NT row erupts on top tertiary post

By HELEN TRINCA

The appointment of a career public servant to head the Northern Territory’s major tertiary institution three weeks before applications for the job closed has been labelled extraordinary by the Leader of the Opposition in the Territory, Mr Bob Collins.

He also criticised the choice of Mr Kevin Davis as principal of the newly named Darwin Institute of Technology on the ground that Mr Davis’ background was in school, not tertiary, education.

The Government’s decision to make the appointment is likely to be seen as highly unusual. All other colleges of advanced education and universities around the nation appoint their own chief executives, although there have been rare government appointments in unusual circumstances.

But the chairman of the institute council, Mrs Nan Giese, said yesterday that the college was a statutory authority and the Government clearly had the power to make the appointment.

The move is likely to be seen nationally as a blow to the academic freedom and administrative independence of tertiary institutions.

The appointment was among sweeping changes to the ministry and the leadership of government departments and statutory authorities announced by the new Chief Minister, Mr Tuxworth, last Friday.

Advertised

Among them was the decision to rename the Darwin Community College, which has a mix of TAFE and advanced education courses, the Darwin Institute of Technology.

Mr Davis, who most recently had been acting chairman of the Territory’s Housing Commission, was previously a deputy-secretary of the Territory’s Education Department and has been a member of the institute council.

The job of principal had been advertised internationally and the institute council had begun the process of setting up a selection committee, when Mr Tuxworth’s surprise announcement put a sudden end to its plans.

But Mrs Giese said she believed the council would support the appointment. Even if the institute council had gone ahead with selecting a head, it would have been only a recommendation to the Government. She said no-one had been informed of the Government’s decision before it was announced publicly.

The secretary of the Department of Education, Mr Geoff Spring, said the Institute was unusual because it combined TAFE and advanced education courses.

There were about 7000 TAFE students and about 900 advanced education students. In other States, heads of TAFE colleges were appointed by the Government.

The Territory Government took the view that all appointments to statutory authorities or government departments above a certain level were Cabinet appointments, and that was how it had interpreted this situation.