

EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND TRAINING

SENATE LEGISLATION COMMITTEE - QUESTIONS ON NOTICE 2003-2004 ADDITIONAL ESTIMATES HEARING

Outcome: 2

Output Group: 2.4 – Funding for higher education

DEST Question No. E889_04

Senator Carr provided in writing

Question:

- a) BAF Newsletter no.1 says that the new scholarships will be available in 2004 “subject to the passage of legislation.” Can you confirm that?
- b) When were universities informed about their 2004 allocations of CLS Scholarships? Was it in a letter dated 23 December 2003?
- c) Have universities been able to allocate their scholarships successfully? Or can't they do that until they have the guidelines according to which the scholarships can be allocated?
- d) When were the guidelines finalised? Have they been finalised?
- e) Doesn't it say in Newsletter no.6 that they will be tabled in late February?
- f) Your Newsletter for February refers to a series of last-minute changes in requirements, eligibility, payment dates etc. What are they?
- g) On pp.10-12 you provide further information about the scholarship scheme. Was this the first time institutions and the public had been given that information?
- h) Have these changes caused confusion or practical difficulties? What?
- i) Does this imply that there is confusion or lack of understanding about the scheme? Have any institutions approached you with complaints that they are uncertain about the administrative arrangements, guidelines, timetable and so on? What are those concerns?
- j) For example, you say (p.16) that universities can award scholarships “immediately” – how can they do so when they won't have the guidelines till the end of February?
- k) You say that you will forward the universities their scholarship payments in the second February payment. What date is that?
- l) How many universities have awarded scholarships? How will students know their situation if they don't know whether they have a scholarship?
- m) Isn't the purpose of the scholarships to encourage disadvantaged students to go to university?
- n) Didn't the Government tell the four independent senators that the legislation had to be passed so that students could get their scholarships for 2004? How many universities will be in a position to award them?
- o) How will the scholarships affect the students' decisions whether to go to university in 2004 – when they would have already have to enrol before they know if they have a scholarship?
- p) Can the Government state categorically that scholarships will be awarded to students on schedule for the academic year 2004?

Answer:

Commonwealth Learning Scholarships

- a) Yes, the BAF Newsletter No. 1 states that. Commonwealth Learning Scholarships will be available in 2004 as the *Higher Education Support Act 2003* was passed by the Parliament and the Commonwealth Scholarship Guidelines under that Act came into effect on 1 March 2004.
- b) The letter of 23 December 2003 attached 2004 scholarship allocations and grant amounts for the CLS. There were some minor modifications to the scholarship allocations and grant amounts notified in that letter and final figures were provided to universities on 26 February 2004.
- c) DEST has been implementing the scholarships in close consultation with universities. They have had access to the Draft Guidelines since November 2003. Universities are at different stages in developing their application, selection and offer processes, and administrative arrangements. The Guidelines provide a high degree of flexibility and universities are able to offer scholarships prior to a student's confirmation of enrolment.

The Minister in his 23 December 2003 letter recognised that some institutions would not have in place the necessary administrative arrangements to offer scholarships at the beginning of 2004. He therefore proposed that universities be able to offer scholarships later in 2004, provided that initial offers are not made later than the start of semester 2.

- d) The Guidelines were finalised on 24 February 2004, sent to universities on 26 February 2004 and came into effect on 1 March 2004.
- e) Newsletter No. 6 contained a table of events indicating that the Commonwealth Scholarship Guidelines would be tabled at the end of February 2004. They were tabled on Tuesday, 2 March 2004 in the House of Representatives and on Wednesday, 3 March 2004 in the Senate.
- f) The changes referred to in the Newsletter are the changes which are detailed in the Newsletter on pages 16-18. These changes were the result of DEST's ongoing consultation with the sector. They resolved a number of matters that had been raised in queries from the sector and/or clarified matters that had been queried by the sector.
- g) The February Newsletter provided information on the development of the Commonwealth Learning Scholarships programme and the changes made to the Draft Guidelines since they had been made public in November 2003. These changes were discussed with the CLS Reference Group on 29 January 2004. Newsletter No. 6, published in early February, was the first opportunity to inform all institutions and the public of these developments.
- h) DEST is not aware of any significant confusion or practical difficulties associated with these changes. The consultation processes for the CLS were designed to ensure timely sharing of information and feedback with the sector.
- i) The Department has not received any complaints from institutions about CLS arrangements. DEST has been working with institutions since the 2003 Budget announcement to ensure that they are consulted on, and kept well-informed of, the development of the CLS Guidelines.
- j) Universities were informed of requirements via draft guidelines in order to give them sufficient time to put in place appropriate arrangements for their institutions. These arrangements did not change between the draft and the final Guidelines.
- k) The first Scholarships payment will be made to universities on 25 March 2004.

- l) The Minister allowed universities flexibility as to when scholarships would be offered in 2004, so long as initial offers were made prior to the commencement of Semester 2. Universities will not be required to report on Scholarships awarded until later in the year.
- m) The objectives of the Commonwealth Learning Scholarships are to facilitate choice in higher education and to increase higher education participation by students from low socio-economic backgrounds. The Programme seeks to achieve these objectives by providing financial assistance to students from low socio-economic backgrounds to assist them to meet both general education and accommodation costs.
- n) The CLS programme was dependant on the passage of the *Higher Education Support Act 2003*. All universities will be in a position to award these Scholarships in 2004.
- o) It is not possible for DEST to speculate on students' decisions about whether to go to university in 2004. Students commencing university for the first time in 2005 under the deregulated fee arrangements will be able to be offered scholarships prior to confirmation of their enrolment.
- p) The Minister has requested that universities offer scholarships before the commencement of Semester 2. The Government currently expects universities to meet this timetable.