P-EDUC: Uni student, staff info to be shared

CANBERRA, Nov 1 AAP - Legislation allowing the federal government to disclose information it holds about university staff and students has passed the Senate on Thursday.

The bill will allow the federal education department to disclose personal information for a range of regulatory, quality assurance and planning purposes to a limited number of bodies.

Bodies that would be able to receive the information include the Tertiary Education and Quality Standards Authority, the Australian Skills Quality Authority, tertiary admission centres and peak bodies representing higher and vocational education and training providers.

The Higher Education Support Amendment (Maximum Payment Amounts and Other Measures) Bill 2012 now awaits royal assent.

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Rankings come at a cost and the stakes are high

Is it achievable to double Australia’s public universities to rank among the world’s best?

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As core promises go, the announcement this week by Julia Gillard that it was a “national objective” to have 10 universities in the world’s top 100 by 2025 didn’t seem unreasonable.

High-quality teaching and research-intensive universities are good — they are the turbine engines through which new knowledge drives innovation, creativity and smart industries.

Economic growth and global competitiveness are closely aligned to the health of higher education systems. Knowledge economies are dependent on them.

Sadly, though, it appears no one had thought to do any costings before the Prime Minister’s announcement.

One expert said it might cost between $500 million and $1 billion over a decade — an affordable price tag to double the number of Australia’s public universities to rank among the world’s very best.

But then economist and vice-chancellor Ross Milbourne put up his hand. The boss of University of Technology, Sydney estimated the cost would be in the vicinity of $10bn a year for 10 to 15 years — over and above the $5bn that annually goes into university coffers for research alone. All up, he said, the Prime Minister was looking at a $150bn investment over a decade.

Ten universities in the top 100 started to look a bit like the no child in poverty promise — big on vision, short on pragmatics.

In fact, the real issue for this and any future government will be not so much increasing the number in the top 100 but sustaining the positions of those already there.

Rankings come at a price, and the stakes are high. And the crazy thing is, they are all based on dubious — sometimes fictitious — information that tells you nothing about the heart, soul and ethos of an university.

The university rankings game started back in the 1980s when US News & World decided to put together a league table to rate America’s four-year degree institutions. The ranking was universally despised and condemned by vice-chancellors, who argued league tables attempted to categorise the mesmerising complexity of a modern university, and that it couldn’t be done.

But consumers couldn’t get enough of them. With a degree in the US costing many thousands of dollars, potential students were desperate for information to help them compare offerings.

A decade or so later, the Chinese government wanted to find out what made the world’s best universities tick. A scholar at Shanghai Jiao Tong University was engaged to discover the secret. And in so doing, chemical engineering professor Nian Cai Liu almost by accident created a new ranking that caused a global sensation.

What is now known as the Academic Ranking of World Universities collected verifiable statistical and objective facts on university research outputs. It counted citations and publications, exceptional scholars among staff and alumni, and other data, which were weighted, aggregated and sorted in order.

The ARWU is still considered the gold standard, but its bias towards research outputs, with almost total disregard for teaching standards, set in train the development of commercially based rankings that it was hoped would capture the more subjective elements of a university’s endeavours — its teaching quality, student experience and community outreach.
The Times Higher Education Supplement was the first to attempt such an assessment by surveying thousands of academics around the globe in the hope of creating a more three-dimensional view of universities. Others have followed. Some are better than others. All are flawed.

As a discussion paper on rankings released by the Group of Eight this week says: “Universities tend to have a love-hate relationship with rankings; not only do they hate them when they don’t look good on them but love them when they do, they are ambivalent towards them, sceptical of their validity but intimidated by their potential to do harm.”

So why do rankings matter?

Because there is a lot of money riding on them. Overseas nations use rankings to decide where to send scholarship students. The Saudi government alone spends $22bn a year sending its talented young people abroad on scholarships — but only to approved institutions, which just happen to be listed on top 200 league tables.

On top of that, UNESCO estimates 3.6 million students travelled to another country in 2009 for the purposes of study, up 6 per cent on the previous year. Many paid full fees. At Australia’s top-ranking Melbourne University, an undergraduate business student will pay $33,344 next year. A local student will pay about $9000, while the government chips in $1800 for a grand total of $10,800. A degree from Harvard costs $48,000 a year. Students pay a premium for the very best. And that creates a virtuous circle.

The US dominates world rankings. In this year’s ARWU, the US had 17 of the top 20 universities, 54 in the top 100 and 85 in the top 200. Britain had two in the top 20, nine in the top 100 and 19 in the top 200. Australia, by comparison, had none in the top 20, six in the top 100 and seven in the top 200. However, a look at the relative size of the university sectors paints a decidedly different picture. The US has 2494 degree-granting institutions, so just 3.4 per cent of them figure in the top 100. Britain has 115 universities, 7.8 per cent of which are in the top 100. Australia, on the other hand, has just 39 universities, so 15.4 per cent of them are in the top 100.

As Melbourne vice-chancellor Glyn Davis said when greeting the news of his institution’s move to 57 on the ARWU, up 22 places in five years: “We are well on our way to becoming a world-class system.”

And herein lies much of the tension: old, sandstone, research-intensive universities have the inside running on rankings. They have a leg-up by virtue of their age, status and locations in Australia’s capital city centres.

The policy question is, which is better — to have a few world-class institutions or a system where resources are spread more equitably across the board?

The answer depends on where you sit.

Sandra Harding, vice-chancellor of Townsville-based James Cook University, has put a stop to information on her university being provided to any ranking other than ARWU. Her bête noire is rankings’ use of reputation surveys because, she argues, any small specialist institution such as hers — arguably the world leader in marine and tropical sciences — will be overlooked because of its size, location and consequently low recognition factor.

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