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The Regional Universities Network (RUN) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC) Discussion Paper on A More Joined-Up Tertiary System. RUN is a national collaborative group of six regional Australian universities:

- Charles Sturt University.
- CQUniversity Australia.
- Federation University Australia.
- Southern Cross University.
- University of New England.
- University of Southern Queensland.

This submission reflects the positions of RUN institutions, and in doing so, also aims to represent the views of the communities which RUN universities serve; the one-third of Australians who live outside of metropolitan centres in regional, rural, and remote locations. RUN believes that all Australians, regardless of background or geography, should have access to an equitable standard of university opportunities, tertiary facilities and research services.

Overview

RUN supports endeavours to create a Tertiary Roadmap that will outline practical steps for tertiary education reform. Initiatives to reduce barriers to students accessing education are strongly supported by RUN, including the ability of students to easily navigate all elements of Australia's higher education ecosystem. To that end RUN supports efforts undertaken by the ATEC and Jobs and Skills Australia (JSA) to create an environment that will benefit learners. However, roadmaps released so far indicate a homogeneity tendency with a one-size fits all approach which will be detrimental to regional universities and students. There are marked differences between metropolitan and regional providers, as well as the needs of students which must be accounted for. A simple one-size fits all approach will yield inferior educational outcomes for all stakeholders and risks losing the benefits of a potentially more joined-up tertiary sector. RUN firmly believes that at the core of any action must be a student-centred approach. A tertiary section must be designed around the needs of students, the diverse range of providers and their operating nuances, which include geography, while respecting that there are fundamental differences between universities and vocational providers. These differences should be celebrated, not eroded.

Clear and transparent learning pathways, nationally consistent credit recognition frameworks, and the alignment of curriculum and learning outcomes across vocational and higher education systems will require dedicated funding and meaningful regulatory reform. Future funding models will need to recognise and support cross-sector delivery and there will need to be properly funded incentives for collaboration in curriculum design and student transition that reflects the nuance and diversity in sectoral education provision.

Entering the Tertiary System

Informing learners of career options and tertiary education pathways

Regional universities are a consistent advocate for the need to raise greater awareness and aspiration-building towards tertiary education, particularly among underrepresented students. Regional universities expand educational opportunities for all, especially students who have been traditionally underrepresented in the sector. RUN universities host the highest concentrations of traditionally underrepresented students within Australia's university system with one in five of all low SES students, one in five of all Indigenous students, and one in four of all regional/remote students¹.

¹ Department of Education. (2024). Selected Higher Education Statistics – 2024 Student data. Accessed via <https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/student-data>

Greater access to informed career advice for those aspiring to, or those who are currently in the tertiary education sector is vital. These need to be presented in a consistent, easily accessible manner across multiple mediums.

Students in regional areas often rely upon proximal influences such as family, peers, school and community, and the media, which work to shape their educational and career aspirations. However, there is currently no national requirement for career guidance to be delivered by qualified professionals within Australian schools, leading to inequities and/or inconsistencies in the support available to regional students. Students who may be less familiar with the tertiary education system face greater challenges in accessing career advice and navigating their academic and career pathways. While high-quality advice can be provided by various stakeholders (schools, universities, registered training organisations, TAFEs, employers, employment services, industry organisations, private career advisors, state and territory governments, and the Australian Government's National Careers Institute) these efforts are often fragmented, as different states and territories have distinct frameworks, and stakeholders operate with differing motivations. Additionally, mature age, and less academically prepared students are more likely to use non-traditional methods to qualify for tertiary level study and therefore need greater support in understanding the pathways into higher education.

To address this, career guidance should be standardised and strengthened not only within schools but across all life stages. This would ensure that individuals receive informed, consistent advice on how to maximise their higher education outcomes and support at critical transition points throughout their educational and career journeys.

Parity of esteem

RUN believes that parity of esteem is important, but it must not be conflated with the roles, qualifications, and missions of different types of providers in the Australian tertiary education system. Australia's universities and vocational education training providers are by design delivering different qualifications, in different modes. One is practical and skills-based, while the other is more academic and research-focused. These lead to different qualifications, in different sectors. Both are equally important to Australia's future economic prosperity, and both yield positive societal and personal benefits.

It is vital that both elements of the tertiary education sector are respected and resourced appropriately. Neither should be viewed as superior, or as a feeder to the other. Rather, reducing barriers to credit recognition and enabling greater student mobility between the sectors through recognition of prior learning is vital. There is already significant movement between the two sectors so to an extent, 'parity of esteem' is a misnomer as it suggests that one element is viewed as inferior to the other, rather than recognising the reality that they are designed to provide different training outcomes, to different audiences, with different approaches to learning and accreditation. RUN welcomes the focus of the discussion paper in increasing the ability for students to move between elements of the sector, but this must not come as a result of eroding sectoral differences.

Furthermore, there is significant risk that recent language used by political figures, senior stakeholders and commentators that "going to TAFE, and then transferring to university will save money" is damaging to the perception and value of a vocation education, as well as diminishing the inherent value of a first year course at university. Not only does this misdirect the focus from solving the broader issue of university costing and pricing, but it also enforces a further divide about the roles and value of elements and courses in the tertiary sector. There are countless examples of university students finding their passion from first year study, and using this experience to refine and change their degree choices in subsequent years of study.

Fiscal constraints

The qualifier in the paper “noting fiscal constraints” is pre-emptive and narrows the range of acceptable answers to those that cost little or nothing. Such a mindset risks undermining approaches that would be meaningful to support learner choice and labour-market outcomes across VET and higher education. If there is substantial evidence that enabling greater credit recognition between the higher education and vocational education sectors would enable greater outcomes for students, then it makes little sense to reduce the impact of those initiatives by improperly funding them or ignoring them for a budget neutral option. Australia, as a leading global economy, should, and must, fund education appropriately to enable all Australians to meet the skills needs our economy will require in future years.

Transitioning between the sectors

Examples of effective transitions

While it should be noted that some regional universities are dual-sector universities, and therefore have significant experience in delivering a more integrated tertiary experience, all RUN universities offer targeted pathway programs for students to receive academic credit for studies in the vocational sector. RUN universities offer dedicated and targeted credit recognition arrangements for students looking to transition from the vocational sector into related university undergraduate courses. Two brief case studies of these are found below.

Charles Sturt University

The Charles Sturt University–TAFE NSW Connected Pathways Program demonstrates genuine regional VET-to-degree integration by providing structured, end-to-end student support. The program moves beyond articulation agreements on paper to deliver coordinated admissions, transition scholarships, assessment-literacy coaching, and regional work placements.

Students completing an identified TAFE NSW diploma receive credit towards their Charles Sturt degree, reducing both the time and cost of completing a university qualification.

In 2025, more than 4,500 Charles Sturt students received credit based on their previous VET study. These students were at different stages of their education journey, with 3,113 entering via diploma or advanced diploma qualifications and 1,281 via certificate pathways. These students are studying in fields critical to regional workforce supply, including:

- 867 students entering from the Diploma of Nursing.
- 817 from the Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care.
- 100 from the Diploma of Community Services.

The program’s regional focus is deliberate and consequential. With more than 80 per cent of Charles Sturt graduates remaining in regional communities after graduation, smoother VET-to-degree transitions directly strengthen the supply of nurses, teachers, and community services workers in areas where workforce shortages are most acute.

The program illustrates that cross-sector collaboration can deliver tangible student benefits — but only where institutional commitment extends to support structures, not just pathway agreements.

Southern Cross University

Working closely with TAFE partners, Southern Cross University focuses on providing clear credit outcomes and starting points, so students can understand how their prior study contributes to their degree and plan their next step with confidence. The streamlined TAFE-to-university pathway model ensures that eligible students with approved NSW or Queensland TAFE diplomas, or equivalent qualifications from recognised RTOs and national TAFE providers, receive a guaranteed full year of credit into selected undergraduate degrees, entering directly into second year.

The model covers 20 pathways across 8 degrees, including nursing, education, business, IT, science, tourism and hotel management. Credit is assessed as part of the application process for each named pathway, providing students with upfront certainty about how their prior study will be recognised before they commit to enrolment.

Students entering through the pathway are connected with a Student Advisor from the point of application, providing transition support alongside the credit arrangement.

The pathways are designed so that eligible students apply directly through Southern Cross University, with credit determined at the application stage rather than after enrolment. Southern Cross currently supports more than 300 broader TAFE and VET credit arrangements. The new streamlined pathways sit within this existing framework, providing named and clearly defined entry points for students whose prior qualifications fall within the specified diploma-level criteria.

Enhancing learner experience and outcomes through cross-sector collaboration

Challenges in developing and sustaining innovative qualifications, pathways and practices

There remain significant challenges in successfully mapping student learning outcomes between sectors, which remains a laborious task involving mapping VET courses to higher education learning outcomes. As universities are self-accrediting autonomous institutions, this process must be undertaken by each provider individually. While this autonomy should not be undermined in any way, it is important to note that this must occur at each university. It would not be appropriate for this mapping to be dictated to universities by government departments, or advisory bodies.

Beyond that, pathway access must be supported by strategies that will enable students to succeed in both sectors. Because the pedagogy and accreditation machinations are different between sectors, it cannot be taken for granted that students transferring between sectors will immediately be able to adapt to the various expectations of the new sector, especially when it comes to assessment practices.

Improved access alone does not guarantee student success and to that end, a more joined-up system must also include: structured transition and bridging programs, academic skills development tailored to pathway students, and early intervention and support. These need to be designed and funded separately to existing programs.

Overarching reform directions

An ideal joined-up tertiary system

An ideal joined-up tertiary system would be one that is genuinely designed around student needs and includes clear and transparent learning pathways, a nationally consistent credit recognition framework that is supported by adequately funded structured transition and bridging programs, academic skills development tailored to pathway students with clear incentives for collaboration in curriculum design and student transition, and regulatory flexibility to enable integrated course structures. It would be a system that provides greater access to informed career advice for those aspiring to, or those who are currently in the tertiary education sector. This advice would be

presented in a consistent, easily accessible manner across multiple mediums.

An ideal joined-up system is one where a student can access careers information that reflects labour market realities, and enrolls in a course of study with a clear understanding of the qualification they will receive and how their course of study can provide pathways into, and credit recognition (based on national standards) across the tertiary education sector. It is a system where the regulatory, funding, and information infrastructure enables all students to pursue their passions and critically, it is a system where geography does not determine educational outcomes.

Opportunities to improve Australia's data and information systems

RUN supports efforts to better align, better collect, and better report on data from both the higher education and vocational sectors. This includes timelier release of data, more consistency between data sets, and greater integration of the data using a sector-wide, lifelong, unique student identifier that enables great in-depth analysis of student pathways and outcomes.

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