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Now, you are listening to Belinda Sanders on ABC Southern Queensland.

The University of Southern Queensland is now considering submissions on the restructure of its courses, and where cuts could be made to allow for new courses. The debate so far has focused around the area of mathematics. The university, proposing to cut pure maths courses because there isn't enough student interest. While the university says management must consider economics, national mathematics groups say the university needs to be promoting pure maths, not cutting it back.

The Member for Toowoomba South, Mike Horan, raised the issue in State Parliament. He believes the university has made mistakes.

Belinda: "What are your concerns surrounding the restructure?"

Mike Horan: "First of all, I recognize that all major organizations, particularly the university, have to refresh and renew themselves every now and again to be relevant to what the needs and demands are. But I think in this particular instance, they have made a mistake in the cuts they have made to the mathematics section of the university. The big call in Australia at the moment from all levels of government and teaching and academia is to rebuild and boost mathematics and science. And I think that mathematics itself is probably one of the intellectual foundations of a university, particularly that part of the university that teaches science and engineering and all those sorts of courses. So I think this is something that they must seriously reconsider. I've just been amazed at the number of correspondence I've got and the number of people that have come to see me about this issue and it's made sense what they've talked about."

Belinda: "The university itself though has actually said that when it comes to the maths courses, they're not getting the students in. So if they have to meet the needs of society, that they have to take into consideration what's popular and what's not, and they're saying that maths isn't."

Mike Horan: "It's not popular in that about 39 or 40 students have graduated I think in the last four years. But it is the foundation of many courses at the university. They are going to continue with what they call service teaching, which would be providing the maths and stats courses to health sciences and engineering and so forth. But if everybody walks away from it, then mathematics will almost collapse in our nation. The Federal Government, to give them credit, have increased the funding that they provide for mathematics courses as from the beginning of this year, and I think in terms of the budget at the university the maths and stats course is more than paying its way. Financially they are not behind in that. And I think that the responsibility for developing maths more, making sure there is a pure maths course and people and the students consider maths falls heavily on the shoulders of a university, as well as the Federal Government, 'cause they provide the funding – and they have increased that, and as well as the State Government through their management of the education system in Queensland, ensuring that everything possible is done to ensure good committed teachers and plenty of interest in maths. But, if you don't have pure maths courses at the university, and stats courses then it is very difficult to develop those secondary school teachers so I think there is a heavy – if you like – corporate responsibility on universities to look at this basic building block of our sciences. "

Belinda: "A couple of other things that USQ have said and, firstly, they have said: 'it's not our responsibility to fix what is a national problem. We can't fix a national problem.' A regional university doesn't have the capacity to, it has to meet the needs of their students."

Mike Horan: "Look a regional university like USQ has, I think, a very big responsibility in our region. It's always been a great university. When it started off, you know, it was difficult. But it got renowned across the nation for its courses through the arts faculty, through its journalism courses, its engineering courses, and it's built on those and now you've got law, and health sciences and so forth becoming very popular. But I don't think a regional university can walk away from its own responsibility. You know all the ripples eventually make a wave. And if every university walks away, then what will happen to this serious problem we have in Australia, of a lack of mathematics teachers, a lack of science teachers and a lack of interest if you like, of students in doing those courses. It is important for them to be available. So I think there is a big responsibility on our regional university to our region, this area, backed up by the Federal Government – and they are doing their bit at this stage – and by the State Government that need to really to develop with the universities, promotions in teaching at the high schools that develops that interest. "

Belinda: "Is that how you expect the State Government to get involved in this particular issue?"

Mike Horan: "I said that in parliament. I think the State Government should accept some role in trying to develop more interest in undertaking maths at university. But at the end of the day, if you haven't got good maths teachers who are committed and have had mathematics tuition at a university to some serious extent then it is very hard to convey that to the students.

The other issue I am a little concerned of is that some of the students who haven't been told things and have been finding out in a sort of second hand or difficult ad hoc way. I think there is a big onus on the uni to provide those students who've enrolled with the ability to finish their course at the university. Not necessarily to have to go away to other universities to do parts of it."

Belinda: "The vice-chancellor has said on the record that no current student will be affected. "

Mike Horan: "Current students will be affected to this degree that some will be expected to go to do some of their units at other universities or some of their units by correspondence so they are affected to that extent.

One of the wonderful things about this university has been that young students living in Toowoomba or from the surrounding areas can attend this university, very often stay at home or stay with friends, where financially, logistically it is very difficult to go to a capital city and be able to manage. And that's been one of the great things about our university. I'd be asking the university to consider this in any of the cutbacks that they are doing, that they need to consider these young students and their families where this university provides this wonderful convenience. "

Belinda: "And finally, one of the other arguments that the University of Southern Queensland has put forward is their responsibility in spending tax payers money. For example, if one or two students is doing a particular course, then that costs a lot of money to provide that course for very small amount of students. What about their responsibility in spending tax payers money?"

Mike Horan: "They have a responsibility, but there is also a lot of fees coming into the university, and a lot of amounts of money being paid by the Federal Government. As I said at the outset, the mathematics and stats course at the university appears to be paying its way. The cost of staff – that's the full staff – is about less than one third of the income that's coming in from fees and government funding. But all universities, because they are involved with academia, and some students who are quite brilliant and so forth, whilst there is the responsibility to do mass education where there is big classes, and popular classes of hundreds or more in them, there is the thing that is quite unique to a university that they can develop special talents and skills and things that are the building blocks of our society. The university has said that what they are doing is the draft proposal. I think in these draft proposals, there's been a couple of issues where I think that they have made the wrong decision. One is maths, and the other is in the way that they've communicated to the students and particularly in whether or not they are going to provide those students who have enrolled in good faith in the university to be able to finish their course here in Toowoomba."

Belinda: "Mike Horan, thank you for your input."

Mike Horan: "Thanks very much, Belinda."

Belinda: "Member for Toowoomba South, Mike Horan. Now, let's hear from the vice-chancellor of the University of Southern Queensland, Professor Bill Lovegrove. Good morning."

Bill Lovegrove: "Good morning, Belinda."

Belinda: "Firstly, Mike Horan has suggested that the university has made some mistakes. Do you think mistakes have been made?"

Bill Lovegrove: "Let me say first of all, that Mike Horan is a tremendous supporter of USQ and has been for a long time. We always take his opinion seriously. And in terms of what I've just heard him say, we agree that maths is very important to the country, and it is important to note that however USQ has never planned to get rid of maths teaching. In our draft plan, we've talked about getting the best mix between the demand for maths, and the supply of maths. Going back to your specific question, have we made a mistake? It is important to know we put out a draft plan. We've taken input on that plan and we're revising it. The draft plan talked about maintaining and probably building our service maths capacity mainly for engineering students. And as the submissions are being considered by the Dean, we are taking on board a broader range of views. And if you're asking what's the likely outcome, the Dean has indicated to me that she'll be recommending that we retain a maths major but we have to look very seriously at the best way of offering all of our maths in order to meet the student demand. "

Belinda: "So, what you're saying is, when it comes to restructuring the university and the original draft, that draft looks like it will be changed when it comes to maths?"

Bill Lovegrove: "Across the whole university, the reason we put out a draft plan is to get feedback to improve the plan. And in the Science's one, there will be some adjustments that the Dean, through the work that she's been doing, believes we can now maintain a maths major. But can I just broaden it out a little bit. Most of the public debate in Toowoomba has focused on maths, whereas there is a proposal for the whole of the Science Faculty. What we are looking at is competing priorities. I agree with Mike that maths is very important but so too are nursing, biomedical sciences and psychology

which are also part of the faculty. So in that faculty for the last number of years, we've had quite significant growth in biomedical sciences and in nursing and moderate demand in psychology. So the challenge is, how do you keep biomedical sciences staff, how do you have enough nursing staff to provide those professions for the region. And of course nursing is a national and state priority. So how do you get the balance between professions of that sort that we desperately need in the region, and mathematics which is also important to the country. Biomedical sciences and nursing, because of the large student growth are in fact understaffed. So there is an issue of adequate staffing, parity in workloads between different departments... so going back to the comments about maths. It's not just maths, it's what's the whole plan for the faculty. What's the broader range of professional needs in our region, and what's the most appropriate staffing to address all of the needs, not just the maths needs."

Belinda: "When do you expect to release the final plans?"

Bill Lovegrove: "We have a meeting next week, which looks at the final plans and the plans will be released shortly after next Wednesday."

Belinda: "So not too far away."

Bill Lovegrove: "No. And I must say, some of the work that the Dean has done, and some of the other Deans, for example, way before this started a group of Deans along with someone in my office have been preparing a submission to send to the State Government and to the Federal Government on a new program that we were trying to borrow from the United States aimed at increasing interest in sciences and maths, especially in sciences and maths teaching. So there is a proposal already there. "

Belinda: "We shall keep in touch regarding that proposal. Down the track, I'd like to hear more about it. Thank you very much for talking to us this morning, Professor."

Bill Lovegrove: "Good, Belinda, thanks a lot."

Belinda: "That's Professor Bill Lovegrove, from the University of Southern Queensland."