

EDUCATION AND HEALTH STANDING COMMITTEE

**INQUIRY INTO CHANGES TO THE POST-COMPULSORY
CURRICULUM IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA**

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE TAKEN
AT PERTH
WEDNESDAY, 21 SEPTEMBER 2005**

SESSION ONE

Members

Mr T.G. Stephens (Chairman)

Dr E. Constable

Mrs D.J. Guise

Dr K.D. Hames

Mr J.N. Hyde

Mr T.K. Waldron

Mr M.P. Whitely

Hearing commenced at 9.30 am**O'NEILL, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR MARNIE****Academic, Graduate School of Education, University of Western Australia, examined:**

The CHAIRMAN: The committee hearing is a proceeding of Parliament and warrants the same respect that proceedings of the house demand. Even though you are not required to give evidence on oath, any deliberate misleading of the committee may be regarded as contempt of Parliament. Have you completed the "Details of Witness" form?

Assoc Professor O'Neill: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you understand the notes attached to it?

Assoc Professor O'Neill: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Did you receive and read an information for witness briefing sheet regarding the giving of evidence before parliamentary committees?

Assoc Professor O'Neill: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Welcome to the committee. I will simply start in the same manner that we have started with all the other witnesses; that is, by providing you with an opportunity to make an opening statement about your submission, which we have received. Clearly the issues with which we are dealing are rather dynamic in that they are changing shape. Perhaps you may want to emphasise something that you have outlined in your submission. Please feel free to speak briefly before we proceed to questions.

Assoc Professor O'Neill: Thank you. I thought that I would speak briefly about the four major concerns I have with the post-compulsory schooling changes. My understanding is that the agenda of the post-compulsory changes is, in two key senses, to increase the number of university places likely to be awarded to Western Australia through the commonwealth funding system and to increase the range of courses available to students who are university bound while, at the same time, increasing the retention rates in senior secondary schools to avoid the approximately 30 per cent drift of students away from post-compulsory education. I am not sure that those two agendas are congruent with each other. The changes will serve the interests of university-bound students and probably disadvantage those who are not university bound. As for increasing the number of places available for university entry in Western Australia, that will relate to the number of students who choose to sit for the external examinations and, therefore, acquire a TER score. It will not be compulsory for students to do that. I think it will become clear to some of the less able students that there is no advantage in putting themselves through the external examination system. We may find that the number of places allocated to Western Australia for university entry does not necessarily increase enormously. I am not sure whether those two agendas will be achieved.

As I pointed out in my submission, I am concerned about students' access to appropriate courses. The gifted and talented students in our state will not necessarily be able to access courses at higher levels in the first year of the new post-compulsory courses of study. They will be required to mark time. The way in which the assessment processes demand that they move through the same process as other students of demonstrating each step of the process for assessment when they may well be beyond that will hold those students back or disadvantage them, particularly in the first year when the higher-level courses will not be available. I am also concerned about the appropriate classroom discourses for those students that will promote higher-order thinking, such as synthesis

generalisation, hypothesising and theorising, which may not be part of the normal level of classroom discourse in the courses that they will be compelled to take.

The structured workplace learning - SWL - which is now an increased part of the post-compulsory courses - one would normally be very supportive of that - will probably increase the number of students requiring structured workplace learning. I am concerned about the capacity of the community to provide suitable places. I am concerned about the costs to community businesses because, as we found with new apprenticeship schemes, employers are reluctant to take on students for whom they have to provide close supervision, particularly in relation to health and safety issues. I am also concerned about the quality of the structured workplace learning that will be provided. It is not automatic that employers or, indeed, some of their employees, are well prepared to provide quality supervision in structured workplace learning. I wonder whether any training will be given to the providers of structured workplace learning. As I pointed out in my submission, I am concerned about the access of rural and remote students to quality post-compulsory education, in terms of both the financial impact on their families and the range of courses that will be available to them, even with the increased provision through the Schools of Isolated and Distance Education.

Access to TAFEs will be problematic. Some schools are closely located to or co-located with TAFEs. North Albany Senior High School is situated next to Albany TAFE. Sevenoaks Senior College is next to Cannington TAFE. However, in other places it will be quite difficult for students to attend both a secondary school campus and a TAFE campus. In the past it has certainly proved problematic because timetables are not congruent, transport issues arise and so on.

The third big area of concern is the cost of professional development, the workloads imposed on teachers and the scale of disruption to the system. The costs of professional development are being spread across all sectors. Clearly, the Curriculum Council is bearing some of them. Individual schools are bearing some of them. Professional associations have been required to provide professional development at their own costs or at a cost to the teachers who enrol for it. Universities have been asked to provide credit for post-graduate courses for the professional development. The costs are substantial. I think that the actual costs of the whole enterprise are probably largely hidden. Much has been made about the number of professional development days that will be provided to teachers and that the five days should be adequate. However, I suggest that the headshift required is not from the delivery of outcomes-based education type courses in the lower secondary school and the curriculum framework in years 8 to 10, but from the existing post-compulsory arrangements to the new ones. For example, I read the course of study outlines for texts, traditions and cultures, which is regarded as the replacement for TEE literature. The existing TEE literature course is located fairly and squarely in the English learning area. The new course of study draws on English, society and environment and arts learning areas, including media studies. The way in which the course is organised is a substantial shift in its outcomes, content and so on. Those teachers will require a considerable amount of time to get their heads around that and to develop appropriate courses of study. I did a detailed analysis of what will be required, and I was sobered. Certainly, I would find it very difficult to make that shift. An enormous number of hours of work would be required before I even started to select appropriate resources to take into my classroom. I think the workload for teachers in this change is uneven. It will strike some teachers in some areas more strongly than teachers in other areas, but it will be substantial.

[9.40 am]

The final point I make on that is the scale of disruption that will impact on schools. Notionally we have five courses coming in for year 11 next year. Those teachers, English teachers and others, will be moving into the year 12 phase in 2007. A further 20 new courses will start in 2007 and move through in 2008, with a further 20 or so new courses starting in 2008 and into 2009. This is actually a rolling process of change, which will affect the entire secondary school system - not just the post-compulsory year, because teachers teach across years 8 to 10 - for the next four years at a minimum,

and possibly for five years, assuming that it takes a little longer for all the changes to be in place and bedded down. I cannot suggest a way in which one could minimise that disruption, but I think it will be considerable for the whole community, particularly for teachers in secondary schools and the school system. I think that addresses the issues that cause me most concern and I am happy to answer questions.

The CHAIRMAN: Thanks for that. I will turn to other members first.

Dr E. CONSTABLE: Marnie, in your submission I recall reading some comments about less able students and that they may not have the same choice of subjects as they have now. Can you give us your view on the impact on less able students?

Assoc Professor O'Neill: Yes. I think that the notion that this system will provide improved educational outcomes for all is not well founded. The less able students will have the same range of courses of study from which to choose as the university-bound students, but the requirement to demonstrate their outcomes in more academic ways than they have done in the past would seem to me to disadvantage students who have lower levels of literacy and numeracy and who perhaps operate at lower levels of cognition. I am not an expert in psychology, so I do not presume to make too many remarks about that. However, they will be forced to compete in the same arena as the university-bound students, they will have fewer vocational-types of courses available to them than previously and I think that the requirement to demonstrate at least level 4.2 outcomes may mean that a large number - how large, I am not sure - will not actually meet the requirements for secondary school graduation. We may find that we have increased the retention rate by approximately 30 per cent, but the number of students who graduate with a Western Australian Certificate of Education may not be substantially greater; and I have a concern about what happens to those students. What do you do when you leave secondary school after 12 years of schooling and you still have not graduated? How attractive will you be to an employer? How cheated by the system will the students and parents feel?

Mr T.K. WALDRON: I just ask for clarification on that. Why do you say that you do not think a number of them will go on to get the high school certificate? I do not quite understand.

Dr E. CONSTABLE: Again it is levels; what makes it any different from today?

Mr T.K. WALDRON: Yes; is it because there will be more of them doing it?

Assoc Professor O'Neill: I think two things will change. One is that students will be compelled to attend either secondary school or TAFE, or be in approved sorts of employment. So the approximately 25 per cent of students who leave school between the end of year 10 and the end of year 11 will still be in school or in an education system. The information is that in the current system many students are not achieving beyond level 3. Previously they were able to take up vocational-type courses that did not carry the same requirement for academic demonstration as the new courses of study will involve. Therefore, students could engage in courses in which they could demonstrate vocational-type learning. There will still be an opportunity for some of those courses, but it will be substantially reduced.

Mr T.K. WALDRON: Do you think the reduction is going to have quite an effect?

Assoc Professor O'Neill: I think it will, not only because we will have more of those students in school, but also because the stakes will have been raised.

Mrs D.J. GUISE: I will raise a point and quote someone else. It has been suggested to us that the new Western Australian Certificate of Education is much more inclusive than the former certificate. An example is that in the current system a student is required to achieve eight Cs, four of which must be at year 12 level. In the new system, there is no such thing, as year 11 and 12 students will perform in their first, second or third year, or whatever. Taking away the requirement to achieve four Cs at year 12 will liberate many lower-ability students. In the new WACE, up to eight of the 20 units can be units that are endorsed by the Curriculum Council; therefore, they can engage in

meaningful activities that will get them units that count towards the completion of their certificate. Another concrete example that was put to us was that it requires an average level 4 to obtain the WACE, which means that some students who are achieving at level 3 in some subjects could equate that to level 5 in others. So, in the context of what you are saying, a lower-ability student and a teacher could address the need in the use of forensics, chemistry of the home or soil analysis at an agricultural college for a student studying environmental education; that is, there are many flexible approaches. That was just one example given to us. Courses, therefore, are to be written in a flexible way and integrated. That example was integrated into science. That is in contrast to what you are saying. How do you respond to that view?

Assoc Professor O'Neill: There are two things. One is that the courses actually have to be offered by the schools at appropriate levels; I am not sure to what extent that will be the case. The students still have to achieve at an average of level 4. It may be that some of them will trade off. Certainly students have varying abilities, so one would hope that there would be some opportunity for trading off. I do not know.

Mrs D.J. GUISE: This is the whole premise that it is built around. The lower-ability students are able to trade off and they have a flexible approach in the courses that are offered so that they are able to reach the level required.

Dr E. CONSTABLE: Also what Marnie said in her submission, and something else that we have learnt in other ways as well, is that there is less choice.

Assoc Professor O'Neill: Yes.

Dr E. CONSTABLE: There is less choice for students; so we are getting conflicting views. There will be 51 courses, whereas now there are 200-something.

Assoc Professor O'Neill: Yes, and I think part of the concern in the community at large was that some of those courses were not necessarily of equal quality or equal value. There was uncertainty, I think, about the quality of some of those courses. This post-compulsory change certainly attempts to address that. I am not totally convinced that the enormous inclusivity and flexibility will be available. It will depend very much on what courses the schools are able to offer and the range of courses that they choose to offer.

Mrs D.J. GUISE: Do you have a view that only the bigger schools will probably be able to offer them, as they do now, and that nothing has changed?

Assoc Professor O'Neill: Indeed.

Mrs D.J. GUISE: So it is the same old, same old: the larger schools will be able to offer them and the smaller schools will need to think about streaming students and taking a more flexible approach to delivery if they are going to make it.

Assoc Professor O'Neill: And that goes back to my concern about rural and remote schools and smaller schools. Some rural schools have had multiple changes of curriculum. When we moved to the achievement certificate in 1970, there was supposed to be a range of optional electives available to students. There was that range in the big schools, but not in the small country schools. Also, those options depended entirely on whoever happened to be appointed to a school, and sometimes that person was there for only one or two years. Therefore, options came and went, and there was difficulty for students to plan anything and difficulty for parents to have confidence. In the change to unit curriculum, again, there was to be considerable flexibility. In fact, students found themselves locked in quite early. There would be one changeover point at year 9. I do not think that this shift is going to improve things for students - I was going to say "be in the interests of students" - in small schools or students in rural or remote schools. Certainly the Schools of Isolated and Distance Education is providing more than it has in the past. It will still leave students in isolated circumstances studying in a small district high school with perhaps little support. I have already remarked on my concerns about structured workplace learning and how that will impact on

country school communities. However, it will also impact on kids in metro areas. For example, 16-year olds attending school at, say, Applecross or Maddington in structured workplace learning in a bakery at Pioneer Village Restaurant are required to be there at 3.30 am to turn on the ovens. Who is getting them out of bed and driving them? Unless they get a special driver's licence to drive there themselves and their parents can provide a car, mums are doing it, as they do it now. I am not suggesting that at the moment there are no families out there doing this kind of thing now; but this is not going to reduce that or make it any easier for them.

Mrs D.J. GUISE: Is that more to do, though, with the extension of the leaving age, rather than an outcomes-based approach to education? We already have the problem of ensuring that kids have access to structured workplace learning. Is that, therefore, more about the fact that we are extending the school-leaving age and the link towards TAFE, further education, work experience and training, rather than outcomes-based education? Is that not a problem that we already have?

Assoc Professor O'Neill: I am not linking this to the outcomes-based stuff at all. I am linking it to the range of courses of study and the kinds of requirements to achieve a WACE.

Dr K.D. HAMES: I am a less educated member of the committee inquiry into OBE, so forgive me if my question is a little wide of the mark. I want to ask about the assessment of students who want to access university. We had an excellent presentation on maths from somebody who said that there were two options for determining someone's ability to understand Pythagoras's theorem. He suggested two different mathematical questions on Pythagoras. One was simple and straightforward and that anyone who has done maths could do and the other was more complicated; yet, each would be assessed as achieving a level that indicated that the student understood Pythagoras, even if, for example, he or she answered only the simple question. We are told that universities are in favour of this new system that has no marks out of 10, but just an achievement of levels, and that the universities are happy with that in assessing students for university. However, I would have thought that having that degree of divergence in ability would make it extremely difficult to meet a level of requirement when trying to assess which students will get into some of the more difficult courses, particularly medicine and the like. Is it your view that this will be a good system, or would you rather see a system that I understand operates in Queensland, which has a combination of both, so that there is still some ability to assess a mark out of 10 to indicate the quality of the achievement that the student is considering for university?

Assoc Professor O'Neill: I think the possibility of assessing or differentiating for admission to university may be covered by the external examinations. I have not seen any external examination formats yet, but I understand that it will be possible to set questions that will spread students along a range again. It is really a ranking exercise.

Dr K.D. HAMES: What is the point then of having levels of passing, if you then need to do that? Will you continue to use the levels in some way or will you base all your decisions for admission on the equivalent of a TEE score?

Assoc Professor O'Neill: I understand the examinations will count for 50 per cent of the final score and the levels will account for the other 50 per cent. How compatible they are, I am not sure. You are asking the wrong person to explain anything to do with statistics and mathematical things. I understand that David Andrich has already appeared before the committee and made it rather more transparent than I would be able to. However, I have a concern about clusters of subjects and the preparation of students for particular university courses. Notionally, all the courses of study are equally acceptable as preparation for university. I would have thought that students who intended to enter any course at university that required mathematics or science as part of the university course would be well advised to take those courses of study at the post-compulsory level; presumably many of them would. However, some of them may not. For example, if you want to go into the physical education course at the University of Western Australia, you have to meet the requirements for admission to the Faculty of Life and Physical Sciences, which requires maths and

science; but the courses of study allow you to take, for example, dance, health studies, physical education, outdoor recreation, English because it is compulsory, and then as part of your studies you might pick up, say, human biology. You would not necessarily be advised to take maths or science in your selection. So, although I understand the claim that specified content knowledge is not necessarily a part of this structure, I cannot help think that it would be a useful adjunct to entry to the Faculty of Life and Physical Sciences at University of Western Australia. Clearly I have some concerns.

[10.00 am]

The CHAIRMAN: Are your concerns about the practicalities involved in the changes rather than an objection to the philosophy or the fundamental approach of the changes?

Assoc Professor O'Neill: There was a question earlier about levels and whether they would sufficiently distinguish student performance or not. We have been there before, certainly in years 8 to 10 with the achievement certificate when students were allocated levels and grades on a certain basis. The top 12.5 per cent of students would be at an advanced level, and the next 12.5 per cent receive an advanced pass. The arrangements made were such that they did not sufficiently distinguish high-quality performance from lesser performance and they removed any incentive for students to strive for excellence because they only get the same level of grade as other students. I have already spoken of my concern about gifted students and the opportunity for them to excel. It is not just about whether the system can be made to work or not. My concerns are also about quality, excellence and provision for both ends of the spectrum. I am concerned about the less able students. I do wonder what they will go away from school with and how useful it will be.

Dr E. CONSTABLE: Next year you will have a group of Dip Ed students, in 2006. In 2007 many of them will be teaching years 11 and 12. Do you have the information you need at this stage to mount the dip ed for those students next year?

Assoc Professor O'Neill: In terms of the detail of courses of study and so on that will be in place by 2007, yes, we do. The lecturers concerned with those courses have been working with that material this year, and even last year, as well as it could be done. The information for some of the other courses of study may not come through in sufficient time.

Dr E. CONSTABLE: Which courses have you got the information for?

Assoc Professor O'Neill: For English, for example.

Dr E. CONSTABLE: I was talking about the next year's group and the 20 subjects for 2007.

Assoc Professor O'Neill: The consultation guidelines are out but the final version is not, so we will be working with incomplete information. Some of the courses of study we have relatively little information about and may not implement in our own program until later. We may not bring in anything for philosophy or psychology before 2008. There is a problem in that if you offer a course of study as a curriculum major - for example, philosophy or psychology - you are giving an undertaking that you will be able to find teaching practice places for students in their grad dip year. That will not be easy, because the course of study will not be in place out in the schools. When I said that I hope we will have a graduate diploma intake next year, I was not being entirely factitious. The furore that has been associated with the proposed changes, widely publicised in the press, will no doubt have an impact on students' decisions about whether they would commence a teacher education course. We have an economy that is supposedly booming. Potential teachers may decide that an alternative career path would be advisable and will not even come into the grad dip course. We will know that to some extent within the next month or so because the applications close in that time.

Mrs D.J. GUISE: How do we get over that problem then when we move to OBE for the primary schools, because I would have thought that the same problem would exist in moving from one to the other for primary teachers and students? How do we deal with that change in those years?

Assoc Professor O'Neill: There was not the same publicity as we are currently experiencing. There has not been the same reluctance for people to go into primary teacher education. I find it very interesting that people are quite happy to think of teaching in primary schools. There are far fewer who are happy to take on the challenge of secondary schools. That has been demonstrated by the MCEETYA inquiries over the past several years. Teachers could be a primary school teacher or teach at a university, but secondary schools are a different territory.

Mrs D.J. GUISE: They seem too hard for a whole range of reasons, do you think?

Assoc Professor O'Neill: Yes. The other thing that happens - this is not associated with the proposed changes, but we may get a double-whammy - is that in January when the year 12 exit students are making their decisions about university and career pathways, the press has run adverse stories about employment opportunities. They do not distinguish between primary teacher employment and secondary teacher employment. We have experienced the impact of that where students do not take up their offers for secondary teacher education. At a time when we have a vast amount of change - "turmoil" may be too strong a word to use - over the foreseeable four-year period, and at a time when the projected separations of teachers, particularly secondary school teachers because the average age of teachers will increase, we may also face the situation where entry to teacher education programs, particularly for secondary education teaching, declines.

Dr E. CONSTABLE: When you look at the intake into Dip Ed, you have students going into different areas of study and different curriculum areas. Have you found in recent years that there has been a drop-off in, say, maths and science anyway and you would see that this impact might affect particular areas?

Assoc Professor O'Neill: Maths and physical sciences are perennial hard cases. It is very difficult to recruit the number of pre-service teachers needed for maths and physical sciences. We have made strenuous efforts, and the state department offers scholarships. We still do not meet the need for maths and science. If those students perceive that they have a much better career path elsewhere without the grief of dealing with this kind of change, they may choose to take that up. It may become harder. I do not know, but it is a possibility.

Mr T.K. WALDRON: Coming from the country, I share some of your concerns about some of the country schools. I have met with teachers from district and senior high schools in the south. The message is coming from younger teachers in particular who have been teaching outcomes-based education that they are quite comfortable with it, and in some cases they do not know anything else, whereas other teachers have real concerns. Is there an issue there, do you think, that we should take into consideration?

Assoc Professor O'Neill: I think that young teachers, particularly recent graduates, have been educated in relation to outcomes-based education. They do not have the baggage that people of my generation have, so I think that they will adapt, without doubt. This process of getting rid of the aged cases over the next five years may in fact be an advantage.

Mr T.K. WALDRON: I may have got this wrong, so tell me if I have, but I thought you said that some gifted and talented kids would have to mark time in their first compulsory year. Is that what you said? If that is the case, I wonder why it would be a concern?

Assoc Professor O'Neill: My understanding is that schools will introduce the new courses of study in year 11. For argument's sake, for English they will introduce units 1A and 1B and 2A and 2B, and 2A and 2B would straddle the sort of level 5 and 6 in all areas, but I am talking about English. The 3A and 3B will in most cases not be available until year 12, so a kid who is gifted and talented in, say, English and literature will not be able to access the high-level courses until year 12.

Mr T.K. WALDRON: Therefore, they are missing out on the opportunity to extend themselves. That will not happen in the first year it is introduced. Is that right?

Assoc Professor O'Neill: I would think so. It would depend very much on how schools organise their timetable arrangements. Notionally, a gifted and talented student in the following year might take 3A and 3B in year 11.

Mr T.K. WALDRON: I understand what you are talking about. Thank you.

Mrs D.J. GUISE: Coming back to a question that Liz Constable asked, in your view what would be the latest time that you would require the introduction of courses for students who are coming in and who would be expected to embrace them? What sort of deadline do you have for the need for that work to be finished?

Assoc Professor O'Neill: When we have a new intake of graduate diploma students in January we have the curriculum units in place in regulation and so on, so we do not have to change any regulations, but the staff would need that material for a February start-up.

Mrs D.J. GUISE: Obviously. I am wondering what your judgment call would be. How much time do you think they would need to get their heads around it ready for that intake?

Assoc Professor O'Neill: Well -

Mrs D.J. GUISE: I do not know how good your crystal ball is; I just wondered whether you have an opinion on that.

Assoc Professor O'Neill: As I have said, I looked at the texts, traditions and cultures of the course of study. If I were trying to teach that unit with grad dips in February of next year, I would need all my time between now and then to feel assured that I had not only got my head around the possibilities but that I had acquired the sorts of resources and developed sample strategies and so on so that I could start properly in February of next year.

The CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much for that. We have come to the end of the time we have available to us. I appreciate very much your availability to the committee.

Hearing concluded at 10.15 am
