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Report

SPEECH

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Speaker Laming, Andrew, MP

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Mr LAMING (Bowman) (17:02): Though not a member of the committee I want to speak on what I think is a really important report that has been delivered with very impressive recommendations. We have talked for a long time about the two challenges in welfare reform—the two bookends of education: the zero- to five-year-olds entering into formal school, and transitioning young people out of formal education into the workforce. This committee has focused on the second area in their excellent report.

For a long time we have known that we have a huge skills imbalance in Australia. Put simply, 170,000 foreigners come in to do the work that we cannot skill our local people to do. They repatriate those salaries overseas and it costs our economy about \$20 billion a year. At the same time we produce around 140,000 unemployable Australians from the school system every year, who go straight onto youth allowance. Another 130,000 of them each year sequence from youth allowance into Newstart. This is a direct and measurable failure of our education system. There is nothing more the government can do than provide opportunity but at this point we are not yet able to produce the skilled Australians to do the work our nation needs.

We are a low-population economy—high on capital and low on labour numbers; high on minimum wage but low on people to do the jobs in a new economy that we are going to need. This is a massive challenge for Australia. I am glad that this report considered those measures.

What I want to see very much is a revisioning of tertiary education—attracting more people who would not contemplate training into TAFE and other private education providers, and encouraging people at TAFE to contemplate a blended degree with a university, earlier. I do not think it is adequate that you need to complete your TAFE degree before you can realistically get into university. It is time to remove that barrier.

We need to be looking at sequencing those 140,000 young Australians who can do no better than receive income replacement from the state, to contemplate a career in one of our high-quality TAFEs. The obvious way to achieve that is to remove the upfront costs, which is precisely what the Commonwealth has done. But I want to see many more TAFEs with far stronger partnerships with universities. Those are the points that I want to make tonight as I highlight the important work by MSIT in south-east Queensland. But, secondly, I am still frustrated at the lack of partnerships that we have with our skills councils and even understanding between jurisdictions of precisely what the needs are for the next generation's training. The jobs of tomorrow are still not adequately catered for in TAFE.

Lastly, I want to emphasise that in schools, as they struggle with the university pathway and the vocational pathway, we need to be absolutely cautious that we do not close off one pathway to students by promoting another. I do not think that we should be closing off for vocational students their pathway into tertiary education. They may not be getting an OP score, as we know it in Queensland, but the pathways for those students, at any time after leaving school, should be the possibility of doing just one or two subjects at university, picking up one or two MOOCs online and not just thinking that, because you chose when you were 15 to be a hairdresser, that is all you will ever contemplate until you are 21, because the bridge back into university, no matter how theoretically attractive and bureaucratically simple that is, is a massive step—to go back five years in demographics and start studying again with 17-year-olds. So many people can never achieve that.

MSIT are grappling with just those concerns, with 20,000 students and 150 courses. They are looking after southern Brisbane, Logan and Redlands, some of the most challenging areas in Queensland. We are only nine per cent of the nation's GDP, but it is an area that is absolutely stacked with 15- to 24-year-olds—more so than anywhere else in the state. MSIT, with its campuses at Mount Gravatt, Loganlea, Yeerongpilly, Alexandra Hills, Beaudesert and Browns Plains, does just that by having tertiary education close to home. While I accept the need for excellence, there is nothing more powerful than having tertiary education somewhere close on a public transport route for those who have never contemplated the possibility of doing that.

Survey results today came out saying that young Australians aspire more than anything to a successful career, followed by homeownership. As I say repeatedly, there is no greater responsibility for a government than the provision of opportunity—the provision of places and pathways that people can take up. It is not up to us to kick doors down, grab people by the scruff of the neck and sit them in front of university lecturers; they will do that of their own accord if we make those pathways possible. What MSIT does is make sure that those high-skill jobs for tomorrow can be accessed through this transition. They have the arrangements for people who left school at 15, people who did not complete senior and, of course, mature-age students.

I want to emphasise that the Brisbane economy is mostly light commercial and niche manufacturing, so it is a little unusual. It has the Gold Coast just down the road, with a real emphasis on tourism. But we do have to be careful. I know we can fill seats at TAFE for a whole range of service industries and we know that internal consumption is a growth area for every economy, but we must be skilling in science, technology and engineering. These are the really big areas; we refer to them as the STEM professions. We must be drawing people on the margins into these areas, because these are the GDP-generating jobs. It is just not enough at the age of 17, simply because you were not exposed to science, technology, engineering and maths at school or never had a great and inspiring teacher in that area, to rule it out for life, because these are the areas that are economy transforming. We must do everything we can to inspire young people into this direction and to inspire young women in particular to contemplate a career in these areas, where often they never have. There is a great imbalance in science and technology for intake of young women, and we can do better.

Lastly, some of the recommendations that came out of that report and particularly the submissions really indicate that we can still do better in a couple of areas that I want to mention. The first one—and this was suggested by TAFE Directors Australia—is the need potentially to help the public provider align their education and training outcomes with the needs of our economy. This is effectively a charter that understands, through states and territories, what our national priorities are. There is still too much jurisdictional difference. We need to better align those federal and state providers so that Queensland is not purely focusing on Queensland's skilling needs, because in reality, when you are looking for a job, these boundaries need to disappear. Every state needs to be pulling its weight. Young Tasmanian children should be dreaming of a job in the mining communities in the electorate of Durack. Young Queenslanders should not just think that tourism is the be-all and end-all because they live on the Gold Coast. We are still not there yet.

Secondly, the skills council can still play a more nuanced role in this. They still need to be looking forward to the workforce needs of tomorrow, and I have already referred to that. That is still not happening to the satisfaction of TAFEs. Linking of small business is wonderful and an emerging area, but let's be honest: not all of commercial south-east Queensland in every business is regularly reminded of the need to workforce-plan, to think about the jobs and the skills they will need and to feed that back in. When conditions in the workforce are changing, do not assume that everyone in TAFE knows that. Do not assume that every university lecturer understands that. Many of them have not been in the workforce for nearly a decade. We need that feedback directly from small business, because they have a stake in this. The idea that somebody else does the training is old thinking, and we can do far better than that.

Let's remember also the role of social capital, and this is that TAFEs are increasingly providing those core skills: living skills, workplace literacy. We call these foundation skills for many students that have had very challenging backgrounds. Thank you to TAFE for their work, not just directly in the provision of lectures but in the social support to keep people from struggling—young mums struggling with a partner that is giving them no support at all, struggling on a low-income, with closely spaced kids, to still make it to TAFE every day; they deal with those skills as well. That is vitally important. TAFEs are also providing links to apprenticeships, industry linkages, traineeships—all of those things—many of which universities are not directly concerned with.

Lastly, we need a level playing field. The Queensland government is doing great work in privatising the TAFE space to maximise the use of lazy assets. Only 27 per cent of TAFE assets are used between nine and five. It is extraordinary that three-quarters of TAFE assets in Queensland are what we refer to as lazy assets. Why not have someone else coming in and using those assets at a market price, training and competing with TAFE? TAFE is not to be the provider of last resort; TAFE is a provider of excellence. But we want more than just that single body responding to the needs of Queensland and, more generally, the nation. States and territories can also provide TAFEs with more policy certainty about where we need to go in training. This is a reminder for all governments. It was all brought up beautifully in this report. I commend those on the committee for their great work.

Debate adjourned.