



Letter to the editors

Retrenchments at University of New England

The previous issue of the *Gazette* contained a letter from Professor J.H. Rubinstein to the incoming Vice-Chancellor of the University of New England concerning a decision apparently made during the tenure of the previous Vice-Chancellor to halve the number of mathematicians employed at UNE.

The response from the new Vice-Chancellor was also published.

The experience of mathematics staff at UNE suggests that the new Vice-Chancellor's response relies exclusively on statements, repeated publicly, by members of UNE's management appointed before his arrival.

While it is understandable that a freshly arrived Vice-Chancellor rely on senior management already there for advice, it is disappointing that this advice be so misleading.

To justify forced redundancies in mathematics, the Vice-Chancellor's letter makes several assertions deserving closer scrutiny.

... the downward trend in mathematics and science enrolments ...

... We cannot continue to be overstaffed

... the standing of Mathematics at UNE is in no way compromised by this action

... our enrolments are too low to sustain the current staff profile ...

... the integrity of the degree will not be compromised ...

... students will not be disadvantaged

... The decision was made after careful and exhaustive financial modelling within UNE.

These points need to be evaluated in light of information not presented to the new Vice-Chancellor.

Enrolment Trends and Staffing.

- (i) Whereas enrolments in terminating service units reflect the drop in student numbers in the disciplines they serve, the number of students taking continuing mathematics courses has increased, not decreased. For example, there are twice as many third-year mathematics students this year as there were five years ago.
- (ii) In those five years, the School was able to justify hiring five new mathematicians, some replacing departing staff, others filling newly created positions. The two last of these new appointments arrived at UNE in February, 2005. Each of these appointments had to be carefully justified, particularly in terms of enrolments.
- (iii) Before the retrenchments were announced, the School of Mathematics, Statistics and Computer Science at UNE had by far the highest student-staff ratio of any School in the Faculty of the Sciences, almost triple that of the School with the lowest ratio. Throughout the past fifteen years, the School's student-staff ratio has consistently been the highest in the Faculty, fluctuating between 120% and 150% of the Faculty average.

Integrity of the Degree and Effect on Students.

- (i) Of the three staff issued retrenchment notices, one accepted and has departed already. This single departure resulted immediately in the mid-semester cancellation of classes (lectures/tutorials/practical sessions) and

has also disrupted the Statistics and Computer Science sections of the School. There are problems with marking examination papers and the teaching of next semester's offerings cannot be covered by the remaining mathematics staff.

- (ii) In order for UNE to maintain the integrity of the degree, each remaining member of staff will need to teach at least five subjects per year at the first to third year level.
- (iii) The Dean is now proposing to delete half of third year mathematics courses at UNE.
- (iv) Honours and post-graduate students now find that they need to change their courses and projects because the lecturers/supervisors are/will be no longer available.

Financial Analysis and Modelling at UNE.

- (i) When, in the course of disputation, the mathematics staff and the NTEU requested details of the financial model(s) used and the data on which they were based, UNE was unable to specify the model and gave three different figures

for the School's salary costs for 2006, differing by over \$130,000.

- (ii) When asked on 5th April, 2006, what the School's closing balance was for 2005, the Faculty's financial officer said that the figure was not known.
- (iii) Each appointment made in the last five years required a detailed financial plan showing the School's capacity to maintain the staff. Each was examined and approved by UNE at three different levels, beginning with the Faculty. When asked which parts of the financial plan presented in 2004 in justification of the appointments taken up in February, 2005, were no longer operable, UNE replied

There is no 2004 financial plan for MSCS on Faculty files.

- (iv) At the last Academic Board Meeting before the arrival of the new Vice-Chancellor, the Acting Vice-Chancellor reported that UNE's Finance Committee had been informed that

UNE does not know what its internal costs are.

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