

EDUCATION — UNIVERSITY DEGREES

Statement

HON CHARLES SMITH (East Metropolitan) [6.28 pm]: I rise this evening to speak on an issue that I care deeply about—that being education, and the education of our children. I have talked about education before in this place around the decline in our national education standards. I have talked about disruptive classrooms and now I want to talk about what I term worthless degrees at our universities. Unfortunately, some of those worthless degrees include teacher training and education degrees.

Firstly, I want to comment on what is happening at Murdoch University, which is currently investigating its international students after it was discovered that many required interpreters to attend class due to their lacking any English proficiency, yet would hand in assignments in perfect English, as reported by the Western Australian divisional secretary of the National Tertiary Education Union —

“Union members have described students requiring interpreters in classes, refusing to stop collaborating during exams, being unable to undertake basic tasks and a high failure rate in first semester this year,” ...

“We have been told by our members that students who can barely write an email are then subsequently handing in assignments in fluent English.”

Furthermore, the article states that an exam was disrupted due to international students collaborating and/or colluding with each other.

Sadly, this sort of cheating is nothing new to Australian universities, or even Western Australian universities. In 2014, WAtoday reported that our own Curtin University was caught in an essay writing scandal, with students paying a New South Wales-based company called MyMaster up to \$1 000 to write their assignments for them. The website for MyMaster, as reported by WAtoday, was entirely in Chinese and aimed at international students.

The cheating issue and poor language skill of applicants could be avoided if universities were not in the business of being visa factories. Murdoch University is reported to have had a surge in international applications on the back of its “welcome scholarships” valued at \$11 000. This is despite the fact that one of its own academics had written to senior staff warning the university about the admission of students with little or no English proficiency. So, of course it will be a hotbed of this sort of issue, but Murdoch is not the first and will not be the last unless things change.

In conjunction with lower standards for foreign students, the same issue is faced by our own domestic students. The ABC published a scandalous report from NSW and the ACT concerning the ever-lowering standards of entry into universities. The ABC reported that some students with an Australian tertiary admission rank between zero and 19 were given offers to enrol in teaching. According to the report, 28 students with an ATAR of between zero and 19 were sent offers, a further 29 were sent offers for scoring between 20 and 29, and a shocking 73 offers were made to students scoring between 30 and 39. The figures show students who scored in the bottom 50 per cent of school leavers made up half of all those offered places in teaching degrees. This is absolutely unacceptable. The report shows that of the 4 075 offers to school leavers in 2015, only 292 scored above 90, with just 14 scoring above 98. In 2017, of 41 countries ranked by the European Union and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, Australia was ranked thirty-ninth, which places us seven places behind the US and 19 behind the United Kingdom. It places us significantly below Bulgaria and marginally above Romania in terms of average student performance for children aged 15.

Why is this? A 2017 ABC report noted that teaching students’ high school marks were dropping, but universities said it did not matter. This trend has been the case for the last decade, with teaching students’ high school marks consistently dropping. This is a worrying trend and a clear problem that could be resolved relatively easily. Universities need to stop acting like businesses and start acting like educational institutions. Year after year, they put out more graduates into fields with little to no job prospects, and lower standards so more young minds—people may not need to be there or have no interest in being there—can be pumped through the system with the false promise of a stable job at the end. For some years now, economic commentators have likened this to the “quantitative easing” of university places, whereby universities have lowered entrance scores and printed as many degrees as possible to accumulate commonwealth government funding through higher education contribution scheme—higher education loan program loans, in addition to foreign student fees. The end result is that the universities have flooded the market with so many graduates that a degree has lost its value, despite the significant cost to both students and the budget. The torrent of graduates has also swamped the labour market, which is unable to keep up with the supply.

I have two recommendations. Firstly, stop universities from being visa factories. Clearly, they are letting the allure of high-paying international students cloud their judgment and are overlooking the most basic of requirements for a tertiary education. Secondly, stop treating educational institutions like businesses. Their function is not to make as much profit as possible; they are there to benefit society with research and education. By lowering their

standards to increase their class sizes and profits, they are pushing out consistently lower quality graduates. This is particularly obvious and heinous in education. Poorly trained teaching students mean poorly trained students down the line, and the downward spiral of education continues. This needs to stop.

I therefore call upon all sides of politics to come together to push for change in this area. Our young people need a decent future and the current system is only setting them up for failure.