

8 July 2021

Dear Professor Davies,

SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES PROPOSAL FOR CHANGE CONSULTATION  
PAPER

I write as a current Adjunct Professor in the School of Social Sciences (Anthropology & Sociology). I can provide details of my ongoing collegial connection to the discipline group as needed. In summary, I am Professor Emeritus at University of Queensland, co-Chair of the Berndt Research Foundation, a member of the Editorial Board of the UWA journal *Anthropological Forum* and over the past couple of years have examined several honours theses and co-supervised two PhD scholars at UWA. I am currently Director of the ANU-based Centre for Native Title Anthropology, have served on the ARC College of Experts for three years, and was Head of a large School of Social Science at University of Queensland (2011-2013). I worked at UWA in these disciplines for 20 years (1986-2007). I have now retired to Perth and remain active in research and as a consultant anthropologist.

I have to say that while acknowledging the importance of addressing UWA's financial situation this proposal to completely discontinue the Anthropology and Sociology major and its disciplines is appalling. It is my opinion that it would be a decision contrary to the remit of the University of Western Australia and to the significant role of these disciplines in tertiary education and public engagement. To state the obvious, staff at UWA would understandably be led to reflect on how many other disciplines will be treated in the same way regardless of long histories over decades of highly productive teaching and research. Targeting Anthropology & Sociology for such harsh treatment risks the appearance of bias against the intellectual position these disciplines occupy straddling both the Social Sciences and the Humanities.

*Substantive issues*

1. Both disciplines of Anthropology and Sociology have a long history at Australia's Go8 educational institutions and are connected to international organisations, academic journals and collegial research efforts. If UWA were to vacate teaching and research in these areas its standing as a world class institution would be downgraded across that sector of the international academic community.
2. I am not in a position to consider the accuracy of the figures shown in Appendix A. Having worked as a Head of School I am aware that there can be complications in such calculations. I assume others will have access to the way

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the calculations have been completed to ensure all aspects of teaching are being taken into account.

3. However, assuming the figures are reliable and reflect the full range of teaching across the disciplines compared, I note the student/staff ratio in Anthropology/Sociology would need improvement but is not so low as to warrant a decision that the major should be discontinued. Are there no other ways enrolments at u/g and higher levels can be strategically addressed? Furthermore, we know that student interest across disciplines can change greatly over the short to medium term.
4. In my opinion, suggesting that the content of anthropology and sociology units in areas such as migration and refugee studies, changing uses and influence of media, social aspects of environmental challenges, the institutions of Australian society, and intercultural research focused on the legacies of colonialism will routinely be met in other disciplines is an assumption that is difficult to sustain. Neither the disciplinary literatures nor the qualitative methodologies that have been supported and taught in anthropology and sociology at UWA are likely to be matched in other School majors.
5. Appendix B of the proposal shows a low level of external research funding for Anthropology and Sociology in comparison to Geography and Archaeology but a level that compares favourably with four of the other disciplines in the School. Again, I do not see a logic that would discontinue an entire discipline group on this basis. Moreover, research income is hardly the only way to assess academic outcomes. I note that the ERA assessment of the **quality** of research outputs in the last round found both disciplines scored four, i.e. 'above world standard'.
6. As anthropology is my main discipline and area of expertise, I comment particularly here that anthropology's academic profile over the period of some 60 years since its establishment at UWA by Professor Ronald Berndt is well documented. The international recognition of the journal *Anthropological Forum* is evidence of that success. In particular, the wealth of scholarship focused on intercultural relations pertaining to Indigenous Australians that has been produced by students and staff at UWA over more than five decades is drawn on by scholars both nationally and internationally. The applied anthropology research and teaching of professional competence in the area of legal cases concerning native title and other land/heritage mediation and negotiation is well known. In the past, the UWA Centre for Anthropological Research (1997-2007) brought in considerable external consulting income

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together with grants from the WA and Commonwealth governments as well as Rio Tinto.

7. Relevant to the current situation is that the need for training of anthropologists to work in this area shows no signs of diminishing. In my current role I recently began as Director of the Centre for Native Title Anthropology at the Australian National University I am aware of the national demand for qualified anthropologists. The work of that Centre over the past 11 years, engaging with anthropology groups across the country, has been funded by the Commonwealth Attorney-General's department explicitly to address the level of expertise in the discipline. Indigenous organisations, government and industry continue to require qualified people to work in this area. **In this context, for UWA to discontinue teaching and research in anthropology will strike many stakeholders as extraordinary.** The Centre for Native Title Anthropology can provide data illustrating the national significance of this area of applied studies. The soon to be passed revised WA Aboriginal Cultural Heritage legislation will continue to require preparation of applied research reports by anthropologists as well as archaeologists and historians.
8. An example of the high standing of the anthropology profession in carrying out applied research for native title claims was the major event organised by the Federal Court of Australia together with the National Native Title Tribunal in Perth in May 2017, where '25 years of Native Title Anthropology' was celebrated (see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=08oveKt3atU> ).
9. Finally, I note in relation to the UWA Berndt Research Foundation, which distributes income from the bequest made by Catherine Berndt in the early 1990s, I will write separately together with Assoc Prof Katie Glaskin who is the co-Chair of the Foundation.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission on this matter. Should it be useful or productive to discuss the issues I am very happy to do so. I know about the pressures on university organisational units to address financial viability. However, I have to state my opinion that avoiding short-sighted decisions that risk assuming greater viability into the future for some entire disciplines compared to others, is rarely the best option. I will copy this letter to a number of relevant stakeholder organisations and individuals for their information as they may wish to contribute to feedback concerning the proposals to discontinue teaching, training and research in anthropology and sociology at UWA.

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Yours sincerely,

*David Trigger*

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