

NOSTALGIA MUST NOT STAND IN THE WAY OF PROGRESS

THE UNIVERSITY'S RELOCATION TO THE HEART OF THE CITY OF HOBART IS THE RIGHT MOVE FOR THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION IN TASMANIA, WRITES FORMER UNI CHANCELLOR MICHAEL FIELD

I WAS the chancellor of the University of Tasmania in April 2019 when we made the decision to consolidate our campus in the heart of Hobart.

It was the right decision. That was true then and it is true now.

There was no question that it was time to rebuild and redevelop the bulk of our facilities in the South. The question was where to do so – in Sandy Bay and maintain a split campus, or in the city and bring southern staff and students together.

The University Council is the correct and appropriate body to make such a decision. That's exactly what we did three and a half years ago, following significant consultation with the university community about what was best for students, for staff and the future of education in Tasmania.

This was no rushed decision, nor was it secret. It was careful and considered. We examined universities around the world, we consulted with stakeholders, we laid out the options and sought feedback, we listened to staff and students about what was important.

Then, as the University Council, we made our choice: we would consolidate in the city.

Through the move into the city, we would develop a modern, fit-for-purpose campus for staff and students that would support contemporary teaching and research.

It would be more accessible to more Tasmanians, closer to jobs and industry, and enable collaboration across disciplines currently split between the city and Sandy Bay.

It would boost retail trade in the CBD, enable university facilities to be more easily shared and used by the community, and create opportunities to build new parks and green the city.

A city campus would help the university become more sustainable environmentally and economically.

This decision was widely publicised at the time. So was the work that followed. As new campuses were being built in Burnie and Launceston – in partnership with local, state and federal governments – we consulted and planned for the move in Hobart.

Towards the end of 2019, there was a summit of almost 200 people from across the community who came together to provide input into how the new campus might best fit into the city. Then in May 2021 we released an urban design framework and preliminary masterplan.

Not everyone agreed the move to the city was the right call. On big, important things such as this, there will always be a range of views. That is to be expected. But the recent suggestions that the university made its decision based on ignorance, indifference, hunger for profits – even corruption – are not just wrong, they are insulting.

I am an old politician who hasn't needed to win anyone's vote in some time, so I can be blunt.

Nostalgia and NIMBY-ism is fuelling a great deal of the negative reaction to the move. It was when proposed plans for Sandy Bay were released – not when the move was announced – that Save UTAS Campus was formed and opposition really took off, happily stoked by political candidates.

The plans for Sandy Bay are good, it must be said. Much-needed housing, redeveloped sporting facilities, protected bushland and heritage buildings, opportunities for childcare, education and aged care, as well as commercial, tourism and innovation spaces, along with university accommodation and potentially some research facilities.

I understand the nostalgia – I feel the pull of fond memories as much as the next person – but we must recognise its dangers.

When I studied at the University of Tasmania in the late 1960s, there were fewer than 3000 students. Almost all of us were straight out of high school, studying full-time and completing degrees in defined areas.

The campus at Sandy Bay was barely 10 years old – the uni had just moved from the city after much debate and a storm of letters to the editor, many of which demanded the Sandy Bay site be used for housing and parkland – and there was no campus at all in Burnie or Launceston.

The contrast with the university today – more than 30,000 students, an average age of 32, most juggling work and study, fitting classes in around busy lives, campuses in Burnie, Launceston and Hobart – is absolute.

We will not solve the challenges facing a modern university, or a state with historically low educational attainment rates, by nostalgically looking back to days gone by. We have to look optimistically to the future and the hurdles we must face and overcome.

The university wants to increase participation in higher education in this state, it wants to provide Tasmanians with the facilities, research and teaching they need to succeed, it wants to attract new students to study and live here, and it wants to ensure it is operating sustainably so it can keep doing these things for the long term.

That is why the University Council I led made the decision in 2019 to bring the university's southern campus together in the heart of Hobart.

Former premier of Tasmania Michael Field is an alumnus of the University of Tasmania and was the chancellor from 2013 to 2021.

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