



UTAS splashes out in PR blitz as staff, students paint picture of low morale

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The University of Tasmania has gone on a charm offensive, splashing out on full-page newspaper advertisements, collaborations with an Australian influencer, and sponsored posts on social media.

But despite the institution's push to paint itself as "people-centred", academic staff and students spanning multiple disciplines have painted a picture of low morale and mutual distrust.

The ABC has spoken to about 20 people connected to UTAS, more than a dozen of whom were current or former academics.

All but one of the academics did so on the condition of anonymity, either because they were subject to a non-disclosure or non-disparagement agreement, or because they feared reprisal.

"The university is a brutal place to work and the staff who stay are terrified," one former staff member said.

Another said: "The voice of scholars has been completely sidelined, if not silenced altogether."

Much of the recent public conversation on UTAS has focused on its plans to move its campus from the Hobart suburb of Sandy Bay into the CBD, then convert current buildings into accommodation, sporting facilities and a tourism precinct.

The university said this would help ensure its financial viability and improve access to higher education, particularly for people in Hobart's northern suburbs.

Former Hobart mayor and controversial Liberal MP Sue Hickey has been hired by the university to meet with people concerned about the move, with the change also promoted through regular newspaper advertisements and posts on Facebook.

Critics fear the university has lost focus on its core mission — to teach — and argue the leafy Sandy Bay campus provides UTAS with a point of difference from mainland institutions.

Key points:

- One former UTAS staff member said it was a "brutal place to work and the staff who stay are terrified"
- Former philosophy head Jeff Malpas is among those who believe the focus should be on saving UTAS itself, and said morale was low
- Vice-chancellor Rufus Black said the university was piloting "a new employee survey approach"

Bright red signs have sprung up around Hobart emblazoned with SAVE UTAS CAMPUS promoting a campaign by the same name led by former history academic Pam Sharpe.

UTAS morale 'at absolute lowest ebb'

Former philosophy head Jeff Malpas is among those who believe the focus should be on saving UTAS itself.

He met with UTAS vice-chancellor Rufus Black last year to discuss his concerns about what he described as "the complete disenfranchisement of academic staff in decision-making" and "an endemic culture of managerial bullying across the institution".

"I thought the morale of the institution was at its absolute lowest ebb," Professor Malpas said.

"[There seemed] a complete disconnect between rhetorical claims and the actual actions of the university."

Some issues have spilled into the open.

Earlier this year, the ABC reported UTAS was investigating academic Vadim Kamenetsky for "serious misconduct" over comments he made on Facebook related to Professor Black and the planned campus move.

In March, student newspaper Togatus published an open letter from law students detailing their concerns on course structure and staffing.

"One of the core advantages of attending a university is having an expert contextualise and explain certain areas of knowledge," the letter said in part.

"You know, be taught by someone."

UTAS vice-chancellor Rufus Black said the university was focused on offering "excellent, accessible and contemporary legal education".

"Senior members of university staff are meeting regularly with law students and have set up additional feedback processes — we are listening and responding as we work to improve the educational experience in law," he said.

About 15 academic teaching staff are believed to have left the university's law faculty since 2020. According to Tasmania University Law Society president Fletcher Clarke, two have walked this semester alone.

"It seems to be when issues are raised that they just simply don't get dealt with," Mr Clarke said.

"They are dismissed, and sometimes when people try to raise them further, it has negative consequences for academic staff. So it puts them in a bind."

Fears law degree has been 'gutted'

Kevin Toman moved from interstate to study at UTAS, attracted by the hands-on nature of its law offerings. He said he would no longer advise others to do the same.

"Those [practical] areas of degrees have been largely gutted over the past year," he said. "If I was a student applying now from interstate there's no way I'd be applying to UTAS with the state of the current law degree."

His peer Lucy Milne said she would switch universities if she were not in her fourth year of study.

"There's such a lack of communication between what we're meant to be learning and what they're teaching," she said.

"My personal experience, I have a unit coordinator for two units and she's never practised."

Within the Tasmanian Institute of Agricultural Sciences (TIA), a joint venture of the University of Tasmania and the state government, there is discontent at the decision to shift its headquarters to Launceston — a plan the university has been accused of making without consultation

The university's argument the move would bring the Bachelor of Agricultural Science closer to the bulk of students has been internally disputed, and there is concern about disconnecting TIA from other science disciplines.

Professor Black said 41 academic and professional positions had been "identified for relocation" over the next two years.

"There will be positions for all staff should they choose to relocate; there will be tailored career assistance for those who choose not to relocate to help them secure an alternative position," he said.

"Over time, we expect to increase the TIA workforce."

'Academic leadership has been hollowed out'

National Tertiary Education Union state secretary Pat McConville said morale was "pretty low" across UTAS and academics felt unheard.

"I think there is a feeling from staff that the vice-chancellor is really imposing a top-down model way of running the university," he said.

"Academic leadership has been hollowed out or sidelined. Change is really a constant across colleges and professional services across UTAS, and I think with that change staff don't really feel like their views are being taken into consideration."

The ABC asked for an interview with Professor Black or another UTAS representative but was instead sent short statements in response to a series of questions.

Professor Black said academics were involved in decision-making through the legislated Academic Senate and representatives on the University Council, with broader staff regularly consulted through forums, meetings and surveys.

Asked for the most recent results of staff surveys on morale, Professor Black said the university was piloting "a new employee survey approach".

"The last two years have been hard," he said.

"We began the work together of delivering on our strategy to create a university that was more people-centric, that was more responsive to the needs of Tasmania and that was more focused on creating opportunities for Tasmanian and interstate students.

"COVID-19 has added an incredibly complex layer of challenge on top of all our efforts ... we are focused on evolving in ways that allow us to better support Tasmania and Tasmanians and will continue to support our people as we do so."

Only about 20 confidential clauses had been implemented over a 12-month period, Professor Black said.

Professor Malpas does not believe much has changed since his meeting with Professor Black last year.

"Most staff are fearful of speaking out, most staff feel that they are bullied in various ways," he said.

"What you have is an institution where people are no longer willing to speak their mind, and in which the institution does not want them to speak their mind."