

Sydney Uni hit by backlash while looking to the West



University of Sydney vice-chancellor Michael Spence.

Rebecca Urban, The Australian, 12:00AM June 9, 2018

The University of Sydney has commissioned a senior academic to prepare a draft of a potential course in Western civilisation ahead of talks with the Ramsay Centre, sparking a backlash from academics who have denounced the proposal as “European supremacism writ large”.

In a June 5 memo to staff, posted on a university internal website, Sydney vice-chancellor Michael Spence revealed he was considering entering into a memorandum of understanding with the Ramsay Centre to collaborate on a funded course and scholarship program, after the philanthropic centre’s negotiations with the Australian National University fell over a week ago.

Appearing to pre-empt some opposition to the proposal, revealed in The Australian the same day, Dr Spence described the course as “really interesting” and “very, very far from the kind of thing you might imagine”. “It is all primary texts: there is certainly nothing like Harold Bloom in the curriculum,” he said, referring to the prolific but polarising US literary critic.

Peter Anstey, a professor in the school of philosophical and historical inquiry, had been asked to prepare a draft course outline as part of the expression of interest to the Ramsay Centre, he said.

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University of Sydney academics have reacted furiously to the news, with more than 100 — including refugee and pro-Palestine activist Nick Riemer, fellow boycott Israel campaigner Jake Lynch and Tim Anderson, who courted controversy by defending Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad — signing an open letter signalling that they are “strongly opposed to the university entering into any arrangement with the Ramsay Centre”.

RAMSAY'S DEAL WITH ANU

CURRICULUM 16 core courses taken over three years to consider books from a variety of genres or disciplines (predominately literature, history, philosophy, religion, politics) but also architecture, art and music, including the work of Homer, Euripides, Virgil, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Herodotus, Shakespeare, Machiavelli, Voltaire, The Parthenon, Michaelangelo, Rembrandt, Wordsworth, Pericles, John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King.

CURRICULUM DESIGN Committee comprising Ramsay Centre's Simon Haines and Stephen McNerney plus two ANU representatives. Final curriculum to be subject to normal ANU academic processes.

PEDAGOGY The use of the 'Socratic' approach to teaching. Small classes of no more than six to eight students. Small-group discussions to be supplemented by a series of panel-style discussions where academics from different perspectives engage in discussion.

STAFFING An academic and professional staff of 12 to be employed by ANU and funded by the Ramsay Centre. Selection committee of approximately 12 will comprise two Ramsay Centre nominees that have academic credentials and approved by ANU. ANU College of Arts and Social Sciences dean Rae Frances to chair the committee which will have a majority of ANU nominees.

SCHOLARSHIPS \$25,000 for up to five years. Up to 30 available in the first year. Additional grants to be provided to non-scholarship students to support international study trips.

Students must achieve a minimum ATAR of 97 to be eligible



The letter, written by Dr Riemer and history professor Adrian Vickers, refers to “political leanings” of the Ramsay Centre board, chaired by former Liberal prime minister John Howard and including Tony Abbott. It accuses it of propagating a “conservative, culturally essentialist, and Eurocentric vision” and claims its program embodies “chauvinistic, Western essentialism”. “We are deeply disturbed by the possibility of Ramsay Centre courses being part of our institution, to say nothing of the significant and justified reputational damage that the university collectively, and its academics derivatively, would incur as a result,” the letter says. “We belong to a multicultural and hybrid society in a world traversed by serious geopolitical and social animosities. Collaborating with the chauvinistic Western essentialism that the Ramsay Centre embodies

would be a violation of our crucial role in promoting a society of diversity, inclusiveness and mutual respect.”

Their concerns have emerged amid accusations that the Ramsay Centre, established last year with proceeds from the estate of late healthcare mogul Paul Ramsay, had been seeking substantial influence over the bachelor of Western civilisation course it had been in the process of developing in conjunction with ANU.

ANU vice-chancellor Brian Schmidt has cited concerns for “academic autonomy” for not proceeding with the program. On Thursday, he told the ABC the Ramsay Centre had been seeking “unprecedented” influence over the curriculum and hiring. Professor Schmidt yesterday declined to expand on that statement and his claim has been contradicted by Mr Howard, who told The Australian’s Chris Kenny in an interview to be aired on Sky News that “provisional agreement between the two parties” had been reached. “There was nothing that Ramsay sought that undermined the academic freedom,” he said. “Things relating to staff and curriculum were always subject to final tick-off by the university authorities, obviously. As a body that was financing this, obviously, we had input, you would be crazy to not have some input.” Mr Howard said talks were well advanced before there was a “rebellion in the ranks”, referring to intervention by the National Tertiary Education Union and students’ association.

A document posted to ANU’s website on April 30, detailing the proposed deal, outlined the role the Ramsay Centre was taking in the development and running of the course. Recommendations on curriculum were to be made by the partnership management committee, consisting of the Ramsay Centre’s Simon Haines and Stephen McInerney, plus two ANU representatives, and the final curriculum was to be subject to normal ANU academic processes.

A staff of 12 would have been employed by ANU and funded by the Ramsay Centre. A selection committee of about 10 to 12 members would have comprised two Ramsay nominees with academic credentials who had to be approved by ANU. ANU College of Arts and Social Sciences dean Rae Frances was to chair the committee.

A Ramsay Centre spokeswoman said the group was not seeking anything beyond what was stated in the ANU document.

The University of Sydney declined to comment on its dealings with the Ramsay Centre.

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