

## Priority Issues for the Universities Accord

The Australian Technology Network of Universities (ATN) appreciates the opportunity to provide this initial submission on our priority issues for the Universities Accord.

ATN is the peak body representing Australia's six most innovative and enterprising universities: Curtin University, Deakin University, RMIT University, The University of Newcastle, University of South Australia, and University of Technology Sydney.

The Accord is a once in a lifetime opportunity to shape higher education for the coming generations and build a legacy together based on lasting reform. We should be bold and courageous. Our ideas should have great scale and ambition, both in terms of scope and what we can all achieve together.

“What do we need to do to set our higher education system up for the next decade and beyond?” Jason Clare asked in the inaugural Bradley Oration.

In that spirit, we call upon the Panel and all stakeholders to rise to the challenge set by the Minister and, indeed, by Denise Bradley herself. We should aim high, embrace ambition and be optimistic about the opportunities we can create by working together.

Universities and the people they bring together are devoted to learning, discovery, dialogue and exchange – we must reflect that devotion in our approach to the Accord. We should not be constrained by tradition or funding. If government is the art of the possible, the Accord should be the art of hope and potential.

Jason Clare also asked, “what can we do here in our universities to open the doors of opportunity wider?” We should also ask what we can do to make opportunity deeper and more enduring.

Creating opportunity is not just about getting a foot in the door, it is about helping students make the most of it and lighting the path for their siblings, children and friends. It is more than being counted, it is about sharing excellence and success through quality experiences.

The Accord should encompass the full suite of activities undertaken by universities, and the important roles universities play in our society. It must underpin the strong social contract that exists between universities and the Australian people.

This may look different for individual universities depending on their local and regional communities. The Accord must consider what we want from the higher education system as a whole, but also establish the groundwork for universities to forge their own compact with their community, backed by funding and support from the Government.

We need diverse institutions for a diverse society. We need a plan that sets the goals for the system as a whole and allows individual universities to define and declare their unique contribution to those overall goals.

There are three fundamental purposes and missions of universities – three core activities that the Accord must consider and address: teaching and learning, research and innovation, and community engagement. We need to directly and explicitly consider the role each of those core activities play, what we want to achieve with each one, and how they relate and depend on one another.

The Accord process is looking at what is needed across the post-18 higher education ecosystem. It will be important to consider how individual institutions contribute to this overall ecosystem without producing a system that is homogeneous and only regards excellence through a narrow lens. The Accord outcomes must allow for differentiated excellence considered against each of the three core activities that define universities.

[info@atn.edu.au](mailto:info@atn.edu.au)  
[www.atn.edu.au](http://www.atn.edu.au)

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## ATN's four pillars

ATN first developed our four pillars approach after the 2022 Federal Election. They succinctly contextualised the issues within higher education an incoming Government would need to address to have real impact. The four pillars represent the challenges faced by universities at an institutional level and how they intersect with the Australian society and economy.

Draft terms of reference for the Accord were circulated for comment in August 2022. The draft terms of reference for the Accord were not ambitious enough in scope or vision, considering the impact that could be achieved by working together. They did not adequately capture what it means to be a modern Australian university, our diverse missions and our role in the community.

ATN responded with our four pillars approach to express the scope and scale we had hoped for from the Accord process:

- **Creating opportunity for people and skilling Australia** – excellence and equity to prepare Australia for the future of work and life
- **Investing in our own ideas, innovations and capabilities** – recognising the importance of discovery, enterprise and impact
- **Leadership in global education, skills and knowledge** – strengthening Australia's place in the region and globally to mutual benefit
- **Contribution to the Australian community, national security and sovereign capability** – fostering partnerships needed for a cohesive, connected and united response to shared challenges

## Accord terms of reference – as they stand now

ATN is pleased that much of our four pillars approach was adopted in the final revision of the terms of reference. However, we believe the Panel should consider a number of issues which we believe need more prominence in the Accord:

1. University missions
2. International education
3. Lifelong learning
4. Equity through excellence

Most importantly, the terms of reference lack direction on defining the **purpose and role of universities**. While education and research are covered, the terms of reference miss the third fundamental purpose and mission of universities – our role as anchor institutions dedicated to community engagement, support and development. More explicitly – what do we as a country want our universities to accomplish? Do we exist for knowledge creation and for investigating issues of importance to local communities? Are we predominantly responsible for preparing the next generation of workers?

**International education** is intrinsically intertwined with the three core activities of universities and the other three pillars – but it also enhances and enriches them and creates new opportunities and experiences for all. As part of the Accord, we must have an open and direct conversation about its value and place within the system. International education is a first order consideration, not an afterthought.

The Accord has a valuable opportunity to give this integral part of our higher education system legitimacy. By legitimacy we mean cementing its role as an enabler of exchange of knowledge across the globe through people, products, ideas and capital. We hope that the Accord sparks a process that culminates in a compact for international education with the Australian people.

The Accord must address the vital role universities play in providing a bridge to a global pool of skills and knowledge and establishing Australia's place in the region.

**Lifelong learning** is mentioned in the terms of reference, but this belies its true importance. For decades universities have provided cohesive and coherent experiences for students through foundational and postgraduate degrees, but we are now educating a much broader group of students.

Universities (in partnership with the vocational education sector) must now turn their expertise and reputation for quality to offering shorter courses, work-based learning and other more flexible pathways. Lifelong learning is crucial for universities to adapt to students' needs, address skills shortages, smooth local and regional industry transitions, facilitate integration of tertiary sector, and help blend work, life and study.

All Australians will need access to lifelong learning post-18 so they can fully participate in society, the workforce, and secure the new and emerging jobs being created. Lifelong learning is needed to fulfill the ambitions and plans of Australians and businesses now and into the future. While participation in university has improved over recent decades, more needs to be done to ensure the benefits are more evenly shared across all communities and regions in Australia.

The focus on equity is also welcome, but it lacks the crucial component of ensuring **quality, excellence and success** - they must be seen as mutually dependent and mutually beneficial if the system seeks to create genuine opportunity. Equity risks being conceived and implemented too narrowly if we simply focus on narrowly defined groups and metrics – we must have a broader and more holistic view of sources and consequences of educational disadvantage.

## ATN priorities

There are threshold questions that the Accord must seek to address and answer if it is bring about significant and long-lasting reform:

- What do we, as a community, want from our universities?
- How do we support universities and communities to achieve those aims?
- How do universities' fundamental purposes of education, research and community anchor inter-relate and support each other?

**ATN's fundamental priority for the Accord is to answer those threshold questions to achieve an open and forward looking consensus on the purpose of Australian universities and what we want to achieve together as a community.**

This consensus requires a strategic and holistic focus on the purpose, form and function of higher education to come to cohesive solutions and address existing structural issues and disadvantages.

This holistic approach is needed to properly understand the inter-dependability of domestic and international education, research, and industry and community engagement.

A disaggregated, component or piecemeal approach to the many different aspects of universities will result in a lack of consensus and disjointed solutions with unintended consequences.

**Within that fundamental priority, ATN's other priorities are:**

- **Ensuring that excellence and success are core to equity and access**
- **Applying an industry and community lens to education and research missions**
- **Defining, valuing and supporting universities' community missions**
- **Establishing the Government and community compact on international education**

To address those priorities, the Accord will need to focus on:

- Lifelong learning and its relation to micro-credentials and access and equity
- Integration across post-school education
- Funding high quality, fair and inclusive education
- Supporting research innovation and excellence wherever it exists
- Impact through community and industry engagement
- Contribution of universities to skills needs through pathways, foundational education, lifelong learning and international education
- Ensuring a resilient and sustainable international education sector.

‘The connection between the vocational education and training and higher education systems’ is key to how universities deliver on that purpose as part of a cohesive, integrated and lifelong post-school system. The Accord must articulate the pathways and connections we want to foster between school, vocational education, the workforce and industry, and higher education – including work-integrated and work-based learning options.

Underpinning all of these priorities is engagement with our communities to understand and meet their needs and ensure their ongoing investment and support. The Accord must speak to the wider roles that universities play in the nation’s economic, social and cultural wellbeing. It must define and value this contribution.

## Practical considerations

ATN also outlines the following practical considerations for the Panel:

- This comprehensive review has a short timeframe considering the depth and complexity of the areas for consideration
- The sector is concerned that any condition that recommendations or reforms fit within existing funding envelopes could limit the long-term vision and impact of the review
- Unified and accessible data will greatly assist the Panel and stakeholders to make informed and evidence-based recommendations – at a minimum the Department must expedite release of 2021 enrolment data.

The Panel will also greatly benefit from existing literature, reform proposals and initiatives. This is an opportunity to forge a definitive and unified path forward on these important matters.

Existing work includes:

- A Migration System for Australia's Future
- Australia's Economic Accelerator
- Critical Technologies in the National Interest
- Employment White Paper
- Jobs and Skills Australia
- National Reconstruction Fund
- Productivity Inquiry
- Review of Australian Higher Education [Bradley Review]
- Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People [Behrendt Review]
- Review of Research Policy and Funding Arrangements [Watt Review]
- Review of Senior Secondary Pathways into Work, Further Education and Training [Shergold Review]
- Review of the Australian Qualifications Framework [Noonan Review]
- Review of the Australian Research Council Act 2001
- Review of the Demand Driven Funding System [Kemp-Norton Review]
- Startup Year
- Trailblazer Universities Program
- University-Industry Collaboration in Teaching and Learning Review [Bean-Dawkins Review].

## Conclusion

ATN appreciates the Panel's openness and willingness to engage with the sector and other stakeholders and the early opportunity to inform the Accord process. We look forward to making further contributions as the Panel progresses its review.

Further enquiries should be addressed to:

**Executive Director**  
Australian Technology Network of Universities  
[info@atn.edu.au](mailto:info@atn.edu.au)