

Barbarians at the Helm

By DEREK BUCHANAN

For far too long we have allowed philistines to be in charge of our schools and universities. The resultant barbarism against academic excellence has led to dumbing down and downsizing (and in some cases elimination) of maths departments.

A well documented example of this is when Adam Walsh sent Terry Tao the following email in March 2008 thereby causing an avalanche of criticism both within Australia and overseas against the USQ administration:

My name is Adam Walsh and I live in the country in South East Queensland. I am looking for ideas to help my only regional university (USQ) keep its maths department. I am going to be interviewed by the paper this Friday because I am nine years old and I have completed a university maths subject. I can use this as a chance to talk about how theoretical maths and science are important to the community, however I do not know how to sway the opinion of the public very well. Any ideas you have would be greatly appreciated. **** and **** at the university are not allowed to speak to the press about what is happening so I feel it is important that I say what I can. Please let me know if I can quote your reply which would give my statements more credibility as I am just a precocious child and you are a famous Australian.

To this, Terry Tao responded with an online petition which attracted over 1000 signatories at

<http://terrytao.wordpress.com/about/petition-to-support-maths-statistics-and-computing-at-usq>

as well as the following comments presented to the Queensland Parliament by Mr. Horan:

The University of Southern Queensland has made a magnificent contribution to Toowoomba and south-west Queensland over many years. It provides about \$350million to the local economy but, most importantly, it provides outstanding educational opportunities for the young people of our area, many of whom can stay in their home town and go to university.

The university has now undertaken a review of its courses to meet the challenges of greater demand in courses such as engineering, the new law course, education, health sciences and so on and perhaps less interest in some other courses. I believe that in putting forward this draft proposal it has made a major mistake in making the cutbacks to mathematics and statistics.

Mathematics is one of the foundations of the intellect of any university, particularly for its science courses. If there is one thing of concern to our nation today, it is the lack of mathematicians in universities and to provide teaching at our high schools as a basis for science courses and to meet the challenges that are coming in terms of new technology systems, climate change, changes in demographics, changes in computer systems and so forth.

I call on the university to reconsider this decision and to look at mathematics as providing a real marketing opportunity and a real intellectual opportunity for this university to continue to be one of the outstanding universities of Australia. At the same time I also ask it to consider the students who have enrolled. It is important that any students who have enrolled and set themselves up to do their full major course at this university should be able to do so. I am asking the university not only to keep the staff to conduct the service courses in engineering and so forth but also to provide major maths courses that can be the foundation of this university.

I would like to thank the chancellor, Bobbie Brazil, for talking and listening to me about this matter and also the acting vice-chancellor, Professor Graham Baker, for listening to what I had to say. The people who spoke to me were teachers, academics, high school students and many concerned people in Toowoomba. This is a draft proposal. I would ask the university to overturn it, particularly in the subjects of maths and statistics.

There must be genuine support for regional universities not only from the federal government, which has increased the funding provided for maths courses, but also from state governments through its education department so that we can have greater support and backup to ensure that students undertake mathematics at the university and the university is supported in providing it. I ask the university with the assistance of the state government to maintain this course as a foundation of the university.

Nevertheless it seems that despite all the international condemnation of USQ's original plan to decimate its maths department and good advice to reverse the decision, the USQ administration have decided to go ahead with the original plan (albeit with some minor changes). Adam Walsh has responded with the following comments in the Toowoomba Chronicle, Thursday, May 22, 2008 (page 5):

I am extremely disappointed that opportunities will be taken away from young people in our region. I feel very annoyed at the primary school teacher who, so many years ago, instilled such a hatred of mathematics in the current dean. I am ashamed that some of the smartest maths and science minds in the world came together behind Dr Tao's petition for our little uni in Toowoomba and yet these third-rate bureaucrats kept their ears closed. If that many first-class minds told me I was doing the wrong thing, I would certainly be thinking very hard about changing direction! I would like to thank Dr Tao for everything he did and apologise for how pathetic and short-sighted we can be in this country.

Terry Tao has commented on his website that "no discussion of current affairs in mathematics in Australia would be complete without mentioning the state of affairs at the University of Southern Queensland". Even though it might be seen as an exclusively

Queensland issue, this is actually not only an Australia-wide issue it is also an international issue. A quick perusal of the signatories on Terry Tao's petition will confirm this.

As I said on his petition, putting philistines in charge of schools and universities has never been such a great idea, but this sort of thing is inevitable if they are put in charge. To avoid it happening again we must not allow barbarians to take the helm.