Britain ‘envious’ of Oz uni investment

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AUSTRALIA’S rise in global university rankings is the payoff from a level of government spending envied by overseas competitors, according to leading British vice-chancellor Steve Smith.

In the latest Times Higher Education league table, two more Australian universities joined the world top 100 while the 2012 Shanghai Jiao Tong rankings includes half of the nation’s public universities in the global top 500.

“As a competitor, we look at Australia as a country that is really investing in its higher education — and it is working, on all the metrics (such as rankings),” said Sir Steve, a former president of the peak body Universities UK.

“We look rather enviously at the amount of investment that institutions here have had.”

In Melbourne for the Australian International Education Conference, Sir Steve spoke of global efforts to lift the quality of university research to compete in the knowledge economy.

Local commentators say that notwithstanding funding increases under the Howard and Rudd-Gillard administrations, university finances are tight and research is heavily reliant on cross-subsidy from money meant for teaching.

Sir Steve, whose fast-rising University of Exeter has just been named Britain’s university of the year by The Sunday Times newspaper, has direct experience of stiffer competition from Australian universities.

“To tell a story against myself, at the University of Exeter we’ve lost more academic staff to Australia in the last 18 months than we lost in the preceding nine years,” he said.

“We’re very competitive, with very competitive salaries, but Australia has invested.”

Sir Steve said Australia faced two challenges: how to maintain its increased investment and how to target money at its best researchers without making them complacent.

He stressed the risk to the competitiveness of Australia’s universities from a tight federal budget or a new government presiding over cuts to higher education.

He said he did not know much about the intentions of an Abbott administration but suspected it might emulate Britain by cutting grants to universities and requiring students to pay higher fees.

In August, opposition education spokesman Christopher Pyne denied reports the Coalition was open to a 25 per cent increase in the amount students pay towards university tuition.

Sir Steve said although funding changes in Britain had increased total investment in higher education, the emphasis on students as consumers was problematic.