




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR TOWNSVILLE

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UNIVERSITY LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr STEWART** (Townsville—ALP) (3.50 pm): I rise today to speak in support of the University Legislation Amendment Bill 2017 and as chair of the Education, Tourism, Innovation and Small Business Committee whose responsibility it was to interrogate and scrutinise the bill before reporting back to the House. Firstly, I would like to thank all those who contributed their views to the bill either through their submissions or through their appearance at public hearings or both—specifically, the NTEU, or National Tertiary Education Union, the many universities across the state and Mr Bill Tweddell, Chancellor of James Cook University. I acknowledge the work of committee members on both sides of the House and also the secretariat staff for their work on this bill.

We have heard the minister speak about the objectives of the bill. I would like to focus my speech today on the part of the bill which addresses James Cook University governance reforms. James Cook University, or JCU, is Queensland's second oldest university, established in 1970 and opened by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II in that same year. As the largest university in north Australia, JCU's student population is around 23,000 students, of whom 7,500 are international students who are attracted to three different campuses across two different countries under one university. There have been some very notable leaders and alumni including members of this House—the Treasurer, Curtis Pitt, and the member for Cleveland, Mark Robinson—but none more memorable than groundsman Eddie Koiki Mabo, Indigenous leader and activist.

The justification of the changes to the governance reforms is a result of the university's wideranging consultation, which is explained in the explanatory notes as follows—

JCU has advised that the governance structure prescribed in the JCU Act makes it difficult for the JCU Council to ensure it has the appropriate balance of skills, experience, expertise and corporate knowledge necessary to provide strategic leadership to the university.

Of the public universities, the JCU council has the equal largest number of members, the greatest number of elected members and the lowest number of council appointed members, or additional members. Currently under the JCU Act there is provision for a 22-member council. The changes proposed under the bill are as follows: council must have at least 11 and no more than 21 members; official members, two or three—chancellor, vice-chancellor and chairperson of the academic board—or two only if the vice-chancellor is also the chairperson of the academic board; appointed by Governor in Council, at least three members but not more than six; additional members appointed by the council, at least three but not more than six, additional members must not be university staff or students, and at least two must be graduates of the university; and elected members, at least three or 25 per cent of the total number of members of the council, whichever is the greater, but not more than six elected members. There must be at least one member of each class of elected members, which new section 22F specifies as academic staff, professional and technical staff, and students. The number of elected members who are staff must be greater than the number of elected students.

The proposed governance structure would reduce the number of elected members and Governor in Council appointments and increase the number of members appointed by the JCU council. Elected members would decrease from 10 to between three and six and Governor in Council appointments from eight to between three and six. The additional members appointed by the council would increase from one to between three and six.

During the public hearing we heard from JCU chancellor, Bill Tweddell, who stated—

The proposed model provides the wonderful flexibility that the university is after to ensure it gets the optimum chance of providing good governance across the university through quite a great balance across the stakeholder groups and giving the university that flexibility of between three and six people that it can appoint to meet all of these desired objectives in terms of skills, geographical representation and gender equity and end up with a diverse membership which suits the needs and helps us meet our objectives.

The QCU and the NTEU were concerned about potential reductions in elected members. The NTEU submitted that elected members should represent at least 33 per cent of the governing body's total members to ensure accountability. During the public hearing the NTEU stated—

Elected staff representatives are those best placed to challenge the insertions of senior management and hold their decisions to scrutiny. Someone who is appointed by the vice-chancellor is unlikely to question the vice-chancellor. There is no need for the changes proposed to the size and composition of governing bodies and our members oppose those changes.

When comparing governance models across a broad range of universities, elected members constitute between 20 and 45 per cent of the council. The department also noted under the current university acts that all members, irrespective of whether they are nominated by Governor in Council, appointed by the governing body or elected by the greater university community must act in the best interests of the university and do not represent a constituency or the government.

In 2008 the federal government initiated a review, known as the Bradley review, to examine and report on the future direction of the higher education sector, its ability to meet the needs of the community and the economy, and to identify options for reform. When we look at the composition of the current JCU council and reference that back to the community and clients it serves across two countries, Singapore and Australia, with three different campuses including Cairns and Townsville, we see that this is a unique set of circumstances that needs effectiveness and efficiency to meet the needs of an increasing, changing tertiary education climate. These changes will equip the JCU council with the ability to create a council with specific skill sets across a range of geographic locations with a balance between gender, ethnicity, industry, student and staff to drive the future of tertiary education for the largest university in north Australia. I commend the bill to the House.