Regional Universities Network
REGIONAL STRENGTH. NATIONAL SUCCESS.

SUBMISSION

Friday 30 October 2026

The Regional Universities Network (RUN) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC) consultation paper: ATEC Statement of Strategic Priorities 2027-2028 (SSP). 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.

Overview

RUN provides its support to ATEC's proposed outcomes and priorities for the 2027-2028 period and welcomes the opportunity to provide more specific input and commentary through this submission process.

RUN supports the establishment of ATEC as the sector steward, as recommended by the Australian Universities Accord. RUN supports ATEC's clear equity focus, and therefore welcomes the role, work, and lived experience of ATEC's dedicated Regional and First Nations Commissioners. As such, RUN supports the SSP's acute focus upon all underrepresented groups, including Regional and First Nations Australians, and the universities they rely upon.

However, RUN holds concerns about ATEC's stretched capacity in meeting an expanded quantum of priorities while it is still in its establishment phase. While it is important for ATEC priorities to remain ambitious and flexible, and as valid as the additional priorities are, RUN believes the SSP must balance stability and practicality as well. During ATEC's important establishment phase, RUN holds concerns that new priority areas may diminish ATEC's capacity to focus on all existing and new priorities. RUN also acknowledges the additional compliance burden that would be placed upon universities, and disproportionately upon smaller and regional universities, in reporting against an expanded quantum of SSP priorities during future compact processes.

RUN also notes there is no explicit reference to the ATEC undertaking the important work to inform any future reform of the Jobs Ready Graduates (JRG) Package within its 2027-2028 focus. While some narrative within the consultation paper may be interpreted as implied reference to JRG reform (references to the importance of the humanities, social sciences, and arts, for instance, or in ensuring students progress through their studies and incurr minimum debt), the issue of major funding reforms for a fairer university system has been left largely unaddressed by the proposed SSP. RUN would urge ATEC to clarify explicitly whether JRG reform falls within its 2027-2028 SSP.

RUN offers specific feedback to the questions posed by the consultation paper, as follows.

Consultation Question 1

Do the draft outcomes meaningfully reflect progress towards the National Tertiary Education Objective (NTEO) and ATEC's legislated goals? Would achieving these outcomes demonstrate a high quality and sustainable tertiary education system?

RUN sees little alignment between SSP outcomes and progress towards the NTEO. The NTEO (as currently worded) is very broad in nature, but in achieving the expansive social, cultural, economic, and environmental remit of the NTEO, RUN believes the SSP outcomes can be better targeted. As such, RUN anticipates ATEC will have difficulty identifying its role and influence in the health of Australia's fluctuating social, economic, civic, environmental, and/or cultural strengths at any point in time. If the opportunity to revisit the wording of the NTEO were to arise in the future, RUN recommends including specific mentions of students, teaching and learning, research, and research training. Furthermore, a revised NTEO should make explicit mention of equity, participation, and attainment. This may allow ATEC to align its outcomes with the NTEO more readily.

RUN believes the draft SSP outcomes provide clear alignment with ATEC's legislated goals, specifically "improving outcomes for persons facing systemic barriers to education, including First Nations Australians, persons with disability, persons of a low socioeconomic background and persons living in regional Australia". RUN will therefore focus its response to this consultation question on how effectively the draft SSP outcomes may reflect progress towards the ATEC's legislated goals, given the difficulties of neatly aligning SSP outcomes with progress towards the NTEO.

First Nations self-determination and success

RUN believes this draft SSP outcome allows ATEC to readily demonstrate its progress towards its legislated goals and RUN welcomes the prominent inclusion of First Nations self-determination and success in the five draft SSP outcomes.

Equitable access, participation and success

RUN believes this outcome rightly belongs in the SSP and allows the ATEC to clearly reflect its progress towards its legislated goals. RUN universities host the sector's highest concentrations of students from underrepresented backgrounds and welcome ATEC's prioritisation of equitable and affordable access to higher education, regardless of background or geography.

RUN welcomes the minimal student-debt aspect of this outcome but would urge the ATEC to expand its focus beyond student debt alone to other costs-of-study factors that represent barriers to participation amongst underrepresented groups. RUN would also urge ATEC to clarify that 'equitable and affordable access to higher education' extends beyond teaching and learning to include equitable access to research training, research infrastructure, and research participation as well. RUN believes there should be no components of Australia's higher education system in which the ATEC does not seek equity in access, opportunity, and participation regardless of background or circumstance. There should be acknowledgement of the disproportionate lack of opportunities for regional Australians in accessing research training, or progressing to research participation, given Australia's research and innovation landscape becoming increasingly concentrated within a small handful of large metropolitan universities. RUN universities host many highly successful and collaborative research clusters that are recognised as performing at, above, or well above world standard in many research areas vital to Australia's national interest. Regional university research efforts and their subsequent impacts are typically targeted and highly applied to the unique social, industrial, and cultural needs of their respective regions. Just as there is wholesale support for the benefits of national degree attainment rates to be more equitably shared amongst regional Australians, there too must be an equal focus on a more equitable distribution of Australia's research capabilities and research-trained workforces towards regional Australia.

Graduate capability and national benefit
RUN supports this outcome belonging in the draft SSP and believes it to be a meaningful and measurable reflection of ATEC's progress towards its legislative goals. RUN believes this outcome will help reveal the clear national interest in ensuring strong higher education services to regional Australians, given RUN graduates consistently outperform national averages in terms of graduate outcomes and graduate employability. RUN welcomes the consultation paper's specific reference to the role played by graduates of humanities, social sciences, and the arts in contributing to a well-functioning society and resilient democracy.

Research and knowledge for public benefit
RUN welcomes ATEC's stewardship in ensuring a more strategic consideration of Australia's tertiary research activity from a systems perspective and supports 'research and knowledge for public benefit' as a formal SSP outcome. However, when considering how this outcome may demonstrate progress towards ATEC's legislative equity-aligned goals, greater emphasis should be placed on the historically inequitable allocation of research funding, and the resultant maldistribution of Australia's research workforces, infrastructure, and capabilities. RUN supports ATEC's role in ensuring that historically underrepresented groups (and the universities they rely upon) play a stronger role in Australia's research activity and research training.

System quality, diversity, and resilience
RUN supports system quality, diversity, and resilience being prioritised as an outcome within the draft SSP, acknowledging that regional Australians stand to benefit from the ATEC's stewardship over a more sustainable and resilient sector. RUN particularly welcomes tertiary infrastructure being included within the composition of this outcome. As the Australian Universities Accord found, the specific infrastructure needs of regional universities must be addressed, with the final report citing:

> *"Without adequate investment in new, maintained and replacement infrastructure, there will likely be an exacerbation of the existing financial pressures felt by regional universities as well as further erosion of student load in regional areas. To support overall system growth and greater participation of regional and remote students, the specific infrastructure needs of regional universities have to be addressed…. The Review has also heard of critical infrastructure needs that warrant consideration of direct and more urgent funding, including significant maintenance backlogs affecting regional universities and their ability to deliver and attract students, staff and research funding."* ~ Australian Universities Accord Final Report, page 268[1].

No dedicated infrastructure funding pool has been available to regional universities for over a decade, resulting in an accumulation of urgent, unmet infrastructure priorities for the universities relied upon by regional Australians. RUN welcomes ATEC's prioritisation of tertiary infrastructure within the broader focus upon the outcome of system quality, diversity, and resilience.

Within the system quality, diversity, and resilience outcome, RUN believes there is a clear role for ATEC to facilitate greater parity between providers, rather than a continuation of the status quo trajectory that undermines genuine sectoral diversity and sustainability.

1 Department of Education. (2024). Australian Universities Accord Final Report (page 268). Accessed via https://www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord/resources/final-report on 10 October 2026.

Consultation Question 2

Do the draft priorities appropriately reflect the key areas that ATEC should focus on throughout 2027 and 2028? Are there any key focus areas within ATEC's remit that should be added, consolidated, refined or removed, and why?

RUN holds concerns regarding ATEC's stretched capacity in meeting an expanded quantum of priorities while still in its establishment phase, and the additional compliance burden that would be placed upon universities, and disproportionately upon smaller and regional universities, in reporting against an expanded quantum of SSP priorities during future compact processes. Notwithstanding these concerns, RUN supports the SSP priorities as collective, interconnected foci towards the SSP's longer-term outcomes. RUN provides specific feedback to each of the draft SSP priorities below.

National, state/territory and regional priorities

RUN is encouraged by the ATEC focus afforded to national, state/territory and regional priorities. RUN welcomes this priority's acknowledgement that workforce needs, economic priorities, and community aspirations vary not only across national and state jurisdictions, but across different regions as well, requiring place-based approaches that reflect local circumstances. RUN recognises that a bespoke training, education, and research response to the dynamic needs of one region will often be distinct from that of a neighbouring region. RUN supports a departure from one-size-fits-all approaches to sectoral oversight and urges ATEC to recognise and respond to regional nuance to drive a more diverse and responsive higher education system.

First Nations

RUN welcomes the inclusion of First Nations – empowering First Nations leadership and enabling self-determination – as an ongoing priority within the SSP. RUN universities recognise the benefits that strong First Nations leadership and self-determination delivers to all Australians, including to any Australian engaging in higher education. RUN universities are committed to working with their communities, ATEC, and the broader sector, to advance the inclusion, participation, success, and self-determination of First Nations Australians through all aspects of higher education.

Equity

RUN supports the SSP focus on enabling increased access amongst equity cohorts who have historically encountered barriers to higher education. As hosts of the sector's largest concentrations of underrepresented student cohorts, RUN universities – and the communities they serve – support a managed higher education system recalibrated towards equity outcomes.

RUN believes that equity within Australia's higher education system does not stop at an Australian Qualifications Framework Level 8 achievement. Genuine equity for all Australians in higher education, regardless of background or geography, must extend to research training and research participation. RUN would urge the SSP to explicitly mention the access, participation and success of underrepresented groups in research training and research activity within the equity priority.

Quality Teaching

RUN supports the inclusion of quality teaching as an enduring priority within the SSP. Quality teaching leads to enhanced student experience and strong graduate outcomes, and here RUN universities have consistently demonstrated nation-leading performance in (for instance) annual Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching student and graduate surveys. However, RUN would like to see the SSP acknowledge a clear link between quality teaching and the provision of consistent, high quality tertiary infrastructure accessible to all Australians regardless of background or geography across the higher education system.

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A joined-up tertiary system

RUN supports the SSP priority of improving the connection between vocational education and training (VET) and higher education. An ATEC focus upon the barriers to students accessing education more readily between the sectors is welcomed; however, RUN would urge against ATEC taking a homogeneous approach that misaligns with the lived reality of regional universities, regional VET providers and regional students. There are marked differences between metropolitan and regional providers, as well as the needs of students which must be acknowledged and accounted for.

Research

RUN supports research remaining a priority for ATEC oversight, and urges a more strategic, national approach to building Australia's sovereign research capabilities through its higher education system. The Australian Universities Accord found significant national interest in redistributing the weight of Australia's university services more equitably towards regional Australians. The Accord concluded that Australia's future prosperity lies largely within the untapped academic potential of regional Australians. Similarly, RUN believes there must be an equal focus upon the national interest of a more strategic distribution of Australia's research capabilities, research infrastructure, and research-trained workforces towards the regions. It is in Australia's interests for regional universities to be more involved in the nation's cutting-edge research, clinical trials, and new knowledge and innovation opportunities. Australia's most pressing sovereign Research and Development (R&D) challenges and opportunities of the 21st century are primarily place-based, within regional Australia. For instance, the national R&D imperatives linked to:

- food, soil and water security;
- mineral, resource and energy security;
- climate change;
- natural disasters and disaster resilience;
- border and biosecurity;
- defence assets and capabilities;
- Australia's transition to net-zero emissions; and
- the Closing the Gap targets.

In the regions, many of these challenges co-exist with the industries and businesses that constitute Australia's majority share of export wealth and activity. Historically, regional universities and communities have been disproportionately underrepresented in Australia's sovereign stocks of R&D workforces, infrastructure and activity. RUN urges ATEC to manage a more strategic distribution of Australia's research activity, infrastructure and talent from the narrow concentrations that exist today.

Global Engagement

RUN supports the inclusion of global engagement as a priority within the SSP, believing this to be an important aspect of any university's role within a world-class and globally competitive higher education system. While the focus upon global engagement is valid, RUN does hold concerns as to how provider scale and volatility in Government policy may impact upon individual compact negotiations against this priority area. RUN agrees with the SSP's assertion that a strong, secure and sustainable international education sector supports research, innovation and cultural exchange, while enriching learning environments, and building enduring connections between Australia and the world. However, in the post-pandemic period, Australian universities have experienced a range of external factors that have produced vastly inconsistent outcomes between providers insofar as their ability to engage with the international education sector in a strong, secure, and sustainable manner.

While some large metropolitan providers have experienced record growth in international student enrolments in the post-pandemic period, many regional providers have experienced unprecedented declines in international student enrolments. Indeed, of the four Australian universities whose New Overseas Student Commencements (NOSC) allocations in 2026 remain below their 2019 levels, all four are regional universities.

Increasing engagement within any offshore market for instance, through in-country student recruitment activity, or Transnational Education (TNE) is a resource-intensive process accompanied by considerable financial risk. The universities with the least capacity to pursue offshore opportunities are smaller, regional universities whose distinct social missions limit the ability to build scaled operations. RUN would be concerned if the social missions of regional universities, coupled with the unintended consequences of Government decision-making and policy volatility, negatively impacted upon their compact negotiations in relation to this SSP priority.

Furthermore, RUN has concerns around ATEC's ability to properly manage this priority, given that the NOSC thresholds allocated by ATEC are being significantly undermined by other arms of Government in the processing of student visas. It is reasonable to assume that ATEC's focus on this priority may continue to be sidelined by political factors beyond the ATEC's control for the foreseeable future, and as such, the ATEC's ability to address the gross imbalance of international enrolment concentrations within the international student sector is somewhat limited.

Collaboration

While RUN supports the principle of collaboration being an important characteristic of a national higher education system, RUN is unclear as to the role of ATEC in managing this priority. For instance:

- What mechanisms are available to ATEC in facilitating collaborations between universities, communities and/or industries?
- Does the ATEC play a role in facilitating collaboration, or is the collaboration priority intended to be a compact discussion point for providers to report against?
- How does the ATEC see collaboration interfacing with higher education funding arrangements?
- Will there be a practical mechanism that enables collaboration to be translated into funded activity?
- How might collaboration influence ATEC's approach to compact negotiations?

RUN urges greater detail on the ATEC's role in managing a more collaborative higher education system. RUN also supports the consideration of the collaboration priority being embedded across relevant existing priorities rather than establishing a standalone priority, as advocated by Universities Australia.

Student experience and safety

RUN supports the additional SSP priority area focussed upon improving the student experience and ensuring the safety of all students. RUN believes it is in the interest of all providers that any student who chooses to study at an Australian university receives a safe and overwhelmingly positive student experience. RUN sees the clear linkages between the sector achieving consistently high levels of student experience and safety to the Accord's longer-term objectives of increasing participation amongst underrepresented cohorts. RUN believes student experience and safety are fundamental component of Australia's world-leading higher education sector, and welcomes the ATEC's focus on this priority within the draft SSP.

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Consultation Question 3
Reflecting on the interim SSP and foundation mission based compact process, are the proposed priorities practical and useful in enabling providers to reflect their unique missions and operating contexts?
Given the diversity of institutional experiences and outcomes when interacting with the interim SSP and foundation mission based compact processes, RUN believes it best to defer to individual institutions to provide specific feedback to this consultation question.

However, RUN understands that the proposed priorities are sufficiently broad to enable RUN universities to reflect their unique missions and operating contexts. When engaging with mission-based compact processes, RUN believes that existing university plans and reporting mechanisms should be built upon, rather than creating parallel, duplicative frameworks. Greater recognition should also be given to the distinctive civic missions of regional universities, including their contribution to regional economic development, social mobility, social cohesion, community resilience, and place-based innovation, not solely regional workforce supply. Performance frameworks should also allow institutions to demonstrate diverse forms of contribution beyond participation, retention and completion metrics, including regional impact, workforce development, First Nations leadership, community engagement, and research translation.

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