

Australian Catholic University

Feedback to the Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC)

A More Joined-Up Tertiary System: Discussion Paper

June 2026

Feedback to ATEC on *A More Joined-Up Tertiary System: Discussion Paper*

Note: The following feedback was submitted to ATEC via its online submission form.

Entering the tertiary system

Q1. What actions will be most effective for ensuring that learners are better informed of the depth and range of course offerings and occupations when deciding on career options and tertiary education pathways?

A range of actions are required to ensure learners are better informed of their options when making decisions on their tertiary education pathways and careers. Tertiary harmonisation work should address underlying systemic inequities shaping access, participation, and attainment. This includes recognising that learners from equity groups, including low socioeconomic backgrounds, regional and remote communities, and First Nations communities, face structural barriers which influence their engagement with tertiary education. Embedding an equity lens into this process is important to deliver reforms which expand opportunity and actively reduce, rather than reproduce, existing inequalities.

Effective, tangible actions to support these objectives include: pathway programs in high schools; short courses (e.g., to meet prerequisites) and taster courses; summer and winter programs on campus; visiting workshops and specialist programs in schools; better informed, resourced and supported school career advisors; 1+2 models with VET sector/ providers; industry consultation, co-design and pipelines; and articulation agreements between TAFEs and universities to allow entry into diplomas and bachelor degrees.

Q2. What are the tangible actions that can be achieved through the Roadmap to support parity of esteem between the VET and higher education sectors?

A central challenge in connecting the VET and higher education sectors is system fragmentation. Achieving genuine parity of esteem requires more than shifting perceptions; it demands deliberate action to address historically uneven access to higher education and the entrenched hierarchy between sectors. Enabling flexible and transparent movement between VET and higher education is critical to this goal. This, in turn, requires a shift from simply providing information to actively designing integrated pathways across school education, VET, and higher education—supporting coordinated, multi-entry pathways and lifelong learning journeys rather than siloed, sector-based decision points. System-wide infrastructure will be essential to enable this transformation, including the development of a nationally consistent skills taxonomy, shared terminology, and a comprehensive national course and pathway database covering courses, prerequisites, outcomes, and occupational links.

There is scope to expand and formalise pathway architecture through integrated, system-level approaches, including more articulation agreements with guaranteed entry and credit, recognition of prior learning (RPL) and transparent credit precedent frameworks; noting that structured RPL approaches improve access, reduce study burden, and enable more efficient, lower-cost entry into higher education; and integrated pathway models (e.g., staged or dual-sector delivery). Work can also be undertaken to implement consistent, transparent and entitlement-based credit recognition across the sectors to enable mobility and underpin parity of esteem. This should be supported by integrated system design, equitable access to higher education, and industry validation of both VET and higher education outcomes.

Strengthening the secondary-to-tertiary interface is also an integral component in supporting parity of esteem between the sectors. Tangible actions include to facilitate: better resourced and informed career advisory capability; early exposure mechanisms (e.g., school pathway programs, taster and prerequisite courses, on-campus experiences); and direct learner engagement through workshops and specialist programs. This should be complemented by maintaining and expanding outreach, access and enabling initiatives, in recognition that many barriers to participation emerge well before tertiary entry decision points. Furthermore, greater support for dual enrolment, enabling, and school-based pathway programs, are key levers to broaden opportunity and improve equitable access. This should occur

alongside work to embed clear education-to-employment pipelines that are supported by industry co-design and transparent outcomes data.

Q3. Noting fiscal constraints, how could existing funding settings and incentives be better aligned to support learner choice and labour market outcomes across VET and higher education?

Funding and incentives could be realigned to support greater system integration. For instance, this could include uncapping pathway and articulation enrolments within the canvassed managed growth system for the higher education sector, to enable demand-responsive models and subsequent growth enrolment. This would also support delivery on the tertiary attainment targets recommended by the Australian Universities Accord. Measures to incentivise joint VET–higher education program delivery and coordinated pathways could also be explored.

Transitioning between VET and higher education

Q4. What are examples of effective transitions, particularly for learners from underrepresented backgrounds? How can these be strengthened across the system?

Examples of effective transitions between VET and higher education are: Accelerated Foundation Studies programs; entry programs with guaranteed pathways and credit into degrees; and diploma programs with guaranteed entry into the second year of bachelor degrees.

Transitions can be strengthened by expanding tailored pathway programs that transition learners from VET to higher education, incorporating wrap-around support models to support transition into bachelor-level study; particularly for underrepresented cohorts and non-traditional learners. This should be complemented by targeted support models that recognise learners' diverse life circumstances, and address cohort-specific barriers to transition, progression and completion in recognition that academic capability is often not the primary constraint.

Q5. What support arrangements are currently available for VET and higher education learners to assist with moving between the sectors and to ensure they can succeed?

As above. Furthermore, with respect to school students, it is noteworthy that tertiary providers do not have open access to the school system to be able to reach and inform all school students on their tertiary education options. This is primarily the role of the career advisors. VET and university providers are invited to schools to present to students in the following ways:

- School presentations: Presentation times vary and are often only 20 minutes, and so providers are challenged to rush through their offerings and take questions.
- Expos: Multiple providers are invited to have an expo stand and speak to students on a one-on-one basis. Again, time is limited and students choose who they want to speak to.
- School careers nights: These are coordinated by each school with a small number of presentations from providers.

More support should be provided at the school system level to ensure all students are appropriately informed of their pathways and suitability for entry, aligned to their interests. The availability of career advisors can vary by school and school sector; for example, some non-government schools may not have a dedicated careers advisor role, with this function added to an existing teacher's responsibilities. To shift the narrative in esteem between VET and higher education, more must be done earlier in schooling to present the positive benefits of both pathways to students. Relying on schools and tertiary providers to do this in years 11 and 12 is too late.

To support the introduction of automatic pathways between VET and higher education, the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA) needs to strengthen its assurance of VET provider quality to ensure system-wide confidence in qualifications and learning outcomes. This would involve:

- Enhancing regulatory oversight to ensure consistent quality standards across VET providers;
- Strengthening outcome-based assurance, including completion quality and graduate capability;
- and

- Providing transparent, nationally comparable quality signals to higher education institutions and learners.

Robust quality assurance by ASQA is a necessary precondition for enabling seamless credit recognition and automatic progression, underpinning trust, portability, and genuine parity between sectors.

Q6. What can VET and higher education providers do to better inform current and prospective learners of credit recognition arrangements and pathways?

The sector can work to support system-wide reforms that promote greater alignment in credit recognition arrangements and pathways across providers and Australian jurisdictions. Areas for attention and proposed reform measures that would facilitate this include:

- *Credit mapping and recognition of prior learning:* Scale credit mapping, articulation and recognition of prior learning initiatives (e.g., with TAFE and for cohorts such as veterans), moving from program and cohort-level approaches to coordinated, system-wide and standardised models that ensure consistency, transparency, and portability across institutions.
- *Pathways design:* Shift from fragmented approaches to systematised and scalable pathway design, enabling more effective forward planning and broader access to supported transitions.
- *Articulation agreements:* Move beyond bilateral articulation agreements towards nationally consistent framework settings and shared standards, enabling scale, reducing duplication and improving learner navigation across disciplines. For instance, the onus is often placed on students to align their VET studies with a bachelor degree. VET completers, for example, may inquire with a university or explore their website to see if there are existing articulation agreements or to calculate any RPL or credit for studies already completed. Currently, universities are tasked to individually develop articulation agreements with VET providers on a case-by-case basis. This is inefficient and causes duplication considering the number of providers in the market. There could be a model where articulations from VET qualifications are aligned to university degrees from the outset.
- *Regulation:* Address fragmentation by progressing regulatory alignment across jurisdictions, particularly to support multi-state providers and ensure a consistent learner experience across the system.
- *Information for prospective learners:* Improve how learners are informed by embedding clear, accessible and consistent information on credit recognition and pathways within system-level frameworks, rather than relying on localised and institution-specific practice. Coordination and collaboration between the VET and higher education sectors also needs to be actively facilitated. For example, ACU undertakes outreach efforts to offer ACU presentations in local TAFEs, in order to speak to students in their final terms who may be considering further study at university. The University has limited success in securing presentations at all providers as this is dependent on the local TAFE/VET contact. Therefore, having a system in place to coordinate and facilitate collaboration between the VET and higher education sectors to support such efforts would assist in this regard.

Drawing on the strengths of both sectors to enhance learner experience

Q7. What does the VET sector do well that you would like to see adopted in higher education? What does the higher education sector do well that could be applied to VET?

The VET sector with its vocational focus demonstrates strengths in industry alignment, applied delivery, and responsive training models, while higher education demonstrates strengths in scaffolded academic pathways, student support systems, and qualification recognition. Greater system integration would enable these complementary strengths to be more consistently leveraged across sectors, improving workforce relevance, progression and portability. However, while there may be areas for mutual learning, it should equally be recognised that the VET and higher education sectors have different and distinct purposes in the tertiary sector and society – efforts to support greater alignment

between VET and higher education should not confuse this distinction or inadvertently promote uniformity.

Q8. What are the challenges in developing and sustaining innovative qualifications, pathways and practices that span across the VET and higher education sectors? What does each sector need from government(s) to support their development and sustainability?

Structural barriers to developing and sustaining cross-sector pathways and qualifications are the associated administrative burdens and constraints. This includes complexity in credit mapping, partnership management and ongoing maintenance, alongside significant internal coordination requirements across pathways, support models, and institutional partnerships. This is further compounded when recognition of prior learning outcomes must align with a university's credit policy and external accreditation requirements, often limiting the credit that can be granted in some programs. Delivery also requires coordinated input from academic and professional staff, creating workload and capability pressures. It involves multiple internal and external stakeholders, increasing governance complexity.

These constraints highlight the need for system-level standardisation and shared infrastructure to reduce duplication and enable scalable implementation. The absence of nationally consistent credit and recognition frameworks, combined with regulatory fragmentation across jurisdictions limits scale, contributes to duplication and constrains learner mobility. It creates additional burden for multi-state providers and reduces consistency in the learner experience.

Government reform must also be accompanied by deliberate system simplification and investment in shared infrastructure, including systems, processes and platform capability, to enable seamless learner transitions and cross-sector coordination at scale; rather than adding administrative overhead. Furthermore, targeted funding is required to support system integration. This should include flexible or uncapped enrolment settings that enable mobility between VET and higher education pathways and support demand-responsive participation.

Q9. In which geographical locations, fields of education, industries or occupations would dual sector models be best suited? What are examples of work underway?

Dual-sector models are best suited to disciplines with clear occupational pathways and workforce demand, particularly in health, education, and business, and should be targeted and fit-for-purpose, with priority given to disciplines and locations where integration delivers the greatest workforce and learner benefit. Progressing reform in this regard may require piloting dual-sector models at smaller scale, ensuring harmonisation is embedded and evaluated prior to broader system rollout; to support sustainability and scalability. Place-based approaches are critical, with dual-sector models most effective where there is strong alignment to regional workforce needs and persistent local demand.

Overarching reform directions

Q10. What does an ideal joined-up tertiary system look like?

An ideal joined-up tertiary system is student-centred and lifecycle-oriented, enabling seamless movement across VET and higher education through flexible, stackable pathways, recognition of prior learning and diverse experiences. It would support continuous and varied learning across the lifecycle, including re-entry, career change and professional development.

A joined-up system requires whole-of-system transformation rather than incremental, sector-specific reform. This includes reforming the Australian Qualifications Framework toward non-hierarchical, multidirectional pathways that support coherent progression across qualification levels. Furthermore, an essential first step is to achieve standardisation of what currently exists. ATARs and entry ranks need to be nationally standardised, and the scoring mechanism must be consistent across states and territories; so that, for example, an ATAR scored in Victoria is equivalent in Western Australia, the Northern Territory or Queensland. In addition, adjustment factors which augment tertiary entrance scores need to be available to all applicants (not just school leavers), and the calculation and application

of these factors should be consistent nationally. Evidently calls for a single, national Universities Admissions Centre have not been realised due to the differences across states and territories in how entry scores are calculated, what is recognised as prior study and adjustment factors. However, consistency across calculation methods and application of those scores could achieve the required change without state-based tertiary admission centres (TACs) needing to be disbanded.

Similarly, an entry rank for completion of a Certificate III or IV needs to have a national equivalence rather than the current wide variations between states and territories. Certificate III and IV studies, which are increasingly popular take-ups as a component of senior school study, should be standardised nationally, and the contribution such study makes to an ATAR or entry rank needs to be consistent. This requires a scaling system, as used in ATAR calculations, so that the academic rigour of Certificates in different subject matter areas is ranked appropriately, relative to each other.

Furthermore, recognition of prior learning needs to have an equivalency that works between VET and higher education providers. That is, from TAFEs/other RTOs to university, and vice versa. RTOs need to acknowledge complete and incomplete studies at a tertiary institution as credit, in the same way that universities do for TAFE studies.

Q11. Which reform opportunities should be prioritised and why? Which ones are likely to have the highest-impact? Are there any gaps that should be considered?

Reform should focus on coherence across the learner lifecycle, aligning entry, transitions, progression and completion rather than treating these as discrete components, and positioning pathways as integrated pipeline ecosystems linked to workforce capability and labour market need. A long-term system architecture should be defined prior to implementation, aligning policy levers across funding, regulation, data, and pathways, to avoid fragmentation and maximise reform impact. Equity should be positioned as a core system objective, with reform explicitly focused on expanding access, supporting successful transitions and improving participation and attainment for learners for underrepresented groups.

System design should prioritise integration and simplification. This should avoid creating a situation where reform expectations outpace institutional capacity in the context of constrained funding, capped enrolments, expanded equity objectives and increasing pathway complexity. Government reform must therefore be supported by appropriate resourcing and sequencing, ensuring institutions can implement changes sustainably. Consideration should also be given to how a more joined-up system extends to international pathways, offshore delivery and articulation arrangements, ensuring consistency across domestic and global education models.

Q12. What opportunities are there to improve Australia's data and information systems to better support learner pathways and outcome measurement across VET and higher education?

There is an opportunity to develop more unified, sector-neutral information systems to replace fragmented platforms and improve the visibility of pathways across the system. Data reform is a foundational enabler of system integration, supporting transparency, accountability and evidence-based policy development. Data systems should prioritise integration and quality assurance, not just aggregation, to support confidence in decision-making and system oversight. There are also opportunities to improve data and information systems to better support learner pathways and outcomes measurement across the sectors by:

- Improving the timeliness of data publication, reducing reliance on lagged data that limits effective planning, accountability and system coordination.
- Aligning data reporting with policy and performance frameworks, including higher education providers' mission-based compacts, to ensure consistency between inputs, outputs, and outcomes.
- Enabling greater visibility of end-to-end learner pathways, including upstream and downstream flows across sectors, to support system-level planning in key disciplines such as nursing and teacher education.
- Strengthening data capability to support workforce planning, including better integration of education, training, and employment outcomes data.