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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

COMMITTEES

Education and Training Committee

Report

SPEECH

Monday, 1 June 2009

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Date Monday, 1 June 2009
Page 5003
Questioner
Speaker Bird, Sharon, MP

Source House
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Ms BIRD (Cunningham) (9.03 pm)—On behalf of the Standing Committee on Education and Training, I present the committee's report entitled *Review of the Department of Education, Science and Training annual report 2006-07*, together with the minutes of proceedings and evidence received by the committee.

Ordered that the report be made a parliamentary paper.

Ms BIRD—On behalf of the Standing Committee on Education and Training and in the presence of my deputy chair, Dr Dennis Jensen, I present the report on the committee's review of the Department of Education, Science and Training's annual report for 2006-07. The DEST annual report was tabled in February 2008. Since the 2007 election, portfolio responsibility for education has moved to the new Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. The committee undertook the review of the annual report in order to acquaint itself with portfolio issues and establish a dialogue with stakeholders.

The report canvassed four areas of interest raised by members of the committee. These were, firstly, the adequacy of skills training to meet emerging demands; secondly, the effectiveness of the Australian qualifications framework; thirdly, the recruitment levels of mature age apprentices; and finally the decline in enrolments in enabling sciences at universities. The first three of these areas refer specifically to the operation of the vocational education and training sector, which is undergoing a period of intense review and significant reform. Indeed, that continued during the time in which the committee was looking at the topic.

A particular challenge to achieving adequate training to meet emerging demands in the VET sector is the development of green skills to promote sustainability principles. Examples of the application of new green skills can be found in areas such as harvesting recycled water, installation of photovoltaic cells and the conversion of cars to run on LPG. In many cases, the evidence before the committee from people such as the industry skills training councils was that the skill sets are not new but that the tradespeople need to learn to apply their existing knowledge in new ways.

Stakeholders identified some positives in the VET sector, such as the ongoing rationalisation of training

packages to increase portability of qualifications across industries and indeed even within industries. However, areas of concern remain. Two such areas of concern refer to shortfalls in the number of VET teachers and ensuring qualifications reflect the expectations of trainees and industry employers. With the onset of the global financial crisis and an expected decline in employment vacancies, VET should be focused on having people skilled and ready to participate once the downturn passes. The capacity to get people skilled and ready for work requires adequate numbers of teachers to meet demand. Ensuring the standards of qualifications is also vital to those undertaking training and to future employers. Ensuring quality of skills is reflected in the qualification is particularly important in an environment of increased competition in the VET sector, both domestically and internationally.

Taking into account the review and reform prevailing within the VET sector, the committee has made only one recommendation in this area arising from the report. The current regime of data collection does not require private providers of VET services to supply data. The committee believes that there is a potentially significant gap in information available to government and consideration should be given to requiring the privately registered training organisations to provide relevant data to the National Centre for Vocational Education and Research as a condition of endorsement under the Australian Quality Training Framework.

The committee also inquired into claims that there had been a decline in tertiary enrolments in enabling sciences—that is, the hard science subjects such as maths and physics. I am sure my colleague, the deputy chair, will have quite a bit to say on this as he had a particular interest in exploring this area. Statistics from various sources painted quite different pictures of what has been occurring in the science departments of universities. Figures provided by the department indicated little cause for concern, with enrolment levels remaining relatively stable. However, statistics and accounts presented by other stakeholders presented more alarming trends of decline in the enabling science enrolments. Discrepancies between data sets appeared to arise as a result of differing definitions of an enabling science that were used to aggregate data, as well as the time frame chosen to establish the trend in participation. Therefore, we have recommended the

department consult with the stakeholders to improve the quality of this data.

I am sure the committee would join me in thanking the secretary of the committee, Glenn Worthington, the inquiry secretaries, Justin Baker and Jane Hearn, and the research officer, Ray Knight for their excellent work in supporting our investigation. I recommend the report.