

Universities welcome cash for the regions

16 May 11 by Annette Blackwell | The Campus Review

Overall universities with campuses in rural and regional areas welcomed the budget provisions which they saw as government honouring commitments made in the 2009 budget.

Doubling of regional loading, \$500 million in the next Education Investment Fund (EIF) round and \$20 million for seed funding to set up a multi-partner university campus on the mid-north coast of New South Wales were what regional universities got from this budget.

The loading provides an additional \$109.9 million over four years bringing the funding to \$249.4 million. The government also said it planned to improve the way the regional loading is provided to universities with the funding targeted to the campuses that need the most support.

It would be “provided through a transparent process that responds to student demand”. Overall universities with campuses in rural and regional areas welcomed the budget provisions which they saw as government honouring commitments made in the 2009 budget. It is not until the detail is released around EIF funding that they can calculate real term of some of these commitments.

Vice-chancellor at Southern Cross University, Peter Lee, described the increased loading as recognition of reality that it costs more to provide higher education places at regional campuses.

The increase will result in his university receiving \$3.8 million in regional loading from 2012, up from \$1.3 million in 2011. “This is good news for the higher education sector, and very good news for a university like Southern Cross, with such a strong remit and commitment to our regions.”

Lee and others across the sector welcomed the continuation of the adjustment to indexation.

At La Trobe which has a number of campuses in regional areas, the doubling of loading means an increase from \$1.07m to more than \$3.7m.

There vice-chancellor, Paul Johnson welcomed the news and said the university planned to seek funds from the EIF round to refurbish teaching and research facilities, establish a new indigenous student centre, and collaborative student learning areas at the Bendigo Campus.

University of Southern Queensland vice-chancellor Bill Lovegrove said he was pleased to see the government had “kept faith” by standing by its intention to remove the existing caps on enrolments with effect from 2012.

Lovegrove said USQ had made strong representations around the particular circumstances of regional universities and the additional resources deployed to support our students towards successful outcomes as compared with non-regional universities.

“The government has listened and responded with cash to help us sustain these activities.” Universities like Wollongong and Newcastle are classified as being like Sydney in the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) classification so therefore will not be entitled to regional loading funds for their main campuses but their rural campuses will benefit. Wollongong will be applying for funds from the EIF round.

At UOW vice-chancellor Gerard Sutton said the ABS needed to differentiate between universities like Wollongong and Sydney.

“I think that is evidently inaccurate. It is true that Wollongong is not the same as Broken Hill but it is equally clear we are not the same as Sydney.

At Charles Sturt University vice-chancellor Ian Goulter said CSU had been talking to the Port Macquarie community and the North Coast TAFE over the last 18 months about establishing a campus on the mid-north coast of NSW.

They would be waiting to see what the rules around the \$20 million seed funding.

The Coalition’s regional education spokesperson, Senator Fiona Nash, said the federal budget failed to give regional education the attention it deserved.

She was critical of the lack of detail in the EIF funding

“It lacks detail on its objectives except to say it will be used for infrastructure.

“Keep in mind too that the bearers of this bucket of money - the Independents Tony Windsor and Rob Oakeshott - rejected my move to use the EIF to give regional students fair access to independent youth allowance. The promise of building lecture rooms is all very good, but there’ll be empty seats as so many regional students cannot afford university without independent youth allowance.”

She said halving the discount for tertiary students who pay their HECS upfront was also unfair. “Students shouldn’t be penalised for paying their fees early and it’s another cost burden when they’re struggling to make ends meet especially those who have to relocate.”

Nash said it was also disappointing that funding for trade training centres was being deferred until 2015/16 and 2016/17 saving the government \$102.8 million.

“After three and a half years only 70 trades training centres are operational out of the promised 2,650, and now a freeze will mean further delays. This freeze will impact the national trade cadetship program, which is dependent on students having access to trades training centres.”