

Letter to the editors

RMIT University staffing cutbacks

Early this year RMIT University announced staffing cutbacks within the mathematics and statistics discipline in their School of Mathematical and Geospatial Sciences. The University is planning to reduce its mathematics & statistics academic staff numbers by 25% by the end of the year. In February, three academic staff, with over 80 years teaching experience between them, were told that they were targeted for redundancies. More redundancies are expected in the second half of this year. Some staff in this discipline have already left the University and some vacancies will not be filled.

The University has told the NTEU that the cutbacks are due to a budget shortfall. Apparently the shortfall has occurred due to a decrease in student numbers in Schools that the discipline services, such as Engineering and Applied Sciences, and an increase in the level of financial return expected from the School to the University. This financial return, calculated from Teaching & Learning and commercial activity within the School, has increased from 43.5% in 2005 to 56.1% this year.

It is not surprising the School is struggling, and the NTEU have asked both the Vice Chancellor, Professor Margaret Gardner and the Pro-Vice Chancellor of the Science, Engineering & Technology portfolio, Professor Daine Alcorn, to support the School and halt the redundancies — not only in the interests of the individual staff members but in the national interest. The request has been denied by both.

Aside from the obvious threat to staff member job security, this erosion of the mathematics skill base at RMIT is of deep concern. Maths is a cornerstone for all technological studies. When maths-based subjects are not taught by properly qualified mathematicians, quality can only suffer as a result. As a member of the Australian Technology Network Group, this not only puts RMIT's reputation as a quality provider in the science and engineering fields at risk, it also accelerates the downward spiral towards the crisis Australia is facing.

We have established a petition on our website, which we are asking people to put their name to. The petition, addressed to the VC, requests that all redundancies are halted. This is not only in the interests of the affected staff, but in the national interest in keeping existing academics within this field in Australia. The Web address is http://www.nteu.org.au/bd/rmit.

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