

EDUCATION — INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Statement

HON CHARLES SMITH (East Metropolitan) [6.20 pm]: I rise briefly this evening to say a few words about the ABC's *Four Corners* program, which ran a segment on Monday called "Cash cows" that exposed how Australia's higher education system is being undermined by a growing reliance on foreign fee-paying students. This is all very familiar territory for me. I distinctly recall asking the Minister for Education and Training questions and making a few statements about the betrayal of Australian students and workers, and how this was really all about backdoor permanent visas. Mr Deputy President, please do not take my word for it: let us hear what some academics and students on the program had to say about it. It was said that many students seemed to be unable to understand instructions or understand the material that was put in front of them. We should not forget that we are trying to attract the brightest and the best. Someone else said, according to my notes —

I would do my best to make sure that the team would understand the topic each week, and then I would get them to send to me what they had written, and I would try and rephrase it into more readable English.

Why are teaching staff at universities risking their reputations by taking on students who are not even capable of higher levels of learning? Do not forget that we are seeking to attract the brightest and the best. I continue —

Admitting students who don't have the right qualifications, or right prerequisites, or correct language capabilities is setting them up for failure. This is just NOT what a university should do. That's not what education is about.

As I have previously noted in this place, the international student influx has led to regular and widespread reports of cheating and an erosion of education standards. Perhaps the best summary of the foreign student rort comes from Dr Cameron Murray from the University of Queensland, who released the following damning indictment via his Twitter feed —

1. 90% of students in my economics masters classes are international.

There is no problem with that.

2. Half of them struggle with basic English

This is a masters class.

3. When I ask in tutorials why they are doing the degree, half tell me that they "need more points for their residency visa"
4. They tell me they choose economics because they can do the maths but don't need to understand anything or write anything.
5. I always set written essays or reports. Students tell me that they know other students are using paid 'essay writing' services to pass my class
6. If half the class can't understand English it brings down standards. It must—unless I fail half the class.

He continued —

10. Unfortunately, this reality conflicts with the widely believed myth that our immigration program brings in "high skilled" workers.

He continued —

14. In sum, universities are being degraded so they can be used as a back-door immigration program, and no one at the senior levels of universities or major political parties want to change it.

That was from Dr Cameron Murray from the University of Queensland, who is observing and talking to students.

In response to one of my questions without notice, the Minister for Education and Training stated —

... the international graduate stream of the state-nominated migration program aims to attract the best and brightest ... to study at universities in the state by providing a pathway for eligible high-achieving graduates to attend the state's universities. Such highly skilled graduates will be complementary to the state's workforce by boosting the economy and helping to create jobs for Western Australians.

I think we can now dismiss that as garbage. It has now been shown without a doubt by the ABC and by academics that this scheme is actually attracting the dimmest and the worst. The minister has confirmed to me today, from answering my questions, that she does not care.

Despite the shocking scandals revealed in Monday's *Four Corners* program, the McGowan government recently announced that it will seek to dramatically lift international student numbers to an estimated 88 000 by 2022. Is this what the McGowan government wants—further destruction of our educational standards in Western Australian universities? That is what is happening. I wonder what is next. Are our schools next, minister?

Statement

HON SUE ELLERY (South Metropolitan — Minister for Education and Training) [6.26 pm]: I did not intend to make a statement but I have to respond to that speech. Hon Charles Smith continually demonstrates his lack of understanding —

Hon Charles Smith: The truth.

Hon SUE ELLERY: — of the truth, yes.

Several members interjected.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Order! The Leader of the House is addressing the Chair on a serious matter.

Hon SUE ELLERY: The member continuously, despite my very best efforts to try to educate him, demonstrates his lack of understanding of the difference between the state and commonwealth government's responsibilities when it comes to immigration and higher education and standards set within them. I get the honourable member's narrative. I read his Twitter feed. I understand the narrative he is trying to get out there publicly. I have personally found it offensive many times, but he is entitled to express his point of view. He is wrong when it comes to understanding where the levers lie on immigration and the standards of education delivered within the universities. The role that the state has in universities is found in the provisions that are set out in the act. If he wants to understand the role, he could look at the act, which says that the role that the state has in universities is around their land, whether or not they enter into and the terms upon which they enter into financial arrangements around their capital. The state has a role in appointing members of the respective senates but academic standards have always been and will continue to be set by the commonwealth. I might just leave my comments there.

Statement

HON ALISON XAMON (North Metropolitan) [6.28 pm]: I was not going to make any comments but I rise because I wanted to make a few comments about the revelations that arose in relation to Murdoch University. I would like to begin by saying that I am a proud Murdochian graduate. I have two degrees from Murdoch University. Many years ago I was the guild president out at Murdoch and I was on the Murdoch senate and, indeed, on the Murdoch Academic Council. I have a vested interest in this wonderful institution and I am very keen to ensure that the integrity of my university is upheld.

I was very concerned about the allegations that came out of the ABC's *Four Corners* program. They were not new to me. I was approached by a number of academics earlier in the year, who raised their concerns with me, knowing my long history with Murdoch University. They expressed their deep concern about the way that the university may be handling the issue of some international students. I want to be very clear that I am fully aware that the issue of standards around international students is very much a federal government responsibility. That is where that oversight responsibility lies. It has been devolved down to individual universities to administer that, and that is clearly where we might need to look at whether there needs to be more stringent capacity for the federal government to oversight. I am aware that that is very much a federal government responsibility.

I also note that the push to have more international students within our federally funded university sector has come about over many, many years because of diminishing funds being made available to our tertiary sector. That is why so much pressure is being put on our individual universities to try to find alternative sources of income. This has meant that universities often have to extend beyond their core business of providing education and undertaking research in this country by establishing aged-care facilities and retirement villages as a source of income, as we did when I was on the Murdoch University senate and we looked at using the land to establish St Ives Murdoch as a source of ongoing revenue for the university to continue operation, and by establishing things like schools on site. We used to have Murdoch College, which has folded and is now part of the wonderful high-rise St George's Anglican Grammar School in the middle of our city. These are the sorts of pressures that have come to bear on our universities as a result of diminished funding.

I also acknowledge how important it is that we get the issue of international students right. International students can and do play a wonderful role within our federally funded universities. Firstly, it is an opportunity for citizens of other countries to take advantage of our wonderful, topnotch tertiary education sector. I think it is a wonderful opportunity for Australia to ensure that our high-quality education standards can be taken advantage of by others. I also think we benefit greatly when we have international students who are well trained within our universities;

they are effectively able to operate as ambassadors for the quality of our universities when they go back to their own countries and work. That is an extraordinary opportunity. I see it as more than recognising that it has become a necessary revenue source for universities; I see it as a genuine way in which to promote the quality of our universities, which goes to the core of ensuring that our standards are being upheld. I do not know whether the allegations that have been raised within Murdoch University are true. I had already written to the vice-chancellor of Murdoch University and received a response to indicate that Murdoch University did not share those concerns. I recognise, though, that many academic staff members of high standing and high integrity have put themselves out on a limb to raise these concerns.

I also note that it is not just Murdoch University that is on the receiving end of these allegations. Since the *Four Corners* episode, a number of universities around the country also have been identified as potentially having the same issues. It is absolutely essential that we have a federal government that is able to step up to make sure that these concerns are dealt with appropriately. We need to deal with these concerns on a number of levels. Firstly, we do not want to end up hurting the very market that we are trying to tap into for international students, because who on earth would want to come here if they thought that the quality of any degree would be diminished? Secondly, we do not want to diminish the quality of the degrees of those of us who have done the hard yards and worked really hard at university to get those degrees. I do not appreciate the possibility that my degrees might be diminished as a result of this. Thirdly—this is critical—we need to look after our international students when they come here. It is important that we remember that their wellbeing matters. It is important that we ensure that international students feel welcome, safe and supported and can perform to the academic standards that they expect to be able to perform to and also that we expect that they are able to perform to.

Obviously, there will be an election in a couple of weeks. We do not know whether we will have a new government, but I hope that whoever governs at the federal level takes up this issue with the seriousness it deserves. In the meantime, I certainly hope that the Murdoch University senate looks at this issue very seriously and takes a very close look at what may be happening, and certainly does not attempt to sweep it under the carpet. It is also absolutely critical that those people who have spoken up and have effectively taken on the role of whistleblowers are not persecuted and pursued and that their jobs are not put in jeopardy for legitimately putting forward concerns about the university that they cherish and that I care about too.