

Radical measures to get La Trobe on track

Deborah Fewster

Too many courses at La Trobe University are looking "conservative and staid" and student retention rates have fallen below the national average in all faculties except health sciences, a 'green paper' published by the university's vice-chancellor Professor Paul Johnson, has revealed.

Entrance scores have also dropped – particularly in science, technology and engineering – and for the past five years, fewer university applicants have preferred La Trobe.

Repositioning La Trobe also reveals that the university is currently "living beyond its means" because it doesn't raise the same volume of teaching and research revenue as its peers.

The paper, which will form the basis of a new 10 year strategic plan for the university, is currently

being circulated for comment.

It sets out plans to "refresh" its courses and better "engage" students – but it also flags a 25 per cent reduction in teaching time and consolidation of undergraduate programs.

President of the La Trobe University Students' Representative Council Sarah Cole, says while there are some good things in the paper, students are concerned it could be a "wolf in sheep's clothing", paving the way for widespread cuts to smaller courses and increasing class sizes in others.

A 'No Cuts Collective' has been established. Between 60 and 70 students attended the first meeting and the SRC has plans to set up a series of smaller meetings between the vice-chancellor and different student groups across the university's six campuses.

Coles says in recent years La Trobe has tried hard to position

itself as one of the top three universities in Victoria.

In the process, it's been trying to emulate Melbourne and Monash and have the same general offerings, so it's no wonder there's a perception that La Trobe's courses have lost their edge, she says.

"The paper talks about going back to the university's radical roots, which could contain a lot of positives," Coles says.

But she finds it hard to reconcile this with potential cuts to smaller, more interesting classes.

"I don't see how that gels – cutting the smaller classes and having a more general offering."

The green paper has been emailed to every La Trobe student and the vice-chancellor has invited students to email him. An official forum for student blogs was also set up on Monday.



Students protest arts funding cuts

Melbourne University students brought the institution's academic board to a standstill late last month.

Dozens of students were protesting planned cuts to the arts faculty and next year's introduction of a US-style teaching model. The action forced the cancellation of a meeting between senior university management and faculty deans.

A statement released by the Student Union's education public officer Liz Walsh said "universities should

not be run like a business, with faculties valued only if they are profitable".

The university had previously announced a cut of up to 12 per cent to the arts staff budget, predicted to cost dozens of jobs.

Next year, under the Melbourne Model, the university will offer just six broad undergraduate degrees and a number of graduate professional programs.

Footage from the protest can be viewed at www.youtube.com/vcasu

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