

ANU stood up for academic freedom in rejecting Western Civilisation degree

Written by Gareth Evans, Chancellor, Australian National University

The Australian National University's decision to withdraw from negotiations with the Ramsay Centre over its proposed very generous gift in support of a new Western Civilisation degree program continues to generate strident criticism from certain quarters, enthusiastically endorsed by the The Australian newspaper in particular.

The nub of the critique is that we were intimidated into submission by a coterie of leftist staff and students ideologically hostile to the West and all its works and determined to prevent its intellectual and cultural traditions being taught in any kind of respectful way.

Nothing could be further from the truth, as we made clear in [a long piece](#) answering our critics in The Australian.

There was and remains strong support across our University – with its great humanities traditions – for new teaching and research capacity in this area. We are attracted by the wide-ranging “great books” courses taught in some prominent American universities and colleges.

And we remain wholly willing to craft a similar degree course here designed to convey understanding and respect for the great Western traditions – albeit in our own way: analytically rigorous, not triumphalist, and open to comparisons being drawn, as appropriate, with other major intellectual and cultural traditions.

What we remain adamantly unwilling to do is compromise our academic autonomy, integrity and freedom in any way in pursuit of financial support.

We withdrew from the Ramsay negotiations not because of any cold feet about the substance of the program, but because of our concerns about the extraordinarily prescriptive, micro-management, controlling approach by the Ramsay Centre to its governance, particularly in relation to curriculum and staffing decisions.

Our explanation has not been accepted by the Ramsay side, with its CEO Simon Haines [writing in The Australian](#) a detailed rebuttal under the heading “Evans and Schmidt have their facts wrong.”

Nor has it been accepted by that newspaper itself, with its [editorial](#) that day headed “Reasons for ANU rejecting Ramsay do not stack up” and its publication of a stream of correspondence to the same effect since.

As tiresome as the back-and-forth may be for some readers, we don’t believe we can now let the matter rest there. It is not only ANU’s reputation at stake, but that of every major university in the country.

If the Ramsay narrative takes hold that our governance concerns had no substance, Greg Sheridan’s [weekend fulmination](#) that “humanities are a lost cause at our big universities” and that no self-respecting philanthropist should ever give to them again will become accepted wisdom.

We asked The Australian last Thursday to publish our reply to the allegations we had our facts wrong, but the paper has declined to do so. So here, for the record, is our point by point response to the Ramsay CEO’s version of events.

Friendly negotiations

It is not disputed that the discussions between Ramsay and our negotiating team which began early this year were generally collegial, friendly, and enthusiastic.

The ANU wanted the gift, wanted an agreement to be reached, and multiple efforts were made by our team to try to find common ground. Until the negotiations finally broke down we remained upbeat about the possibility of a mutually acceptable outcome, and that optimism was reflected in the “Frequently Asked Questions” document then posted on the ANU website.

But all those discussions were conducted by our side on the usual basis that nothing was

agreed until everything was agreed – and that everything was subject to reference to, and agreement by, the Vice-Chancellor, and endorsement by the University Council chaired by the Chancellor.

It is true that neither of us were directly involved in the negotiating process. Nor, although the Vice-Chancellor was given reports from time to time on the general progress being made, did either of us see the actual text of the evolving draft Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) until the week that Mr Abbott's [Quadrant article](#) appeared online on 5 April.

Alarm bells

When we did, alarm bells rang – just as they had also begun to ring for the negotiating team in the immediately preceding weeks.

The facts are that, as discussions proceeded, the ANU negotiating team grew increasingly concerned as the Ramsay Centre continued to propose amendments to the evolving draft MOU which amounted to more and more control over key academic matters.

Contrary to the Ramsay CEO's assertions, a number of such concerns were communicated by our team to the Ramsay side during February and March.

One proposed change to the MOU which starkly encapsulated the emerging divide was the Ramsay amendment on 27 March of the sentence reading "The parties to this MOU acknowledge each other's objectives and their shared commitment to the principles of academic freedom": the words "their shared" were deleted and "ANU's" substituted!

Those concerns were dramatically compounded by the appearance of Mr Abbott's [Quadrant piece](#), with its blunt assertion that "A management committee including the Ramsay CEO and also its academic director will make staffing and curriculum decisions".

The four person (two from each side) "partnership management committee", which had

previously seemed to the negotiating team a fairly innocuous mechanism for coordinating the financial and other aspects of the gift, took on a much more troubling aspect.

Also particularly troubling in this context was the proposal from the Ramsay CEO that Ramsay representatives be able to sit in on classes to monitor implementation of the program. Our negotiating team did not accept that at any stage of the discussions, although they had agreed to a formal annual review of the program (in which context they did initiate the expression “health checks”, familiar to universities in the context of TEQSA reviews).

Trust gap

Another indicator of the trust gap opening up between the two sides was the Ramsay Centre’s flat refusal to meet our request, made after some consultation of our team with members of our Academic Board, that the title of the proposed degree be changed from “Bachelor of Western Civilisation” to “Bachelor of Western Civilisation Studies”.

The idea was to make it clear that the new degree would take its place beside – and reflect the objective, analytical approach of – our existing degree courses like “Asia-Pacific Studies”, “Latin American Studies”, “European Studies” and “Classical Studies”. But that was unacceptable.

Confronted with the Abbott article, and after carefully reviewing all the clauses of the draft MOU, we agreed that the Vice-Chancellor ask the Ramsay Centre’s Board, through its chairman John Howard, to clarify that ANU’s autonomy in implementing agreed objectives would be completely respected, and that we would retain complete control over curriculum and staffing decisions, making clear that negotiations could not continue until such assurances had been received.

Our discussions with Mr Howard did not, unfortunately, bear the fruit we had hoped. As stated in our article of 26 June, we did not receive any reply giving us any cause to believe that the MOU, with all its overreach – and all the manifest lack of trust in ANU’s commitment to implementing the new program in good faith that it represented – would be fundamentally revised.

Regrettably, there is nothing in Simon Haines’s [article](#) of 28 June which gives us any more confidence now than when we withdrew from negotiations that the necessity for university

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autonomy is better understood by the Ramsay Centre leadership. We hope that others tempted by the very generous support on offer will learn from our experience.

Gareth Evans is Chancellor of Australian National University (ANU). This article reflects his view of negotiations between ANU and the Ramsay Centre over a proposed Western Civilisation degree program. This account is contested, and links to an alternative account by Ramsay Centre CEO Simon Haines are contained in the article.

Brian Schmidt is Vice-Chancellor of Australian National University (ANU). This article reflects his view of negotiations between ANU and the Ramsay Centre over a proposed Western Civilisation degree program. This account is contested and links to an alternative account by Ramsay Centre CEO Simon Haines are contained in the article.

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