Central Queensland merger 'scuttled'

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FEDERAL-state wrangling is threatening a three year-old proposal to merge Central Queensland’s university and TAFE, just five weeks after the project finally got the go-ahead.

Queensland Education Minister John-Paul Langbroek said the commonwealth had reneged on a commitment to allocate $74m to the merger, regarded as one of the few positive moves towards the federal government’s vision of an integrated tertiary education sector.

Federal Tertiary Education Minister Chris Evans confirmed the project was in doubt and blamed the Queensland government’s intention to “slash funding” for TAFEs. He said Mr Langbroek hadn’t responded to his concerns about how the state’s reform plans would affect the financial viability of the merger.

But Mr Langbroek said Central Queensland TAFE had been quarantined from the reform plans. He blamed a recent $79m cut in the state training budget on the federal government, which had discontinued a major training program and withheld $50m promised at COAG last April. “They’re the ones cutting money,” he said.

Mr Langbroek said he’d tried for weeks to talk to Senator Evans about the issue. “The silence was deafening,” he said.

“The federal government was clearly working out a political strategy on the eve of an election. There’s now a manufactured reason by Chris Evans that we supposedly haven’t guaranteed funding.”
The row reflects the increasingly fractious relations between Canberra and the conservative states, as Senator Evans portrays funding cuts in Victoria, NSW and Queensland as a taste of things to come under an Abbott government.

Senator Evans has put federal infrastructure funding for training colleges on hold in response to last year’s cuts, which exceeded $500m.

The Australian Education Union has backed Senator Evans’s move, saying the budget cuts and competitive funding arrangements are making TAFEs unviable.

The Central Queensland merger has a stop-start history despite community support for the longstanding project. It was approved by the Bligh cabinet but put on hold for nine months by the Newman government, which finally endorsed it last month.

Senator Evans said he’d asked Central Queensland University to reapply for the $74m, which was approved in principle in 2011 and was the biggest grant under the $400m Structural Adjustment Fund.

The SAF was designed to help universities, particularly regional ones, cope with increased competition under the new demand-driven funding system for higher education. CQU was considered vulnerable because of the region’s dispersed population and low university participation.

The merger was considered crucial to help provide applied courses for the resource-focused economy.

Higher education reviewer Denise Bradley recently told The Australian that the failure to bring the university and training sectors together was the major failing of the federal government’s tertiary education reforms.

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