P-EDUC: Strengthening loan schemes

CANBERRA, Sept 19 AAP - The federal government says it is strengthening the administration of its higher education loan programs.

Parliamentary secretary for higher education and skills Sharon Bird introduced a bill on Wednesday that she said would strengthen the integrity of the schemes, improve information-sharing and transparency, help early identification of “low quality” providers and improve the government’s ability to manage risk to students and taxpayers’ money.

Amendments in the bill include providing more effective suspension and revocation actions and simplifying guidelines.

Debate on the Higher Education Support Amendment (Streamlining and Other Measures) Bill 2012 was adjourned.

AAP dw/rl
P-LAW: Lib senator speaks up for gay marriage

Labor frontbencher Kim Carr spoke in favour of gay marriage, rejecting claims marriage equality was part of an elaborate left-wing plot to shake the foundations of capitalist society and undermine family and social morality.

"I just don't think the Left is that clever to pursue such grand conspiracies," he said.

Senator Carr said many in the chamber had argued that gay marriage was a second-order issue and that blue collar Australia didn't care.

"I disagree. Similar things were said about the apology to the Stolen Generation," he said.

"However once it was made it became a defining moment in the history of the 42nd parliament."

Senate President John Hogg told the chamber he had a deep-seated belief that marriage was between a man and woman.

"To decry my views is to seek to discriminate against me," he said.

"I utterly reject the offensive language of some of those who support the bill that people who share my views are discriminatory or homophobic."

Liberal Ian Macdonald told the chamber his best friends were a gay couple, having lived in a loving, caring, committed relationship for more than 35 years.

"In their own eyes, in mine and in the eyes of most Australians, they are no less equal than any other Australians because of the definition of marriage," he said.

Government leader Chris Evans said he supported gay marriage and congratulated the chamber on handling the issue in a mature and sensitive way.

But he slammed Senator Bernardi for denigrating the debate earlier in the week.

Senator Evans said Opposition Leader Tony Abbott had failed a test of leadership by not condemning the comments and appointing the embattled senator as his personal parliamentary secretary in the first place.

Senator Evans said as a happily married man he saw no harm in extending marriage rights to gay couples.

MORE lpm/rl/jlw
TAFE protests target MPs

By BENJAMIN PREISS
HIGHER EDUCATION REPORTER

PROTESTS against TAFE funding cuts will target regional MPs and those in marginal seats to pressure them into opposing the slashing of the sector's budget.

Teachers walked off the job yesterday to hold a protest meeting in Treasury Gardens in opposition to the estimated $290 million cut to TAFEs.

Australian Education Union state president Mary Bluett said protesters would next rally outside Coalition MPs' offices.

"It's time for those backbenchers to stand up for their local communities and support their local TAFE," she said.

Some protesters wore white chefs' hats with stickers that said "Stop the cuts". Students also joined the rally. It came after a prolonged series of protests across the state.

Documents leaked to the media last week revealed plans for campus sales and closures, fee rises and college mergers in response to the funding changes.

The state government has defended TAFE funding, saying it is investing an extra $1 billion over four years in training and areas of skill shortages.

Higher Education and Skills Minister Peter Hall condemned the strike. He said it was unnecessary and caused inconvenience for students.

Yesterday's industrial action was unprotected. The teachers could only take protected action during negotiations over an enterprise bargaining agreement.

William Angliss Institute professional cookery teacher Garry Blackburn said the funding cuts would affect young students beginning their careers and mature workers hoping to train for a new job.

"We've got people that have business degrees, engineering degrees, they're coming and they want to cook for a living," he said.

"It was quite short notice for the unprotected action, but at the end of the day you have to take a stand and be proud of what you do for a living."

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Open the door

The demand for skilled drivers can only increase and that means positions will become available to those who want them, regardless of gender or background. Amanda McKenzie writes

Newspapers and television reports have loomed large with information about skills shortages and the diminishing availability of low-skilled employment opportunities available in Australia as the economy shifts.

To this end, Federal Skills Minister Chris Evans recently launched a new government agency to lift the skill level among Australians. Senator Evans has said that there are enormous opportunities to obtain highly-skilled and well-paid jobs in Australia.

“Low-skilled jobs are disappearing from the economy as a result of technology [and] structural changes,” he says.

One way that is open readily to many people looking for a new skill set is truck driving. This once male-dominated domain is now very much open to women and it welcomes people of all ages.

We are seeing more and more women undertake training to become truck drivers. Driving trucks can provide the flexibility and work conditions many desire. As women adopt their diverse skill sets to their roles, the individuals, employers and industry all benefit.

The truth is, both men and women bring invaluable skills to any industry and transport isn’t any different. In order to change the often-suggested perception that transport and logistics is a bit ‘old school’, all within the industry need to speak out about the exciting and fulfilling opportunities that exist.

Australia’s transport industry is wrongly considered mostly in terms of interstate haulage or increasingly now with drivers in the mining industry, but in reality these occupations represent just the tip of a very broad-based iceberg.

Just as there are a number of licences available — light rigid, medium rigid, heavy rigid, heavy combination and multi-combination — there is a multitude of driving careers to be had.

Driving trucks can be a local career just as much as it can be a long-distance occupation; delivery trucks are used by every industry from courier fleets to supermarkets. So, local truck work is readily available for licenced and skilled drivers.

Alternatively, for those who do want to travel the country, the opportunity is there to drive long-haul trucks or even move from state to state working in one of the many industries that relies on trucks such as mining, forestry or quarrying.

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There is no state in Australia that does not use a significant amount of road transport as part of its infrastructure.

According to Australian national pay data supplied by PayScale, truck drivers receive up to $75,000 per year for full-time employment, but opportunities also exist for part-time work, as well as the other end of the scale with higher paid but more demanding fly-in, fly-out employment.

Obtaining the right licence along with the right skills and training will ensure that a career behind the wheel is on offer.

Driver Education Centre of Australia (DECA) has a complete range of truck licensing and training. For those looking to enter the transport industry, a nationally recognised qualification can be an invaluable starting point.

Providing qualifications will not only teach the driving skills relevant to a particular type of truck, such as a heavy rigid vehicle, but also educate students on the skills and knowledge employers want to see from employees.

Unlike other training courses, nationally recognised qualifications will also equip students with the skills necessary to successfully function in their chosen industry by teaching things such as workplace calculations, accident and emergency procedures and record keeping for example. These skills are highly transferrable and allow people the flexibility to look at exciting opportunities in a wide range of industries and locations.

Even people with zero experience with trucks should be encouraged to participate, and accommodated into truck driving qualifications.

The best training organisations will have trainers that understand how to pass on their experiences to novices in a fun and informative way, utilising new training tools such as driving simulators.

There is no reason to overlook a career as a professional truck driver. Training is readily accessible, the variety of job opportunities provides ample employment options for people with differing employment needs, and multiple funding opportunities exist for those people requiring support to make the transition.

With the total domestic freight requirements set to double over the coming years, transport and logistics is proving to be an industry which we all should be excited about. ■
Senate blocks latest push for same-sex unions

GAY MARRIAGE
By Dan Harrison

Same-sex marriage advocates and Opposition Leader Tony Abbott have rejected a new push for civil unions after the Senate voted down a bill to legalise same-sex marriage yesterday.

The bill, co-sponsored by Labor Senators Trish Crossin, Carol Brown, Louise Pratt and Gavin Marshall, was defeated by 41 votes to 26.

It follows a vote in the House of Representatives on Wednesday on a separate bill sponsored by Labor backbencher Stephen Jones, which was lost by 98 votes to 42.

Chief opposition whip Warren Entsch, a gay rights advocate, is now considering introducing a bill for "civil partnerships," which would provide national legal recognition to both same and opposite-sex couples.

But the proposal was rejected by same-sex marriage campaigners, who said such a move would act as a roadblock to gay marriage.

"Civil unions entrench discrimination rather than removing it, are a step away from marriage equality rather than a step towards it, and are a sop to homophobia rather than a solution to it," Australian Marriage Equality convener Rodney Croome said.

"We acknowledge Mr Entsch’s heart is in the right place but we reject his proposal out of hand," he said.

Mr Entsch’s proposal also received a chilly response from Mr Abbott.

"We really should let the dust settle on these Parliamentary votes before we rush off and do something else," he said yesterday. "The second point I make is that the constitutional prerogatives of the Commonwealth are in the field of marriage and civil unions really ought to be the prerogative of the state parliaments."

Victoria, NSW, Queensland, Tasmania and the ACT already have civil union schemes.

Efforts to legalise gay marriage at the state level received a boost yesterday when Alex Greenwich, who had led the Australian Marriage Equality campaign, announced he would contest the seat of Sydney in the NSW parliament, which will be vacated by Sydney Lord Mayor Clover Moore.

Mr Greenwich said if elected, he intended to take the lead in getting same-sex marriage laws through the state parliament. State MPs have formed a multi-party group to draft laws and Premier Barry O’Farrell will allow coalition MPs a free vote.

Efforts to legalise same-sex marriage are also under way in the ACT, South Australia and Western Australia.

Mr Croome said many same-sex couples and their families would feel "betrayed" by yesterday’s Senate vote, but said change was "inevitable." A same-sex marriage bill sponsored by her remains before the Senate, while a separate bill co-sponsored by Green MP Adam Bandt and independent Andrew Wilkie is still before the House of Representatives.

The nine Green Senators, independent Nick Xenophon and many Labor Senators including Senate leader Chris Evans and Finance Minister Penny Wong voted for the bill.
Whole new class of debt

CATHOLIC schools are hiring debt collectors as growing numbers of parents struggle to pay fees and others simply refuse.

Principals in both the Independent and Catholic sectors are reporting a rise in parents requesting fee help.

The schools, which have more than a fifth of Queensland’s students, say while they will do everything to help struggling parents, there are some who simply won’t pay.

Roger Mendelson, chief executive of debt collection agency Prushka, said it was Catholic schools that had started to more aggressively pursue debts in the past year.

“They are prepared to sue the hard cases but will rarely proceed to an enforcement step which will risk the parent losing their home, such as bankruptcy. “What is new is the trend for Catholic schools, other than the elite ones, to become more aggressive in debt collection.”

It comes after Brisbane Catholic Education’s biggest school, Southern Cross Catholic College (SCCC) at Scarborough, hired a “School Fees Debt Management Officer” for the first time this year.

It followed an increase in SCCC parents falling behind in fee payments, but BCE communications manager John Phelan said the position was not “debt collection per se”.

“It is to work with parents to help them find a way through,” Mr Phelan said. BCE executive director David Hutton said unpaid fees had risen slightly across its schools since the Global Financial Crisis, from 8 per cent in 2009 to 11 per cent last year.

He said while there had been no affect on enrolments “anecdotally we can say we are aware that in a number of low (socio-economic status) areas, principals do report concerns about some families struggling and needing to provide a higher level of fee concessions … But I wouldn’t say it has been overwhelming.”

Mr Hutton said SCCC wasn’t doing anything new by getting someone to financially manage unpaid fees, while debt collectors were only hired in rare circumstances.

“It is rare, but we do use collection agencies where we believe people just simply are not paying, even though they can afford to pay,” he said. “I think it is galling. I mean, if they are turning up in 4WDs and taking overseas holidays and not paying their school fees, you have got a pretty good idea they could actually be paying.”

Independent Schools Queensland executive director David Robertson said anecdotally principals in his sector were also reporting an increasing number of parents asking for fee help.

One private school reporting a jump in unpaid fees is Toowoomba Grammar School.