

UNIVERSITIES — REVIEW

92. MR S.J. PRICE to the Minister for Education:

I refer to the McGowan Labor government's appointment of an expert panel to review Western Australia's public university sector.

- (1) Can the minister outline to the house how this government is working to ensure a sustainable future for Western Australia's university sector to ensure that WA universities are at the forefront of research and innovation?
- (2) Can the minister advise the house how the review will consider how structural change could strengthen the local university sector and deliver for students?

Dr A.D. BUTI replied:

I thank the member for Forrestfield for the question. Yes, I can provide that information.

- (1)–(2) Western Australian universities will play a very important role in the state's society and economy in the future. The sector generates about \$2 billion in economic activity, employs over 10 000 people and on average caters for the enrolment of around 35 000 students in our four public universities, including 14 000 new international students. At any one time, there are over 100 000 students enrolled in our four public universities. I am really pleased to say that today the Premier and I announced an independent review of the structure of the public university sector in Western Australia.

The expert panel has been charged with investigating and making recommendations to ensure that the WA public tertiary sector is well placed to take on current and future challenges, and meet the needs of industry and the workforce going forward. We live in a very rapidly changing world economically and with people's employment and technological advancements, so we need to have a public university sector that is geared to be ready for those changes. It is critical that our four public universities—the University of Western Australia, Edith Cowan University, Murdoch University and Curtin University—evaluate their ability to generate a skilled workforce to take on those challenges, whether it be in local innovation or the diversification of our state's economy.

Prior to the pandemic, Western Australian universities were increasingly constrained on international recruitment, our share of grants received nationally and the commercialisation of our research task, which was falling behind. For instance, between 2010 and 2019, WA had the smallest percentage growth in university enrolments in Australia, with 13.6 per cent compared with 32 per cent nationally. We need to address that decline. The Western Australian university sector has experienced a significant decline in its share of research funding, more than any other Australian state or territory, falling from 11 per cent in 2001 down to as low as 2.9 per cent in 2022. We need to do something, and that is why we have announced the review of the university sector. It will explore opportunities for structural change.

The terms of reference will be finalised after we receive feedback from the four vice-chancellors, whom I met yesterday. We look forward to working with the universities to ensure that the review process fully explores all the opportunities and possibilities so that ongoing we have high-performing universities and the public university sector in Western Australia is financially sustainable.

We have appointed a very eminent panel to be headed by Professor Sandra Harding, AO, former vice-chancellor and president of James Cook University; with Professor John Williams, executive dean of the faculty of arts, business, law and economics at the University of Adelaide; and Dr Ian Watt, AC, former secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. They will be joined by Professor Peter Shergold as a special adviser. He is a former chancellor of Western Sydney University and a former secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. I think everyone would agree that that is an eminent panel to look at our public university sector. It is intended that the review will be completed within six months from the time it commences. I really look forward to working with the panel. I am sure the public university sector will also work with the panel to ensure that it comes up with recommendations that will allow our universities to become world class and meet the challenges expected as we go forward.