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Belinda Sanders interviews Professor Graham Baker, acting Vice-Chancellor, University of Southern Queensland

*Belinda:* "Briony Carey is in her final year of a maths and statistics course. At this time of year if things were running smoothly she'd be happily finishing her study and looking for work opportunities. We heard from Briony earlier this morning. She told us of her concerns about finishing her degree given that the USQ is restructuring its courses. The uni says there has to be changes to maintain financial viability and relevance in the future. In the proposal, mathematics courses are in its sights. Professor Graham Baker is the acting Vice Chancellor.

Good morning, Professor."

*Prof. Graham Baker:* "Good morning Belinda, how are you today?"

*Belinda:* "I'm very well thank you. Why is the maths/science area one of the areas that has been listed in this draft proposal?"

*Prof. Graham Baker:* "I think the .. an important issue for your listeners and our students of course to appreciate that the numbers of students studying mathematics – purely if you like – there are declining numbers right across the country .. this is not an issue for our university alone .. the large metropolitan universities face exactly the same challenge."

*Belinda:* "If that's the case though isn't there an obligation for you to increase numbers rather than close down possibilities of people enrolling?"

*Prof. Graham Baker:* "I think the important thing to say is ... our students are our most important stakeholders and the whole review that you mentioned in your introduction is in fact in reaction to student demand. Our students in bulk – I'm not speaking of Briony particularly but in bulk - are talking about programs in our main flagship areas and we are actually looking to consolidate our programs into an exciting, sustainable suite of programs exactly for our students. Now, we do our best of course in all areas to be able to attract students and give them great opportunities. But where there are small numbers we clearly have to take a very close look. The challenge for us and for all universities is to provide the opportunities but we have to recognize that the funding from our government relates to the number of students in a program area and it's impossibly difficult to support small numbers in certain areas – and that's the challenge for us. But I repeat – our most important stakeholders are our students and we are doing everything to give them the appropriate career options and provide them with the right pathways to gainful employment."

*Belinda:* "Briony mentioned that amongst her classmates there hasn't been any official word, negotiation between students affected and the university".

*Prof. Graham Baker:* "I think that's ... must recognize a couple of things here. First of all, the state we are at at the moment is in a state of a proposal stage and we are consulting ... and are exactly as we

are doing in fact by this telephone discussion in some sense. We are very important ... our students are very important to us ... and we do talk to them... an important issue I wish to raise which of course is that all of our students ... if there are any students in an area that might be affected ... the students won't be. We have very clear transition arrangements to guarantee that our students have pathways through to the programs that they are enrolled in. The students should be reassured that they will not ... our current students ... even those who have just enrolled this year ... won't be affected. What we are talking about is consolidating program areas in the future so that new students who come on will see a different portfolio of programs."

*Belinda:* "So, what you're saying is that if you go down the path of a different portfolio of programs within maths/sciences they won't begin until the current students finish?"

*Prof. Graham Baker:* "We will start with a reconsolidated phase so new students coming on might move into new areas but the students we currently have will be supported through their studies there is no question about that. We have articulated ourselves a commitment to a transition so that our students graduate in programs with the same objectives as the ones that they enrolled in."

*Belinda:* "But would that include outside .. off campus study?"

*Prof. Graham Baker:* "That's not the general intention, no. There has always been ... I think your listeners would be interested to know that there have always been cross-institutional work between universities ... you know another university may have courses in some area that we don't ... sorry, courses to me mean subjects – programs mean whole degrees ... those things at a local level will always happen but it's not explicitly part of this particular plan. And someone in their final year would graduate from USQ in my view."

*Belinda:* "When do you intend to tell the students of these arrangements though? Because the students themselves are telling me that they are only hearing rumours, that they are not hearing anything from the university management itself."

*Prof. Graham Baker:* "We do send out through our student administration section, a local group. Regular bulletins on the changes that we are going through ... the first phase which was completed last December was to design what we call the 'blueprint' ... effectively the academic map of what we want to do ... this is a second phase where we are talking about the implementation effects and I repeat we are consulting and we are putting out information to all of our stakeholders as we go through this process."

*Belinda:* "You have received national criticism now from mathematics support groups throughout the country. What's your response to that national criticism?"

*Prof. Graham Baker:* "Only to repeat a comment I made right at the beginning ... that those groups also have to recognize that they have a role to play in helping young people ...students at universities to recognize the value in careers in mathematics and professional science areas in order to stimulate the interest. It isn't a role for a single university ... our university is very proud of its professional education and all of our main degrees that are going very well indeed in engineering, education, biomedical sciences, creative arts, law ... the whole host of those are very powerful degrees. No university – and not a regional university – can solve the problem on its own of the declining interest in mathematics. And I might just also draw a parallel – if I may – that it is another national problem

in the information technologies area where for years the whole country has seen declining student demand for degrees in information technology. Yet at the moment the jobs available – job vacancies, employment opportunities – are growing at a very rapid rate. Now there is some sense that that may also be true in mathematics. But a university of course can only react to student demand and the funding received relates to the number of students who enroll. So there is a social question out there and groups like the maths lobby really have roles to play in helping... people coming to university to see the value in those careers.”

*Belinda:* “But surely the University of Southern Queensland would also have a role and the fact that they are considering reducing the options when it comes to those maths/science subjects is contributing to the overall problem.”

*Prof. Graham Baker:* “I think not entirely. Let me put it another way. We have actually growing numbers of enrolments in mathematics at the subject level largely through very rapidly growing numbers in areas of engineering, business, commerce, accountancy etc. So there is a vibrant demand for mathematics in those professional areas and we are not in any way diminishing our capacity to teach mathematics or do research in mathematics. The other very important issue that is a national issue of course ... many schools worry about being able to attract teachers who can teach particularly in secondary level mathematics and sciences generally. And we are actually looking to enhance our teacher education in these areas so the teachers go out into schools and they have the skills to do their part because the problem starts very early on.”

*Belinda:* “Do you recognize that the students would be feeling extremely vulnerable at the moment in maths/science, in some of the other areas that have been listed as possible areas that might be restructured?”

*Prof. Graham Baker:* “Well, I would reassure them by saying that we ... as I said ... we have a commitment for transition arrangements for any students in those areas and I repeat that for an individual student this may not be a particularly helpful comment but these are relatively small numbers compared with the 27,000 students that we support at the university. And we will look after those students there is no question. And that they will be given appropriate transition arrangements and they need not feel nervous. Nothing is going to be pulled out from under their feet, if that’s the kind of concern that’s being expressed.”

*Belinda:* “Professor, thank you for explaining your position this morning.”

*Prof. Graham Baker:* “Thank you for the opportunity”

*Belinda:* “That’s Professor Graham Baker, he’s the acting Vice-Chancellor at the University of Southern Queensland.”