

## EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND TRAINING

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

**Outcome:** 2

**Output Group:** 2.4 – Funding for higher education

#### **DEST Question No. E914\_04**

*Refers DEST E460\_03, E467\_04*

Senator Carr provided in writing

#### **Question:**

In April 2002, Minister Nelson published Higher Education at the Crossroads which attributed some of the blame for shortage of resources universities offering too much choice to students resulting in a seemingly large number of small classes, stating:

“Some 20 per cent (20,681) of units of study on offer annually have fewer than five students. ... Yet some universities also have crowded classes, especially in first year, in popular subject areas where they are attracting growing numbers of students. Yet they persist with unviable subjects with miniscule enrolments and indeed continue to proliferate such courses.”

When questions were raised about the usefulness of this data in the June 2002 Estimates round, DEST indicated that:

“The Crossroads paper is upfront about the fact that a proportion of the apparent small enrolment units can be attributed to the effect of coding anomalies.”

When asked in November 2002 if DEST was able to adjust for these anomalies it was stated that:

“No data additional to that provided in Higher Education at the Crossroads is currently available on this issue.”

When questioned further last February (2003) we were told:

“The Government is currently examining the views and data gathered during consultations for the Higher Education Review. This is informing the Government’s response to the need for reform in the sector, which will be considered in the context of the forthcoming Budget.”

When asked last November (2003) for an update on the data that it was indicated in February was in the process of being gathered we were referred back to the data that prompted this question that was published in Higher Education at the Crossroads.

After nearly two years it seems we are back where we started with the initial data being cited once again, despite repeated attempts to get a deeper understanding, particularly the acknowledged weaknesses. (a bit like a slow version of the Children Overboard modis operandi).

- a) Does the Department have any intention of further analysing this data in an attempt to better understand current practices around the incidence of small enrolment courses or was the intention always to use partial data to assist the Minister to blame universities for the outcomes of the Howard Government’s cut backs and then obfuscate until the Parliament forgot about it?

**Answer:**

*Small classes*

- a) Universities make their own decisions about courses and their viability. Their decisions to rationalise, cut courses or provide them online rather than in direct contact classes is completely their own. The Department is reviewing the basis of its statistical data collection as part of the introduction of HEIMS. This may provide additional data on which to analyse the issue of small unit enrolments.