

Opinion: Deakin Uni can afford to stay

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Education campaigner Toni Jenkins, CEO of the South West Local Learning and Employment Network. File image.

OPINION

With Deakin University still to decide its long-term future in Warrnambool, TONI JENKINS* asks whether its priority should be making a profit, or serving the people:

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;"]D[/dropcap]uring the recent Federal election I watched many political interviews and began to wonder if I lived on a different planet to the politicians.

In particular, I was and still am most concerned about the

state of education in Australia.



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According to the OECD, we are slipping globally from a well-regarded, high-ranking country to a very mediocre, middle-ranking country with falling results in literacy, numeracy and the sciences.

By the end of the election – after the results rolled in – I was left with the question I started with. It's a vexing question and one that I know I don't ask alone: **is education a service, or are our educational institutes corporate profit making entities?**



Deakin University Vice Chancellor Jane Den Hollander. Image: Deakin University.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;"]
M[/dropcap] work for the past 13 years has been focused on improving education outcomes for the young people of our region.

It is thankless and goes largely unnoticed as we work behind the scenes brokering changes, developing projects, highlighting trends and in many cases, cajoling other service providers to change what they do to better address the needs of young people.

There are very few wins in this work, so when we recently scrambled to develop a partnership to keep Deakin as the university provider in Warrnambool, I couldn't believe the audacity or the attitude of Deakin Vice Chancellor Jane Den Hollander telling our community that we 'had no appetite for higher degrees'.

What rubbish.

To top it off, we had a look at Deakin's balance sheet and there it was, with millions upon millions of dollars derived from providing education services at a handsome profit. Putting it nicely, they're rolling in it.

Our community, so it seems, is no longer a community which 'suits the Deakin business model'.

No, they can't make enough profit down this way: in fact we cost the corporation money. Imagine that..... an education service costing money!!! WOW!



While the Deakin Warrnambool campus is struggling, the university overall is making significant profits. Image: Deakin University.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;"]I[/dropcap]n 2014, the Victorian Auditor General produced a report about the Department of Education's ability to meet the needs of rural and regional Victorians.

It cited many instances where the department had failed to understand and respond correctly to the needs of rural and regional Victorians. It went further still, to say that policy needed to be developed that reflected the *real* needs of rural and regional communities. Spot on!

They've just discovered what we have known for a very long time: the proliferation of policy, structural adjustment initiatives and bureaucratic edicts that purport to support education in our communities but in fact do more damage than good is staggering.

Even good policy, by the time it trickles down to the local level, has little chance of being implemented before it is changed OR altered along the way to suit the bureaucracy of the day.

So how about we simplify things here and now? How about we draw a line in the sand?

Here's the deal: we get State and Federal Departments of Education to agree to a few basic rules:

1. Offer and provide the same level of education service to ALL young people regardless of postcode;
2. Give ALL young people the opportunity to access education across the breadth of provision in a mode that suits their needs;
3. Make sure that education is affordable to everyone;
4. Provide value for money for the tax payer by ensuring that education services paid for by the government are spent on education services and not accumulated like a corporation. Caps on equity and assets, over the cap is reinvested into EDUCATION SERVICES;
5. Make sure that NO SCHOOL is operating in deficit and stop punishing them for having too many senior teachers on their payrolls – a ridiculous imposition. Either give them real autonomy and stop regulating every breath they take OR go back to the State run system that didn't burden the local balance sheets of these individual schools.

Then Deakin University, or any other University who cares to act with humanity, can put education provision above profit.

They can develop and thrive in the south west, leveraging off a community that highly values 'learning for life' and its young people with an economy that feeds the nation a good portion of its protein, leads the way in renewable energy, and promises to thrive in a future where water is scarce and land, a non-renewable commodity.

Just imagine all the schools developing programs and services out of educational need rather than the need to balance the

books.

How about a systemic approach, making sure that every young person, at every step along the way is supported as needed?

To quote John Lennon, yes, I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one. In fact Finland, Norway and Sweden are living the dream by providing **free education to every citizen** from pre-school to higher education.

In the words of scientist Karl Kruszelnicki, "education is not an intolerable burden upon a society, but rather an investment in the future".

[box]**Toni Jenkins cares deeply about country students having the same opportunities in education as city students. As CEO of the South West Local Learning and Employment Network, Toni has campaigned on this [critical issue for many years](#). You can visit [the SWLLEN website here](#).** [/box]



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