

**Review of Higher Education in Australia  
Australian Universities Accord  
Submission to the Interim Report  
University of Tasmania Northern Support Group**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The *University of Tasmania Northern Support Group* broadly supports many points proposed in the interim report.

In particular, we agree strongly with the need to overcome the difficulties to university access encountered by people in all: rural; regional; and outer suburban/metropolitan locations.

We note that Tasmania is in a unique situation, with only one university (UTas). This is based in the capital city, where the majority of the population of the state does not reside.

In the recent past, UTas senior management has threatened to close its campus in Launceston, which would be to the serious detriment of the people living there, and to the prosperity of the city.

Whilst we recognise that the current UTas senior management are not of this view, and support the campus in Launceston (and the North West Coast), we are concerned that future senior management may reverse this policy.

**We recommend that, in order to guarantee the long-term sustainability of a full university campus in the North of the state, funding needs to be allocated to UTas based on where the population resides, and that the University be required to distribute this funding along the same lines.**

Finally, we note the importance of small national institutions, such as AMC, and the difficulties that they may experience when embedded into a larger, state based, university, and recommend that consideration be given to providing funding for them directly.

## 1. Introduction

We are members of the *University of Tasmania Northern Support Group* who have concerns about the *long-term* future of university education in Northern Tasmania. The core members of this Group are:

***Dr Brian Hartnett:*** Former Managing Director of Tasmanian Alkaloids Pty Ltd and a former member of the University of Tasmania Council

***Professor Emeritus Coleman O’Flaherty:*** Former Director of the Tasmanian State Institute of Technology, former Deputy Vice Chancellor of the University of Tasmania, and a former member of the University Council

***Adjunct Professor Martin Renilson:*** Former Head of Naval Architecture and Ocean Engineering at the Australian Maritime College and former Dean of Maritime Programs at the Higher Colleges of Technology, United Arab Emirates

***Professor Emeritus John Williamson:*** Former Chair of the Academic Senate, former Dean of Education, and a former Member of Council at the University of Tasmania

***Hon. Don Wing:*** Former President of the Legislative Council of Tasmania and former Mayor of Launceston.

This group formed when the University of Tasmania (UTas) threatened to close its campus in Launceston, due to this costing too much, and the then senior management claim that the University was “losing money” on it.

Our group is very conscious of the significant economic, technological, and societal changes that have occurred over the past 30 to 40 years – and which are even now accelerating. Education, especially higher education, is a key ingredient in the way that society copes with, and manages, such changes and, as history shows, universities have profound influences on the places in which they operate during these changing times. Looking to the future, communities with university campuses that succeed in promoting educational opportunity and equality of access for students from their locations will thrive; those that do not, will slumber.

These technological and socio-economic revolutions are causing most universities to vary their modes of operation to cope with the challenges of change whilst, at the same time, they attempt to fulfill the obligations for which they were established. Our group is concerned with ensuring that Tasmania as a whole, and especially Launceston, benefits from these transformations.

As a result of the above we are particularly interested in the ongoing review into the future of higher education in Australia, and have studied, with great interest, the interim report, published on the 20<sup>th</sup> of July, 2023.

## **2. Comments on access**

We note that in the interim report the difficulty of access to universities for those not located close to an existing university is raised. The resulting disincentive to obtain university qualifications for people living in these locations is stressed. We are particularly pleased to see that it is recognised that this difficulty can be encountered by people in all: rural; regional; and outer suburban/metropolitan locations.

As noted in the interim report this difficulty means that the educational level achieved by people in these locations will be lower than elsewhere, and hence these places will not prosper in the same way as those with a university campus. We strongly agree with this point.

One of the two solutions proposed is the creation of Regional University Centres (RUCs). Whilst we agree that this may be a good solution in certain situations, and would support their use in these cases, it must be recognised that this is not always a suitable solution. These RUCs will never be able to offer the same level of university experience as the main university campus.

## **3. Tasmania's unique position**

We believe that it is important to recognise that Tasmania is in a unique position compared to the other states and territories.

The majority of Tasmania's population does not live in the capital city, yet the whole of the state is served by a single university, UTas, which has its headquarters in Hobart.

This differs, for example, from Queensland, where there is no expectation that the University of Queensland serves the population in Townsville, or Cairns. There is a university located in Townsville, which enables people there to have good access to a "full" university experience on their doorstep.

UTas has a history of focusing on Hobart, to the detriment of the majority of the state's population who do not live there. As university education is becoming more and more important, we feel very strongly that those living in Launceston ought to be able to access the full university experience, without the additional costs, and difficulties, associated with having to travel to Hobart.

As noted above, we are very pleased that the disincentives caused by these additional costs for potential students living away from the main campus are recognised in the interim report.

In the recent past the management of UTas has been very Hobart centric, and has even threatened to close the campus in Launceston. However, we wish to acknowledge that the current management has indicated that it does not want to do that, and it certainly seems to be supporting the campus in Launceston (and that in the North West Coast).

Our concern, then, is that future senior managers will resort to the Hobart centric mentality, particularly if funding becomes difficult. This will result in Launceston having “second class” status, and its population not benefiting from university education, which we all agree to be important into the future.

**We recommend that, in order to guarantee the long-term sustainability of a full university campus in the North of the state, funding needs to be allocated to UTas based on where the population resides, and that the University be required to distribute this funding along the same lines.**

This is not particularly radical, as it is similar to the way that both health and school level funding is distributed.

See our comments below in the section on funding.

#### **4. Comments on specialisation**

We were very interested to read that the interim report notes that there should be more of a role for diversity in the roles of different universities, and that the review panel suggests that the “ .. *uniformity of their core business models and funding pulls them back to the norm.*” (Subsection 3.1.1.2).

We agree that there should be greater diversity in the roles and missions of different universities. For example, UTas is the single university in Tasmania, and as a consequence has quite a different role and responsibility to the population of Tasmania than, for example the University of NSW has to the population of New South Wales. These differences should be identified and encouraged. Any funding model which makes it difficult for universities to be different should be avoided.

Another example is the Australian Maritime College (AMC) which is a specialist institute within UTas, based in Launceston. Until around 2007 this was an independent higher education (and VET) provider, with distinct national responsibility for maritime education across the whole of the country. In fact, few of its students actually came from Tasmania, most being from the mainland, and overseas. It was a truly national organisation, which just happened to be located in Tasmania.

AMC, operating now as it does within the College of Science and Engineering at UTas, finds it difficult to sustain a strong national presence. This has resulted in the number of students from the mainland being significantly decreased. AMC’s mission is quite different from that of UTas, and unfortunately the structures, and funding models, make it difficult for it to prosper within the larger university.

We have noted in the interim report that there is a suggestion that: “*This might require more specialist institutions, ....*”. (Subsection 3.1.1.3). We agree, and believe that nationally focussed institutions, such as AMC, ought to be encouraged to retain their national identity, and role.

## 5. Funding

We note that the interim report discusses the need for sustainable funding and financing (Section 3.3), and that the submission from Universities Australia is quoted: *“To maximise the value universities can provide as part of a strong post-secondary system, we need policy and funding settings that recognise that university education and research make our nation stronger”*.

We agree with this need, and in particular want to ensure that there is sufficient continuing funding for a full university campus in Launceston. As noted above, the only university in Tasmania is UTas, which has its headquarters in Hobart, where less than half of the population of the state live. In the recent past, UTas has threatened to close its campus in Launceston, citing that it is “losing money”.

In order to ensure that UTas retains a full campus in Launceston into the future we believe that funding needs to be allocated based on where the population lives. Sufficient funding ought to be provided to UTas specifically to support its campus in Launceston. Only in this way can we be sure that future senior management at UTas is not able to close that campus, such that UTas becomes Hobart centric again.

We realise that this contradicts the ninth dot point in subsection 3.3.1, which reads:

*“Institutions are free to use their own funds as they see fit, given legislative requirements are met and spending is guided by the strategic plan of the institution.”*

However, as noted above, Tasmania is unique, with a single university based where most of its population do not live. UTas has a monopoly in the state. Hence, we believe that, in this case, the above point should be overridden.

This is not a particularly radical suggestion, as it would deliver the funding of universities in the same manner as funding of health and school level education, both of which take into account the location of the population.

We also believe that adequate funding ought to be provided directly to national institutes within a university, which may have a different role to that of the university as a whole. Only this sort of approach will prevent a university from allowing a national institute to decline, when it is not seen to be in the best short-term interest of the university. Again, we recognise that this is contradictory to the recommendation that institutions should be free to use their own funds as they see fit.

However, this is vital to ensure that national institutes, such as AMC, are retained for the nation’s benefit, even although the particular host university may not feel the need to continue it.

## 6. Concluding comments

The *University of Tasmania Northern Support Group* broadly supports many points proposed in the interim report.

In particular, we agree strongly with the need to overcome the difficulties to university access encountered by people in all: rural; regional; and outer suburban/metropolitan locations.

We note that Tasmania is in a unique situation, with only one university (UTas). This is based in the capital city, where the majority of the population of the state does not reside.

In the recent past, UTas senior management has threatened to close its campus in Launceston, which would be to the serious detriment of the people living there, and to the prosperity of the city.

Whilst we recognise that the current UTas senior management are not of this view, and support the campus in Launceston (and the North West Coast), we are concerned that future senior management may reverse this policy.

We therefore recommend that funding be allocated to UTas based on where the population resides, and that this be specifically provided in such a way as to ensure continued strong support for the campus in Launceston into the future.

Finally, we note the importance of small national institutions, such as AMC, and the difficulties that they may experience when embedded into a larger, state based, university, and recommend that consideration be given to providing funding for them directly.

Dr Brian Hartnett;

Professor Emeritus Coleman O'Flaherty;

Adjunct Professor Martin Renilson;

Professor Emeritus John Williamson; and

Hon. Don Wing.