



Speech by

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HIGHER EDUCATION [GENERAL PROVISIONS] BILL

Miss SIMPSON (Maroochydore—NPA) (5.42 p.m.): I am pleased to rise to speak to this bill and, in particular, to acknowledge the great work that has been done on the Sunshine Coast by the University of the Sunshine Coast. It was an historic occasion when the university opened a few years ago, because it was the first stand-alone university to be opened in Australia in the past 20 years. With all the changes that have occurred within tertiary education, we fought hard for the establishment of that university. Over the past few years, there has been a rapid development in the types of courses that that university provides and there have been some very exciting developments and partnerships with other entities on the Sunshine Coast, which I believe makes it a particularly strong regional university.

Today, I want to acknowledge quite an exciting development, and that is the combined nursing degree that is provided this year by the University of the Sunshine Coast and the University of Central Queensland. They have collaborated to put together a nursing degree that is available on the Sunshine Coast. They have used their own resources to provide for this course. This initiative deserves to be commended in this place. It is about universities recognising the need for accessibility of degrees as important as nursing in our communities and acknowledging that they can also benefit from working together to provide those quality courses.

What is also outstanding about the way in which these universities have done this is that the course was put together within 12 months to gain accreditation from the Nursing Council. Anybody who knows how difficult it is to put together a university degree and to get the appropriate approvals would agree that that is an outstanding result and is really a credit to the many people who dedicated themselves to not only making that happen but also making it happen in a timely way.

The future for education in many of our regional areas is going to rely upon that sort of collaboration. I believe that the regional universities are a very important economic driver for many parts of Queensland. If anything, we want to see that education extended even further. Also, the partnerships that are being developed with our TAFE facilities and our other training facilities are essential.

I believe that there has to be a tiered approach to education—where people have the opportunity to access appropriate education as close as possible to their homes. In the case of nursing, an enrolled nursing course is provided by the Cooloola Sunshine Institute of TAFE. The beauty of that course is that the people who complete that 18-month enrolled nurses course, which is roughly equivalent to the old registered nurses course that existed years ago and which has a medication endorsement, means that they can practise in the health system, contributing in a much-needed area of care. Also, if they so choose, they can go on to higher education in the university by using 12 months of that 18-month course as accreditation towards a registered nursing degree. I believe that that is a very important pathway.

The enrolled nursing course is more accessible at the local level and we need to see that access extended through more of our vocational institutions. We should also make sure that those courses articulate into our tertiary institutions so that people are able to use that qualification, if they choose, to go towards a registered nursing degree or other qualifications within the health profession.

It is critical that we offer such courses in the regions, because the clientele base is mainly women. It can be difficult for people who have young children or work commitments to upgrade their skills if they have to move away from their homes to access education. So I would like to draw to the attention of the House both the Cooloola Sunshine Institute of TAFE enrolled nursing course, which articulates into a full registered nursing degree if people choose that option, and the collaborative effort of the University of the Sunshine Coast and the University of Central Queensland to provide that nursing course. I would like to see funding available for the extension of places for that course. It is absolutely critical because, as we know, we need more nurse training places.

However, we also need to look critically at ways of losing fewer people once they have started to study or have completed their study. As I said, some of those initial pathways are very important for people to gain an understanding of what their future occupation is going to be like. The whole issue of retaining people within an area of study, or ensuring that they have adequately scoped the type of occupation that they are seeking before they enter into a three or four-year degree, is something that we need to look at very carefully. When I hear stories of high drop-out rates or the lack of people taking up an occupation after they have completed a degree, I get very concerned. There can be very legitimate reasons for that—people have a choice—but we need to look at that issue critically, because it means that in areas of high need, such as the health system, we have lost the opportunity of somebody progressing through the system and gaining a nursing degree or some other health qualification. We cannot afford to have the drop-out rate that we have. Appropriate career counselling or pre-vocational training so that people gain some understanding of their believed chosen profession is essential.

I would like to commend to the House the enrolled nurse course offered by the University of the Sunshine Coast and the University of Central Queensland. It is a model of excellence. I believe that it is one that can be replicated elsewhere. Essentially, it is about getting an outcome for students and for the health services who provide clinical places for those people as they finish their degree. They deserve to be commended. That is the sort of innovation that we all support and applaud.