



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

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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Questioner
Speaker Jensen, Dennis, MP

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Question No.

Dr JENSEN (Tangney) (9.09 pm)—I rise to commend the report to the House. However, with regret I note that a review of a Commonwealth department's annual report for the 2006-07 year is only now being tabled just weeks before the 2008-09 year. This two-year gap is unacceptably protracted, and has occurred for reasons I shall explain.

The Department of Science, Education and Training, as it was previously known, tabled its 2006-07 annual report in parliament on 13 February 2008 for reasons best known to the department itself. Consider though, that following the 2007 federal election, the department was disbanded and its responsibilities transferred to the new Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training decided on 29 March 2008 to review the annual report, and the document before you today is the result of that 14-month project.

The review highlights unacceptable delays by the department concerned in providing responses to requests for information from the committee. Information requested at the first public hearing on 6 June 2008 was not provided until 20 October, and information requested on 5 February 2009 was not received until 2 April. If a parliamentary committee receives this treatment from the department, what chance does a member of the general public have in obtaining responses within a reasonable time frame?

The review notes that the committee is concerned that Commonwealth departments understand they are ultimately accountable to the people of Australia through the parliament of the people's representatives. I trust the committee does not experience such tardiness on the part of the department in future. As such, a recommendation was made that the department provides in future annual reports details of the number of questions it receives from parliamentary committees and the time taken to respond to them.

On a positive note, I note that this committee continues to function in the best bipartisan spirit, and the document before you is a fine example of when members from both sides work together for the common good of the people. Although there will inevitably be differences of ideology and opinion on matters of the day, there is no doubt that the committee works for the best outcomes of the nation.

The review focuses on a number of issues I would like to highlight, and one of these in particular is the decline in university enrolments in the enabling sciences. These sciences—chemistry, physics and mathematics—provide the very foundations for innovation and development of technical expertise. The year 2006-07 saw a decline in undergraduate enrolments in all enabling sciences, most notably in my own field of physics. The fall in physics and astronomy enrolments for the year was 11.4 per cent. Thankfully, the number of postgraduate enrolments for enabling sciences was slightly up for the year and only down marginally at 0.2 per cent for physics and astronomy.

The figures for the year bucked a more positive trend in this field over the preceding five years. But the committee was told enabling science enrolments had been in steady decline over the longer term from 1989. The number of mathematical sciences students dived 33.7 per cent from 1989 to 2005, with physical sciences dropping 19.4 per cent over the same period. The number of chemical sciences students fell by 5.3 per cent. Making these figures even more disturbing is the fact that they are based simply on the numbers of students enrolled in particular courses, and make no allowance for the rapid population growth in that same period or the increasing percentage of people pursuing tertiary education. Reasons for these changing trends are varied, but appear to include both a lack of interest among high school students and a lack of quality science teachers at high school. It is very much a chicken-and-egg question: which came first—the lack of interest or the lack of good teachers?

The review details some suggestions for increasing enrolments in the enabling sciences, and I urge the government to implement some of the suggestions raised. There was some disagreement on interpreting enrolments data. The committee agreed that studies in these enabling sciences must be encouraged with initiatives commencing at the high school level at least. The sciences offer varied and rewarding career paths. They are rewarding to the individuals concerned and Australia as a whole. We cannot afford to neglect them. I commend the report to the House.