




Speech By
Robbie Katter

MEMBER FOR MOUNT ISA

TAFE QUEENSLAND BILL

 **Mr KATTER** (Mount Isa—KAP) (5.58 pm): I rise to speak on the TAFE Queensland Bill 2013. The Mount Isa Institute of TAFE plays an important role in the vocational education and training sector in my electorate. The institute itself has two smaller offices in Cloncurry and Normanton, delivering nationally recognised vocational education and training to remote areas, not just in these small centres but in outlying regions such as Burketown.

The Mount Isa TAFE was established in 1972 and is geographically Queensland's largest institute, with a service area covering 30 per cent of Queensland. Mount Isa TAFE's core business is education and training in automotive, mining and engineering fields—such as diesel, electrical, fitting/machining and metal fabrication—as well as business, administration, management and IT, and community services such as child care and aged care. These are all essential training fields for our region and are tailored to serve the needs of industry in my electorate. Mount Isa TAFE and the neighbouring Spinifex State College Senior Campus, which is physically next door to the TAFE campus, together formed a senior educational precinct of knowledge, which has been working well for the past few years. It is an excellent facility.

Let's have a look at what the passing of this bill will mean to Mount Isa. Cairns, the Barrier Reef and Mount Isa TAFEs will come under one unit. That may be very good from a delivery perspective for Mount Isa but is bad for the identity of TAFE in Mount Isa and its satellite campuses in rural and remote areas. Mount Isa's TAFE already works collaboratively with other TAFEs and other training organisations, bringing in teachers to teach courses such as fitting and turning and diesel training—skills that are vital for a mining city such as Mount Isa. A big downside of the restructure will be the loss of identity for Mount Isa's TAFE and possibly the loss of smaller campuses at Cloncurry and the lower gulf campus at Normanton. Identity is important in the north west of Queensland. Will Mount Isa TAFE become the Barrier Reef Institute of TAFE or the Cairns Institute of TAFE? Both options are worrying for a mining resource city 1,000 kilometres from the coast.

The Commission of Audit report says private registered training operators have been able to gain a higher market share in Queensland than TAFE, while TAFE's decline in market share in Queensland has been steeper than other states, falling by over 20 percentage points between 2007 and 2011. I appreciate that fact, but the logical conclusion is that if we move towards more RTOs, even with trying to make TAFE more competitive, it would seem that the RTOs will keep losing the day and I do not think they can promise the same service delivery that can be ensured by keeping this service firmly within the grip of the government and making sure that we have our fair market share. I think the more prominent the RTOs are the more the industry becomes privatised. I am not sure that this is the only way to go to combat that. Government delivery of these services ensures that there is a buffer between the commercial challenges brought by the tyranny of distance in remote areas such as Mount Isa.

This may be used as an argument for reforming TAFE, as this bill does, and to reinforce the concept that TAFE is an expensive and inefficient provider of training. But at the same time the Commission of Audit report states that higher training delivery costs may be attributed to the delivery of higher level qualifications—certificate III and above—as well as Queensland’s geographic spread and growing numbers of disadvantaged learners accessing training. TAFE is the benchmark, the leading body in subject delivery for vocational and further education in Queensland. My fear is that the baby will be thrown out with the bathwater and the ones who will suffer will be those students and TAFE institutions in remote and rural locations such as Mount Isa, Cloncurry and Normanton. It is important to factor in the nature of Queensland’s geography as well as the unique needs of people in rural and remote communities.

Under the new model, people with concession cards may miss out on TAFE education. If you do not have a healthcare concession card, what other process will be available to identify students who are financially not in a position to pay the fee? That could be a definite barrier to further education, and this bill will limit those who can access publically funded education. The big question for me and for those involved in TAFE in my electorate is: what will the funding model look like for remote institutions like Mount Isa? Previously Mount Isa has been funded at a higher rate than other TAFEs due to remote its location, and I dearly hope that this will continue.

I want to tell the House how vital Mount Isa TAFE is to my electorate. In Mount Isa we have a desperate shortage of child-care facilities with waiting lists of two years. This prevents mothers going back to work, exacerbating the shortage of staff we have, especially in the service industries. It impacts on our local economy. The Mount Isa TAFE serves very well to fill that gap.

Mount Isa TAFE also focuses on Indigenous students in rural and remote communities. Our First Australians rely very heavily on this service for them to be engaged back in the workforce. Let me quote from a recent report which comments on Mount Isa TAFE’s success with Indigenous students. The report states—

Mount Isa Institute of TAFE in Queensland offers a ‘wrap round’ program for local Indigenous students. Co funded by the provider, religious charity and the local mining company, the program offers students assistance with transport, food, addressing gaps in literacy and numeracy and also an Indigenous mentor to help them through the qualification. Because so many of the students face multiple disadvantages this additional support is necessary to help students stay in the course.

These things are unique to the area that are often difficult and not captured properly when something is run remotely from the coast. It takes that special type of local engagement and understanding, and the integrity of that model is compromised by this proposal. A chill of fear always runs down my spine when I see moves like this that smack of decentralisation. Decentralisation is a great enemy of remote towns and cities like Mount Isa and other towns within my electorate, and this does move towards that. You could say it is rationalisation and streamlining and it saves us money. It may do, but pardon my cynicism for seeing this as a move towards decentralisation. I see that will be a problem.

I have spent a lot of time with the manager of TAFE in Mount Isa and he has said that there are some good parts to this bill that will offer some benefits to the area and help him be competitive. I appreciate that, but I am at the same time mindful that we preserve our services and our staffing in Mount Isa which is something I flag as being very important with this bill.