

Campus shift ignites University of Tasmania revolt and challenge to VC power



University of Tasmania vice-chancellor Rufus Black. Picture: Nikki Davis-Jones

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The backlash against the relocation of Hobart's university campus has escalated into a push for reform of university governance, with national implications for the power of vice-chancellors.

A Hobart City Council elector poll last week recorded a 74 per cent vote against plans by University of Tasmania VC Rufus Black to shift the campus into CBD buildings and develop the existing Sandy Bay site for housing. The poll, while not binding, has led Professor Black to suspend a bid to rezone the campus site – a vital step for the housing development.

But he appears to be pushing ahead with other elements of the city move and some senior academics called on the VC to resign.

They are using a Legislative Council inquiry into the state University of Tasmania Act to push for fundamental governance reform aimed at diluting VC power.

Proposals, including election of more academics to the governing UTAS council and other checks on executive power, are being closely followed by a new body hoping to achieve similar reforms nationally.

"If this happens in Tasmania, then it will be a blueprint for the rest of the country," said Dr Alessandro Pelizzon, a senior law lecturer at Southern Cross University and a founder of Public Universities Australia.

PUA formed in late 2021 to represent university academics, staff and students, and push for greater academic influence and freedom in Australian universities, which have over the past 30 years seen a power shift towards VCs.

Dr Pelizzon said the UTAS “crisis” and the Legislative Council inquiry could result in a new governance structure under its University Act. He said university councils in Australia typically had a third of members elected by the council and a third appointed by a minister on advice from the chancellor, who acted on council advice. “So two-thirds of council members are de facto appointed by the council itself,” he said.

Currently, only two of 14 members on the UTAS governing council are directly or indirectly elected by academics. Half are chosen by the council.

Submissions to the Legislative Council inquiry by dozens of current and former academics argue the current council make-up has seen UTAS “taken over by a narrow and shortsighted corporate-managerial elite”.

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There is concern that Professor Black, paid almost \$1m a year, was recently given open-ended tenure.

Some academics believe UTAS management has “taken over almost all decision-making”, including relating to teaching, with particular concern about the axing of traditional face-to-face lectures.

UTAS Emeritus Distinguished Professor Jeff Malpas has told the Legislative Council UTAS management has “lost touch with the community” and is “contemptuous of academic staff”.

“We need major structural change,” Professor Malpas told The Australian. “The university is in a world of pain. It’s lost the electors’ poll, which is a serious setback, but it will also find that what comes out of the Legislative Council inquiry will be quite serious. I think we ought to see the resignation of the VC.”

Professor Black did not respond directly to those calls but said he “expected and welcomed scrutiny”. “The Legislative Council committee will soon be holding hearings and we look forward to the opportunity to respond in depth and detail to the various views and claims being made about complex matters of governance,” Professor Black said. He defended the city move, which has some support within sections of the wider southern community. “University campuses must evolve ... to deliver an accessible, contemporary and vibrant educational experience,” he said.

“We clearly have work to do. Our engagement has not worked for the community. We are committed to working with the Hobart City Council on next steps.”

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