Old School, New Thinking

With a long history and a vision for the future, Federation University Australia is an example of the importance of regional education institutions.

Federation University Australia, formerly known as the University of Ballarat, is changing the face of regional universities. With a history in regional education dating back to 1870 and to the School of Mines Ballarat, Federation University has the experience and expertise to ensure that it continues to provide quality services to students as the industry changes. Vice-Chancellor David Battersby spoke to The CEO Magazine about how the university has changed since its inception, why regional universities are so essential for Australia, and what the future holds for the education sector.

The CEO Magazine: What was your background prior to becoming Vice-Chancellor of Federation University Australia?

David: I went to university in Australia, completed my undergraduate degrees, and then went to New Zealand to complete my PhD in sociology. The start of my academic career was at about the time I finished my PhD. My first academic appointment was in the late 70s when I worked at two universities in New Zealand during the late 70s and into the 80s. Then I came back to Australia to Charles Sturt University in the mid 80s and spent 19 years there in a variety of positions, before becoming a deputy vice-chancellor at Charles Sturt University. In 2006, I came to the then University of Ballarat as vice-chancellor; and, of course, in 2014, the University of Ballarat became Federation University Australia.

In your 10 years as vice-chancellor, what have been the highlights of your tenure?

I spent most of my academic career in regional universities, both within New Zealand and Australia. So my passion and commitment are about the regions and their regional universities. In terms of the University of Ballarat, and...
more recently Federation University Australia, it’s about having the university flourish as an important lifeline or ‘lifeblood’ of the community and the regions we serve. So I think one of the most satisfying things is to see how intertwined the university has become in terms of the communities it serves, and also within the local industry and organisations, from local government through to the schools, through to health services and so on. It’s been really quite fantastic to witness and just see how involved and intertwined the university is in the community— and, of course, in Ballarat, the headquarters location of the university, to see the growth and development of our technology park, which is a major employer of people in the Ballarat region, has been wonderful.

Over that period, we have made such a huge difference to students whom we call ‘first in family’. Every four in five of our students are the first members of their family to go to university. To see literally thousands of students, most of whom come from the regions we serve, go to university and complete their studies, and to see how that influences their life and their life trajectory, is very rewarding, in relation to that, also just to witness firsthand the commitment and the involvement of our staff with all of the teaching and the research they do. They are very passionate people, and they themselves make a huge difference to the university. Are there specific challenges that regional universities face compared to other universities?

All universities face challenges whether they be funding challenges, or responding to public policy developments, but I think within the regions there are particular challenges. These challenges first relate to the fact that predominantly our students are first in family, the proportion of first-in-family students is very high for us, as they are for most regional universities. The fact that we are getting such high numbers of first-in-family students is an enormous compliment they pay to the university, because it’s a big move for a student from a small regional town or village to complete high school and then to come to university. It is an enormous compliment for those who live in our regions who perhaps did not even finish secondary school but in need are coming back to try university.

The very high proportion of first-in-family students pays us an enormous compliment, but it also means additional awareness for us to make sure at the end of the day that we provide the support and the mentoring for these students to enhance their success at university. The resources for that are invariably generated from within the university, firstly in terms of staff, because we have to have additional staffing to make sure that the students do succeed. Secondly, we have to provide additional resources in the form of student accommodation. We are a major provider of student accommodation which is modestly priced, and that in itself means there is a bit of enhancement for students who come to the university to stay in residence.

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Then there’s a political challenge for us, which is to continue to reinforce the importance of having regional universities in Australia to serve the national interest. For example, Federation University Australia plays a pivotal role in the regions we serve, whether that be in Gippsland or in the Ballarat region or in Western Victoria. Invariably, over time in political spheres, the powers that be lose sight of how important regional universities are to regional economies, to the social and cultural life of communities, to producing graduates who return to their home regions to take up employment. We have to ensure we are reinforcing this idea on a constant basis—regional universities that are vibrant and doing research and teaching are very important to our ongoing national interest.

How would you describe the culture of the university both for students and for staff?

I think each university has its own cultural ethos and prides itself on the way it does things. The Federation University Australia can be described as an agile, responsive, flexible university that’s focused on meeting the needs of our 23,000 students. We provide a personalised learning environment for students, mindful of the fact that of our domestic students, four in every five are first in family. So we give that personalised attention to students. We are able, in terms of the communities we serve, to be agile, responsive, and flexible in relation to meeting industry needs, providing new opportunities for engagement and for our research.

The other defining characteristic of Federation University Australia is that we call ourselves a multi-sector university. We have several hundred high-school students studying at the university, and we offer qualifications from certificate 1 to PhD. We are a major occasional education and training provider as well as providing higher education and research opportunities. For our region in general, we have become very much a one-stop shop for a lot of our community. That versatility we have in terms of offering qualifications across the full array of what’s called the Australian Qualifications Framework is a powerful message to our community and region that we are here to service all of their needs in relation to tertiary education.

How has the university changed over the past two decades?

We are one of the few Australian universities in the past 20 years that’s repositioned itself, restructured ourselves, changed our name, and changed our University Act. That’s all about making sure that we develop into the type of university that meets the expectations of our community. For instance, the name change has enabled us to position ourselves now as not just a local university that serves one region but as one that is increasingly serving a whole set of regions, both within Victoria and in other states and internationally. Our new name and branding enables us to do that with a high degree of comfort.
**“In the last five or six years, we have injected a better part of $150 million into building state-of-the-art facilities.”** - David Battersby

I think the other changes have been in responding proactively to the changing demographic of the typical university student. Ten years ago, our student body was predominately made up of what we call recent school leavers. Increasingly now, however, the majority of our students are non-recent school leavers—those who had a break between their formal schooling before going to university. Currently, in excess of 60 per cent of our commencing students are non-recent school leavers, and we have to cope with that in terms of different levels of support and mentoring.

The third profound area of change is that the infrastructure of the university has changed dramatically in the last four or five years, because we have had the biggest injection of funding for new and refurbished capital development that we have ever had. In the last five or six years, we have injected a better part of $150 million into building state-of-the-art facilities and making sure the environment meets the needs of modern-day university students.

**Why are partnerships with local organisations so important to the university?**

One of the defining characteristics of our university is partnerships. Our partnerships are evident on one end through the technology park, but we touch most industries and most organisations in the communities we serve.

We’re roughly a $300-million enterprise, which makes us a really large employer and large enterprise in terms of goods and services. So those relationships we develop mean that we are required to be a really good community citizen, engaging in all aspects of community and regional life, and also contributing nationally. At the same time, we benefit enormously from the value-adding that comes from those relationships. It’s a reciprocal set of relationships that we have developed in the regions, and I think they are really important in terms of both the present and the future.

Where do you see the tertiary education industry heading in the future, and what role do you see Federation University playing in that?

The future is really quite exciting in terms of what’s happening both nationally and internationally. Australia is becoming very much a service economy, and universities have a role in assisting this development in all sorts of ways. We pride ourselves on the fact that Australian universities are a beacon internationally in relation to attracting international students; they’re a major contributor now to the Australian economy. I think the future is really bright.

In the case of Federation University Australia, it’s about making sure that we continue to remain focused on our core values and assets, which are based around making sure that we produce graduates who are employable, who add significant value not only to the jobs they take up but to their communities, regions, and to this nation. ●

"Our 10-year collaboration with Federation University has strengthened under Professor Battersby’s leadership. Our relocation to Technology Park Central provides state-of-the-art facilities within an innovative campus, supporting our mission to advance the understanding and treatment of cancer through internationally recognised research." - Professor George Kannourakis, Director of Fiona Eliot Cancer Research Institute-Ballarat

**The tragedy of a young life lost has enabled the creation of a research institute hoping to make a breakthrough in cancer treatments.**

When teenager Fiona Eliot lost her battle with cancer in 1991, she couldn’t have imagined the impact her courage would have on the community that mourned her. Fiona held a belief that research must go on, and that a future generation of Australians would benefit from the knowledge gained.

Fiona’s dream of a cure has since become a reality. Today, the Fiona Eliot Cancer Research Institute is still led by that same doctor who cared for Fiona, Professor George Kannourakis. It is making enormous progress in unlocking the riddles of cancer, including a world-first trial of individualised chemotherapy treatments for patients.

With the recent move to new facilities at Federation University Technology Park Central (Ballarat), the institute is already attracting world-renowned researchers and collaborating with the University of Melbourne, Karolinska Institutet in Stockholm, Monash University, and Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York.

The institute is the fruit of the dedication of the institute’s community of donors. It is because of their continuing support that this most critical research into cancer continues.

Ongoing research is needed to move towards prevention and, ultimately, Fiona’s dream of a cure. The institute aims to fund internationally recognised research projects, and its current focus is research into the role of immune cells in various cancers including leukemias, especially the role of MAIT cells.

The chemosenstivity lung cancer project is ongoing and is currently the only randomised trial of this method in the world. This approach may lead to better individualised chemotherapy for patients.

Another part of the research is to look at the biomarkers for ovarian cancer to find ways of screening and therefore diagnosing the illness earlier, and understanding why the immune system becomes deregulated and not able to fight the ovarian cancers.

This will also assist in discovering the molecules that can be used in conjunction with chemotherapy to help eradicate the resistance to drug therapy that ovarian cancer cells build up. ●

This fight is a marathon, not a sprint, and without your support we cannot win. Please visit www.fecri.org.au to join the team to fight cancer.