

chapter seven
the university in the city

The Master Plan focuses on the land that is owned or may potentially be acquired by the University. However the integrated nature of the University and the city, and the dominance that the University has on the economic, commercial and social fabric of Dunedin, is such as to require commentary and recommendations outside this scope. There are a number of key issues in this regard.

7.1 Residential precincts and the impact of student growth

It was clear from the Campus Survey and workshops that, for most undergraduates, living in Dunedin is a fundamental attraction of study at the University of Otago. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that this experience is a competitive advantage for the University, as Dunedin is perceived by many New Zealanders as being a safer and therefore more attractive proposition for their children than other major New Zealand cities, certainly Auckland, whose main University is arguably Otago's most significant competitor for high calibre students.

However Dunedin's small size and the relatively compact nature of the Precincts surrounding the University have resulted in the evolution of student-intensive neighbourhoods, where private landlords buy up houses and villas and then rent them to students by the bedroom. These properties can be highly attractive investments and keenly sought after, especially those properties close to the campus. Such concentrations of students and the value of their tenancies have been such as to displace other longer-term residents, which further intensifies the student residential demographic of these Precincts. This has led to some significant and serious consequences:

- The student presence in these neighbourhoods is overt;
- The lack of other residents has had an adverse impact on the services available in these Precincts. As students are in residence only for certain portions of the year, the corner stores and other local services that might have once serviced these neighbourhoods are unable to survive the lack of patronage during University holidays and have moved elsewhere. The only enterprises that have survived are the hotels which, it is assumed, make enough profit during the semesters to survive the "dark" months between them;
- While some landlords clearly care about the quality of their properties, many do not, seeming to do only the bare minimum of property maintenance and cleaning, to maximise their investment returns; and
- As a result, the squalid nature of many properties and the accumulation of rubbish have generated something of a "ghetto" feel to the neighbourhoods.

This outcome is problematic for both the University and the city on a number of fronts. Firstly, the most intensely-populated student Precincts are those immediately adjacent to the Campus, which means that the "ghetto" problem is effectively at the University's front door and highly visible to visitors and the public. Secondly, the concentration of the student population means that any civil disturbance in

the vicinity is attributed to students, regardless of whether Otago students are actually involved or not. Thirdly, the behaviours within these Precincts tend to be self-perpetuating, with the first-year students in the colleges observing at first hand the life that will be available to them in the following year. Indeed students commented during the consultation process that the typical Otago experience was to spend first year in College, second year in a flat close to the campus and then in third and subsequent years to move further away to “somewhere quieter”.

While the observation was made during the consultation process that “students have always been rowdy” it was also noted that “it’s just that it is so much more obvious these days”. Future growth in student numbers has the potential to cause renewed pressure in this regard and – if the student residential areas continue to spread into North East Valley – the geographical extents of such behaviour may also spread.

In making this observation, it is acknowledged that the University has in the past two or three years moved decisively – and with apparent good effect – to address anti-social behaviour. Continued attention will be required in respect of this.

It is therefore recommended that more overt action is required and that this will require joint action by the University and the City Council operating in partnership. Such a strategy is truly beyond the scope of the Master Plan, but the following initiatives are nonetheless suggested for consideration:

- The landscaping of the streets surrounding the campus to be upgraded;
- Rubbish removal, management and security be augmented, potentially financed through a special levy on the owners of “student investment” properties;
- The “quality rating” scheme that has been suggested as a means of monitoring the quality of student accommodation be implemented and, as part of this initiative, the University publish standards of what is considered “acceptable” quality for student accommodation;
- The current regulations which compel landowners to provide off-street parking be relaxed and landowners be encouraged to reinstate the gardens that once graced the street frontage;
- The University consider the strategic acquisition of residential properties (i.e. the most in need of repair/upgrading with the least heritage value) and redevelop them to achieve a better standard of accommodation and/or the City Council amend its planning regulations

and/or rate structures to encourage private developers to do so; and

- The City Council consider amending its planning regulations or rate structures to restrict or discourage the density of occupation of such properties.

For the longer term, it is fundamentally important that the City Council develop a policy for addressing the potential growth of the student population. If the forecast increase in student numbers materialises and an additional 4,000 undergraduate students enrol (of whom approximately 1,000 are first year) then an additional 3,000 beds in student flats will be required – the equivalent of approximately 500-700 private houses if the current accommodation model is perpetuated.

This growth represents both a challenge and an opportunity. As noted earlier, left unchecked this growth will extend into the suburbs, placing increased strain on transport and other services and risking the creation of yet more “ghettos”. Alternatively, it could be used to stimulate the creation of new residential communities in and around the inner city and/or the harbour front. This would clearly require very careful planning.

7.2 Retail / leisure precincts

At present the sense of life and activity on campus is restricted primarily to times at which classes are being held, which means the campus is substantially “dark” at night, at weekends, throughout semester breaks and end-of-year holidays. One way of addressing this is to increase the retail and other services available on campus to stimulate its public use and enjoyment, and strengthen the desired sense of campus community. It would also assist security by increasing activity and passive surveillance.

Similarly, the management of “high-spirited” student behaviour might be more easily achieved if there were more on-campus venues available to students, to divert them from roaming the city streets at night.

There are two issues here. The first is a question of propriety and the desired “character” of the campus – august institution or vibrant community? The second is the impact that this would have on the current facilities and services in surrounding Precincts and the CBD, which reportedly depends heavily on student patronage and would potentially suffer if this was to retreat to within the campus boundaries.

It is the Master Plan proposition that a vibrant community should indeed be a clear objective in which case a comprehensive study needs to be done to determine how this can be achieved in such a way as to complement rather than compete with the establishments and services of the wider city.

7.3 Innovation/ enterprise zones

The University currently provides on-campus accommodation for private sector and joint-venture enterprises in the form of the Centre for Innovation, which was built as an “incubator” for the commercialisation of research and to provide linkages between the University and external organisations and enterprises. In addition, a number of Departments are undertaking research projects with external partners within their facilities.

Both the City and the University strongly support the concept of such partnerships and joint ventures as a means of extending the University’s reach in research work, obtaining financial benefit from the outcomes of that research and supporting the city’s economic momentum. A number of submissions were made during the Master Plan consultation to this effect, with suggestions that one or more enterprise zones and/or innovation facilities be proposed as an important component of the Master plan.

While such proposals are entirely consistent with the University’s Strategic Direction, there are a number of factors to be considered in devising how best they are implemented in the Master Plan.

The first is one of available land and capital funding. For the Centre for Innovation these were secured through a joint venture between the University and the City, with the University also contributing a particularly prominent and valuable site at the centre of the campus. While the Centre for Innovation has enjoyed reasonably high occupancy, demand has not yet outstripped supply, so it is questionable whether another such facility would be justified in the short to medium term. A related consideration is the intent of the Master Plan to concentrate rather than disperse academic functions on campus, which would render the use of central campus land for a non-academic use, such as another innovation facility, a lesser priority.

The second is the economics of such a facility. The concept of an incubator facility to prove the value of research output is one of commercial rather than academic enterprise and in such a realm close control of costs is a fundamental imperative. This consideration leads to start-up businesses typically being found where real estate is cheapest. Indeed this is already happening in Dunedin where a cell of next generation businesses is starting to emerge in the under-utilised buildings south-east of the Octagon off Princes Street. Quite often, attempts to artificially replicate such environments can be expensive failures. This is not to say that the Master Plan should not recognise the importance of such facilities. Rather, their existence should be the result of need and demand for space as it emerges across a range of strategies, as follows:

- The existing Centre for Innovation should be retained as a high-profile facility for research commercialisation, and its use for that purpose should be monitored and promoted;
- New facilities for research, notably in the Sciences and Health Sciences Divisions, should include the ability to accommodate external joint venture partnerships, particularly with respect to access and security;
- The City Council should be encouraged to consider promoting the use of sites adjacent to the University on major roadways such as Albany Street, Frederick Street and George Street as research-related enterprise zones; and
- The University should provide recognition, support and encouragement for other enterprise zones which may be spontaneously generated as is happening south of the Octagon.

7.4 Coordinated planning and management

An unusual, if not unique aspect of the University of Otago is the symbiotic nature of its relationship with the city in which its principal campus is located. In many respects they are interdependent for their success and prosperity. For this reason, the stewardship of the campus and wider city environment needs to transcend the traditional boundaries of property ownership. The University and City must create and enact a meaningful partnership if many aspects of the Master Plan are to be realised.



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