




Speech By
Curtis Pitt

MEMBER FOR MULGRAVE

TAFE QUEENSLAND BILL

 **Mr PITT** (Mulgrave—ALP) (5.42 pm): I rise to contribute to the debate on the TAFE Queensland Bill 2013. Since coming to power last year, the LNP government provided no direction to Queensland TAFE colleges, which have been in limbo. Then the government announced its proposed changes to the TAFE sector; changes formulated by a government task force that did not include in its membership the Queensland Teachers Union.

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER (Miss Barton): Order! I am sorry, member for Mulgrave. Members, if you want to have conversations please take them outside. The noise level is increasing and I am struggling to hear the member.

Mr PITT: The consolidation of TAFE institutes, which is at the core of this legislation, could result in the closure or sale of 11 campus sites in North Queensland, which would be a reduction from 26 to 15. If those closures become a reality, it could cost jobs in the north and have a disproportionate impact on regional areas where TAFEs are central to the livelihood of communities. It will also see a reduction in the range of courses available in many areas. None of that was announced by the LNP prior to the election. In regional communities, there were no LNP letterbox drops promising to take away local TAFE facilities. Why would there be? This LNP government should have been upfront with the more than 30,000 TAFE students in the Cairns region, including Innisfail, the Cape, Townsville or Mount Isa as to the impact this plan will have on their education and eventual job prospects.

The opposition will be watching closely to see whether the government uses these reforms to lower funding to the TAFE sector. In Far North Queensland, the TAFE campuses at Cairns and Tagai are already running very lean and will not cope with any cuts. Partnerships such as SchoolTech at Woree and co-location at campuses like Innisfail State College and Atherton are already well evolved. As Skills Queensland has previously set out, and the government's taskforce report details, the previous government's investment in the TAFE sector was already below the national average. The Report on Government Services 2013 sets out that in 2011 Queensland's expenditure on TAFE as a percentage of education expenditure is lower than any other state in Australia. At that time, Queensland also had a lower participation rate in TAFE as a percentage of the population than any other state in Australia. If anything, we need to continue to increase our investment in opportunities for technical and further education; not reduce it. That is what the previous government was doing: increasing investment and opportunities for technical and further education.

In contrast, the LNP government's own task force report details that it is decreasing the overall level of investment in tertiary education, skills and training this financial year. While we were increasing investment in TAFE, the LNP government's own task force report details that the hourly costs of training had been in steady decline since 2002. The cost of training delivery fell substantially from 2009 to 2010. Further, as the government's task force report sets out, there are reasons that TAFE services cost more in Queensland than the national average. Key reasons include Queensland having the most decentralised population in the nation, along with more people studying higher level

qualifications in the TAFE sector. This is not to say that the opposition does not support the TAFE sector being more responsive to the needs of industry for particular skills. That is precisely why we established Skills Queensland, an industry led statutory body to link technical and further education with industry needs. Skills Queensland provides regular skills and employment plans, with input from the Queensland Resources Council, to match training with the needs of industry.

When you take all those facts into consideration, it poses this question: what are the real motivations for this legislation, which fails to protect particular employment conditions of workers transferring to the new TAFE entity? This legislation also fails to establish union representation on the new TAFE entity board. As outlined earlier, the opposition will be opposing those parts of the legislation.

To conclude, I have reservations about whether the establishment of a single TAFE entity will deliver on its intended outcomes to achieve a sharpened commercial focus without undercutting the quality of training. The contestability model for TAFE already implemented by Liberal governments in Victoria and New South Wales has led to higher fees, lower enrolments and reduced course quality. We have already suggested that in Queensland 'contestability' is a euphemism for 'privatisation'. It is a model that will create skills shortages and lead to a sudden influx of private providers with no proper verification as to whether they are delivering proper or safe training.

An example often given to me is that, say, you have a provider that may not be providing the service in the same way as a TAFE. You have a room full of students who are learning how to fillet a fish, but in the classroom there will be only one fish. All the students will crowd around it. They will be given a detailed look at it and then told, 'This is how you do it', and they will tick off that exercise. It may not go down the path of having proper competencies such as we would like to see. In the current TAFE model, all students in that classroom would have a fish. This is a pretty important distinction and we want to ensure that the training standards will not decline under any of these models. We must see that private providers, in their bids to under-price TAFE, will not be incentivised to cut corners and lower standards. In Victoria this led to builders being trained to use sand instead of concrete in house construction. As a former Victorian trainer said, 'You wouldn't build a house on sand.' We cannot have the many pillars of the Queensland economy being made from sand.

Speaking of pillars, there is a concern that a move to focus courses offered on the LNP's four pillars of mining, construction, tourism and agriculture may leave out one of the most important growth areas. Mining is the only pillar that has seen large jobs growth and it has grown at only around one-third of jobs in the health and community care sectors. That is an important point. While we support the provisions in this legislation to protect the TAFE brand, we have strong reservations about other parts of the legislation and the general direction of the government for the delivery of technical and further education.