

The Australian

Sector says no to double standards

- Andrew Trounson
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THE Australian Technology Network of universities has floated the possibility of strong performing universities being treated differently by the new national regulator, subject to periodic reviews.

The suggestion follows a federal opposition attack last week on the development of the new regulator in which education spokesman Christopher Pyne warned that it risked tying universities in red tape.

He suggested that institutions ranked among the top 100 globally by the Times Higher Education supplement deserve to be exempted.

The sector, while also concerned about looming red tape, uniformly rejected the idea of using rankings to determine oversight. But Mr Pyne's comments have sparked debate over the degree to which different universities should be subject to scrutiny by the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency.

In a letter to Mr Pyne, ATN chairman and University of Technology, Sydney, vice-chancellor Ross Milbourne said the ATN was concerned that exempting some universities from TEQSA had the potential to "divide a strong Australian sector and marginalise many of the nation's universities."

But he also said there may be merit in treating some universities differently from others.

"There may be some merit in considering policy in which different universities are dealt with differently, recognising the diversity of our current system," Professor Milbourne said in the letter.

"Indicators such as financial health and verifiable research and education outputs could be used as a basis for exemption for a period of time, with a period of re-examination to follow," he wrote.

Universities Australia chairman and Queensland University of Technology vice-chancellor Peter Coaldrake said that although oversight should be proportionate to risk, with new players in particular subject to greater scrutiny, it would be inappropriate to exempt some universities. "Just as it would be inappropriate to exclude any companies from the Australian Securities and Investments Commission or any major financial institutions from the Australian Prudential Regulatory Authority, so it would be inappropriate for any university to be excluded from TEQSA," he told the HES.

Group of Eight chairman and University of Western Australia vice-chancellor Alan Robson echoed calls for regulation to be set according to risk. But he noted that would mean more scrutiny for some universities than for others. "I think each institution needs to be looked at on its merits," Professor Robson told the HES, stressing that the relative risks posed by institutions will vary over time. "This is never a static game."

In an earlier statement he said: "Low-risk higher education providers shouldn't be caught up unnecessarily in these processes. Nor should government seek to impose uniform academic standards across the nation."

The Innovative Research Universities said it would strongly oppose exempting any universities from agreed national standards "as it would weaken Australia's international reputation for quality and infringe basic principles of competitive neutrality".

The Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations dismissed the idea of using the THE rankings to exempt some universities as "absolutely absurd".

UA is lobbying for all universities to be initially registered and accredited automatically by TEQSA while the new regulator focuses on new and higher risk providers. But UA chief Glenn Withers said "no ongoing automatic exclusion of any universities is sought".

However, he said "universities . . . see themselves as benefiting in any proper risk-based approach from their standing as major organisations which have long been subject to a full range of transparency, accountability, and quality assurance checks".

Last week the Ministerial Council for Tertiary Education and Employment agreed that the Australian Universities Quality Agency should continue to audit the sector until TEQSA is fully operational from 2012. It also agreed that AUQA should take a risk-based approach in its audits.

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