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Staff reluctant to switch to individual contracts

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The number of Australian **workplace** agreements at universities increased dramatically last year as the Howard government challenged the power of the academic **union**, but the individual contracts still cover fewer than 500 staff.

Employment and **Workplace** Relations Minister **Kevin Andrews** revealed in an answer to a question from Labor's **Jenny Macklin** that 432 AWAs were registered at universities last year, up from 78 the previous year and 31 in 2000.

Both the National Tertiary Education **Union** and the Australian Higher Education **Industrial** Association, the employer body, agreed that, despite the federal government's push to increase the use of AWAs, they would not quickly become widespread in universities.

"They are not a major factor across the sector," said AHEIA executive director Ian Argall. "Most **industrial** regulation is still collective. My prediction is that will remain the case for some time. They will still remain a minority option."

Universities are required to offer all staff AWAs under the government's higher education **workplace** relations requirements (HEWRRs), which they must fulfil in order to qualify for additional funding.

NTEU senior **industrial** officer Ken Mcalpine said 432 AWAs amounted to only about one in 300 staff, and many who had signed them would be in senior management.

"The take-up has been absolutely minimal," he said. "This vindicates the position of the Australian Vice Chancellors Committee last year that AWAs were not suited to the sector."

However there has been an increase in the take-up of AWAs at the University of Ballarat, where they provide the only option for staff to

receive a pay rise after the university failed to reach a collective agreement with staff.

Ballarat is one of three institutions that have not received additional federal funding.

Ten days ago, the Federal Court refused to grant the NTEU an injunction to stop the University of Ballarat signing any further AWAs with staff.

But in a ruling the **union** claimed as a victory, the court required the university to circulate a statement clarifying the conditions in the AWAs and to wait until today before signing any more individual agreements.

Education Minister Julie Bishop announced last week that 40 higher education providers had complied with the HEWRRs and would receive the additional funding, which is worth \$147 million this year.

Discussions were continuing with the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education in the Northern Territory and Curtin University in West Australia over whether they would qualify for the funding.

Mr Argall said he understood that the hurdles to the institutions' compliance with the HEWRRs related to clauses in their collective agreements allowing for automatic **union** representation of staff, which is forbidden under the new rules.

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