

Division 14: Jobs, Tourism, Science and Innovation — Services 1, International Education —

Ms M.M. Quirk, Chair.

Mr D.A. Templeman, Minister for International Education.

Ms R. Brown, Director General, Department of Jobs, Tourism, Science and Innovation.

Ms S. Spencer, Deputy Director General.

Mr R. Sansalone, Chief Financial Officer.

Ms K. Kelleher, Acting Executive Director, Service Delivery.

Mr A. King, Executive Director, Strategic Policy.

Ms M. Shimmin, Program Director.

Ms L. Rodgers, Director General, Department of Education.

Ms P. Moss, Director, Department of Education.

Ms P. Beamish Burton, Executive Director, Finance and Commercial Services, Department of Education.

Ms J. Healy, Executive Director, School Curriculum and Standards Authority.

Ms K. Ho, Director General, Department of Training and Workforce Development.

Ms R. Trotter, Acting Chief Finance Officer, Department of Training and Workforce Development.

[Witnesses introduced.]

The CHAIR: The estimates committees will be reported by Hansard and the daily proof will be available online as soon as possible within two business days. The chair will allow as many questions as possible. Questions and answers should be short and to the point. Consideration is restricted to items for which a vote of money is proposed in the consolidated account. Questions must relate to a page number, item or amount related to the current division, and members should preface their questions with those details. Some divisions are the responsibility of more than one minister. Ministers shall be examined only in relation to their portfolio responsibilities.

A minister may agree to provide supplementary information to the committee. I will ask the minister to clearly indicate what information they agree to provide and will then allocate a reference number. Supplementary information should be provided to the principal clerk by noon on Friday, 31 May 2024. If a minister suggests that a matter be put on notice, members should use the online questions on notice system to submit their questions.

I give the call to the member for Roe.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: Welcome to our cast of thousands over there. Hopefully we will not hold you up for too long tonight. My first question on division 14 is on the line item “International Education” under the heading “Ongoing Initiatives” on page 194. Last year, the funding in this line item went from \$8.9 million in 2023–24 to \$3.4 million this financial year. This year’s budget shows an even more dramatic fall from \$1.85 million to \$100 000 in the following year. Can the minister explain the reduction in funding to nothing by 2026–27, given that the minister is such an advocate for international education?

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: I thank the member for the question. As the member would be well aware, post the 2021 election, the then Premier specifically sought to ensure that our focus would be on international education and increasing our student numbers from the pre-COVID level. That investment included some \$75 million across a range of initiatives that were focused on targeting markets and capturing a share of the international student market for Western Australia. The investment included money for marketing and incentives. Those incentives included student incentive bursaries through to other supports and measures for families, agents and others involved in the sector. We have been very successful. In fact, we have been outstandingly successful. The international student numbers for the sector have increased rapidly. We now have a 7.4 per cent share of the international student market in Western Australia. That is up from the pre-COVID levels of five per cent. That has secured nearly 60 000 enrolments as at February 2024. That investment that focused on lifting the numbers has succeeded, and the government and I are very proud of it.

Following the announcements in this budget and taking into account the circumstances that are evolving with regard to the federal government’s announcements on its migration policy and the potential impact that will have for international students more generally across the country, we will obviously advocate on behalf of Western Australia our continued desire to grow those numbers. However, we are aware of the announcement by the federal government in the budget it handed down last week and of the policy position of the federal opposition, which went further and effectively mentioned targeting international education more broadly. Therefore, we will now pause and closely monitor what impact those policy initiatives will have on the sector. I can assure the member that all the good work

we have done still sets us up in a very strong position to maintain our numbers, but of course we do not control migration policy. That has been highlighted by the federal government and also commented upon by the federal opposition.

[7.10 pm]

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: The minister spoke about the federal government's migration policy. That will no doubt affect future investment and numbers. Has the minister had much interaction with the vice-chancellors about how this will play out in the year ahead?

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Yes; in fact, I met with the vice-chancellors this morning. I have a very strong relationship with the vice-chancellors. The policy direction that is coming from Canberra obviously has potential impacts across the sector, including for private providers, those in the vocational and TAFE sector and certainly for universities, and it is of concern. My focus will be on positioning Western Australia according to our strengths. We have developed some very strong relationships in the market. We have a very firm commitment to supporting our students who are here, and that is why some of the initiatives that we funded in the initial boost to international education were focused on student wellbeing and welfare. Of course, that is something we will need to be conscious of.

The \$1.95 million of support in this budget is for, as I said, targeted initiatives, and we will need to watch and monitor very closely the rollout of the federal government's policy position. From my perspective, Western Australia has some unique circumstances that we will argue deserve consideration by the federal government. We believe that some of the pressures of international student numbers being referred to in other states do not necessarily apply to Western Australia. For example, accommodation is a big issue on the eastern seaboard, but a lot of work has gone into making sure that the students coming onshore have been safely accommodated and supported. We also believe very strongly that our market share is much smaller than that of the eastern seaboard, particularly New South Wales and Melbourne. We see that our market share has opportunities for continued growth that will not impact on some of those pressures being felt on the eastern seaboard.

The measures in this budget are very targeted. I mentioned the \$1.95 million. That is broken down to \$1.5 million to extend our partnership with the WA Technical Vocational Education Training consortium for another year, which is very important work; \$250 000 to attract teachers in areas of shortage; and \$200 000 over two years to grow student enrolments in our public schools. We will put our position very strongly to the federal government. My relationship with the sector is very strong. As I said, I met with the vice-chancellors and representatives from private providers this morning.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: I have a further question.

The CHAIR: The minister's answer was very comprehensive, but I discern that we are trespassing into federal policy issues, so if you can just restrict it to what is currently in the budget.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: That is led by the minister!

If the minister is so strongly supportive, why has the amount in the out years for the 2025–26 budget dropped to \$100 000, and what will that \$100 000 pay for?

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: To answer the first part of the member's question, I do not want to repeat what I have said, but we are in an interesting situation. We have invested very heavily and the results are outstanding. Student numbers in Western Australia are outstanding. Students have been accommodated in a sustainable way. I happen to believe very strongly that international students make a tremendous contribution to the Western Australian lifestyle, economy and way of life, and we should welcome and support them, as we are. However, through no control of ours, policy levers targeting international students and education have been moved by the federal government and are also mirrored by the federal opposition. The position of the federal opposition is now very clearly known. I need to use this time we have now to manage and articulate the Western Australian circumstances, which I believe have some unique aspects to them, and I will keep doing it. I will also ensure that we are agile and able to respond to the impacts of what we may see from those measures.

I might ask the director general to respond to the question about the specific \$100 000.

Ms R. Brown: The \$100 000 relates to the new initiatives. There is still ongoing funding in the department's budget for international education more generally across a range of areas, including staffing in the department, ongoing baseline funding for StudyPerth, funding of our overseas staff who work to develop the pipeline in our key markets and other programs and initiatives that have been in place and remain enduring.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: I refer to paragraph 1.1 under "Diversifying the Western Australian Economy" under "Significant Impacts Impacting the Agency" on page 194 of the *Budget statements*. How is the department driving the development of WA industries when the funding for international education is virtually non-existent?

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Of course, I dispute the premise of the member's question. This government has invested record amounts of money into international education. We have established a specific minister responsible, and the work of the first budget has been outstandingly successful because of the investment and the drive from government

to continue the diversification of our economy and to recognise that international education plays an important role in that diversification. As an example, when we market the state internationally, international education is part of that suite of marketing elements. When we market the state of Western Australia, be it through the Tourism WA advertising, visitations, delegations or inbound familiarisation activities, that work includes international education because it is a key component of how we market the state. We are marketing the state of Western Australia to the international education sector and parents of young people in the market because we think WA is the best state to come to. We think WA is the safest place to come to study and a vibrant place in which to study and learn. We also believe that we have some outstanding institutions and training stakeholders that deliver high-quality education. We will keep doing that. The effort on behalf of international education is also integrated into our effort to sell the state to the world.

[7.20 pm]

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: The minister said that he had met some vice-chancellors this morning. Does the department and the minister work with them as a group to bring international students in or is it every man for himself when it comes to the universities competing with each other?

The CHAIR: With many of the vice-chancellors being women, of course.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: Is it every man and woman for themselves?

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: I thank the member for the question. This is all about team WA. Although the campuses and their offerings have particular strengths and they understandably market to those strengths, all of them are on the same page with regard to the marketing of Western Australia. Curtin University knows that when it is marketing its suite of courses internationally or through its international campuses, it is all about Western Australia. It is all about enticing students to come here to study or to study through the university because of the quality of education that is provided, the expertise that is delivered and, indeed, the quality of the experience. The conversations are always very much about team WA. We are fortunate that we have a diversity of university offerings, but it is very much an all-in effort. That is the commitment by everybody.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: The minister is talking about team WA. I go back to the former Premier's decision to have a six-week extension of the COVID scenario.

The CHAIR: Are we still on page 194?

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: I am on page 194 about driving investment in Western Australia. Does the minister think that Western Australia and our universities have now recovered from the damage that former Premier McGowan did by extending that six-week COVID moratorium, which left students stranded overseas? There was a lot of collateral damage. What is the minister's perception?

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Again, I do not support the member's reference to the former Premier doing damage. I remind the member that, during COVID, very important decisions were made by the government to protect Western Australians and people who were living and working in Western Australia. Those decisions were focused primarily on the health and wellbeing of our state's population and those who were living here at the time, and also on ensuring that our economy was robust so that people would be able to continue to be employed. What we saw was a remarkable outcome in terms of our economy. Reference is still made to Western Australia being one of the most robust and effective economies during the COVID period of any economy in the world. That was because of the commitment by the Premier and the government to delivering that to the people of Western Australia, and we continue to reap the benefits of that.

In terms of returning international students to pre-COVID numbers, that is one of the reasons we have invested a record amount of money—\$75 million—which is still being rolled out through ongoing programs, to ensure that this government's commitment to international education is not only embedded, but also enduring. My focus will be on making sure that no matter what might be thrown up by the federal parties, either in government or out of government, Western Australia's case and special circumstances will be well and truly articulated, and clearly articulated, and that WA does not become collateral damage because of some things that might relate more to the circumstances on the eastern seaboard.

Mrs L.M. O'MALLEY: I refer to Western Australia's share of international student enrolments under the outcomes and key effectiveness indicators on page 198 of budget paper No 2. How has the government's record investment of \$75 million over the past few years contributed to international student enrolment numbers?

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: I thank the member for the question. I have answered this question in part, but I want to give the example of the Asia-Pacific Association for International Education conference, which was held here recently. Through the department, we attracted that conference to Western Australia—I think it was the first time it had been held here and only the second or third time it had been held in Australia, from memory. It was very significant. That brought several hundred delegates to Western Australia from all around the world, including people from universities, agents, private providers and people involved in international education at the government level.

It was the first time that many of those people had come to Perth, and one of the reasons they came was the interest this state has demonstrated in genuinely including international education as a key plank of our economy. We have had a couple of other important conferences of a similar nature. That highlights that whilst this is a very competitive sector—there is no doubt about that—we believe we have some specific assets or advantages that we are marketing. We are doing that through the Walking on a Dream campaign, the team WA approach to our trade missions et cetera. That has seen the numbers increase. Now, it is about supporting and continuing to support inbound students when they are onshore or those students who might be studying in some of our institutions on campuses in other parts of the world. We are ensuring that our story, our narrative, is strong and robust. We still have room in the market to increase our numbers. What I want to articulate to the federal sphere is that we have capacity.

We believe that Western Australia can be looked at through a different lens as it will not have the same impact on things here as the impacts in other parts of Australia. As the member would be well aware, also underpinning that is that many international students work part time in hospitality and tourism. Many who are studying aged care, for example, work in aged-care facilities, fulfilling important roles as they learn, train and study. That is, of course, a net benefit to Western Australia more broadly. We know that the tourism industry relies a lot on international students to assist in the delivery of tourism and hospitality services. I am very keen to make sure that our story is well heard and listened to while we wait to see what the federal policy levers deliver for us.

The appropriation was recommended.