

**TECHNICAL AND FURTHER EDUCATION COMMISSION AMENDMENT (FEES) BILL 2014****Bill introduced on motion by Mr John Robertson, read a first time and printed.****Second Reading****Mr JOHN ROBERTSON** (Blacktown—Leader of the Opposition) [10.15 a.m.]: I move:**That this bill be now read a second time.**

On behalf of the Labor Opposition, I introduce the Technical and Further Education Commission Amendment (Fees) Bill 2014. The purpose of this bill is very clear: It is a bill designed to protect our precious TAFE system and ensure that the tens of thousands of people who rely on TAFE continue to have a bright future. As the people of New South Wales are discovering to their horror, the price of having wall-to-wall Liberal governments in Sydney and Canberra is an education system being gradually ripped apart. The Abbott Government has broken its promise to deliver the Gonski reforms, pulling \$10 billion out of New South Wales schools over the next decade. The Federal Minister for Education, Christopher Pyne, is now stumbling about the country in a bid to deregulate university fees—a move that would lead to the prospect of degrees costing \$100,000. But the truly scary news is that the Abbott Government has found a fellow traveller right here in New South Wales.

The Baird Government is unleashing disastrous cuts to TAFE. In just three years it has cut \$800 million from the system. It is sacking 1,100 teachers and staff; slashing courses from the curriculum; and doubling, trebling or, in some cases, even quadrupling the cost of a degree. The bill that I introduce today is a determined attempt to stop that destructive agenda in its tracks. Let be there no doubt, while the Baird Government is distracted by the Independent Commission Against Corruption [ICAC] and focused on its own internal problems, here in New South Wales we are in the midst of a youth unemployment crisis. Last week many people were concerned to see the statewide unemployment rate rise to 5.9 per cent—the highest rate since the global financial crisis. But it is the youth unemployment rate across New South Wales that is truly shocking. The rate of people aged between 15 years and 24 years who are out of a job is 17 per cent in Parramatta; 16 per cent in Blacktown; and 15 per cent in south-western Sydney. Further out of Sydney, we see unemployment rates of 16 per cent in the Southern Highlands and Shoalhaven; 13 per cent in Newcastle and Lake Macquarie; and 11 per cent in the Richmond-Tweed area; as well as double-digit youth unemployment rates in New England, the Far West, the Central Coast and the Mid North Coast.

Today, I have a question for Premier Mike Baird: What kind of government decides to cut funding to TAFE in the middle of a youth unemployment crisis? At both a Federal and a State level, the Liberal Party is making a mess of its policies in education. Do not be fooled by the Orwellian title of its policy document "Smart and Skilled". The Baird Government is introducing changes that will leave our people neither smart nor skilled. The Liberals fail to see that our neighbours in the Asian region are investing more than ever before in education. They fail to see that in the middle of a youth unemployment crisis, education is the one area you just do not cut. The Opposition's bill is designed to achieve several goals. First, it caps fee increases for government-subsidised TAFE courses at no more than the consumer price index. It will ensure that TAFE fees can be reduced but cannot be

increased above the cap. In addition, current arrangements for fee waivers, exemptions and concessions will also continue to apply.

I say to the Parliament: There is a critical principle at stake here. For decades, our TAFE system has existed to give every person in New South Wales a chance. The students it services often have complex needs. They might include: young people who did not complete school; mature-age workers who have been made redundant; people with disabilities; mothers returning to the workforce after a long hiatus; and, of course, Indigenous Australians.

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At its best, TAFE is a gateway to an exciting new world of knowledge and access to the wisdom of qualified teachers and counsellors, and it is designed to help every person onto a pathway that fits their aspirations in life. In Labor's view, a properly resourced TAFE system is the essential bedrock of a humane, civilised and compassionate New South Wales.

By contrast, the Liberals have one vision for TAFE in New South Wales: to bludgeon it, downsize it and eventually privatise it and run it as a business. Already, as I have noted, \$800 million in funding has been slashed and 1,100 hundred teachers and support staff have been sacked, including 375 jobs in this year's budget. Key parts of the curriculum have been gutted, including carpentry and metal fabrication courses at South West Sydney TAFE and plumbing courses at Western Sydney TAFE. Welding and boilermaking courses have been cut in the Hunter and on the Central Coast, and the Higher School Certificate syllabus has been eliminated in the Hunter and the Riverina. It is also an ominous sign that the recent Baird budget projects 23,000 fewer students will be enrolled in TAFE next year.

Under the Liberals, from 1 January 2015, New South Wales will move to a market-based vocational training system—the same approach that has shattered a once great system in Victoria. The Government is forcing TAFE to compete with private providers while it is providing private colleges with additional State support. What do TAFE students across New South Wales have to look forward to? First, there will be the continued erosion of the syllabus and the elimination of capital-intensive courses that are costly to run. Secondly, we will see a massive reduction in the support provided to disadvantaged students—the groups of people who require more individualised attention and are more expensive to service. From next year the Government will offer TAFE colleges only a flat 15 per cent loading for each disabled student they enrol. That is a fraction of what is needed to fund Auslan interpreters and note-takers or to fund specialised programs such as ZoomText or Job Access With Speech [JAWS] for the vision impaired.

No wonder the Government's own budget papers predict that the number of students with disabilities will plummet by 4,300 compared with two years ago. My question is: What do the Liberals expect people with disabilities to do? On the one hand, Tony Abbott is scaling back eligibility for the disability pension and, on the other hand, Mike Baird is making it harder for people with disabilities to access TAFE. The Liberals are cruelly turning their backs on the TAFE charter and the very people that the system was designed for. The third aspect of the Government's business model as of January 2015 is a ruthless campaign to price students out of training. To learn at TAFE or at one of the new private providers, students will face unconscionable fees of up to \$4,000 for basic certificates. Forty per cent of students will pay between \$500 and \$1,500 extra for courses.

Apprentices will pay \$2,000 for a course—up from the current \$500 a year. A two-year Diploma of Electrical Engineering currently costs \$3,038, but under Mike Baird's new system the same course will cost \$8,190. A Certificate III non-apprentice bricklayer course currently costs \$838. As of 1 January 2015 it will cost \$3,550.

Making matters worse, government loans for TAFE fees are only available for the highest-level diploma or advanced diploma courses, not for entry-level training. This means that students will be forced to pay large sums upfront or amass large debts that will take years to pay off. Of course, all this is happening as the Abbott Government plans to abolish Newstart for six months, to deregulate university course fees and to force students into repayments with a rapidly compounding interest rate. These policies from the Federal and State Liberals are a declaration of all-out war on young people, and Labor will not stand for it. They are not only cruel policies, they are dishonest policies—a travesty built on betrayals and broken promises. Who could forget Tony Abbott's solemn words before the election, broken immediately after the election: No cuts to education and a Gonski unity ticket with Labor? Who could forget the New South Wales Liberals and Nationals piously signing the TAFE pledge before the last election? When he was in opposition the now education Minister said:

Cuts to TAFE [are] short-sighted and would cost New South Wales in the long-term ...

I refer also to the Leader of The Nationals, who once had some decency. He acknowledged to this Parliament that many TAFE students did indeed struggle to pay existing course fees and were living below the poverty line. The Leader of The Nationals added that students were dropping out because they could not afford the fees, accommodation and travel. He said:

I hope members from all sides of politics will consider this matter on the basis of their consciences. Do they support low-income families and students who want the opportunities provided by a skilled career?

If so, their consciences will tell them that they need to support something that will keep TAFE fees at a reasonable level.

Where have the consciences of Government members gone? Personally, I cannot think of a worse betrayal than that of The Nationals, who have rubberstamped fee increases for their constituents. They are sending regional TAFE to the slaughterhouse, guilty in the knowledge that their cuts are causing courses to close and eventually campuses to close. The difference in regional areas, of course, is that if the local TAFE shuts its door it can be hundreds of kilometres to the next college.

To give one example of how the Government's TAFE cuts are brutally reducing learning opportunities, only three weeks ago I met with students who are apprentice shipwrights at Meadowbank TAFE. Thanks to the Government's cuts, Meadowbank TAFE is the last remaining college in New South Wales that provides the shipwrights course. Many of the students I spoke to have been forced to travel from the North Coast to complete their training because the course is not available closer to home. At Meadowbank it has even reached the point where teachers are billeting out students because the costs for young apprentices are too high for them to complete their apprenticeship.

The Opposition has very different priorities and values from the Government. Labor believes in standing up for the disenfranchised in our community, wherever they may be. We should not want a

society where young people find it harder than their parents' generation to access university and TAFE, or they lack government assistance to find a job. Leaving a whole generation of young people disenfranchised is a sure-fire way to invite higher crime and incarceration rates, and an increased incidence of suicide and mental illness. These issues are several times cheaper to address now than several years, or decades, down the track. That is why the Labor Opposition has committed to making priority investments in education and training. Labor has committed to a landmark review of education and training in New South Wales after year 10—a review that will be every bit as iconic as the McGaw review of the Higher School Certificate or the Gonski review of school funding—aimed at developing a better system.

We want to ensure that every high school student either completes year 12 or is offered a realistic training pathway to a job. Labor has also committed to fund an additional 800 scholarships for talented students to train as teachers in secondary maths and science. We will establish a New South Wales Jobs Commissioner—an expert body to provide oversight of the training market and ensure that the skills profile of every region in our State is matched to emerging job opportunities. Labor will also mandate that 15 per cent of the work in major government construction projects be allocated for apprentices, trainees, Indigenous Australians and the long-term unemployed. Labor understands that the first job of any Premier is to ensure that the people of New South Wales have jobs. Piece by piece, we are announcing a coherent program of policies designed to ensure that people have the opportunities they deserve.

I passionately believe the Abbott-Baird fixation with cutting back on skills and education is a false economy. The whole premise of the Liberal Party's approach to employment and training is wrong. The jobs of the twenty-first century will not follow low wages and conditions; they will go to people who display knowledge and creativity—the ones capable of delivering the productivity enhancements and the medical breakthroughs. That is why, in the twenty-first century, the best economic policy that a government can have is an education policy.

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The Baird Government is determined to rip the heart out of the TAFE system in New South Wales. Somebody needs to stand up to it. Somebody needs to stand up against the policies that will lock students out of TAFE and leave countless more struggling through their degree, floundering without hope and in many cases below the poverty line. I deeply believe it will be the responsibility of the next Labor Government in New SouthWales to gold plate our education system into a world leader while ensuring that it remains universally accessible. It is vital that this Parliament make a start by moving to cap TAFE fees. It is a matter of urgency that the Parliament support Labor's bill.

**Debate adjourned on motion by Mr Gareth Ward and set down as an order of the day for a future day.**