

Lights out as Te Pūkenga races its way toward extinction

Mike Houlahan | 11 October 2025 | Otago Daily Times

As the calendar moves into mid-October, more than a few people are ticking off the days until January 1.

One person in particular with an eye on New Year's Day is Southland Invercargill MP Penny Simmonds, for it is on that day that her bete noire, Te Pūkenga, is set to be abolished and autonomy restored to most of the country's polytechnics.

However, time is also ticking fast on the number of days left in the parliamentary year, and the Education and Training (Vocational Education and Training System) Amendment Bill — the vehicle for this change of gear — remains on the legislative grid.

That all changed this week though, as Ms Simmonds took the Bill for a warm-up lap on Tuesday, when it progressed through second reading.

It will be lights out next Tuesday when the Bill is likely to commence its committee stage.

"This includes ensuring representation of employers and employee perspectives, and preventing people with ownership or governance interests in providers from sitting on an industry skills board."

Green Dunedin list MP Francisco Hernandez has been at the forefront of opposition to the dismantling of Te Pūkenga, showing off some excellent forensic skills in the use of written Parliamentary Questions and the Official Information Act.

"I want to talk about what we do find disappointing about this Bill and why we do regard it as a missed opportunity," he said.

"One of the things that this Bill has failed to do is it has failed to guarantee any kind of staff or student representation on the governing councils of the newly established institutes of technology and polytechnic (ITP) councils. The second thing we're quite disappointed by is that during the select committee process, what were already weak provisions for Māori representation in the Bill were stripped even further during the select committee stage.

"The third reason — and, I guess, the most important reason — why we're disappointed with it is that it doesn't actually do anything to enhance sector viability."

Hernandez cited the Treasury analysis of the Bill, which he said could result in polytechnics suffering from financial results that were the same, if not worse, than before.

"It's just all pain and no gain," he anguished.

"There were 855 job losses last year and 1000 are expected in this year. Contrary to the Minister for Vocational Education's rhetoric about how they're overstaffed, for a sector that had only about 8000 staff, losing about one-seventh of the staff is absolutely devastating to the capacity of these regions."

Speaking for one of those regions, Dunedin Labour MP Rachel Brooking was up soon after, and she was not holding back either.

"It seems that this Government is down on Dunedin, it is down on jobs, and we've had reports in the *Otago Daily Times* that the polytech might have to decrease their land area by 60%. This is a shameful Bill and it's terrible for Dunedin," she thundered.

Brooking was a lowly backbencher when Te Pūkenga was brought into being by the previous government but, she clearly remembered that the Otago Polytechnic was not in the financial strife that many others were at the time, and nor was the Southern Institute of Technology, formerly managed by Simmonds.

"This is very interesting that you would put someone who has such strong desires to break up polytechs and to bring back SIT at any cost that it is going to be difficult for that minister to look at the evidence and make good decisions. I say that because I think there have been some very bad decisions made," Brooking said.

"Somehow or other, SIT is going to stand on its own, yet Otago is not. That is very mysterious when you look at the various documents . . . I ask you, for Otago Polytechnic, how is it possibly about local control when it is not that anchor polytech? That anchor polytech is the Open Polytechnic."

That is something which Brooking will, no doubt, explore in depth next week.

This may well be a tortuous process: both the Greens and Labour have profound issues with the disassembling of the law change which they built, and the government has taken the precaution of extending Tuesday's sitting into Wednesday morning for government business.

Simmonds began by thanking the education and workforce committee for its careful consideration of the Bill over the past four months, partly noting that it received 210 written submissions on the Bill, "a relatively modest number in comparison to when Te Pūkenga was set up — I believe, from memory, there were about 2000 submissions back then."

Ms Simmonds' grievance has some validity; having campaigned to reverse a law change which polytechnics and many industry bodies were vehemently opposed to, she might be forgiven for expecting to receive a little bit more support from those stakeholders now that she is attempting to put things back the way they were.

That said, the Bill does not entirely bring back a pre-Te Pūkenga nirvana.

For a start the organisation gets renamed the New Zealand Institute of Skills and Technology and hangs around for a year on death row as a transitional organisation.

Not does it give all polytechnics back their individual status: some, like Otago, are moving into a halfway house halfway down Te Pūkenga road to be part of a federation of institutions deemed not yet ready to fend for themselves in the brave new vocational education world.

"There is going to be a transition period for work-based training for up to two years, whereby the management and arrangement of work-based training and programmes will move from Te Pūkenga to industry skills boards," Simmonds said.

"This is a temporary transitional measure that will allow time for new work-based training programmes to be developed at private training establishments, polytechnics, and wānanga,

and it will provide for continuity for those learners who were enrolled prior to commencement of the Bill."

Those boards would be tasked with meeting industry needs, a key concern for the businesses expected to hire the graduates, Simmonds said.

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