Charles Sturt University, Holmesglen TAFE dental deal blocked

THE federal government has blocked a degree-franchising deal between Charles Sturt University and Holmesglen TAFE despite concerns that it will leave a looming skills gap in the supply of dental therapists and hygienists.

It is the second time the government has invalidated a franchising deal in Victoria, stoking fears that providers are getting caught up and punished in an ongoing feud between the federal and state governments over cuts to TAFE funding.

Last month the HES revealed that former tertiary education minister Chris Evans annulled an already-announced franchising deal between the University of Canberra and Holmesglen.

CSU vice-chancellor Andrew Vann said the decision late last year was "extremely disappointing" and he feared the university had been caught up in collateral damage from the inter-government funding fight.

Holmesglen chief executive Bruce Mackenzie said he was "amazed" the minister had rejected an arrangement that would have encouraged health professionals moving to under-serviced regional areas. He also blamed federal "spitefulness" in its fight with Victoria.
Professor Vann said the federal government appeared to mistakenly fear that the franchise agreement would have shifted costs from the state on to the commonwealth.

He now hoped new Tertiary Education Minister Chris Bowen would approve the arrangement for next year.

Under the agreement, which had been in planning since 2009, Holmesglen was to have taught the first two years of a CSU bachelor degree in oral health in Melbourne, with students to then complete their final year at the university's Wagga Wagga campus in regional NSW. An intake of 40 students was planned.

Mr Vann said the arrangement did not involve replacing a state-funded vocational qualification so there was no issue of cost shifting.

He said CSU would have provided some video tuition to Holmesglen and paid the TAFE for its teaching out of commonwealth and HECS funding for the course.

In January Senator Evans said there was a ban on further expanding the supply of government funded degree places to TAFEs until it had assessed the full impact of providing unlimited places to universities.

His move was widely interpreted as a bid to limit the government's ballooning liability in the wake of the university sector expanding degree places faster than expected.

The TAFE sector has been actively lobbying for access to more government places, arguing that it is cheaper, better tied to industry needs and likelier to bring in disadvantaged students.

Mr Mackenzie described current policy as incoherent.

"A clear statement on higher education policy is needed in Australia," he said.

"The Australian Dental Council went through this with a fine-tooth comb," Professor Vann said.

He said the arrangement would have helped meet skills shortages in both NSW and Victoria and helped encourage metropolitan students into regional practice. Dental therapists treat diseases of the teeth while hygienists work with dentists and independently.

Senator Evans blocked the University of Canberra's deal with Holmesglen using a clause in funding agreements that requires universities to seek approval before offering degrees at a different campus location.

The same clause was used to block CSU.

UC and Holmesglen's arrangement has been limited to distance students in which Holmesglen provides learning support. About 200 students are enrolled.

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