

By an alum of UTAS with an association with the University lasting 35 years

The University of Tasmania and its Statement of Values

The University of Tasmania has attracted much attention recently for a number of reasons, some positive and some negative. Unfortunately, the negative are overshadowing the positive and will continue to do so while UTAS is enabled to continue as a fundamentally flawed organization. Symptoms of this flaw have been and continue to be well documented in The Mercury, The Australian, Campus Morning Mail, and by the ABC, the Save UTAS group, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), Robert Hogan (The UTAS Papers) and John Lawrence (Tasfintalk), to name a few. Recognising the symptoms, the Legislative Council of Tasmania conducted an inquiry (commencing in 2022) into the University of Tasmania Act of 1992 and the 'Save UTAS Campus' group renamed themselves 'Save UTAS'.

The community of Tasmania is currently relying on the professionalism of the academic staff, and those who directly support them, to continue to do their research and teaching in an increasingly challenging workplace environment within a culture where morale is too low, a culture that has been labelled toxic (NTEU word cloud, 2022).

International good practice is that a place of work will have a 'Statement of Values'. This Statement of Values reflects the core principles and beliefs of the organisation and is fundamental to every single action that is taken by people, for people and towards people in that organisation, thereby leading to a healthy culture in which people can thrive. An organisation in which the leaders and their management teams do not abide by its Statement of Values cannot and will not have a certain future.

There are numerous examples of UTAS senior management not meeting the values contained in its own Statement of Values, which are expressive of the fundamental flaws in the organisation.

The Statement of Values of the University of Tasmania contains the following words.

We subscribe to the fundamental values of honesty, integrity, responsibility, trust and trustworthiness, respect and self-respect, and fairness and justice that act as the basis for collective principled action.

The honesty of UTAS management is questionable. Robert Hogan has uncovered, with the help of Right to Information applications, countless examples of false and misleading claims and reports on these in The UTAS Papers. John Lawrence (Tasfintalk) comments on an email from UTAS management to staff when the 2023 Annual Report was released in May 2024.

'For an outsider it was jaw dropping to see the tenor of the email to members of the university, replete with misleading statements, half-truths and unsubstantiated assertions when commenting on the 2023 financials'.

An email to Tasmanian members of the NTEU (2024), contains the following words. (Save UTAS Facebook page, July 24, 2024)

'UTAS Senior Management has lost the trust of a majority of its staff, its student body and a large proportion of the Tasmanian public through poor management, poor consultation and a lack of transparency'.

UTAS management is not trustworthy. A management team that is dishonest is not acquitting itself with integrity.

Senior management of UTAS seem to demonstrate a lack of respect for the functions of a university.

'A university is an institution of higher learning providing facilities for teaching and research and authorized to grant academic degrees.' (Merriam-Webster dictionary)

The UTAS 2023 annual report provides an institutional overview that includes only two poorly constructed and largely uninformative pages each on research and teaching, while including 36 pages on sustainability which is UTAS's claim to fame as they are first in some rankings for sustainability. One might question the

respect UTAS' management has for the core functions of the university, those being research and teaching. The report notably lacks meaningful reporting on enrolment numbers or trends.

For many academics, academia is a way of life. They possess a passion for their research and for passing on their knowledge through teaching students, both at undergraduate and post graduate levels.

Academics are not being accorded the respect they deserve with change often being forced upon them, without genuine consultation processes.

'UTAS's reply (concerning the College of Business and Economics) is nothing more than bureaucratic doublespeak. They continue to shroud their true intentions in a fog of procedural jargon, showing a blatant disregard for genuine consultation and wellbeing.' (NTEU, July 2024)

There is a perception by UTAS management, including amongst Human Resources (People and Wellbeing) that academics are incapable of being leaders at higher levels.

The fact that there are very few genuine academics with a recent rigorous academic background either in management teams at UTAS or on the University Council is very revealing. The perspective and input of academics is neither trusted nor respected, nor valued.

Students in the law school released the following statement on April 29, 2022.

'We believe that there are fundamental issues at the Law Faculty which have, so far, gone largely unaddressed and have been ignored. These issues are both institutional in nature and specific to particular units/subjects. The subject specific issues are symptoms of the much broader institutional issues.'

We believe that the following issues threaten the very existence and future of the Law School:

- *High staff turnover and the dramatic loss of subject-matter experts.*
- *Severe cuts to teaching and learning resources.*
- *A new teaching model that has been inflexibly and strictly applied to the detriment of content delivery.*
- *Overworked and unsupported staff.*
- *A culture where:*
 - *Concerns and issues go unaddressed and are dismissed.*
 - *The welfare of students and staff is undermined'.*

Students and staff at the law school received concessions from management in part due to having prominent Hobart lawyers take on their case. This high level of advocacy is not available to students in other colleges, a fact recognized by the then president of the Law School Society.

Evidence of the accuracy of the law student's claim concerning the broader institution is highlighted by an alarming decline in student numbers. Between 2013 and 2023, the number of Tasmanian student enrolments at UTAS fell from 7 805 to 5 427 – a decline of 30.5 percent. In the same period, the number of Tasmanian students enrolling at mainland universities actually rose from 1 697 to 2 315 – an increase of 36.4 per cent. The corollary of these figures was that while only 17.9 percent of Tasmanian students were enrolled at mainland universities in 2013, the figure increased to 29.9 percent in 2023, meaning that nearly one in three Tasmanian students is now choosing to enroll at a mainland university. (The UTAS Papers) These numbers are a poor reflection on UTAS leadership, highlighting the lack of respect that UTAS senior management have for the core function of teaching – in particular teaching Tasmanian students for the benefit of Tasmania. Students are not prepared to trust their education to management at UTAS and UTAS management do not appear to be taking their responsibility for teaching seriously enough. UTAS cannot afford any downward trends as this will affect their ability to offer a breadth of courses and consequently staff numbers, contributing to a shrinking university.

Another symptom of a shrinking university is in an area of research funding. The number of applications for a prestigious Australian Research Council Discovery grant, has fallen from 78 in 2018, to 32 in 2024, a decline of 59 percent. The success rate has also declined from 25.6 percent to 15.6 percent.

The definition of a university says it is ‘*authorized to grant academic degrees*’ (M-W dictionary). ‘-In addition to chairing Council, the role of the Chancellor is to confer degrees....’ (UTAS Council Ordinance https://www.utas.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/1372429/University-Council-Ordinance.pdf)

The Chancellor’s attendance at graduation ceremonies is infrequent. From 2023 until the present, she has attended only 20 percent of the ceremonies in Tasmania, or 8 of 39, and the Vice Chancellor rarely attends. This is a further example of a lack of respect for graduating students and the academics and staff who have taught them. These ceremonies are the opportunity for the Chancellor to celebrate with students, staff, families and community the achievements of our students, wishing them well in all future endeavours. One would question the integrity of a Chancellor who does not confer degrees given it is a major and stated duty of her role. Why does UTAS have a Chancellor who does not take every opportunity to celebrate with staff and students the success of a core function of a university?

Senior management at UTAS does not seem to demonstrate respect for the core functions of a university, and its people – the academics, the professional staff and the students.

There are a number of people who have spoken out, and a larger number who are too scared or scarred to speak out, on the lack of fairness or justice practiced by UTAS management. Many have signed Non-Disclosure Agreements which prevent them from speaking out. Accounts of bullying of individuals and schools are so frequent that there must be truth to them. These accounts of bullying and the resulting physical and mental harm are a symptom of an institution that is not upholding its own Statement of Values. Bullying and harassment are not part of the culture of an institution that subscribes to its Statement of Values. A headline from The Weekend Australian states: “University of Tasmania management culture condemned as ‘disappeared’ staff speak out” and the article contains the following words:

An academic from Iran

‘The attitude of UTAS toward me was even worse than institutes in Iran, a country that is frequently criticized for not adhering to democratic principles’.

Greg Barnes, a human rights lawyer

‘The internal discipline system is quite capricious and it can have enormous and devastating implications for individuals caught up in it. It doesn’t seem to afford procedural fairness’.

Pam Sharpe, a former history professor

‘It’s abominable that UTAS attracts world class teachers and researchers then treats them at worst callously, at best with indifference’.

UTAS owes \$11 million dollars to those who have been underpaid. UTAS is not the only university in Australia to have underpaid staff, but UTAS does not learn from its mistakes and the NTEU has numerous examples of those who have been or still are being unfairly treated. There appears to be little justice at UTAS.

Further words from the Statement of Values

Nurturing a vital and sustainable community

We value the care, connection and energy that come from a community of many levels and dimensions. Keeping our community strong supports each of us to find our place, do excellent work and extend our capabilities. We enable and participate in authentic conversations that allow us to be agents of change and transformation.

Amongst academics and students in the university schools, there is a sense of community, and excellent work is happening in research and teaching along with authentic conversations. However, UTAS as a whole is not working as a community in part due to the lack of authentic conversations between senior management, the UTAS Council and those doing or enabling the work of the university – research and teaching. Management at UTAS is responsible for ensuring that UTAS is a valued and respected part of the wider Tasmanian

community. An important part of the Chancellor's role is presumably to champion UTAS in the community so that the community in turn provides UTAS with strong support. UTAS would benefit from having a Chancellor who actually lives within, and listens to, the Tasmanian community as has been the case in the past.

Intentional online learning models are not conducive to making connections, and a vital and sustainable community cannot happen without authentic connections.

Working from the strength diversity brings

We value diversity and the strength, resilience and creativity that it brings. We harness its gifts. In supporting the contribution and well-being of all, we create a welcoming, caring and inclusive environment.

Yet, an article in the Australian (May 30, 2024), with the title 'University of Tasmania leaders asked staff what they thought – response made their ears burn,' said the following

'University of Tasmania staff have given a damning assessment of senior management, with as few as 12 percent in some colleges believing it is handling change well'.

'UTAS.... has in recent years been plagued by claims of bullying, erosion of academic independence and resources....'

'Sections of a staff engagement survey obtained by The Australian show that in some colleges as few as 16 percent of staff believe management effectively directs funding, people and effort. A similarly low number believes there are good methods in place to improve systems and processes...'

'In some colleges, less than a quarter of staff believe UTAS is in a position to succeed in the next few years...'

The results of this engagement survey strongly suggest that UTAS management is not creating a welcoming and caring environment. Nor do they support the well-being of all.

The final paragraph of the UTAS Statement of values says

We lead by example, supporting each other to act with integrity, be accountable, and consistently live our values every day.

Really?

How accountable are a Chancellor and a University Council who can approve an ongoing appointment for the Vice-Chancellor, a contract with no end date? One might be justified in questioning the integrity of the Chancellor, The Vice-Chancellor and the University Council in either being complicit in or accepting this extraordinary situation. A contract with no end date is not common practice in any organization in the present economic climate and therefore should have been a profoundly alarming wake-up call for those with a desire to see our University succeed into the future.

Neither senior management of UTAS, nor the University Council, seem to be subscribing to the UTAS Statement of Values. These values and guiding principles must be the foundations on which UTAS is built and are absolutely fundamental to the success or not of the University of Tasmania. The Tasmanian University community is fractured, and the symptoms of this fracture are evident in a far more extensive list than discussed here. While the current senior management team continue to demonstrate failures in subscribing to their own Statement of Values, the symptoms of our University in decline will continue.

Now is the time for political leaders and those on the University Council to recognise that management at UTAS is fundamentally flawed. While UTAS denies it, UTAS is accountable through the Government and Parliament to the Tasmanian people, and therefore our government has a responsibility to all Tasmanians to ensure that UTAS is the best it can be. Community members, academics, students, the media and the Save UTAS group will continue to highlight the remarkably diverse symptoms of our failing university, but this will become more and more frustrating and futile while the underlying flaw is ignored.

An interim management team should be put in place - one that understands academics, research, teaching and students and one whose priority is to value the academic staff and students in their academic endeavours, while subscribing to the Statement of Values. While this interim team is restoring unity and pride amongst our academics and students, a new Chancellor, Vice Chancellor and senior executive should be sought using a transparent and consultative selection process involving academic and professional staff. There needs to be a complete reset at UTAS of the entire management team and the University Council.

The Tasmanian community and its leaders are in a difficult position regarding the plans of UTAS. UTAS management cannot make decisions in good faith around its future while it is changing so rapidly. Only when it is once again functioning as a highly regarded university with a healthy culture, and a new management team that reflects the UTAS Statement of Values will it be in a position to plan for a future.