Call for feds to take over VET

RMIT vice-chancellor Margaret Gardner has called for what would amount to a federal takeover of vocational education, warning it is senseless to continue to split tertiary education between the commonwealth and the states.

"This is a national endeavour and it would be better if there were a single layer of government," said Professor Gardner, who heads a dual-sector university straddling VET and higher education.

"It isn't sensible to continue to split it in the way we do," she told the HES.

The policy divide in vocational education has been put into stark relief by the fight between the federal and Victorian governments over the state's cuts to TAFE and training subsidies.

The cuts are forcing TAFEs and the state's dual-sector universities to cut staff and drop courses at a time when they have been seeking to increase pathways into university and boost vocational skill levels in response to federal participation targets.

"We are in a very counter-productive situation that just increases regulation," Professor Gardner said. "It is difficult to get the sort of strategic direction that makes sense for tertiary education."

Her concerns have been backed up by a yet-to-be released federally funded report on the future of dual-sector universities. It recommends the funding of VET and higher education be integrated more closely.
The report, a copy of which has been seen by the HES, says the separate funding regimes are "antithetical" to building pathways between the sectors.

The report suggests the federal and state governments should agree on a common funding model across both sectors which would result in VET no longer being measured in terms of scheduled hours taught, but in terms of equivalent student load as it is in universities.

Such a change would make it easier for students to transfer credit between the sectors.

Under such a system, the federal government could continue to fund VET jointly with the states while continuing to fund universities directly. Alternatively, the report suggests a "national tertiary education funding agency" could be created to administer tertiary education funding nationally.

"In either case, a single funding model can also be the basis for Australian governments to agree to a national tertiary education student entitlement, commencing with all higher education and the upper level of VET; and a consistent income-contingent loan scheme for all tertiary education," it said.

The project was led by dual sectors the University of Ballarat and Swinburne University. It was submitted to the government in March.

The report also recommends convergence of the different industrial relations regimes across VET and higher education staff. Dual-sector universities are seeking to respond to the Victorian funding cuts by integrating TAFE and higher education teaching. But given TAFE teachers teach more hours than academics, who also undertake research, such integration could spark tension between the two groups. The report says the different enterprise agreements could include agreed core conditions across both sectors, or even remove the distinction between academics and VET teachers.

"Convergent agreements in Victoria would require consensus from unions and management, support from the state government to amend legislation, and structural adjustment funding to equalise superannuation conditions," it said.

Separately, Ballarat vice-chancellor David Battersby has warned there is no sign of the Victorian government backing away from its cuts. But he said he would be expecting the state government to provide funding to the TAFE sector to help it adapt to the reduced funding, such as in pursuing alliances.

"The government sees a period of what it calls structural adjustment ahead, and the reality is that that will require funding," Professor Battersby said.

For example, Ballarat had already been in discussions with six regional TAFEs in a federally funded project on promoting better pathways into higher education.

However, in the wake of the Victorian cuts it will use the funding to find ways to create economies of scale to sustain higher level VET programs such as diplomas through joint delivery arrangements across the region.

Read the article online: http://www.theaustralian.com.au/higher-education/call-for-feds-to-take-over-vet/story-e6frgcjx-1226372965543