

Chapter 3

Education, Science and Training portfolio

Introduction

3.1 This chapter summarises areas of interest and concern raised during the committee's consideration of the Budget Estimates of the Education, Science and Training portfolio for the 2007-08 financial year. This section of the report follows the order of proceedings and is an indicative, but not exhaustive, list of issues that received consideration during the estimates' hearings.

3.2 The committee heard evidence from Senator the Hon. George Brandis, as the Minister representing the Minister for Education, Science and Training, and from officers of the department and related agencies, including:

- Australian Research Council (ARC);
- Australian Nuclear Science and Training Organisation (ANSTO);
- Australian Institute of Marine Science (AIMS); and
- Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO).

3.3 Senators present at the hearing were Senator Troeth (Chairman), Senator Marshall (Deputy Chair) and Senators Barnett, Birmingham, C. Brown, G. Campbell, Carr, Crossin, Fifield, Forshaw, Lightfoot, McEwen, Milne and Siewert.

Australian Research Council (ARC)

3.4 Senator Carr began with questions on the departure of the former CEO, Professor Peter Høj, and an article in the *Australian Financial Review*. Areas also covered by Senator Carr in this line of questioning included: the Quality and Scrutiny Committee, the College of Experts, recommended research proposals vetoed by the Minister, operations of the peer review system in the ARC and the appointment of the new advisory committee.

3.5 Further questions from Senator Carr focussed on ARC supported post-doctorates, fellowships, awards and research projects since 2002. The aim of this line of questioning was to establish the ARC's continuing financial commitments for post-doctoral and fellowship programs.

3.6 Senator Carr finished with questions on the Australasian Legal Information Institute and the alleged reduction in funding. The ARC officers did not have the required information and were asked by the committee to return later on in the day to answer further questions.

Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation (ANSTO)

3.7 ANSTO were again questioned on the proposed nuclear waste disposal facility. This round Senators Carr and Forshaw led the questioning which centred on ANSTO's involvement in the selection of sites, meetings with Parsons Brinckerhoff and the department and the timing of advice given to the Minister.

Australian Institute of Marine Science (AIMS)

3.8 Senator Carr opened the questioning of AIMS on the topic of research infrastructure and equipment. Dr Ian Poiner, AIM's CEO, advised the committee that AIMS was fortunate in its research capacity with the launch of a new research vessel later in the year and the establishment of a new centre for marine microbiology and genetics.

3.9 Senator Carr also asked questions on the AIMS@JCU project which has provided a fibre-optic link between AIMS and the James Cook University.

Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO)

3.10 Senator Carr began with questions on the Business Enabling Technologies Review (BETR) and SAP platform. The committee was advised that the implementation of the SAP platform had been deferred as the system did not meet the minimum accepted criteria.

3.11 Senator Siewert followed with questions on the CSIRO's baseline funding increase of 2 per cent and the flow-on effect for Flagship programs and research. Questions also followed on the budget and possible revenue sources for the agency. The committee was advised that the CSIRO had factored the effect of the drought into its research planning and resource calculations.

3.12 Senator Brown attended the estimates hearing in order to ask specific questions about an incident in her constituency of Tasmania. The questions related to an alleged incident in April on the marine research vessel, the *Southern Surveyor*. The CSIRO officials could not locate any details on the incident even after contact with their Tasmanian office. Senator Brown followed up this issue with written questions on notice.

3.13 Other issues discussed included:

- Water for a Healthy Country flagship and the Murray-Darling Basin Commission;
- the percentage of CSIRO funding derived from the mining industry;
- the percentage of funds spent on renewable energy as compared with clean coal technologies;

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- staff pay increases, bonuses and redundancies;
 - status of the CSIRO's American patent application involving Dr Prata;
 - staffing issues in the soil health area;
 - carbon emissions from chemical and organic agriculture; and
 - the Northern Rivers assessment.

Department of Education, Science and Training

Cross portfolio

3.14 Senator Carr directed questions to the department on its current financial position and advertising budget. Of particular interest was the remaining uncommitted \$4 million in the advertising budget to be spent by 30 June on the third wave of the Skills for the Future campaign.

3.15 Further questions followed on the Freedom of Information (FOI) request by the National Tertiary Education Union regarding conditions of funding under the Higher Education Support Act. The committee heard that the department quoted a retrieval cost of \$103 000. The department explained that the FOI request was quite large and encompassed approximately 229 files containing 29 770 pages.

Science Group

3.16 The science group was again questioned on the progress of the radioactive waste management facility by Senators Milne and Crossin. The department confirmed to the committee that it had had discussions with the Northern Land Council on the details of a compensation package for nominating land, namely Muckaty Station, for the location of the facility. The department also confirmed that the Northern Land Council has indicated an intention to nominate land, but have not as yet formally nominated a site.

3.17 Further questions focussed on the community consultation process and obligations, administration of the compensation payments to the traditional owners and the adequacy of record keeping facilities to house a contract for 200 years.

Innovation and Research Systems Group

3.18 Questioning was opened by Senator Carr on the topic of the recently announced Higher Education Endowment Fund (HEEF). The committee was informed of the Minister's intention to assemble an advisory board, for which nominations had already been sought, to guide the initial set up and future decisions on expenditure from the fund.

3.19 Other issues discussed included:

- the total value of university maintenance backlogs;
- National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Strategy (NCRIS) applications;
- International Science Linkages program;
- Major National Research infrastructure programs;
- Research Quality Frameworks (RQF) implementation expenditure and the sitting fees for panel members; and
- Regional Training Scheme funds.

Higher Education Group

3.20 Senator Carr asked specific questions on the details of the changes, including funding, for the reduced number of clusters in the higher education sector, including the effects on current students and the provision of a transition fund. The committee was advised that with these changes would make it possible for a university to offer a particular course on a full fee paying basis only provided that all Commonwealth supported places in the broad discipline cluster had been filled. This issue was later reported in various press articles.

3.21 Other matters dealt with by the committee included:

- Carrick Institute forward estimates and baseline funding;
- New South Wales Auditor-General's annual review of universities and the University of New South Wales' financial reports; and
- the percentage of Central Queensland University's revenue dependent on international education.

Industry Skills Development & National Training Directions Groups

3.22 Senator Carr asked a series of questions on Australian Technical Colleges and the Skills for the Future package. Of particular interest was the amount of uncommitted funds for both programs which the department committed to answer on notice. Further questioning on the Australian Technical Colleges identified specific issues in the colleges of Lismore-Ballina, Western Sydney, Dubbo, Port Hedland, Queanbeyan, the Pilbara and Darwin.

3.23 Senator Birmingham followed with questions on the role of state governments in the establishment of the Australian Technical Colleges. The committee heard that each state school registering authority has its own process and the department took it on notice to inquire whether there has been any undue delay within any particular

state. Senator Birmingham subsequently asked questions on Australian Apprenticeships.

Strategic Analysis and Evaluation Group

3.24 Senator Carr followed a line of questioning on the topic of market research for a telephone poll undertaken in January 2007. Officers informed the committee of the date, duration, staffing requirements and cost of the research associated with the poll, the results of which are published on the department's website.

3.25 Senator Carr followed with questions on the new budget measure of income support for masters students, totalling \$43.3 million over four years. Further questions then went into the details of the new payments available.

Schools Resources & Schools Outcomes Groups

3.26 Questions to the Schools Group began with the Average Government School Recurrent Costs (AGSRC) rates and the fluctuations in the last quadrennium.

3.27 Senator Carr also asked questions on:

- school enrolment projections for the next four years;
- reading assistance program uptake in 2007;
- non-government recurrent funding and number of non-government schools;
- budget measures which will benefit rural and remote schools;
- Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership;
- National Schools Chaplaincy Programme;
- Summer Schools for Teachers program;
- Investing in Our Schools infrastructure program;
- National Literacy and Numeracy Week program;
- school flagpole program guideline changes.

International Education Group

3.28 Senator Carr began by raising a matter with the officers regarding an allegation about the awarding of an Endeavour program scholarship. This incident was featured on ABC Radio National. However the department had no knowledge of the contents of the allegation.

3.29 Further questions followed on the International Business and Hospitality Institute which has ceased operations and was the subject of an Australian Crime Commission investigation. The committee heard that the Institute was suspended by the Office of Training and Tertiary Education in Victoria and as required under the Education Services for Overseas Students Act its registration was automatically suspended from the Commonwealth Register of Institutions and Courses for Overseas Students.

3.30 Senator Carr finished by asking questions on various other 'degree mill' universities and colleges, such as St Clements University and Greenwich University, which have been investigated for unlawful practice. The department took these questions on notice.

Indigenous and Transitions Group

3.31 Senator Crossin led the questioning of this group beginning with examination of the budget allocation and success of the Career Advice Australia program.

3.32 Questions then followed on the Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Programme (IESIP). The committee was informed that the term IESIP is no longer used and is now referred to more generally as indigenous education programs. Senator Crossin asked further questions on the timing for the negotiations with the states and territories for the next quadrennium.

3.33 Final questions from Senator Crossin were on the topics of:

- the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme;
- whole-of-school intervention strategy;
- Nyangatjatjara College at Yulara;
- accelerated literacy program; and
- the reading assistance voucher program and the Northern Territory.

Acknowledgements

3.34 The committee thanks the ministers, departmental secretaries and officers for their assistance and cooperation during the hearings.

Senator Judith Troeth
Chairman