Committee Secretary
Senate Education and Employment Committees
PO Box 6100 Parliament House CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Committee Secretary,

Re: Submission to the inquiry into the Universities Accord (Australian Tertiary Education Commission) Bill 2025 and a related bill

The establishment of the Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC) represents a significant reform in Australia's higher education landscape and Swinburne University of Technology welcomes the opportunity to engage with the Committee.

This is an incredibly important moment in time for our sector. A well-designed, well-structured and independent ATEC has the potential to provide the academic and economic scaffolding to help guide and support our country's future growth.

To deliver on the bold ambitions of the Universities Accord, it is important that we get this right. It is important we have a robust, equitable and accessible system to enable the pipeline of skilled graduates for the jobs of the future and to drive the innovation through research Australia needs to boost our economic prosperity.

To that extent, as it is currently drafted, the Bill is not yet fit for purpose. There is further work to be done to develop an ATEC model that embodies true independence, and is equipped with the expertise required to drive the long-term reforms necessary for Australia's tertiary education system to prosper, as outlined in the vision of the Accord.

Swinburne University of Technology

Australia's university system is internationally recognised for delivering world-class education, maintaining qualification integrity, and achieving strong global research performance – underpinned by a well-established and transparent quality assurance regime. Swinburne, an industry-engaged, dual-sector STEM university, proudly contributes to this robust system.

As a dual-sector institution committed to innovation, quality, and sector-wide collaboration, Swinburne supports the need for an approach that is student-centred, streamlined and can address emerging challenges without impeding the innovation required for national prosperity and productivity.

We are committed to tech and people-centred innovation, ensuring our graduates are equipped with the skills and knowledge needed to thrive in a rapidly evolving digital landscape. Our focus on industry engagement and real-world impact sets us apart, making us a leader in technology and innovation.

Swinburne has a unique DNA: technology enriched, and industry connected from its very beginning.

Swinburne recently announced our next chapter for the University, Ad Astra_2030. This strategy lays the blueprint for the years ahead, and focuses our efforts on real world problems, and finding practical world solutions. We will enhance our leverage to create technology for purpose, whilst co-creating the industries of the future.

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Equity

Now more than ever, it is profoundly important that we recognise that an education pathway does, and should, be different for every person, every student, in every context. Equity is core to Swinburne's mission. As a multisector university offering vocational education and higher education, as well as short courses, research and innovation capabilities, we can craft individual and often unconventional pathways to success for those who engage with us, at any time in their or their organisation's journey.

And, as a university built on the foundations of technology, we recognise that in a rapidly changing world, learning can, and more importantly, **should**, look different. That is why we champion broader acceptance of skills and prior learning that recognise micro-skills and competencies built through real-world work experience.

Our tailored pathways and offerings are designed to empower both individuals and organisations to achieve their ambitions and fulfill their dreams, and we are deliberate in meeting our learners where they are, empowering them to take the lead in reaching the goals that matter most to them.

Our learners come from and study in regional, rural and urban areas throughout Australia and the world. They are school students, school leavers, working parents, Indigenous students, first-in-family, career professionals, small businesses or large enterprises. As a result, we aspire to be the most diverse and inclusive university in Australia, where every learner is provided a pathway to success.

At the system level, the proposed ATEC can be a positive partner in Swinburne's journey towards the goals of Ad Astra_2030 and delivering on the Accord's ambitious 80% attainment target, particularly for equity cohorts. Swinburne is building a new education model that aims to widen participation through flexible pathways and broadens success through a learning architecture that gives students the ability to succeed at every step. ATEC – properly enabled – can lead to the modernisation of the funding architecture to ensure the system becomes more accessible, fairer across disciplines and future-ready while still supporting national skills, research and community impact.

Swinburne's new strategy provides a unique new way of learning and experiencing education that makes us a natural partner to the Federal Government, to test ideas, new ways of learning, and new ways of advancing the intentions of the Accord. We encourage the government to engage with us early and often, and we welcome the opportunity to become a willing Petri dish for new concepts, trials and new ways of educating the next generation of learners better-prepared for the challenges and opportunities of the future.

Mission Based Compacts

ATEC's remit to negotiate tailored, collaboratively agreed compacts is an opportunity to recognise the distinctive role of STEM universities in Australia's productivity and skills needs. Equity participation and success in STEM, workforce alignment and research and innovation capability will be key. To achieve this, the compact framework requires deep, structured consultation with STEM institutions and industry, so targets, measures and funding settings reflect their real costs and cohort realities across disciplines, whilst respecting differentiation.

This will make compacts function as forward-looking partnership instruments rather than compliance levers.

Swinburne is uniquely positioned to be the prototype for testing the development of a new Mission Based Compact and Managed Growth Funding model.

If the new models do not allow for a dual sector STEM university to thrive, it will be very difficult for the government to deliver on its Higher Education agenda. We stand ready to work with the Government but must be in early conversations to ensure we get this right.

International Students

When it comes to international education, ATEC is uniquely positioned to play a system stewardship role that is rooted in transparency, and we recommend that ATEC plays a core role in restoring fairness, stability and trust in our education system. This includes taking a long-term, system wide view that factors in the skills gaps that exist domestically.

Policy decisions in recent years have undermined Australia's global standing as a premier education provider and destination. We know that these policies, and the accompanying public narrative, have deterred international students from coming to Australia.

International students play an essential role in the workforce we need now and into the future, and as a nation, we cannot afford to allow this talent pipeline to run dry.

We need urgent policy reforms to maintain and enhance Australia's pipeline of STEM talent, ensuring that the country continues to benefit from the expertise of international students in these critical areas and safeguard Australia's STEM future.

This will ensure Australia remains internationally competitive while securing the nation's long-term economic and technological future.

Commissioners

Swinburne welcomes the appointments of ATEC Commissioners, all of whom can be trusted to bring their insight and expertise to push forward the reforms required to realise the aspirations of the Accord.

Nevertheless, the proposed composition is insufficient in its current form. A lean Commissioner model runs the risk of setting up ATEC stewardship to fail.

Under the Bill, ATEC's three Commissioners are intended to provide the strategic leadership and judgement for a wide stewardship remit – most visibly mission-based compacts and tertiary system advice (including advice on efficient cost across disciplines and other settings). In this sense, we consider the current three commissioner model to be too narrow to steward a complex tertiary system.

The proposal to establish ATEC with only three commissioners risks concentrating power, narrowing expertise and weakens institutional resilience. While we recognise the skills and expertise of the appointed Commissioners, this is a significant undertaking and limited diversity means all relevant key stakeholder interests are not represented.

First Nations Engagement

Swinburne strongly supports embedding First Nations self-determination in every step of this process. Swinburne is currently in the process of pursuing a Treaty with the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung. This Treaty represents a milestone not only for our university, but for higher education in Victoria. We are taking a vital step in rethinking what reconciliation means. It is not symbolic, it is structural, local and long overdue

As a university on a journey towards Treaty, we recognise the importance of genuine engagement and genuine partnerships with First Nations communities, ensuring that cultural safety and inclusion are central to any considerations.

The ATEC must continuously reflect and platform First Nations perspectives in a meaningful way.

Stewardship

As currently drafted, the Bill does not deliver on the Accord's aspirations for an independent body. ATEC's legitimacy over the long-term rests on public confidence that it can provide frank, evidence-based advice without undue influence. A clear separation from the Minister and Department is therefore essential, particularly for Commissioner recruitment and nominations. The Bill should ensure appointments are made via independent, merit-based selection process, supported by transparent criteria and safeguards against perceived or actual conflicts of interest.

Contributions

As it is currently drafted, The *Universities Accord (Australian Tertiary Education Commission) Bill 2025* gives ATEC no direct power to advise on setting student contributions.

ATEC should be expressly empowered to provide advice on both Commonwealth and student contribution levels separately to ensure that costs to the individual do not price prospective students out of higher education.

This includes examining a fairer and more equitable pricing model that values all disciplines and recognises the uncertainty of future workforce needs. In an unpredictable, rapidly changing environment, no discipline should be financially advantaged or disadvantaged over others.

Commonwealth funding, on the other hand, needs to be calibrated to reflect the very different costs of teaching different disciplines with clusters developed to achieve learning outcomes and a positive student experience, rather than simply compute what universities currently do to manage and cross subsidise across disciplines.

Closing Remarks

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this important work. Swinburne supports the vision of a robust, independent and responsible ATEC which realises the bold ambition of the Universities Accord.

Swinburne encourages the Government to consider reforms in the context of the broader tertiary system, so regulation enables rather than constrains the sector's capacity to innovate and respond to emerging national and global challenges.

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We invite the Government to partner and engage with us as we work to achieve what this next exciting chapter looks like for future learners and workers.

Finally, we warmly invite you to visit any of our three campuses to continue the conversation.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Pascale Quester
Vice-Chancellor and President
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