

Division 14: Jobs, Tourism, Science and Innovation — Services 1 to 7, International Education, \$8 901 000 —

Ms M.M. Quirk, Chair.

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

Mrs R. Brown, Director General.

Ms S. Spencer, Deputy Director General, Strategy and International Education.

Mr A. King, Executive Director, Strategic Policy.

Mr R. Sansalone, Chief Financial Officer.

Mr B. Jolly, Executive Director, Service Delivery.

Ms R. Lee, Executive Director, Strategy and Policy.

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

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

Mr R. Perera, Associate Director, International Education.

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

Ms T. Widdicombe, Chief of Staff, Minister for International Education.

[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. I 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 he agrees to provide and will then allocate a reference number. Supplementary information should be provided to the principal clerk by noon on Friday, 2 June 2023. If the 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: I refer to page 190 of volume 1 of budget paper No 2 and the ongoing initiatives and, obviously, the international education line item. The funding declines from \$8.9 million to \$3.4 million and then to \$411 000 and \$415 000. Can the minister enlighten us of the situation there? What is the cause of that?

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: The member is referring to the line item and a change in the dollar figures.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: That is right—the spending changes.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: As the member will probably be aware, in the 2022–23 state budget, there was additional funding of \$41.2 million for international education initiatives, including a range of measures. In this year's budget, an additional \$13.1 million investment in international education has been provided, with a total of \$20.3 million in 2023–24. The first budget saw a record amount of money allocated to international education through a suite of programs and measures. I can give the member the details of those. The additional money that has been provided in this budget will allow a range of student support programs to continue, as well as the continuation of marketing activities and global showcases of in-market activity.

The line item shows a boost for 2023–24 that is effectively for a range of measures, including student marketing campaigns, the English language intensive course for overseas students incentive scheme, temporary staff grant programs and some further student accommodation subsidy support. All in all, these measures have been ultimately cumulative because of the investment in the first budget, which saw a record amount allocated to the international education budget and sector. We will continue that work in marketing and we will continue that work to support inbound students coming to Western Australia to study.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: The minister referred to previous announcements and so forth. I note that on 23 May 2022, he welcomed skilled migrants and international students to study, live and work in WA, and 194 occupations have been added to the graduate occupation list, which means that overseas students can gain a visa through the student pathway. Can the minister enlighten us about how many extra students came in through that particular pathway? I think it was also part of the \$185 million Reconnect WA program.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: I am happy to answer the question. The Reconnect WA program has been particularly successful and has been focused on making sure that we are working in the market to attract and reconnect students in our key countries of market back to Western Australia in the post-COVID pandemic period. I remind the member that semester 1 in 2022 was impacted by the later border reopening. Allocations allowed us to continue to work in the market and the vast increase in numbers ultimately took place in semester 2 in 2022. The indications from our key stakeholders, including universities, has been that student numbers have increased dramatically post the COVID pandemic; good numbers have come back since the COVID situation. In fact, as of 12 May 2023, year to date, visa holder arrivals to Western Australia have totalled some 17 720, and this is slightly higher than in the same period as at February 2019. We can see that this is already slightly over the pre-COVID numbers that we experienced in 2019. That is very promising. Of course, the allocations in this budget are building on the Reconnect WA initiatives so that we can continue to be active in the market throughout the target countries that we are working within.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: The minister referred to the COVID announcement of what was going to be the opening date of, I think, 5 February 2022, and the Premier's disastrous public relations exercise. Does he have any numbers of students who were lost through that particular announcement and does he feel that he has now recovered those who were left stranded in Hong Kong or Europe?

[7.10 pm]

The CHAIR: Okay, we have a couple of questions there, member, so just let the minister answer them and then you can have a further question.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Of course, I do not accept the premise that keeping Western Australians safe and ensuring that businesses continued to operate under the COVID threat is a failure. It is in fact a huge success and, as has been highlighted on numerous occasions, it is one of the key reasons that Western Australia's economy, and the growth in sectors such as international education, has been so successful. The premise of the member's question, his preamble, is totally incorrect and I reject it outright. I need to highlight that the impacts of measures taken have seen a remarkable recovery in numbers. It is remarkable and tremendous. I applaud our universities, training institutions and international student agencies in Western Australia for the work they did in responding rapidly. That is why we have seen successful growth in numbers and the success of our record amount of investment in international education. If we compare the investment by the McGowan government in international education with the investment when the member's party was in coalition with the Liberal Party, the difference is stark. We have unashamedly focused on international education as a key element of our diversified economy, which is demonstrated by our investment—\$41.5 million in the first budget and the additional ongoing moneys that we have allocated in this budget—and the results speak for themselves. It is a stark contrast with when the member was in power.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: Although the minister says the results speak volumes, in actual fact Western Australia has only 5.8 per cent of the market, which is the lowest of all mainland states. Would it not be right to say that we have not recovered from that dramatic announcement of the Premier?

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: All the trends are showing outstanding outcomes. I am sure the member does, but he should speak to our vice-chancellors. I had a meeting with our vice-chancellors only last Wednesday morning and they again highlighted the remarkable interest of international students in course enrolments. The vice-chancellor of Curtin University highlighted the record number of student enrolments there. These are very positive measures and outcomes, and it demonstrates the importance of the investment made by the McGowan government in international education. It also demonstrates the way that the department, StudyPerth and other key members of the sector are working very closely together to maximise the benefits, ultimately, for Western Australia. We know that a vast majority of international students take up part-time and casual work, which of course has supported our burgeoning and important hospitality industry, hotels, restaurants and other important employment areas. This has been a remarkable success. We will keep working very hard to continue that success and growth and of course invest in the pipeline of students, making sure that we are in-market. We have very effective trade commissioners in place, particularly, of course, in the international students' sphere in the gulf, and they are working very hard to represent Western Australia's interests in the international student market in those countries.

Dr D.J. HONEY: Have we seen the percentage of students from India return to pre-COVID levels?

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: The major proportion of international students continue to come from India, but we are seeing growth in a number of other markets, including countries in South America. India represents approximately 20 per cent of our student numbers in Western Australia. It is followed by China, with 11 per cent, and Bhutan, with some seven per cent. A number of other countries make up the top 10. That is the reason we continue to work hard in-market to make sure that we not only build those numbers, but also make them sustainable and build a pipeline going forward.

Dr D.J. HONEY: Is the minister aware of the percentage of Indian students before the COVID pandemic?

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: I am happy to ask the executive officer.

Ms S. Spencer: At its highest point it was 20 per cent; so, it is very close to what it was, pre-pandemic.

Dr D.J. HONEY: What are the estimates of the cost–benefit analysis of the investment that is being made by the government in relation to international students coming into the state?

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: I am sure the member would be aware that increasing the number of international students delivers a range of outcomes. International students pay fees to study in Western Australia, so there is a direct payment benefit to training institutions, be they universities, TAFE colleges or our international students who study in primary and secondary schools. The fees that come from those students is significant. Mature adults also bring economic benefits in terms of their contribution to business activity in Western Australia as consumers. Then, of course, are those who work in various industries, and a vast number of them do work and bring economic benefits as employees. In terms of direct cost–benefit analysis, I am not aware of any recent work on that, but one of the directors may correct me; and, if not, it is an interesting question.

Ms S. Spencer: One area I will highlight is that during the Reconnect WA campaign, considerable effort was spent on marketing our international education offering globally. Under the “Western Australia—It’s like no other” overarching campaign, we delivered a range of media across our target markets. We know that our media reached over 624 million people, and we know they were a large percentage of decision-making parents as well as students. Our website had over 3.96 million clicks and the videos, which we put together for our target markets, received over 640 million views online. We know that the additional funding we were able to put toward global awareness campaigns definitely netted a result and, as the minister noted, we are seeing that in enrolment numbers at the moment.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: I can add that a lot of parents and families choose to come and visit their loved ones, who might be studying in Western Australia. There are those visitation benefits as well. The in-market efforts through both the trade delegations and ministerial visits are focused on selling Western Australia. A key component of that is indeed the international education sector and the benefits of having your son or daughter enrol in an institution in Western Australia, receive a high-quality education and live in one of the safest places on earth.

[7.20 pm]

The CHAIR: Are we moving on?

Dr D.J. HONEY: I have a further question.

The CHAIR: Gee, I thought it was exhausted. One more?

Dr D.J. HONEY: Yes. It was thorough!

I am aware that there are many potential benefits from the international education effort. Has any cost–benefit analysis or benefit-to-cost analysis been carried out for that program?

The CHAIR: You have already asked that question, member.

Dr D.J. HONEY: No. I asked what the number was. I asked whether the government has carried out any analysis and the minister could not give me a number.

The CHAIR: I think the member received the answer from the deputy director general. Anyway, minister, go ahead.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: I could talk on this for some time.

The CHAIR: Yes. It serves you right.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Member, it is extremely significant. As the member is aware, international education, more broadly, is playing an even greater role across Australia in its significance to the economy. We might not measure it like we do iron ore in tonnage and price per tonne, and nor should we because these are human beings. One of the things that I have always been focused on is making sure that international education and international students are seen as important partners of Western Australia’s economy. It is also of great benefit to Western Australians that we have students from all around the world studying here and engaged in the local community. That is a great benefit to Western Australians more broadly, too, because I think it is wonderful that our Western Australian students have the opportunity to study alongside people from all around the world. We cannot necessarily put a price on that aspect.

Ms M.J. DAVIES: That was a very thorough answer, minister. Surely when the minister is making the case for additional funding for marketing campaigns and the like to increase the sector, having a cost–benefit analysis will actually assist, particularly Treasury. Treasury is particularly keen on understanding the financials.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: I suppose the point I am making is that there are a range of direct economic benefits, and I have highlighted the fact that those students pay fees. We could do a back-of-the-postcard calculation to

average the fees that an international student pays times the number, but their contribution is more than that. There are a whole range of other factors, some that are attributable to a formula and others that I think are also important—for example, our relationships with our dear neighbours. It is good for Western Australia if Bhutanese students have a high-quality experience in WA. I will ask the director general to make further comments. She may help add to that.

Mrs R. Brown: Thank you, minister. The state government's overall economic development framework, Diversify WA, highlights a number of target industries to diversify the state's economy of which international education is a high priority. As part of the reporting for that framework, data is drawn to demonstrate progress in both growing the sector and its contribution to the economy. As the minister has outlined, international students contribute to the community more generally and as trade efforts. As part of that reporting, there is a demonstration of the growth of the sector and the contribution to the overall economy.

There was a question about the cost-benefit analysis of various initiatives. As the deputy director general pointed out, she has key targets as part of the campaign and in tracking the evaluation of our grant programs. Cumulatively, the agency is then measured as part of its key effectiveness indicators, particularly around Western Australia's share of Australia's international student enrolments in which the 2022-23 estimated actual has shown growth and a projected growth into 2023-24.

Dr D.J. HONEY: The director general indicated that there was in fact a measurement of the benefits to the community outside the tangible benefits. She said there was a measure of the economic benefit to the community and that that was reported. Where is that reported?

Mrs R. Brown: I am happy to clarify. It is in the contribution to the diversification of the Western Australian economy. This ensures that the diversification and contributions are measured in terms of the growth of international education as a target industry by the state government.

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

The CHAIR: That is good—11!

Dr D.J. HONEY: Do you not care about it?

The CHAIR: No, members. We have a lot to get through. Members have asked 11 questions to the extent that they are flogging a dead horse, so I will move on.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: The minister is giving very copious answers!

I refer to page 192, paragraph 7.1 and supporting the international education sector. It refers to the additional spending for dedicated marketing campaign activities. Can the minister enlighten us on how much he has spent on those various marketing activities?

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: As the member is aware, a range of marketing initiatives have been delivered, including through the recovery program. The initiatives include additional spending for dedicated marketing campaign activities. We also support familiarisations of inbound visitation. Some of these families might be for agents; some might be for ministers from particular market countries. They may be delegations. They may be clusters of agents. They may be collaborative initiatives established through memorandums of understanding with institutions. Those are some of the family programs.

The CHAIR: Minister, I think the member might have wanted to know the quantum; is that correct, member for Roe?

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: That is correct.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: I am happy to outline the student accommodation subsidy. Does the member want dollar figures?

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: That is my next question. Just on the marketing side, we have had any number of press releases and media statements on 23 May, 14 September, 7 December, 8 March and 16 April. What I would like quantified is: how much has the government actually spent on marketing since that early 2022 arrangement when the international students were stopped from coming in?

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: In the 2022-23 budget, the amount for the student marketing campaign was \$5.8 million. That was over two years. The allocation for this budget is \$3 million in 2023-24 and \$3 million projected for 2024-25. As I said, those campaigns include a range of initiatives to target, attract and ultimately assist students to come to Western Australia. The accommodation subsidy was \$3.75 million in the last budget and it is \$4 million in this budget. That subsidy supports inbound students with accommodation. I think it is \$1 500 per student. We have a Reconnect WA welcome desk at the airport so that when students land in Perth, they can get immediate support. Some grant programs are associated with temporary staffing. There is a range of measures all focused on supporting students when they arrive with accommodation and getting used to the particular place where they might be studying and supporting them during that early period.

[7.30 pm]

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: Can the minister outline how many students have taken up the \$1 500 grant in the program that he mentioned?

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Yes, I think we do have that information. I will give the member the exact figures. In round 1, there were 2 081 applications and 1 824 students were eligible. Obviously, they are assessed against the criteria to make sure that they are eligible. That resulted in \$2.736 million being paid out. This round was impacted by the delay in opening the border, which the member referred to in one of his previous questions. In round 2, there were 3 710 applications and 2 818 students were eligible. They were paid a total of \$4.227 million. Round 2 was impacted by some visa processing delays that were experienced across Australia. I assume the member is aware that there were some issues with visa delays mainly because of resourcing pressures on the office that issues visas. The latest figures for round 3, as at 22 May, are 257 eligible students, totalling \$385 500 in funding paid out.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: How many students are currently billeted following the \$50 000 campaign delivered by StudyPerth?

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: When the member says “billeted”, I assume he means provided accommodation through the homestay program?

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: That is right. It is the Australia Homestay Network.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: The Homestay Network is an important program. As the member is aware, the number of students in on-campus accommodation is easy to identify, obviously, but the number of students in private rentals is not necessarily something that we can collect data on and give a finite number for because they are private transactions, essentially between students and landlords and/or real estate agents. StudyPerth has advised that since it ran a campaign highlighting the opportunities with homestay late last year, over 150 home owners have registered with the Homestay Network. This does not reflect home owners applying to other hosting services or home owners with existing registrations with hosting services; it is new registrations.

Homestay is something I would encourage members of Parliament to promote. It is an option for some students, but not all students wish to seek a homestay. It works well for some students. As the member would be aware, there is a sliding scale payment system for those who take in students, be it in a spare room, a granny flat or whatever the arrangement might be. I think it is perhaps a live option for a number of Western Australian families to consider if they have a spare room and they are willing to host an international student. It is really more a lodging opportunity. The homestay, or the home lodging as I keep referring to it, option is one that we need to continue to focus on. I know StudyPerth has re-looked at its most recent campaign and hopes to target that even further. As I say, it is an option for a number of students for their accommodation needs.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: I recall that the minister recently announced a campaign about TAFE International students going to the regions. Can the minister let us know how that is going?

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Yes. This is a support program that was announced, from memory, earlier this year. I launched the program in Geraldton. It is a program that we want to grow. Obviously, there are opportunities for regional areas to benefit from having international students enrol particularly in the TAFE sector. The strategy that commenced in January 2023 includes a \$5 000 student bursary and student employment and accommodation support. It is focused on assisting international students to train in regional Western Australia. We targeted six locations—Broome, Geraldton, Northam, Kalgoorlie, Bunbury and Albany. These are only small numbers but to date, as of semester 1 this year, 20 international students have been awarded bursaries under this strategy. Most of them are studying in Bunbury and Geraldton, and then there are a couple in Kalgoorlie and Broome. It is an area in which I would like to see further work done because, as we know, a number of regional centres have labour shortages in hospitality and tourism, and international students provide a wonderful opportunity for those businesses.

[7.40 pm]

The CHAIR: Minister, can I just stop you there because that is in fact division 25 and we are still on division 14, as I understand it.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: There we are; how naughty of you! But it is a good program and we will keep working on it.

Dr D.J. HONEY: I am glad the minister has gone down the path of TAFE. Can the minister explain the detail of the TAFE program for attracting —

The CHAIR: Member, did you just hear me?

Dr D.J. HONEY: It is within the line item of international education and the attraction of students.

The CHAIR: TAFE is further on in division 25.

Dr D.J. HONEY: I am happy to ask it there.

Extract from Hansard

[ASSEMBLY ESTIMATES COMMITTEE B — Tuesday, 23 May 2023]

p143b-148a

Chair; Mr Peter Rundle; Mr David Templeman; Dr David Honey; Ms Mia Davies

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: I refer to page 202 and the line item “International Engagement, Trade and Investment”, specifically “International Education”. How much funding has been handed out to state government agents in recognition of successful enrolments at Western Australian education providers as a result of the \$10 million agent incentive scheme?

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: In the first round of the international education agent incentive scheme, \$636 000 was paid to 28 providers. In round 2, the total amount expected to be paid is \$7 137 500 to 36 providers. In round 3, which is open at the moment and closes 30 June this year, 53 providers have been approved to participate in the program. The final figure for those will be available post that date, I assume.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: The allocation for international education in 2023–24 is \$11.2 million and it drops back in the out years to \$1.65 million. Is that due to the \$10 million program disappearing after this budget year or is there another reason for the drop-off?

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: The initial allocation in previous budgets focused on building a pipeline. We have an allocation of \$3 million for the agent incentive scheme—I think that is the correct figure—in 2023–24 and others dollars are allocated for building that student pipeline. Obviously, we are seeking to build on the initial work that was achieved through allocations in previous budgets. We will continue to monitor the effectiveness of the agent incentive package.

The appropriation was recommended.