

TAFE — FREE IN '23 COURSES

664. Mrs L.A. MUNDAY to the Premier:

I refer to the Cook Labor government's sustained efforts to boost training and skills in Western Australia.

- (1) Can the Premier update the house on the government's partnership with the federal government to deliver fee-free TAFE courses?
- (2) Can the Premier also outline how this initiative will help Western Australia meet its demand for skilled workers in key industries?

Mr R.H. COOK replied:

- (1)–(2) I thank the member for the important question. We know that workforce constraints are one of the biggest restrictions on our economy. Getting Western Australians skilled up and ready to go to take advantage of these great job opportunities is a key priority for my government. I was delighted to be at the North Metropolitan TAFE today with the Minister for Training, the federal Minister for Early Childhood Education, and the federal member for Perth, Hon Patrick Gorman, to talk about our new round of fee-free TAFE courses. It was great to be there with the students enrolled in certificate III courses in surveying and spatial information services. The Minister for Training and I had the opportunity to talk to a young student, Nian Chao, who was studying at university last year. She realised it was not the thing for her, and did not think the standard was that great, either. She understood it was going to cost her about \$20 000 for her three-year course. She was attracted by the idea of being able to go to TAFE to take one of these priority courses and do it free of charge.

I am so proud of the work the Minister for Training has done under our Free in '23 agreement with the federal government to create these fee-free courses. The 12-month program was a \$112 million funding agreement to deliver fee-free training in 130 courses and skill sets in 2023. We estimated that somewhere between 18 000 and 20 000 people would take advantage of these courses. Ultimately, over 34 000 took the step to become part of this great cohort—whether it is in early childhood education, hospitality, engineering or in this case surveying and spatial information services. They are incredibly important. These people step straight into jobs. It is very exciting to be able to see them on that journey.

I was very fortunate to be there today with the ministers when we announced an agreement with the Albanese government to commit to not only Free in '23 but to do more in '24! This new agreement will apply across 130 courses in 2024. We will continue to focus on in-demand skills such as construction, early childhood education and care, health care, hospitality and agriculture. That comes on top of our Lower Fees, Local Skills initiative, which reduced fees for a range of priority courses by up to 72 per cent.

Let us think about the context for this, because it is very important. When in opposition, we saw a Liberal–National government hike TAFE fees over a number of years. In some cases, fees went up by 500 per cent. Not only did that exclude a whole range of people in the community from taking up these courses, it also decimated our TAFE enrolments, which meant we were interrupting the pipeline of skills that our industries need. It was such a destructive program, and thank goodness we now have a Labor government that is reversing it. In the first instance, we froze TAFE fees as part of our attempts to continue to make TAFE more affordable. We introduced the Lower Fees, Local Skills program, which cut fees by up to 72 per cent in targeted courses. We undertook a significant redevelopment of our TAFE system with over \$146 million worth of reconstruction and redevelopment of TAFEs right across the state to make sure that they were fit for purpose and that students were job ready. Now we have Free in '23, which is making a whole raft of courses free of charge.

I provide an example of the difference between a Liberal–National and a Labor government's treatment of TAFE education. After the wreckage of the former government's training and workforce development programs, a nursing diploma cost \$10 000. Now, before they get to the subsidies and so forth, it costs \$2 000. That has made nursing diplomas affordable for a whole new range of people. As we all know, the state needs nurses so this is a really important initiative. It is great particularly for young people who are looking for an opportunity in life, and we have targeted free courses to more marginalised members of our community such as women who are looking to re-enter the workforce, Aboriginal students, and people from low socio-economic backgrounds. It makes sure that we continue to put our shoulder to the wheel to support industry to get the workers they need to grow their businesses. It continues to make Western Australia a great place to live, an affordable place to live, and we are very proud of this new announcement with the federal government.