

EDUCATION

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Campuses take on a new look

University buildings now feature cutting-edge design, thanks to federal funds, writes **Joanna Mather**.

Universities are undergoing a radical reshape, inside and out, as more than \$4 billion worth of projects funded by the federal government's recession-busting infrastructure investment come to fruition.

A wave of overtly modern, multi-storey teaching and research facilities is transforming the urban landscape, in sharp contrast to the decades-old facilities that blight the nation's university campuses.

Pressure to expand and attract the best quality students has fed the building and redevelopment frenzy, and delivered a windfall for the construction sector and leading architectural firms.

Concept plans for at least a dozen buildings in capital cities around Australia suggest a hunger for cutting-edge design, including sharp angles, glass panels and sustainability features.

On the inside, corridors and classrooms have given way to open-plan areas fully equipped with technology and designed to encourage group work.

"Universities want to have attractive, interesting buildings," says Carey Lyon, director of Melbourne-based architectural firm Lyons. "Universities are in the knowledge industry, the industry of innovative ideas, so it's completely natural that they would want to sponsor, enjoy and appreciate buildings which are in their own way innovative and creative."

The firm won a design contest for La Trobe University's \$94 million Institute for Molecular Science, a six-storey research facility due for completion on the Bundoora campus in 2013.

Lyons also designed the Monash University-CSIRO New Horizons research facility within the research precinct at Clayton in Melbourne.

The nation-building Education Investment Fund has supported 61 projects worth \$4.15 billion across the tertiary sector since the 2008-09 federal budget. Universities have added millions of dollars more from their own budgets.

As at March 31, there was \$5.25 billion left in the fund, and the



Students at University of Technology, Sydney have spaces where improvisation is easy.

Photo: ANNA ZHU

government has just released draft guidelines for a \$500 million regional spending round.

To win funding, projects have to present the opportunity to transform knowledge generation and teaching in higher education or, in more recent rounds, vocational education and training.

Property group Lend Lease has targeted the tertiary education market. It has at least \$412 million worth of projects under way, including the University of Queensland's planned \$120 million Oral Health Centre in Brisbane and a \$122.5 million redevelopment of the Wallace Wurth building at the University of NSW.

Construction company Watpac is also a major player, with projects worth \$201 million under way in Queensland and Victoria.

Lend Lease's managing director in Australia for project management and construction, Murray Coleman, says education clients want multi-functional facilities to accommodate a combination of research, education and administration.

"Along with the area of sustainable design, this is where we

are seeing particular focus on innovation," Coleman says.

Architectural firms Woods Bagot, Lyons and Denton Corker Marshall have grabbed their fair share of the market too, cashing in on demand for avant-garde design.

Along with new construction, architects are being commissioned to revamp inside spaces to attract students and researchers.

"They're looking to attract scientists from around the world. It's a major attraction for them to be able to do their research in state-of-the-art new buildings," Lyon says.

Queensland University of Technology has spent almost \$100 million in the past four years on remodelling existing space to make it more attractive to students.

"There is no more critical priority," vice-chancellor Peter Coaldrake says. "There is so much obsolescence built into university infrastructure, much of which is now 40 or 50 years old."

Among the largest campus transformations under way is a \$1 billion redevelopment of the inner-city campus of University of Technology, Sydney.

Lend Lease and Denton Corker Marshall are involved in the construction of a \$170 million building on the Broadway campus to house the engineering and information and technology faculty.

But attracting most of the attention is the new business school, which will be world-renowned architect Frank Gehry's first Australian project.

Woods Bagot is involved in 17 teaching and research design projects of varying scale across the country. The firm will provide design leadership for the University of Sydney's new business school and has remodelled learning spaces at UTS, Deakin, Macquarie, Swinburne and Griffith.

Woods Bagot principal specialising in education, Georgia Singleton, says students are agile and want relaxed, collaborative study environments. UTS has a "sticky" campus plan aimed at encouraging students to study and socialise on campus. Woods Bagot has installed a "terrain" in a building where furniture can be easily rearranged to accommodate groups of different sizes.