

UTAS sees the light on Sandy Bay, but should open its

Last month, the state Minister for Infrastructure Kerry Vincent submitted UTAS's business case to the federal government, seeking a funding commitment of \$401.5m towards a revamped STEM precinct at the Sandy Bay campus.

Regardless of whether the business case attracts federal funding, it presents overwhelming arguments for keeping STEM at Sandy Bay, rather than relocating it to the Hobart CBD, which was the alternative option considered in the business

Business case to federal government makes an overwhelming argument, says **Robert Hogan**

case. However, the business case also casts serious doubts on UTAS's previous decision-making, including the \$200m Forestry Building folly, and presents a flawed proposal to raise UTAS's own funding contribution to the STEM project.

Among the advantages of keeping STEM at Sandy Bay, the business case strongly emphasises its social

amenity and large green spaces, which it rightly connects to physical and mental health benefits.

Sandy Bay is also recognised as ideal for hands-on learning and fieldwork, as well as providing for future campus expansion.

This includes having space to support industry collaboration and community partnerships, such as

establishment of a science museum. Critically, the business case demonstrates that the Sandy Bay option is economically superior to the CBD option, which would still require a Sandy Bay presence, leading to "duplication of assets and inefficient resource allocation".

The business case is vague on the reasons for this, but many STEM facilities would be impossible to locate in the CBD, such as the 15 glasshouses located above Churchill Ave, the engineering department's two-storey hydraulics laboratory with

its 3m sump, and facilities for managing hazardous waste.

This vagueness may be deliberate. The "duplication of assets and inefficient resource allocation" was an issue largely neglected in UTAS's previous business cases, in 2016, to relocate STEM to the Hobart CBD, and in 2019 to relocate the entire Sandy Bay campus to the CBD.

The amenity and green space advantages of the Sandy Bay campus site stressed in the business case, of course, apply to other faculties. The business case also emphasises the

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other eye to the advantages of selling out of the CBD

importance of inter-faculty connectedness, stating: "The co-location of the STEM precinct with other faculties on the Sandy Bay campus would provide students with greater access to interdisciplinary learning, enhancing the appeal of STEM courses."

Seen from this perspective, the recent highly problematic relocation of the College of Business and Economics to the CBD and the proposed move of Humanities and Social Sciences, in 2026, to the Forestry Building are clear mistakes.

This makes the more than \$200m (in today's dollars) involved in site purchase and refurbishment of the Forestry Building nothing but a needless extravagance.

Moreover, the Forestry Building is dysfunctional (Professor Michael Bennett, Mercury, February 27). It is no wonder that many of the staff slated to occupy the building do not want to move there (Mercury, March 3), despite praise by some politicians – generally after UTAS management curated tours. The \$200m would have been much better spent at Sandy Bay.

For all its strength in highlighting the arguments to keep the Sandy Bay campus, the business case has major flaws. Chief among these is UTAS's plan to leverage federal funding by contributing "a proposed \$100m (through) land sale or transfer to the Tasmanian government, subject to Tasmanian parliamentary approval for rezoning" of Sandy Bay campus land above Churchill Ave.

The most recent valuation of this land in UTAS's 2019 business case suggests a value of only about \$35m, meaning UTAS is effectively using a

business case to propose that the state government pay an overmarket price for land that was gifted to UTAS.

Tellingly, Minister Vincent made no mention of a state government commitment in his covering letter to the federal government on March 26, even though such a commitment would have strengthened UTAS's funding application.

A better and more practical plan would be for UTAS to sell its Hobart CBD properties, which the business case makes clear are superfluous.

Such a sale would provide at least

\$100m and release land immediately for housing in the CBD, which would reinvigorate the city. UTAS would retain its land and STEM facilities above Churchill Ave, keeping options open for any future funding scenario, while providing room for the very expansion flagged in the business case. Sale of any surplus land could be considered later.

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