
Opinion: Deakin a casualty of poor leadership

Description



While Deakin has a presence in the Warrnambool CBD, the city has not fully capitalised on the potential of becoming a university town. Image: Deakin University.

OPINION

If Warrnambool wants Deakin to stay, it needs visionary and strong leaders prepared to make it a true university town, argues a former State MP for the south-west, ADAM KEMPTON

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[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;"] I[/dropcap]t is disappointing that the local leadership are confusing the need for improving educational opportunities with the need to preserve Deakin, Warrnambool campus. These are separate issues.

Clearly educational opportunities need to be improved for all students irrespective of location, economic background, or social circumstances, however that is quite separate from saving Deakin, Warrnambool. The former issue is of great concern to the broader Australian community and the latter is, of course, more parochially of concern to south-west Victoria.



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To intermingle all these issues is to confuse the situation and distract from achieving outcomes. The debate about the future of Deakin has been far too focused on governance and procedure and not enough on outcomes.

Deakin, Warrnambool grew out of the Warrnambool Institute of Advanced Education, which was elevated to university status. Some question whether these reforms were appropriate. It has since become an important educational, cultural and economic provider in this area.

The significance of each of these components is not to be understated or underestimated. The whole community has benefitted. It has enhanced significantly the local area and contributed much to uplift our community. **The question remains whether this has ever been sufficiently capitalised upon.**



The future of the Warrnambool campus should not just be about serving local students, but students from everywhere. Image: Deakin University.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;"] S[/dropcap]adly, Australia has lagged behind the British and American traditions of encouraging students to study at tertiary institutions away from where they live. We have no tradition of university towns and certainly this has not been viewed as a priority in Warrnambool.

It appears that once established, little has been done to rigorously promote the relationship between Deakin and the city of Warrnambool and Western Victoria. It has been an approach of set and forget: entirely foolhardy.

In recent times there has been a real attitude of “Deakin is here and therefore it will continue along”.

There was no view that the City of Warrnambool had to continuously develop a dynamic and changing relationship with Deakin to assist Deakin and ensure that it prospered in a changing environment from which the city and the community would benefit.

A progressive view would be to enhance Deakin such that it would maximise its attractiveness to *non* western-Victorian students, interstate students and international students. Courses need to be targeted to service areas not covered otherwise at any other universities.

Unfortunately there is a certain local complacency, where students attend Warrnambool schools, and rather than attend tertiary institutions appropriate to their attainment levels, go to the local Deakin campus and then remain in Warrnambool for careers.

This does not optimise the situation for all and has become a default position. It has also helped deflect from need to address education disadvantage issues.

Deakin Warrnambool does not exist for Warrnambool: it is a tertiary institution that is part of the national, if not international tertiary sector and needs to be sustainable on that basis. Anything less is not sustainable and is short-sighted and foolhardy.

It is further confusing to talk about profit motive and education.

Tertiary institutions are not charities. They need to be sustainable; they need to attract students; they need to offer skills, training and the experiences that students want. They must recognise a clear demand and act to meet it. Some seem to suggest Deakin should remain in Warrnambool with diminishing student numbers – clearly ridiculous.



Federal MP for Wannon, Dan Tehan, was quoted as saying the uncertain future of Deakin in Warrnambool came as a “complete shock”. Image: Office of Dan Tehan.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;"] A[/dropcap]ll this comes at a time when there are huge shifts in the delivery of learning, largely driven by technology. Many argue there is really no need for bricks and mortar institutions. If there is a need for them – and there needs to be if Deakin Warrnambool is to continue to exist – then they must deliver something that warrants the huge cost of providing them.

It seems there has been a real lack of recognition of this to justify a physical campus in Warrnambool. The advantage of the physical locale of universities is not just what is provided by the university, but relates to the whole living environment around the university.

Government and the community have a responsibility here. It is insufficient for the community not to engage and accommodate and enhance this experience. A real vacuum exists locally in adding to this enhancement.

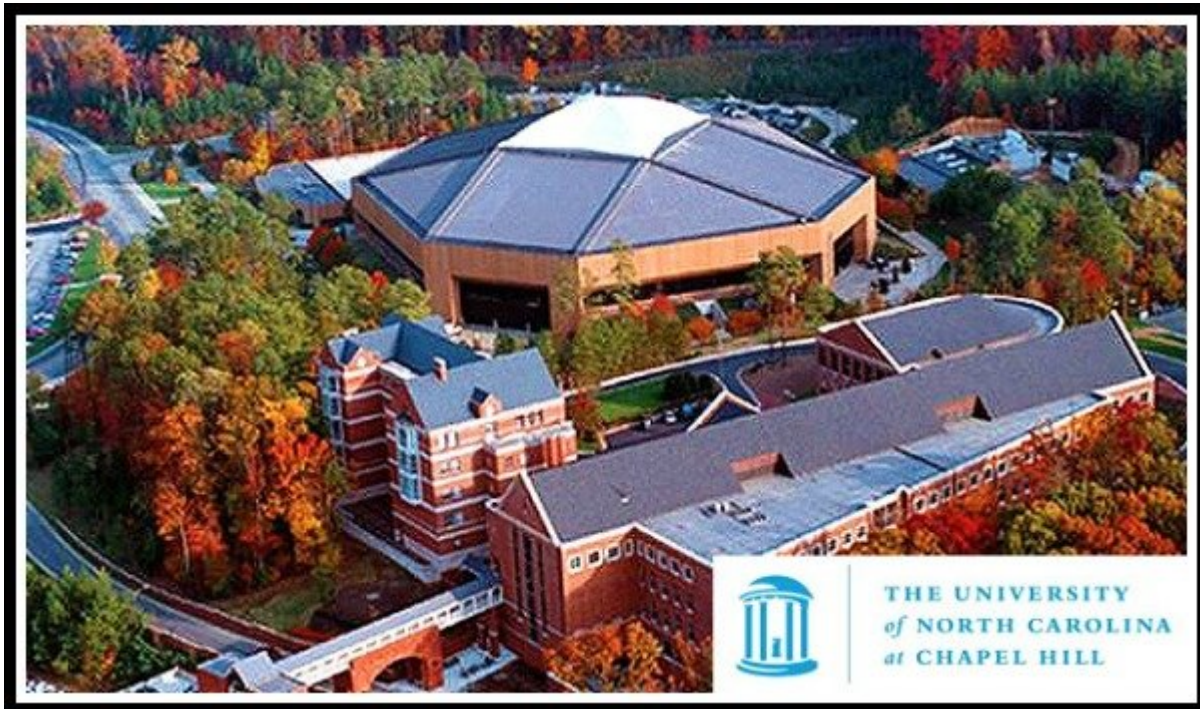
There is a lazy attitude that south-west Victoria always continues on no matter what immediate crisis occurs and that the south-west always bounces back. That view is complacent and inadequate.

All of this can be summed up in a lack of leadership.

The community entrusts its leaders to be close to community and important sectors, to have a clear vision and strategically act to deal with change and act to mitigate harmful impacts of this change.

The leadership is broad: tiers of government, regional representative groups, education interest groups, business groups, to name a few. There is commonality in membership of such groups.

But worse, the potential loss of Deakin Warrnambool campus is the result of lack of effective leadership across this region.



Chapel Hill, North Carolina, is a typical example of a university town in the United States where the university is central to its existence. Image: University of North Carolina.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;"] T[/dropcap]he leadership needs to be ahead of the game. That means having informed and constructive consultation with the appropriate players in the sector. This must be meaningful and regular. The hands-off approach is simply not good enough.

There should be no surprises if the consultation is effective. Lip service consultation is not enough. The consultation needs to be in-confidence and those being consulted need to have confidence in those to which they are talking.

This whole saga reveals a lack of that confidence and is effectively a vote of no confidence.

The Deakin issue also reveals a scary scenario. It is insightful for similar situations and shows that the leadership is only geared to be reactive. That is not leadership.

The lack of leadership and lack of engagement across the local community means that when crises arise, there is little opportunity to address them strategically in advance. This weakness risks the horse having already bolted.

The community needs to learn lessons from what has happened here: the leadership has been vacant from the field. The next Warrnambool City Council election provides some opportunity to fix the leadership vacuum, but it needs not to stop there: all of the mentioned leadership groups need a radical overhaul.

And the whole community needs to be more the demanding of this leadership to avoid this parlous situation continuing.



See an earlier Opinion piece by Toni Jenkins here: [‘Deakin can afford to stay’](#)

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