

12 July, 2021

Professor Robert French,
Chancellor, University of Western Australia

Dear Professor French,

We are writing as the current President of The Australian Sociological Association (TASA) and the President of the Council for the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (CHASS) to share our concern about the proposal to discontinue the Anthropology and Sociology Discipline Group and the majors they teach.

Sociology and Anthropology are among the core social science disciplines, and it would be highly unusual, we believe unique, for a major world ranked university with a broad humanities and social sciences program not to offer them. This change would make the University of Western Australia an outlier among the Group of Eight and its global peers. The disciplines provide the foundation for applied policy and field studies offerings in major universities and teach key social science theories and methods across many areas of the university.

A move to discontinue broad-based undergraduate majors offering key methodological and conceptual skills for the study of human society would run counter to an emerging consensus that the evolving labour market make such skills more valuable. Recent reports from Deloitte argue technical skills are not sufficient by themselves to meet the needs of the future of work. Complex problem solving, reasoning, comprehension and understanding of the social are identified as necessary skills – all of which can be readily tied to these disciplines. Of note, while these non-technical skills are critical for 21st century employability, they are reported to be in short supply.

Universities that have built their current strength and reputation on understanding and serving the communities in which they are based have large and vibrant sociology programs (Western Sydney University and Newcastle University, for example). To reduce such outreach and impact would run counter to your mission of providing world-class education, research and community engagement for the advancement of the prosperity and welfare of your communities. It is also contradictive to your University's defining characteristics of 'relevant', 'influential', 'open', and, 'just and equitable'. Operationalised, each of these characteristics point to the work of these disciplines; the need to tackle the 'pressing challenging problems facing society', by 'being the catalyst for social change', to 'work across boundaries', and to 'promote the expression of human values'.

Further, the respect Sociology and Anthropology at UWA attracts across the social science community in Australia and internationally is of note. Both have received a four in the most recent ERA ranking. These 'above world standard rankings' are noteworthy as is the leading

research in the areas of migration and multiculturalism. We are hopeful that a thorough and consultative rethinking will take place, attentive to the significant risks posed by the proposal to eradicate these disciplines from UWA.

Following are further key issues to be taken into consideration:

1. The stated aims of the restructure, to enhance the applied focus of its social science degrees and develop a 'Social Science Skills passport', will be undermined if the disciplines of sociology and anthropology are discontinued. The onset of the pandemic has demonstrated the necessity of these disciplines in informing how we need to rebuild. The quest to create a 'Social Science Skills passport' is profoundly compromised without the insights, knowledge and skills that these disciplines provide, particularly in designing, undertaking and reporting results from research projects.
2. Data points to an uptake in 'studies in human society' degree preferences in 2021, with these prospective students fully aware of the rise of course fees and their proportionate responsibility for them. The Department of Education student statistics further points to significantly higher enrolments in these degrees over that of political science & policy studies. The proposed Department of Politics, Society and Policy would be more financially resilient with the addition of sociology and anthropology. Further, the name of the Department is nonsensical without their inclusion.
3. The proposal to remove the disciplines from the University makes use of Employment outcome data from QILT. It should be clearly noted that full-time work or full-time study do not take into account for example, graduates who take casual employment, are self-employed or continue in part-time work and part-time study. Using these measures is not reflective of the graduate profile of the majority of providers.
4. The proposal states that students in Anthropology and Sociology majors will be offered support to complete their study. The University policy on transition arrangements indicates that movement to another degree or major is voluntary for students. The proposal simultaneously details the dismissal of the academics who teach into these majors. As such, the University's ability to ensure that students are not disadvantaged is not demonstrated.
5. UWA's Courses Undergraduate Policy in clause 1.1d indicates that courses should reflect international expectations. As outlined above, the eradication of sociology from your courses is an outlier of Go8s and its global peers. 1.1f. details that courses should meet the educational needs of students and the wider community, at the highest possible standard; and 1.1i. states that courses will place emphasis on inquiry based learning and research skill development, thus introducing students to the research culture of the relevant discipline. These clauses detail the needs for the skills and knowledge set that these disciplines provide to the relevant degrees of the School.

The recent challenges faced by the University sector, including the drastically restructured funding models in teaching and learning and research, provides universities with a unique opportunity to reimagine curriculum and approaches to cross-disciplinary research,

commercialisation and translation. Rather than cutting these foundational social science disciplines from your offerings, we ask UWA to ensure their continuation for the good of the University in this reimagining, its students and the communities in which it serves.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission on the proposed changes.

Yours sincerely

Professor Alpha Possamai-Inesedy
President of The Australian Sociological Association

Professor Dan Woodman
President of the Council for the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences