

Regions tomorrow's tertiary territory

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Local governments, chambers of commerce and employers are throwing their weight behind moves to revitalise regional economies and create jobs by boosting tertiary education options.

Plans range from expanding courses offered by existing TAFEs and universities to proposals for new campuses and – ambitiously – the creation of entirely new higher education providers.

Much of the impetus comes as a result of government targets to increase participation in higher education nationally, with hundreds of millions of dollars up for grabs to make the targets a reality.

Independent MP Robert Oakeshott's Lyne electorate has already been promised \$20 million in seed funding for new higher education facilities on the mid north coast of NSW. It was earmarked as part of a post-election commitment by Prime Minister Julia Gillard to spend up to \$500 million exclusively on regional education.

Regional authorities in other states are also eyeing higher education as a panacea for skills shortages, struggling economies and demographic woes associated with an exodus of young people.

A bid to establish a satellite campus of the University of Canberra in Cooma, south-eastern NSW, has major buy-in from the local community, including the region's biggest employer, the Snowy Hydro Corporation.

In the Capes region of Western Australia, meanwhile, a consortium of councils and the chamber of commerce are debating the launch of an entirely new higher education provider. State MP Nola Marino will chair a forum in February to decide a way forward.

Keen to expand its reach and increase its student population, the University of Canberra is considering both Cooma and Goulburn as sites for satellite campuses. "The moment of regional education is coming," vice-chancellor Stephen Parker says. "If Australia's population is to grow, it has to happen through its regions."

As well as the \$500 million regional round of the education investment fund is \$400 million to help universities make the transition to a demand-driven system of student places in 2012.

Canberra has applied for a share of the \$400 million structural adjustment fund and short-listed applicants are to be named soon.

Degrees offered at the new campuses would cater to local employment needs such as building and construction management in Cooma and business and heritage in Goulburn. "We've had a phenomenal reception to the idea to establish in Cooma and Goulburn," Professor Parker said.

"Letters of support have flooded in from shire councils, state and federal MPs, chambers of commerce, the NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet."

Snowy Hydro chief executive Terry Charlton is a major advocate of the Cooma campus proposal.

He has committed to establishing a call centre in Cooma for Snowy's electricity retail business if the university campus project goes ahead. He needs young staff to work in the centre. "The towns that do go ahead and are successful, I believe firmly the core of that is tertiary education," he said. "Just look where the universities are located and it brings other things with it."

Indeed, regional centres such as Townsville in north Queensland and Armidale in country NSW have garnered significant economic and social benefits as a result of being "university towns".

But regional education is expensive. Existing universities lose money on their outlying sites and are lobbying the government for extra funding.

In Mr Oakeshott's electorate, the Port Macquarie-Hastings Council has adopted local targets for higher education attainment which mirror the federal government's goal to have 40 per cent of 25-to-34-year-olds with a bachelor's degree or higher by 2025.

The region also has a \$150,000 grant from the federal Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations for a study on how to meet the 500 extra enrolments the target requires.

The council's executive officer, Wayne Graham, said education and employment were crucial to the region's future.

"For us as a council there could be no greater social and economic turnaround than having more higher education skills delivered locally," he said.

Like most regional areas, the mid-north coast struggles to retain young people.

"We have very low university attainment rates in that critical 25-to-34-year age bracket and, for us, that's a shrinking demographic," Mr Graham said. "Plugged in the middle of that is the fact we've got critical skills shortages."

Newcastle University offered education and nursing degrees in the area but a wider range of courses was needed, Mr Graham said. Meanwhile the council has secured funding from six universities most popular among locals for an online information portal opening next month.

"The web portal is specifically designed for residents on the mid-north coast to increase their awareness of higher education options and to build aspirations of higher education options."

Western Australia's Capes region comprises the shires of Busselton and Augusta-Margaret River. Busselton Chamber of Commerce chief executive Ray McMillan said youngsters were lost to the cities soon after leaving school.

A higher education provider or offering would give young people the chance to stay at home and could attract students from elsewhere, he said.

The Centre for Wine Excellence, a partnership between universities and the state Education Department, is 50 kilometres distant, as is the Bunbury campus of Edith Cowan University.

"We don't want to compete with those and it would be senseless to do so, but we might be able to provide an alternative which is possibly more science-based," Mr McMillan said.

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