

Chapter 2

Education, Science and Training portfolio

Introduction

99.1 This chapter summarises areas of interest and concern raised during the committee's consideration of the Additional Budget Estimates of the Education, Science and Training portfolio for the 2006-2007 financial year. This section of the report follows the order of proceedings and is an indicative, but not exhaustive, list of issues that received consideration during the estimates' hearings.

99.2 The committee heard evidence from Senator the Hon. George Brandis, as the Minister representing the Minister for Education, Science and Training, and from officers of the department, together with Questacon and related agencies, including:

- Australian Research Council (ARC);
- Australian Nuclear Science and Training Organisation (ANSTO);
- Australian Institute of Marine Science (AIMS); and
- Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO).

99.3 Senators present at the hearing were Senator Troeth (Chairman), Senator Marshall (Deputy Chair) and Senators Allison, Barnett, Carr, Crossin, Fifield, Lightfoot, Milne, Nettle, Patterson, Siewert and Stephens.

Australian Research Council

99.4 The ARC was questioned on matters relating to the Discovery Grants program, the Linkage International Awards program and the Research Quality Framework (RQF) panel structure. The committee was assured, in response to other questions, that there had been no ministerial rejections of grant applications except on advice from the ARC.

99.5 The ARC advised that they would have to take the RQF questions on notice as their CEO was absent from the hearing due to unforeseen circumstances.

Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation

99.6 The committee followed a line of questioning on the transition between the decommissioning of the HIFAR reactor and the commissioning of the new OPAL reactor at Lucas Heights. ANSTO officers informed the committee that no reactor is currently operating in this transition period. Related to this was questioning about a

gas explosion at Lucas Heights and the issue of importing essential medical isotopes which would otherwise have been produced at Lucas Heights.

Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation

99.7 The committee noted the unavoidable absence of the CEO, Dr Geoff Garrett who was abroad on government business. Senator Carr pointed out that three out of the four agency CEOs were unable to attend the hearing and indicated his expectation that at the budget estimates all CEOs would be present.

99.8 Committee members questioned the Chief Financial Officer about the CSIRO's 2005-06 budget, external earnings and the flagship program shortfalls. Questions were taken on notice by the CSIRO for updated information from the 2005-2006 annual report and individual flagship budgets.

99.9 Senator Milne followed with questions on the Cooperative Research Centre (CRC) for Coal in Sustainable Development and its work on geosequestration and solar technology. Questions focussed on what work had been undertaken, the publication of research and the outcomes of the projects.

99.10 Of particular interest was the admission by Dr David Brockway, Chief of Energy Technology, that a report on carbon dioxide capture from coal-fired power plants, co-authored by CSIRO engineers through the CRC for Coal in Sustainable Development, may not be released. The committee was informed that private industry partners in the CRC may have the ability to suppress the report to protect their commercial interests. Dr Brockway also pointed out that it was not necessarily unusual for a report such as this to be withheld. Senator Milne followed up later in the day with questions for the department on the CRC arrangements. Both the CSIRO and the department took questions on notice regarding the status of the report and arrangements governing the release of publications from CRCs. Dr Brockway's comments to the committee received prominent press coverage.

99.11 Questioning continued with Senator Carr, who used various letters and emails from former CSIRO staff as well as newspaper articles to raise concerns about staff morale, payments and other human resource issues across various sections of the agency. Officers took on notice the request to provide a table outlining the number of scientists in one division who had left since 1987.

99.12 Other issues raised by the committee included:

- Consolidation of CSIRO sites
- Research support services review
- CSIRO contract with Fujitsu Australia
- Government water initiative announcement
- CRCs and the Australian Centre for Weed Research
- G-bIRD
- ECOMmodore

Australian Institute of Marine Science (AIMS)

99.13 AIMS was questioned briefly on its \$5 million increase in baseline funding and staff redundancies.

Department of Education, Science and Training

Questacon

99.14 This was Questacon's first appearance since the Additional Budget Estimates in February 2005. The committee sought confirmation of Questacon's budget allocation and whether base funding had grown over the past three years. As at previous hearings, questions were asked about private revenue raising and sponsorship arrangements. There were also questions regarding the longest running outreach program, The Science Circus.

99.15 Professor Graham Durrant, the Questacon director, also offered to give the committee a detailed written answer in order to better explain the additional measures that government could take to assist Questacon secure additional funds to expand programs.

Science Group

99.16 Senator Milne began with questions on the matter of Cooperative Research Centres (CRCs) which had earlier been the focus of extensive questioning with the CSIRO. Senator Milne was particularly interested in the arrangements governing the release of publications from CRCs and was searching for a specific report scheduled for release last year. Senators Milne, Crossin and Carr also inquired into the altering of the selection criteria for funding CRCs, and questioned the department on why the Weeds, Reef, Dairy and Tropical Savannah CRCs now did not qualify for funding under the new guidelines.

99.17 Senator Crossin then asked questions on the development of the Commonwealth Radioactive Waste Management Facility in the Northern Territory. Questions focussed on the content of discussions between the department and the Northern Land Council, and Senator Crossin was again reminded of the Northern Land Council's request to keep these matters confidential. Discussions followed on the timeline for construction of the facility, transport infrastructure requirements, job creation, the inventory and costs of the waste facility.

Cross portfolio

99.18 Senator Carr questioned the department as to the status of answers outstanding to questions taken on notice and expressed concern regarding the general late submission of answers.¹ Senator Carr noted that although all answers had been

1 See Appendix 4 for Question on Notice statistics from the Supplementary Estimates

received by the morning of the hearing, this did not allow sufficient time to study the answers.² The committee acknowledges that the department has made an improvement on previous efforts and also accepts that the Christmas holiday period had contributed to the slower than usual response time. The committee expects the improvement to continue with answers from this round answered on or near time.

99.19 Other cross portfolio matters raised were in regard to consultancies, an increase in expenditure on staffing and advertising costs.

Innovation and Research System Group

99.20 Senator Carr directed questions to the department regarding Research Quality Frameworks (RQFs) as well as issues raised previously during the questioning of the Australian Research Council.

99.21 Questions followed regarding the additional appropriation of \$1 million to the Museum of Economic Botany for proposed refurbishment, and the process for which these additional funds had been allocated.

Higher Education Group

99.22 Senator Carr began by questioning the department about the annual grant and forward estimates for the Carrick Institute. The committee was interested in the work of this body at Macquarie University.

99.23 Officers were then asked a series of questions on the university funding arrangements for 2007 and the continuing review of funding clusters. Questioning then turned to the compliance by universities with the higher education workplace relations provisions, and was followed with questions on the workplace productivity program. Officers took on notice a series of questions about cost breakdowns, productivity gains and the tabling of reports.

99.24 Other expenditure matters dealt with by the committee included:

- Voluntary Student Union transitional funding
- FEE-HELP
- Collaboration and Structural Reform Fund
- Larry Knight Scholarship in Tasmania.

Vocational Training and Education Groups

99.25 Following on from previous estimates hearings, Senator Carr asked questions on the Industry Skills Councils contracts and the evaluation report.

99.26 Senator Carr then asked the department about Australian Apprenticeship centres, specifically concentrating on the closure of a centre in Hobart and investigations into meat industry centres in Victoria. This discussion was followed with questions on the Skills for the Future work skills vouchers.

Schools Group

99.27 Senator Nettle asked a series of questions regarding national school standards and accountability in non-government schools as well as national testing exemptions given by the Minister. This was in particular a reference to schools conducted by the Exclusive Brethren. Senator Nettle continued with questions on the progress of the National School Chaplaincy Program, following on from the previous supplementary estimates round.

99.28 Senator Carr finished with questions on the Investing in Our Schools Program grant applications and the compliance auditing of schools.

