

TAFE — FEES AND INFRASTRUCTURE

864. Ms A.E. KENT to the Premier:

I refer to the Cook Labor government's commitment to providing quality, affordable training opportunities to all Western Australians.

- (1) Can the Premier outline to the house this Labor government's initiatives to restore and enhance the TAFE system in Western Australia?
- (2) Can the Premier advise the house how this government's record compares with the record of the former Liberal–National government?

Mr R.H. COOK replied:

- (1)–(2) I thank the member for the question. A key value and pillar of a WA Labor government is that everyone should have access to quality education and training opportunities. This is integral to what we believe in; that is, we want people to have the opportunities to get the skills they need to have rewarding jobs and lives in our community, but also to contribute to the overall economy and wellbeing of our community. The opportunities that we see in TAFE are absolutely fundamental to what we believe in and how we want to make sure they continue to provide an affordable way for people to undertake courses to get the skills they need to get the jobs they deserve.

Strangely enough, those values are not shared by everyone in the Parliament. When we had the Liberal–National government, we saw what it did to training in Western Australia. It deserves reminding, and we will remind the community and the public time and again about what that mob did to training in the TAFE sector when it was in government. We saw record increases in fees year after year. Let us take a couple of examples. Some courses were hiked by as much as 510 per cent, putting TAFE out of reach for many young Australians. For instance, the cost of a diploma in mental health went from \$600 to a whopping \$6 311. At a time when we wanted more people to take up these skills due to growing demand for mental health services, that mob, in government, put them out of the reach of a lot of students. The cost of an advanced diploma in engineering technology in electricity to become an electrical engineer went from \$1 700 to \$11 256. It was an extraordinary growth in those fees. The legacy of the Liberals and Nationals was self-evident in the plummeting numbers of people studying at TAFE. Between 2013 and 2016, there was a 25 per cent drop in people going to TAFE. That is extraordinary. There was a 25 per cent drop in the number of people getting the skills they needed to get the jobs that they deserved. As a result, apprentice and trainee numbers plummeted. At the same time, there was no real investment in TAFE campuses designed to upskill future generations. Members, it is a shameful record and period for TAFE in this state.

My WA Labor government has put a lot of hard work into repairing the damage done by the opposition because Labor governments believe in access to education and training. First, we started by freezing TAFE fees. Then, as the budget repair progressed, we began cutting fees. Then, we began upgrading our TAFEs—building better facilities and expanding courses. Under the Minister for Training we are seeing a huge investment of around \$247 million in upgrading TAFEs. I have seen this take place. I have seen it in Mandurah. I have seen it in Albany. I have seen it in north metro and I have seen it in south metro. TAFE campuses are being redeveloped and upgraded so that young people can get the skills they need, for not only the jobs of today, but also the jobs of the future, which we will absolutely depend on, particularly as we look to the energy transition that we will shortly experience. We consulted industry to ensure that TAFE courses responded to the skills required. Bit by bit, we have restored our training sector to the point that it is now world class.

Perhaps our proudest initiative has been introducing fee-free TAFE. We have had more than 30 000 students benefit from our 130 Free in '23 courses. These are incredible results. I think we were targeting around 19 000 students and it has got to 30 000. We have also partnered with the federal government to offer more free courses in 2024.

The results are black and white. These are stark statistics. In 2022, there were 140 000 people enrolled in courses, an increase of 18 per cent on pre-pandemic levels. That is an extraordinary record and one of which we are very proud. Apprenticeship and traineeship commencements are also now at the highest level in around 10 years. Just last week, we announced a further \$21.5 million expansion of our successful wage subsidy scheme to get more building and construction apprentices and trainees on the job sooner. This will result in 150 more apprenticeships in our building industry, which was left gutted and damaged by the Liberal and National Parties. This new investment is part of our plan to do everything we can to accelerate the diversification of the Western Australian economy, deliver on housing right across WA and get more young people into training.

I commend the Minister for Training, Hon Simone McGurk, who has done an incredible job in making sure that we elevate our whole training sector and that it is fit for purpose for the economic challenges of the future. Most importantly of all, she has been making sure that our young people and people who are reskilling have opportunities through a great TAFE sector that is well resourced by my government.