Australian Academy of the Humanities

ACADEMY OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES IN AUSTRALIA

Submission to the Australian Tertiary Education Commission

Statement of Strategic Priorities 2027-28 Consultation Paper

Introduction

The Australian Academy of the Humanities (AAH) and the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia (ASSA) are the national bodies for their respective fields. Representing excellence across the humanities and social sciences disciplines, bringing together the nation's leading thinkers to provide independent, evidence-based advice on important issues facing society.

Our Academies welcome the opportunity to provide this joint submission in response to the Australian Tertiary Education Commission's (ATEC) *Statement of Strategic Priorities 2027-28 Consultation Paper (the consultation paper).*

The inaugural statutory Statement of Strategic Priorities (SSP) presents an important opportunity to establish a coherent national framework for tertiary education stewardship, which respects both institutional autonomy and the diversity of university missions.

Our Academies broadly support the direction of the SSP, particularly the commitment to researcher training, explicit recognition of First Nations self-determination and success, and ensuring the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences thrive within the tertiary education system. The detail of the supporting Strategic Plan and Workplan will be critical to translate the outcomes and priorities into tangible actions which are clearly **defined, measured, resourced and implemented in practice.**

Question 1: Do the draft outcomes meaningfully reflect progress towards the National Tertiary Education Objective and ATEC's legislated goals? Would achieving these outcomes demonstrate a high quality and sustainable tertiary education system?

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?

In response to **questions 1 and 2 of the consultation paper**, we recommend the following changes to refine and strengthen the SSP:

1. **Explicitly incorporate monitoring national knowledge and disciplinary capability into the stewardship framework.** This would mean a role for ATEC in identifying and monitoring national capability gaps, assessing risks to the sustainability of critical disciplinary expertise, and supporting coordination and investment where individual institutions cannot adequately address system-wide needs. The AAH's Asia capability report and ASSA's *Social Sciences for Australia's Future* report clearly identify nationally important disciplines whose viability is at risk, with potential losses that would undermine the national interest. We recommend expanding the "national, state/territory and regional priorities" section to explicitly include sustaining disciplinary capabilities of national importance, with ATEC monitoring disciplinary health and using mission-based compacts to support strategically important but vulnerable disciplines. This would also give practical effect to the proposed outcome that the humanities, social sciences and arts should "thrive".

2. **Prioritise establishing system-level data and analysis to support the performance framework and State of the Tertiary Education System reporting.**

   Addressing significant gaps in the higher education data is essential to provide a reliable picture of national disciplinary capability and enable ATEC to identify emerging risks and guide timely intervention.

   To "provide guidance to governments, stakeholders and the public about current challenges and opportunities in tertiary education" ATEC requires access to robust system-level data on the tertiary education workforce, education pathways, research capacity and discipline-level trends. The underlying ABS Australian Standard Classification of Education dates back to 2001. Reviewing and updating these classifications should form part of building the evidence base required for effective system stewardship. A commitment to data capture, coordination and consolidation by ATEC would provide a national evidence base through which governments and institutions could make informed decisions.

3. **Clearly articulate how priorities collectively contribute to the National Tertiary Education Objective.** The current draft does not clearly articulate either the relationship between the proposed priorities or the causal pathway from those priorities to the system-level outcomes and the National Tertiary Education Objective (NTEO). Without a clear framework, priorities risk being treated as discrete goals rather than mutually reinforcing elements of a coherent reform agenda. We encourage ATEC to articulate these relationships through a systems-level analysis of the tertiary education system.

4. **Encourage greater alignment between the SSP and the vision, guiding principles and outcomes of the First Nations Education Policy.** Better alignment with the forthcoming First Nations Education Policy would support a coherent strategic framework. To ensure this priority is meaningfully implemented the ATEC should embed this commitment across its stewardship activities, mission-based compacts and performance frameworks, with measures of success developed in partnership with First Nations peoples and supported by clear accountability, adequate resourcing and First Nations leadership.

5. **Prioritise higher education funding reform.** Explicitly commit to reforming the Job-ready Graduates (JRG) Package, including the implications for student contributions. The JRG runs counter to the proposed outcome of 'Equitable access, participation and success' and the equity priority's focus on improving participation, progression, retention and completion among students facing systemic barriers. Its unequal debt burdens also sit uneasily with the proposed outcome that students finish their studies 'incurring minimum debt'. The evidence is now overwhelming that the JRG is inequitable, poorly targeted and inconsistent with the objectives of the Higher Education Loan Program (HELP). Rather than aligning student contributions with graduates' capacity to repay, JRG imposes the highest debts on many graduates with lower lifetime earnings and weaker repayment prospects, while reducing contributions for graduates with stronger repayment capacity.[1] There is also mounting evidence that enrolments from low-SES student groups have declined since the introduction of the JRG.[2] Funding reform is therefore essential to aligning the system's financial settings with ATEC's participation and equity ambitions. The ATEC should support an immediate redesign of student and Commonwealth contribution arrangements to replace JRG with a simpler and more equitable model.

[1] Warburton, M, (July 2026), Fixing JRG: Gender, Lifetime Incomes and the Argument for a Single Rate of Student Contribution (Working/Occasional Paper, Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne), https://melbourne-cshe.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/5596656/Fixing-JRG-a-single-rate-of-student-contribution.pdf

[2] 2050 Alliance (March 2026) JRG Student Contributions and Low SES Enrolments, https://iru.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/3.-JRG-student-contributions-and-Low-SES-enrolments-March-2026.pdf

6. **Recognise 'success' varies across cohorts facing barriers to tertiary education and it includes their transition to employment and lifelong learning.** Equitable access, participation and success for low SES, regional, rural and remote and students with disabilities needs to involve not just the opportunity to attend university, but also gain knowledge and skills, and to achieve tertiary attainment with connections to employment and opportunities for lifelong learning. Within this context, an equity framing recognises people have different starting points, and that 'success' will vary across people and across time. Improving system design and provider service delivery will be fundamental to achieving this outcome and could include different models of community voice and specific equity indicators.

Q3: 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?

We support practical and useful mission-based compacts that allow universities to reflect their distinctive missions, strengths and operating contexts. However, their effectiveness depends on a nationally coherent approach that balances institutional flexibility with oversight of the tertiary education system as a whole.

Without a clear understanding of the diversity of institutional missions, disciplinary expertise institutional collaborations and capability across the system, ATEC may be limited in assessing the collective contribution of individual compacts to the NTEO and SSP outcomes, or identifying national capability gaps and risks. The metrics used to develop and assess compacts should therefore be fit for purpose, reflecting both institutional missions and differences across disciplines and fields of research. This would help preserve institutional diversity while enabling ATEC to identify and respond to system-wide needs that may not be apparent through institution-by-institution planning.

The Australian Academy of the Humanities and Academy of the Social Sciences of Australia stand ready to contribute its expertise and work collaboratively with ATEC, universities, governments and other stakeholders to advance these objectives.

To discuss any matters raised in this submission, please contact Dr Kylie Brass, Director Policy and Research, Australian Academy of the Humanities (Kylie.Brass@humanities.org.au) or Andrea Verdich, Policy Director, Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia (andrea.verdich@socialsciences.org.au).