

For immediate release
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UTAS used a loophole in the 1992 Act to abandon its Sandy Bay Campus: Save UTAS Campus calls LegCo inquiry for loophole to be closed

THE Save UTAS Campus group has called for a loophole in the University of Tasmania Act 1992 to be closed to prevent the University of Tasmania from disposing of its entire campus without community approval.

In its submission to the Legislative Council inquiry into the Act, the group says that in relocating to Hobart City, UTAS has taken advantage of the loophole.

The Legislative Council inquiry into the University of Tasmania Act was established earlier this year following a successful motion by Rob Valentine MLC in response to the full range of issues relating to the University in past months.

In its submission, the Save UTAS Campus group says it is common for universities not to be permitted to sell or lease land without ministerial approval, given their land is often a gift from the community specifically for the purpose of higher education. Universities such as Melbourne and Sydney and in South Australia could not abandon their land without government consent.

“After UTAS was gifted the Sandy Bay land in 1951, UTAS was subject to a similar arrangement - the land had to be given back if UTAS did not use it for higher education,” the submission says.

“But in 1992, a new Act replaced the old one, and this provision was removed. Other accountability requirements decreased over time, with the result UTAS was able to dispose of its entire campus without community approval.

“Our Act needs to be amended so that, in line with other major universities, the university cannot sell or lease its land without approval by the Minister as representative of the Tasmanian community.”

The Save UTAS Campus group submission also says it is concerned UTAS is not accountable to any level of government (Federal, State or Local) in relation to its big decisions to alienate an entire campus.

“Other Tasmanian public institutions like Hydro Tasmania must provide the minister with an annual plan under the Government Business Enterprise Act.

“UTAS is entirely a creation of the Tasmanian Parliament, operates on land gifted by Tasmanians, and receives millions in annual Tasmanian government funding.

However, its reporting to the government is weak and only in retrospect. It does not have to say what it is thinking of doing, only what it has already done.

“The Act needs to be changed so that as a public institution, UTAS must annually provide the minister with a plan for approval, and so the community can respond to radical ideas like the intention to abandon an entire campus.”

In its submission, the Save UTAS Campus group also says UTAS has shown little respect for the community.

“Its Statement of Values says the university is ‘in partnership with the Tasmanian community’ which would be expected of an institution established by the community. However, the Act itself is silent about this, and UTAS has shown, through its decision-making and management process for relocation, that it does not take its Statement of Values seriously.

“The Act must be changed so UTAS’s unique role in Tasmania is respected by UTAS and that it never again is able to act solely in self-interest and in conflict with the community.

The group’s submission says UTAS has a long tradition of acting in secrecy and avoiding public scrutiny.

“For example, UTAS has a history of devoting resources to fighting reasonable right to information (RTI) requests for years, imposing confidentiality requirements on staff and even taking disciplinary proceedings against academic staff who dare to criticise UTAS.

“An ABC TV investigative report found UTAS management was seen by academic staff as ‘brutal’ and almost none felt safe to speak out. The conduct of UTAS around its relocation plan has graphically illustrated this.

“To change that management culture, the Act needs to change to require UTAS to promote freedom of expression, protect whistle-blowers, and bring transparency to major plans affecting the community, such as relocation.

“UTAS should become a best practice model in these areas, as might be expected of a great Tasmanian public institution.”

For more information:

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