

**OPINION PIECE FOR THE MERCURY NEWSPAPER
ATTENTION: TALKING POINT EDITOR KIRSTY EADE**

UTAS'S 80-MEMBER PANEL CONSULTATION SIMPLY A PR STUNT

By PROFESSOR PAM SHARPE*

UTAS has confirmed its 80-member so-called community consultation panel is purely a PR stunt (Phil Leersen Talking Point Friday August 19). In his column he categorically states: "Is the move itself up for discussion? The short answer is no". The panel is to discuss only *how* the move into the city happens, not *if* it happens.

So, despite claims by the Vice Chancellor Rufus Black to the 500-strong public meeting in May that the university is "listening", it seems this has well and truly gone by the wayside and if you don't agree with the relocation, then too bad.

This reaffirms the 80-member panel sessions which begins in September are simply a publicity stunt to give an impression the university is giving a voice to the community. Nothing could be further from the truth. All the panel will be doing is ratifying decisions already made. This is the reason why the Save UTAS committee decided not to participate in the process. If there is no opportunity to talk about relocation, then why waste our time sitting on a gagged panel?

Added to this is the cost of the exercise. Apart from the fact that panel members are being reimbursed to the tune of \$600 each - times that by 80 - are the massive costs the university is obviously paying a number of consultants it has commissioned to sift through the expressions of interest of panel aspirants, Enterprise Marketing and Research Services – EMRS, and the agency facilitating each session, The20 – formerly advertising agency, Clemenger, which it's known has worked for UTAS for many years. The over-arching agency is Font PR which would not come cheap plus other PR consultants in Hobart who are all doing UTAS's bidding. This is a massive amount of wasted money on a PR exercise, money that could be spent on renovating buildings and providing student support at Sandy Bay.

The Save UTAS group has always believed UTAS is not serious about a proper community consultation and the terms of reference and Mr Leersen's comments are clear that panel discussions are only focused on how make the move to the city a good one.

The fact panel members are not allowed to discuss relocation of the Sandy Bay campus plans, it begs the question of why pause rezoning but not discuss it, but not pause the CBD works yet have a consultation group to discuss it?

The terms of reference state how UTAS "can contribute to the vibrancy, culture and life of the CBD and create a civic place where all of the community feels welcome".

Other terms specify participants must:

- Contribute information to support the ongoing development of the University's master plan for the city campus.

- Consider what innovation looks like as UTAS makes this move.
- Contribute information to *support* the ongoing development of the master plan for the city campus.
- Provide a sounding board for insights and feedback on other project-related matters, such as ideas for future engagement by UTAS.
- Provide a connection to others in the community, passing on accurate and up to date information and being a conduit for other voices to be heard by UTAS.

So according to these terms, the university wants this panel to endorse what it is doing and be yet another UTAS mouthpiece.

It's quite clear from the terms of reference and confirmed by Phil Leersen, UTAS isn't interested in hearing any opposing views.

It has a precise agenda with restrictions on panel membership responsibilities. One clear PR stunt is participants *must* agree to have their photograph taken so photos can be used for online and media publicity, as well as allowing their images to be used in panel session filming.

By imposing restrictions on what participants can and can't say or do UTAS is *not* listening to the widespread concerns about relocation that have been growing exponentially over the past 12 months and more throughout the State.

Participants must agree to work only within a framework devised by the university and its PR consultants. There will be no balanced discussion. Rather, the panel will be tightly manipulated to produce responses that validate UTAS's masterplan under the consultation guise.

The fact that some selected participants have already decided to withdraw from the panel demonstrates their own serious concerns with how the sessions are to be run.

For some time, we as a group, have been troubled about UTAS's intended outcome establishing the 80-member panel. The comments from Phil Leersen and the terms of reference supplied to participants have confirmed our serious concerns.

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