Mrs RICE (Mount Coot-tha—LNP) (4.19 pm): I rise in support of the TAFE Queensland Bill 2013. On coming to office last year, the Newman government wasted no time fulfilling our election commitment to establish the Skills and Training Taskforce to do a once-in-a-generation review of VET in Queensland. When the minister addressed the task force for the first time, he said very clearly that we do not intend on doing this again. That was a reference to the many other inquiries into the VET sector or TAFE separately and why it is not working as well it could or should. The TAFE Queensland Bill before the House is a direct response to the recommendations of the Skills and Training Taskforce that reported last year. The objectives of the bill are to establish an independent body, TAFE Queensland, to be the public provider of vocational education and training, and to ensure that TAFE Queensland operates in an effective and efficient way and is commercially successful.

The Newman government recognizes the importance of skills and training to the economy. To improve our state’s economic performance we need not only encourage economic growth but also boost productivity. We can only do that if we have the skills on the ground, in the areas we need them and we have enough of those skilled workers to facilitate a productive economy. We can only do that if we have the skills on the ground, in the areas we need them and we have enough of those skilled workers to facilitate a productive economy.

The task force was charged with providing advice to improve the operations and outcomes of Queensland’s VET sector. The performance of the public provider, TAFE, was one of the three terms of reference for the task force. Very quickly it was decided that without a strong public provider we could not have a strong VET system. Importantly, though, it must stand on its own two feet. A new TAFE Queensland was one of four key elements of the task force recommendations. In its report, the task force acknowledged the professionalism of individual TAFE teachers and their commitment to students. The task force also recognised the concerted and continual efforts by all TAFE institutes to achieve efficiencies in an ever tighter fiscal environment. However, at its core the final report of the task force outlined that TAFE is sick and it is sick because as times have changed it has not. It is sick because under those opposite TAFE was ignored. The infrastructure footprint and industrial arrangements for TAFE were established in the 1970s and reflect the role and purpose of TAFE then. They are antiquated, they are outdated and they need to be modernised if TAFE is to survive.

What we need to do is make sure our campuses are full and thriving. No business can survive with utilisation rates below 50 per cent. Around Queensland there are sites with barely any activity. There are sites that are simply not viable. A classic example is the South Bank Institute of Technology, just across the river from where we are today. We have a beautiful facility at South Bank. It is one of the very best VET facilities in the nation. It is modern, close to central transport nodes and the city itself. It is used 51 per cent of the time. Between 6 pm and 9 pm, the traditional night-time class times, it is used five per cent of the time. Across the state, the utilization rate is 40 per cent. When the minister and I have visited TAFE campuses across the state, the common message from the TAFEs themselves is that they want to be freed from the shackles that impact on their goal, that is, the delivery of quality training to students across this state. One of those shackles is certainly the continued management and maintenance of campuses that are no longer in use, are used by only a few and, more importantly, are no longer fit for purpose. Another issue standing in the way of
increasing utilization is an industrial instrument for TAFE teachers written in the 1970s. In all, the task force suggests the current industrial arrangements have a negative impact on productivity of 30 per cent and I note that negotiations have begun in relation to a new enterprise bargaining agreement.

The Queensland government is committed to growing a four-pillar economy focusing on resources, construction, agriculture and tourism, as well as reducing unemployment in Queensland to four per cent over the next six years. Strengthening the state’s VET sector is a key part of delivering on those commitments. The ongoing increase in enrolments to private colleges, coupled with a move to a fully contestable market, means the landscape across Queensland VET will be at a competitive high. Defining the future role of the public provider in Queensland is an important element of the government’s commitment to strengthening the sector. As such, this bill fulfills the key aim of separating the purchaser and provider, which will enable TAFE to be freed from many of the departmental shackles it has also had to deal with in recent years. This bill establishes TAFE Queensland as a statutory authority, a stand-alone entity where its budget and revenues, personnel and physical assets, new business practices and flexibilities can be free to deliver on the quite different requirements of the training market to those of the schooling sector.

As I mentioned earlier, the ongoing increase in enrolments to private training providers, coupled with a move to a fully contestable market, means the landscape across Queensland VET will be at a competitive high. On this point, it is important to note that it was the federal Labor government that proposed to the states and territories the new National Partnership Agreement on Skills Reform at the beginning of 2012. It is this national partnership agreement that requires a national shift towards a demand driven framework for skills and training that, in turn, will lead to a more contestable training market. In moving to a more contestable VET market, the national partnership agreement focuses on the need for structural reform of the VET sector, of which TAFE is a significant component. For this reason, support for the public providers in the transition to a more competitive training system is specified under the agreement. Queensland has agreed and signed up to this national partnership agreement and the bill before the House is a key component in meeting Queensland’s requirements under the national partnership agreement to support the public provider in its transition to a more competitive training market. On this point I also note that, while the federal Labor government is right behind these reforms, the fact that they continue to play political games or the three different federal ministers we have had in this area over the past 12 months continue to play political games with Queensland’s future by not signing Queensland’s implementation plan associated with the NPA is utterly disgraceful. Unlike the federal Labor government, the Newman government takes its responsibilities seriously and we remain committed to doing what we signed up to. Regardless of Labor’s games, the future of education and training in Queensland and the future of TAFE is too important not to continue with these reforms.

The Skills and Training Taskforce was clear: if these systematic issues are not addressed, the state will not be able to deliver the increases in participation required by industry to grow employment, businesses, improved productivity and prosperity for all Queenslanders. The government intends to deliver an industry led, demand driven skills and training sector that can boast a strong and thriving TAFE. I am sure all parties agree that a renewed emphasis is needed for training to help shape a quality workforce that is ready to sustain a vibrant Queensland economy into the future. To that end, I commend the bill to the House.