

EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND TRAINING

SENATE LEGISLATION COMMITTEE - QUESTIONS ON NOTICE 2003-2004 ADDITIONAL ESTIMATES HEARING

Outcome: 1 and 2
Output Group: 1.2 – Assistance for individuals including those with special needs
2.5 – Assistance for post school students including those with special needs.

DEST Question No. E737_04

Senator Crossin asked on 18 February 2004, EWRE Hansard page 48.

Refer to DEST Question No E489_04.

Question:

Can you provide an update on the continual improvement policy elements of the collaborative business improvement project, including the internal mechanisms between Centrelink and DEST in applying ABSTUDY policy elements?

Answer:

The review of the impact of the continual improvement policy elements of the collaborative business improvement project.

ABSTUDY service delivery

1. The Department is conducting a collaborative business improvement project with Centrelink, focused on improving ABSTUDY services delivery. This work is continuing.

2. Progress on the joint project is outlined below:

(a) implementation of a communication strategy to promote ABSTUDY includes targeted information products, such as the *ABSTUDY Guide* (printed – for customers) and the *ABSTUDY Handbook* (e-published for institutions) commenced in late 2003;

A copy of the Guide is at Attachment A. A copy of the Handbook is at Attachment B. Both the *ABSTUDY Guide* and the *ABSTUDY Handbook* are available on Centrelink's website at www.centrelink.gov.au.

(b) a new form has been developed for claiming incidentals for part time study which will simplify access to this benefit, as well as plans to review and improve other forms for the 2005 processing season;

A copy of this is at Attachment C. The form is available from Centrelink's Customer Service Offices or Call Centres.

(c) plans are well advanced to develop stronger partnerships with stakeholders, including opportunities for them to identify, influence and contribute to service delivery initiatives through participation in forums and workshops;

DEST and Centrelink are working on identifying opportunities to work more closely with each other and with key stakeholders to improve understanding of ABSTUDY and to help reduce debt. DEST is also considering some joint projects with Centrelink covering particular themes and in remote locations.

- (d) an ABSTUDY debt prevention and management strategy is being explored to reduce the incidence of preventable customer debt and debt prevention responsibility and accountability;

Work on the analysis of debt and debt prevention strategies is also being undertaken by DEST and Centrelink.

- (e) a new simplified ABSTUDY e-policy manual which can be accessed via the Internet was launched during December 2003. It is supported by updates to Centrelink's *e-Reference* product (a support tool for Centrelink staff that provides guidance on the procedures for assessing ABSTUDY entitlements) www.dest.gov.au/schools/guidelines/abstudy/2004. This will be further updated in April 2004.
- (f) a comprehensive ABSTUDY training strategy for Centrelink staff has been developed;
- (g) management information for ongoing performance monitoring and programme evaluation is undergoing continuous improvement.

DEST has undertaken extensive analysis of ABSTUDY data and tools for improving its application in programme evaluation.

Early indications are that this work is having a positive impact. In the Northern Territory for example, the Department understands that there has been a substantial increase in the number of claims processed at this point in the 2004 processing season as compared to the same point in time last year.