

ATN opening statement:
Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee

Inquiry into the Higher Education Support Amendment (Response
to the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report) Bill 2023

Professor Harlene Hayne CNZM, ATN Chair

1 September 2023

The Australian Technology Network of Universities (ATN) welcomes the opportunity to appear at this hearing as part of the inquiry into the Higher Education Support Amendment Bill 2023.

I am here today as Chair of ATN. Given that this is the first time that I have appeared before the Senate, I would like to let you know a little bit more about my background. I have been the Vice-Chancellor of Curtin University since April 2021. Prior to that, I was the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Otago in Dunedin, New Zealand for 10 years.

Throughout my career as a Vice-Chancellor, I have continued to be a practicing academic, conducting research, supervising postgraduate students, and teaching in the classroom.

I was the first person in my family to attend university and I am personally aware of the extra obstacles that face equity students. I am also a parent, and both of my daughters attended university in the United States and New Zealand. In this way, I have considerable experience in university life in a range of different countries.

ATN strongly supports the intent of this Bill to improve access to higher education. I proudly lead the Australian university that bears the name of John Curtin, the 14th Prime Minister of Australia--a leader who believed that everyone deserved a chance. At Curtin, we share this belief. Equity is in our DNA. My ATN colleagues and I welcome the opportunity to work with the Accord Panel and with Government on ways that we can meet our skills shortages in Australia. But more importantly, we look forward to finding the most effective and sustainable ways to enhance the opportunities for all Australians, improving lives for generations to come.

ATN has led the call for the removal of the 50 per cent pass rule and the extension of the demand driven system to all First Nations people.

These changes will make an immediate impact for some of our most disadvantaged students. This should be a priority for all governments, given the significance of education in reducing disadvantage in a long-term, sustainable and targeted way.

ATN also welcomes the focus on student progression and success. Creating opportunity is not just about providing access, it is about supporting students to make the most of their time at university. We all want our students to succeed. That's why we come to work in the morning.

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Demand driven system for all First Nations students

ATN strongly supports a fully-demand driven system for all First Nations students, irrespective of their postcode at the time of enrolment.

ATN universities strongly believe that everyone should have the opportunity to participate in the economy of the future, and we know that the bulk of new jobs will require higher education. As we continue to build a stronger, more equitable Australia, investment in our workforce of the future should be a high priority for all of us. Extending funded places to all First Nations people is a step in the right direction.

Ceasing the 50 per cent pass rule

With respect to the 50 per cent pass rule, in our experience, students fail for a variety of reasons and many of these reasons are outside of their control (e.g., they get sick, a family member gets sick, they have to work, they are balancing family responsibility and study, a pandemic strikes). Equity students are over-represented in those captured by the current 50 per cent pass rule, particularly students from low SES backgrounds, like me. The transition into post-secondary education can be tough. Students from low socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds, those from regional areas, First Nations and first-in-family students all can struggle to adapt to university in their first year.

In our view, challenging life circumstances should not be compounded by the removal of Commonwealth support for further study. Curtin and the other ATN universities have well established policies, practices, and procedures to identify and support students who are risk of failure. We want our students to succeed. But we must also acknowledge that sometimes life intervenes. No one is at fault. Second chances are important. Additional Commonwealth support for students' living costs would also help to ease the burdens that many face, increasing their chances of success.

ATN strongly supports an evidence-based approach to student support. Fortunately, here in Australia, we have significant expertise on hand through the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE). Although this NCSEHE is based at Curtin, it is a national centre, funded by the Minister of Education. The role of NCSEHE is to design and trial evidence-based support for equity students. Their work will be increasingly important in the future.

Support for students policy

Finally, ATN agrees with the Government that universities should be identifying students at risk of falling behind and helping them to succeed. We already do this. All higher education providers are currently required to have in place processes that monitor and support academic success. These arrangements should be further developed and enhanced if they are not working satisfactorily.

But we would ask that the Committee carefully consider the need and benefit of additional regulation and reporting requirements. We have a well-established and effective regulator in TEQSA. We have existing requirements to monitor and support student progress, and we regularly report data to the Department of Education.

We appreciate the intent to monitor and improve student progression and success, but we must also make sure this is part of an efficient and effective system of administration and regulation. We would welcome improvements in the Department of Education's collection and publication of relevant and timely data.

As ATN universities, we do not shy away from our obligations to students and the community as public providers. We seek to ensure that we can effectively apply our staff and resources to the goal of supporting students.

ATN is pleased that the Accord Panel and the Government have placed equity at the heart of Australia's higher education system. They have also recognised the value of our education, research, community engagement and global development. We look forward to working with you as we continue to foster a high-quality, fair, and equitable system that is accessible to everyone.

I welcome questions from the Committee.