VU rejig to help disadvantaged will cost 115 academics’ jobs

Kerri-Lee Krause denies the university is double dipping.

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The Australian
12:00AM May 3, 2017

Equity experts say Victoria University’s overhaul of course delivery could “break new ground” in supporting disadvantaged students.

The dual-sector university plans to implement a stand-alone first-year college from next year to deliver “the first year of bachelor degrees and an integrated certificate IV program” in tertiary preparation.

VU’s higher education structure will be “remodelled” to deliver degrees from second year onwards and will result in the loss of at least 115 academic positions.

An implementation plan sent to staff in March said the move was about “improving student success and ensuring ongoing financial viability”.

VU has run at a financial loss for four of the past five years and another deficit is projected for this year. The institution went from a net profit of $34 million in 2010 to a loss of $12m in 2015.

VU is more reliant on student fee revenue than other universities and has above-average staffing costs, the memo to staff says.
“These factors, among others, have placed the financial viability of VU at risk. The university now faces an imperative to reach a positive net operating position by 2018.”

As a result of the demand-driven system, 60 per cent of VU students have an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank below 50 and the institution has a 33 per cent first-year attrition rate, well above the 23 per cent sector average.

Now VU has been accused of “double dipping” for simultaneously enrolling students in a state-funded certificate IV and federally funded bachelor’s degree.

Deputy vice-chancellor Kerri-Lee Krause said this was “simply not true”.

She said, as a dual-sector institution, VU was “taking the opportunity to leverage available programs in support of students” and had consulted with relevant government agencies while the initiative was launched in a pilot this year.

“All first-year students will be required to complete the certificate IV,” Professor Krause said.

A spokesman for Victorian Training Minister Gayle Tierney said the state government would “back courses that provide additional support to students”.

VU’s new model is based on research into student engagement and the first-year experience, Professor Krause said.

She said the stand-alone college would deliver discipline-specific first-year courses as well as “personalised learning support strategies and extension activities”.

“We’re not proposing a general first-year curriculum,” she said.

However, National Tertiary Education Union VU branch president Paul Adams said the initiative was primarily about moving staff into lower paid, less secure jobs.

Professor Krause said there had never been a proposition to move existing staff on to lower conditions.

“This is misinformation and serves only to distract attention away from the primary and urgent need for VU to focus on improving the experience of our students,” she said.

The affected academics in the senior colleges had until last week to indicate their interest in the 50 new roles for “academics with an education focus” or seek voluntary redundancy.

The new college also will be staffed by 65 “academic teaching scholars”, which sessional staff are expected to apply for, as well as 40 TAFE teachers to deliver the tertiary preparation.

Marie Brennan, an honorary professor of education at VU and a member of the Friends of VU group, which opposes the initiative, said shifting academics to teaching-only roles would harm students and staff.

The teaching scholars are expected to teach 18 hours a week, which together with the requisite hours for class preparation left no time for marking, student consultation or feedback, Professor Brennan said.
National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education director Sue Trinidad said VU would “break new ground” in evidence-based approaches to supporting disadvantaged students, which would provide additional support.

However, Andrew Harvey from La Trobe University said: “Less academically prepared students are often asked to attend extra tutorials or mentoring sessions.

“There is often a risk that they can become overloaded through these — both formal and informal — additional requirements.”