



Education Minister pours cold water on Commonwealth moves

Federal takeover off the table

■ **Matthew Knott**

The minister responsible for fixing the federal government's scandal-plagued vocational loans scheme says he does not favour a Commonwealth takeover of vocational education and training.

Fairfax Media last month revealed a leaked federal government proposal to take over responsibility for funding TAFE's from the state and territories, a move which drew howls of criticism from state governments. Education and Training Minister Simon Birmingham has strongly advocated a Commonwealth takeover.

But Scott Ryan, appointed Minister for Vocational Education and Skills in Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's most recent reshuffle, said there were strong arguments to maintain the current system.

"It's a matter for COAG - for the prime minister and premiers and chief ministers - but my personal inclination has not usually been that a federal takeover ensures better outcomes," Senator Ryan told Fairfax Media.

"I instinctively like diversity.

"There are different needs in our different states, we have different high-

school completion rates. In my experience - and I have worked a bit in state government - the states are very protective of their autonomy. They like our money but they like to make decisions ourselves.

"My prediction would be we won't be heading down that path."

Senator Birmingham, by contrast, has spruiked the benefits of a "truly national system" for vocational education and training.

"By placing control of all of the funding levers - the setting of fees, payment of subsidies, and lending of income-contingent loans with one level of government, we would promote accountability in the system and could create a

more effective market, driven by students rather than providers, than we've seen to date," he said last year.

Senator Ryan said redesigning the troubled \$3 billion VET FEE-HELP scheme - which has blown out in costs and led to the targeting of vulnerable and disadvantaged students - was his top priority.

"There have been examples of profoundly unethical behaviour," he said.

"I don't know how some people sleep at night"

"There is serious work to be done to clean up the sector and make sure the new funding model in 2017 eliminates this behaviour and ensure it doesn't happen again."

Senator Ryan said the previous Labor government's move to extend HECS-style loans to vocational students was "laudable" but has clearly failed. But he stressed he did not want to punish private providers offering high quality courses and that the sector has to be flexible enough to respond to changing economic needs.

He wants to outline a new model by the middle of the year.

Senator Ryan, one of the key plotters behind Mr Turnbull's leadership coup, is a powerful player in Victorian factional politics.

Before entering the Senate in 2008, he worked at the free-market Institute of Public Affairs and as a politics lecturer at the University of Melbourne.

His maiden speech to Parliament outlines his commitment to states rights, parents' ability to send their children to non-government schools and voluntary student unionism.

He lives in Carlton, in Greens MP **Adam Bandt's electorate of Melbourne**.

'There are different needs in our different states'

Scott Ryan (pictured)

