

Submission to the
Australian Tertiary
Education
Commission

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THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

Consultation on A More Joined- Up Tertiary System: Discussion Paper

Executive Summary

The University of Melbourne welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the new Tertiary Roadmap. The University supports a more diverse, connected and properly resourced tertiary education system, that encourages system diversity, with differentiation between teaching-intensive, research-intensive and vocational institutions. This differentiation should be accompanied by easier to navigate pathways for students between institution types, while retaining their distinct missions, to deliver benefits to learners and the broader economy.

Transitions and pathways between VET and higher education are particularly important and universities, especially dual-sector institutions, are undertaking significant work to create easier progress for students moving between these sectors. However, this submission focuses in particular on the role of professional education and pathways for students looking to upskill or reskill after an initial undergraduate degree. We make two key points about how the Tertiary Roadmap should support these diverse student pathways:

1. The Roadmap should encompass a comprehensive range of pathways across the entire Australian Qualifications Framework, including postgraduate qualifications, rather than focusing solely on transitions between VET and higher education. Student pathways are diverse and may involve transitions within higher education, within VET, between sectors, and in and out of the workforce.
2. A principles-based approach should support credit transfer and recognition of prior learning (RPL) rather than a prescriptive national framework. Providers should retain responsibility for credit and RPL decisions, supported by transparency and shared best practice. This approach will enable smooth pathways for students while preserving academic independence, diversity and innovation within the tertiary system.

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Pathways across the Australian Qualifications Framework

Jobs and Skills Australia (JSA) [forecasts](#) in November 2024 indicated that more than 90 per cent of employment growth over the next decade will occur in roles requiring post-secondary qualifications. While the ATEC discussion paper identifies persistent challenges in harmonising the VET and higher education sectors, including regulatory complexities and funding disparities, this submission focuses on accessible pathways through the tertiary system that can be advanced through improved credit transfer and articulation arrangements.

The current policy focus on pathways between VET and higher education is very important, but it does not capture the full range of pathways students may seek. Students move between institutions at different points in their lives, undertaking undergraduate study at one institution and postgraduate study at another, transitioning between VET and higher education, or moving in and out of the workforce. Each of these transitions requires clear pathways.

The Universities Accord suggested that “institutions need to innovate and evolve in type, diversity, size and number over the coming decades to respond to the changing needs of our students and economy” (p. 14). In response to this and the Strategic Examination of R&D’s finding that university registration requirements have resulted in too many broad-based universities, the Government is now considering revising the Provider Category Standards to allow for greater sector diversity and specialisation.

If universities are permitted to specialise, the tertiary system would shift fundamentally. While some broad-based institutions would remain, others could concentrate on particular fields of study, qualification levels, modes of delivery, or student cohorts. Rather than having all institutions offering comprehensive programs, institutional offerings would become more complementary, with no single institution necessarily providing every program a student might need. This greater diversity would increase student mobility: a student might undertake a broad undergraduate degree at one institution, then move to a specialist institution for postgraduate study; another might complete a VET qualification, transition to higher education, then move to a different institution for postgraduate study. That increased mobility places greater importance on seamless pathways for students, with clear articulation agreements and straight-forward credit transfer arrangements.

The Tertiary Roadmap should recognise and support this full range of pathways. As identified in the ATEC discussion paper, it should prioritise improving credit transfer arrangements and pathways through articulation agreements, particularly for fields with strong occupational links and clearer alignment between different levels of qualifications, such as nursing and teaching.

Cross-sector tertiary data

The lack of cross-sector tertiary data can make it challenging to understand where pathways exist and where barriers prevent students from moving between sectors. The University welcomes work underway by JSA and the Department of Education to align core VET and higher education datasets. This should focus on using existing data where possible, noting that the [Better Regulation Working Group](#) is currently considering opportunities to reduce reporting burdens and adopt consistent reporting measures across systems.

Support for underrepresented cohorts

As noted in the University’s 2025 [submission](#) to the Productivity Commission, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, people with disability, those in regional and remote areas, women, mature-aged workers and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are generally more likely to have non-linear educational or career pathways. For those students, the complexity of applying, inconsistency across providers and lack of transparency in individual provider rules can complicate their efforts to seek credit transfer and RPL.

Acknowledging this, the University is exploring RPL and credit transfer processes in partnership with other institutions, particularly for non-traditional learners, to support more equitable access to higher education including through program-level articulation arrangements.

Examples of diverse pathways

The University of Melbourne's pathway initiatives demonstrate how institutions can facilitate seamless progression for professional education, including through articulation arrangements and partnerships.

Melbourne Curriculum

The Melbourne Curriculum exemplifies how institutions can structure pathways, including through program articulation, to serve different cohorts. At the University of Melbourne, students are offered seven broad three-year bachelors degrees with pathways into specialised professional postgraduate programs. The undergraduate programs allow students time for exploration and to acquire core disciplinary knowledge in their chosen major, before specialising in a professional postgraduate program. This structure enables students to make more informed career choices by discovering new interests before committing to a specialisation or career path.

The Melbourne Curriculum also addresses the needs of career-changers and mid-career professionals through flexible postgraduate entry. For graduates seeking career transition or advancement, a two-year postgraduate degree often represents a more efficient pathway than another three-year undergraduate degree. For example, someone looking to retrain as a registered nurse could complete a Master of Nursing Science in two years rather than undertaking full undergraduate retraining. For those already in the workforce, a range of one-year part-time graduate certificates provide targeted upskilling which can be completed while learners remain in the workforce. These pathways demonstrate how a coherent system can accommodate students at different life and career stages.

A truly joined-up tertiary system should accommodate multiple entry and exit points for students at different career stages. Yet Government policy often overlooks qualification models that support rapid professional development and career transitions. The [Nuclear-Powered Submarine Student Pathways program](#) exemplifies this gap. By restricting places to bachelor level courses, it overlooked professionals with relevant degrees and work experience who could have entered the workforce more quickly through postgraduate study. This constraint undermines system coherence by forcing career-changers into longer, less efficient pathways rather than building on students' existing qualifications.

Doctor of Medicine Pathways

The University's medical pathways demonstrate how articulated entry points can both serve learners and address specific workforce gaps. In regional Victoria, the University partners with La Trobe University to deliver the [Rural Pathway](#) within the Doctor of Medicine. This partnership ensures that students can complete their entire medical education in a regional setting, with more than half of the Doctor of Medicine CSPs at the Shepparton-based Department of Rural Health reserved for graduates of La Trobe's Bachelor of Biomedical Sciences (Medical) in Bendigo and Wodonga. By eliminating the need for students to relocate to metropolitan centres, the pathway helps build a medical workforce with local knowledge and a commitment to underserved regional communities.

The University has also partnered with Victoria University to offer the Doctor of Medicine [North Western Pathway](#), which will strengthen the general practice and primary care workforce in the western and north-western Melbourne growth corridor. Victoria University graduates from approved degrees, including the Bachelor of Nursing, receive priority access to the Enhanced Primary Care Stream of the Doctor of Medicine and undertake their clinical placements at the Western Clinical School. This pathway enables graduates already located in the west of Melbourne to transition into medicine while remaining geographically

connected to their home region. This helps meet student needs while addressing the specific healthcare needs of a rapidly growing area.

Melbourne Online and Professional Development

As occupations evolve and the economy shifts, mid-career professionals increasingly need accessible opportunities to upskill and reskill without leaving the workforce or undertaking lengthy full-time study. A student-centred tertiary system must meet learners where they are—recognising that career development is not linear and that professionals at different life stages require different forms of support. The University supports this through multiple flexible pathways.

[Melbourne Online](#) offers graduate degrees for working professionals in health, information technology, business and management, and education, with six intakes per year enabling students to accelerate study or take breaks as work and personal commitments require. The Master of Youth Mental Health, co-designed with Orygen (Australia's largest youth mental health research organisation), exemplifies how the University tailors postgraduate offerings to emerging workforce needs.

For those seeking rapid skill development, the University offers [short courses and micro-credentials](#). This modular approach allows professionals to build targeted expertise incrementally. The University also collaborates with industry to co-design bespoke professional development programs tailored to workforce needs. For example, our partnership with Rabobank delivered training on carbon-neutral agriculture, enabling their employees to upskill in response to sector-wide shifts toward low-emission farming practices. Together, these offerings demonstrate how a coherent tertiary system can create multiple entry and exit points for mid-career professionals, enabling them to upskill and reskill through flexible pathways.

Academy of Sport, Health and Education

Place-based partnerships are critical to creating seamless pathways within regional communities. The [Academy of Sport, Health and Education](#) (ASHE), based in Shepparton, exemplifies this approach through a partnership between the University, the Rumbalara Football and Netball Club and GOTAFE. ASHE supports Indigenous and other young people to complete secondary and TAFE qualifications before transitioning to employment or further education, all within their community.

By funding ASHE's operations while GOTAFE delivers course programs, the University ensures that students can progress from secondary through vocational qualifications to university study without leaving the Goulburn Valley region. ASHE graduates pursuing further study typically enrol at GOTAFE Shepparton or La Trobe University's Shepparton Campus, demonstrating how place-based institutional collaboration creates coherent pathways rooted in community.

Victorian Medtech Skills and Devices Hub

Effective tertiary systems leverage shared infrastructure and expertise to serve multiple groups—students, workers, and employers—simultaneously. The [Victorian Medtech Skills and Devices Hub](#) (VMH) is a collaborative initiative between industry and education and training providers. Officially launched in June 2023, VMH is supported by the Victorian Government and delivered by a consortium led by the University and including RMIT, Swinburne University, and the Aikenhead Centre for Medical Discovery (ACMD).

VMH is based in the ACMD and manages a purpose-built laboratory space, offering University and TAFE students practical and realistic training in Good Manufacturing Practice and cleanroom best practice in a mock manufacturing environment representative of real industry conditions. It also offers space to industry seeking to train new and existing staff, as well as training providers seeking to enhance their existing training offerings by adding a practical element to their courses.

To help provide people with experience and grow awareness, VMH has developed a Medtech Industry Connections program, for which it is building an opt-in database of university and VET students and recent graduates. When a business is interested in offering an internship position, hiring a student or a new graduate – usually in a contract or part-time role – VMH accesses its database and provides the business with a list of students with relevant training. VMH is also working with dual-sector education partners to facilitate a VET – Medtech Industry Careers Fair towards the end of 2026. The aim is to showcase medtech industry-relevant skills learnt during VET courses to companies hiring the next generation of future employees.

Principles-based credit transfer and recognition of prior learning

While the University supports more seamless pathways, we recommend a principles-based approach to credit transfer and RPL reform rather than a prescriptive framework. We recommend two key principles. First, credit transfer and RPL decisions should remain the responsibility of individual providers. Providers are best positioned to assess the equivalence of learning and make decisions about credit recognition to ensure that students are set up for success in academic programs they are entering while enabling student mobility. Different institutions may make different decisions about credit recognition depending on their mission, the context and nature of the student's prior learning, and the requirements of their academic programs. This flexibility is appropriate and necessary. It also supports academic autonomy.

Second, providers should commit to transparency and sharing best practice in decision-making. This allows the sector to learn from each other and improve practices over time, while still preserving provider autonomy. Providers should also commit to providing clear and relevant information for students on pathways and courses available to them, including any arrangements where credit transfer is guaranteed.

An overly prescriptive framework – one that mandates how credit transfer and RPL must be assessed and applied – risks constraining this diversity of approaches. It may inadvertently drive system homogenisation, as providers conform to centralised requirements rather than innovating in response to student and workforce needs. It could also present issues for courses subject to professional accreditation requirements, noting that these can require the completion of specific units or placement hours, for example.

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