Education could lead Tasmania’s economic renewal

Tasmania needs to embrace a conversation about education as a key driver of economic revitalisation.

University of Tasmania Vice-Chancellor Professor Peter Rathjen, writing in an opinion piece expected to be published this week, urges a broader view of the potential value of education, beyond that of student outcomes.

“The conversation about education in Tasmania is in reality a conversation about the future of our State and our communities,” Professor Rathjen said.

“Our traditional industries are in decline and/or facing challenges to shift to high value-add production. Tasmania has remarkable economic opportunities but requires time and investment to transition to sectors that can provide highly skilled, well-paid jobs across our communities.

“The importance of research and innovation will be a constant on the State’s path to economic renewal.”

While education could unlock economic, social and cultural revitalisation for the State, current outcomes had a choke hold on the State.

“Youth unemployment in Launceston stands at 18% and at 21% in Burnie. International assessments of maths, science and reading literacies measure our 15 year olds comparable only with the Northern Territory, performing significantly lower than the OECD average,” Professor Rathjen said.

“The lack of completion to year 12 for Tasmanian students is described by the government as a ‘social ill’ – only 14% of boys in parts of rural Tasmania attain a Certificate of Achievement.

“We see a need for two key initiatives:
“We want our generation of young people to grow into skilled and sustainable jobs; the human capital required for economic transition. We believe another 20,000 Tasmanians each year need access to higher education, to bring us to average national levels of participation.

“And we want to continue to bring the University into the heart of our cities where the visibility of students and infrastructure can raise aspiration and challenge culture.

“The result would be economic and social revitalisation associated with large student bodies living, working, playing and mixing in our cities – at Inveresk in Launceston, at West Park in Burnie and throughout the Hobart central business district.

“The ways in which this can be achieved will not be clear until we understand the outcome of national debate and the resources available to us.

“Education-led economic renewal has not been part of the Australian tradition but is well understood elsewhere in the world. It is a goal worth pursuing.”

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