

Chapter 2

Education and Training portfolio

2.1 This chapter summarises certain key areas of interest raised during the committee's consideration of additional estimates for the 2015–16 financial year for the Education and Training portfolio. This chapter of the report follows the order of proceedings and is an indicative, not exhaustive, account of issues examined.

2.2 On 10 February 2016, the committee heard evidence from Senator the Hon Simon Birmingham, Minister for Education and Training, along with officers from the Department of Education and Training (the Department) and agencies responsible for administering education and training policy, including:

- Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority;
- Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership;
- Australian Research Council;
- Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency; and
- Australian Skills Quality Authority.

2.3 Senators present over the course of the day's hearing included Senator McKenzie (Chair), Senator Lines (Deputy Chair), Senators Carr, Dastyari, Johnston, McKim, O'Neill, Reynolds, Simms and Sterle.

Cross-portfolio

Departmental Secretary

2.4 Senators and Ministers opened proceedings by acknowledging the work of Ms Lisa Paul, who retired as Secretary of the Department as of the end of January 2016. Ms Paul was recognised as the second longest-serving Secretary in the federal government, having first been appointed to the role in 2004.¹

2.5 Mr Cook gave an overview of some of Ms Paul's achievements:

Lisa's career in the public service began as a graduate, and what followed was a career that focused on health, welfare, family services, housing, homelessness and education. In 2011, Lisa was recognised as an officer in the Order of Australia for her achievements in driving reform in education, employment and workforce relations. For her work in leading the domestic response to the Bali bombings, Lisa received a Public Service Medal in 2003.²

1 *Estimates Hansard*, 10 February 2016, pp. 2-3.

2 Mr Tony Cook, Acting Secretary, Department of Education and Training, *Estimates Hansard*, 10 February 2016, p. 3.

Enterprise Bargaining

2.6 The committee sought information regarding the status of the Department's enterprise bargaining, including the removal of certain provisions from the most recent draft proposal and the intention to move these provisions into policy. Those provisions discussed included rights to consultation prior to decisions being made and personal leave requirements. Mr Cook advised that the draft proposal had been provided to staff within the Department as well as bargaining representatives and that feedback would be gathered prior to a final determination being made.³

2.7 The committee also discussed the Department's current position in relation to a pay offer for departmental staff. Mr Cook explained that, as a result of a number of machinery-of-government changes, the Department has had to review their budget in order to make an informed decision regarding a pay offer. He also advised that this process was in its final stages and that the Department will then work with the Australian Public Service Commission (APSC) to obtain approval on an agreement.⁴

Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA)

'Refocusing' of ACARA

2.8 The committee asked for clarification regarding the coalition's policy for schools which refers to a 'refocus' of ACARA in relation to curriculum development. Mr Cook advised that this refocussing of ACARA formed part of the recent review of the agency. Mr Cook further advised that, in line with the recommendations made in the review of ACARA, focus would be shifted to assessment and the utilisation of online assessments.⁵

2.9 Mr Cook also responded to questions relating to how the roles and responsibilities of ACARA are reviewed. He explained that, in addition to the recently completed review of ACARA, which was a legislated requirement, ACARA submits a work plan to the Education Council. The Commonwealth and state and territory governments then examine and amend that work plan if necessary before it is approved for implementation.⁶

Assessment of general capabilities

2.10 ACARA responded to questions regarding the assessment of general capabilities such as problem-solving skills and critical and creative thinking. Chief Executive Officer of ACARA, Mr Robert Randall noted that, while seven general capabilities are included in the approved curriculum, these are not yet being measured.⁷ Mr Randall commented:

3 *Estimates Hansard*, 10 February 2016, pp. 6-8

4 *Estimates Hansard*, 10 February 2016, pp. 8-9.

5 *Estimates Hansard*, 10 February 2016, p. 18.

6 *Estimates Hansard*, 10 February 2016, pp. 19-20.

7 *Estimates Hansard*, 10 February 2016, pp. 20-21.

[W]e have ongoing discussion with the states and territories about how, expecting that young people are being taught and are learning those sorts of things, we might continue to adjust and improve our assessment program so that we can assess those.⁸

2.11 The committee also discussed the importance of general capabilities with regard to students' ability to perform well in areas such as specialist maths and science.⁹ Mr Randall acknowledged the challenge of broadening parents' focus from their children's literacy and numeracy abilities to encompass these general capabilities and noted that '[t]hose things go hand in hand, so, yes, that is why they are in the curriculum.'¹⁰

Students with disability

2.12 ACARA provided the committee with an update regarding their involvement in work to make the Australian curriculum more inclusive of students with disability. National agreement has not been reached on the matter. However, Mr Randall advised that, in line with a resolution of the Education Council, ACARA would provide access to relevant resources developed for teachers of students with disability through the Australian curriculum website.¹¹

Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL)

Literacy and numeracy testing for student teachers

2.13 The committee requested information about the AITSL's involvement in the development of literacy and numeracy tests for student teachers. Ms Margery Evans, Chief Executive Officer, advised that AITSL had collaborated with contracted experts and a steering committee in order to put the tests together. AITSL was also involved in initial pilot testing to determine the tests' validity, how long they took and the quality of the test items.¹²

2.14 Ms Evans also described the structure of the tests:

It is an online test. It is done in two parts...While the examples are relevant to schools, the test does not go to how you teach literacy or numeracy...The test is in two parts, the literacy part and numeracy part. They are multiple choice questions and they use the context of schooling, but equally they could use the context of anything else. They are actually about your personal levels of literacy and numeracy.¹³

8 Mr Robert Randall, Chief Executive Officer, Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, *Estimates Hansard*, 10 February 2016, p. 21.

9 *Committee Hansard*, 10 February 2016, p. 23.

10 Mr Robert Randall, Chief Executive Officer, Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, *Estimates Hansard*, 10 February 2016, p. 21.

11 *Estimates Hansard*, 10 February 2016, pp. 34-36.

12 *Estimates Hansard*, 10 February 2016, p. 38.

13 Ms Margery Evans, Chief Executive Officer, Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, *Estimates Hansard*, 10 February 2016, p. 38.

STEM capacity gap

2.15 The committee heard evidence from AITSL regarding how it has responded to the broadly identified capacity gap in the teaching of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). Ms Evans explained that these issues have in part been addressed through the implementation of new and strengthened standards and procedures around teacher accreditation. These new standards and procedures stipulate the prerequisites and amount of time graduates would be expected to have in relation to STEM subjects. Moreover, primary school teachers are now required to graduate with at least one subject specialisation.¹⁴

Involvement of teacher unions

2.16 Senator McKenzie raised questions about what efforts have been made by AITSL to include teacher unions in their work. Ms Evans noted that AITSL has invited teacher unions to participate in their expert standing committees, but that this offer has not been accepted. AITSL does, however, endeavour to keep teacher unions informed as to the agency's progress.¹⁵

Australian Research Council (ARC)

Budget savings

2.17 The committee asked the ARC to identify where savings are coming from as a result of delays in the implementation of higher education changes. Ms Leanne Harvey, Executive General Manager, informed the committee:

We have a delay of one year in the implementation of the 3.25 per cent efficiency dividend, which equates to \$17.842 million over four years. We also had a delay in the commencement of the ongoing funding for the Future Fellowships scheme by one year. So for one year we are doing 50 future fellows and then we go to ongoing after that, of 100...We then had a reclassification of \$6.887 million from the special appropriation to introduce and fund the continuous application process for the linkage scheme.¹⁶

Linkage Projects scheme

2.18 Professor Aidan Byrne, Chief Executive Officer, also responded to questions regarding the ARC's movement to a continuous application process for the Linkage Projects scheme. Professor Byrne explained the ARC would have to move from a process where a large number of applications are received and assessed at one time, allowing for applications to be scored and ranked. In moving to a continuous application process, the ARC has no control over what time an application is received. Consequently, the ARC will create a 'virtual pool' of grants that applications can be

14 *Estimates Hansard*, 10 February 2016, pp. 41-42.

15 *Estimates Hansard*, 10 February 2016, p. 52.

16 Ms Leanne Harvey, Executive General Manager, Australian Research Council, *Estimates Hansard*, 10 February 2016, p. 53.

referenced against; assuring that the integrity and consistency of standards is maintained in the assessment process.¹⁷

Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA)

Staffing levels

2.19 Representatives from TEQSA responded to questions regarding the agency's staffing levels and the resignation of six senior management personnel. Professor Nicholas Saunders, Chief Commissioner, advised the committee that these staffing losses related to the corporate restructure carried out in response to budget constraints. Mr Anthony McClaran, Chief Executive Officer, further advised that TEQSA's staffing levels have reduced to approximately 60 staff as compared to 90 in 2014. However, the implications of further reductions to TEQSA's annual budget on staffing have yet to be determined.¹⁸

Entrance requirements

2.20 The committee also raised the issue of the transparency of entrance requirements in higher education. Professor Saunders explained that, when evaluating applications for course accreditation or re-registration, TEQSA assesses providers' ATAR admission processes as well as the accessibility of information regarding entrance requirements.¹⁹

2.21 Professor Saunders elaborated on what TEQSA has done to address the transparency of entrance requirements:

[W]e have done a number of things in recent months. First of all, we have met with the Universities Australia quality committee...We have had discussions with them around the issue of ATARs generally and the transparency of the arrangements that individual universities have in terms of using the ATAR. Secondly, as you know, the matter has been referred to the Higher Education Standards Panel, which is the panel that oversees TEQSA...Thirdly, we have obtained some information about ATARs from the department and done a review of provider websites, university websites.²⁰

Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA)

Student complaints

2.22 Senator Robert Simms asked officers from ASQA about the proportion of complaints received from students and how these complaints are dealt with. Mr Christopher Robinson, Chief Commissioner, informed the committee that ASQA has received a total of 5783 complaints since it was established, with approximately 40

17 *Estimates Hansard*, 10 February 2016, p. 54.

18 *Estimates Hansard*, 10 February 2016, pp. 62-63.

19 *Estimates Hansard*, 10 February 2016, p. 66.

20 Professor Nicholas Saunders, Chief Commissioner, Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, *Estimates Hansard*, 10 February 2016, p. 66.

per cent of those coming from students. ASQA endeavours to use the information gathered through complaints and marketplace intelligence to prioritise which registered training organisations (RTOs) they investigate and to inform their future activity.²¹

2.23 ASQA also advised that the decision as to whether or not a complaint warrants further investigation is made by assessing the complaint against set of criteria. These criteria include the nature and degree of noncompliance against the standards, whether students were provided with misleading information, and the number of complaints received.²²

2.24 The committee also discussed the issue of how students are informed about the complaints mechanisms and procedures available to them. ASQA noted that it is requirement under the standards that RTOs have a complaints policy in place, and that students are informed about the procedures available upon their enrolment. Mr Robinson stated:

I think this is an interesting issue in the VET sector, because most of the students are adults who are studying part-time in a vocational course and they do not have student associations and the same sorts of information channels that the university sector—particularly for the younger group of university students—has.²³

Security industry review

2.25 The committee sought information from ASQA regarding its review of RTOs within the security industry. Mr Robinson gave an overview of ASQA's findings, noting that there are significant issues in relation to consistency across the industry. The review found that, while occupational licensing is recognised across state and territory boarders, training requirements are not nationally consistent.²⁴ Mr Robinson further emphasised the issue by noting that ASQA 'looked at five different jobs in the security industry and we did not find the occupational licensing arrangements the same in any two jurisdictions.'²⁵

Department of Education and Training - Outcome 2

Research Block Grants

2.26 The committee asked representatives from the Department for information regarding changes to Research Block Grants (RBG) in response to the recommendations of the Watt review and the implementation of the National Innovation and Science Agenda. The new RBG funding arrangements for universities

21 *Estimates Hansard*, 10 February 2016, pp. 75-76.

22 *Estimates Hansard*, 10 February 2016, p. 76.

23 Mr Christopher Robinson, Chief Commissioner, Australian Skills Quality Authority, *Estimates Hansard*, 10 February 2016, p. 77.

24 *Estimates Hansard*, 10 February 2016, p. 90.

25 Mr Christopher Robinson, Chief Commissioner, Australian Skills Quality Authority, *Estimates Hansard*, 10 February 2016, p. 90.

will allocate a greater proportion of funds to collaborative industry research and deemphasise publications.²⁶

2.27 The committee queried what work the Department had undertaken with regard to modelling the impact of the RBG changes. Mr Dom English, Group Manager—Research and Economic, advised:

[W]e have modelled the change in the funding outcomes that are possible with the new formulas for advising Dr Watt on the possible impact of his changes, but in terms of modelling the impact on the research behaviour of universities, that is a far more tenuous concept...The balance of judgement in the review by Dr Watt was that it would have a limited impact on the way universities prioritised the basic blue sky research, because there are strong incentives to maintain effort in those areas already. The expectation is that by elevating the importance of partnerships with external parties in the research endeavour that more of that activity would be done.²⁷

HECS-HELP debt

2.28 Officers from the Department responded to questions regarding the HECS-HELP changes that will require Australians living overseas to repay their higher education debts. As of 30 June 2015, a total 2.223 million individuals had an outstanding HECS-HELP debt. It is estimated that between one and three per cent of those debtors, representing approximately 44 000 individuals, reside permanently overseas. The requirements come into effect from 1 July 2017. The Department will work with the Australian Taxation Office over the coming period to identify and communicate the requirements to existing debtors.²⁸

Department of Education and Training - Outcome 1

School funding

2.29 The committee heard evidence from the Department regarding proposed changes to school funding whereby from 2018 funding will be based on the consumer price index (CPI) and student enrolments.²⁹ The Department clarified that Commonwealth funding for schools will continue to grow year on year. When asked about how Commonwealth expenditure on school funding compares with state and territory expenditure, Mr Cook noted:

[O]ver the 10 year period between 2004-05 and 2013-14...Commonwealth funding has increased to government schools by 66 per cent, and state

26 *Estimates Hansard*, 10 February 2016, pp. 97-100.

27 Mr Dom English, Group Manager—Research and Economic, Department of Education and Training, *Estimates Hansard*, 10 February 2016, p. 97.

28 *Estimates Hansard*, 10 February 2016, pp. 106-108.

29 *Estimates Hansard*, 10 February 2016, pp. 111-119.

funding has increased to government schools by 6.7 per cent. So almost a 10 times difference in relation particularly to government schools.³⁰

NCCD data

2.30 The Department responded to concerns raised by the committee regarding the progress of the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data (NCCD) on school students with disability. Mr Cook advised that an independent quality assurance process is currently being undertaken to ensure data consistency and reliability across sectors, states and territories. Once the quality assurance process is complete, a data report will be submitted to the Education Council for consideration. It was noted that while the implementation of the NCCD is following the same time frame agreed by the previous government, delays in the release of the data have resulted from the need for further consultation and consistency between states and territories.³¹

Child care reforms

2.31 The committee canvassed a number of issues relating to the child care reforms announced by the government in December 2015. The Department was asked to explain the particulars of claims that one million out of 1.2 million families will be better off as a result of the reforms.³²

30 Mr Tony Cook, Acting Secretary, Department of Education and Training, *Estimates Hansard*, 10 February 2016, p. 118.

31 *Estimates Hansard*, 10 February 2016, pp. 120-123.

32 *Estimates Hansard*, 10 February 2016, pp. 129-147.