

GEMMA THOMASSON — AUTOMOTIVE AND MARINE TRIMMING TECHNOLOGY

Grievance

MR F.M. LOGAN (Cockburn) [9.48 am]: My grievance is to the Minister for Training and Workforce Development and is on behalf of Gemma Thomasson, who is sitting at the back of the chamber with her father, Roland. Gemma is a third-year vehicle-trimming apprentice who works with her father at their business, Custom Seating in Wangara. It would probably be a surprise to the minister to learn that Custom Seating works in the following areas: the vehicle industry, the marine industry, caravans, horse apparel, horse floats and domestic furniture. The minister will see that the skills in the trade of vehicle and marine trimming go across a wide range of industries. Being in a small business, Gemma has to be flexible and able to compete and gain work in a wide range of industries beyond the skills in which she has already been trained. Gemma should have completed her apprenticeship by now. In fact, she had only six months of her apprenticeship left to go. However, as the minister knows, because I have raised this matter with her on six occasions—twice in this chamber directly, and four times by questions on notice—since the minister’s government killed off the trades of car and marine trimming, furniture polishing, wood-turning, floor laying and furniture upholstery, the victims of those cuts have been left in limbo. Gemma is one of the victims of those cuts. The minister indicated in response to the questions that I raised in this house that the existing apprentices in these trades will be looked after and will be able to complete their apprenticeships. After further questions in this house, and also on notice, the minister indicated that the training for these crafts would be shifted to the eastern states. In the case of vehicle trimming, the training went to Sydney TAFE at Ultimo. Originally, the minister proposed that the apprentices in Western Australia would go to the eastern states to complete their apprenticeship, with one return airfare provided by the government, and funding of \$110 per day. Not one of the companies that are involved in employing apprentices in that trade took up that offer, and for good reason. Gemma’s father, Roland, has made it very clear that he cannot afford for Gemma to be in the eastern states and undertaking training on block release when she is needed in their small business in Wangara. That is why those apprentices and their employers did not take up that opportunity.

Since that time, the Department of Training and Workforce Development has proposed that instead of sending the apprentices to the eastern states for their training, it would bring the trainers to Western Australia. Remember, the lecturers who were delivering those courses had their employment terminated. The department is now proposing to bring in lecturers from the eastern states to deliver exactly the same training that was being delivered by the lecturers whose employment has been terminated. That is how ridiculous the situation has become.

The problem for Gemma is that not only has the automotive trimming course been referred to Sydney TAFE, but also the content of the course has been changed. In fact, the content of the course has expanded since TAFE New South Wales has taken up the subcontracting to deliver that course. Had that course remained in Western Australia, Gemma would by now have completed all her competencies and completed her apprenticeship. However, because the training has been subcontracted to TAFE New South Wales and the course content is now larger, she still has six months to go before she can complete the apprenticeship. Although Gemma has been given credit by TAFE New South Wales for most of the coursework that she has done over the last three years, she still needs to complete a number of course competencies before she can be signed off as a tradesperson who has completed all her trade competencies and training.

The minister’s argument has been that this is a small course—a “thin trade” were the words the minister used. I put this to the minister. Neurosurgery is a very small skill area in Western Australia. The Minister for Health would agree with me on this. However, training in neurosurgery is delivered in Western Australia. Approximately four neurosurgeons graduate every year. That is a thin trade, similar to the trades that the minister has referred to. Does that mean we should not teach neurosurgery anymore in Western Australia? Of course it does not. The industries that I have referred to are no different. The work that the people in those industries do is still needed here in Western Australia. The course content was being delivered on a casual basis at Balga. It was costing the government and TAFE nothing to deliver these courses, yet the victim of those cuts is sitting at the back of the chamber, unable to complete her apprenticeship. As the minister knows, that is unacceptable for a woman who is trying to get into a non-traditional trade. Recently, the minister launched a campaign to encourage young women to go into non-traditional trades. One of those women is sitting at the back of the chamber today. She is trying to complete a course in a non-traditional trade. The decisions that the minister and the Department of Training and Workforce Development have made have basically left her absolutely in limbo, and the department will not even return her phone calls.

MRS L.M. HARVEY (Scarborough — Minister for Training and Workforce Development) [9.55 am]: I thank the member for Cockburn for raising this grievance with me. I acknowledge in the Speaker’s gallery Gemma and her father. Thank you for making the effort to come to Parliament today to hear the result of this grievance.

I want to give some background. There is a range of courses, being 10 thin market apprenticeships and one traineeship, that Polytechnic West ceased to deliver in 2015. Prior to ceasing the delivery of those courses, the industry training council and Polytechnic West worked with industry over a period to try to increase the number of apprenticeships across those areas, figuring that if we could increase the demand, we could run a more sustainable program and ensure that the courses could continue to be delivered in Western Australia. When we could not increase the number of apprentices who were taking up those programs, we went to assist Polytechnic West to exit those thin markets. The Department of Training and Workforce Development published a tender, seeking applications from registered training organisations to deliver those qualifications. A range of successful applicants were then assigned with the task of transitioning students, with the assistance of the department, to either have their programs delivered in other states, or have registered training organisations come into Western Australia to deliver those courses.

As a result of that process, six of those 11 qualifications will be delivered in Western Australia. For the other courses, apprentices are required by the contracted providers to travel to the eastern states for the off-the-job training and attend the specialised facilities that are operating in the eastern states. The department was responsible, and will remain responsible, for meeting the training delivery costs, exclusive of the applicable students fees and charges, and we are funding the apprentice travel costs and contributing towards the accommodation costs. As the member has said, the successful tenderer for the certificate III course in automotive and marine trimming technology—vehicle trimmer—was TAFE New South Wales. I understand that two apprentices are currently receiving training through TAFE NSW.

I am confident that this arrangement will provide our Western Australian apprentices with enhanced opportunities for training. Thin markets are very difficult. They are very expensive to deliver. When we made this decision, we determined that the cost of delivering vehicle trimming through TAFE New South Wales was less than half the cost of maintaining the program delivery in Western Australia, because of the small number of students who were taking up that program. That is why this decision was made. The decision to exit thin markets is a difficult one. It is usually made over time, because we do not want to inconvenience students and we want to ensure that we are delivering as many of these training programs and apprenticeships as we possibly can in Western Australia.

I acknowledge that the member has put a number of questions on notice and made a number of attempts on behalf of the students to raise the issue of thin markets. It is a bit unfortunate that the member did not identify Gemma's specific issues with me earlier. I understand that Gemma has been dealing with the department. However, had this issue been brought to my attention, I think we would have had a resolution to this issue somewhat earlier. When we were looking at transitioning students through to TAFE New South Wales, an offer was made to the students who were well into that course—three years into that program—to teach them at Polytechnic West. I believe that occurred in 2014, with some of those students finalising that program in 2015. I understand that Gemma had a break from the course, which was for a pretty exciting reason and was not just for a holiday, but for family reasons. Given the exceptional circumstances that Gemma has faced, we have liaised with Polytechnic West and we are going to make arrangements to ensure that Gemma can complete her training program and apprenticeship through Polytechnic West here in Western Australia. Hopefully, that will make life a bit easier for Gemma and her father, with the small business they are running in Wangara.

It might surprise the member for Cockburn to know that I am familiar with custom seating. My late husband was a big fan of retrimming and refitting every single vehicle and toy that we had, and we have substantial toys! I am well aware of the range of marine trimming and motor trimming businesses in the Wangara area and I have been a frequent visitor to many of those businesses over time, having seats reupholstered and refitted and having all sorts of covers made for boats, which are now housed in a facility and at various different premises of family members, who are getting somewhat tired of my predilection to hold on to these toys. That said, I am pleased that we have a good outcome for Gemma.

I encourage the member for Cockburn, if any other students have extenuating circumstances such as this with respect to thin markets or programs that the college is finding difficult to sustain because of low numbers, to bring their individual cases to me. The government is very much in favour of and takes steps to encourage all students to complete their courses. In particular, it has a focus on women in non-traditional trades. Also, when we are looking at family businesses and family business structures, such as Gemma is engaged in with her father, running a small business and being part of a small business gives women the best flexible work arrangements possible and an opportunity for economic independence. That is what this government stands for. I am very happy to have facilitated this outcome for Gemma.