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Professor Amanda Davies
School of Social Sciences
The University of Western Australia

Dear Professor Davies,

SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES PROPOSAL FOR CHANGE CONSULTATION PAPER

I write to comment on the proposal to eliminate Anthropology & Sociology from the School of Social Sciences. As a former Head of the Anthropology Department and the inaugural Head of the School of Social and Cultural Studies, I find this proposal baffling and deeply disturbing. Not so many years ago Anthropology / Sociology was one of the "big three" groups, along with History and English, in the Faculty of Arts & Humanities . That student enrolments have now declined in Anthropology / Sociology should in my view initiate moves to help the group rather than eliminate it. Anthropology / Sociology is thriving elsewhere in the academic world.

Student enrolments over time will always wax and wane. In the late 1990s and early 2000s your own discipline group, Geography at UWA, along with Linguistics, Italian and Classics, were all in the crosshairs of managers seeking to save money at all cost. It was only with support that these groups were rescued. Archaeology, for different reasons, was also threatened with extinction. It, too, was saved. That both Geography and Archaeology are thriving today is testament to the value of the longer-term vision taken by UWA decision makers in the past.

The current proposal appears to have limited intellectual rationale. Anthropology in particular should be one of the core subjects in a humanities and social sciences curriculum, especially today when the need to understand other ways of life is crucial to our very survival in an often hostile world.

Anthropology has been a foundation subject for the development of other contemporary disciplines. Two among them being the modern practice of management consulting and the discipline of epidemiology, which originated in the anthropological study of disease. I do not need to state the importance of epidemiology today.

A shortsighted decision to deprive UWA students of the chance to study anthropology would be irresponsible and reflect badly upon the University's leadership.

Furthermore, I cannot comprehend why UWA would willingly surrender a discipline to Curtin University, where the program in anthropology was started by UWA's own PhD graduates. Curtin's small program is unlikely to fill the shortfall of anthropology graduates that would flow from UWA's exit.

This proposal looks good only from a narrow management perspective. It produces a tidy Organisational Chart in which seven messy boxes are reduced to three tidy ones. Yes, it will save money otherwise spent on salaries, but it will also lose income from potential students who vote with their feet and enrol at Curtin or elsewhere rather than UWA. These students are unlikely to pick another subject to study at UWA. They will be lost. In reducing costs you will also be reducing income.

In addition to the lack of intellectual justification in this proposal, I am surprised about two further aspects: (1) Why are student enrolments alone being used to demonstrate weakness? A more transparent document would have included total School income in dollars balanced against total School expenditure per group. I know that Anthropology with its Level E and D positions would still be in an unfavourable position, but so too would be Archaeology and Geography, both of which are obviously very expensive. A summary of the School's budget would make it easier to understand the cost structure of the entire School and its income. And (2), why, if saving money is the goal, is the cost of the School's office not also included? I know that the School's Office staff are important and necessary, but I also know that they represent all cost and zero income. The School administration is subsidised by the teaching and research of academic staff. This should be made clear in the proposal. Shifting to a view of the School that clearly shows income against expenditure could possibly reveal the way to a wiser solution to the School's difficulties.

Enacting this proposal as it stands will inflict a wound upon the local, national and international reputation of the School and the University that will never cease to bleed.

Yours sincerely,



Dr John L Gordon (PhD, Harvard 1975)
Head, Department of Anthropology (1988-90, 1992-94, 1998-99)
Head, School of Social & Cultural Studies (2000-2007)
Deputy Executive Dean & Associate Dean, Faculty of Arts (1994-95)
Director, Asian Studies Centre (1988-89)
Director, Centre for South & Southeast Asian Studies (1985-87)
The Editor, Anthropological Forum (1988-2000)

cc: Hon. Robert S French, Chancellor, The University of Western Australia
Prof. Amit Chakma, Vice-Chancellor