

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH EMERITUS PROFESSOR, JIM REID

Monday, 5 August 2024

Can you just tell us exactly what have people signed on to and what is the text of the letter?

The text of the letter is very, very short and very to the point, saying that we want to maintain a university of world-class status, it's a first choice for university students in Tasmania. We believe that it would be more efficient and more cost-effective to upgrade the facilities at Sandy Bay that were purpose-built for STEM activities and we believe that the cost that has been talked about for a new STEM facility in town would not deliver a facility that is large enough and of the right quality with the right sort of facilities to allow STEM research to prosper into the future.

Do you think that the size of the footprint in the city could fit in everything that's currently at the Sandy Bay campus as far as STEM is concerned?

Planning for the STEM facility in town is at very, very early stages but the sort of areas they've been talking about are somewhere between about 25% and 40% of the current floor area. So clearly a very much smaller facility, there's been no real discussion about where you put animal houses or rock stores or field vehicles, glass houses, things of that sort that you want integrated into your research and teaching programs.

What does that mean for, say they did build that, students, attracting students down from mainland states internationally and even our own students in Tasmania to study at those facilities?

Well we're worried that in fact the number or percentage of Tasmanian students going to UTAS is actually declining over the last decade. We feel that's partly because we're at risk of losing our international reputation. We built ourselves up and got up into about the top 250 spots in the world as a university and that took a lot of time over the 15, 20 years ago and we spent a lot of effort doing it and we feel as though that's going to gradually now decline as we lose that interaction with our students, we lose those small class sizes. Students still want face-to-face activity, they want to interact with staff, postgraduate students want to interact with undergraduates, Sandy Bay offers the capability to do that very very well.

Do you think that's a part of the student experience, having that face-to-face contact with your peers and your supervisors?

I think it's absolutely crucial, I've always said to when I've been meeting new students as the Dean of Science in the past that half of the benefit you get out of the university education is interactions with people on campus and the university experience. You get a certain amount of it in formal lectures and things of that sort but it's in pracs, it's in sitting around the tea room, it's those sort of experiences that really do give the experience, the university experience to students, particularly those who are first, the younger students, the ones who have just come to university. For people who are taking on a second or third degree, that may be something different but for the younger undergraduate students, that's really crucial.

How does it feel being on campus for staff and students now versus 10 years ago because that facility was not available?

Well the number of students on campus now and the number of staff on campus now is still way down on what it was in 2017, 2018, so pre-COVID. Students have not come back onto campus in the way they have in some of the other bigger universities on the mainland, largely because a lot of our things have gone online, we're not giving big first year lectures anymore, they're being encouraged to look at it and see it online. We think that the interaction in small classes, particularly in the tutorials and practicals is really important and we need the students on campus to do that and we think the students also want to do that. We feel there's an emphasis amongst, if you do questionnaires, that they would like to have that experience.

How many people have put their names to this letter and what is some of the feedback that you've heard from them about why they've done it?

Well I think there are 56 signatures on that particular letter. The interesting thing is it's a very brief letter, we circulated it to a group of academic and asked them whether they would sign it and believe it or not, they didn't even change the wording. So that shows a certain amount of enthusiasm, but that shows their willingness to sign onto it. Academics, if you write something, usually you send it out to 10 academics and you'll get 11 responses, all with minor wording changes. I think the fact that we didn't have to make any changes shows the strength of the wording and the support all those academics have is for those very simple messages. We need a university that's international class, world renowned, operating out of Tasmania for the benefit of Tasmanian students and the best way to do that is to have a multidisciplinary campus with strong facilities such as we've got at Sandbank.

And how do you feel about the argument that's been made, the way it's been framed as a university in Tasmania, versus housing development outside?

I think the housing issue is a side issue, I don't see anything in the University Act that talks about housing and the university being responsible for providing land for housing.

As far as I'm concerned, the debate has gone completely off track. Housing is somewhere over there, we need it, absolutely, but it's not as though we have a shortage of space in Tasmania, there's space even in the city that the university owns. The people who signed this letter signed it because they're concerned about the university, its reputation and it becoming or remaining the first choice for Tasmanian students. They are concerned about the quality of the facilities that are available and the size of the facilities that are available for research and teaching. The government has the university legislation that we expect to be pressed for Parliament soon.

Is your perception that that legislation is about keeping the UTAS campus at Sandy Bay?

Well, it doesn't act. I think the Minister is the person to actually answer that question, but all it's really saying is that Parliament has to sign off against the sale of that land, as I understand it. I would like to see, from a personal point of view, the Legislative Council review that was done, what, two, two and a half years ago, about the governance of the university. I'd like to see the result of that come out. I think we need to see that. I thought it was a very good review, we all had a very good hearing at it, it's just unfortunate that it has taken so long for the review to actually be published.