The tertiary sector isn’t so much split as serrated, writes John Ross.

The only thing the Judean People’s Front hated more than the Romans, according to Monty Python, was the People’s Front of Judea.

Immigration Minister Chris Bowen reportedly quoted from the Life of Brian during last month’s inaugural meeting of the International Education Taskforce. His meaning was clear. It’s easier to deal with different stakeholders if they have a common message. At last he had all the factions in one room.

Well, not all the factions. Universities were a notable absence. They’re big organisations, and they didn’t want to crowd out the other players, a Universities Australia spokesperson told Campus Review.

But most stakeholders had gathered in a rare sense of common purpose. And the government seemed to be listening.

“We are encouraged by yesterday’s forum, and welcome the Australian government’s willingness to work with us to resolve many of our sector’s challenges,” International Education Association of Australia vice-president Helen Cook said afterwards.

Peace broke out for a good three days. Then one of the taskforce’s main instigators, the Australian Council for Private Education and Training (ACPET), said the government had verballed it over changes to student visa classifications.

“I am furious that the government would so recklessly and contumaciously misrepresent consultations with the international education sector to justify these changes,” said acting chief executive Claire Field.

Some were taken aback by the vehemence of these comments – not least Navitas, an ACPET member, which publicly supported the changes.

But another member, Brisbane-based Kelly Colleges, went even further than Field. It vowed to sue the immigration department. “It’s unconscionable what they’re doing … I’m going to claim damages for what they’ve done,” director Natasha Mayrseidl told the ABC.

It was more a sectoral split than a war between private colleges. Higher education was advantaged by the latest visa changes, which left VET at a competitive disadvantage.

There’s a sectoral split over skilled migration, too. Higher education was generally pleased with the recently announced points test. VET was generally ropable.
Not that a higher education-VET split is anything new. The two sectors are chalk and cheese, with full-fee courses for domestic students – outlawed in public universities – now a mainstay of public VET.

VET has been shut out of most infrastructure fund allocations, the Diversity and Structural Adjustment Fund and the forthcoming demand-driven funding system. It’s even banned from applying to the equity fund that’s designed to get universities and VET working together.

One of the thrusts of the Bradley review was that the two sectors should be integrated – a theme picked up by Julia Gillard as education minister, when she stressed the need for “seamlessness”.

But the Bradley review itself highlighted the seam between the sectors. Higher education has been reformed by public review. VET has been reformed behind closed doors.

Of course, that will all end when a new national agency assumes control over both sectors – a goal Gillard optimistically set for 2013. But for now, proposed national regulators for the two sectors are evolving separately – with neither facing an easy run.

If the early apparent enthusiasm for a national VET regulator seemed too good to be true, that’s because it was. Two states soon spoiled the party, insisting on keeping their hands on the strings. More trouble now looms, with at least one of those states insisting it never agreed to a compromise under which the Commonwealth would regulate the bigger providers.

And the installation of a Coalition government in Melbourne – which, despite the differences over national VET regulation, has mostly been in lock-step with Canberra’s education reforms – suggests more commonwealth-state tension ahead.

Not that the Commonwealth has been a tension-free zone, with frosty relations rumoured among DEEWR, DIAC, DIISR and Austrade. Treasury, of course, is everybody’s bête noir.

Meanwhile higher ed is hardly harmonious, with its peak body, three formal groups, informal alignments of unaligned universities, and unaligned institutions that prefer to remain unaligned.

Recently, tensions have emerged between UA and the Go8, and, Campus Review understands, within the Go8, particularly over the new tertiary education regulator.

And unis are finding it hard to align with themselves, says former broadcasting executive Larry Anderson. “It’s almost like there’s two universes operating here,” he told Campus Review.

Anderson is lobbying for funds to explore whether the “Think Before” social media campaign, which channels safety tips to international students, can be extended to topics such as accommodation, water safety and safe sex – all areas where Anderson says universities have a duty of care.

“The problem we have in Australia is scale. There are some areas where it’s helpful to have competition between institutions and sectors, but there are others where there needs to be consolidation – purely for practical and economic reasons.”
Anderson said student safety, in particular, demanded a cooperative approach. “The issues of violence against Indian students started in Victoria, and everybody tried to warehouse that problem in Victoria. But it quickly became everybody’s problem.”

But far from coordinating with each other, universities can’t coordinate with themselves, he said. “The PVCs and DVCs – all they care about is providing pre-arrival information. Once those kids hit the deck, it’s suddenly the responsibility of the director of student support services. Even though they’re on the same campus, there’s demarcation about where responsibility begins and ends.”

Just like Monty Python’s Judeans, Australian tertiary education faces big challenges.

And just like Monty Python’s Judeans, a united front looks pretty unlikely.