



A more joined-up tertiary system

Submission by the University of Technology Sydney



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Introduction

UTS welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Australian Tertiary Education Commission's Discussion Paper on a more joined-up tertiary system, and commends ATEC for its examination of the opportunities and challenges facing Australia's tertiary education system.

The Discussion Paper clearly demonstrates that the current level of fragmentation across the sector creates unnecessary complexity for learners, particularly those who are already underrepresented in tertiary education. Students should not have to navigate disconnected systems, inconsistent information, or unclear pathways to access education and training opportunities.

As a public university with a strong commitment to equity and social justice, UTS supports reforms that make it easier for learners to access, navigate and succeed across Australia's tertiary education system. Our experience implementing the UTS Pathways Plan has demonstrated the importance of clear pathways, strong learner support and innovative collaborations across sectors in improving participation and outcomes for underrepresented students.

Across all reform areas, UTS encourages ATEC to **embed equity as a core design principle**. The success of the Roadmap should ultimately be measured by whether it expands opportunity, improves participation and supports successful outcomes for learners from underrepresented backgrounds.

UTS's core recommendation is that the Roadmap include policy and funding settings that encourage providers to invest in pathway development, credit recognition and cross-sector collaboration. Effective student mobility depends not only on learner access, but also on sustained investment and collaboration from institutions across the tertiary system.

Tertiary institutions operate within a competitive environment for students, funding and reputation which creates structural disincentives to collaboration. If the government wishes to improve learner mobility, policy and funding settings must encourage collaboration, innovation and shared responsibility across universities, TAFEs, schools, industry and other partners.

The Australian Government has already recognised this in principle. The Minister for Education, the Hon. Jason Clare MP, has indicated that ATEC will be able to allocate future student places to universities that provide credit for TAFE qualifications (9 June 2026). UTS strongly supports this approach and encourages ATEC to consider additional funding mechanisms that incentivise pathway development and student transition.

Alongside allocations of future student places, existing funding mechanisms such as Commonwealth Supported Places (CSPs) and Needs-Based Funding (NBF) could be leveraged to incentivise and support high-quality tertiary pathways. For example, allocating NBF loading to all eligible students articulating from VET into higher education, regardless of provider, for a transition period. This would recognise the additional support required, incentivise universities to strengthen pathway partnerships and student success initiatives, and build institutional capability while longer-term funding reforms are developed by the ATEC.

As the Tertiary Roadmap develops, it will be important to ensure that reform reflects the full diversity of the tertiary education ecosystem. This includes universities, TAFEs, university colleges, enabling and pathway providers, private higher education institutions, and Regional and Suburban University Study Hubs. Many of these organisations work with learners who face the greatest barriers to participation and have an important role to play in creating a more connected system.

Ultimately, a more joined-up tertiary system is about both economic prosperity and social equity. A system that makes it easier for people to move between sectors, have their prior learning recognised, access flexible pathways and receive the support they need to succeed will deliver benefits for learners, communities, employers and the broader economy.

UTS looks forward to continuing to engage with ATEC and the broader sector as this work progresses. We welcome the opportunity to contribute our experience in pathways reform and widening participation and to work collaboratively towards a tertiary system that is simpler, fairer and more accessible for all learners.

Our responses to the discussion questions are provided below.

UTS's responses to the discussion questions

1. 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?

Access to good careers information is not equally distributed. Students from low socioeconomic, First Nations, regional, refugee and culturally diverse backgrounds are often less likely to have family, community or professional networks that can help them navigate tertiary education and career options. As a result, they are more likely to rely on fragmented or incomplete information when making decisions about their future.

UTS's experience shows that when learners are provided with clear information about available pathways, entry requirements, support services and career outcomes, participation increases, particularly among groups traditionally underrepresented in higher education. Improving access to information is therefore a critical equity measure.

UTS recommends the following actions:

- Establish a single, sector-wide information platform that brings together VET, university, university college, enabling and pathway programs in one place. Information should be presented consistently and include career outcomes, course costs, duration, available credit arrangements and work-integrated learning opportunities. The current spread of information across multiple websites creates unnecessary complexity and particularly disadvantages learners who are less familiar with the tertiary education system.
- Strengthen career education in schools by investing in qualified career practitioners who have current knowledge of the full tertiary landscape, including VET, university pathway programs, enabling courses and alternative entry options. Ongoing professional development should be supported to ensure advice remains accurate and relevant.
- Expand peer mentoring and near-peer outreach programs that connect prospective students with current students and graduates from a range of educational pathways. Hearing directly from people with similar backgrounds who have successfully navigated tertiary education can help build confidence, awareness and aspiration, particularly for First Nations and other underrepresented learners.
- Ensure labour market information and employment projections are translated into practical and accessible resources for students. Career education should help learners understand future workforce demand, emerging industries and the qualifications most likely to lead to employment opportunities.
- Support Regional and Suburban University Study Hubs and other community-based services to act as trusted, place-based tertiary navigation centres. Face-to-face guidance remains essential for many learners, particularly those who may not engage with digital information platforms or who require additional support to understand their options.

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?

The lack of parity of esteem between VET and higher education is not simply a perception problem, it reflects and reinforces real structural inequalities. VET is disproportionately accessed by learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, and the cultural devaluation of VET therefore functions as a devaluation of those learners themselves. Addressing parity of esteem is an act of social justice.

UTS also notes that parity of esteem challenges extends beyond the VET/university binary. University colleges, pathway providers and private higher education institutions often occupy an ambiguous position in public perception, despite providing high-quality, equity-focused education. These institutions frequently provide enabling and foundation programs that serve many students who go on to succeed at university yet they are frequently invisible in policy discourse. A genuinely joined-up system must affirm the value of all provider types.

UTS recommends:

- A sustained, nationally coordinated public campaign affirming the economic value, professional prestige and social contribution of VET-linked occupations, co-designed with VET graduates and industry, and grounded in data rather than aspirational messaging.
- Reforming how qualifications are presented in official communications to avoid language that implicitly hierarchises sectors for example, framing VET as a 'stepping stone' to higher education rather than a valuable end in itself.
- Ensuring that school performance frameworks do not penalise schools whose students pursue VET or university college pathways, which can create perverse incentives to direct students toward direct university entry regardless of suitability.
- Embedding recognition of university colleges, pathway providers and enabling programs within official harmonisation frameworks, affirming their role as a valued and distinct component of the tertiary ecosystem rather than a marginal add-on.
- Establishing formal recognition of dual-qualified professionals across accrediting bodies and professional associations, affirming that holding both VET and higher education qualifications represents genuine expertise.
- Improve transparency to support informed student choice by publishing clear, comparable information on provider quality, regulatory status, student outcomes, graduate employment and pathway opportunities across all registered providers. This would enable students to distinguish high-quality providers based on evidence rather than ownership **model** or public perception, while complementing the government's efforts to strengthen quality assurance across the sector.

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 structures currently create a two-tiered system in which access to income-contingent loans is largely confined to higher education, while VET learners face inconsistent, jurisdiction-specific, and often opaque fee and subsidy arrangements. University college and pathway program students also navigate complex and variable funding arrangements, often with less information and support than those entering mainstream providers directly.

UTS recommends:

- Extending a nationally consistent income-contingent loan scheme to all VET qualifications at Certificate III level and above, removing the cost distortion that currently pushes some learners toward higher education regardless of aptitude or aspiration.
- Ensuring that funding settings explicitly include university colleges and pathway providers, and that students undertaking enabling or bridging programs have access to financial support equivalent to that available to students in mainstream qualifications.
- Auditing Fee-Free TAFE and other subsidy programs to identify gaps in coverage and ensure subsidies are reaching learners who most need them, with particular attention to learners from low-SES, First Nations and regional backgrounds.
- Reforming funding to support learners who exit and re-enter the system including those who partially complete qualifications by enabling accumulated learning to count toward funding entitlements rather than being forfeited.
- Addressing the perverse incentive whereby some learners at some institutions opt against credit transfer to retain access to first-year student support services, by ensuring all learners regardless of entry pathway or credit status can access academic, financial and wellbeing support.
- Investing in enabling and preparatory programs as cost-effective equity infrastructure, not discretionary supplements, recognising their role in building confidence and capability for learners who have experienced educational disadvantage.

2. 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?

The data shows that First Nations learners and low-SES learners rely more heavily on VET-to-higher-education pathways, yet face greater structural barriers to participation, completion and employment

outcomes. However, while transition pedagogy has strengthened institutional approaches to supporting student success, it has not, on its own, addressed these structural barriers experienced by students moving between VET and higher education. Universities continue to absorb the additional costs of curriculum alignment, credit assessment, tailored support and academic advising without dedicated policy or funding mechanisms recognising these activities.

This indicates that effective transitions between providers therefore requires more than credit arrangements, they require holistic and appropriate wraparound support accessible throughout their learning journey (not just in their first year of study).

To strengthen transitions system-wide, UTS recommends:

- Integrating support programs for learners entering higher education on the basis of a VET qualification or via university college and pathway programs, including academic skills bridging, peer mentoring and explicit orientation to institution-specific systems.
- Formally recognising Regional and Suburban University Study Hubs as transition support nodes within the Roadmap architecture, with dedicated resources to support cross-sector navigation and referral.
- Developing 'soft landing' support mechanisms for learners transitioning from higher education into VET, a direction that is currently under-supported and poorly understood.
- Collecting and publishing completion and outcome data disaggregated by entry pathway, provider type (including university colleges) and equity group to enable accountability.

In a mature tertiary system, the Roadmap should support non-linear movement between vocational and higher education sectors, such as embedded qualifications, concurrent study and dual enrolments, shared credentials, credit transfer and recognition arrangements. These arrangements support learners to enter qualified work in their field while continuing their studies and provide greater flexibility to respond to changing workforce and life circumstances.

CASE STUDY

VET to HE pathways

In 2025, more than half of students receiving VET or TAFE-based exemptions entered the Bachelor of Nursing. This demonstrates strong demand, and value of having well-articulated pathways from vocational education into regulated professional occupations.

Strengthening these arrangements would support workforce participation, lifelong learning and greater tertiary system integration.

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?

UTS observes that while some support arrangements exist at a national level, they are fragmented, inconsistently implemented and frequently invisible to the learners who need them most. A critical gap in the current landscape is the invisibility of university colleges and pathway providers as formal components of the education ecosystem.

Students who complete enabling or bridging programs through pathway providers and then move into university are not always recognised within institutional data systems as 'pathway students' in a way that triggers appropriate support. The Roadmap should establish a longer-term objective that all providers receiving Commonwealth funding are able to identify and support students based on their prior educational pathways. Achieving this will require Commonwealth investment in data infrastructure and system interoperability, as many providers currently lack the capability to consistently collect, analyse and operationalise pathway data.

Current gaps include:

- Learners admitted on the basis of VET or via university college pathways frequently miss out on first-year support such as academic skills programs, peer networks, digital literacy orientation designed for cohorts who enter at the beginning of a qualification.
- Students transitioning from higher education into VET may not always receive clear recognition of their prior study or guidance on how previous learning can support their VET pathway. Greater attention to these transitions could reduce unnecessary duplication and support learner confidence and progression.
- Financial and welfare support is not consistently available across sectors and provider types, creating gaps for learners, particularly those moving between a university college and a university or between a university and a TAFE.

UTS recommends that the Roadmap prioritise investment in transition support for students from underserved backgrounds, including those entering higher education through VET, university colleges, enabling programs and other non-traditional pathways. This should include support for student navigation, academic readiness, peer connection and access to wellbeing services during periods of transition.

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

The finding in the discussion paper that most learners are unaware of their credit entitlements (page 36) points to a fundamental failure of information equity and suggests that the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) pathway and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) principles need more support to be fully realised in practice. If learners are receiving conflicting advice about their credit eligibility then this is undermining confidence in pathways as a viable option to them. The Roadmap should therefore prioritise alignment of published credit information across institutions and support this through a national, learner-facing information platform and credit recognition register that provides consistent, transparent and easily accessible information. ATEC could take the lead in developing and maintaining these registers and seek to cover all established pathway agreements across all provider types.

UTS recommends:

- Providers be supported to make information about credit recognition arrangements more transparent and accessible to prospective learners. Given the complexity and cost of maintaining detailed credit precedent information, consideration should be given to Commonwealth-supported solutions that improve consistency and ease of access across the tertiary system.
- Providers should ensure that information about credit recognition opportunities is clearly communicated to prospective and commencing learners at key decision points, including application, admission and enrolment.
- The ATEC National Credit Recognition Framework explicitly include credit for university college and pathway provider programs alongside VET qualifications and, where possible, align with the Australian Qualifications Framework.
- Providers be incentivised to recognise credit on the basis that the provider's course has TEQSA accreditation.

The Roadmap should aim to support providers to strengthen capability and consistency in credit recognition processes, with a focus on improving the student experience and reducing unnecessary delays in pathway decisions.

3. 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?

Both sectors have genuine, distinctive strengths that should be recognised and better connected, not duplicated. Harmonisation should enable complementary functions across the tertiary system while preserving the distinct educational purposes of vocational and higher education.

VET's strengths lie in developing practical competence, strong industry engagement, modular and responsive credentialing that enables students to progressively build recognised skills and qualifications while responding to changing workforce and learner needs. VET also has the capacity to engage students from diverse and disadvantaged backgrounds. Higher education's distinctive strengths include the creation and application of new knowledge through research, the development of critical thinking and analytical capability, preparation for complex professional practice, and education for lifelong learning and innovation.

A genuinely joined-up tertiary system should leverage these complementary strengths through stronger pathways, credit recognition and collaboration, rather than encouraging convergence or duplication of educational missions.

From VET, higher education should adopt:

- Stronger industry engagement in curriculum design through models like Jobs and Skills Councils, producing qualifications that are more responsive to real workforce needs.
- Competency-based assessment approaches for practical and technical learning outcomes.

- A stronger tradition of engaging learners from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds through pre-vocational and foundation skills programs.

From higher education, VET should adopt:

- Greater emphasis on critical thinking, research literacy and theoretical knowledge, equipping graduates to adapt to a rapidly changing world.
- Stronger institutional support for learner wellbeing, academic development and transition, including student associations and peer support networks.
- Clearer articulation of graduate attributes and transferable capabilities, to improve VET graduate mobility across industries and roles.

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?

UTS acknowledges the substantial barriers to developing and sustaining dual sector qualifications, including the resource-intensive mapping process, the difficulty of maintaining relationships across institutions, and the challenge of translating between fundamentally different educational languages. These challenges are real and should not be minimised.

UTS adds that many of these same challenges apply to cross-sector collaboration involving university colleges and pathway providers. Developing articulation arrangements with university colleges and other pathway providers requires dedicated resources, ongoing mapping, and relationship management that is not systematically funded. The Roadmap should recognise university college-to-university pathways as a form of cross-sector collaboration deserving the same policy attention and resourcing as VET-to-university arrangements.

UTS recommends that governments provide:

- Dedicated funding for cross-sector pathway development, explicitly covering arrangements involving university colleges and pathway providers, with grant mechanisms that support ongoing maintenance rather than one-off development costs.
- A national pathway mapping service or shared infrastructure that reduces the burden on individual providers particularly smaller or resource-constrained providers to undertake mapping independently.
- Regulatory flexibility through the proposed Tertiary Sandbox to allow innovative models to be trialled and refined without undue compliance burden.
- Workforce development investment for VET educators and university college staff, who are currently overstretched and for whom cross-sector collaboration represents additional work on top of existing duties.

Additionally, professional accreditation bodies (e.g. Engineers Australia, Nursing and Midwifery Board) are critical in enabling or constraining cross-sector pathways, particularly in regulated professions. Their accreditation standards directly influence curriculum design, credit recognition and the feasibility of dual-sector or articulated qualifications. The Roadmap should explicitly engage professional bodies as system partners in pathway design to ensure that harmonisation efforts align with accreditation requirements and support scalable, recognised pathways into professional practice.

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 institutions demonstrate that stronger pathways can be achieved through aligned curriculum, coordinated student support and transparent credit recognition. Their success reflects collaboration and student-centred design, rather than organisational structure alone. The key lesson is not to expand dual-sector institutions, but to apply the strengths of the model across the tertiary system. Harmonisation should enable collaboration while preserving the distinct roles of VET and higher education.

From an equity perspective, reform should prioritise regions, industries and student cohorts where fragmented pathways create the greatest barriers to participation, progression and employment.

UTS also notes that the geographical question must include the role of Regional and Suburban University Study Hubs as anchor infrastructure for cross-sector collaboration in communities without a major university or TAFE campus. These hubs are well-placed to broker relationships between providers, host cross-sector advising services, and support learners navigating between VET, university college and

higher education options. Their potential as nodes of joined-up tertiary infrastructure is underutilised in the current policy framework.

UTS identifies the following priority areas:

- Regional and remote communities, where co-located or hub-based models including Regional University Study Hubs may represent the only viable pathway to both VET and higher education qualifications without relocation.
- Outer metropolitan communities, where Suburban University Study Hubs serve diverse, high-equity populations and where university college programs play a critical access function.
- Fields with sequential occupational requirements such as in nursing, early childhood education, social work and allied health where VET and higher education qualifications serve distinct but interconnected roles and workforce shortages are acute.
- Emerging industries, including clean energy, digital technology and care economy roles, where neither sector alone has developed the full range of required credentials.
- Industries with strong apprenticeship cultures where higher-level apprenticeship models could widen participation, including construction, engineering and manufacturing.

UTS also notes the promising work underway at RMIT (dual-award degree apprenticeship in mechanical engineering), Adelaide University's degree apprenticeship pilot, and the Flinders/TAFE SA dual offer model as examples worthy of evaluation and, where successful, systematic expansion.

In terms of fields of education, UTS is a member of the NSW Department of Education's Credit Working Group where the State has prioritised the following occupations for exploration:

Area	Code	Occupation Name
Construction	1331	Construction Managers
Agriculture and agrifood	2343	Environmental Scientists
Digital and cyber	2613	Software and Applications Programmers
Net Zero	2332	Civil Engineering Professionals
Care and support	2544	Registered Nurses
Advanced manufacturing	2631	Computer Network Professionals
Education	2412	Primary School Teachers

UTS recommends the Commonwealth works with the States to ensure objectives and priorities are aligned for providers, all of whom are investing significantly to meet national, state and regional needs and objectives.

4. Overarching reform directions

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

An ideal joined-up tertiary system is one in which a person's background, postcode, family history and financial circumstances do not determine the educational pathway available to them. It is a system in which underrepresented learners are central to system design, and their outcomes are the primary measure of system success.

Indicators of a harmonised system could include:

CASE STUDY

Institute of Applied Technology – Digital

UTS has invested in a series of partnerships with TAFE NSW to address emerging educational and skills needs.

A key example of work underway is the Institute of Applied Technology – Digital (IATD) at Meadowbank which recently transitioned into a National Centre of Excellence. Since 2023, the IATD has supported more than 400,000 enrolments in micro skills and microcredentials, demonstrating the strength of the partnership between UTS, TAFE NSW, Macquarie University and Microsoft.

This next phase reflects continued government commitment to the IATD as a key mechanism for addressing critical digital skills needs, including artificial intelligence and cybersecurity.

- Every learner, whether entering through VET, a university college, an enabling program or directly into higher education, has access to clear information, genuine choice, and appropriate support.
- Prior learning is respected and recognised, so that no learner is required to repeat what they already know simply because systems do not communicate with each other.
- The value of a qualification is determined by what a learner knows and can do, not by which sector or provider type issued the credential.
- Pathways run in all directions, with learners able to move between VET, university colleges, enabling programs and higher education across their lifetime without penalty or administrative burden.
- Funding arrangements are transparent, equitable and do not create perverse incentives that distort learner choices.
- All provider types including university colleges, pathway providers and Regional and Suburban University Study Hubs are recognised as valued components of the tertiary ecosystem, not peripheral actors.

UTS emphasises that a joined-up system does not mean a homogenised system of replicated functions. The distinct strengths of VET and higher education practical competence and theoretical depth respectively should be preserved and celebrated, not blended into a grey middle. The goal is connection, not convergence.

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?

UTS recommends prioritising reforms in the following order, based on their likely equity impact and implementation feasibility:

Highest priority (short term):

- National Credit Recognition Framework: The ATEC's announced framework is the single most important near-term reform. It must cover credit from VET qualifications and from university college and pathway programs, must be mandatory rather than aspirational, and must include accountability mechanisms.
- Sector-neutral information infrastructure: A unified digital platform presenting all tertiary options including university college programs, enabling courses and Study Hub resources on equal terms, achievable in the short term with immediate equity impact.
- Extension of income-contingent loans to VET: The funding asymmetry between sectors is a root cause of inequitable pathway choices. Extending HECS-style loans to Certificate III and above would remove a significant structural distortion.

Medium-term priorities:

- Transition support standards: Minimum standards for learner support during all cross-sector transitions, including university college-to-university pathways, backed by funding conditions.
- Career guidance reform: Funded, qualified career practitioners in secondary schools with mandatory knowledge of the full tertiary landscape, supported by national professional standards.
- Dual sector regulatory streamlining: Full implementation of the ASQA/TEQSA Dual Sector Regulatory Strategy to reduce compliance burden for providers registered in both sectors.

Longer-term systemic reform:

- AQF reform: Revisiting the qualifications framework to better reflect the equal value of all tertiary credentials and support genuinely cross-sector qualification design.
- National skills taxonomy: Completion and adoption of JSA's National Skills Taxonomy as common language for skills recognition across sectors.

In terms of gaps, the discussion paper gives insufficient attention to university colleges, private higher education providers and pathway programs as formal components of the tertiary system. The Roadmap must explicitly include these providers in its architecture, funding and accountability mechanisms. The paper also gives limited attention to learners who are culturally and linguistically diverse and to learners with disability – cohorts that require targeted reform attention.

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?

From an equity perspective, the current gaps in cross-sector data are not merely technical inconveniences they make it impossible to hold the system accountable for equity outcomes. A particular data gap that UTS highlights is the near-complete absence of longitudinal data on learners who move through university college or pathway programs into higher education. Without this data, the significant equity contribution of these providers is invisible to policymakers.

UTS recommends:

- Acceleration of the JSA/Department of Education work to align VET and higher education datasets, with explicit inclusion of university college and pathway provider data, enabling cross-sector learner pathways to be tracked longitudinally.
- Disaggregation of all published outcome data by equity group (low-SES, First Nations, disability, CALD, regional/remote, first-in-family), entry pathway, and provider type including university colleges as a baseline requirement for evidence-based policy.
- Investment in qualitative research alongside administrative data, recognising that the lived experience of learners navigating the system contains insights that aggregate data cannot capture.
- A public-facing outcomes dashboard, maintained by ATEC, presenting cross-sector learner outcomes across all provider types in accessible formats, updated regularly.
- Specific investment in data on credit recognition: both successful and unsuccessful applications, disaggregated by equity group and provider type, to establish a baseline and monitor progress against the National Credit Recognition Framework.
- Regional and Suburban University Study Hubs to be included in national data collection as discrete entities, enabling their equity contribution to be measured and reported.