



Speech by

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MEMBER FOR BURDEKIN

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EDUCATION LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mrs MENKENS (Burdekin—NPA) (4.11 pm): Education of our youth should be one of the highest priorities of any administration as our children are our future. Certainly, from this perspective I have no hesitation in fully supporting the intent of this legislation. This legislation has three main objectives. It introduces the new Queensland Certificate of Education—the QCE—and facilitates the new system that will require student accounts, which will be the method of supporting the QCE's arrangements. The legislation also amends the Education (Queensland College of Teachers) Act 2005 so that a person who has been convicted of an indictable offence, and that offence is not a spent conviction, cannot continue as, or become, a member of the Teachers Disciplinary Committee. The legislation also amends the Higher Education (General Provisions) Act 2003 so that the procedure for collecting course survey data by a non-university provider offering an accredited course and providing the data to the minister is aligned with national practice.

The Queensland Studies Authority—or the QSA—was been established under the Education (Queensland Studies Authority) Act 2002. Currently, this authority is authorised to issue the Senior Certificate and the Certificate of Post-Compulsory School Education. Recently, there have been reforms in education and training across the state and on a national level owing to the major skills shortage in vocational as well as professional areas. The changes that will be made as a result of this legislation are necessary so that a broader range of students' achievements and their vocational training can be recognised.

Criticism is sometimes levelled at the ever-changing educational structures and systems that students and teachers are regularly confronted with and must endure. But I would like to say that education is a living culture. Students are often seen as pawns in educationalists' experiments, particularly when we consider the many changes that have been made in primary and secondary education over the previous few decades—and I can stand here today and say that I have seen quite a few of those changes. But schools and other educational institutions must move with the challenges of changing community expectations. As well, there are new and emerging industry needs, particularly as technology and science progress.

So, as a result, from 2008 the Senior Certificate will be replaced by the QCE. The Queensland Certificate of Education is an achievement based qualification that will be awarded to students who have satisfied a set standard of learning, including numeracy and literacy, which I think we all agree is desperately important. The changes proposed by this bill allow for the QCE to offer a broader range of achievement based qualifications than those offered by the current Senior Certificate. The new arrangements, which permit a student's learning achievements to count towards the QCE, may come from vocational training and education, university, workplaces and the community as well as the traditional formal schooling. I welcome these modifications, because I believe that that reflects the changing needs of industry in terms of the skills that are required. I hope that the Queensland Studies Authority exercises a certain amount of caution and puts in place a system of checks and balances because, although completing senior has always been classified as achieving a high academic level, softer options by which to achieve that academic level could become available.

The new Australian technical colleges are just one of the initiatives that will be accommodated by this bill. A technical college in north Queensland will be opened in the new year. I would like to share with members its progress to date. The Australian Technical College—North Queensland will open in 2007 as a non-government school and registered training organisation in a new purpose-built facility that is currently under construction in Townsville. This college is for students in years 11 and 12. It provides a vocational based education that is recognised by the Queensland Studies Authority. Students can receive a Queensland Certificate of Education as a result of those studies and training. Students learn a trade while they are studying for their QCE. If they choose, they can also study subjects that will give them the option to go to university. The aims of the college are to provide students with further incentives to stay at school and to provide greater opportunities for trade training. This provides another pathway for students and apprentices.

This morning I read the background information on the federal government's technical colleges web site. It stated—

Australian businesses report that their greatest challenge is finding people to take up skilled jobs. Industry has also been saying for some time that training is not always responsive to their needs.

It is vital that the teaching of skills is relevant to the future needs of industry. One of the fundamental elements of technical colleges, and a key difference from existing institutions, is the leadership role that local industry and business play in the operation and governance of those colleges. The district involvement of industry may ensure that what is learned at the college will match what is really needed in the local region. Of course, the success of these colleges is going to be entirely dependent upon the support of industry. I understand that in Townsville the new technical college is being given tremendous support. I understand also that industry groups and employers have been ringing the college expressing keen interest to take students and have also been fully supportive at a corporate and board level.

North Queensland is the powerhouse of Queensland industry and nowhere else is there more need of skills. The credit for this initial success of industry involvement—which has involved a great deal of effort, enthusiasm and work—must be due to the chairman of the board, Mr John Bearne, and his various board members. The CEO of the college, Mr Geoff Riddell, and the Head of School, Mr Bob Knight, are the driving forces of the college. Its initial success speaks for itself. I understand that there have been at least 400 inquiries since about June about student placements for next year. There have been approximately 190 actual applicants. On enrolment day last Saturday, approximately 150 school based apprentice students were enrolled. I would like to sincerely offer my very best wishes to the board members, staff and students for their inaugural year in 2007. I have no doubt that the Australian Technical College—North Queensland has an exciting future. As I understand it, the Commonwealth government will fund these colleges for the first five years and after that these colleges are expected to become self-funding from industry and stakeholders.

Ms Struthers: I bet they're expecting us to pick up the tab. I bet you.

Mrs MENKENS: Time will tell. The Townsville college will be able to provide high-quality training facilities for these students and is offering an Australian school based certificate III in metal and engineering, automotive, building and construction, and electrotechnology. As well as this, the college offers academic courses, business studies, student support services and trade training. Student support mechanisms are being developed with a particular focus on Indigenous support.

When I met with college staff at a recent chamber of commerce meeting, I was particularly impressed when they focused on the need for life skills and social skills for students. As they said, industry leaders put employees' attitudes and values at the top of their priority list, and I was very pleased to see that this is to be an important area of learning for all students.

As a former communications teacher in the vocational field, I am passionate about this area. Earlier vocational curricula in the Queensland TAFE system—and I am going back quite some years here—allowed for genuine focus on these areas, but I have been very critical of the national training framework which in more recent years has almost totally ignored these vital subject areas which have been dismissed as being of lesser importance. There are some excellent programs of study that will help young people develop self-esteem, a sense of values, responsibility, assertive skills and the very valuable customer service skills. These I believe are as important, if not more important, than the actual trade training skills area, and I am delighted to hear that this college will really focus on this area.

We want to keep our young people in north Queensland. For too many years the major export from northern communities has been our educated youth. Now, with the excellent James Cook University, this new college, the Barrier Reef Institute of TAFE, as well as our excellent schools, skills training in Townsville and its environs should be very well catered for. When these technical colleges get off the ground, they may cause a drain on enrolments at TAFE, and no doubt time will tell if this is to be the case. However, competition is often very productive, and I have no doubt that there is room for both facilities to operate fully.

I hold a great deal of loyalty towards TAFE—being an ex-TAFE teacher and a later member of the community council and as such I have a very strong allegiance to the TAFE system. I believe these technical colleges across the state will offer a real challenge to the state education and training department. The real challenge will be to ensure that the TAFE colleges remain at the leading edge of vocational training. Of course, what the majority of TAFE courses offer does differ quite significantly—in fact, they are totally different—from what the technical colleges offer, but there will have to be a certain amount of real competition for places for students in the 15 years and over age groups.

Another of the objectives of this legislation being debated today is the introduction of student accounts, which are required to support the QCE. I find this is a new and rather unique way of aggregating points towards the Queensland Certificate of Education. As I understand it, students will operate an account—I suppose similar to a bank account—of their achievements, and these will be measured by a series of credit points derived from the successful outcome of their various academic and vocational studies. A QCE will then be awarded once a student attains at least 20 credit points. I find it particularly interesting that students may now complete year 12 without receiving a QCE but that their accounts may remain open and they may continue their studies at a later date to attract further credit points. As with all new systems, no doubt there may be some difficulties in the initial implementation, and it will put additional stress on staff. However, at face value it seems to be a user-friendly process, and I will certainly be very interested to monitor its initial rollout and how it functions.

The ability of the QCT to not admit or to disqualify persons from the Teachers Disciplinary Committee on the grounds of certain convictions is common sense and is a realistic addition to this legislation. The TDC is the disciplinary arm of the Queensland College of Teachers and it does have some very important and necessary functions. It has powers to conduct hearings and make decisions about matters referred to it. It can also authorise further investigations if it believes there is a requirement to examine further evidence. These changes do make sense.

As I said earlier, education is an ever-changing culture and I will be looking with very great interest to see how this much broader approach to the accreditation process of final year educational achievements rolls out. I commend the bill to the House.