

Transcript

Update from the Department of Education

SONAL SINGH: Hello, everyone. Thank you for joining us for today's event. Firstly, I would like to acknowledge that for those of us here in Australia, we are on the traditional lands of the First Nations people and acknowledging this land was never ceded. Now, I'm to acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, upon whose beautiful lands our UTS city campus now stands, and it's also where I'm joining you all from today. I would also like to pay respects to the Elders both past and present, acknowledging them as the traditional custodians of the knowledge for this land.

I would also like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the country that you are located on. Please feel free to write that in the chat. And I'd also like to pay respects to Professor Maria Raciti, who is actually on our speaker panel today as well.

My name is Sonal Singh. I'm the Executive Manager, Student Access & Equity here at UTS and I will be your host for today. It's my pleasure to be hosting today's event, especially at the critical time that we are in given all the discussions that's happening around diversity, equity and inclusion.

Today's event is entitled "Higher Education at a Crossroads: What's at Stake for Equity". We have a great line of speakers, so I'll introduce each one of them properly in just a moment.

A couple of housekeeping first. Today's event is live captioned. To view the captions, click on the "cc" button in the Zoom control panel at the bottom of your screen or you can click on the link that Leah has put in the chat right now.

If you have any questions during today's event, please type them in the Q&A box which you can find in your Zoom control panel as well. You can upvote questions that others have asked as well.

We will first go through each of the topic areas and the audience questions at the end. Please do try to keep them relevant to the topics we are discussing here today.

We also have the Zoom chat open, and I can see a lot of engagement happening there already, so do feel free to engage in the conversations robustly and respectfully, but please remember all questions to our panellists is in the Q&A function.

I'm mindful that we have a lot of people from the sector here with a lot of expertise and also EPHEA executive members as well, so please feel free to engage in some of those chat questions that are emerging as well and let's make this a collective effort to have a robust discussion.

To kick off today's event, we are very grateful to have Adi Smith, Assistant Secretary, Funding and Pricing Policy Branch from the Australian Government's Department of Education who will provide an update to the Universities Accord implementation and the Australian Tertiary Education Commission. Take it away, Adi.

ADI SMITH: Thank you, Sonal, so much. I do have a presentation that hopefully Leah is sharing there we go. Thank you, Sonal, for that acknowledgment of country and I'd also like to acknowledge the Ngannawal and Ngambri people, who are the traditional owners of the land around Canberra. I'm coming to you from Canberra today and it's an interesting time to be a public servant in Canberra right before an election.

So I'm here to give a short update on where we are on the Government's higher education reforms. I will beg your indulgence that given the timing of this webinar and where we are in election cycle, I am constrained in some of the things that I can talk about, but I beg your indulgence as I walk through this and give you some of the background about the reforms and our plans for reform going forward.

I might just move on to the first slide.

So I do want to acknowledge that the Government has already made a range of decisions around the reform agenda coming out of the higher education review, the Universities Accord, and has announced and implemented a range of reforms already. So firstly, in 2025, the Government has agreed to increase or to quadruple the disability support fund and that has happened from 1 January this year. FEE FREE Uni Ready places, which are the new form of Enabling Places, started from 1 January and additional competitive places are now being allocated to providers and I'm pretty sure those allocations have been shared with all providers.

The 40% Student Services and Amenities Fee allocation commenced from 1 January. The new National Student Ombudsman started taking complaints from 1 February and is beavering away in the background looking at those complaints as they come in. We've also rolled over some of the unused funding from the 20,000 places, commencing CSPs for our non table A providers from 24/25.

What's coming up through the rest of the year? The Government has made a big commitment as part of their reforms to reduce HELP debts by 20% and that should occur this year from June and it will be followed by an increase to the minimum repayment thresholds for HELP from 1 July as well.

The national code on gender-based violence legislation is before the Parliament. We expect that to probably be debated one more time this sitting period, with the aim of passing that as soon as possible.

Commonwealth paid prac payments should begin rolling out to students from 1 July. We will have an interim ATEC, an Australian Tertiary Education Commission, starting from 1 July in an interim capacity and then the full legislated function to roll on from then. And as an internal sort of to government movement, the Indigenous Student Success Program, administration of that will move from the National Indigenous Australians Agency to the Department of Education from 1 July as well.

So as you can see, there's a lot happening in the higher education space and a lot of movements just for this year, but they're not the only movements. I've sort of indicated that there are a few more things happening over the next couple of years. I might just move on to the next slide, please.

One of the big ones that I think a lot of the sector is really interested in is the Government's commitment to establish an Australian Tertiary Education Commission. The ATEC, as we call it, is one of the key recommendations out of the Australian Universities Accord report and really the ATEC the commitment of government is to establish this ATEC as a formal independent body that will be established through primary legislation and the ATEC will advise the Minister for Education on a range of topics that will be specified through a published statement of expectations that will be shared with everyone.

The ATEC is expected to work really closely in collaboration with the sector and the Government has agreed that the ATEC will be established by three expert Commissioners, so a full time Chief Commissioner, a full time First Nations Commissioner, and a part time Commissioner.

The body of the ATEC will really be established such that it makes decisions like a board as a collective decision making process and some of those decisions are decisions which will be defined under legislation. Other things will be decisions about the type of advice which it gives to government about the size and shape of the higher education system in the future.

As a collective, the Commissioners in the ATEC will be expected to bring a diversity of experience both across the higher education sector, but bringing in some experience with the VET sector as well. That's really to help reflect the fact that the ATEC does have a role in shepherding the whole of the tertiary education system and that that experience with VET will be central to how it understands the interplay between the higher education and the VET system.

The Commissioners will be expected to be appointed through a transparent and merit based process and be established as independent statutory officeholders and they'll be supported by ATEC staff from within the Department of Education. Overall, the Commissioners will be appointed for up to and ideally five years and that's in an effort to give certainty around the role into the future.

So there are two periods which I've already hinted at, a period which we're calling the interim ATEC period prior to the legislation being established, and that will be from 1 July until 31 December 2025, and then from the establishment of the ATEC as a legislated statutory authority from 1 January 2026 the organisation will be stood up in its full statutory capacity. I might just move on to the next slide, please.

So in addition to the changes around the establishment of the Australian Tertiary Education Commission, there's a range of other changes that are flagged for 2026. The managed growth funding system transition year will begin in which changes will be made to the administration of Commonwealth supported places to include funding that better reflects student demand and a range of continuing funding protections for some providers; the introduction or the establishment of the demand driven needs based funding system. In 2026, as I've said, the ATEC will be permanently implemented subject to passage of legislation. And there will be a negotiation of the first enhanced

mission based compacts with providers that represent a new way of agreeing mission based compacts with the higher education sector. From 2027 and beyond, we have the task ahead of us of fully implementing the managed growth funding system subject to passage of legislation by amending HESA and representing the changes in the primary legislation.

Secondly, we also will intend to kick off the enhanced mission based compacts negotiation in or to apply for the 2027 year. So the work to negotiate those will be done in 2026, but the implementation of them will happen through 2027.

What's not listed here, but is probably super relevant to this cohort, is that we intend to legislate the full demand driven needs based funding system for operation from 2027 as well. So it is likely that, given the election timing and the busy legislative agenda that will happen after the election, we will deliver demand driven needs based funding through the other grants guidelines as the first step as a transition year and then implement the full system through primary legislation in 27 alongside the managed growth funding system.

So apologies for the quick whip through all of the reforms that we're going through now, but I have a short period of presentation here. So as we shift into an election cycle and we shift into caretaker period as a government, as a bureaucracy, we will be unable or be more restricted in what we can talk about over that period and then we'll come out to the sector after the election. Obviously depending on the outcome of the election that engagement will have some very different potentially different aims and different goals and I'm sure Andrew will deal with this in the next section where he talks about the differing views of the two sides of the parliamentary divide.

But I would like to say that we have done a long series of engagements with the sector all the way from the establishment of the Accord process through the interim report and the final report and a long series of consultations across the sector as we design the new system, but this isn't really the end for us. There will be a whole 'nother series of consultations as we take legislation through the parliament and everyone will get a chance and opportunity to provide feedback along the way.

So we're excited and interested in your feedback as we progress through this process and really sort of stand ready and waiting to implement the next series of reforms as we take this agenda through parliament with the Government.

Thank you, Sonal. I'll hand back to you to kick off the next part of the section.



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