



Associate Professor
Kate McGregor
President of the ASAA

STATEMENT OF CONCERN RE CUTS TO STAFF WITH ASIA EXPERTISE AT UWA

Further to the cuts made to Asian language programs at Swinburne, Latrobe at the University of Western Sydney earlier this year, the ASAA is very concerned to learn of proposed cuts in the School of Social and Political Sciences at UWA that will affect staff with Asia expertise. We understand that there is a proposal to both cut jobs in the School that will adversely affect scholars of Asia and to convert teaching and research positions for scholars of Asia to teaching-focused positions with half the previous research load. This will significantly disrupt UWA's research expertise in Asian Studies.

The University of Western Australia has a strong reputation for research focused on Asia and as a training ground for students learning both Asian languages but also about Asia. Over the last twenty years, the School of Social and Political Sciences has trained many honours and postgraduate students leading to a new generation of highly Asia literate graduates who now work across academia, business, law, and numerous federal government graduate programs including the Department of Defence and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Indeed, it was due to the strength of Asian studies at UWA and the leadership of staff in this field that they hosted with great success the 2014 biennial ASAA Conference and the ASAA's 2017 Women in Asia Conference. The 2014 conference attracted 360 delegates: 18 themes, 106 panel sessions & 351 individual presentations and the 2017 conference attracted 95 papers from 128 delegates, almost half of whom were from overseas, predominantly the Asian region. Both of these conferences helped build the reputation of UWA within Australia and across the region as a hub of Asia focused knowledge.

We are concerned that scholars of Asia are considered dispensable at a time when Asia is one of the most important regions of the world to understand and indeed it is the region within which Australia is located. With regards to the conversions to teaching focused positions, we view this as a devaluing of the research-teaching nexus which is critical to Asian studies particularly given the years of training people in this field undertake to become experts. We believe that the best student experiences and the future of Asian studies in Australia will be dependent on the continuance of the practice of supporting active researchers who continue to pioneer research on Asia and pass on that knowledge to generations of students throughout their career. It is our view that teaching-focused positions will lead to diminished capacity for supervision of HDR students and the continued contribution of outstanding scholars to the scholarly community in Australia and the region. Many of the researchers currently in the School, including those at risk in Political Sciences and International Relations, and Anthropology and Sociology, research beyond the area of linguistics/language education.

They are committed to the promotion of Asian languages within their socio-cultural, historical and political contexts and to fostering “Asia literacy” beyond the learning of language. At this point in time, it is important that universities are able to offer both local students as well as international students’ deep undergraduate and graduate engagement with Asia. We note that the University of Western Australia indeed flags as priorities ‘regional engagement’ with the Indo-Pacific region, including with India and Indonesia specifically. The proposed changes are directly at odds with these stated commitments.

Further to this, the state government of Western Australia has shown strong support for engagement with Asia in recent years. For example, the first ever state-level ministerial position for Asian Engagement was created in Western Australia. The first appointment to this position was Minister Bill Johnston, who is proficient in Indonesian language. In 2018, the Government of Western Australia launched its Asian Engagement Strategy. It would appear to run contrary to the broad goals of this strategy and to the interests of the state government to reduce an Asian studies program in such a way as to undermine research expertise on Asia at UWA.

As President of the ASAA, I call upon you to support colleagues at risk at UWA by signing the following petitions and sharing online the petition about these proposed cuts. The UWA is currently in a consultation period about its proposal, so we encourage you to act before July 20.

<https://www.savesocialsciencesuwa.net/> (linked to this twitter account: @SaveSocSciUWA)

or

<https://www.change.org/p/the-hon-robert-french-save-social-sciences-at-uwa>

President of the Asian Studies Association of Australia,

Associate Professor Kate McGregor