

UNI RELOCATING TO CBD KEY STEP IN EVOLUTION

Although now living on the mainland, I have been following the debate about the proposal to relocate the heart of the University of Tasmania to Hobart's CBD. I have a high regard for the University's Vice-Chancellor, Professor Rufus Black. I know him to be a person of the highest integrity – a visionary leader who would only pursue a course of action if he sincerely believed it to be in the public interest. Yet, I also respect and admire critics of the proposal. So, what is to be done?

In my opinion, the best argument for change lies in a vision of how Hobart's evolution might lead the evolution of Tasmania as a whole. Moving the university into the CBD is not to be seen as an end in itself – but as one important step in a process. Instead of Hobart being a city with a university, it would become a 'university city' – in which the integration of academia, commerce and government creates a new, dynamic whole. Hobart is the perfect size for this to work spectacularly well. Cities like Melbourne and Sydney are simply too large to allow for true integration. Hobart is 'just right'.

Any change will not be immediate. However, the ultimate prize is real. Universities can be magnets for excellence – drawing in people from around the world. The force of attraction is amplified when the whole environment in which people work and live is aligned. In turn, the 'sense of place' infuses everything – not least the commercial enterprises that grow in the fertile soil of a university city. Excellence breeds excellence.

What I describe is a proven formula. One only has to look at the example of places like Oxford, Cambridge (both in the UK and Massachusetts) and a host of other university cities that offer some of the most dynamic intellectual and commercial environments to be found anywhere in the world. None of these places came into existence 'fully formed'. All began with tentative steps – and grew from there. In many respects, Hobart has a 'head start' when compared to other places in the world. The city and university are already established – with their own distinct forms of excellence. The opportunity, now, is to leverage the advantages of each to reach a new level of achievement.

I realise that embracing a new vision for Hobart may require a difficult 'leap of faith' for those who have a fond attachment to the old place in Sandy Bay. Memories of the formative moments of one's youth have a

special hold on us. However, the world has changed. Gone are the days when students were free to spend hours on campus – much of it devoted to socialising. Today, most undergraduates hold down multiple jobs.

Many more study online. Instead of asking students to leave their place of work and trek to Sandy Bay – why not reimagine the CBD as an extended campus where all aspects of one’s life can be experienced? It could be exhilarating.

What, then, is to be said about the future use of the Sandy Bay campus?

I sense that a major source of resistance to the move lies in the belief that it is nothing more than a ‘real estate ploy’ dressed up as ‘progress’ so that the university can fill its coffers by selling its valuable holdings in land.

If it was so minded, the university could silence sceptics and cynics alike by placing all of its land in something like a charitable trust – required to use the land exclusively for the public good. A trust of this kind might make use of the land to provide community assets like sporting grounds, or perhaps establish a new school on the site. It would be prevented from selling prime real estate to private developers.

Being realistic, I reckon the university could make good use of additional funding for investment in its infrastructure and programs around the state. One can see the good sense in doing so. However, who says that public amenity and financial prudence cannot be reconciled?

Perhaps the solution lies in a transparent process in which the university acknowledges the genuine misgivings of its critics and voluntarily ‘ties its hands’ to the extent necessary to convince people that their worst fears cannot be realised. In turn, perhaps the critics could look beyond their fears for the future of Sandy Bay (or Hobart more generally) to imagine the extraordinary way in which the university and city might develop in the future. Perhaps, recognition that each side of this debate is proceeding in a spirit of goodwill, each aiming to advance the public good, will afford a degree of mutual trust and respect sufficient to realise a vision of what Hobart could become.

My hope is that Tasmanians will ‘dream big’ for their university – for the state of Tasmania could become as famous for its university as it is for its footballers, fine arts and food (not necessarily in that order). It could become home for some of the world’s brightest minds. Its students could enjoy a form of education that allows them to experience everything wonderful that Tasmania has to offer. Hobart’s emergence as a true university city is a necessary step towards that future.

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