



Speech by

Andrew Cripps

MEMBER FOR HINCHINBROOK

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HIGHER EDUCATION (GENERAL PROVISIONS) BILL

Mr CRIPPS (Hinchinbrook—NPA) (11.52 am): I rise to make a contribution to the debate on the Higher Education (General Provisions) Bill. The primary objectives of the bill are to uphold the standards of education delivered by higher education institutions operating in Queensland; to uphold the standards of education delivered by higher education institutions approved to be established or recognised, authorised to operate or registered under an act when operating outside Queensland; and to maintain public confidence in the higher education sector in Queensland. Other objectives of the bill are to amend the Education (General Provisions) Act 2006 to clarify the head of power to charge a fee in relation to non-state school students who undertake a component of a program of distance education at a school and to amend the Vocational Education, Training and Employment Act 2000 to implement a number of recommendations arising from a review of the role of group training organisations.

The national protocols for higher education approval processes were originally approved by the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs on 21 March 2000. These national protocols underpin the national quality assurance framework for Australian higher education. They have been designed to ensure consistent criteria and standards for higher education approval processes across Australia. The national protocols provide a common framework for regulating the establishment and recognition of new universities, the operation of overseas higher education institutions in Australia and the accreditation of courses offered by providers of higher education other than universities. In October 2007 the ministerial council approved a new edition of the national protocols. The council also agreed to the development of national guidelines for higher education approval processes, which were also approved by the council in October 2007. Individual states and territories have the responsibility for implementing the national protocols through legislation. The amendments required to implement the new 2007 national protocols are contained in this bill.

In the past higher education providers other than universities were required to be registered and have their courses accredited by state higher education approval authorities. The new national protocols have separated the registration and course accreditation processes requiring non-university providers to be registered in the jurisdiction in which they operate. This is additional to the requirement for their courses to be accredited.

The separation of registration and accreditation processes is seen to do the following: facilitate an approved national framework for mutual recognition of course accreditation whereby local jurisdictions accept an accreditation decision by another authority but still scrutinise local delivery arrangements by reference to certain criteria; and make it possible to streamline processes by not revisiting generic registration criteria every time a provider seeks accreditation. Currently, universities are empowered to accredit their own courses while most non-university higher education providers must have their courses accredited through a state course approval process. There was no mechanism under the previous national protocols for any other higher education entities to become self-accrediting.

Following the review of the national protocols, the ministerial council has decided that these types of institutions should be empowered to self-accredit their own courses. The new national protocols introduce a process whereby institutions other than universities can apply to be self-accrediting. The new national

protocols provide that institutions will demonstrate that they meet the criteria to be a self-accrediting authority by successfully being re-registered and re-accredited for at least two approval cycles.

These recommendations appear to be attempting to reduce the administrative and bureaucratic burden on non-university higher education institutions in terms of accreditation. From one point of view, this goal is a progressive goal. However, I would be grateful if the minister would indicate how the academic standards of institutions that achieve self-accreditation status will be monitored going forward to ensure adherence to those standards over time. Will there be a maximum number of accreditation cycles where an institution can self-assess before it goes through a re-accreditation undertaken by a state based higher education approval authority? Will there be any indicators in annual reports issued by self-assessing institutions that could act as a trigger for re-accreditation to be undertaken by a state based higher education approval authority? How will the minister monitor the performance of self-assessing institutions, spot the red flags that go up and ensure students are getting an education that is up to standard, in line with what they need and, in most cases, what they are paying for?

Furthermore, the explanatory notes accompanying the bill indicate that in exceptional circumstances self-accrediting authority may be granted to an institution which has no track record of prior higher education provision, in which case the assessment will be based on a detailed plan rather than an existing institution's track record. This allows for new entrants to the sector to attain self-accrediting status.

Minister, similar to the concerns that I have just raised in respect of established non-university higher education institutions, similar questions could be legitimately asked in respect of newly established institutions, if not more strenuously so. I note the qualifying statements in the explanatory notes that authority to self-accredit may be limited to the fields of study in which the institution has a proven track record, or for which the institution is seeking self-accrediting authority in the case of assessment based on a plan.

I also note that the minister will have the power to impose conditions on self-accrediting higher education institutions, as well as to cancel the approval to be a self-accrediting higher education institution if necessary. However, my specific question is: how do state higher education approval authorities, when an institution is granted permission to self-assess, monitor standards in that self-assessing institution? What if there is a change of leadership or culture or funding and resources or any combination of circumstances at an institution and for some reason standards are not maintained? What are the triggers for re-assessment? How do we spot the red flags and ensure that standards are being maintained?

The bill provides that an application may be made for the minister to approve a suitable entity under an act of the Queensland parliament as a university if the minister is satisfied that the entity will comply with the national protocols upon its establishment or recognition under an act. The bill also provides for the establishment of specialised university level higher education institutions to be self-accrediting if they fulfil all the criteria for being a university except for the breadth of courses and programs offered. The bill also seeks to establish a new category of institution called university colleges. The national protocols provide that a university college is required to deliver higher education qualifications across a range of broad fields of study but not to the same qualification level as a full university or a specialised university.

The bill also permits interstate universities, specialised universities, university colleges and specialised university colleges to operate in Queensland under a recognised authority. These interstate institutions are not required to apply for any kind of approval to operate in Queensland, as the recognised authority is automatic under the new arrangements agreed to by the ministerial council which this bill is implementing. Notwithstanding this situation, I am encouraged that the minister will have power to withdraw the approval in certain circumstances—for instance, if the institution is not complying with the national protocols and the national guidelines, but again in these circumstances it is unclear how the minister or the state higher education approval authorities identify the triggers or spot the red flags that indicate that the protocols or the guidelines are not being complied with by these institutions at any given time when they are given permission to be self-accrediting.

The previous national protocols allowed for overseas higher education institutions to operate in Australia provided that they met two criteria—the standing of the institution's accreditation status in its country of origin; and that the courses to be offered in Australia were to be comparable to an Australian course at the same level in a similar field. This had the effect of requiring the institution to undergo similar accreditation procedures as what was required for Australian higher education providers even though the overseas institution was not offering an Australian qualification. Apparently, when the ministerial council reviewed the previous national protocols it was considered that the attraction of a course offered by an overseas institution may well be its differences from similar courses offered by Australian providers, and therefore the overarching consideration should be to ensure the comparability of standards as a means of ensuring quality. That sounds like a reasonable approach, but I would argue—consistent with my questions in respect of the non-university higher education institutions both established and new, interstate universities, specialised universities, university colleges and specialised university colleges—maintaining standards at higher education institutions is of paramount importance. It could be argued that in respect of overseas institutions operating in Australia this imperative is even more important.

Self-assessment in all of these circumstances will no doubt offer a reduction in the administrative and bureaucratic burden of non-university higher education institutions, and that should and will be welcomed. But vigilance is important in maintaining those standards and the apparent lack of mechanisms for ensuring that that occurs has been my consistent point throughout my contribution today.

Section 52 of the Education (General Provisions) Act 2006 sets out the circumstances in which a fee is payable for the provision of distance education to a person. In certain situations—for example, to extend the range of subject offerings available to their students—some non-state schools make arrangements for their students to undertake one or more of their subjects by studying the subject or subjects through schools of distance education in the state system. On this issue, I would like to reiterate the concerns expressed by the shadow minister for education, training and the arts, the member for Cunningham, that in principle this concept is to be supported. Non-state school students undertaking courses through the school of distance education should certainly make a contribution when studying a subject or subjects in the state system. That is fair and reasonable. However, it is eminently important that these fees be kept at a fair and reasonable level for non-state school students to access these courses.

Many, although not all, non-state school students who undertake these courses are from smaller non-state schools or from non-state schools in regional, rural or remote areas of the state where they would not otherwise have the opportunity to undertake these subjects. They should not have unreasonable barriers put up by the government to access these services. I have had an opportunity to peruse the response to the regulatory impact statement on these proposed fees by Independent Schools Queensland. I tend to think that it is a reasonable document, and I urge the minister to reflect on its contents before implementing fees of the magnitude currently proposed. Certainly the proposed fees representing increases of up to 900 per cent do not represent a fair and reasonable fee. I share the shadow minister's objection to them as they are currently proposed. I call on the minister to abandon plans to proceed with fee increases of up to 900 per cent in respect of fees for non-state school students undertaking school of distance education subjects. With those remarks on the record, I am pleased to support the bill.