

Economics Legislation Committee
ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE
Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education Portfolio
Additional Estimates Hearing 2012-13
13 February 2013

AGENCY/DEPARTMENT: DEPARTMENT OF INDUSTRY, INNOVATION, SCIENCE, RESEARCH AND TERTIARY EDUCATION

TOPIC: Casualisation of the academic workforce

REFERENCE: Question on Notice (Hansard, 13 February 2013, pages 65-66)

QUESTION No.: AI-31

Senator RHIANNON: With the increasing casualisation of the academic workforce—which I think is one of the highest in the world now—are you looking at how that is impacting on completion rates of PhD study, courses taken, completion of the thesis—getting into that detail?

Ms Baly: I can give you a general answer to that, which might not really answer your question fully, but we have done a lot of work over the last couple of years on the research workforce and preparation for research careers. The Research Workforce Strategy was released in 2011, I think, and it sets out a program of work. One of those areas that we are looking at is the research training process itself and how we can provide incentives both for students to finish early and for universities to assist in that process of improving the completion rates and the work readiness of PhD graduates. There are a number of universities that are doing quite different things when it comes to research training, in order to try to address some of those things. During this year we will be doing a review of research training arrangements, including looking at the Research Training Scheme itself.

Senator RHIANNON: Thank you for that. Just to check again, is the level of casualisation something that is looked at as a factor that could be impacting on these outcomes?

Ms Baly: The casualisation of the workforce?

Senator RHIANNON: Yes, of the active workforce.

Ms Baly: I think that is a different sort of question to the preparation of students who are undertaking research training. I do not know whether that is impacting on people's choices about whether or not to go into PhD and the like type programs.

Senator RHIANNON: Is anybody in the department looking at that?

Ms Baly: That is part of the work that we have looked at and will continue to look at when we are looking at the needs of the research workforce.

Senator RHIANNON: Could you provide the information now, or take it on notice to provide information, to the committee about the research that you are doing into the impact of casualisation on the academic workforce?

Ms Baly: I can take that on notice and see what it is that we can give you that would be helpful on that.

Senator RHIANNON: Also related to that—and maybe give a general comment or just take it on notice—is the casualisation being assessed in terms of the impact on a future skilled academic workforce, especially in terms of the need for a future generation of PhD supervisors?

Ms Baly: Let me just see that I have got this straight. You are interested in the casualisation of the workforce and how that is impacting on the choices that potential students make in choosing, or not choosing, to undertake a research training program. Is that correct?

Senator RHIANNON: Yes, that is part of it, and just to dig a bit deeper, whether you are judging, or making an assessment, that this is having an impact in terms of the future skilled academic workforce that we need—and clearly a part of that is a future generation of PhD supervisors.

Ms Baly: On the first part, I do not think that we have got very good information on the choices that are made or not made at the point of deciding whether or not a student will go into a research training program, but I will take it on notice just to see what has been done on that that we might be able to provide you with. In terms of the quality of the supervision, the work that we have been doing on the research workforce and the work that we are doing—and will be doing—during the review of research training will look at issues around the quality of supervision. That is a very big part of what makes a good research training program, as you would appreciate.

Anything that would impact on the capability of current supervisors, or supervisors into the future, will certainly be part of what we will need to look at, and be reaching some views on, in terms of what needs to be done to ensure that we have a high quality research training environment.

ANSWER

The department has not undertaken any work specifically related to the potential impact of the casualisation of the academic workforce on postgraduate research activity.

The department is currently considering further work on support arrangements for postgraduate students and examining factors that may have an impact on research training performance. If the casualisation of the academic workforce is identified as an issue, this may be investigated in more detail subsequently.