

Executive Summary

For some time, the Senate has expressed concerns about the approach of the Government to the timely provision of information as requested by the Parliament. These concerns go to the propensity of ministers to deny requests, in particular requests for specific financial and other data related to Commonwealth expenditure, on the grounds that such information is 'commercial in confidence'.

Senate standing order 164 can be invoked in an attempt to have documents tabled. The standing order provides for the Senate to make an order for documents to be produced by the Leader of the Government and laid on the table. The documents so produced are known as returns to order. This report arises from the Government's refusal so far to comply with this order in regard to a request for information on the financial state of universities, as documented in discussions between the Department of Education, Science and Training and each of the publicly funded universities.

No evidence was presented by the Minister to support the Government's and the Department's assertion that the material warrants the description of being 'commercial in confidence'.

No evidence was presented to suggest that releasing the information would not be in the public interest, or would be contrary to the interests of universities.

Therefore the information should be made available. Indeed, in the light of the government's proposed reform package, it is important that the Senate have all appropriate financial analysis in order to assess the impact of the Backing Australia's Future legislative package.

Evidence from DEST as to the financial health of sector rests on aggregate data. An analysis of public data on universities' financial standing reflects significant variations in financial standing.

Evidence presented to the inquiry reflected a variety of opinion within universities as to the value of financial summaries and projections prepared by DEST. Furthermore, it indicates a degree of distrust on the part of some universities about the interpretation which the Department places on the information it receives.

