




Speech By
Hon. Grace Grace

MEMBER FOR MCCONNEL

Record of Proceedings, 16 November 2021

QUEENSLAND UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY AMENDMENT BILL

Second Reading

 **Hon. G GRACE** (McConnel—ALP) (Minister for Education, Minister for Industrial Relations and Minister for Racing) (5.10 pm), in reply: I thank all honourable members for their contributions to the debate on the Queensland University of Technology Amendment Bill. As we know, the bill is largely about streamlining the governance arrangements at QUT by reducing the size of the council from its current 22 members to 15 members. The amendments support effective governance while maintaining an appropriate balance of skills and experience on the council.

I note some comments that reducing the number of council members to 15 will somehow compromise governance, but I do not accept that for one second and neither does the committee nor a lot of the submitters. A lot of the issues raised by a number of members today and the NTEU occurred under the 22-member council. Those issues all occur currently. It is not like we have already introduced the 15-member council and there are now concerns about the governance structure of QUT or any other university. I know there are a lot of conspiracy theories about what is going to happen, but any issues raised so far have all occurred under the current 22-member council. I leave members to think about that.

There has been lengthy consultation. I do not accept for one minute that members of the community, staff and students were not given the opportunity to have their say. The parliamentary committee ran an extensive public inquiry and held public hearings. There was more than adequate time for people to have their say. The bill implements the QUT proposal to reduce its membership and obviously QUT consulted well over a period of two years.

I thank members on both sides of the House for their contributions during the course of this debate. In particular, I thank the shadow education minister, Dr Christian Rowan, for his bipartisan support of the bill. I also thank the member for Southern Downs and Deputy Chair of the Education, Employment and Training Committee and I acknowledge the committee chair, the member for Redlands. The deputy chair, in particular, said a few kind words in relation to the collegial nature of the committee. It is always good in this House when we admit that often we do work very well together. Even though there may be times when we are adversaries, most of the time we get on very well. I thank the member for making that point.

I note that the member for Hinchinbrook made a reference to the bill being like dry toast. I will give him the vegemite, the jam and the honey to put on the toast to make it a little more interesting. I must admit that most of the bills I bring before this House are pretty exciting and dynamic and have a bit more emotion in them. However, it is important to get the governance right with a university of the calibre of QUT. Anyone who diminishes the professionalism or the calibre of QUT or any university in Queensland underestimates how wonderful those universities are. Are they perfect? I do not think any institution is perfect. Believe it or not, not even our political parties are perfect. Whether with the Greens, the LNP or Labor we all have issues, as do some of our best institutions. Mind you, Labor probably has fewer issues than any of the others, but I have a little bit of a conflict of interest when I say that.

As an aside, I join others in saying that my adult child is also a graduate of QUT having completed the creative industries degree and is enjoying working at the Melbourne Theatre Company. I am very pleased that they have enrolled in the University of Melbourne and are now doing psychology. I am very glad to add that. They loved their time at QUT.

I will address one point that the member for Hinchinbrook raised about the NTEU losing representation on the council. The QUT Council is comparable to other Queensland public universities in terms of the representation of academic staff, professional staff and students. The proposed council membership will see a reduction of only one academic member and one professional staff member. Importantly, there will be no changes to the number of students represented. I know that others have made that comment. Most of the reduction is achieved through the reduction in the governor-in-council members, that is, the members I appoint. Most of the reduction comes from the government taking the hit, not QUT. The number of academic staff members is the same as Griffith University, James Cook University and the University of the Sunshine Coast, and the sky has not fallen in on those universities. In fact, allegations have been made, but I do not think we should conflate industrial issues with governance issues of council. As an industrial expert I can say that it is a little bit tough to conflate those issues.

I have the transcript from the public hearing at which the NTEU secretary, Michael McNally, appeared. I know that the Greens party and the member for South Brisbane joined with the NTEU in some of this stuff. I note that the NTEU claims that I should be fixing the outrageous salaries, but that happened under the 22-member council. That is an industrial issue that comes under federal industrial relations law. As minister, I cannot go in there and fix salaries and issues like that. If anyone even suggested that then I think I would be up for a CCC investigation. I might add that QUT is also subject to CCC legislation.

At the public hearing the chair questioned Michael McNally. I respect the NTEU. I understand why they do not want to reduce the numbers. I respect their position. However, I do not necessarily agree with it at the moment. The chair asked—

You obviously represent staff at James Cook University as well. Can you provide us with some feedback on the experience of James Cook University and your members up there under a similar model?

That was in relation to reducing the membership of the council to 15. Mr McNally responded—

James Cook University has not been as adversely impacted by COVID as other universities such as QUT because of its lesser exposure to international students. In terms of governance, we have not had any major scandals or problems. Do staff feel like they have a voice at JCU? No, I would say they do not. Is that directly related to the number of members on council? No, I cannot make that connection.

In answer to the suggestion that reducing the number of members on the council will somehow make a number of other changes, the evidence speaks loudly for itself and I have read verbatim from the transcript of that committee hearing. I understand the issues. No-one likes change. However, I think that this is a step in the right direction. I would not have brought this legislation forward and gained the support of the majority in this House, from what we have been hearing over the course of the debate, to reduce the numbers on the council if I thought otherwise.

The changes do not affect QUT's public accountability at all. As a statutory body, QUT is subject to extensive public reporting, audit and accountability requirements under the Financial Accountability Act, the Auditor-General Act, the Right to Information Act, the Information Privacy Act, the Public Records Act, the Public Sector Ethics Act, the Human Rights Act and the Integrity Act. Under the Ombudsman Act, the Queensland Ombudsman has the power to investigate complaints about the actions and decisions of QUT as a public university. Under the Crime and Corruption Act, the CCC is to combat and reduce the incidence of major crime and corruption in units of public administration, and this applies to universities. Australian universities, including QUT, are regulated nationally by the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency.

There were some comments about the funding of universities, whether they are funded adequately and the introduction of HECS. I agree with a lot of those statements, but this bill is not about that. Yes, we can raise these issues. I would love to see free degrees, as there used to be. Most of the people making decisions about the funding of universities benefited from a free university education—they sit on the LNP side in the federal government—but that is not what this bill is about. Many statements were made, some with which I agree and some which I respect, but they really have nothing to do with the bill before this House.

No other Queensland public university has more than one professional and general staff member on its governing body. That seems to be the standard. We are in line with the code. The category of elected members remains the largest membership category on the council, at 33 per cent. As I mentioned in the second reading debate, reducing the council from 22 to 15 members will obviously see some members miss out—that just stands to reason—but, as I said, the majority will come from

Governor in Council appointments. The reduction in the number of QUT Council members is in line with the code of best practice for the governance of Australian universities, which states that a university governing body should desirably be no more than 15 members. That is exactly what is in this bill.

It is difficult to address all of the issues that were raised. I will make a couple of comments. I appreciate the input of the majority of members, particularly those proud QUT alumni. The member for Greenslopes made a very good contribution in that universities are a major contributor to the Queensland economy. There is a lack of support from the federal government, especially when you consider what they went through with COVID. They were denied JobKeeper. Did I agree with that? No. I found it difficult that the Greens got JobKeeper but universities did not.

A government member: The LNP too.

Ms GRACE: And the LNP, but it stands to reason that that occurred. Universities were denied JobKeeper and very difficult decisions were made in relation to international students. I agree that they should have been looked after and that staff should have been looked after in terms of being adequately funded.

The member for Mirani raised a number of conspiracy theories. I disagree with them all. I do not agree that this lessens the governance. As I said previously, most of the other issues raised by the member for South Brisbane, who opposes this bill, and the respectful position put by the NTEU—and I thank them for their contribution—all occurred under the current 22-member council. If they are occurring today, I do not think reducing membership to 15 will necessarily compromise their ability to have good governance and decision-making. Anyone in this House who has sat on a board with 15 members knows that that is a board or a council of adequate size. As I have said before, cabinet has 18 members and we run the whole of Queensland. Sometimes it makes for very effective decision-making, but it is a big state. Now we have a council that has 22 members. Even the shadow cabinet has 18 members.

QUT consulted extensively on the exposure draft of the bill with its university community, comprising thousands of people including its staff members. Out of 12,000 staff members that QUT invited to provide feedback only two provided a submission, both of which were supportive of the bill. I think there may have been another that was not supportive. QUT also invited its 53,000 students to provide feedback. QUT advise that only four provided comment and that these views were mixed, with one supportive of the bill, one having a neutral position and two opposing the changes.

Issues in relation to funding of universities, their entitlements and the manner in which they operate should be directed to the federal government. Their industrial practices are regulated under the Fair Work Act. Even though I respect the NTEU, it raised the same concerns when governance changes to the James Cook University were introduced. As I read from the transcript, there really is little evidence to suggest that the reduction has brought about any major changes to the manner in which the university has operated under that reduced number of council members. In fact, one of the main reasons I was able, as a government representative and the minister, to bring this forward is that I think it is a step in the right direction and it will give the governance issues of QUT greater emphasis. Really, I did not have to appoint eight members by Governor in Council. The numbers under the bill are more than adequate. As I said, the reduction did not come from students. Of course, someone will miss out. I was happy to take the biggest hit. The others were, as I said, canvassed and agreed.

I think these are very good governance changes. I do not believe that they will somehow lead to the downfall of public universities. I think that is completely unfounded. Any conspiracy theories and accusations made in the House during this debate are completely unfounded. In fact, most of the issues raised—I said it before and I will say it again—happened under the current council arrangements of 22 members. To somehow suggest that the sky is going to fall in when a lot of the issues raised have been occurring currently is totally unfounded. I am very pleased with the support given to the bill by honourable members and I commend the bill to the House.