

Committee Secretary
Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Committee Department of the
Senate

Re: Inquiry into Academic Standards of School Education

Dear Sir/Madam,

I would like to make a submission to this Inquiry. I am a full-time research professor of physics who visits around ten High Schools each year as part of the Outreach program of Murdoch University and my ARC Centre of Excellence. I do not have access to any firm statistics, but have gained considerable anecdotal experience over many years through interaction with school staff and students.

The fact that academic standards are falling at schools and the university sector generally is undeniable. This is best seen at the second level universities and the less academic schools. Top universities, like ANU, Sydney, Melbourne, etc, will see this to a lesser extent because the shrinking market of well-trained school students will hit them last. However, universities like Murdoch can readily see the variation in the student background over say the last ten years. Similarly, having visited many schools over the last six years I can see how the top academic schools have maintained their standards, while the others have fallen away. Hence, I would claim that, overall, there are fewer academically well-trained high school students than ever before.

Why this is so is also undeniable. There are fewer academically well-trained teachers than ever before. Bright young students are not taking up the teaching profession, and hence are not replacing the retiring/resigning senior teachers. I've added the word resigning because in WA the introduction of what is termed "Outcome Based Education" (OBE) has resulted in massive useless busy work that has led to many resignations and subsequent teacher shortages. However, I do not wish to overemphasize the OBE problems in WA. The key problem, of bright young people shunning teaching as a career, afflicts most English speaking countries, or wherever the teaching profession has seen its pay and conditions erode relative to other professions.

My experience suggests a gradual decline over the last twenty years. The solution to the problem is simple, but expensive. Start treating and paying teachers as some of the most important professionals in a society. Once we start doing this, in a short twenty years we may get back to where we once were.

Yours faithfully,

Igor Bray

--

Igor Bray, Professor of Physics
Australian Research Council Professorial Fellow
Deputy Director of the ARC Centre for Antimatter-Matter Studies
a: Physics, Murdoch University, Perth, Western Australia, 6150
e: <mailto:I.Bray@murdoch.edu.au>
w: <http://atom.murdoch.edu.au>
p: +61 (0)8 9360 6443
f: +61 (0)8 9360 6183
m: +61 (0)4 0489 2862