

## Forced redundancies at UNE

*Recently the University of New England announced that three members of its mathematics department will be made redundant. Many in the mathematical community have expressed their dismay and concern about these forced redundancies and the future of mathematics at UNE. Below the Gazette has reprinted email correspondence between Hyam Rubinstein and the Vice-chancellor and CEO of UNE, Alan Pettigrew.*

Dear Professor Pettigrew,

I am writing to express my concern at the plans to reduce the size of the mathematics department at UNE. I am appending a copy of an article written recently about the crisis in the mathematical sciences around Australia, arising from the ongoing national review of mathematical sciences. I am currently the chair of the National Committee for Mathematical Sciences which has the responsibility for this review, which has been funded by the Australian Research Council, with support also from the various national societies representing different aspects of mathematics and statistics.

It is very short sighted for universities to slash mathematics and statistics programs, given the fundamental contributions in economics, social and biological sciences, not to mention engineering and technology, of the mathematical sciences. It appears that essentially all universities in Australia are following a similar course and this is alarming from the point of view of supply of teachers and mathematics and statistics graduates in general.

Clark Kerr, the great chancellor at University of California, Berkeley, wrote in his memoirs – ‘Mathematics had quality of faculty under the guidance of Griffith Evans but not quantity. The sciences and engineering had treated it mostly as a ‘service’ department for training their students. I was convinced, although I was a non-mathematical economist, that mathematics should and would be as central a department in a great research university of the future, as philosophy had been in the past.’ He goes on to say that ‘Thus I concluded that if a campus were to have one preeminent department of modern times, it should be mathematics.’

I note that one of the staff members being made redundant is Gary Bunting. Gary’s solution of the black hole uniqueness problem is a very significant result in general relativity and no doubt one could ask people like Stephen Hawking and Sir Roger Penrose to attest to the importance of this work. The other two staff members are also hard working productive people and it is certainly the case that Australia’s reputation in general and UNE in particular will be damaged by these sackings. I think that all academics recognise the very difficult situation that universities are in but this is not a good solution.

Sincerely

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Dear Professor Rubinstein,

Thank you for your email regarding Mathematics at UNE. I agree that the current downward trend in mathematics and sciences enrolments is lamentable. As a nation we need to raise the profile urgently, and UNE is proactive in this task. Nevertheless we cannot continue to be overstaffed in the hope that our efforts will be successful.

I can assure you that the standing of Mathematics at UNE is in no way compromised by this action. We find ourselves in the situation that our enrolments are too low to sustain the current staff profile. In view of this, the integrity of the degree will not be compromised and students will not be disadvantaged.

As you well know, the financial constraints on Australian universities are both real and significant. As a responsible Vice-Chancellor I must ensure financial as well as academic responsibility and best practice in all UNE activities. The decision was made following careful and exhaustive financial modelling within UNE. There was no alternative.

Thank you again for your concern, and once again I assure you that Mathematics at UNE is not at risk.

Yours sincerely,

Alan Pettigrew

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