

21 February 2006

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Dear Vice Chancellor,

I am writing this letter because of my concern for Higher Education, RMIT, its International Studies program, Spanish Language study in both RMIT Higher Education and TAFE, and for the treatment of Robert Austin in the role of Program Coordinator.

As such, I am also sending this letter to Dr Bruce Wilson, Head of the new School of Global Studies, Social Science and Planning.

I have been a student of RMIT's TAFE stream of Spanish study for 4 sessions in 2003, 2004 and 2005. Through this time I have continued a high level of academic achievement. Throughout 2005 I was also a member of the TAFE Languages Staff/Student Consultative Committee. As such, I believe I am in a good position to comment on the TAFE Spanish Language Program in the time before and after Robert Austin's commencement at RMIT at the start of 2005.

Over 2003 and 2004, Spanish was administered by a Program Coordinator who did not speak the language. This email is not a criticism of that person; it is a comment that without the specific knowledge and interest of a Program Coordinator who speaks the language, the resources made available to tutors/language sessional staff and language students are limited in nature.

Throughout this period, study was focused on textbook study; extra-curricular activities involving Latin American/Spanish culture and the chance to meet native speakers were infrequent and relied on the networks of tutors and students' personal interests and drive. As such, notice of events was infrequent and haphazard. The teaching of the language led me to recommend RMIT to friends wanting to learn languages, but it was not an environment which encouraged further involvement in culture and other issues that have the potential to foster critical thought and interrogation in context. As anyone who has studied a language knows, continual practice in each of aural, oral, reading and writing skills is essential to develop and maintain these skills. Therefore, language and all elements of culture must be united in everyday life to enhance the language process. These linkages are essential to learn a language, and were lacking.

Robert Austin's commencement as Program Coordinator in 2005 was a breath of fresh air into the Spanish program, which was most needed. Robert was quickly able to start

publicising events and further opportunities within Melbourne for students to practice their language skills. For the first time, this was through emails (“Spanish Matters” bulletins) to the class lists of students studying Spanish and handouts to class tutors/sessional staff. Many times Robert was able to announce these events personally to the classes, which added further focus. With Robert’s recent arrival in Melbourne, this was an impressive first step. In addition, Robert made access to news available – in particular, all students were offered addition to a mailing list for translated news from Chile (“Santiago Times”).

These opportunities were made available because of Robert’s passion for, and knowledge of, Hispanic studies. This is an important point to stress, because in my comments on Robert’s performance at RMIT, I have had to consider what was/should be expected of a Program Coordinator, and what was provided.

I consider all of the above to show service above the call of duty, as to my understanding this was beyond the requirements of the role. These were further to duties such as general revision and the updating of weblinks for further info in course guides, which were also improvements to prior years.

I have heard that someone objected to these “Spanish Matters” bulletins to the former Head of School of International and Community Studies (SICS). I can understand that there was a lot of information provided, but none of it was compulsory for study. If there were any comments on formatting or similar issues then these could have been advised to Robert.

The subject matter of these emails is important to discuss considering the debate about Robert’s own politics and the advice of his dismissal in late 2005. I do not feel that the emails that were sent had a predominant political slant. They had wide diversity: job offers in community programs in Melbourne with native speakers, social events organized by community groups, film festivals etc. I advised Robert of events that I knew of (Melbourne International Film Festival, 400th anniversary of “Don Quixote” etc) and these were then sent on to the class lists. I know that others did the same. Therefore, if students thought that particular events were not getting the publicity they deserved, there was the available mechanism of using Robert as a conduit. In my view, this provided a model of what can be done through the power of collective interest.

Unavoidably, there was a political element to some of the advised events. Many of the community groups in Melbourne are formed from people who left Latin America for political and economic reasons. However, I did not feel that there was any partisanship in the advised events: a case in point was that the bulletins advised events in the Chilean community for both the Memorial of the overthrow of the Allende Socialist Government (11th September, remembered by the Left) and the National Day celebrations (18th September, celebrated by the Right).

I say unavoidably, but necessarily should also be inserted into the above paragraph. If language study is to equip the student adequately, there needs to be an exposure to a wide

range of themes and social issues to develop both vocabulary and a critical approach to language use. From this, every student can develop the tools to express their own viewpoint.

As such, Robert was actively working on catering for the need to formalize the fostering of critical thought and interrogation in context, through the new course to be offered in 2006, Latin America Studies. This sparked immediate interest in 2005 students: through a poster that made reference to literature, politics, social issues and popular culture. Being a member of a Spanish class with people of many backgrounds, there had already been debates on many issues with proponents for many different points of view. A course of this nature will allow a more structured and critical analysis of the evidence for and against various topics.

Robert was also able to investigate increasing the available exchange options for students: from limited options in Spain and Mexico; to what has ended up as options throughout South and Central America/Caribbean and Spain in educational institutions with a wide variety of specializations across and outside the Arts. In the prior pages I have discussed the importance of all aspects of culture being integrated with language study to develop learning. The next critical step to developing language proficiency is obviously to live in countries with native speakers. Previous exchange students from International Studies have commented that the experience gained from the historical Mexican exchange option was limited by the fact that the University was strongly aligned with US Foreign Policy, and classes were taught in English; which limited the academic, extracurricular and cultural possibilities. Due to this, many students had chosen to travel rather than do exchanges, or organize exchanges through other Victorian Universities instead. As such, there was a clear gap in the options available through RMIT, which through 2005 was being converted by Robert into a wealth of opportunities across undergraduate and postgraduate study; and almost all the geographic regions of Spanish language influence.

On a personal note, I can add that the development of these options changed my planned path for the coming years; from leaving my work to travel through the various regions of the Spanish speaking world; to instead applying for (and being successful in) gaining admission into the 2006 Bachelor of Arts in International Studies intake at RMIT. This was based on the development of a rich and diverse learning environment at RMIT in both Spanish language study and the International Studies program [with enriched complementary study options at RMIT (Latin American Studies) and through exchanges], which (as I opened this letter stating) I am now concerned is instead taking several backwards steps.

In addition to the exchange options, Robert also led the applications for UMAP (University Mobility in Asia and the Pacific) scholarships (that were of greater monetary value than others previously available) to assist students financially with exchange options. I was involved in the application process for these scholarships, and saw that this had created interest in students from other faculties across RMIT.

Further to all of the above, Robert also led the organisation of a Fiesta (dinner and dance in Semester 2) attended by over 100 students, tutors and families that promoted language practice, social networks across the different levels of TAFE and Higher Education classes and cultural influences to all who attended. This was a great night for all, despite some teething issues due to it being the first such event; and will lead to continued interest for the various academic courses involved if continued.

In short, the moves being made by Robert in the role of Spanish Program Coordinator were developing a clear strength for RMIT that was leading to interest from TAFE students (such as myself) in entering the International Studies course; providing existing students with a more vibrant and challenging learning environment; and promoting the Spanish/languages courses across other faculties. With time and further encouragement in an Australian/Western society that is taking more and more interest in South and Central America (for both economic and cultural reasons, due to its ever-increasing influence), this will lead in future to both more and happier students for RMIT. Whether it is for learning for learning's sake, or a market-driven academic environment, this is a clear win for RMIT in all aspects.

My understanding of the reasons for Robert Austin's dismissal notice is that it was based on comments relating to non-collegiality, and that his teaching and research were classed as excellent.

I trust that my comments above add a student's perspective to further support Robert's teaching and research skills. They also speak strongly for his relationships with students; the community; and throughout the academic world in his area of speciality.

I also add that Robert's dedication through 2005 in so many aspects beyond the call of duty (outlined above) provide a model on how to develop a language program. It was common for Robert to be available to students after our classes finished at 8:30pm, which further highlights Robert's hours and commitment.

I have heard that the official reasons given for Robert's non-collegiality are:

- Media attention over the postponement of classes so that students could attend VSU rallies.
- The poster advertising the Latin American Studies course for 2006.

My responses are:

- My TAFE language class was unaffected by the postponement of classes to attend the VSU rally, so I cannot comment directly on this issue. Many in the class were able to attend the rally and so therefore appreciated the rescheduling so as to minimize disruption to other students. However, students are extremely concerned over the perception subsequently created by Robert's dismissal, that the media can control/censor the academic world so directly.
- The poster seems to highlight an issue of academic freedom, because the management concern appeared to be that the course would portray an unfavourable picture of capitalism. As previously stated, one of the most

important responsibilities of higher education is to raise an issue and promote debate based on critical analysis. As such, students of any faculty, particularly of business, would be able to investigate this if it were an issue, to add collective wisdom to the pool of meaning.

I have heard unofficially that the dismissal was based on:

- Other factors relating to interpersonal relations.

My overall responses to this are:

- If this is the case, the principles of natural justice are being denied.
- If there are allegations of interpersonal relations issues, these need to be discussed with the individuals involved at the time and RMIT needs to provide training to avoid further issues – rather than advising dismissal.

My personal comments are:

- That in our personal relationship, I have found Robert most cordial. Sometimes too much so, because it has delayed discussion on the issue at hand!
- That after spending so much time in Latin America/outside Australia, and then commencing employment at a new institution; some measure of culture shock should have been expected by both Robert and RMIT, and that assistance was required to help Robert acclimatize as quickly as possible.
- That Robert is a man of deep convictions on many matters, and to me it seems that there has been a conflict with those that hold the opposite convictions that all should take responsibility for, rather than just Robert.
- That the situation of the dismissal has placed incredible stress on Robert, and that the way that this has been done should not be expected of anyone in a tolerant workplace.

I am sure that much has occurred over the last year that both sides look back on with regret. My hope is that meaningful discussion can be recommenced to understand and resolve this issue in a non-combative way so that the time of so many could be put to better use, and for the future benefit of all parties concerned.

I believe that RMIT can seek to redress this unfortunate situation by reopening dialogue with Robert (who to my understanding is being represented by the National Tertiary Education Union). My understanding is that the dispute is currently awaiting hearing at the Industrial Relations Commission (IRC), a waste of the resources of all.

If dialogue does not recommence, I believe RMIT has several clear responsibilities to the students affected in both TAFE and University streams.

These are:

- Re-instating Robert Austin as Spanish Program Coordinator until the IRC dispute is concluded. Otherwise this is a continuation of a “guilty until proven innocent” approach.

- Allowing Robert Austin to complete the exchange agreements with the universities that were investigated in 2005. This is especially important for students who have already commenced exchanges in 2006 after being advised that these would be finalized as soon as possible, and whose academic career and finances are being jeopardized. In addition, this would allow other students to progress their own future path of study.
- Allowing Robert Austin to teach the Latin American Studies course that he has developed and for which students have already enrolled for 2006. This would allow Robert to work on what RMIT has to my understanding already classed as his strengths (teaching and research), for the benefit of students educationally and monetarily (our contribution to university finances should be spent in the best manner available).

Further to this, it seems clear to me that RMIT needs to thoroughly review its human relations practices.

- Managers need to be given training in how to administer the teams that are responsible to them.
- Clear direction needs to be provided on RMIT's strategy to avoid the situation of individual schools/managers not being aligned with critical RMIT policies such as VSU legislation, where it appears that SICS had the opposite view to you, as VC.

I apologise that I have not been able to write earlier than now, for your greater consideration of my comments before Semester 1 2006, but I hope you appreciate that the full discussion of the variety of topics I have mentioned above has taken considerable effort, and as such demonstrates the importance of the above matters to me and the other students that I can represent through my Staff/Student Consultative Committee responsibilities.

I look forward to the various parties currently involved in these issues minimizing the glances back at the many misunderstandings in the last year and instead looking forward to how best meet the needs of the students of RMIT in these matters in 2006 and beyond, because this is the group who currently are receiving the least attention; which is disproportionate to them being the most important stakeholder.

I look forward to a response to my letter at your earliest convenience, but more importantly to resolution of the issues raised.

Yours truly,

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