

UNIVERSITY FUNDING, IMPACT OF FEDERAL GOVERNMENT'S APPROACH

966. Mr A.P. O'GORMAN to the Minister for Education and Training:

The Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training yesterday released a range of statistics regarding Australian universities. What effect has the federal Government's approach to university funding had on Western Australians aspiring to higher education?

Mr A.J. CARPENTER replied:

I thank the member for Joondalup for the question and his abiding interest in education. Earlier in question time, students from Ballajura and Noranda Primary Schools were in the public gallery. Those children, and every government and non-government school student in Western Australia, should have a legitimate expectation that if they complete their high school years and do well enough to attain sufficient marks, they can genuinely aspire to go to university. We in government are doing as much as we possibly can to facilitate that aspiration. We are doing a lot and have been quite successful.

It is very sad and potentially very damaging to the Australian economy that federal higher education policy settings mean that fewer people are able to access university this year than last year.

Ms S.E. Walker: They can't afford it because of the compulsory guild fees.

Mr A.J. CARPENTER: The number of people in Western Australia able to access undergraduate university courses dropped by 3.3 per cent between 2002 and 2003. This State Government put in place a series of policy settings to increase the number of people who can get to the doorway of university. Those people have a genuine aspiration to get into university. At the other end of the scale the Commonwealth, which is responsible for funding university places, is narrowing the doorway so that fewer people can enter university.

I heard the inane and ill-informed interjection from one of the members on the other side that our policies are discouraging people from wanting to go to university. I have some statistics that might be of interest to those who are capable of absorbing them. In 2003, 21 600 Western Australians applied to go to university in Western Australia, which is an increase on the annual average of 18 000 who applied under the previous Government. There has been an increase of 3 600 Western Australians applying to go to university. Incidentally, this figure is consistent with other trends. In 1992, 23 000 people in Western Australia applied to go to university. Through its mismanagement of the education system, the previous Government reduced that to 18 000. We have increased that to 21 600 at the same time that the Commonwealth Government is narrowing the doorway and making it more difficult for Western Australians to get into university. This is scandalous. It is the role of the State Government to try to get as many young people as possible educated and skilled so that if they want to go to university, they should be able to get there. It should be the role of the federal Government to facilitate their entrance into university. Instead, exactly the opposite is happening. I have told the House before that year 12 retention rates in Western Australian government schools declined under the previous Government, from 65 per cent in 1992 to 59 per cent. Last year was the first year in a decade in which there was a significant increase in the number of young people in our government schools successfully completing year 12. It is an achievement, albeit a small one. There has been an increase of about the same percentage of young people applying to go to university. More people are qualified enough to go, but the Commonwealth Government is stopping them. It is an absolute and utter scandal. It reflects upon the calibre of the people on the benches opposite that while they were in government they allowed that situation to develop without ever commenting on it because it did not matter to them. It further reflects upon them that when we raise this issue in an attempt to put some pressure on the Commonwealth, they scoff. That is because they, in general terms, do not represent the sort of young people who cannot get to university other than by -

Mrs C.L. Edwardes: Excuse me!

Mr A.J. CARPENTER: I said in general terms. The worst offender is sitting on the bench opposite on my right.

Ms S.E. Walker interjected.

Mr A.J. CARPENTER: We will continue to apply pressure on the Commonwealth Government. However, I am fearful of the level of success we will have if the Commonwealth Government does not change.

The SPEAKER: I call the member for Nedlands to order for the first time.