

Call for uni law reform amid 'core role shift'

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The laws governing the University of Tasmania need reviewing to address a drift away from its core role as an educational institution, a parliamentary committee has found.

Legislative Council Select Committee on the Provisions of the University of Tasmania Act has handed down its final report after 151 submissions and 12 days of public hearings.

The committee was established amid disquiet over the university's planned move into the Hobart CBD, although it did not examine that decision directly.

The final report found the university's mission appeared to be changing.



Independent
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Webb.

"Concern was expressed that the university appears to prioritise commercial over community interests in its core functions, with a significant focus on corporatisation, which undermines the university's core role and identity," the report said.

"The committee received evidence of a perception the university has deviated from its core functions of education and research specified in Sec-

tion 6 of the Act, and has shifted to a more commercial focus."

It noted evidence of centralised decision-making and a decline in consultation.

"It was clear from the evidence provided that a substantial number of people connected with the university, including students, alumni, and current and past academics, are highly concerned and distressed by aspects of its governance, management and strategic direction," the report noted.

"There is a clearly expressed deficit of trust in the current university governance, management and decision-making.

"Comprehensive review and amendment of the Act, with

key changes to the governance structure and accountability mechanisms, presents an opportunity to address this deficit of trust in a foundational way."

The committee recommended a comprehensive review of the University of Tasmania Act. There were 19 further recommendations for specific aspects of the Act.

The report found that at the same time as there was mistrust, staff at the university were fearful of raising issues.

"Significant evidence was presented pointing to a culture at the university in which staff and students felt constrained in speaking up or raising issues due to a fear of repercussions or reprisals," the report said.

"A casualised workforce felt

this vulnerability even more acutely. The use of 'gagging clauses' further added to a sense the workplace culture would not tolerate views counter to management.

"It was clear that current complaints management processes within the university were not regarded as sufficient or effective, nor were the agencies of external recourse for complaints – the Ombudsman and Integrity Commission – regarded as effective in resolving those complaints."

The report noted that the university was alone in the nation in being able to dispose of land granted by the Crown or paid for by public money without legislative restrictions.

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