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## **ANU blasted for 'double standards' over Western civilisation course**



Tony Abbott has pointed out the 'hypocrisy' of opposing a Western civilisation course when ANU had accepted funds from Dubai, Iran and Turkey in the past.

Rebecca Urban, The Australian, 12:00AM June 7, 2018

A course in Western civilisation has proved too provocative for the Australian National University to take on, yet its Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies has been at the forefront of contentious discussions around Middle Eastern politics and society with minimal backlash from its academics.

The centre, which has benefited from sizeable donations from the United Arab Emirates and the governments of Iran and Turkey, frequently publishes articles supportive of a Palestine state and Iran, hosts lectures on “deconstructing the extremist narrative” and “Islamophobia in post-communist Europe”, and has featured guest speakers who are critical of US policy.

It has also spruiked the success of a delegation to Iran late last year — led by ANU chancellor Gareth Evans — as the “first round of the Australia-Iran dialogue” after a 10-year suspension.

ANU vice-chancellor Brian Schmidt has been forced to defend the centre in the wake of criticism of the university's decision to withdraw from negotiations

with the Sydney-based Ramsay Centre over a proposed degree in Western civilisation and scholarship program.

Professor Schmidt announced the decision last Friday, citing concerns for academic autonomy. However, it also followed threats of a backlash from the National Tertiary Education Union, which had claimed that the Ramsay Centre — chaired by former prime minister John Howard and with Liberal politician Tony Abbott on the board — sought to pursue a “narrow, radically conservative program to demonstrate and promulgate the alleged superiority of Western culture and civilisation”.

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### **SOME UNEXPECTED CONSEQUENCES OF ‘THE SATANIC VERSES’**

Satanic Verses is also gratuitously offensive. One wonders: would he have been able to achieve the same effect of questioning the sacred with less confrontational language? For when the intended audience finds the metaphors crudely constructed and the political instrument of language blunt, offence is bound to be taken. What may have been intended as literary licence, even a philosophical challenge, is destined to be greeted by those within the tradition as ‘literary terrorism’.

**An extract of an essay by James Piscatori, professor and deputy director at CAIS, in the centre’s Bulletin**

“Any association, real or perceived, with this divisive cultural and political agenda could potentially damage the intellectual reputation of the humanities at ANU and the ANU more broadly,” the union wrote in its letter to the vice-chancellor.

Politicians and conservative academics have since questioned how ANU had been able to successfully negotiate donations with foreign entities but had been unable to resolve any issues preventing the Ramsay Centre alliance from going ahead.

Mr Abbott this week pointed out the “hypocrisy” of the union opposing the course when the university had accepted funds from Dubai, Iran and Turkey in the past. A member of one of the donors, Dubai’s Al-Maktoum Foundation, is listed as a member of the centre’s advisory board. Liberal backbencher Craig Kelly has also accused the university of double standards. “They are accepting money from Iran. That’s a despotic government ... that does everything to suppress academic freedoms, the freedoms of women,” Mr Kelly told Sky News.

“When it comes to a course on Western civilisation, absolutely, any course of Western civilisation is going to be pro-Western civilisation, simply because of the facts, because Western civilisation is why we have the great society that we have today.”

Bella d’Abrera, the program director of Western civilisation at the Institute of Public Affairs, said she struggled to understand how a course that was “for” Western civilisation should be viewed any more contentiously than that of the Arab studies centre’s promotion of Middle Eastern and Central Asian politics and culture and the role of Islam in the broader world. She pointed to an upcoming symposium sponsored by the centre on “alternative traditions of law, norms and rules” that will seek to examine “new ways of seeing the relationship between interpretation, law and justice”.

“The fact that ANU is prepared to accept funds to promote the study of other civilisations but has rejected Ramsay Centre’s generosity reveals academia’s deep antipathy towards its own civilisation,” Dr d’Abrera said.

Arab studies centre director Amin Saikal did not return calls or emails yesterday. The highly distinguished academic has written extensively on Middle Eastern politics. In an article last June published in the centre’s Bulletin, titled “Fifty Years of Israel’s occupation”, he wrote about Israel’s unwillingness to implement any deal that could require it to relinquish its occupation of the West Bank, and East Jerusalem. He was critical of Benjamin Netanyahu and referred to Hamas, “which Israel, as well as many of its Western supporters, especially the US, have denounced as a ‘terrorist organisation’.”

An article by his deputy director, James Piscatori, also published in the Bulletin, critiques Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*, which prompted Iran to issue a fatwa against the author, as “gratuitously offensive”. “One wonders: would he

have been able to achieve the same effect of questioning the sacred with less confrontational language?" Professor Piscatori writes. "For when the intended audience finds the metaphors crudely constructed and the political instrument of language blunt, offence is bound to be taken. "What may have been intended as literary licence, even a philosophical challenge, is destined to be greeted by those within the tradition as 'literary terrorism'."

Professor Schmidt has declined repeated interview requests, but in a letter on ANU's website on Tuesday he said he was "disappointed" that the Arab studies centre had been singled out.

Additional reporting: Rachel Baxendale

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