



Speech by

Hon. D. WELLS

MEMBER FOR MURRUMBA

Hansard 10 November 1998

UNIVERSITY OF THE SUNSHINE COAST BILL

Hon. D. M. WELLS (Murrumba—ALP) (Minister for Education) (12.52 p.m.): I move—

"That the Bill be now read a second time."

This Bill provides for the establishment and operations of the University of the Sunshine Coast. Higher education courses were first offered on the Sunshine Coast in 1989 by the then Brisbane College of Advanced Education. Teaching first commenced in temporary premises in Nambour. As a consequence of the amalgamation of the Brisbane College of Advanced Education and the Queensland University of Technology in 1990, the council of the Queensland University of Technology assumed responsibility for the provision of university education on the Sunshine Coast. The "campus" was relocated to the Sunshine Coast Community College of TAFE at Nambour.

The need for a more substantial higher education facility in the Sunshine Coast region had already been established and was agreed in principle between the Commonwealth and the State in 1989. A 100-hectare site at Sippy Downs and funding for external works and services were provided by the State Government at a total cost of \$3.5m. Commonwealth capital funding of \$9.5m was approved for the construction of the first buildings in 1992 and made available in 1994 and 1995.

In November 1993, agreement was reached between the State and the Commonwealth Governments that the new facility should be established as a university college. It was to operate under its own legislation but affiliated with the Queensland University of Technology. This arrangement was seen to provide the new institution with a high level of control of its own affairs and the freedom to develop its mission in step with the needs of the region. At the same time, it would satisfy the Commonwealth's policy that any new campus should be established and developed under the aegis of an established institution.

In July 1994, the Sunshine Coast University College Act 1994 commenced. That Act created an institution which had all the normal powers of a university—the power to appoint staff, to determine who and what it would teach, to offer a full array of higher education awards and to accredit them itself. It had the power to manage its own affairs. It also gave to the Queensland University of Technology the responsibility to assist the university college to provide higher education in the region. The QUT had the responsibility to provide academic quality assurance for the new institution and the responsibility to negotiate with the Commonwealth the package of funding due to the institution and to forward such funds to the new institution. It required the two institutions to develop a formal agreement under which administrative and other services, such as computing and library support, would be provided by the Queensland University of Technology to the Sunshine Coast University College. Finally, the Act provided for a review of the relationship between the two institutions as soon as possible after 10 years from the commencement of the Act.

The Parliament noted at the time that the relationship between the two institutions could be expected to evolve as the new institution developed its own systems and acquired senior staff of its own. It also noted that any decision to bring forward this review process would need to be negotiated between the State Government, which has legislative responsibility for the operations of universities, and the Commonwealth, which has primary responsibility for their funding.

The Sunshine Coast University College opened for teaching in February 1996 with an intake of some 500 commencing students. Since then, it has grown to a total student body of around 2,000 students. It offers bachelor degree awards in three major discipline areas, arts, science, business as well as graduate course work and research studies. It has had an annual budget of just over \$14m and capital infrastructure worth around \$40m of which the State Government has provided some \$14m. A feature of its development is the construction of buildings which are sympathetic to the climate, lifestyle and culture of the Sunshine Coast community. The library building, designed by Sunshine Coast architect John Mainwaring, was recognised in 1997 by a national award, the Sir Zelman Cowen award for the best public building.

Significant changes have taken place in national higher education policy since 1994. The election of a Federal coalition Government in 1995 has brought a direct funding cut of 6% to institutional budgets and has left them to find the costs of much overdue salary increases themselves, amounting to a further cut of around 11%. The cost of higher education to individual students has risen significantly in the same period, with Australian students now funding around one third of the cost of their education. At the same time, institutions are being pushed to compete with one another for public funds, for the increasing number of fee-paying students in our community, and for private support and the sale of services. It is in this context that the Sunshine Coast University College sought an early review of its status as a university college, believing that its capacity to compete in this new environment was unfairly constrained by the word "college" in its title and that its soon-to-graduate students, while holding full university degree awards, would be similarly disadvantaged by the title "college" attached to those awards.

Late in 1997 my honourable predecessor, the member for Merrimac, commissioned a distinguished panel of interstate academics to advise him on the status of the university college. The review panel found that there were no academic grounds for the institution not to be accorded the status of a university and that its staff, academic programs and organisational arrangements were all appropriate to the operations of a university. The panel recommended that, if the Commonwealth would agree to recognise the institution for the receipt of higher education funds under its legislative arrangements—the Higher Education Funding Act 1988—then the State should move to provide legislation for the operations of the institution as an independent university.

The Bill which is now before the House, the University of the Sunshine Coast Bill, will achieve this goal. The Bill repeals the Sunshine Coast University College Act 1994. In the process, the requirements of that Act for the institution to be affiliated with another institution and to be oversighted by that institution are removed. This is the key purpose of the legislation. The Bill confers on the institution the name University of the Sunshine Coast. This is the name chosen by the governing council of the institution. The Bill also confers on the new university powers, functions and accountabilities which are virtually identical to those held by other Queensland public universities. These are enshrined in Acts passed by the Parliament as recently as March of this year. These Acts were supported by both sides of the House at that time.

One provision which is unique to this Bill is section 80. While the Commonwealth Government has agreed to recognise the new university for the receipt of higher education funding under the Higher Education Funding Act 1998, this cannot be achieved without amendment to the Commonwealth legislation. This is unlikely to be achieved before April 1999. A provision has therefore been included in the Bill to ensure that any funds provided to the Queensland University of Technology for the University of the Sunshine Coast can be transmitted to the new university without delay.

The Bill also includes some minor amendments to the Central Queensland University Act 1998 and the University of Southern Queensland Act 1998. When these Acts passed through the Parliament earlier this year, it was anticipated that both Acts would commence and new governing bodies be appointed by a specified appointed date. As a consequence of the timing of the State election, the proclamation of the commencement of both Acts was delayed beyond the appointed date. This made it impossible to achieve the requirements of the legislation in the form in which it was originally passed. The amendments in the Bill before the House provide for the repeal of section 73 of the Central Queensland University Act 1998 and section 72 of the University of Southern Queensland Act 1998. These sections are replaced with provisions which enable the members of the governing councils of both universities holding office prior to the commencement of the two Acts to become members of the councils upon commencement of the two Acts. Their terms of office are to conclude on a common date.

The substance of this Bill is the recognition of an institution as a university. This is an important occasion for the people of the Sunshine Coast, the education community and the people of Queensland. The circumstances of the Sunshine Coast University are unique. The reconstitution of this university college as a university is not a precedent for any other campus. To provide effective higher education, universities must have a certain critical mass, both of students and of staff. Without a certain level of population, such as this university has potentially, university life does not flourish. Those things

which are important adjuncts of university life such as flourishing clubs and societies for the student body, a social life for the students centred around the university, the opportunity to talk with students from other disciplines and thus encounter other views of life, are not luxuries but part of the very substance of a university education.

Academic staff who are by definition specialists in particular fields cannot thrive in isolation. If a campus is so small that there is only one expert in a particular field, then that academic will have nobody to bounce his or her ideas off and the intellectual life of the campus and of the State will atrophy. Obviously, our education policy has to bear this in mind just as we bear in mind the necessity for providing regional opportunities in Australia's most regionalised State. It is a matter of getting the right balance. In this case, the balance clearly favours the establishment of a full university in the most rapidly growing regional area of Queensland. I commend the Bill to the House.
