



12 July 2021

Professor Amanda Davies  
Head of School Social Sciences  
University of Western Australia  
35 Stirling Highway  
Crawley WA 6009

Dear Professor Davies,

We write on behalf of the Executive Committee of the Australian Anthropological Society (AAS) to express our grave concerns about the change management proposal put forward by the School of Social Sciences, particularly the proposal to dissolve the discipline group of Anthropology and Sociology. Among the first departments of anthropology or sociology established in Australia, UWA has trained generations of students in both theoretical and applied aspects of the disciplines. It has contributed enormously to the development of these fields of study in Australia and around the world. Even in the context of serious budgetary shortfalls, we cannot understand why the School is proposing the destruction of one of the best Anthropology and Sociology discipline groups in the country.

If acted upon, the proposed changes would undermine UWA's status as an internationally recognized university offering a full range of academic disciplines. Along with sociology, anthropology has a distinctive contribution to make to some of the most pressing challenges of our times. Scholars at UWA are leading experts on of Indigenous land rights, environmental conflict and food security in Australia and the Asia-Pacific region, educational policy in Australia, youth lifeways and educational policy, Australian multiculturalism and inclusion, and migration and mobility. Among social sciences, anthropology is distinctive for an insistent focus on the full range of human experience, not only the experiences of the Global North. Its core methodology, ethnographic field research, builds on long-term, sustained relationships with people and communities—an approach increasingly emphasised in work calling for the decolonisation of social sciences. Ethnographic methods have been adopted across many social science disciplines, but few support the long-term, engaged research characteristic of qualitative sociology and anthropology.

While anthropologists today study all aspects the human condition, the discipline has maintained a strong research focus on Indigenous societies in Australia and globally. For decades, anthropologists have focused not only on documenting Indigenous culture, but on understanding and supporting struggles against processes of colonial dispossession, racism, and exclusion. Anthropology brings a broad comparative perspective to questions and concerns shared by other disciplines, including Indigenous Studies, and has long critically interrogated its own disciplinary history and the ways that some kinds of knowledge are excluded from the Western academy. One of the most exciting developments in the contemporary discipline of anthropology is the increasing prominence of Indigenous anthropologists who are transforming the discipline from within. The contemporary discipline of anthropology, along with sociology, is thus well placed to support initiatives mentioned in the change proposal, including the embedding of Indigenous knowledge and perspectives into existing courses and developing research partnerships with Australian Indigenous communities.

The proposed changes also diminish the overall national social science research capacity in Australia by sacking some of the most accomplished scholars in the country. Both disciplines comprising today's department of Anthropology and Sociology are ranked as "4" ("at or above

international standard”) in the ARC’s evaluation of Excellence in Research for Australia.<sup>1</sup> In the past decade, the discipline group has attracted two Future Fellows and two DECRA scholars plus several Discovery and Linkage grants and many industry grants. Two UWA staff have won the prestigious Curl Prize for the best essay published in the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, one of the top journals of social anthropology in the world. The group includes one of the “top 30 Australian researchers in the Social Sciences, and Research Field Leader in Human Migration” and several scholars with some of the the highest h-index and number of citations in the School. The change proposal misleadingly takes *research income* as a proxy for research activity, output, and impact. As is the case in other humanities and social sciences disciplines whose core methods involve talking to people or reading texts, anthropological and sociological research is great value for money. We don’t need huge grants to do innovative and important research.

The justification for dissolving Anthropology and Sociology as a teaching unit is no stronger than the justification for eliminating the research capacity of its staff. Anthropology and Sociology is a popular major at UWA, with the third largest number of undergraduate enrolments in the School, high numbers of students (200+) to its first-year subjects, and one of the largest cohorts of HDR students in the School. The change proposal cites a relatively high full-time staff to student ratio of 18, but this alone is hardly a justification for abolishment—indeed, it may help to explain the high levels of student satisfaction reported by anthropology and sociology students!

The School’s commitment to ensure graduates can apply their social sciences skills in meaningful work is another reason to retain Anthropology and Sociology. There is significant unmet demand for anthropologists across Australia in Aboriginal land councils, native title research, mineral and resources development, and land management. Around the country, anthropology graduates work across public and private sectors, doing work focused on environmental conservation, migration policy, international development, health services, demography, law, market research, product development, human resources management, and health services to name only a few of the professions pursued by students trained in anthropology. Training in ethnographic research methods allows students to see patterns in ordinary activity, ask good questions, listen deeply, and link different kinds of data together to produce new insights. The Anthropology and Sociology discipline at UWA has led the country in developing undergraduate and postgraduate curriculum integrating transferable research skills in its undergraduate and master’s programs.

The legacy of anthropology at UWA goes beyond the academic discipline, and is evident in the Berndt Museum of Anthropology, the internationally respected journal *Anthropological Forum*, the Anthropological Society of Western Australia. The destruction of the discipline group will diminish the capacity of these organisations continue their work in promoting research into culture and society in Australia and beyond.

We are dismayed to see that the School of Social Sciences is the first victim of UWA’s budgetary shortfalls. Australian government research shows that students who major in arts, humanities, and social sciences are highly employable—indeed, more employable than science graduates.<sup>2</sup> It is hard to see how the proposed changes will help to address the significant financial difficulties of that the University of Western Australia is facing in the wake of COVID-19. Such a drastic change is, instead, likely to damage The University of Western Australia’s global reputation, alienate students and alumni, and minimise the contributions that scholars at UWA contribute to finding solutions to the world’s most pressing challenges.

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<sup>1</sup> Only 3 of 11 universities (27%) that put forward submissions for Anthropology were ranked at this level or higher. By comparison, 75% of submitting universities earned 4 or 5 in archaeology and 47% of submitting universities earned a 4 or 5 in Human Geography.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.qilt.edu.au/docs/default-source/gos-reports/2019-gos/2019-gos-national-report.pdf>

The discipline was built by brilliant scholars, teachers, and students over many generations, and continues to achieve international excellence by all accepted measures. Its sudden destruction would amount to an act of intellectual vandalism—a terrible disservice to the current and future students of Western Australia and to the broader scholarly community in Australia and around the world. We urge you to reconsider.

Sincerely yours,

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