

UNIVERSITY'S BIG MOVE INTO THE CITY IS HAPPENING AND IT'S A GOOD THING

I'M ALL FOR A GOOD DEBATE, BUT LET'S KEEP THE ONE ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA'S IMMINENT MOVE TO THE HOBART CBD IN PERSPECTIVE AND FACTUAL, WRITES SUE HICKEY

TASMANIANS have always loved a good fight. Think of the salmon wars, the dams, forestry, the cable car and now UTAS. We take sides and verbally belt the living daylights out of each other, with little room in the middle for rational debate.

Let's not worry about the innocent staff who value their jobs, or those without the courage to enter the fray to share their opinion. We have right on our side! It is our right to express our thoughts, be they righteous or outrageous. The side you take will decide the rumours whispered often enough to become the truth.

This month, the good people of the municipality of Hobart are being asked to vote on whether the imminent move of the last of UTAS's Sandy Bay remaining facilities to the CBD proceed.

The poll will not bind UTAS to any outcome, nor the Hobart City Council. It also represents the municipality with the highest percentage of tertiary educated persons at 43.5 per cent. Yet those of us who live across Creek Rd, the bridge or anywhere outside this council area get no voice. Glenorchy has just 9 per cent of its residents with a tertiary qualification. Two bus trips from the Sandy Bay campus or 15 minutes from the GPO should not impact your access to tertiary education, but maybe it does.

This battle is based on a few myths. One is that the university only decided on this move in a secret meeting in 2019 and has proceeded with stealth. However, the first of the significant campus moves occurred when UTAS built the Menzies Centre in Campbell St in 2011, injecting \$58m of capital investment into the CBD.

This was followed in 2013 with a \$90m medical sciences precinct, and in 2014 the \$45m IMAS campus was built at Salamanca. I became lord mayor in 2014, a time when the city was undergoing the biggest building boom it had seen in years, with five hotels, a new hospital, a refurbished Cat and Fiddle Arcade, and Myer finally rebuilt. In addition, the city invested in public infrastructure including in the Liverpool and Morrison streets public toilets, resurfaced parks, new rubbish bins and signage.

I was mayor of a council that understood the benefit of this move, despite contrary opinions now espoused by forgetful aldermen in the chase for Save UTAS campus votes.

In 2016 UTAS built student accommodation at Inveresk and renovated Domain House (first home of the University of Tasmania). Then 2017 saw the first of the accommodation buildings to house 450 students, followed by the second in 2020, housing 459 students, significantly reducing pressure on private rentals.

In 2021, students from the dilapidated Tasmanian Conservatorium of Music entered world-class teaching facilities in the Hedberg building, which is a significant contribution to the arts and the city with a \$115m capital investment. I would challenge any naysayers to not recognise the high standard and quality of this contribution to student and city life.

Let's not forget the School of Art, which has been at Hunter St for 25 years and is about to undergo a significant refurbishment, as is the heritage Philip Smith building on the Domain.

Development applications have been accepted for the renewal of the Forestry Building, which will house 3000 students and 300 staff.

These students are already accommodated in the city in the KPMG and the Vodafone buildings. The students will cross the street into stunning new purpose-built accommodation, not causing any more stress on traffic or parking because they are already in the city, along with all the above-mentioned facilities.

Launceston has a new library, and new buildings are going ahead. Burnie has an amazing West Park campus for nursing, teaching and more.

The point is that UTAS has campuses everywhere, including scientific telescopes at Bisdee Tiers and Cambridge, marine research facilities at Tarooma, and research farms in the North-West. The Sandy Bay campus is one small piece of the educational puzzle.

This battle is about "saving our campus", but I ask from what? Hadn't anyone noticed that much of the campus had been slowly moving to the city over such a long time? Why hadn't this caused a fuss previously? Maybe it was the 2700 homes that were proposed in February to be built over the next 20 years.

As with many a fight, there are casualties. People who love their work at UTAS feel hurt and even threatened by the hateful, targeted attacks on an institution they feel they are contributing to. Staff are reporting feeling bullied and stressed by attacks at barbecues or over drinks, and are even avoiding saying where they work.

I'm all for a good debate, but let's keep it in perspective and factual. Let's remember the good the university has done for the city and for all of us who have benefited from a good education.

Another myth is that UTAS is taking over the city and is ruining the CBD trade. The university has strategically purchased buildings, mostly vacant for many years and in need of renewal. These buildings provide students with proximity, on relatively flat, easy-walking ground, to more than seven times the jobs available in Sandy Bay.

It is important not to forget that the modern student profile is now an average 30 years of age, and eight out of every 10 of them must work to provide for themselves and possibly their family. School leavers are only 18 per cent of the university cohort.

Universities have been forced to change and adapt not only to the modern students' needs in a very competitive environment, but due to the fact that their funding is not for buildings or maintenance but rather for teaching. This federal funding has dropped from 0.6 per cent of GDP over the past few decades to just 0.06 per cent.

I am the first to admit the university has not handled this move well. It did not bring the community along on the journey of change, and it has suffered reputational damage as a result. However, as someone proud to work at the university – and I know there are many others who feel they can't speak up – I'll say this: the move is happening, and it is a good thing. It is reinvigorating the inner CBD with intelligent, aspirational younger people. It is helping to transform our capital city into one with vibrancy, and this will attract additional private sector investment.

All modern cities need transformation to survive and keep the next generations connected to opportunities.

Sue Hickey is the UTAS Southern Transformation stakeholder liaison and a former lord mayor of Hobart.