



Speech by

Miss FIONA SIMPSON

MEMBER FOR MAROOCHYDORE

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UNIVERSITY OF THE SUNSHINE COAST BILL

Miss SIMPSON (Maroochydore—NPA) (10.44 p.m.): It is with great pleasure that I rise to support this Bill as it marks another historic milestone for the Sunshine Coast University. Little more than four years ago, my colleagues and I debated the original Bill which established this institution as the first new public university in Australia in about 20 years. It is pleasing tonight, as it was at that time, to see the bipartisan support for this institution, which has opened up tremendous opportunities to the people of the Sunshine Coast. One has only to look at the strong enrolment from local people, particularly mature-age students, to see that there is a tremendous thirst for education on the Sunshine Coast and a great appreciation that higher learning also expands the opportunities available in the workplace.

In the past few years that the university has been operating officially as a university college under the enabling legislation, great foundations have been laid and, as we have heard, the university has grown to over 2,000 students. We all know and understand that one does not simply open the doors of an institution one day and have a record of standing and proven academic performance the next. Like the students who study for their degrees, university status has to be earned, and it takes hard work. There is no doubt that the Sunshine Coast University has done that. It was quite an outstanding result that the Sunshine Coast University satisfied a rigorous and independent academic review of its achievements many years earlier than envisaged in the original legislation, and it did so passing with flying colours.

I want to thank the former Education Minister, Bob Quinn, for his positive response to the request of his colleagues on the Sunshine Coast to bring forward this review. The successful review has paved the way for the Bill before the House, which seeks to cut the legal ties of QUT and bring about truly independent university status. Most importantly, the outcome of this academic review was also a critical factor in securing Federal Government agreement to recognise that this university should stand in its own right.

While in theory the State may be able to legislate what it likes in universities, the reality is that funding comes from the Federal Government, and that major influence could not be ignored when drafting the original legislation, nor could it be ignored in the legislation we see before the House tonight. I am pleased that the Federal Government has agreed to this move for legal independence from QUT and that the Federal Government has assured the State that this fledgling Sunshine Coast University's funding would not be jeopardised as a result. Given the changing times we live in with regard to the higher education sector, this is extremely important.

It was never enough just to change the name without a review of the institution's legislated affiliation with QUT. I referred to both these issues—the need for a name change and an earlier review—in my speech in this House in 1994. For the record, I will again quote from that speech where I said—

"However, I am concerned that this enabling legislation imposes an unacceptably rigid and lengthy teething time of 10 years on the new Sunshine Coast University. Under this Act, the Sunshine Coast University is locked into a 10-year, no-review period of the affiliation arrangements with the Queensland University of Technology. QUT is a fine institution, but this decade of no review is stifling in view of the rapid population growth."

However, we were fortunate that, upon our representations to Minister Quinn a few years later, that review period was brought forward. I want to reiterate for the record that the Sunshine Coast University's success in passing this independent academic review many years earlier than originally planned should not be underestimated. It is an outstanding achievement for an institution which is still so young.

Ultimately, the real test of a university is the quality of the education with which it equips its students for the world. It is really wonderful that, at a time when the university is about to see its first full crop of graduates hitting the world, the university itself is also preparing to graduate through this legislation. Congratulations Sunshine Coast University, you have put in the hard work and established the academic teaching and research programs that distinguish you not only as a degree provider, but as a university. I also wish every success to that graduating class and to all those who come through in the future. I know that they will leave their mark. We wish them every success and I know that they will take with them their time of learning at the Sunshine Coast wide into the world.
