



Speech by

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MEMBER FOR BURDEKIN

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VOCATIONAL EDUCATION, TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT AND OTHER ACTS AMENDMENT BILL

Mrs MENKENS (Burdekin—NPA) (12.41 pm): I rise to support, and add my contribution to the debate on, the Vocational Education, Training and Employment and Other Acts Amendment Bill 2006, which was introduced at the end of last year. The bill amends three acts, with the main objectives to enable the implementation of actions outlined in the *Queensland skills plan* white paper and to address minor technical issues to ensure the legislation remains current and accurate. We are all aware of the huge skills shortage that is evident right across Queensland—not just Queensland but Australia-wide, and it is certainly extremely evident in the Burdekin electorate and north Queensland in general. There is an enormous amount of developing industries and ongoing commercial enterprises right across northern Queensland.

Possibly one of the hardest hit areas in this regard is primary production, where award rates of pay cannot compete with the opportunities that, say, the mining and other industries can offer. This is a difficulty in north Queensland. However, shortages of skilled personnel are evident right across nearly all vocational and professional areas. We are seeing changing dynamics with backpackers being totally relied on and a large number of overseas skilled workers being brought in. The *Queensland skills plan* white paper, which was released in March 2006, outlines the major reforms to the state's education and training system that the government intends to implement. It was produced in an effort to address the growing skills shortage in Queensland and to develop a new training system which better serves industry's changing needs.

This bill principally amends the Vocational Education, Training and Employment Act 2000 to support the implementation of specific actions as outlined in the *Queensland skills plan* white paper. One of the most important aspects from the white paper is the removal of the legislated role of Industry Training Advisory Bodies, the ITABs, to enable a range of new arrangements for industry engagement that aim to improve the alignment between industry skills needs and training delivery. ITABs have been in place for a significant number of years and I believe in many cases have been very effective and sensitive to the needs of industry. Vocational training must be tailored to the ever-changing needs of industry, and to this extent the relationship between training providers and industry must be very strong. Because the ITABs were accepted by industry, there has been some apprehension towards abolishing this process and I, along with the coalition, will certainly be watching for the success of the new initiatives that this bill promises.

Genuine representation from industry is the key to success, and in many cases previously with some of the ITABs real input from the actual businesspeople was difficult to obtain and the personnel on these boards was often not truly representative of the actual needs on the ground. The white paper acknowledged that significant feedback was received that the existing industry advisory arrangements did not meet the needs of many Queensland employers and revitalisation of those arrangements was definitely needed. It was needed particularly to ensure greater representation of regional and remote location employers. That is definitely a concern that was echoed throughout north Queensland.

I note that in place of the ITAB structure this bill introduces new strategies such as industry skills alliances, centres of excellence, industry-government skilling partnerships and skills formation strategies which seemingly aim to better serve the needs of industry at local, regional and state levels. The coalition's consultation has confirmed that industries generally support this amendment, but there will be a lot of work needed to rebuild the confidence of industry and the new processes, and I for one certainly hope that that does occur because it is essential for the real skilling and skill upgrades in Queensland.

Funding for ITABs ceased on 1 January 2007. Clause 7 of this bill effectively removes their legislative role. It is vital that the teaching of skills is relevant to the future needs of industry. The involvement of industry may ensure that what is learned will match what is really needed in relevant industry and at the local level. This is of course an all-Queensland initiative, but north Queensland is the powerhouse of Queensland industry. I will stay with this thought because I certainly believe that this is where the centre of the main skills needs are. Industry is occurring right across north Queensland. Nowhere else is in more need of these skills.

The other major initiative within this bill is streamlining the completion process to support early completion by apprentices and trainees to better meet industry needs and to address significant trade skills shortages. This process is dealt with in clause 6 of the bill. It implements another initiative of the *Queensland skills plan* white paper—reorganising the process for completion of apprenticeships and traineeships and the implementation of competency based training apprenticeships. I understand the reasoning behind the decisions made in this initiative, but I believe it is a fairly difficult area. Certainly, we need more skilled tradespeople in employment. We need them fast; we need them now. In fact, we needed them yesterday. Shortening the training time is an obvious answer to expedite this process, but it can be fraught with potential hazards.

I, along with the previous member for Hinchinbrook, Mr Rowell, and the current member for Hinchinbrook, Mr Cripps, attended several meetings with hairdressers in the Burdekin, Townsville and Ingham regions. Hairdressing is a highly skilled profession and it is typical of the types of trades that require a very high level of learned dexterity. Learned dexterity takes experience and it takes practice. Some of the very real concerns of some tradespeople and employers is that shorter time lines may not be conducive to fully gaining complete competency in those skills. Many current hairdressers were trained over a four-year period and current suggested timings are less than three years.

Competency based training—CBT—is a concept in training that has been introduced in recent years. I was teaching in the TAFE system when CBT was first introduced into vocational training and TAFE colleges across Australia. I suppose one could say that it was met with quite a lot of suspicion and concern. I was actually involved at the state level in developing the competency based models for the Diploma of Business. In the early 1990s this was a totally new concept and certainly required a mindset for trainers, for students and for industry. The basis of competency means just that: it means that the student is actually competent or able to successfully achieve selected outcomes.

The argument against theoretical teaching and the previous methods of assessment were that a student might pass at 51 per cent, but what about the other 49 per cent, which was the bit that the student did not pass? If an airline pilot was competent only in 51 per cent of the procedures, I do not think that any of us would want to fly with that pilot. I believe the argument for competency based training is very valid. I also believe that it is an excellent method, provided the assessment tools and standards are of sufficient quality. I note that in his second reading speech the minister stated—

Rewarding apprentices who are competent instead of maintaining a time served approach ensures quality tradespersons who can meet the needs of industry.

That certainly makes common sense. It is true and competency based training certainly can work. The concern—and no doubt it has always been so—is whether the assessment tools that are used are sufficient to gauge the student's competency. Certainly, as the minister also stated—

It is foreseeable that the expedited completion of competent apprentices or trainees will assist in the timely provision of fully qualified tradespeople into the labour market.

I am greatly concerned that, in the effort to expedite the training processes, some valuable areas of training may be left out. Industry leaders put an employee's attitude and values at the top of their priority list. As a former communications teacher, I can assure members that I feel very strongly about this. Attitudes and values are not easy to impart in the vocational field. I am pretty passionate about this. I know that members have heard me speak about this matter previously. Earlier vocational curricula in the Queensland TAFE system—and I am going back quite some years here—allowed for a genuine focus on these areas, but in more recent years life skills and communication have been almost ignored. I will not pick out TAFE specifically for this; in training areas across Australia these vital subject areas have been dismissed as being of lesser importance. There are lots of excellent programs that will help young people develop self-esteem, a set of values, responsibility, assertiveness and those very essential customer service skills. That is what industry wants. That is what employers want. I believe that they are as important, if not sometimes more important, than the actual trade training skills.

I will be looking for assurances from the department that these areas will not be ridden roughshod over, as has happened in many cases in recent years. I believe that cost cutting in vocational training by TAFE and other training providers has been the cause of this deficiency. This is a subjective area. It is very difficult to assess and it is very easy to bypass, because it is not seen as an essential skill. Although industry has generally supported this amendment, there are some genuine concerns regarding access to the full range of TAFE subjects that apprentices and trainees are required to undertake to complete their theoretical training, which is not only the life skills area.

The bill also establishes a process by which an apprentice or trainee can be deemed as competent by the Training and Employment Recognition Council even though one of the parties to the training contract does not sign the completion agreement. If the apprentice or trainee has achieved all practical and theoretical competencies and their completion agreement is not signed, the council can make a determination about the apprentice's or the trainee's competency, ensuring that all parties are afforded the opportunity to submit their case.

This is a significant change. It is a new initiative in training. It could also be seen to open up a proverbial can of worms. The quality assurance of the level of training is essential and it is critical to ensure that the fast-track completion of apprenticeships does not compromise the quality of the training. Training quality standards must not be comprised in an effort to address the growing shortage of skilled workers. Although it is recognised that some apprentices may achieve a level of competency earlier than their peers and that they should not be stalled for the sake of bureaucratic time lines, procedures must be in place to ensure that the early completion mechanism is not abused by apprentices or their employers. Industry has also expressed concerns in relation to this amendment regarding the breadth and width of consultation.

There is a critical need for increased funding to TAFE. That increase in funding is needed not simply for infrastructure but to increase the number and quality of teachers. Governments put much stock on new buildings, but I note that in quite a few regional communities the TAFE colleges are almost empty white elephants. The infrastructure is there, but the students and the staff are not. I think we should consider changing that situation.

Over the years industry has been very critical of the flexibility in the delivery of TAFE subjects. Because of the bureaucratic nature of such an institution it can take many months—and sometimes years—to accredit a new course and have it up and running. In this regard, sadly, in recent years TAFE has lost much of its competitive edge. I for one have been very sad to see that occur. In previous years, the quality of TAFE training was greatly applauded throughout Queensland. TAFE needs some rejuvenation in funds and in processes. I hope that this bill attempts to address those issues.

I have a great deal of loyalty to TAFE. I am an ex-TAFE teacher and I also was a member and chairman of the community council. As such, I have a very strong allegiance to the system. The real challenge will be to ensure that TAFE colleges remain at the leading edge of vocational training.

I also note that the bill makes a minor amendment to the Agricultural College Act 2005. The agricultural colleges in Queensland have a very proud history. Those agricultural colleges are unique in their structure and, for that reason, they are looked up to by all the other states. Major changes to agricultural colleges have occurred since the legislation was introduced in 2005 with the amalgamation of the colleges. For many years the colleges resisted amalgamating, but it has occurred. At this stage, I think it is fair to say that the colleges are still in a rebuilding phase. I certainly hope that that continues and that the colleges can regain the strength they used to have in years gone by.

I am certainly very proud of our Burdekin Agricultural College and the magnificent work that is done there by the staff. Over the years, it has been amazing to find out where those students from that college have gone. That is the college that I have the most contact with and it is very interesting to hear the success stories of where the students from that college have gone.

The Mareeba college was set up while I was on the board of the Burdekin College of TAFE. So technically, Queensland has five agricultural colleges, including the Mareeba college. That college was started as an experiment. It offers training in different fields. Yesterday, the member for Hinchinbrook outlined in great detail what that college offered. That college has also gone from strength to strength.

Of course, the nature of training has changed so much over the years. Much of the training is not carried out on campus—being either at the TAFE colleges or the agricultural colleges. At times that is a little hard for the community to comprehend. Even so, in many cases the training hours are being undertaken, but they are not necessarily being undertaken on campus. As those students are not viewed as living on the campus, often those colleges receive negative publicity, which is not always correct.

I support the excellent points that were raised by the shadow minister, the member for Cunningham, and also by the other coalition members who have contributed to this debate. With the few concerns that I have raised, I have great pleasure in commending this bill to the House.