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LegCo Committee told failure of governance and accountability in University Act puts UTAS future at risk

THE Save UTAS Campus group (SUC) has told a parliamentary committee the future of the University of Tasmania is at risk because of a failure of the governance and accountability provisions of the University Act 1992.

The group said the university's future was threatened by UTAS's appalling management culture and relationship with staff, a collapse in relationships with students including poor delivery of courses, and a badly planned relocation proposal strongly opposed by most staff, students, and the community. This was underpinned by the recent elector poll which saw 74 per cent of electors in the Hobart City Council area voting against the move.

The group was speaking to the Legislative Council Committee of Inquiry into the University Act 1992 which began its face-to-face meetings with stakeholders in Hobart today.

Chair Professor Pam Sharpe and deputy chair, Michael Foster told the committee SUC had hundreds of interactions with UTAS academics, particularly senior academics and professors, with UTAS students and student associations, and with community members which had led it the conclusion the future of Tasmania's only university was significantly threatened.

Prof Sharpe and Mr Foster said SUC believed the cause was a failure of the governance and accountability provisions in the University Act.

"The UTAS Council is dominated by management and UTAS management measures its success by whether it can force relocation against the opposition of staff and community. Management gives inadequate weight to the welfare and retention of staff or to UTAS's reputation in either education or research," Prof Sharpe and Mr Foster said.

"Because UTAS Council is dominated by UTAS management, the Council reflects senior management views and can no longer differentiate between the best interests of the university and the best interests of a management group which is thoroughly invested in forcing relocation and avoiding genuine consultation or scrutiny.

"This has been graphically illustrated by two unprecedented UTAS Council decisions.

"Firstly, it substituted its own chair, Chancellor Alison Watkins, in place of the leader of UTAS management, Vice-Chancellor Rufus Black in an unsuccessful but expensive (likely \$1 million of

education funds) public advertising campaign to try to skew public opinion behind management's relocation proposal.

"Secondly, the Council has, for the first time at any university in Australia as far as we are aware, given the Vice Chancellor an indefinite employment contract presumably as a reward for his unremitting work in trying to force relocation against the strong community/staff/student sentiment. It was obviously not because he has been able to maintain satisfactory relations with either the staff he employs or the students that UTAS should be educating.

The SUC submission goes on to say the failure of UTAS management and governance had a range of consequences including:

- UTAS has lost focus on the welfare of staff and students who are fleeing. Who can blame them when law students and staff have to seek the support of the legal profession to save their faculty from UTAS which is not teaching them adequately? With the amount of bullying and staff departures reported it is clear staff are treated with disdain.
- The Council says it can do what it wants and is not required to disclose its deliberations or the information upon which it makes crucial decisions. It even refuses to disclose to the community the information and options. and the business case which were before it in April 2019 when it made its big decision to relocate from one of Australia's best campuses and inflict itself on the Hobart CBD and at the same time become Tasmania's largest commercial residential property developer.
- UTAS Council once had broad and balanced membership including state parliamentarians and strong academic representation. Now it simply appoints many of its own membership.
- It reports annually to the State Government but only in retrospect when it's too late for government or community input. It is not required to develop a plan for approval in advance like other Government Business Enterprises which are dealing with public assets and income.
- It is not required to produce figures such as staff turnover, the number of Non-Disclosure Agreements it issues, the number of staff under investigation for serious misconduct etc.
- The common requirement that ministerial approval is required for land sale or long lease was mysteriously removed so that UTAS can sell or lease its entire campus without approval of government or community.
- Instead of being in partnership with the Tasmanian community, as claimed in its Statement of Values, UTAS Council is secretive and defensive, diverting scarce education funding to its battles with its own staff, its students, and the Tasmanian community. It devotes substantial resources to avoiding compliance with RTI (Right to Information) disclosure requests. UTAS's spend of about \$1 million on the recent elector poll campaign may have been the most expensive advertising campaign ever undertaken by a public institution in Tasmania.

"We urge this committee to review UTAS's recent actions and the public sentiment as expressed in the HCC elector poll, and take account of this in the necessary reform of the deficiencies in the 1992 Act," Prof Sharpe and Mr Foster said.

*Media please note: Professor Sharpe and Mr Foster will be speaking to the committee at 3.50 pm today Tuesday December 6.

For more information: Professor Pam Sharpe 0408 461 514 and Michael Foster 0432 962 416.