



The University of Western Australia

Academic Staff Association

UWA Academic Staff Association's Objection to the Vice Chancellor's Plan to Dismiss 100 Academics in 2016

As UWAASA is charged with promoting and upholding the wellbeing of the University's academics it is our duty to protest the proposed dismissal of 100 of our colleagues. This objection is made on the following grounds:

1. A dismissal of University values

UWA has increasingly come to resemble and function as a (potentially) profit making 20th century corporation rather than an institution of higher learning. This change appears to have been accompanied by a bottom line mentality, a near exclusive focus on income and cost. This emphasis has been mirrored by a de-emphasis on, if not exclusion of, the values long associated with the ideals of a public institution of learning: openness, collegiality, democracy and scholarship. Our University is not a glorified trade school, but should prepare an informed citizenry able to contribute to the good of a global humanity.

2. A disrespect for academics

Our Vice-Chancellor, Paul Johnson, acknowledged the poor timing of his announcement of job losses but nevertheless made it at least two months before any academic will be informed of his or her redundancy. Most critically, these months include the break between academic years, the only time that many academics have to do research and writing. While there may be a few who are convinced they will not be one of the 100, the vast majority will spend part of their creative energies wondering about their futures. Negative stress of this kind rarely improves performance.

Yet performance, we are told, may be one of the grounds for dismissal. After at least a decade of dramatically changing performance directives dismissal of academics on such grounds would be a travesty. We know from firsthand experience that academics have worked far beyond the normal 37.5 hour week. Repeated demands for increasing publications, along with teaching workload models such as that used in the Arts Faculty, have pushed many to the breaking point. Long accustomed to working a six or seven day week and a 12 month year, many academics have been struggling to wring just another few hours out of their overloaded schedules in order to meet the duties increasingly heaped upon their shoulders. Long told that the primary mission of UWA was teaching, various government and university directions to engage in more research and produce more publications has never been matched by provision of adequate resources for research or teaching. To even consider 'productivity' as grounds for immediate dismissal is to blame and punish academics for something for which past and present administrators should, in fact, take responsibility.

3. A narrow vision

When asked about his vision with reference to 'place', our Vice-Chancellor replied that our sense of place will not necessarily be in Western Australia; his focus was on 'citizens of the world', the external environment and on increasing recruitment of international students. While we see the



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benefit of a global consciousness, there seems to be no recognition that the global happens on the local level; we can see this in the increasingly multicultural character and vitality of Western Australia and of our student body. Does not our institution owe something to Australia? And to Western Australia, even though the majority of our funding comes now from Canberra? And would the emphasis on 'comparative advantage' spoken of more than once in Paul Johnson's proposal, enable us to meet our obligations to the local as well as to the global? A well informed citizenry is one that requires a breadth of exposure to the accumulated knowledge of the world. A narrowing of our offerings was foreshadowed in this proposal by use of the phrase 'comparative advantage', mention of a focus on 'areas of excellence', 'rationalizing', and the question, 'Can we sustain all of our offerings?' The recent history of 'tertiary transformation' alerts us to the vulnerability of the arts and humanities, in particular, disciplinary areas that are vital to the preparation of a global citizen. We would not like to see the breadth of our offerings reduced in any way.

Principles

From this series of objections we have derived four principles that we believe should sustain the operation of this University.

1. Genuine 'transparency' should be a standard of UWA. As the 'greatest and most creative asset' [1] of the University, academics should be included at all levels of decision making with regard to University wide policy and practice.
2. The University should recognize collegiality, democracy and scholarship [2] as its core values and ensure that they are supported in its policy and practice.
3. The centrality of academics to the University's functioning should be recognized. Administrators at all levels should strive to provide them with adequate resources to pursue their activities which should include at a minimum: teaching, research and decision making.
4. The University should be a leader in knowledge and opinion not a follower of shallow, short term trends. It should strive to change opinions and practices of uninformed and unsympathetic local and national governments, not acquiesce to them.

We ask the Chancellor, the Senate and the Executive to reconsider their proposal in light of our objections.

UWAASA Governing Committee

December 18, 2015

Footnotes:

1. Paul Johnson included 'professional' staff in his remark to this effect. As the Academic Staff Association we limit our remarks to academics but are reassured to know that the NTEU is speaking for our professional colleagues.

2. Under the term 'scholarship' we include 'research' and under the term 'academics' we include 'researchers'.