

EDUCATION

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Privates seek university status

Private education providers are pushing for parity with the public sector, writes **Joanna Mather**.

Red tape is choking attempts to respond quickly to the skills shortage, private higher education providers will tell key federal government officials this week.

Members of the Australian Council for Private Education and Training will step up their fight for a level playing field with universities when they gather in Hobart for a national conference.

They are urging the Bradley review of higher education to make radical regulatory and policy changes to increase competition and innovation in the sector.

Key lobby points include slashing red tape, allowing new players to use the term "university", and equal access to competitive research grants, commonwealth tuition support and infrastructure funding.

Federal Education Minister Julia Gillard and former University of South Australia vice-chancellor Denise Bradley, who is heading the review, will attend the conference.

ACPET national executive officer Andrew Smith said regulatory overload hampered private providers' ability to respond to the changing needs of students and the workforce.

A world-class higher education system required a diversity of course offerings and players, and it was time to end the old and unhelpful divide between public and private.

"The only way that we are going to meet the sort of challenges we've got as a country and an economy is to have a range of providers, all able to provide quality outcomes for students," Mr Smith said.

Private higher education has grown rapidly since it was partially opened up in 2003. Australia now has about 150 such providers, accounting for 10 per cent of students.

Mr Smith said although regulations and quality assurance



Students should receive funding at any accredited provider, say private education providers. Photo-illustration: JESSICA HROMAS

were vital, they should be applied evenly.

It could take a private provider 18 months to get a new course off the ground but workforce pressures shifted much more quickly.

The chief executive of Chifley Business School, Neil Edwards, said specialist providers with close connections to business, industry and the professions were the drivers of innovation, but multiple regulatory processes were "compounding the competitive disadvantage against the larger resources and self-evident standing of public universities".

The provost of Sydney-based Raffles College of Design and Commerce, Tony Shannon, said freeing up private providers would stimulate competition and boost innovation.

Unlike universities, private providers are "non self-accrediting" which means changes and new courses have to be approved by commonwealth, state and territory accrediting authorities.

"Because the [accreditation] process is so tortuous you are less

inclined to stick your neck out for something that is really new," Professor Shannon said.

"But more importantly, the committees which are set up by the government to accredit our courses have members of universities which are often competing with us."

The Council of Private Higher Education, with about 16 members, including Bond University and Avondale College, urged the Bradley review to adopt a broader understanding of the term "university".

Executive officer Adrian McComb said private providers that could demonstrate high-quality scholarship in their teaching should be able to use the words "university college" or "university institute".

"They are rigorously accredited to offer courses at university level and the terms university college or university institute would convey that they teach at the same level but are not large comprehensive universities," he said.

The Australian and New Zealand Association of Theological Schools submission to the review said

private providers should have access to public funding, including Australian Research Council grants, the research training scheme and institutional grant scheme.

The idea of a national system of portable scholarships also found favour among non-university providers in their submissions.

ACPET, which represents 1000 organisations nationally, advocates a "student-centred funding model" under which students could take their commonwealth funding support to any accredited provider, public or private.

ACPET's submission argues: "While universities are an historical national investment, there is no policy argument for public entities to be given priority, special treatment or advantage as tertiary education providers".

Three hundred submissions to the review by institutions, professional bodies, research organisations and individuals have been posted on the federal Education Department's website.

The panel is to report to the government by the end of the year.