

GEOSCIENCE EDUCATION

Statement

HON BARRY HOUSE (South West) [10.00 pm]: Earlier today during the budget debate, I made reference to a couple of aspects of the science portfolio, but I ran out of time to complete my remarks on the issue. I wanted to mention one aspect of science education. I raise it in the context of some observations I have made about the science portfolio. There appears to be a trend for the government to move away from supporting the traditional areas of strength in our economy, in particular the agricultural and mining industries, towards emerging industries. The fact is that we need both. We all know how important the mining and resources industry is.

Some statistics have been brought to my notice about geoscience in particular and its difficulties within the education sector in Western Australia. For example, this year only four government schools and one independent school in the state offered geology as a tertiary entrance examination subject. These schools are all in the metropolitan area. The four government schools are Churchlands, Kent Street, Kelmscott and Woodvale Senior High Schools and the one private school is Scotch College. Last year only 44 students sat the TEE geology exam. In the previous year, 2004, it was worse: 35 students sat the TEE exam. Numbers are so low in many of these schools that the classes for years 11 and 12 are combining to make the course partly viable. A new course of study, earth and environmental science, will be introduced in 2007. I sincerely hope that that course of study does not encounter the same degree of problems that many of the other courses of study have encountered.

An organisation called Earth Science Western Australia has been put together. It is a consortium of key players engaged in high-level geoscience education and research and consists of Curtin University of Technology, the University of Western Australia, the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation, the Geological Survey of Western Australia and the Western Australian Museum. It has been put together to acknowledge the role that the mining and resources industry plays in Western Australia and to promote the need for geoscience education. Let us not forget that Western Australia is the world's leading exploration and mining province. Minerals and petroleum underpin our economy and the key role played by those industries will continue well into the future. Geoscience is essential to sustaining these contributions, but geoscience has little support in our secondary schools and there is little awareness of its strategic importance to the economy and our quality of life. Only 35 students took the geology tertiary entrance examination in 2004. Earth Science Western Australia aims to raise the profile of geoscience in our secondary schools to match the strategic needs of the state. The low number of students being introduced to geoscience in our secondary school system is a concern. That translates further into the small numbers of students who then move into tertiary studies in this very important area of our economy. I am sure that the government is aware of it and will take these concerns on board. Earth Science Western Australia believes that a concerted effort must be made to promote the courses and to get more students to study these sciences. Currently a dearth of schools is offering these courses and there is a dearth of takers, which is why the number of students who study those courses is so low. We need more students to take up courses in these areas to provide the human resources necessary for the further expansion of a very vital part of our economic fabric.