

Transcript

Impact on regional, rural and remote students with Chris Ronan

SONAL SINGH: I will now invite Chris Ronan, the CEO of the Country University Centre at the National President of the Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia.

There has been mention of regional study hubs. What is your take on the Accord, the recommendations, regarding regional and remote communities?

CHRIS RONAN: Thanks Sonal. Lots to share, but I will try and be succinct and to the point. I think it has been interesting, as some body who sits adjacent to higher education, watching this process unfold. When the interim report came out I raise the question that it might be like the problematic that the sector is looking at itself, to review itself, to open access to people outside the sector.

I think it speaks to a broader challenge about what role tertiary education providers play in society more broadly. I think the final report was encouraging some of that was really addressed and I think that is a nice segue into the regional university study hubs.

Our network is a 18 hubs that work together. I think this is the point that has somewhat been lost in the discourse around the accord in the final report, is that there is much attention and commentary on what these study hubs could or should or might be. From leaders, from University. And people are very much creating their own version in their head, and projecting that out.

That is not necessarily a bad thing. But I think it's challenging to watch it, as people from communities who have spent more than a decade, in some cases, building this concept up.

So I just want to go a bit adjacent, and stretch this concept a little bit. This isn't new. Community led higher education was a response to market value from universities. And that is not blaming any university, nobody had malicious intent. The actual system itself is really hard to operate in really small communities, that's just a fact of the matter.

So, Geraldton originally in Western Australia, and then where the country University Centre started. Community came together, rolled up their sleeve, and try to solve that challenge their cells.--
Themselves.

This was around 2013. The community was driving a solution where anyone from any university could come in and get first face-to-face support, didn't matter what they were studying, didn't matter how it was working.

The interesting thing is that some obtain easily in the higher education sector at the time we were post-Bradley, having all these equity initiatives going on. So that was all of this wonderful work happening in the sector, and then adjacent to the sector there was communities who were, at that time, not really recognised in doing this work.

It has taken us almost a decade to get to this stage. That is a really positive thing. But I think it's sort of speaks to a bigger point that, yes, reform in the sector is really important. But it's a societal thing, and how it fits around the communities in which we operate.

Nailing it on what these regional university study hubs are, they are all community owned, they are all very different. And I think the key is that the sole purpose is about providing access and support for students, about widening participation, and obviously the product diversity around workforce development.

The key in that community won't-- ownership is around being provided agnostic. It is highly problematic, in my view, for providers to be at the core of this. They have the best intentions in the world, but institutional priorities. Regional Australians have seen universities come and go, and not with malicious intent, but just from simply, that is how the structures of higher education have worked.

And in regional Australia, there are raw memories for those things. So I think a student can come and get that face-to-face support, can engage with people from their community, that is governed by their community, and can adapt to what their local communities need.

And this is largely successful. To just take an example to drill on on this, a provider agnostic piece, the community driven concept. The country university centre in Cape York a town of 2500 people in far North Queensland.

As of today there are 56 students from 27 different providers, getting 48 different degrees. That is in a town of 2500 people. The Minister talks about opening the door to opportunity, and to me that is smashing up the whole wall.

I think it is really important, to highlight why that has been successful. It's been successful because the community has wrapped around it, itself.

There is a role obviously for providers, for the sector, to play in that. But I think it has been, I suppose, risk and all the discourse around the accord. Like the future fund, or the other spicy things that are going on. This community led concept that has had quite a long history, is being lifted and



sort of twisted, more sectorised or institutionalised. There are a lot of other things I can speak to, like the National University.

But I think with this audience, these other people who are focused on this equity work. I think take a bit of criticality around what these study hubs can be, I just know that that community driven aspect is the secret sauce.