

Lessons we all must learn from UTAS

It is essential for development the university successfully delivers, writes **Meg Webb**

The University of Tasmania is a beloved Tasmanian public institution and is of primary importance to the social, economic, cultural and environmental success of our state.

The university holds a special place in shaping Tasmania and many, especially in the south of the state where the university has the longest history, cherish this institution and have a sense of stewardship over it.

From late 2021, in the context of the then-proposed move of the Sandy Bay campus to the Hobart CBD, Rob Valentine, previous member for Hobart, and I began to be flooded with community members raising issues relating to UTAS.

Concerns included: executive management practices, workplace culture, strategic decision-making, facilities management and infrastructure development, funding priorities, loss of key staff and a diminishing quality of student experience.

Many of the issues being raised were not within the direct purview of the parliament, which has no authority to reach into the operational management of the university. However, the appropriate way to explore some of these issues was in examining the suitability of the provisions of the University of Tasmania Act 1992.

The Legislative Council Select Committee, formed to inquire into and report on the provisions of the Act, received extensive evidence in 151 submissions and held 12 days of public hearings, presenting its final report, in December 2024.

Amendments to the Act over time significantly reshaped governance and decision-making power within the university, resulting in a diminishment of consultation, transparency and accountability.

Significant concern, distress and a deficit of trust in the current university governance, management, decision-making, and strategic direction were expressed loud and clear in evidence.

A key matter discussed in the report was tension between the core purposes of a university to create, preserve and transmit knowledge and the recent adoption of a corporate, managerial approach to governance and management.

This was linked to loss of voice and influence in decision-making by university academics, especially on academic matters.

The report includes case studies of recent university decisions

illustrating concerns raised on deficiencies in accountable decision-making.

Evidence pointed to a workplace culture in which staff and students felt constrained in speaking up or raising issues due to a fear of repercussions or reprisals. A casualised workforce felt this vulnerability even more acutely. The use of "gagging" clauses further added to a sense that – views which were counter to management – not be tolerated.

The report recommends government promptly undertake a comprehensive review to update the University of Tasmania Act 1992, including addressing the 19 further recommendations in the report.

Of note, the committee did specifically recommend the Act be amended to provide a constraint, or prohibition, on the university having the power to sell land gifted to it by the state.

During the inquiry, the university identified some areas in which it was already making changes in response to matters raised in evidence.

This demonstrated the inquiry's merit in providing opportunities for information to be put on the public record, public discussion of concerns, and impetus for improvement.

The Legislative Council will note the report in debate today (Tuesday, April 1). The government's response will give an indication of the support necessary to progress recommendations.

The university is challenged with providing tertiary education statewide within changing federal funding models, driving the need to pursue other sources of funding.

It is essential for the social, cultural and economic development of the state that the university successfully delivers on its central mission of teaching and research to a level of excellence.

The aim of the final report of the committee and its recommendations is to make the University of Tasmania a better, more robust and accountable institution for our state and its people.



Nelson MLC Meg Webb

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