

## THE AUSTRALIAN

---

### Push for universities to share students

ANDREW TROUNSON THE AUSTRALIAN NOVEMBER 18, 2015 12:00AM

**Students should be allowed to mix and match their degree across multiple institutions as a way of widening choice. It also would encourage universities to develop key areas of strength and defuse the push for all universities to offer a comprehensive set of courses.**

Sean Leaver, an economist researching parental school choice at RMIT University, said the idea that price differentiation would drive diversity was misinformed. Lessons from the private school sector reveal that fee competition leads to sameness and social stratification as schools compete not on innovative offerings but on the perceived quality of their cohort.

Mr Leaver said universities also would benefit from savings from not having to cross-subsidise low-demand courses. It also would better align university research to teaching, addressing concerns that students are cross-subsidising research outside their disciplines.

“The focus should be on cooperative rivalry, not individual competition,” Mr Leaver said. “And a lot of the research that is done isn’t aligned with teaching but is for glory projects.”

He said a co-operative model would require a shift in the mindset of university leaders and likely would need government policy.

Mr Leaver said the government could encourage students to take up to 20 per cent of their courses outside their home university. He said a system that made universities interdependent would raise accountability and transparency for the entire sector while encouraging innovation.

The Regional Universities Network has already moved down this path, with student sharing in languages and the performing arts.

University of New England vice-chancellor Annabelle Duncan said sharing allowed regional universities to offer more comprehensive sets of courses.

She said it would boost teaching quality as universities could focus on fewer areas rather than spreading resources thinly. This could lead to staff teaching across different areas. “That isn’t desirable,” she said.