

Economics Legislation Committee
ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE
Industry, Innovation and Science Portfolio
2016-17 Supplementary Budget Estimates
20 October 2016

DEPARTMENT: DEPARTMENT OF INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND SCIENCE

TOPIC: STEM education

REFERENCE: Written Question – Senator Carr

QUESTION No.: SI-143

In response to a request for a general update in the Committee's Estimates hearing on 20 October 2016, the Chief Scientist said,

Dr Finkel: In the area of STEM education, we have a couple of programs that we are looking at—one very actively involved in—to do with schools education. One is to take to the next stage a project that I inherited. My predecessor Ian Chubb, working with Roslyn Prinsley in my office, developed a compilation of all the extracurricular activities that we could find in Australia that are really stimulating for students' interests. But a compilation like that is permanently out of date on the day you publish it. So we are converting that into a digital online portal that can be maintained by the providers and be easily accessed by parents, students and teachers. Without going into too much detail, we are looking at a program that will help principals in schools to develop a science and mathematics plan for progress that is individualised to their school.

1. What intersection does this or any other work conducted within the Office of Chief Scientist have with the business activities of Stile Education?
2. Does the Chief Scientist have a financial interest in Stile Education?
3. What safeguards have been put in place regarding conflict of interest?

ANSWER

1. Stile Education produces two main products, both of which are resources for teachers. First, a platform for digital delivery of interactive lessons. Second, Cosmos Lessons that provide science content that is effectively a textbook replacement for Years 7 through 10.

Neither of the two schools programs conducted within the Office of the Chief Scientist directly intersects with the work of Stile Education. The Star portal program is intended for extracurricular and co-curricular activities, not teacher resources. The work with principals in schools is intended to encourage schools to develop their personalised mathematics and science strategies. How schools do that is up to them, but the Chief Scientist will be encouraging them to use evidence-based approaches.

Stile Education also produces lessons for the CSIRO, aimed at Years 5 and 6. Although the Chief Scientist made the initial introductions between Stile and CSIRO in 2015, his last interaction was before his appointment as Chief Scientist. The details of the contract were worked out between CSIRO and Stile staff without his involvement.

2. The Chief Scientist is the founder and with his wife the majority owner (about 70%) of Stile Education. The Chief Scientist and his wife are the 100% owners of Cosmos Magazine.

The Chief Scientist retired at the end of 2015 as Executive Chairman of Stile Education and retired as the Publisher of Cosmos Magazine. He conceived of the Stile Education platform and the Cosmos Magazine Lessons. However, since the end of 2015, he has stepped aside and has had no control of their ongoing development. His ownership interest in Stile Education and Cosmos Magazine were fully disclosed by him when he took up his appointment as Chief Scientist at the beginning of 2016.

3. The appointment of Dr Finkel as Australia's Chief Scientist required him to resign from all professional organisational offices, research and advisory roles, executive, publishing and editorial roles, and to relinquish directorships of any company or foundation that could potentially conflict with his new duties, prior to starting in the role on 25 January 2016.

Under his Deed of Appointment, the Chief Scientist is also required to lodge with the Secretary of the Department of Industry, Innovation and Science an annual Record of Private Interest Statement setting out his pecuniary and personal interests and those of his immediate family. He must update this information whenever there is any significant change in his or his immediate family's private financial circumstances.

If any conflict arises in relation to a matter to be considered by the Chief Scientist, he must disclose this to the Portfolio Minister as soon as possible, and not participate in making decisions on that matter until the conflict is managed in a manner approved by the Minister.