

All jokes aside, money talks for the 'Smart State'

Rachel Nickless

The Queensland government is expected to make major research and development funding announcements in its budget tomorrow, a government source says. The move will continue the state's history of putting its money where its mouth is.

Peter Roberts

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reliant on mining, agriculture and tourism. The strategy values research and development, but also emphasises the need to commercialise or apply these ideas and link industry with universities.

The University of Queensland's Institute for Molecular Bioscience was one of the first major research institutes to benefit from the Smart State vision and the state government has provided funding to the IMB in excess of \$71 million. This includes the state providing \$15 million for IMB's new home in the University of Queensland's state-of-the-art biosciences precinct in 2003, which cost a total of \$105 million.

Among the breakthrough research to flow from the institute is the discovery in March this year of what triggers the beginning of egg and sperm production - something which could help solve Queensland's cane toad conundrum.

IMB's professor, Peter Koopman, described the discovery as textbook science that was likely to lead to improved infertility treatment and cancer therapy in humans and to assist in pest management.

IMB has its own commercialisation company, IMBcom, to manage its intellectual property. The company has already helped to establish 11 companies from IMB research with investments of about \$50 million. It also manages 29 patent families and has gained business support funding from the state and federal governments.

UQ vice-chancellor John Hay believes "the Smart State strategy in relation to the University of Queensland has been spectacularly successful". His university has received the largest

chunk of Smart State funding. A combination of Smart State, private and university funding has breathed life into five major research institutes, he says. UQ's Sustainable Minerals Institute and the IMB are already in operation, while UQ's Queensland Brain Institute, Australian Institute for Bioengineering and Nanotechnology and its Centre for Clinical Research are yet to open in plush new facilities.

But Professor Hay tempers his praise for the state government by pointing out that Queensland universities still face financial burdens. "However good things are, one should not forget payroll tax, and ... Brisbane-based universities have to pay rates to local councils," he says.

According to the latest Department of Education, Science and Training figures, the Queensland government took \$52.65 million from its higher education sector in 2004.

Another cutting edge research centre to benefit from Smart State funding is the Queensland University of Technology's Institute of Health and Biomedical Innovation, which opens for business this week.

The institute will have 400 staff, including researchers from health, engineering and physical, chemical and life sciences coming together to solve important health problems, including those afflicting the elderly, QUT vice-chancellor Peter Coaldrake says.

He argues that as well as the medical and commercial benefits of the research, the institute has already helped Queensland to lure talented researchers from around Australia and overseas.

Smart State funding is all the

Among the new initiatives is a \$140 million building fund to be spread over four years.

When the Queensland government launched its Smart State strategy in 1998, many viewed it as more spin than substance and the brand quickly became the butt of Queensland jokes. Last year the

media gleefully seized upon revelations that Queenslanders were six times more likely to choose "Sunshine State" licence plates than the "Smart State" plates Premier Peter Beattie launched in 2001.

But eight years after it was launched, Queensland's universities - and the state itself - are reaping

real rewards, while some other states have taken a leaf from Queensland's book.

At its heart, the Smart State strategy is a government commitment to invest in skills and innovation to boost the state's economy, broadening it from one traditionally

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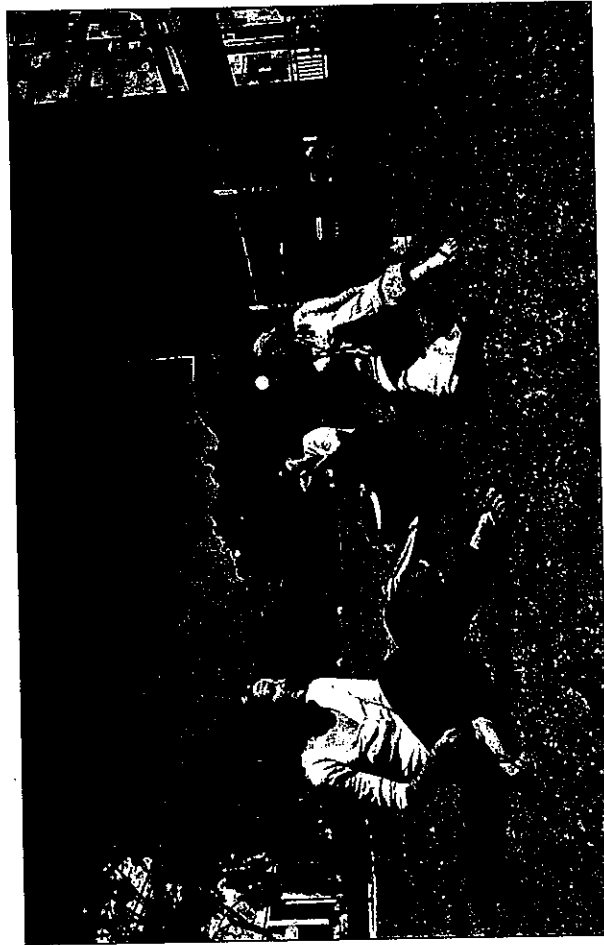


Photo: ROBERT ROUGH

State government funding of universities grew steadily between 1998 and 2004.

more critical to a number of QUT projects because of the dearth of federal government funding, he says. "In terms of capital investment, the commonwealth is for the most part a minor player. Although it has increased this year, it is aimed at universities in regional areas and growth corridors."

The Institute of Health and Biomedical Innovation received no second phase will have a broader

other states have measured themselves."

Despite the traditional orthodoxy that universities were a commonwealth responsibility, Department of Education, Science and Training figures show that state government funding grew steadily between 1998 and 2004, but Victoria and Queensland were the only consistent top performers.

The Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee is also supportive of Queensland's proactive stance and hopes other states will catch on. "Clearly universities are

organisations that contribute to development within regions, states and the nation," AVCC chief executive John Mullarvey says. He sees Queensland and Victoria as making a "fair contribution" to universities teaching and research and development activities.

"The rest of the states lag behind."

"The strategy in relation to the University of Queensland has been spectacularly successful."

scope, tackling the state's future infrastructure challenges. He names research and innovation in engineering, water supply, bio-agriculture, transport, communications and housing as the likely focus of the broader strategy.

Professor Hay describes Queensland's Smart State strategy as "the benchmark against which