Amid the debates about the carbon tax, one region is taking the lead in preparing for change. Gosia Kaszubska reports
It seemed a perfect opportunity to reskill a workforce and keep a local economy alive. A Welsh steel factory was closing down, just at the time when Professor Peter Fairbrother was in the UK working on transition plans for the European steel industry. But instead, the one-size-fits-all efforts of the local authorities became the perfect example of well-meant ineptitude.

“All the operators were trained up as forklift drivers, so all of a sudden they had this surplus of forklift drivers and only a handful of forklift jobs in the local area,” he recalls. “In the end they were still forced to leave to find work, taking their families with them, resulting in the usual, disastrous knock-on effect on the local economy.”

Since arriving in Australia in 2009, Fairbrother has turned his focus on a region expected to be one of the hardest hit by the difficult transition to a low-carbon economy. Home to the state’s huge brown coal deposits and four power generators, the Latrobe Valley in Victoria’s south-east is one of Australia’s most trade-exposed regions, but talk on the ground is about creating opportunities rather than mourning the past.

Working closely with key stakeholders, Fairbrother and his RMIT colleague Dr Darryn Snell are helping develop transition plans. Fairbrother is a founding member of a recently established Latrobe City Council committee which brings together the council, employers, local unions, the power industry and farming groups.

For Fairbrother, who is Director of the Centre for Sustainable Organisations and Work in RMIT’s College of Business, it’s a chance to inject a robust evidence base into the policy decisions ahead.

The first step for Fairbrother and Snell will be a comprehensive skills profile of the region. Latrobe City has a population of 75,000, largely based in four regional centres. The 2006 census showed just over half the population had no qualifications and 42.4 per cent had left school at year 10 or earlier.

But the skills audit is about more than formal qualifications. “It’s about their embedded skills, the knowledge they’ve gained through their working lives and also outside of the workforce, volunteering for the local footy team or leading a fundraising committee at the primary school,” Fairbrother says.

“That kind of in-depth analysis and research is time-consuming and difficult. But the rewards are rich, because you reveal the real depth of knowledge and experience in the area.”

Once a true picture of the regional skills base is uncovered, analysis of new and emerging economic opportunities follows. Off-farm developments in the local agribusiness industries offer great potential, says Agribusiness Gippsland chair, Alex Arbuthnot AM. “The food production of tomorrow will be as much about processing and marketing as the actual work on the farm,” he says.

“A whole range of services will be needed, from engineering to welding. Finding ways to fill these skills shortage gaps will go a long way towards addressing one of the major challenges that is currently restricting the expansion of the agricultural economy.”

Fairbrother adds: “What we need is training that enables people to work across industries. A welder in the power industry may not have qualifications to do welding in stainless steel, as the dairy industry needs, but it’s not a big task to adapt those skills.”

Having learned the lessons of power industry privatisation in the early 1990s, which caught much of the community by surprise, local unions have been deeply involved from the start of the project.

A number of education forums led by the Gippsland Trades and Labour Council and RMIT have laid a solid foundation for engaging stakeholders by building awareness of the critical need to start planning for change. GTLC secretary John Parker says the focus is on a “just transition”.

“If we can get it right here and plan the way forward by bringing round the table all those affected – the workers, employers, local government, community – we’ll have a model not just for coal mining regions but for any area facing major change,” Parker says.

The Latrobe transition planning model of community education, skills analysis and skills futures is readily adaptable and has already caught the attention of the ACTU, which has begun discussions with Fairbrother on spreading the work to trade-exposed areas around the country.

“The best policy is evidence-based, and it is here that social and economic research can make a particular contribution,” Fairbrother says. “Based on this knowledge, we can identify practical and credible strategies that can smooth the transition to low-carbon but also work to revitalise this regional economy, stimulating job growth and prosperity.”

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