

The Committee's Review

- 1.1 On 20 March 2008, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training resolved to review the 2006-07 Annual Report of the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST).¹
- 1.2 DEST's 2006-07 Annual Report was tabled in Parliament on 13 February 2008. The report contains information on the Department's role and performance, corporate governance arrangements, and management accountability framework.²
- 1.3 Following the 2007 election, DEST was disbanded and the portfolio responsibility was transferred to the new Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR).

Purpose and scope of review

- 1.4 The Committee undertook the review to familiarise itself with portfolio issues and establish a dialogue with the Department and other stakeholders.
- 1.5 The Committee pursued issues relating to the following portfolio areas:

1 House of Representatives Standing Order 215(c) empowers standing committees to inquire into the annual reports of government departments and authorities that have been tabled in the House of Representatives subject to a number of conditions.

2 The report is available online at:
http://www.dest.gov.au/portfolio_department/dest_information/publications_resources/profiles/dest_annual_report_2006_2007.htm.

- the adequacy of skills training to meet emerging demands;
 - the effectiveness of the Australian Qualifications Framework;
 - recruitment levels of mature age apprentices;
 - the decline in enrolments in enabling sciences at universities; and
 - support for the education of children with special needs.
- 1.6 The report is divided into three chapters. Chapter two discusses some vocational education and training issues that arose in relation to the first three areas of interest identified by the Committee. Chapter three canvasses matters related to levels of participation in tertiary level education in the 'enabling sciences'.
- 1.7 As noted above, the Committee also inquired into support for children with special needs. While the Commonwealth provides some support in this area, it is a responsibility that falls largely under state and territory jurisdiction. Issues related to Commonwealth support for special needs students were not pursued beyond the first public hearing.
- 1.8 The review was advertised through a recurring advertisement in *The Australian*. The inquiry received four submissions, listed at Appendix A, and five exhibits, listed at Appendix B.
- 1.9 The Committee held eight public hearings between June 2008 and February 2009 in Canberra, Adelaide and Sydney. The list of witnesses is set out at Appendix C.
- 1.10 Following the Adelaide hearing, the Committee made a site visit to University Senior College as part of the review and is grateful to those staff who participated.

Timeliness in responding to requests for further information

- 1.11 Representatives of DEEWR were invited to public hearings in Canberra on 6 June 2008 and 5 February 2009. At these hearings several requests for further information were taken on notice.
- 1.12 Information requested at the hearing of 6 June 2008 was not received until 20 October 2008. Information requested at the hearing of 5 February 2009 was not received until 2 April 2009.

- 1.13 While DEEWR kept the Committee informed of delays in providing responses to its requests for additional information, the period of time taken to provide these responses is not satisfactory.
- 1.14 In the first instance, the Committee proceeded with public hearings in July, August, September and October before receiving requested information. In the second instance, the period of time taken to respond delayed the completion of drafting this report.
- 1.15 The Committee is concerned that departments of the Australian Government understand that they are ultimately accountable to the Commonwealth Parliament. A principal accountability mechanism is responsiveness to requests for information from all committees of the Parliament.
- 1.16 Under 'Services to ministers and the Parliament', the 2006-07 Annual Report indicated numbers of parliamentary questions and Senate Estimates questions responded to by DEST. The Report states that 'During the year, the department met the target for timeliness in ... responding to parliamentary questions.'³ However, the criterion of what constitutes a timely response is not specified.

Recommendation 1

- 1.17 **That the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations include information in its Annual Report on the number and timeliness of responses to questions taken from committees of the Parliament outside of questions taken in Senate Estimates sessions.**

3 DEST, *Annual Report 2006-07*, p. 256.

