

'Book ban' angers academics amid claims University of Tasmania 'in crisis' due to 'all powerful' VC and management 'cadre'

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University of Tasmania academics say they have been ordered to remove books from shelves and throw away their "life's work", all in the name of "safer spaces".

A parliamentary inquiry on Wednesday heard senior academics allege UTAS was in "crisis" and had "lost its direction" due to an [erosion of academic influence by a rampant "management cadre"](#).

"What we've been seeing in recent times is the growth in the management level and them assuming more of a role in directing academic activities," UTAS Emeritus Professor Stuart McLean told the Legislative Council inquiry.

"As an example, an edict came around recently that books were to be removed from shelves in ... academic offices."

Outside the inquiry, several academics confirmed to The Australian they had been ordered to remove books above shoulder-height, as well as all records that will not be used in the next year.

"You can't have anything left in the office – it is deeply puzzling, and quite bizarre," said one academic, on condition of anonymity. "Most academic offices are lined with books ... and dumping much of your life's work in the bin is hard to do."

Academics said some had dodged the safety auditors, retaining ceiling-high books; others had been allowed to keep some above shoulder-height as long as they had an "industrially-rated step ladder".

UTAS safety and wellbeing director Chris Arnold said any actions were about "keeping our people safe". "Throughout 2020 and 2021, we ran a series of safety-focused clean-up days in all areas of the university, which resulted in cleaner, safer spaces for our staff and students," Mr Arnold said.

"Some of the advice we provided included ensuring workspaces were not cluttered in ways that inhibited access or created fire and trip hazards, and that heavy items – like large books or boxes of equipment and items like glass sample slides – were not kept on shelves above shoulder height."

The LegCo is inquiring into UTAS' governance under state law, with peak bodies hoping it will lead to a model to restore academic freedom at universities nationally.

Senior academics are pushing for an increase in elected academic representation on key bodies.

Distinguished Professor Jamie Kirkpatrick told the inquiry even UTAS' academic senate, of which he was until recently a member, was dominated by managers.

"So the majority of people on the academic senate are in upper level management positions and a minority are elected from the academics," Professor Kirkpatrick told the inquiry.

"It's not really giving an academic perspective on the courses and on the teaching programs. It's a perspective that's dominated by the people who are managing the university."

Distinguished Professor Jeff Malpas told the inquiry UTAS was "in crisis" and "looking like a third or fourth rate" institution, due to the "McKinsey-ite" management model of Vice Chancellor Rufus Black.

"The governance structure has fallen into complete decay as a result of a centralised approach that concentrates effectively all power in the VC – and that's a sure-fire recipe for disaster," Professor Malpas said.

Former UTAS chancellor Michael Field has defended the current UTAS council as having the "right balance" and dismissed the reform push as a "harking back" by "retired academics".

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