Dan Tehan calls in uni chiefs for funding talks

Dan Tehan and senior officials will brief vice-chancellors in Wollongong next week. Picture: AAP

EXCLUSIVE

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Performance-based funding, cyber-security and Confucius Institutes will be on the agenda after vice-chancellors were summoned to a meeting with federal Education Minister Dan Tehan in Wollongong next week.

At the meeting, the University of Wollongong’s vice-chancellor, Paul Wellings, who headed the performance-based funding review, will outline the expert panel’s deliberations, the proposed scheme and the funding formula.

In a letter of invitation, dated July 5, Mr Tehan says that after the briefing vice-chancellors will be given a presentation by senior commonwealth officials on “interventions and actions that universities can take to identify and protect against cyber threats”.
The letter says there is a need for heightened vigilance around cyber-security threats “to protect the important investment that the Australian community has made in our universities”.

The Australian National and Australian Catholic universities have both been subject to cyber attacks in recent months. It is understood that other universities may also have been impacted but have not made details public.

In confirming the August 5 meeting, Mr Tehan told The Australian it would also include a “discussion on Confucius Institutes”.

In selling the benefits of a deeply unpopular performance-based funding model, Professor Wellings and Mr Tehan will have to confront deep scepticism about its ability to improve education standards at the nation’s universities.

The government had asked the expert panel to look at how to use certain performance criteria — mostly likely attrition, completion rates, satisfaction and graduate outcomes — to allocate growth funding from 2020 onwards.

Under the government’s nascent plan, growth in student places would be dependent on population growth in the 18-64 age group. Those universities that did not meet certain benchmarks around the four criteria, plus possibly the repayment of student loans, would be ineligible for extra funding.

Based on population growth of about 1.2 per cent annually, the amount of funding is in the vicinity of $70 million a year.

However, the majority of the 44 submissions to the review expressed doubt as to whether such a fund was needed and, if implemented, whether it would achieve its aims.

In a strongly argued submission, Andrew Norton, higher-education director at the Grattan Institute, noted that “performance funding is unlikely to be helpful in improving student and university performance”, noting that international and local evidence reveals that such schemes “often fail to find clear evidence of positive effects and they often come with negative side effects”.

Mr Norton said that among the “problems” associated with performance-based funding was that universities would be held accountable for factors outside their control, such as the state of the economy, previous academic performance, cultural attitudes, family background and the transience of government commitment to such policies.

Mr Norton also outlined possible scenarios in which it would be more “valuable” for universities to actually decrease enrolments in order to maximise per-student
funding — an outcome that would have a devastating impact on any access and equity objectives the government might hold. It would also put downward pressure on total graduate numbers, even in areas of skill shortage.

Andrew Harvey, director of the Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research at La Trobe University, told The Australian implementing a rigorous performance-based funding regime would be extremely hard, given the relative homogeneity between universities on most measures. “One of the problems with performance-based funding is that it has drifted from an objective under Simon Birmingham to improve completion rates among low-ATAR students to a funding allocation,” Dr Harvey said.

“The performance-based fund doesn’t appear to be connected to other policies.”

He also pointed to a strange anomaly that shows that students who report being the happiest and most satisfied with their studies are also the most likely to drop out, to not complete and to have poor graduate outcomes.

Almost without exception, submissions to the review point out that demographic growth among the 18-24 age group will be much steeper than the prescribed 18-64 group, largely because of the imminent bulge in school leavers.