

Blurred sector seeking clarity

Andrew Trounson *The Australian* September 25, 2010

UNIVERSITIES may complain that commonwealth funding doesn't cover the cost of teaching, but the chairman of TAFE Directors Australia believes the funding rate is "pretty reasonable".

The comments at the TAFE Directors Australia conference in Melbourne this week highlight the lower cost structures of TAFEs that don't offer higher degrees or research.

"You can operate at the HECS level fairly easily," said Bruce Mackenzie, who is also director of Victorian TAFE Holmesglen.

His comments coincide with TDA lobbying the Gillard government to compete with universities for access to commonwealth funded places for degrees in areas of skills shortage.

But Mr Mackenzie also said the faster-than-expected expansion of the university sector ahead of commonwealth places being uncapped in 2012 "suggests that maybe vice-chancellors think the money isn't too bad" after all.

The TAFE push for commonwealth places is raising questions about the importance of the research-teaching nexus in delivering degrees.

Meanwhile, Australian Catholic University vice-chancellor Greg Craven said aggressive expansion at current funding rates during 2010, was for many universities a business decision aimed at capitalising on growth before the market moved to a student demand-driven system in 2012, rather than an endorsement of funding levels.

"The reality is if you are a relatively small university going into open competition with a two-year time lag, you would be crazy to wait for the bell to ring and all the sharks to jump in the water and then start to grow," said Professor Craven, whose institution is 25 per cent over-enrolled above the existing cap.

On the question of degrees in TAFEs, Professor Craven said the appropriateness of it depended on the course and the capacity of the organisation.

He noted that while much university teaching was vocational in nature, universities also have a wider role in delivering disciplines that aren't specifically vocational, as well as pursuing research and participating in public debate.

Professor Craven said some serious thinking was needed on how universities and TAFEs could co-operate in a blurred tertiary sector.

But the author of a report into higher education in TAFE, Leesa Wheelahan, said TAFEs needed to move beyond a focus on competency-based learning if they were to deliver quality qualifications.

"Vocational education and training qualifications need to prepare people for a wider range of workplace destinations and occupations, rather than a specific focus on workplace tasks and roles," Professor Wheelahan, from the L. H. Martin Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Management at the University of Melbourne, told the conference.

John Dawkins, National Quality Council chairman and architect of sweeping reforms to the sector in the 1980s, backed her. He noted industry gave mixed signals on the issue, with some calling for students to be job-ready with specific skills, while there was a broader movement demanding so-called soft skills such as communications and teamwork so people could adapt to changes and eventually take on greater responsibility.

"Surely we are going to be better off if we ensure that those people who emerge from the education and training system have that greater flexibility and ability to move with changing circumstances," Mr Dawkins said.