

Senate Finance and Public Administration Legislation Committee

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

Finance and Administration Portfolio

Department of Human Services and agencies

Budget Estimates 2005-2006, 26 May 2005

Question: HS105

Outcome 1, Output Group 1.1

Topic: ABSTUDY

Hansard Page/Written Question on Notice: Written

SENATOR CARR asked on 26 May 2005

- (1) You have provided a list of the four ABSTUDY processing centres that have remained after closure of ten centres.
- (2) Where were the ten located?
- (3) (a) What has happened to the staff of these centres? (b) How many were there? (c) How many were made redundant? (d) How many were redeployed by the Commonwealth?
- (4) What has been the impact of this change on ABSTUDY recipients and applicants?
- (5) Can you provide information on the average length of processing time for ABSTUDY applications (i) for four years immediately before the closures and (ii) since the closures?
- (6) (a) Can Indigenous students still apply for ABSTUDY through Centrelink? (b) Are Centrelink staff provided with training to help them provide culturally-appropriate assistance and advice to Indigenous ABSTUDY applicants?
- (7) (a) With the opening of the new ICC network, will students be able to apply for ABSTUDY through ICCs? (b) Will ICCs replace Centrelink in this regard. (c) Or augment it?

Answer:

- (1) The current ABSTUDY Customer Service Support Centres are located at:
 - Victoria Park, Area West Australia;
 - Palmerston, Area North Australia;
 - Mount Druitt, Area West NSW; and
 - Cairns, Area Central and Northern Queensland.

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(2) The following are the ten other ABSTUDY Processing Units that existed prior to consolidation:

- Adelaide, Area South Australia;
- Brisbane, Area Brisbane;
- Canberra, Area South West NSW;
- Dubbo, Area South West NSW;
- Ingleburn, Area South Metropolitan (NSW);
- Lismore, Area Pacific Central (NSW);
- Newcastle, Area Hunter (NSW);
- Wollongong, Area East Coast (NSW);
- Hobart, Area Tasmania; and
- Melbourne, Area North Central (Victoria).

(3) (a) These staff were either placed into one of the consolidated sites or redeployed within the Centrelink Network.

(b) There were 109 staff in ABSTUDY Processing Units prior to consolidation.

(c) No staff were made redundant.

(d) 55 staff were redeployed within the Centrelink Network. No staff were redeployed elsewhere in the Commonwealth.

(4) The consolidation of ABSTUDY claim processing into four Processing Units has allowed for greater consistency of decision making for ABSTUDY claimants.

The extensive network of Customer Service Centres, Call Centres and Centrelink Agents continues to provide a personalised service for customers enquiring about ABSTUDY and available allowances.

Consolidation has also provided the opportunity for Centrelink to improve the delivery of outreach services by allowing staff to concentrate on improving their relationships with communities, schools and Indigenous support organisations.

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(5) The detailed information required to answer the Senator's question is not readily available. To obtain this information would be highly resource intensive and I cannot justify the level of expenditure that would be required to obtain it.

However, Centrelink currently measures the proportion of claims that are assessed within the 21-day timeliness target outlined in the Business Partnership Agreement with the Department of Education, Science and Training. The following table demonstrates that timeliness performance has improved subsequent to consolidation of ABSTUDY claim processing in October 2004.

<i>Period</i>	<i>Percentage of ABSTUDY claims finalised within 21 days</i>
2001-02	85.63%
2002-03	86.93%
2003-04	87.33%
July 2004 to October 2004	89.31%
November 2004 to June 2005	90.09%

(6) (a) Yes

(b) Yes. Centrelink has an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Awareness training package available to all staff. In addition, the National Induction Package, Customer Service Stream and the Call Centre Induction Package both have sections addressing cultural awareness, as do the foundation modules of the Centrelink Customers Learning Guide.

(7) (a) No

(b) No

(c) To date, there have been no changes made to the ABSTUDY application processes as a consequence of the opening of the Indigenous Coordination Centres.