in developing and sustaining innovative qualifications, pathways and practices that span across the VET and higher education sectors? What does each sector need from government(s) to support their development and sustainability?

ACDS strongly supports innovative qualifications, pathways and collaborative models that improve outcomes for students, employers and the broader community.

The principal challenge is not commitment, but the practical effort required to establish and sustain collaboration. Effective pathway arrangements require significant investment in facilities, curriculum mapping, credit recognition, governance, quality assurance and relationship management. Most importantly they require a strong commitment to seeking mutual understanding of each sector's strengths and approaches and to identify opportunities for both co-design (dual sector especially) and to deliberate pathway progression enablement.

Financial disincentives compound this. Providers often absorb implementation costs while forgoing revenue from credited components, even as students benefit from recognition of prior learning and advanced standing. These arrangements generate substantial long-term societal benefits. In the short term they may increase the number of students accessing a university education. In the long-term, there is a risk that different funding mechanisms for VET and Universities may create unintended incentives for students who would otherwise study their entire degree at university to undertake the first year of their studies elsewhere. There is danger here that this may imperil the financial viability of some degrees and courses, especially in areas of lower enrolments but that are critically important, such as mathematics and physical sciences.

Regulatory complexity and differing contexts **remain a significant barrier**. Universities operate under national higher education frameworks while VET involves considerable state and territory variation. In science and professional disciplines (and more broadly in Engineering and in Health), pathway development must also accommodate professional accreditation requirements.

Collaboration increasingly extends beyond the VET–higher education divide. Some institutions are developing ‘triple-sector’ models that bring together universities, VET providers and industry partners to deliver integrated learning experiences, including for example ‘earn and learn’ models entailing study whilst in employment. These approaches offer significant benefits for students, employers and the broader economy, but require substantial coordination and sustained commitment.

Governments can help by simplifying and aligning regulatory arrangements, supporting new pathway models, incentivising long-term partnerships, and ensuring funding reflects the real cost of establishing and sustaining collaborative programs, including with industry. Critically important is to establish regulatory frameworks and policy settings that are stable and do not entail continual and substantive changes and associated costs by providers.

The key points of our response to this question are that:

- Cross-sector pathways and collaboration deliver significant benefits.
- The main barriers are practical: investment, coordination and commitment.
- Governments should reduce regulatory barriers and support collaboration through appropriate funding.
- Future success depends on stronger partnerships between universities, VET providers and industry.

Q10 What does an ideal joined-up tertiary system look like?

An ideal harmonised tertiary system places people, opportunity and lifelong learning at its centre while recognising the distinct strengths and complementary roles of different providers. It should value institutional mission diversity: some institutions emphasise regional participation and workforce development, others focus on research intensity, innovation or specialised disciplinary capability, while dual-sector institutions demonstrate the benefits of integrating vocational and higher education pathways. The system should support these varied missions while building stronger connections between them.

Students should be able to move more easily (and in both directions) between VET and higher education throughout their lives, with transparent pathways, consistent credit recognition, and the flexibility to enter, exit and re-engage as their careers and circumstances evolve. This means supporting lifelong learning rather than a single linear journey—an important characteristic as labour market shifts require Australians to acquire new knowledge and skills, to develop fresh capabilities and transition between occupations.

The system should also foster collaboration among universities, VET providers and industry, combining theoretical understanding, technical competence and workplace experience to benefit students, employers and the broader economy. Australia’s dual-sector and industry-engaged institutions demonstrate that stronger integration is achievable; their experience should inform future reform.

A harmonised system must not, however, reduce tertiary education to a focus on only addressing short-term acquisition of workforce skills. Universities contribute to research, innovation, public policy and the disciplinary capability that underpins national prosperity—particularly in science, where education and research directly and synergistically support future industries, technologies and national capability over time horizons not captured by immediate labour market indicators. A university science degree is not a short-term ticket to a vocational occupation; it is an underlying foundation for the long-term prosperity of Australia.

An ideal tertiary system treats workforce and knowledge capability as complementary and mutually reinforcing. Success should be measured through educational and workforce outcomes, innovation capacity, social prosperity and national resilience.

In summary, we suggest that an ideal harmonised tertiary system includes:

- Stronger, flexible bidirectional pathways and lifelong learning opportunities across the tertiary system.
- Appropriate funding models that adequately address the costs of teaching, staffing and infrastructure
- Distinct but complementary roles for VET providers and universities.
- Closer collaboration between education providers and industry.
- Balanced support for workforce capability, research, innovation and long-term national capability.

Q11 Which reform opportunities should be prioritised and why? Which ones are likely to have the highest impact? Are there any gaps that should be considered?

We support prioritising reforms that improve educational and workforce outcomes while strengthening Australia's long-term capability and prosperity. The highest priorities should include:

- Stronger and more flexible learner pathways – Improving articulation and partnership arrangements, recognition of prior learning and credit transfer would directly enhance participation and progression.
- Improved support and incentives for cross-sector collaboration – Collaborative qualifications, pathway programs and work-integrated learning models offer significant benefits for students, employers and the broader economy. Explicit investment to facilitate such collaboration will be essential.
- Better support for lifelong learning – Policy settings should recognise that Australians increasingly engage with tertiary education across their lives and careers, rather than through a single episode of study.
- Greater system coherence – Reducing fragmentation across funding, information and regulatory systems would benefit learners, providers and employers alike.
- Realistic funding – Ensuring government funding reflects the real costs of a harmonised tertiary system, which includes establishing and sustaining collaborative programs.
- Sustaining future capability – Reform should ensure that the pursuit of short-term workforce outcomes does not weaken the foundational disciplines, research capability and innovation systems that underpin Australia's future prosperity. Performance measures and funding incentives must not discourage investment in disciplines such as mathematics, chemistry, physics, biology and environmental science, whose benefits emerge over long time horizons and across multiple sectors. Importantly, the reforms must also actively consider the

interactions with and alignment to international and transnational education in both VET and HE sectors.

As governments increasingly focus on outcomes and national priorities, success measures should capture the full contribution of tertiary education, including workforce outcomes, research and innovation, social mobility, scientific capability and long-term national benefit.

Conclusion

ACDS is strongly supportive of a more connected tertiary system that **improves educational outcomes, strengthens workforce capability and enables lifelong learning**. The most effective reforms will build stronger connections across sectors while respecting the distinct strengths of VET providers and universities.

Australia needs a tertiary system that develops both skills and knowledge, supports both workforce participation and innovation, and underpins economic prosperity, social wellbeing and long-term national capability.

ACDS looks forward to working with government, ATEC and sector partners to realise this vision.