Victorian agriculture courses will continue to be offered despite cuts being made to the TAFE sector across the state, Victorian Farmers Federation president Peter Tuohey said.

The assurance that courses would continue was given at a meeting with the office of the Higher Education and Skills Minister.

The Victorian Farmers Federation has been assured that agricultural courses are here to stay, with many courses in regional areas receiving a five per cent loading.

The VFF has expressed concern that because enrolments have dropped for these courses, cuts to TAFE funding could see agricultural courses disappear, causing a continuing employment problem for the sector.

“It is therefore reassuring that the government intends to provide greater funding for students wishing to undertake study in Certificate 3 and 4 agriculture courses,” Mr Tuohey said.

“Unfortunately funding for the base entry course into agriculture Certificate 2 will see a reduction in funding.”

Mr Tuohey reinforced to government at the meeting the need to have ongoing regional training providers offer agricultural courses, to ensure a skilled workforce for the future.

He also called on all students to consider a career in agriculture, where there are many opportunities for employment and advancement.

The VFF will be monitoring the future funding of TAFEs to ensure agriculture courses continue to be provided at acceptable funding levels.

Mr Tuohey said country TAFEs and private training colleges provided an essential service for regional communities and should be protected.
Calls for new tertiary policy

By KIM BARTLEY

THE STUDENT population of the Dubbo campus of Charles Sturt University (CSU) could grow with the development of government policy for regional universities, suggests Australian Senator Fiona Nash.

She said including a tertiary access allowance in such a policy could help western NSW residents take the higher education leap in Dubbo, and more enrolments at the campus would increase its economic and social contribution to the city, already playing its part in firming up the regional workforce.

The senator contends the mooted policy would seek to address “unique challenges” faced by regional universities that were “vital to Australia’s education fabric and make an enormous contribution to regional Australia, its sustainable future, and therefore the nation”.

“The economic and social contribution of these universities to their region is extensive, but more importantly students who study there are demonstrably far more likely to go on to pursue a career in regional Australia,” Ms Nash said.

“If we agree that regional universities are quite different and that it is in the national interest to secure their future, it follows that we need a distinct regional universities policy from government.”

Ms Nash, the federal opposition’s spokeswoman for regional education, has thrown open the doors to debate, even though she cannot promise that the opposition would form a regional universities policy if elected. CSU Vice-Chancellor Professor Andrew Vann has been among the first to speak up.

“Charles Sturt University supports the comments by Senator Fiona Nash. Regionally-based universities play a critical role in facilitating economic, cultural and social development in their communities,” he said.

Professor Vann said in the USA the term “anchor institution” was used to describe some of its universities.

“We think this captures the contribution very well. There is a distinct difference in communities that have their own university and a very clear return on this investment,” he said.

He said four public dentists and 12 oral therapists had begun working at Orange’s hospital since the CSU dental school was set up in the city.

“This is an example of how investing in regional education builds regional capacity across a diverse range of areas, making these communities attractive places in which to live and work, and addressing social disadvantage,” he said.
Lack of funding on agenda

By Blake Hardy

Higher education advocates will meet at two different Armidale forums today to discuss a lack of federal government funding at regional universities.

It comes as a new report by research firm Ernst and Young reveals university student places, on average, are being funded at a higher rate because of federal government reforms.

While the report, Independent Analysis of Higher Education Funding Approach, indicates university student places will almost be $2000 higher in 2013, attendees at today’s forum are likely to contest ongoing underfunding at universities has resulted in other issues and the money should be funnelled there instead.

The forums are being hosted by the National Tertiary Education Union.

NTEU national president Jeannie Rea made no indication there were funding issues with the student places at universities, but rather a shortfall which has left classrooms overcrowded, staff overworked and infrastructure declining.

She said there were also problems with higher levels of casualisation and an unsustainable dependence on international fee income from international students, who pay thousands to study in Australia.

Ms Rea said there was no excuse not to invest more in universities because of Australia’s prosperous economy.

University of New England NTEU branch president Tim Battin said the continued stress of the sector was being felt by the regional universities, which the latest figures have shown generated $4 billion in total income and employed almost 21,000 full-time equivalent workers.

Today’s forums will be held at the Armidale Ex-Services Club in a 2pm open session and a Q&A-style session at 4pm.
Our top chippie

SOME of Australia's best carpenters have used National Carpenters' Day to battle it out for the title of the nation's carpenter and apprentice carpenter of the year.

The Minister for Skills, Senator Chris Evans, said the event at Melbourne's Federation Square last Friday recognised that a career in a trade can be both personally and financially rewarding.

"Having a trade qualification can open up endless opportunities," Senator Evans said.

"Qualified tradesmen are in high demand by employers, and their skills are the key to Australia's future growth."

Peter Bazzan, 42, from Gympie was named National Carpenter of the Year. Twenty seven year old Paul Tran, a former police officer from Melbourne, was named National Apprentice Carpenter of the Year.