

## RUSU COMMENTS ON MAJOR CHANGE PROPOSAL

**Memo: RUSU Feedback on Major Change Proposal**

**To:** Dene Cicci - Executive Director, Students; David Howard - Director, Library Services; Martin Bean CBE, Vice Chancellor and President

**From:** Daniel Hoogstra, RUSU President

**Date** 18/09/2020

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### Proposed changes to library services

1. Within the space of three days, almost 500 students have contacted RUSU to tell us they do not want to see cuts to library staff and services. This is an extraordinary response within such a short timeframe. Students' individual comments are reflected in italics in this memo.

*"A university is a place for learning and libraries are a vital hub for information. More funding should be put into the library and spaces such as the Makerspace should be expanded."*

*"I cannot express how much I love our library. I am grateful for the resources and the staff who are available to help us. The library played a major role in my decision to study at RMIT."*

2. **RUSU is concerned about the proposal to reduce frontline staff on information desks and cut staffing for the library's online chat service.** When we return to campus, students will expect access to face-to-face support from professional librarians. They also need to know that their online queries will be answered quickly and effectively. This cannot occur with the proposed reduction of existing staff.

*"I have relied on the professional librarians who have been available at information desks for all of my studies so far, but particularly for the Art History + Theory + Cultures and Studio subjects which make up the core of my degree program. Their professional expertise has helped me to find important resources to facilitate my study, but more importantly helped me to develop research skills which are a key part of my learning."*

*"Professional librarians at the campus are needed, they have the expertise that we can ask for when finding tools and academic resources... Furthermore, the library online chat service is extremely helpful, I know many of my friends and other students use it, so I hope there will be no cut on this as well."*

*"I have relied on the 'Ask the Library' online chat service both during business hours and after hours. My caring responsibilities sometimes make it impossible for me to attend the campus in person during the day. At those times the chat service helps me to keep up with my studies. At other times I am forced to study out of business hours to keep up with my workload, so both regular hours and out of hours support is essential for students like me. Access to the chat service during business hours comes down to an issue of equity for me as a student with an Equitable Learning Plan, as it helps to bridge the gap at times when I am unable to attend campus."*

3. **Students are calling for the Makerspace to be retained.** The Makerspace is one of the only places students can get free laser cutting and 3D printing for their coursework. Many students require this technology for design work and the Makerspace provides vital support in this area.

*"The Makerspace is a vital component of the library at RMIT - a university with Technology in its name. The laser cutters are valuable to me for test etching on fabric as part of my practice-led research. The staff have been valuable for advice and training. I was so thankful to have a free resource on campus for this, rather than having to trek out to other locations and pay additional \$\$."*

*"As an Engineering student I strongly value the Makerspace, and am frustrated at the suggestion of its closure. For a University known for 'hands on' tech and design work, to cut these sorts of facilities, seems short-sighted as they provide a great public resource for personal projects."*

*"As a Communication Design student who is moving into their final year of study, the space has and will continue to provide essential access to technologies that aid me in my learning. It is essential to some courses, and will leave students with more expenses sourcing other facilities."*

*"I love studying at RMIT, and more than ever I am looking forward to returning to campus next year and spending as much time as possible using the university's great resources. The library and Makerspace are the heart of the school, where students can connect with each other and their learning."*

*"The Makerspace is also an integral part of my time at RMIT. It has allowed me to go above and beyond in projects and assessments and allowed me to create on a budget that just would not be possible otherwise. Many of my friends and I have been able to use these fantastic resources RMIT has and speak very highly of them to our peers. It will be a real shame to see this go."*

*"The idea of a Makerspace is a place for students to engage in all manner of creative pursuits. To encourage innovation and practical up-skilling in a relaxed and friendly environment. A place for students to engage in their own personal projects, free of administrative oversight and deadlines."*

*"RMIT's Makerspace has succeeded in this goal. One only has to look at the wall of Makerspace to see the dozens of projects that they have helped students see to completion."*

- 4. The Print Collection.** Not all resources have a digital equivalent and not all students are able to perform their best using online resources. Students need the option of accessing the print collection once we are able to return to campus.

*"RMIT libraries, particularly Swanston and Carlton Libraries have been essential to my studies so far. The subjects I am planning to study to complete my degree will require ongoing access to both the print collection and digital resources. For the subject matter I am studying, a significant proportion of the important material is only available in the print collection. The impossibility of getting access to this material has been one of the major losses for me during this year's lockdown period. The thought that this collection might be compromised is devastating."*

- 5. A new "Library Connect":** While RMIT Connect staff do a great job (and Connect has employed a lot of students in the past), any rebranding as 'Library Connect' cannot be allowed to replace expert advice from qualified librarians. University libraries play a fundamental role in ensuring high quality educational experiences. Any reduction of access to professional librarians would be a huge loss for RMIT students. RUSU is concerned this proposal may signal a shift towards greater casualisation of library services, which will undermine existing expertise.
- 6. Peer mentoring:** RUSU is pleased to see the proposal includes 'ongoing staffing for peer mentoring' (formerly known as SLAMs). Peer mentoring is a key study support tool for students. RUSU participated in consultations with the peer mentoring team in 2019 with a view to growing the program as part of our 2020 priorities. We are keen to see the program be properly resourced and student-focused.

# Proposed changes to Equitable Learning Services (ELS)

## The role of ELS

In RUSU's opinion, ELS plays a fundamental role in upholding the rights of students with disabilities (including psychosocial disabilities and long-term illness) in accordance with equal opportunity and disability legislation. There have been many improvements in the structure and operational resourcing of ELS over the past several years. RUSU is pleased to have worked with RMIT to help shape some of these changes. All of these recent improvements rely on ELS providing expert advice with a disability and mental health lens.

The role of ELS extends far beyond study and learning to encompass broader interactions between students and RMIT. For complex cases, ELS provides a bridge between students with disability and RMIT to facilitate wide-reaching processes such as enrolments, policy development and access to broader RMIT services.

ELS staff handle highly confidential medical information that is not shared with other areas of RMIT. This documentation is equivalent to counselling case notes and needs to remain highly secure.

The ELS Manager attends conciliation hearings under relevant human rights legislation and provides advice on whether inherent requirements comply with legal requirements. The governance structures for the ELS team need to reflect this important role. It is important that the ELS Manager is able to report to senior executives with a background or expertise in either human rights, disability, wellbeing or similar.

It is also important that ELS staff receive appropriate access to professional development and peer coaching from other student support, wellbeing and/or equity and diversity team members.

## Support for staff in addition to students

We understand there is a proposal for ELS to support staff with disability, in addition to students. We note this may raise issues of conflicts of interest and/or confidentiality. For example, we are concerned that it may be possible for a student and their teacher to attend an ELS appointment at the same time and encounter each other in the waiting room. If this happened, teacher and student might discover each-other's status as a person with a disability/mental health condition before they were ready to make such a disclosure. We are also concerned about the extra resourcing that would be required for ELS to take on additional duties supporting staff. This should not be allowed to undermine services for students.

## The position of ELS within the proposed organisational structure

As a result, RUSU considers that moving ELS under the umbrella of library services would be incongruous as it would not reflect key components of ELS's role within the university. We are also concerned that, with the library already facing significant cuts, this may lead to under-resourcing of a critical function supporting students with disabilities and/or mental health conditions.

RUSU would support ELS remaining alongside other key wellbeing groups - such as counselling - within the proposed organisational structure. We would also be open to further consultation regarding a structure similar to Ngarara Willim, with a focus on excellence and wellbeing support for students with disability, long-term illness or mental health conditions.

## Mental health services at RMIT

RUSU places high importance on mental health support for students. RUSU's Compass Coordinators had the following comments:

*"Compass Drop-in centre has seen an increase of distressed students accessing our service during COVID19. Having RMIT Counselling as the main referral pathway is integral to our service. If counselling receives decreased funding to this service, we would expect to see an impact on other departments at RMIT and also an impact on the already fragile mental health of our students."*

In particular, RUSU is aware that higher degree by research (HDR) students are under enormous pressure and can have complex mental health needs. In a recent report commissioned by RMIT, participants identified "the key role [RMIT counselling] services play in helping support HDRs intellectual and emotional journey." - HDR Belonging: Practices & Perceptions during COVID-19, Richardson et al, RMIT School of Graduate Research

RMIT Counselling currently has staff with significant expertise in supporting HDR students. To fully support an HDR student with mental health concerns, RMIT Counsellors require not only professional counselling knowledge but institutional knowledge of RMIT's processes and the HDR experience.

Senior counsellors have played an important role giving presentations and workshops to HDR supervisors and students. They have also contributed to HDR mental health and wellbeing groups and, of course, have provided high quality counselling support to individual HDR candidates.

RUSU is concerned that the proposal to reduce the number of senior counsellors may undermine the existing expertise which is necessary to support HDR students.

RUSU would like to see RMIT embed and retain senior counsellors with HDR expertise, with a particular focus on employing counsellors with the necessary institutional knowledge, connections and experience to work with complex HDR cases. RUSU is concerned that reducing the number of senior counsellors will undermine current HDR counselling practice.