

By email: HESFconsultation@atec.gov.au

9 September 2026



**Australian Academy of Science submission to the Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC)
on *university research specialisation***

The Australian Academy of Science welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Australian Tertiary Education Commission's consultation on the Review of Research Requirements: 'Australian University Category.'

The Academy supports flexibility for universities to deliver high-quality research and scale in areas of strength and comparative advantage, as recommended in the *Ambitious Australia* report. Changes to the regulations to relax the requirement for research breadth would support institutions to develop research depth, critical mass and internationally competitive capability.

In implementing changes to standards for university research breadth, ATEC's stewardship role for the sector must ensure that Australia can maintain research excellence and scale in critical national capability areas.

The Academy recommends:

1. Changes to the 'Australian University Category' should not compromise Australia's national research capability and workforce. ATEC's role as a national steward must include national monitoring of the system to ensure Australia sustains critical capabilities across institutions and can evolve to meet current and emerging national needs.
2. University specialisation supports development of research excellence, scale and competitiveness. ATEC should engage with the Australian Research Council as it develops its research insights framework to support a coordinated approach to research evaluation.
3. Preserving the research teaching nexus as a core requirement of Australian universities. Specialisation should strengthen research excellence while maintaining the connection between research and teaching that underpins education and research capability.

National stewardship of research capability is important to maintain capability for national needs

University specialisation should enable institutions to build excellence, not create gaps in the knowledge base Australia needs for its future. National coordination is required to ensure that the research capability residing within Australia's universities aligns with Australia's strategic national needs.

Australia's universities are custodians of a substantial proportion of the nation's research capability. However, individual institutions' decision-making against their missions, strengths, resources and operating environments alone will not guarantee the spread and diversity of research capability that Australia requires nationally.

The proposed changes to allow universities a greater degree of specialisation could create a system where individual institutions will specialise away from research areas that are more expensive, and concentrate on areas where funding, commercial opportunities or student demand are strongest, to the detriment of areas where Australia needs to build capability to meet our national ambitions and address our future challenges.

Geoscience and Earth sciences illustrate the risk. Low student demand and profitability pressures have led many universities to close or downsize their geology departments, despite these fields being fundamental to addressing climate change, decarbonisation, locating and refining critical minerals and electrification of the economy. Each decision was rational for the institution making it; nationally, the result is a stark capability gap in an area of national significance.

The Academy's initiative *Australian Science, Australia's Future: Science 2035* demonstrated the importance of looking beyond the present capability to identify the science Australia will require to meet its future challenges. This national capability assessment provides the evidence base to identify areas where Australia is facing capability gaps in the next decade that should be strengthened, particularly in the context of these proposed changes. Research capability can take decades to establish and only few years to lose. Once researchers, infrastructure and training pipelines disappear, rebuilding these can be difficult, expensive and slow.

National-level oversight is required to ensure the cumulative consequences of these decisions can be captured across the country. In line with its role as an independent steward of the higher education system, ATEC must establish a national mechanism to monitor the effects of specialisation across the university system, anticipate gaps, and opportunities to build Australia's capacity and capability to meet our national needs. This mechanism could be established in partnership with the National Resilience and Science Council, complementing its remit to provide coordinated advice on R&D investment.

This should include working with the sector to monitor where research capability is concentrated, declining, and where specialisation could leave Australia dependent on a very small number of research groups or institutions. This focus should extend to research capabilities necessary for Australia's long-term economic prosperity, health, environment, resilience, security and sovereign capability.

Australia's university system should also retain capability to evolve as new knowledge, technologies and national challenges emerge. Sustained investment in foundational capability must be complemented by sufficient flexibility to pursue emerging opportunities and rapidly mobilise expertise.

Specialisation should build research and workforce excellence

High-quality research requires critical mass and maintaining an institutional environment that supports research excellence. This is dependent on talent from researchers, technical expertise, research students, institutional knowledge, international networks and sustained research investment. Concentrating resources in areas of specialisation and advantage could enable institutions to develop deeper capability, scale and competitiveness in specific areas.

Universities pursuing a specialised research model should be expected to demonstrate greater depth, quality and sustainability in specific fields. This should include consideration of research-active staff, sustained research investment, strong higher degree research training, long term supported infrastructure, high-quality research outputs, effective research integrity arrangements and strong national and international research networks. ATEC should engage directly with the Australian Research Council as it develops its research insights capability to ensure that this evaluation approach can assess research depth, diversity, scale and sustainability across the research system.

Research and teaching must remain connected

Universities do not only transmit knowledge, but they also contribute to its creation. Teaching by active researchers ensures students learn from those at the forefront of discovery and are equipped with contemporary knowledge, skills and research methods. This research-training connection is a defining feature of a university education and gives students access to the process through which knowledge is developed, tested and revised. Sustaining the connection between research and teaching strengthens Australia's future scientific workforce and ensures new knowledge flows into education, industry and society. ATEC must ensure that the revised *Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards)* preserve the research teaching nexus as a core component of the Australian University category.

To discuss or clarify any aspect of this submission, please contact Lauren Sullivan, Manager Science Policy and Advice at science.policy@science.org.au.