**Flinders University**

Fearless Conversations

Episode 8: Education  
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**SPEAKERS**

Wendy Johnson, Professor Colin Stirling, Karyn Kent, Chris Russell

**Chris Russell** 00:08

Well, hello, and welcome to the eighth in the series fearless conversations, which is a collaboration between the advertiser and Flinders University. This is a series about being brave and our thinking about how we drive South Australia forward in the future and about the challenges that we face to make this great state a success. It's a, there's been a series of fearless discussion panels over a 13 week period. And as I say, this is the eighth in those. We've looked at all sorts of topics, things like the environment, digital health and technology, defence, transport, and infrastructure, and there's more to come. These are all hot topics that are very much the areas that will determine what happens next in South Australia. We've got leaders in each of these sectors have joined us to share their thoughts on what are the opportunities and challenges that we face together as a state, and then individually within their own industries. Today, we're looking at education, which of course is an absolutely crucial sector basically underpins everything else, as well as offering opportunities in its own right. Please, you're welcome to join the conversation, ask questions and make comments, or the Twitter handle. Hashtag fearless conversations. Or you can make comments and ask questions via the advertiser website. Look for it there and put your comment in there. Now thanks for joining us today in fearless conversations. I'm Chris Russell. I'm the education reporter at the advertiser and the Sunday mail. And I'll be facilitating today's discussion. Now before I introduce the panellists. I would like to acknowledge that we are meeting today on the traditional lands of the Kaurna people of the Adelaide plains, and we pay respect to their elders past and present. We recognise and respect their cultural heritage beliefs and relationships with the land, we acknowledge that they are of continuing importance to the Kaurna people living today. And we also extend that respect to other Aboriginal and indigenous language groups and other First Nations peoples. So very exciting panel that we have with us today. On the far side we have Wendy Johnson, who is the principal of Glenunga International High School, who's been there now for some time, but she's had a lot of experience in other schools and across a range of socio economic groupings. In the middle, we have Colin Stirling, who is the vice chancellor of Flinders University, and it comes from a background of being a geneticist. And next to me, we have Karyn Kent, who is the chief executive of Study Adelaide, Study Adelaide is the prime party which promotes international student recruitment, and looks after the students while they hear across the board, universities, other tertiary education institutions and schools. So as I say, please feel free to join in with the hashtag fearless conversations. Now one of the things that one finds in education is there's there's a certain amount of resistance from the public, when we write stories in the advertiser or when the conversation comes up that there is often some sort of criticism about where the students are coming out of schools, fully equipped, are they able to read and write properly or certainly as well as they used to be able to do and students coming out of universities having studied something obscure or degree that such as law where lots and lots of people have come out in in our jobs? So I wanted to just explore that, firstly, with Wendy, in terms of whether there is any validity to those sorts of criticisms and, and where she thinks, where the panellists think that kind of that attitude is coming from.

**Wendy Johnson** 04:03

Thank you, Chris. I think it's one of those urban myths that our young people can't read and write. I think there's some truth in terms of the fact that over the past decade or so we've dropped the ball in terms of primary schools, in terms of how we teach reading and writing and numeracy. But we're certainly currently working intensely on that, because we know if our students can actually read and write successfully by the time they finish year three, that they're going to have a much more successful education. But what we know in terms of reality is their young people are far better equipped than they've ever been. If you think about the fact that an adolescent holds in their hand the smartphone which has all the information that took man to the moon in the first place, and yet the students are able to To manage all of that, the challenge for us really in schools is to teach students how to manage the information flow that they're subjected to all the time. We work obviously, on ensuring that the basic foundations reading, writing and numeracy, which enables students to access learning are in place. But then our focus is very much on developing the whole young person to make sure that they can think critically, that they're innovative, that they're creative, all the sorts of things that our employers tell us they want, and can see in our young people.

**Chris Russell** 05:41

It's what what happens. Australia, Australian students really in comparison to two other students in the OECD seem to be falling behind. So why do you Why do you think that's been happening?

**Wendy Johnson** 05:53

It's a really troublesome comparison, because our cultures are very different. We're often compared, for example, to Finland, which is a very different culture to Australia and to South Australia. So it's comparing apples with oranges, it is important that our young people can read and write there's no question about it. And although there's a great deal of controversy about netplan, we find it really useful in terms of diagnosing what we need to teach in terms of dealing with the gaps in young people's education. I think the challenge for us, Chris, is our publicity, in terms of why do the public think that our young people can't read and write when they actually can in many cases, and where they can't? We're working on that significantly. But why is it that the public don't appreciate the wonderful education that our young people are currently getting? And how skilled and articulate our young people currently are, that they never were two or three decades ago?

**Chris Russell** 07:01

And people coming out of university? Colin, like, I'm sure you've heard that criticism, why am I studying law when there's not going to be a job for me? Well, what was my my child studying law when there's going to be a job for them?

**Professor Colin Stirling** 07:12

So look, I think that I think the the concept of an urban myth, I think, is a is a very real one. You know, I think I went to university in the 1980s. And I remember being told then that things weren't as good as they used to be, you know. So I think that the concept that education is changing, it's a good thing that we change and update the way that we teach and the things that we teach. And then there's this negative, a negative perception can so very easily grew up around it. I mean, in terms of the graduating students for employment, clearly is a very important part of what we endeavour to do. Clearly, we want our graduates to be employable. But we don't necessarily in every instance, in every degree, design the degree and tailor it to a specific job outcome. I mean, clearly, there are some exceptions to that, and the professions and nursing and medicine, you know, those students, they anticipate working in those particular areas, specific skills, very specific skills. But many other elements of the courses that we deliver, are designed to develop the skill sets that then are transferable into different areas. You mentioned law. I, I remember sitting once actually in a Minister's outer office talking to that ministers, advisors, who were raising the precisely the same point universities train too many lawyers, and they can't get jobs in law. And I mentioned that many people with law degrees go on to very exciting roles in other disciplines in other fields. And both these advisors, both of these advisors said, Oh, yes, I've got a lawyer. You know, so that are huge opportunities that are that become available if if we develop those graduates with the right suite of skills. And you know, look, I certainly don't want to blow Flinders University's trumpet, you know, on this occasion, but I can't resist mentioning that. We did come top in the country in the most recent graduate outcomes survey for postgraduate employment outcomes. So we're doing something right. That's what 97% of our post graduates are in are in full time employment.

**Chris Russell** 09:25

That's three years after they, after full time employment full

**Professor Colin Stirling** 09:28

time. That's exactly yeah. So that's, you know, that's clearly something we're very proud of. Have we for every one of them predictive, which job that go into No, because that's not really what education is about education is a preparation for then a lifetime of employment.

**Chris Russell** 09:45

And in terms of evaluating the students as they come through schools, and like applying to universities. The traditional thing has been the the ATAR mark and the quotas for some of the competitive courses and so on, but there seems to be a bit of change. going on, certainly the size board is looking to producing a learner's profile rather than just a, say certificate. So you get a broader picture. And the university seem to be increasingly opening up different pathways, different avenues in which you can get into university. Do you think that's a that's a welcomed trend? Is that a better indication or again, are they better indications of who's going to be successful coming out of school into?

**Wendy Johnson** 10:26

Well, at Glenunga, we've had a learner profile for every one of our students for the last two years. And the important aspect of a learner profile is it enables future employers future universities, to see the whole student not just the academic grades of a student, so they can actually see the 21st century skills, creativity, innovation, collaboration, and they can actually see how the student has developed the skills and to see evidence of the student developing those skills. So with enables a university or a future employer, to make a much better assessment of a student who's going to be really successful in terms of undertaking a university course, which is, after all, education for life, we know that if students only do the academics, they end up often not being as successful in terms of the next step of their education. Whereas we know that if students develop a holistic approach to learning, and they're capable of driving their own learning and taking responsibility for their own learning, they'll be successful at university or employment, and thrive in the rest of their lives. So for us, a learner profile is absolutely essential. We understand that potentially, it means a lot more work for universities, lots more research, resourcing in terms of admission procedures, but we think the SACE board led by Professor Martin Westwell is on the right track, because we think that's how you need to assess 21st century students,

**Chris Russell** 12:00

and how are you tracking? What happens with that you've had there for a couple of years, are you tracking whether people are actually employers universities are actually looking at that and evaluating that, rather than just the HR school?

**Wendy Johnson** 12:11

It's really early days for us. But that's certainly what we're working on, Chris? Yeah.

**Chris Russell** 12:15

And in terms of pathways, yeah. Do you think that a tie is going to be sort of decreasing in importance?

**Professor Colin Stirling** 12:22

I mean, I think the, you know, there is no single assessment that could ever be perfect in terms of predicting an individual's future success. An ATAR is a moment in time, and it's a ranking, you know, it serves a very useful purpose. But, you know, I think no one would argue that it was perfect. And therefore, additional insights and information is immensely valuable, you know, at my own university, around half of our intake in first year, entered directly as graduates of new 12. So they come straight from your 12 into the university, the other half, come maybe two, three, or 20 years later. And they come in with a different set of, of experiences. And we can use their different experiences as part of their entry into the university. So we've got lots of different pathways that enable people to come in and join us. But what we then do is we track, we track those different cohorts that have come in by different different routes. And we make sure that we're getting the entry standard, right, by virtue of the capacity of those students to then be successful and graduate,

**Chris Russell** 13:43

and it's working like the ones like observing as well as anybody else.

**Professor Colin Stirling** 13:46

Absolutely. So we have, we have success rates for alternative pathways that are just as just as successful, sometimes even more so than our base ATAR score.

**Chris Russell** 13:59

Now that's looking ahead to this the future and then the way, you know, people have evaluated, but in the very immediate term, the education sector, has suffered a very severe blow with the COVID travel restrictions. And, you know, the effect that that's had on international students coming in, and so on. So I know Karyn as through study Study Adelaide, you've got like an umbrella view of the situation, sort of what's the latest feeling in terms of the the overall economic impact jobs impact? And, you know, we're where are we at at the moment? Yeah,

**Karyn Kent** 14:34

well, they clearly has been an impact. And I guess the data tells us that, you know, the economic value to the state has declined by about 250 million between 2019 and 2020. So that's that pipeline, I guess, is something we will we will never get back in terms of the students that we

**Chris Russell** 14:52

chose that that's 250 million a year. That was Yeah, it was was about 2 billion. It was

**Karyn Kent** 14:57

about 2 billion. That's right. Yeah, definitely. And we're back 1.8 5 billion at the end of last year, it's probably hard to sort of predict where we will I mean, we are we will expect another decline at some point this year. But there are lots of signals about 2022 and and Australia are reopening again, which are very positive, we will start to see, ideally, some students all going well, and on track some students returning hopefully by the end of this year. Now, the priority for those students will be those that need to complete those placements or complete their qualification they need to do placements or practicals, or an element of their qualification on shore, they will be the priority to come back first, but their very presence here in the city in the state will generate a level of activity and vibrancy because I think that's something that a lot of people comment on that has been missing in the city as well. And, you know, as we start to see, things open up in 2022. If we're on the right track, we'll see some new students starting to return at some point next year.

**Chris Russell** 16:00

Now we were in South Australia, there was a handful of students who went to the Northern Territory, but the South Australia was the first to get state to get approval from the federal government. For a Go ahead. You know, there have been a series events that have been back a year now that we've had, yes, some sort of agreement and even formal agreement more recently, but we still haven't got a set date. And we've also got, Victoria has now got their plans, New South Wales got their plans. So are we at risk of South Australia losing the first mover advantage that we might have had?

**Karyn Kent** 16:33

Look, I think we will be one of the first definitely still one of the first states to start welcoming students back. And I think the priority, as I said earlier, is the individual for assets in particularly for the universities and the schools and the other providers is those helping those students who are partway through their qualification to get back first and foremost. So for the individual, that's that's the imperative is to get those students back for those individuals. And, you know, the signal that it sends to, to new and prospective students is going to be very important. So you know, it's very competitive,

**Chris Russell** 17:09

where the sticking points now because it's, it's a process that's to the side of returning Australians and central children. So it's a, it's not interfering with media, hotels, not interfering with anything else. Right. So So what are the points that haven't been resolved at

**Karyn Kent** 17:28

just a few logistical and matters that the sector is working through, so the sector is now operationalizing, this and working very closely with the government agencies such as SA Health, to to make sure that we're operationalizing this in a very safe manner for both the community and also the students returning so.

**Chris Russell** 17:46

So that would reflect physical changes to students? parafield?

**Karyn Kent** 17:50

Absolutely. So there's got to be some operational infrastructure changes out at Parafield the site that's been selected and approved by se health to to accommodate the students when they return. And that will take you know, a number of weeks to to, to set that up. So we you know, we as I said, the sector is working really closely together, and there's a real momentum and ideally, we do start seeing those students return by the end of the year

**Chris Russell** 18:15

and the cluster, I think, earlier, there was indication that deciding who is going to cover exactly which bit of the cost was was still being negotiated is that is that reached some sort of position where it's clear now who's going to pay well, then

**Karyn Kent** 18:29

the cost do stick with the sector and and they'll there'll be a side discussion at some point that the students will have to contribute some as they are for all return programmes around Australia or, and that will include flights and a contribution to to the quarantine so

**Chris Russell** 18:45

and do you think we're going to get chartered planes? Or are we going to rely on commercial airlines coming in just on the regular flights and having a spare seat not needed by anyone else?

**Karyn Kent** 18:54

Well, I think those discussions are actually underway with the airlines at the moment as to what's going to work best, because as I said, ideally, we bring in, you know, around 200 students at once into to maximise the capacity at parafield, to how we operationalize that with the air capacity that's available is something we're working through.

**Chris Russell** 19:12

So maybe you've charted flights?

**Karyn Kent** 19:14

Possibly, yeah, that's definitely an option. So I bet potentially working with commercial carriers. You know, there's a lot of different ways to do this yet.

**Chris Russell** 19:22

So the Federal Minister expects that there will be 1000s of students coming back by next year. Do you think that's realistic? Are we Colin?

**Professor Colin Stirling** 19:29

So I think one thing I would say is, you know, I do think that we've been it's been an extremely important development in the state that the state prioritise the return of international students and did develop and get get a plan approved. For various reasons, because of outbreaks and further state lock downs and so forth, then it wasn't possible to implement it any earlier. It probably is, you know, hopefully, soon, I guess. But I would also add that we need to remember that that plan was developed, as you mentioned more than a year ago, at a time and and pointing the pandemic where vaccination hadn't begun, where the certainly the Delta variant wasn't around, the situation was very, very different. We're facing ongoing uncertainty. And the plan itself does allow for the return of students, and especially as Karen mentioned, bringing back those students who yet need to complete. But it does have a relatively limited capacity to move students through that facility. And we'll take about a year I think to in the original conception, would take about a year to get three or 4000 students through, we need to return more like 10,000

**Chris Russell** 20:49

sorry, 4000, within a year in a year, right. So and

**Professor Colin Stirling** 20:53

that's because of the original plans are in quarantine. Now we're talking with SA Health around what the quarantine requirements might look like in the future. We also, you know, everyone knows that vaccinations are no more prevalent and much more widespread in the Australian population than was the case a year ago. And we're in a position now where we could bring back double vaccinated students from various countries. And that's a very different proposition. And I think we need to then look at how quickly we can spin up international student returns because this is, as Karen said, this is the biggest international export earner for South Australia. And this, this, therefore, is the biggest financial, if you wanted to, you know, reboot the SA economy, you pick the biggest export earner that the state has. And, you know, I know that a lot of people listen to this might say, well, there's the Vice Chancellor banging on about how the university needs fee paying students. Well, actually, those students all spend far more money outside the university and the local economy than they spend inside the university and local businesses, landlords and so forth. You know, the the cafes, the coffee shops, the restaurants, they're all missing this vibrancy that we had in Adelaide just two years ago. They all they know how much they want it back.

**Chris Russell** 22:24

Again, it's one of those areas where there's there's a community that you go to bring on site look, you know, again, when we put a story on, on advertising Comdata you and the comments come through, it's just keep them out. We don't need them here. You know, we've got our own people to look after. Why, you know why?

**Professor Colin Stirling** 22:43

I Chris, I walked, I walked from the train station back to this building in Victoria Square about a week ago. And I was pretty shocked at how many empty storefronts I walk past and right, the city is, you know, I mean, there are the economic impact of what we are going through is pretty profound. And we have an opportunity to take one of our biggest industries in this state. And to spin that up quickly. And that is something that we ought to be doing.

**Wendy Johnson** 23:16

And the challenge for us is how we actually help the kind of general members of the South Australian community to understand that by bringing back in international students, we're actually helping them in South Australia, for all the reasons that Colin's just outlined. And I think it's it's making that connection, that's really important so that people understand that international students actually means a thriving South Australian economy which benefits every South Australian

**Chris Russell** 23:45

matter the attention with the the question about returning students has been about university students and tertiary rather than not many people think about the school level. But Glenunga certainly have a significant number of international students. We

**Wendy Johnson** 24:02

have a long history of international students at Glenunga. And it's been really important for us to have international students because it enables our South Australian students to understand better what being a global citizen is. So the friendships that are established between our international students and our South Australian students are really important in terms of broadening South Australians picture of the world, and we can be very insular. In South Australia, we have a very comfortable, good life. For many of us, even those of us who are not doing so well. It's much better than many parts of the world. And so if we can actually connect our young people, with students that have very different experiences, it helps them appreciate what they have here in South Australia, but it also broadens their understanding of what being a global citizen is and if if students nowadays don't understand what Being a global citizen is they're not getting themselves ready for future employment. We know that future employment is about being able to be employed anywhere in the world and being able to be employed when necessary by global employers, really important, as students are really disadvantaged if they don't have that global perspective, and

**Chris Russell** 25:19

what was the pipeline like so I mean, the university students certainly can do a lot of their work, you know, they can begin to study online and you know, in the expectation maybe in a couple of years time, they're going to be able to come here and conduct face to face the face to face with their need. School students, I don't know, like, you're not running all your classes with an online component. Now you because everyone's the kids are back in class,

**Wendy Johnson** 25:47

a number of our Department of Education, schools are running online programmes for students that stuck overseas, our students have actually been with us for nearly two years, and they haven't seen their families in that time in a face to face setting. So they are really homesick, we're really interested in kind of bringing students but we're also really interested in letting our students be able to go back to see their families, and then come back to finish their qualifications, which is really important.

**Chris Russell** 26:17

But you've got to look for next year and 20, you got to pick new ones coming in.

**Wendy Johnson** 26:22

Not many at this stage. And so we're waiting to see what happens in terms of bringing international students back into South Australia. Because whilst it impacts on universities, it also impacts on schools.

**Karyn Kent** 26:35

And if we can have them in the schools here, then obviously there's a much greater chance that they will stay study and, and when these raise a really good point about the students and the support that they have needed here in South Australia, the fact they're missing their family so much. And you know, the schools have done a fantastic job that other provide institutions, the, you know, all the English language that vocational education providers and universities have been so conscious of that support. But and we've seen some amazing and who heard about some amazing stories of families who have taken in this the students over the Christmas holidays last year. In fact, some of the schools were telling us recently that because the students were here over holiday breaks and not flying home, they've actually created even stronger bonds with the with their counterparts, their their Australian counterparts, which has been a wonderful, I guess, byproduct of this, you know, really tough time for them. So

**Chris Russell** 27:31

and the students, the international students have been very interested in regional areas in South Australia. And yeah, you know, well, those areas, we've got chronic shortages, we just can't get medical specialists out to, to go and work in country towns, you know, a lot of teachers, you've got vacant principal positions, positions and so on there lots of areas where regional towns are suffering, but in the national season, so quite interested,

**Karyn Kent** 27:58

well, this, I mean, skill gaps, and regional employment is clearly a critical need. And there has been a cross government and industry working group that's been in place this year, which has actually looked at this and one of the outcomes of that is we've been able to put together for meals or field trips for international students out into certain with support from those regions, the councils and regional development Australia to connect them to local employers. And we have been blown away by the the demand from the final year students and graduates to actually go into the regions and experience for themselves because it really does change their perception of what a regional area can offer. Not just the job opportunities, but what it's what it looks like and what it feels like and what the community is like. So, you know, they've met employers and about 50 groups of students have gone at once and you know, we are now hearing about actual tangible outcomes of students either moving to these regions, I've gained employment, or they're doing their, their nursing placements in in certain areas. In fact, there was one, one physio student I think that on the most recent trip to the limestone coast, who was who was like the rock star, because everyone wanted to employ him. There was there was just so many jobs. And so he was like the rock star, and then one lady who had a, like a well being and mental health practice, you know, grabbed a group of 10 students and walk them down the street, you know, from the town hall or wherever they are meeting, you know, just basically put her arms around them, walk them down the street to show them what it was like, you know what her practice was like. So the feedback that we've had about the interaction between the community and the students has been has been wonderful when in fact, these students have also opened opened the eyes to those possibilities as

**Chris Russell** 29:41

well. Now we know that the market is going to get recovered whatever happens, you know, we've got to learn to live with COVID one way or another and the International Student market will recover. Do you think the mix will remain the same? Colin and, you know, China has obviously dominated in terms of numbers and maybe to see Next and India, do you think that will continue or

**Professor Colin Stirling** 30:04

it's a very education is a globally competitive field. And we're seeing certainly China is growing as a destination country for international education, with students from many countries now going into China to study in Chinese institutions. And clearly, that's a very deliberate strategy from the Chinese government. But again, for in terms of outgoing students and students coming to Australia, Australia does remain a very, a very prominent destination choice for many countries. And we need to make sure that we don't poison that well, by being too slow, or making it too difficult to reopen. Because if it's too difficult, there are other places to go Canada is is you know, has been snapping at our heels for years, and is very proactively encouraging international students to study in Canada, the UK, the same, always has been very competitive in that area. So we need to make sure that the appearance and you know, think of those parents that have sent their kids to school and haven't seen them for two years, you know, as they're doing the studies, same for university education, and think of the parent who's thinking, well, where am I going to send, you know, little Johnny or Johnny or whoever? And will I send them to Australia? Well, Australia can shut down for two years, and you know, they may spend two years studying there and then not be able to complete. And that's actually quite a risk. So we need to demonstrate that we are open, and we're, you know, we're we're freely open, and we're welcoming.

**Chris Russell** 31:58

One of the things sort of the community debate is is the Karyn is that sort of balance between security considerations that at a national level, and the attractiveness of international students and so on. And, you know, there's all sorts of questions about defence and infiltration and, and all the rest. Where do you think that balance lies? And maybe, you know, where the international students sit in terms of the actual defence of the country in terms of creating relationships and friendships with people?

**Karyn Kent** 32:32

Well, I think one of the, perhaps one of the less understood benefits of, of international education has, is this what we call soft diplomacy. So the connections that international students offer back to those countries and other parts of the world that it's just, it's just amazing. And in fact, you know, you talk about diversity. And I would argue that actually, this sector is extremely diverse, given we have students from 120 countries here. And if you look at even our top 10 countries, and the difference that, you know, in our market mix from traditional exports is incredible. You know, Vietnam's in the top 10 of poles in the top 10. Even Brazil, is in the top 10. So, the ability to so if you have hundreds or 1000s of students from those countries, there's hundreds and 1000s of families that we are instantly connected to if we take that opportunity, and I think we can all talk about people we have met on our travels, they have to talk about the time they've studied in Australia or Adelaide, and they, you know, if anyone's ever lived overseas, they and they've had a good experience, you always have a connection with that place. And I think that's an amazing opportunity for South Australia in particular, as Wendy said, you know, we do have we feel very comfortable here. And we it's very easy to feel safe in our little spot down here in the southern hemisphere. But we're we're globally connected. So these students are making enormous contributions across a number of sectors. And I acknowledge there is you know, there's certain sectors such as events, but there are so many other sectors such as health that are crying out for, you know, the skills that they bring.

**Chris Russell** 34:13

Now, we'll be looking there at certain extent the effect of COVID on international students, but obviously COVID is having a major effect on our domestic students and staff now the Victoria has moved to make it compulsory for staff to serve and students to be vaccinated, and I think University of New South Wales just announced today, the same. So is that something that's going to be inevitable here? We certainly will, you know, your counterpart, Colin, Peter hoy at University of Adelaide has said it's not a thing, not a decision that the university should make individually. It's a it's a conversation that the whole community is going to have, and the universities would be part of that. So do you think it's inevitable that the Some sort of vaccination requirement and let me

**Professor Colin Stirling** 35:02

just put my cards on the table, you know, I think absolutely everyone should be vaccinated with the exception of you know, those who may have some medical reason as to why they ought not to be, such as an allergy or or whatever. The best way to protect ourselves from this, you know, lethal pandemic, are these marvellous vaccines that are being created in record time. Can we make them compulsory? You know, I would love to, but as an employer, speaking as an employer, there are certain difficulties around that, at this moment in time, and specifically, in a state where effectively there's no circulating virus, right? It's very different in Victoria, or New South Wales at this particular moment in time. And that actually changes the dynamic quite significantly. And in order to protect our staff and our students, then encouraging vaccination, I think is crucially important, and potentially mandating it at some point down the line, I would say that, you know, the resistance that we see the vaccination is, you know, profoundly misplaced. And it is also from a public health perspective, from a societal perspective, it is deeply selfish. And what we people need to understand is that every unvaccinated person becomes a potential pool for the growth of virus, an individual is infected with this virus, they'll produce 10, to the 11 new viral particles, right? That's 10,000 billion new particles, and every single one of them has the potential to be a new variant. So every single infection is a potential source of a new variant of COVID. And we don't want to see any new variants, we don't want to see variants that may be able to evade the vaccines that are presently being created. So as a public good, we should we should be insisting on folks getting vaccinated. I like to think in the university sector. You know, we are, you know, this the the population that work in universities are, you know, highly educated, you know, they, they can examine facts, generally speaking, you know, incredibly well. And so, you know, I'd expect them to look at the evidence and make their own decision.

**Chris Russell** 37:37

So you're talking with your geneticist hat on, in terms of indeed,

**Professor Colin Stirling** 37:41

but it's a it's a, it's a, it's an absolute reality, that's what happens, the more you let a virus develop, the more you let it grow, the more opportunities you give it to, to change and to then find new ways to infect. And that's why it's very important program of work that's going on, which is around the provision of, of vaccine to less wealthy countries, because we will not protect ourselves from COVID. by merely vaccinating every Australian, we will protect the planet from COVID. By vaccinating the globe, frankly,

**Chris Russell** 38:22

you know, we've been too soft on people like this sort of this idea that you have freedom of choice, you can be vaccinated or not vaccinated. But we don't offer that freedom of choice to people. If they get into a motor car and they want to drive they have to have a driving licence. Why is there this difference? Like if you're going to do something that potentially will harm somebody else in the workplace? What Why, why are we not being strict and enforcing it?

**Professor Colin Stirling** 38:45

I mean, I think the you know that there are some clearly profound implications around whether no one could ever contemplate forcing an injection upon someone, you know, that's an that's, that'd be a pretty interesting world if we lived in that one. And I don't think I'd even want to live in that particular world, if they want to make that choice, make the choice, but they need to understand the consequences of that choice. And for me, I think, you know, we, I mean, I'll declare I'm double vaccinated. AstraZeneca. You know, I think that if a large percentage of the population remain on vaccinated, there's the risk from COVID, they will also clog up every ICU bed, I mean, they'll all catch COVID sometime in the next two years. And a significant number will wind up in ICU intubated, and every ICU bed in the city or the country will be occupied. And then other folks, you know, who've done the right thing, who wind up needing an ICU bed for some other reason won't be able to get one that's fundamentally selfish. And I do think we need to probably better educate in order to make sure that folks understand that these myths around vaccination exactly that. And to clarify what the safety that this the fact that these vaccines are safe, but, you know, mandating is is, you know a bit of a bit of a minefield.

**Chris Russell** 40:15

Now just one of the questions that's come in from the audience. And again, just a reminder that if you do want to put in a question, do use the Twitter hashtag fearless conversations. So a question from Stefan. Oh, and as to you, Colin, apparently, yeah, there is a question about Flinders University and the teaching of Italian is potentially to be phased out. Is that correct? And if so, why, and isn't sort of provision of teaching a foreign language is really one of the essential things that the unit should be doing.

**Professor Colin Stirling** 40:50

And there's been no decision made in that regard at this moment in time. There is, though a discussion going on around that particular subject area, and, and several others. And the, the important factor for us is that and this isn't a COVID phenomenon. Yeah, this is a phenomenon that's been running for several years now. Which is that there aren't very many students studying certain subjects. And sometimes some of those subjects are have a remarkably small numbers of students enrolled. And there does come a point, when, as an institution, as we're facing significant financial pressures, mainly actually from the Commonwealth Government, and the changes in the job ready graduates programme, or the job ready graduates funding model, that, frankly, mean universities will have to do very much more with very much less into the future. And that means we have to look at every course we teach, that's losing money, and ask whether we can continue that or not. And that's the discussion that's happening at the minute with that particularly area.

**Chris Russell** 42:04

just talking about that. Yeah, the federal government fundings and the job ready package. So certainly your, they've said yet got to have more places, but less per head of students on average. And if you look at the funding packages, the, from the federal government, they are increasing funding to schools, but they seem to be tightening up on funding to universities, if we exclude student loans. So already already, private schools get more money, than universities and public schools are on a trajectory to be getting more money out of the federal government than the universities again, saying excluding loans that get paid back. Why do you think that's happening? And you know, he said, uh, obviously, public schools would would welcome any more money, Wendy, but do you think that that's, that's something that the community understands is happening? And what why do you think that's happening, that more money's going into schools and not, you know, the increases to universities, is not keeping pace.

**Wendy Johnson** 43:05

I think it's really important if we want to be a civilised, highly developed country, that we fund education really appropriately, whether it's school education, or university education, I think it actually has to be a really high priority. Because we know if we have well educated citizens, we actually have a strong democracy. And one of the challenges for us currently in Australia is do we have a strong democracy. So that's a particular issue, in terms of the prioritisation of various governments in terms of funding. And we know that David Gonski, quite some time ago, talked about how we need to rethink the funding to schools in particular. And I guess it's a challenge for schools, particularly government schools, where they can't get the funding for a coat of paint on their school. And they look across the road to a private school, and they see it establishing a $40 million Sports Complex with an indoor pool, squash courts, etc. So we don't want to develop a rivalry between public and private schools. But what we do want is we want all of our schools to be properly funded. Now the challenge is, the pie for funding is only so big. So where do you find the funding in order to make sure that every school has the appropriate funding in every university has the appropriate funding? And so the challenge is, does the federal government continue to fund private schools? And right at the beginning of this conversation, you talked about the comparison between our results in something like naplan, or sace or timss or whatever, compared to other countries. And what we know is that many other countries in the world don't have a private school system like we have or if they do Have a private school system. It's funded by the people who actually attend the private school. And we know that in Australia, we've long had the argument that all the private school families are taxpayers too, my position. And like Colin and his bias in terms of Flinders, I have a really strong bias in terms of government education. I think that basically, a government's role is to fund government schools. And then if you as a taxpayer, don't want your young person to go to a government school, then you pay for that privilege of making a different sort of choice. I know that many of my colleagues won't agree in terms of across education generally. But I think the time has come for governments to seriously think about how they're funding their state school systems and how they're funding the university system.

**Chris Russell** 45:50

In light of that, do you think people would be a bit surprised that some of the the public schools that are in sort of basically wealthier socio economic areas like Glenunga, like, you know, the eastern suburbs here Marryatville Norwood Morialta, that if you combine the the federal and state funding that's going to your school per head of population, that taxpayers are paying more per head, per head of student per student, to some private schools? Do you think people would be surprised by that?

**Wendy Johnson** 46:23

I think it varies enormously. Chris, I think there are a number of people who know about it, who are very angry about it, but who feel powerless to actually change it. I think there's also a range of people who are not interested in how you fund schools, and a range of other people who would be interested if we were able to promote it. And often we're our our own worst enemies. We're so polite about things that we don't want to kind of rush to the barricades and talk about how you fund schools, instead, we do it in a very polite fashion. And as a result, taxpayers or people generally, actually don't necessarily get the message because they're used to having messages pummelling into them by social media, as opposed to the kind of polite way that we kind of talk about the issues that we have.

**Chris Russell** 47:12

And then the argument, you know, certainly many politicians raise is not about just putting in more money into schools that, you know, the class sizes don't matter so much that, you know, what, if he had more money in public schools, what what would the money be spent on what I would improve things?

**Wendy Johnson** 47:30

Yeah, I understand that putting more money in doesn't necessarily get you great outcomes. So you have to be very careful about where you're putting your money. But the issue for us is that in many other advanced countries of the world, they give their teachers paid time to do the preparation and to work collaboratively to deliver the best outcomes possible to our students. Now, in a secondary school, like ours, our teachers have five classes each, and that means they're responsible for 150 students. Now being responsible for 150 students, they do a wonderful job, but they do a so much better job if they actually had time to prepare for those classes. So from my perspective, it's not about smaller class sizes. It's actually about smaller teaching loads, so that teachers can have time to do what they do in many other countries of the world, Singapore, Finland, for example. And that is to prepare collaboratively to deliver the best education possible to our young people.

**Chris Russell** 48:34

And then people with our teachers get all that holiday time and that why aren't they spending, you know, they get paid a full time wage.

**Wendy Johnson** 48:40

But I think people are changing their tune, Chris, since homeschooling came in. Because what I say to parents who say that is, would you like to spend five hours with 30 adolescents and be trying to get an outcome from each one of those adolescents? And people who have teenage children say, Ah, look, I'm having trouble managing one or two, let alone 30. So the reason why teachers actually need the holidays that they've got is because they have to replenish their batteries to be able to deal with that 150 students that they have for the 10 or 11 weeks of term. It's a hugely draining exercise to teach really well.

**Chris Russell** 49:25

And in terms of the funding, but but at the personal level. Now, the job ready graduates reforms have gone through and they have made some, the idea was to push students into choosing courses where supposedly there were more jobs like teaching and some of the health professions and make some of the other courses more expensive, and therefore less attractive to the students at a school level. Are people is that proving to be a consideration? When you when you, your students? Yeah,

**Wendy Johnson** 49:57

it's a mixed response. Well, most Our students, they're intent on pursuing their passion. So if they have a passion for a course, that's now become more highly expensive, they'll still pursue it. And I think for a lot of young people, they don't think about too far into the future, they're actually thinking about what costs do I want to get into, and are worried about paying off the loan later. For other families with significant financial difficulties, it is a really tough choice. So I think there's a real challenge for us in terms of making funding for different courses at university so different based on the job market, because as Colin said earlier, going to university isn't about just preparing for the job market is actually preparing to be a good citizen of a strong democracy. And if we don't have universities doing that, if we don't have schools doing that, Australia grows weaker, and we can't afford Australia to grow weaker in terms of its democratic principles.

**Chris Russell** 51:02

And one of the changes that university level is instead of students coming in and doing a whole three, four year degree, they're coming in and just doing a micro credential courses, just looking at one particular thing. And that obviously, far less time commitment for less money commitment, is that a trend that's going to accelerate, maybe just explain what a micro credential is, if anyone doesn't understand,

**Professor Colin Stirling** 51:29

I mean, essentially, as a short course, something that might it might be a week, it might be a month, it might be six months, but but a short course, we do a number, some of them are for, for qualifications, like diplomas and so forth, that are really very, very successful. And we've done a few in recent times around digital manufacturing, for example, that has been hugely successful. One advantage to those types of courses is that they enable us to, to bring in people who may or who might already be in the workforce, who are looking for a short upskilling course, then the the open some new opportunity for them in their in their job or in a new career. And these will be individuals who couldn't afford to go back to university necessarily for a whole nother years did you have degree. And so I think it's actually a very important workforce development tool, actually, that we should use more off, it doesn't mean that we stopped doing the longer degree, because those degrees are, you know, they bring a different type of value in the development in the earlier development, if you like, of, of, of younger people.

**Chris Russell** 52:53

But do you think it's a, it's a, an offering this kind of grow in numbers,

**Professor Colin Stirling** 52:57

I think we're doing more and more of them. You know, they are, you know, I think if you can, if you can find the right upskilling opportunity, and offer it in a very timely fashion to, to the to the to the market. And you know, people see that as a real opportunity for them to develop their prospects, then, of course, you've got something that's going to be very successful.

**Chris Russell** 53:23

Now, what are the other things that's sort of on the table in terms of changes that universities are facing is in South Australia is the question of mergers. Now, Flinders University is kind of largely seems to have taken a bit of a backseat. And it's really, most of the debate has been about the original proponents of UNISA and Adelaide. But it is very much on the agenda. It is a policy of the Australian Labour Party, at least to bring the the parties together and to talk about it. David Lloyd from UNISA is in favour of bringing the VET sector into the TAFESA into the into the room as well. Where do you see that that going forward? Now,

**Professor Colin Stirling** 54:13

before I answer that, I've got this pressing thing in my head because I know that I'm going to criticise the numeracy because I expand the 10 of the 11 incorrectly earlier. I just want to see if anyone on Twitter has picked it up already. I just want to see it. So I'll tweet the right answer. In terms of university mergers, look, the it's an interesting discussion. We've been there before. It's interesting that it keeps coming up in South Australia and I think it says something about the recognition. To me that speaks to the recognition that the universities are a big part of our economy. So there's a desire to be seen to do something about it, right? Whatever that means. What would a university merger deliver One of the arguments is that we'd have somehow a bigger, better institution, you can do the math on it in terms of university rankings. And you can see that if you took any two of the three public universities and merge them, you would have a university that would rank more highly in research metrics in some of the global rankings. And that's potentially interesting and potentially worthwhile. There are many, many risks, though, associated with that sort of activity is having actually been involved in the in one of the mergers that globally that is recognised as probably the most successful University merger or internationally, which was Manchester. You know, that was a long and difficult and by no means pain free process. And it was incredibly costly, to make it the success that it was cost billions of pounds. Now, if we've got billions of dollars, to help to make such a process successful, then let's have a conversation. But let's not forget that what we're targeting, there are improvements in research rankings, we're not, you don't even you don't even change the research that's being done, you simply put it together bundled in a different package, and it scores more highly, so nothing's changed. So what's the goal? What's the outcome that's going to actually deliver, then better performance. And the area that would, that actually, I would say we also need to pay particular attention to would be actually competition student choice. Students in this state choose the three different public universities for different reasons. Because we offer different things and a different culture and a different experience and different courses. Sometimes we offer the same course you mentioned law earlier, I can tell you we compete, you know, tooth and nail to make sure that our course, if the others offer we make sure we keep on our toes, by making sure that we keep updating and improving the thing that we are offering. So that it's the thing that students choose. Now that's good for students, right? If we become, you know, if we became some single institution, you know, and we spread the courses out on into different campuses, so that you go to one place for law somewhere else for medicine, you'd have a monoculture that needn't necessarily lead to a drop in standards. But to be honest with you, you'd need to work very hard to make sure that

**Chris Russell** 57:45

now sadly, we're coming to the end of our discussion. So just very briefly, I'd like to ask each of you, what's the one thing and you know, very succinctly, one thing that's worrying you most at the moment and what you're going to do to fix it. So calling Christopher Pyne perhaps, but, Karen, with you?

**Karyn Kent** 58:05

Well, I try not to worry about things I can't control, Chris. So there are a number of things outside of our control at the moment. So I guess, you know, the thing that I guess I'm very focused on is how we can support the return of international students, what's the role that study, like can play in working very closely with our institutions, and supporting the individual students themselves? Because we are we and I'm sure that Flinders and Glenunga, and many other providers are also receiving, you know, constant contact with students. So it's how we can best support those students.

**Chris Russell** 58:38

And Colin, yeah.

**Professor Colin Stirling** 58:40

Other than my maths error, it's probably forgive you that now it gets the it'll be the, you know, the the international student return is extremely important. And that's certainly for us, that's not about the money at all. Not at all. It's about the students that we owe something to, and also all those future students that we can do so much for. I guess the thing that the other challenge that I see the university sector facing the present is the loggerheads that we have been at with the federal government and the the pressure on it to try to increase regulation on the way that universities operate. And those the squeezing of funding and the way that we're gonna have to respond very nimbly, to ensure that we can get through some of those difficulties.

**Wendy Johnson** 59:42

And when do you Well, people may not realise that but right at the moment, secondary schools are in the midst of a revolution. So you haven't heard the beating of the drums for the revolution, and that is to shift from a 20th century factory model to a 21st century agile, flexible innovation. model of teaching. And we say to our kids, you know, 1020 years ago, secondary school was about a sausage factory, you were the sausage casings, we stuffed you full of content, right moment squeegee walk out a came. And now that won't work, because all the content you need is on your smartphone. So what we need to teach kids is how to actually use that what they know, in really different settings. And you can't do that by monologuing, at adolescence. And in the past, we in secondary schools have been really good, particularly middle class schools monologuing at kids who sat there and looked like they might be engaged. Meanwhile, their minds were everywhere else. So for us, it's the challenge of actually shifting a whole workforce, from our way of doing business to a new way of doing business. And we Glenunga, have been on this transformational journey for the last 10 or 12 years. And the challenge for us is, how do we make sure that that learning that transformation is available to every student undertaking secondary education in South Australia, or at least if not in Australia, that's really important for equity sake, that every kid gets an opportunity for a 21st century education.

**Chris Russell** 1:01:16

Well, thank you very much. That was Wendy Johnson, Principal of Glenunga international High School and thank you, Colin, Stirling from Vice Chancellor of Flinders University and Karyn Kent from study Adelaide, Chief Executive of Study Adelaide, and thank you to our audience for being here with us today. If you'd like to review the programme, you can do so shortly either via advertiser.com.au or through the Flinders University site, but this number eight in the series, and the previous feasrless conversation sessions now. Tune in again next week at the same time. Next week's fearless conversation will be about innovation and entrepreneurship. So thank you very much for joining us.