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## THE LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL SELECT COMMITTEE MET IN COMMITTEE ROOM 2, PARLIAMENT HOUSE, HOBART ON MONDAY, 1 MAY 2023

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### INQUIRY INTO THE PROVISIONS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA PROVISIONS ACT 1992

**The Committee met at 11.02 a.m.**

**CHAIR** (Mr Valentine) - Welcome everybody, including those who may be viewing this online. We are indeed in a session dealing with the Legislative Council Select Committee into the Provisions of the University of Tasmania Act 1992. We have with us today the Launceston Chamber of Commerce representative, William Cassidy, the Executive Officer.

I will introduce the members who are at the table for you, Will. We have Sarah Lovell, Meg Webb, Rob Valentine, Mike Gaffney, and we have the secretary of the committee, Jenny Mannering, and Allison Scott in support, and we have James Reynolds from Hansard - a very important component of our inquiry.

I'd like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land, the Tasmanian Aboriginal people on this land that we are now meeting on and we acknowledge and pay respect to those Aboriginal people and Elders past and present. We recognise them as the traditional and original owners and the continuing custodians of this land.

Now before we commence today, obviously this committee is taking sworn evidence and so I ask you, Will, to make the statutory declaration which has been forwarded to you, if you wouldn't mind reading that.

**Mr WILLIAM CASSIDY**, EXECUTIVE OFFICER, LAUNCESTON CHAMBER OF COMMERCE WAS CALLED, MADE THE STATUTORY DECLARATION, AND WAS EXAMINED VIA WEBEX

**CHAIR** - Thank you for that. Sorry, I didn't introduce Nick Duigan, who is also Webexing in today. Apologies, Nick. He is a member of the inquiry panel.

Thank you for attending and for taking the time out of your no doubt busy day to present to us. Our hearings today are in relation to the Legislative Council Select Committee Inquiry into the Provisions of the University of Tasmania Act 1992. As we said before, it's important to note that all evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege and I remind you that any comments you make outside the hearing may not be afforded such privilege.

A copy of the information for witnesses has been made available to you, and I'm assuming that you've read those. Is that correct?

**Mr CASSIDY** - Absolutely.

**CHAIR** - Thank you. So if you get to a point where you feel that there is something you wish to say in camera, then you can make the committee aware of that and the committee can deliberate and either accept that request or otherwise.

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The evidence you present is being recorded and the *Hansard* version will be published on the committee website when it becomes available.

Today our process is that you'll be given an opportunity to make an opening statement in relation to your letter to us because there is no submission as it is understood. So do you wish to make an opening statement?

**Mr CASSIDY** - Yes please.

**CHAIR** - Okay, so go ahead.

**Mr CASSIDY** - I'm William Cassidy, Executive Officer of the Launceston Chamber of Commerce, based at Level 1, Suite 2, 63-65 Cameron St, Launceston.

I'd like to begin by thanking the committee for allowing the chamber to contribute to the inquiry. The University of Tasmania is a platinum member of the Launceston Chamber of Commerce and has been a member of the chamber for many years. However, our relationship with the University is not the conventional member/chamber relationship. As well as supporting them, we also monitor their activities, provide feedback when necessary and we've been keen enthusiasts of the northern transformation project.

As Kate Daley, the chamber President and I stated in our letter to the committee, from a business community perspective, a world class and connected university is critical to the competitiveness of Tasmania. A well functioning university has the capacity to lift our economic output through both the export of education attraction of students to stimulate our economy and raise the capability of Tasmanian business through education of the workforce and assistance in research and development.

That concludes my opening statement. Thank you.

**CHAIR** - Thank you for that, Will. Going to your letter which outlines a number of clauses that come in the act, I'm particularly interested in clause 6(b) 'to encourage and undertake research'.

You say that from a business perspective; the chamber considers that UTAS has a significant role and responsibility and an increase in the economic potential of businesses through a greater focus on supporting industry-led research that will create career pathways for academic students into industry.

Now just looking at that, some might say that approach is more like a college of advanced education rather than the university entity. Do you have a comment on that?

**Mr CASSIDY** - I think what we've written to clause 6(b) builds on what we've said to clause 6(a). We feel that the primary reason that a lot of our young people are attending university, and more mature people, is to gain knowledge and skills needed to get a job in their chosen field. It lends itself to, from a business perspective, we believe UTAS has a significant role and responsibility in increasing the economic potential of business through a greater focus on supporting industry. I think the Northern Transformation Project's aspect of moving the Tasmanian Institute of Agriculture to Northern Tasmania is a key example of this. Agriculture

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is a leading industry in the north so by moving the institute to the northern campus we hope that the research will benefit local agri-businesses in the region.

**Mr DUIGAN** - It was pretty obvious to us on the committee that the chamber was very keen to present, and I'm just wondering if you could give us some idea of why you were so keen to give evidence to this committee or why the chamber was?

**Mr CASSIDY** - I think from looking at some of the submissions to the inquiry that were publicly available online, there was a perception that these submissions were more about the move from the Sandy Bay campus into the UTAS CBD. We wanted to provide a northern perspective on the other aspects of the review, including a review of the University of Tasmania Act.

**Mr DUIGAN** - You mentioned in your letter that the Chamber has had a long-term relationship with the university. I'd be interested to know whether you feel that the conduct or the behaviour, whether the university has changed the way it conducts business over that long period of time that you've had an association.

**Mr CASSIDY** - Certainly. I think under the current leadership the university is more about collaboration and working with business and industry. I've been with Launceston Chamber of Commerce since 2019 and there seems to be a greater focus, particularly through the College of Business and Economics, to not only cater to employers in the region's needs, but to prepare students for work rather than expecting them to be ready to go into a role straight away once they've graduated. A primary example of this that I can give you straight away is the Masters of Professional Accounting course that's offered through the College of Business and Economics.

Not only are the students trained in, or gain skills in that particular area of accountancy, they're also given opportunities to improve their English, attend work experience days so that when they come to the workplace, they're not as - if will you pardon the expression - 'fresh out of the box' as a graduate than in the past. We've had one of these students do work experience and we were able to give her real-time skills that she can take forward into any future roles.

**Mr DUIGAN** - I will just take you back to something you said earlier in your opening statement, that the chamber had a role in monitoring the activity of the university. Is that something that you can expand on?

**Mr CASSIDY** - For example, very early during the Northern Transformation Project, we were given a glimpse at architectural drawings of the proposed buildings that would make up the new Inveresk campus of the university. We provided feedback.

We were, to begin with, a little bit underwhelmed by the designs, but because of the constant feedback and consultation the university has had with the chamber, we're now really impressed with the sustainability and the architecture of the new buildings. I've actually said in the past that they're an example for private developers.

**Ms WEBB** - In your submission in relation to clause 6(e), you make the point on the first dot point, that the chamber believes UTAS's decision to relocate into Tasmania's city centres rather than to refurbish existing is because its facilities meet this function requirement. Does the chamber actively take a view? I can understand why you would have a strong and informed

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view on the northern transformation. The southern decision to relocate is a sort of separate matter, certainly very different circumstances given that there was City Deal money attached to the Launceston move, whereas for example, there's no such money attached to the southern move. Does the chamber actively have a view about the southern move or feel that you're in a position to have a view about that?

**Mr CASSIDY** - I would say we don't have an official view on the Southern Transformation Project, but we're so impressed with what has been done as part of the Northern Transformation Project. Some of you may be aware of it, I issued a press release in 2022 basically inviting UTAS that if the Hobart CBD won't have you, Launceston will. Feel free to bring more courses north.

We can understand from anecdotal conversations that we've had, why it's a good idea for the University of Tasmania to relocate from Sandy Bay into the city. There are transportation issues that we've been made aware of. Just that connection with business, but no official position at the moment.

**Ms WEBB** - Thank you.

**CHAIR** - Okay, Will, an interesting observation.

**Mr DUIGAN** - I am interested in just around a lot of the evidence that we've heard, while not talking directly about the Hobart CBD move, it does point to the decision-making of the university and whether there is enough oversight and whether the university potentially has too much power to make those decisions. When you take your mind back to the northern transformation, Will, do you recall that being an issue at the time? Was the the university seen to be a power unto itself?

**Mr CASSIDY** - That's a very good question, Nick. From what I recall, there was controversy around the decision and there are still probably some residents of Launceston who are opposed but from what I understand, everything has been done appropriately as far as the Northern Transformation Project goes. I think that the University has really acted appropriately. I don't think they have too much power. I believe that the Northern Transformation Project is going to be incredibly beneficial for Launceston, both the Inveresk campus and the redevelopment of the Newnham campus, and no, I don't think that the University has too much power.

**CHAIR** - Further to that, I guess the issue is consultation. This is a statewide inquiry, it's not just about the south, as you would appreciate. It's important that we look at process and so with respect to the northern transformation, can you give us an impression as to what the businesses think in terms of how the university has gone about consulting over these sorts of moves away from the fringes of the city to closer into the centre?

**Mr CASSIDY** - I think generally their approach to socialising the move in, in the north here, has been well planned. It's interesting, if we compare the the Northern Transformation Project to the Southern Transformation Project, we're looking at an area which was probably somewhat underutilised in the Inveresk campus. While it was the Royal Launceston Showgrounds, it was only used one or two months of the year.

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We've been taken on a journey with the Northern Transformation Project. When the first building was completed, there was a grand opening. The community has been invited to use those facilities. The parking has been corrected when it's been raised as an issue. Generally, the steps they've taken as part of the Northern Transformation Project have been quite positive.

**CHAIR** - Okay, so for instance has the council been involved right from the word go? To your knowledge, did it go through a planning process of any sort or a sign-off by Launceston City Council before the moves occurred?

**Mr CASSIDY** - To my knowledge, the correct procedures with development applications have been adhered to. Because some of the land required, I believe, for the for the new campus at Inveresk was owned by the City of Launceston, they worked well together to ensure that the the developments have gone ahead without hindrance. I'm fairly positive that there's a very positive relationship between the City of Launceston and and the University of Tasmania.

**CHAIR** - Has the general public view been positive or has there been any angst publicly expressed through the media?

**Mr CASSIDY** - There has been some angst, but I believe it's in the minority and from what I understand there probably isn't the understanding of the potential for the Newnham campus.

Planning for the Newnham campus has been a hot topic of conversation most recently, particularly with the plan to incorporate social housing onto the site, to expand the Australian Maritime College and the move of the Tasmanian Institute of Agriculture.

**Mr GAFFNEY** - Will, does the Launceston Chamber of Commerce take any stats or numbers on the number of international students who work and play in the Launceston area? Do you have any stats on that?

**Mr CASSIDY** - No statistics, unfortunately, just anecdotal items because Henty House, where the majority of the College of Business and Economics courses are currently being undertaken is just a block away, I can tell you that participation by international students is strong in that college.

**Mr GAFFNEY** - Okay. We we have heard evidence that our international numbers, not only because of COVID-19, but because of what's happening at the university - which is statewide, I imagine - has affected the number of international students and students from other mainland states coming here. I'd be interested to know, have you heard any conversation about difficulty in getting a lot of those international students or students from the mainland would-be workers, I would imagine in a lot of the hospitality and those sort of areas. I'm just wondering whether you had any comments through the chamber about reflecting that situation?

**Mr CASSIDY** - Only that I've heard that there are hopes for stronger international students studying at the northern campus. While that's not a direct link, we do know that there are staff shortages in the hospitality industry. There could be a link between the lower enrolments and that skill shortage.

**Mr GAFFNEY** - Okay, thank you.

**Ms WEBB** - I'm looking at the part of your submission which relates to clause 6(fa), which is around 'to foster or promote the commercialisation of any intellectual property'. You made a series of comments under that, about strengthening that clause in the act to include facilitating commercialisation. Then you make some points that relate to greater transparency about UTAS's approach around IP ownership and progress reporting and the like. Would you like to expand on that to explain why you've made the suggestions around things like strengthening and greater transparency in relation to what occurs now and what you'd like to see improve or be strengthened?

**Mr CASSIDY** - Absolutely. We believe that the entrepreneurial ecosystem in Tasmania needs improvement and we're not enjoying the benefits of a really strong entrepreneurial ecosystem that states like Queensland or South Australia are. In an entrepreneurial ecosystem, your educational institutions, particularly universities, play a really strong role particularly in research, intellectual property and the entrepreneurialism that can come from that. As part of our vision for a stronger entrepreneurial ecosystem in Tasmania, we'd like to see UTAS strengthened to include facilitating commercialisation of the IP and greater transparency as to what they're doing with entrepreneurship. It's only due to an introduction by a staff member at UTAS that I became aware that the University of Tasmania has an incubator program for entrepreneurs. It's really vital that we re-examine the role of the University of Tasmania in a Tasmanian entrepreneurial ecosystem.

**Ms WEBB** - Are there some specific examples where you've identified that something has fallen short or an approach that's fallen short? You mentioned not being aware of that particular initiative. Are there any other things you'd like to point to that you'd like to see treated differently?

**Mr CASSIDY** - As far as entrepreneurialism goes, the incubator is currently based in Hobart. The first step, we think, would be to see the university have an incubator for entrepreneurialism at each of their locations and possibly even working with a state government office of the chief entrepreneur.

There is a lot that could be done to improve the entrepreneurial ecosystem in Tasmania. We want to see UTAS take a stronger role in any potential developments of the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

**Ms WEBB** - Do you think that there's a receptivity to that within UTAS? Not everything needs to be put into the act in terms of directing UTAS in terms of what it does and the scope of what it does. So is it that you think it needs to be in the act because there's not a receptivity to it to that in UTAS or that couldn't be dealt with through communications and shared planning that happens beneath the act at a more operational level and planning?

**Mr CASSIDY** - It could be. From the discussions that chamber president Kate Daley and I had, we felt that if the act is to be examined, and this is crucial for entrepreneurialism and it's crucial for the future of Tasmania, we'd like to see it incorporated.

**CHAIR** - Just a bit further on that. Can you see the possibility of conflicts of interest arising through this approach? For instance, if the university itself ends up being bound into the development of IP and its relationships with various components of industry, for instance, that when it comes to playing the role of - I won't say honest broker, but the holders of the

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knowledge - that they're constrained in terms of examining certain industries. Let's take, for example, something that's happened in the past. The Institute for Marine and Antarctic Studies may well partner with industry and there may well be some development of IP through that but they might also be asked to sit in judgment on what industry does and the science behind that.

Can you see that some of this development might actually have a downside, or not?

**Mr CASSIDY** - That's a very good question and I think it needs to be explored further. However, I see it happening in other states, where the universities in other states play a crucial role in providing - sorry, I'm a little lost for words.

**CHAIR** - That's okay. Take your time.

**Mr CASSIDY** - I believe in other states universities act as a research partner and stimulator of the development of IP that can be used for entrepreneurship.

**Mr GAFFNEY** - Will, in that case, you can always phone a friend or ask for another question, I think, because it lost me as well, but whatever.

**CHAIR** - Okay.

**Mr DUIGAN** - The final one which is clause 6(g), where you speak and this might be the key point around the northern transformation: I wonder if you can give some more context to this where it is that the university 'engage in activities which promote the social, cultural and economic welfare of the community and to make available for those purposes the resources of the University'?

For me, that nicely sums up the northern transformation. Can you add some context to that?

**Mr CASSIDY** - Certainly. Looking at the College of Business and Economics because that's one of the colleges that we work most closely with, they are currently providing a range of talks on thought leadership or leadership management, that sort of topic. That's an open invitation to people to listen to those talks and contribute to the conversation and then it informs future direction of more talks or perhaps study or research.

I think it's important that the university is seen as a leader in providing opportunities for collaboration. Another example of that could be where we received a presentation and interested parties received a presentation on urban greening. That conversation led to the development of several urban greening thoughts by the chamber. We've entered into a memorandum of understanding with the City of Launceston to green outer city streets and our suburban streets. It would be good to see more collaborations and projects where the community and business can get involved.

**Ms WEBB** - The paragraph that comes after that in your submission right toward the end of the page speaks about that the chamber would like to see greater industry engagement in the determination of the course content and delivery methods at the university. I'm interested in that, particularly if you've an example, because while I could say that that sort of comment might relate well to a TAFE-style institution or level of training, universities are fairly unique in terms of their academic approach to things and that being something that the academics and

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academic experts in those areas inform and develop. Can you talk more or give any clearer example of what you're referring to there, where industry might be part of determining course content or delivery methods in a university course?

**Mr CASSIDY** - Absolutely. Again, I'll use the College of Business and Economics as an example. In 2019, the chamber hosted a forum where senior staff from what is now called the College of Business and Economics attended a forum with business leaders in the accounting and finance space. One of the big conversations that they had was when mentoring students on accounting information systems, the information systems that were being taught weren't being used in businesses in Tasmania. So I believe, following that conversation, the university now trains accounting students in more commonly used accounting software systems. It was also highlighted that there are a number of courses that aren't currently available in Tasmania. Financial planning was one of those, and now, unfortunately, I'm not sure if that has changed, but at least the senior staff from that college were made aware of the need for such courses.

**Ms WEBB** - So your observation is that this sort of engagement is in fact occurring between various industries and the university, but you're just expressing the view that that should continue and maybe expand?

**Mr CASSIDY** - Absolutely. I know that there are committees that provide information to different colleges. Whether this needs to be formalised or whether, for business-related degrees, the Chamber of Commerce or the regional Chambers of Commerce could be avenues for creating that engagement between industry and the University of Tasmania.

**CHAIR** - Our time has expired, but I need to make a small clarification. I was reflecting on the example that I used earlier about IMAS and the salmon industry. I wasn't alluding to any particular issue, I was just using that as an example of a relationship. It's a hypothetical. I need to make that clear for the record - when relationships form between universities and industry and the different roles that that they might play.

Will, thank you very much for presenting to us today. We've noted the various aspects of the act that you've highlighted and some of the suggestions that you've made. It's appreciated and the committee will consider those suggestions that you've made as part of any deliberations that we have. Thank you. Is there anything else you wish to say before we wrap up?

**Mr CASSIDY** - Thank you for the opportunity and in closing, could I possibly draw the committee's attention to our suggestion of reducing the costs of degrees in skill shortages areas? There are a number of industries where I speak to members on a regular basis who are struggling to find staff. By decreasing the costs of degrees and making them more attractive, particularly in light of the recent conversations around our HECS debt indexation, it could be quite a draw card for attracting more staff to these areas that are seeing skill shortages.

**Ms WEBB** - Can I check, who is it that you think should be subsidising those courses? State government, federal government or the university itself?

**Mr CASSIDY** - Possibly a combination of all three, but as it's a very local-based problem, it could be that the state government look to providing economic stimulus to study those units or degrees.



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**CHAIR** - Thank you for that, Will. Just to remind you as we close, that the evidence taken today is protected by parliamentary privilege, and I will remind you that any comments you may make outside the hearing may not afford such privilege. You're aware of that?

**Mr CASSIDY** - Absolutely. Thank you.

**CHAIR** - Thank you for attending.

**THE WITNESS WITHDREW.**

**The committee suspended at 11.39 a.m.**