



World leaders urge government action over Australia's ailing mathematical sciences

In an unprecedented move, the international mathematics community has rallied in support of their Australian colleagues and signed an open letter to Prime Minister John Howard, urging him to prevent the imminent collapse of our national mathematical capability.

More than 110 of the world's leading mathematicians and almost 400 Australian academic mathematicians and statisticians, teachers, engineers and geophysicists have signed the open letter, calling on the Prime Minister to address the 'perilous path' of Australian mathematics and statistics as a matter of urgency.

The open letter - available online at <http://www.review.ms.unimelb.edu.au/OpenLetter.html> - comes three months after the release of a damning review of Australia's mathematical sciences, in which business leaders, top government agencies, universities and mathematicians warned that the system was near collapse.

Although the issue has received widespread media coverage since the release of the review, the Australian government has failed to take any action to implement the key recommendations.

Worryingly, since the review was released, matters have further deteriorated, with "... the already seriously depleted base of mathematical sciences in Australian universities being further eroded, with a number of universities currently reducing staff through voluntary or forced redundancies."

AN OPEN LETTER TO THE PRIME MINISTER - Background

Who has signed it?

Many of the world's mathematical leaders including Sir John Ball (President of the International Mathematical Union), Professor Terence Tao (Fields medallist), and Sir Michael Atiyah (Fields medallist).

Australians signing the letter include academic mathematicians and statisticians, teachers, engineers and geophysicists, many from medical research and others from diverse fields. They include Professor Suzanne Cory (Director, Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research) and Professor Ian Sloan (President of the International Council for Industrial and Applied Mathematics).

Why is an open letter needed?

Because of national and international concern about the parlous state of mathematics and statistics in Australia and that action is needed now.

During 2006 three major reports documented the dire situation:

- *Participation in advanced and intermediate mathematics subjects at Year 12 was found to have declined and was continuing to do so;*
- *A worsening situation in regard to teacher supply was documented; and*



MEDIA RELEASE

For immediate release

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- *A national strategic review showed shrinking mathematical sciences in our universities and the percentage of mathematics and statistics graduates well below the OECD average.*

For copies of these reports see www.amsi.org.au/publications.php (Recent Reports of Interest).

Despite a plethora of reports identifying the problems and suggesting solutions, there has been no clear response from the Australian government and no commitment to address the problems in schools and university mathematics education, advanced research, and mathematics and statistics needs in business, industry and government agencies.

Australia needs urgent action that recognises the interconnected nature of the problems.

Why do the mathematical sciences matter?

The situation in regard to university mathematical sciences departments should be of concern to every parent in Australia.

Australian students are growing up in a world where access to mathematical knowledge determines many career choices and opportunities. Any action to improve school mathematics education must be accompanied by rebuilding university mathematics and statistics departments and the number of graduates in these areas, or else teacher supply will continue to decline.

All Australians depend on the mathematical sciences for security, efficient management of natural resources, managing water and energy supplies and modelling climate change.

Outsourcing security to other nations is not an option. Without our own mathematical expertise defence, financial institutions and other agencies are vulnerable.

Ends/ends...

MEDIA NOTE:

A copy of the open letter is available at: <http://www.review.ms.unimelb.edu.au/OpenLetter.html>

Chairman of the Working Party for the Review of Mathematical Sciences in Australia, Professor Hyam Rubinstein, and Working Party member, Ms Jan Thomas, are available for interview. For media interview arrangements and further information:

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