



Speech by

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MEMBER FOR HINCHINBROOK

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VOCATIONAL EDUCATION, TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT AND OTHER ACTS AMENDMENT BILL

Mr CRIPPS (Hinchinbrook—NPA) (4.33 pm): I rise to make a contribution to the debate on the Vocational Education, Training and Employment and Other Acts Amendment Bill 2006. The bill amends the Vocational Education, Training and Employment Act 2000, the Agricultural College Act 2005 and the Education (Queensland Studies Authority) Act 2002. The main objectives of the bill are to enable the implementation of actions outlined in the *Queensland skills plan* white paper.

The government developed the *Queensland skills plan* white paper, which discussed major changes to the state's vocational education and training system in response to the serious skill shortage in the workforce that Queensland faces. The Queensland Skills Plan includes addressing the fact that the needs of Queensland industry are now more diverse. In addition to the requirement of traditional trade skills, new types of professionals are required to ensure that our industries remain efficient into the future.

The main outcomes as a result of the implementation of this legislation will be the removal of the legislated role of industry training advisory bodies to enable a range of new arrangements for industry engagement that aim to improve the alignment between industry's skills needs and training delivery and streamlining the completion process to support the early completion of training by apprentices and trainees to better meet industry needs and to address significant trade skill shortages in Queensland. In place of ITAB structures, the bill creates a framework to be based on industry skills alliances, centres of excellence, industry-government skilling partnerships and skills formation strategies that aim to better serve the needs of industry at local, regional and state levels. I understand that the intention is for industry to have a leading role in setting training priorities, including the manner in which the training is delivered. I think that is a particularly positive step forward.

One of the major changes to the way in which Queensland trains people as a result of this legislation will be the changes to the way in which people will complete apprenticeships and traineeships—moving to a competency based completion of these programs. Last year I placed a question on notice to the Minister for Education and Training regarding the move away from apprentices and trainees being required to undertake a set period of training—generally taking four years to complete their certification—to accelerated competency based programs, which generally takes three years to complete. The minister advised that, at that time, up to 23 trades would move to this format. So the changes will be widespread and significant in a large number of trades.

The justification for moving to this program was based on a formal review undertaken by the Queensland Training and Employment Recognition Council. As part of that review, the council—importantly, in my view—considered feedback from registered training organisations. The minister advised that industry had been approached to verify that apprentices will be able to achieve competence in the field by undertaking an accelerated program. The minister's advice was that the achievement of the required levels of competency will depend on the individual concerned, their dedication to their trade and that there was no intention of compromising the competence levels of apprentices by reducing the period in which they spend in their apprenticeship or traineeship.

But a number of tradesmen have expressed their reservations to me about the acceleration of apprenticeships. There is no getting around the fact that a large number of long-serving, experienced tradesmen remain of the view that the best way for an apprentice to gain the necessary skills and experience to pursue a career in that field independently is to spend a significant and extended period under their direct supervision. Certainly, an issue about which I have some concerns is the suggestion that the bill will establish a mechanism 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. I certainly think that this provision of the bill needs to be considered very carefully, especially in regard to a situation in which the supervising tradesman is the party that does not sign the training contract.

I understand that, if the apprentice or trainee has achieved all practical and theoretical competencies and for some reason the completion agreement is not signed, the council can make a determination about the competency of the apprentice or trainee while ensuring that all parties involved in the completion agreement will have an opportunity to submit their case. Although I appreciate that the minister has said that this arrangement aims to ensure that those apprentices and trainees are not held back from completing their apprenticeship or traineeship if they have achieved competency, I hope that the dispute resolution process that will be established by the bill to resolve situations where there is not an agreement will give sufficient, due and appropriate recognition to the considered opinion of the experienced tradesman providing supervision to the apprentice or trainee in question.

There is a very good reason for that. Vocational education is a critical component for the successful development of young people. Although I think we all agree that the assessment of competency must be completed to workplace standards, employers are certainly looking for something a little bit more than that in an employee. Employers are not only looking for industry-specific skills; they are also looking for a strong work ethic and more generic skills that are a good indication of the capacity of that person to be a valuable employee into the future. These attitudes are best acquired by apprentices and trainees by spending periods of time with an experienced tradesman who passes on those qualities. It is for that reason that we should be mindful of giving apprentices and trainees adequate time with their instructors.

There is a small part of this bill which refers to minor changes to the Agricultural College Act 2005. I would like to speak about the Australian Agricultural College Corporation, as it provides an enormously important service to regional and rural communities. In 2005, the government took the step of amalgamating the administrative arrangements of the then four independent agricultural colleges that were operating in Queensland through the Agricultural College Act 2005, which established the Australian Agricultural College Corporation.

Each of the four agricultural colleges had developed an excellent reputation for delivering quality training to their students and maintained strong relationships with rural industry organisations. The former Dalby Agricultural College is located in the heart of the highly diversified agricultural and grazing area known as the Darling Downs. Dalby is a major centre in Australia for grain handling, cotton production, rural merchandising and agricultural manufacturing and engineering. This tied in closely with the core business focus of the Darling Downs, and the college provided training to meet the needs of the farming and intensive livestock industries in the region.

The strength of the Dalby Agricultural College was always the strong links it had with, and the support that it received from, agricultural industry bodies and research institutes. This support kept the courses reflective of contemporary issues relevant to the rural industries that students would eventually move into.

The former Emerald Agricultural College offered courses in very practical skill areas for rural industries, including cattle pregnancy testing, engine maintenance, horseshoeing, agricultural chemical application and chainsaw operation. These very practical courses were complemented by subjects in business management, computer skills, commodity marketing, communication skills and time management, which ensured graduates had the skills to participate in the rural sector into the 21st century.

The former Australian College of Tropical Agriculture operated two campuses, one in the Burdekin and one at Mareeba, and together they delivered excellent training to the students who attended those campuses. The Burdekin college offered a range of agricultural and farm engineering courses. The Mareeba campus catered more for students pursuing environmental and conservation orientated careers, such as land management and tourism, although it also offered courses relating to the demand for skills in the local agricultural and horticultural industries.

The former Longreach Pastoral College offered courses specifically designed to provide students with training for the pastoral industry, in contrast to the other former colleges which were principally focused on agricultural as distinct to pastoral industries, and did so to a very high standard. It also enjoyed a strong relationship with pastoral industry organisations that ensured that courses remained relevant to the needs of industry operators.

The important theme of each of the four formerly independent colleges was that they had strong relationships with relevant industry organisations and the content of courses offered at the colleges was

driven by the involvement of those industry groups. It is critically important that the quality training continue under the current model where the Australian Agricultural College Corporation has assumed responsibility for the delivery of this training.

The move to amalgamate the four agricultural colleges did create a degree of concern. This concern pertained mainly to the absence of separate boards for each of the campuses that would have enabled a degree of autonomy with respect to the course material delivered at these colleges. It was clear at the time that there were certain issues that meant that there was a case for centralising the financial arrangements of the colleges. However, there were concerns put forward about the appropriateness of centralising control over the curriculum delivered to students, and these concerns were legitimate in my view. Nevertheless, on 1 July 2005 the Australian Agricultural College Corporation was established. The task of amalgamating the four former colleges posed a significant challenge. The 2005-06 annual report of the Australian Agricultural College Corporation lists several initiatives that are being undertaken by the corporation.

The corporation, in its first 12 months of operation, installed a \$2 million information technology upgrade and centralisation of core business support systems; achieved an actual deficit of only a quarter of a million against a predicted budget deficit of \$1 million; streamlined its financial management framework and progressed towards finalising its risk management framework; instituted a corporation-wide organisational restructure and streamlined vacancy, recruitment and selection processes. The corporation also improved the relevance, quality and efficiency of all training, with particular emphasis on on-campus training and responding to industry and training needs for entry level students and existing rural industry employees.

The corporation planned for lower level courses to be common to all campuses, supporting greater efficiencies in course materials, assessments and compliance. It also developed objectives and enabling strategies to facilitate an increase in the level of off-campus delivery and assessment with these initiatives to increase the availability of staff to deliver training off campus, increase staff capacity to deliver training off campus, increase community and regional training opportunities and increase the profile of the vocational education and training sector to meet industry needs.

I think it is fair to say that these initiatives have demonstrated strong outcomes for the Australian Agricultural College Corporation in its first year, particularly as far as its financial situation is concerned, and I congratulate the CEO, the director of the college and the board of the corporation to that end. I note that there has been a certain degree of standardisation as far as the course material between campuses is concerned. I hope this does not result in the concerns that I described earlier becoming a reality.

The reason I wanted to note the important contribution that the Australian Agricultural College makes to the training of large numbers of people in Queensland as far as skills and knowledge of rural industries is concerned is that rural industries make a very significant contribution to the Queensland economy. Of particular importance is that a large percentage of Queensland products are exported. As a result, it is particularly important that the employees working in our rural industries are appropriately skilled, and the Australian Agricultural College is a vital resource to ensure that the workforce can obtain those skills. While large amounts of the work undertaken in our rural industries are nowadays performed by machines, the people operating those machines need to be highly skilled. The Australian Agricultural College is also making a strong contribution by providing training in this area.

Nevertheless, in my electorate of Hinchinbrook there are still some industries that are labour intensive. The banana industry comes immediately to mind. There is still a very large number of people in my electorate who are directly employed in farm labouring positions. For a long time, the banana industry has been trying to explain to governments at all levels that these farm labourers have particular skills which ought to be recognised. You cannot send inexperienced people into the field on a banana farm. They need to spend time with more experienced farm hands. That is similar to the circumstances of apprentices and trainees.

There was recently a program delivered by the government as part of its Cyclone Larry Recovery Plan, which will provide training through the Australian Agricultural College in programs like quarantine, chemical application and plant protection to farm workers. I welcomed this program. I note the minister who provided that program is here, and I welcomed it at the time. It was due recognition that these farm workers required skills training and that they were skilled workers. Banana industry workers work very hard and they are valued by their employers. I pay tribute to them as the backbone of a very important industry in my electorate.

With those remarks on the record, I conclude my contribution by saying that I support the bill, although I hope the minister will be vigilant in ensuring that relationships between training authorities and industry organisations remain close to ensure that our apprentices and trainees are getting the best possible instruction.