

Pathways to Technological Innovation

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to this inquiry.

Throughout its period in office, the Australian Government has consistently expressed its commitment to building strong and prosperous regions with the capacity to secure their own long term economic future.

Recognising that education is a major priority, the Government has created new university places for allocation to regional areas and has implemented the Regional Loading measure, which recognises the higher costs faced at regional campuses as a result of factors such as location, size and history.

In this submission, I would like to briefly outline an example of successful collaboration in creating pathways to technological innovation, not just between a university and its region, but also with the active support of local, State and Commonwealth Governments.

In no way can this be seen as double or even triple dipping. Each level of government brings a unique perspective, expertise (including that of departmental officers) and funding opportunities that are essential for a project of this magnitude. All three tiers of government share a commitment to strong regions and the importance of developing knowledge based industries where a foundation already exists in which they can flourish.

Sippy Downs as a 'knowledge hub' for the Sunshine Coast

In the recent draft South East Queensland Regional Plan, Sippy Downs (where the University is headquartered) is identified as a Knowledge Hub, with the expectation that it will evolve into a Major or Principal Activity Centre by 2026.

According to the Plan:

These Centres provide the focus for major emerging communities, comprising the primary focus of regionally significant urban growth. They are planned to evolve to provide key sub regional or district concentrations of administrative, business, retail, cultural and entertainment activity. They are also the preferred locations for major health, education and public transport services. (Qld Govt 2004, 37)

The Sippy Downs Development Control Plan and Urban Design Master Plan envisage Sippy Downs as an integrated knowledge community, and a regional hub for the knowledge based economy on the Sunshine Coast. To capture the essence of this vision, the parties characterise developments in and around Sippy Downs as a 'Knowledge Precinct'.

The Knowledge Precinct therefore comprises both physical developments (eg the Sippy Downs Township, a Technology Park, etc), and knowledge based developments.

One of the central elements of the Precinct is the Technology Park project, which was conceived with three implementation phases:

1. The Innovation Centre: A small business incubator for high tech start ups located at the entrance to the University
2. The Accelerator: A next stage development designed to accommodate graduates of the incubator program, compatible high tech businesses and service firms and
3. The Technology Park itself.

Phase 1 of the project – the Innovation Centre – was launched in January 2002, and was recognised in the following year as 'Australia's Regional Incubator of the Year' by AusIndustry and the Australian and New Zealand Association of Business Incubators (ANZABI).

Supported by all three tiers of government and by the business community of the Sunshine Coast (and, increasingly, Brisbane) the Innovation Centre has attracted and selected twelve high potential companies (from over 1500 inquiries and applications) across a range of industry sectors, including software development, electronics, multimedia and video production, technical documentation, and nutraceuticals. The businesses currently based at the incubator employ around 60 people, with 45 in full time jobs.

Already, the incubator is ahead of schedule to fill its remaining space, and it is anticipated that the Centre will be at full capacity before the end of this year.

This rapid growth has meant that planning for Phase 2 – the Accelerator – has had to be brought forward.

The Accelerator will support businesses through their early stages of growth and development and, with a flow through of growing businesses, it is estimated that at least 500 jobs will be created in its first 10 years of operation.

Importantly, it will allow for high growth, high tech businesses to be nurtured and retained within the region, providing next stage space for graduates of the Innovation Centre's incubation program, and allowing for compatible high tech businesses and service firms to collocate.

A business case has already been developed for the Accelerator, which will be built on University land, in close proximity to both the Sippy Downs Township and the University.

The final phase in the Technology Park Project – the development of the Park itself – was given a major boost when, in 2004, a parcel of land was identified and earmarked by the Queensland Government to provide the initial footprint for the Park.

The Park will provide a pathway through which graduating and high growth companies from the Innovation Centre and the Accelerator can be retained within the region. It will also focus on attracting complementary established companies, as well as service providers.

The aim of this three phase project can be expressed in three words – jobs, jobs, jobs! More specifically, it seeks to catalyse the generation of high value, knowledge based jobs and sustainable economic development on the Sunshine Coast.

Activity surrounding the development of the Sippy Downs Township has also gathered momentum over the past year. Ownership of privately held land surrounding the site has consolidated, and ongoing and fruitful discussions are continuing with a view to retaining the conceptualisation of the township as one complementary to the knowledge based developments taking place all around it.

As one might expect, the University has taken a strong role in bringing together the parties – Maroochy Shire Council, various Queensland Government Departments, private developers and other community groups – not only to address planning issues, but also to ensure that essential infrastructure (eg transport, ICT) is in place to best serve the needs of those living and working in the Knowledge Precinct.

But in order to have sustainable knowledge based industries and the communities that grow and prosper around them, you need to have a 'pool' of entrepreneurs with the skills and enthusiasm necessary to grow a successful business.

The University has recognised this by supporting and encouraging staff and students to participate in the business incubator program, and through the introduction of a significant curriculum initiative – the Core Course 'Innovation, Creativity and Entrepreneurship (ICE)'.

USC offers two interdisciplinary Core Courses (ie subjects) that are compulsory for students enrolled in an undergraduate program.

The Core Courses are 'Communication and Thought' and 'Innovation, Creativity and Entrepreneurship (ICE)'.

The Core Courses provide:

- a firm grounding in inquiry-based learning
- an opportunity to enhance the ability to communicate ideas and information
- guidance in developing interdisciplinary contexts of specific topics and subjects
- an environment which fosters the consideration of social impacts
- a stimulating learning environment encouraging intellectual growth and curiosity

and aim to:

- be a positive and constructive introduction to the university experience
- provide effective progression into other courses in all faculties
- encourage students to explore innovative and creative uses of technology
- contribute to the development of graduates who are good communicators

The Core Course 'Innovation, Creativity and Entrepreneurship', developed in conjunction with the Innovation Centre, introduces students to the processes used in creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship, as well as exposing them to successful entrepreneurs and innovators.

In response to positive feedback on the ICE course, schools within the region have taken up the challenge, and are working with the University to develop curriculum elements on entrepreneurship.

Conclusion

The Sunshine Coast's economy has been characterised by:

- A declining agricultural sector (3.7% of gross regional product compared to 4.6% State average)
- A low manufacturing base (8.8% of gross regional product compared to 11.4% state average)
- A high service industry sector (eg retail and hospitality employ over 17% of the workforce)
- A heavy reliance on the construction sector (10% of gross regional product compared to 6.8% for the State)
- The dominance of the tourism industry (as evidence by high employment in the café/accommodation and restaurant areas)

- A higher than average unemployment level (presently 8.6% compared to 6.2% for the State and 5.8% nationally) and
- A higher proportion of small and micro businesses (with 75% of businesses having less than five employees and 90% having less than 10).

This paints a picture of a region that has, in the past, been dependent on industries, which are both seasonal, and which tend to generate mostly casual and part time work.

In order to overcome this dependence and thereby ensure the ongoing economic viability of the region, high level and active partnerships between public and private sector stakeholders have been and continue to be entered into, to facilitate a shift towards a knowledge based economy. The Sippy Downs Knowledge Precinct and initiatives such as the ICE course provide potent examples of the way in which a regional university, its community and governments at all three levels can take proactive steps to overcome impediments and create a sound economic future in regional Australia.

Bibliography

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