

Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee
Quality of Governance at Australian Higher Education Providers
Submission: Professor Ben Goldsmith and Associate Professor Jana von Stein
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We thank the Committee for its time and consideration.

We write to raise governance concerns in relation to the “Renew ANU” process¹, which currently includes an Organisational Change Proposal (OCP) under consideration in the College of Arts and Social Sciences (CASS) at the Australian National University (ANU).² We are academic staff members in the School of Politics and International Relations (SPIR) within CASS and serve as the two senior-most members of SPIR’s International Relations (IR) group. Our combined experience spans more than four decades as academic staff in Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand, East Asia, and North America. In addition to serving in various leadership roles in SPIR including Head of School, Director of Education, and Director of Research, we have held leadership positions in CASS, nationally, and internationally.

Below, we highlight governance concerns we believe the OCP raises, particularly regarding transparency, evidence, accountability, and the alignment of proposed changes with the process’s stated principles. Our concerns have intensified this week as CASS proceeds with its OCP and forced redundancies, despite the Vice Chancellor’s 19 August announcement that no further redundancies were planned beyond those already underway.³

Background

The OCP recognises SPIR as a “highly ranked and globally recognised centre of excellence.” Our degree programs are among CASS’s most popular and our courses account for some 40% of all College enrolments, generating over \$12 million annually from teaching—approximately twice our operating budget. Since 2021, nearly one in five of our academic staff have departed without replacement, leaving SPIR with the highest teaching load in the College. To manage these pressures while sustaining high-quality teaching and research, we undertook major reforms including a comprehensive curriculum reform completed in 2024 under von Stein’s leadership.

The OCP proposes two core changes to SPIR:

- Elimination of two IR roles, reducing IR teaching staff by 20%; and
- Merger of three SPIR degree programs: the Bachelor of International Relations (BIR), Bachelor of Political Science, and Bachelor of Public Policy.

Governance concerns

1. Lack of transparency and evidence

According to the Renew ANU change principles, “Resources, funding, and workforce planning will be data-driven to align with student demand, research funding, and strategic priorities” and “workforce composition will be tied to key drivers such as the number of

¹ www.anu.edu.au/about/renew-anu/change-proposals-and-consultation

² www.anu.edu.au/about/renew-anu

³ www.canberratimes.com.au/story/9045549/opinion-why-anus-painful-journey-was-necessary

students, research funding, teaching loads and strategic priorities, ensuring that resources are fairly aligned.”⁴ However:

- The university has provided no data to substantiate the rationale for staff reductions. Academic staff from across CASS have requested information on student-to-staff ratios but were advised during a town hall meeting that this information would not be provided.
- We submitted two requests for information that is necessary to substantiate CASS’s claims:
 - An FOI request for documents communicating CASS’s student-to-staff ratios. We were advised that “no report or emails/email attachments exist” regarding academic student-to-staff ratios.
 - A request for information on each CASS unit’s budget, submitted through the Renew ANU online system. We were advised that the information in the OCP documents was sufficient and therefore no additional information would be provided.
- Given the university’s continued unwillingness to make data available, we collected information on student-to-staff ratios ourselves using the ANU’s centralised enrolments system. (It is not possible to do the same for budgets). This was very time-consuming, but the information is crucial and the university left us no other option. Shockingly, we found the OCP will impose CASS’s *highest* teaching load increase on SPIR. The resulting student-to-staff ratio would be over four times the CASS average and higher than that of any university in Australia.⁴ Targeting the College’s most teaching-intensive unit with the largest teaching increase raises serious workload and equity concerns.

2. Financial and operational implications

The OCP states that merging three degree programs and disestablishing roles is needed for financial viability, cost-effective teaching, and sustaining research excellence. We fully support these goals for ANU, but SPIR already delivers them.

- The OCP cites “declining international rankings” as a motivation for the proposed changes across the university, but no such decline exists in Politics and IR at the ANU. On the contrary, our area consistently holds a stable position around 11th in the QS rankings—a fact the ANU itself recently celebrated.⁵ This year, three academic staff members were recognised among the “Top 10 Political Science Scholars by Region” for Oceania.⁶
- SPIR is not only viable but a net contributor. For every dollar spent on SPIR, we generate \$2 in teaching income alone. The result is millions of dollars that directly contribute to the university’s financial health.

The OCP suggests that “unsustainable demands on SPIR staffing” stem from SPIR running too many degree programs, requiring more courses than necessary.

- This statement is simply wrong. The real challenge is our rising student-to-staff ratios, not an overabundance of courses. In fact, SPIR has a very limited number of courses – many fewer than other units with substantially lower enrolments and no named degrees.
- In this context, it is surprising that the OCP makes no reference to SPIR’s

⁴ www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/resources/2024-staff-appendix-2-student-staff-ratios

⁵ <https://science.anu.edu.au/news-events/news/anu-climbs-global-university-rankings-key-subjects>

⁶ Barceló, Joan, Christopher Paik, Peter van der Windt, and Haoyu Zhai. 2025. “A Global Ranking of Research Productivity of Political Science Departments.” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 58(3): 574–85.

significant reforms, concluded in direct collaboration with CASS less than a year ago. In addition to disestablishing all undergraduate courses with fewer than 45 students (over 20% of our courses), we eliminated several small majors/minors and rationalised our degrees. The outcome is a flexible, highly cost-efficient model with a deliberately lean suite of courses. The lack of knowledge of SPIR's operations is troubling and contributes to our governance concerns. The secrecy and lack of consultation have led to a curricular and staffing proposal that is not fit for purpose and cannot be delivered with the proposed staff reductions.

Eliminating 20% of our IR teaching staff will very likely force us to reduce our already lean IR offerings. This is not a matter of accommodating a few extra students—this involves hundreds of additional students per course. In the short term, more students will have to be packed into lecture halls and bulging tutorials, even in their final years of study – where most units are sufficiently staffed to deliver small seminars of 20 students. The impacts on student experience as well as staff wellbeing and equity are obvious. In the longer term, this is likely to reduce university revenue and harm the ANU's reputation for excellence in the study of international politics – an area of clear national importance in today's uncertain geopolitical environment.

3. Inadequate consultation and impact assessment

We focus here on the BIR, given our expertise. As noted by external reviewers from prestigious overseas universities, it is well-designed, revenue-generating, attracts students from all over the country and the world, and strengthens ANU's reputation for excellence in undergraduate education. Merging the BIR and other degrees eliminates what makes them unique and attractive.

Our concerns are as follows:

- There is no evidence of consultation with key stakeholders, most notably students. Amalgamating degrees and reducing available courses directly impacts on the value of their degree and learning experience.
- There appears to have been no risk assessment or market analysis. Eliminating degree programs will likely reduce revenue to CASS in the medium to long term, but the OCP does not appear to account for these costs, which are likely to be very large. This raises significant concerns that the university's leadership is unnecessarily exposing the institution to substantial risks with no evidence base to inform decisionmaking.
- There appears to have been no impact assessment. Even if the degrees are amalgamated, the ANU will face substantial adjustment costs, given its obligations to 'legacy students' through 2030. As far as we are aware, CASS has no plan to maintain sufficient staffing during this transition to ensure those students can graduate.

4. Employment Practices and Staff Wellbeing

The OCP cites two motivations for disestablishing two IR positions:

- A reduced need for IR courses resulting from an amalgamation of degrees. Our IR courses are already CASS's largest and our offerings very lean. Merging the degrees will not extinguish student interest in these courses. Instead, if coupled with IR redundancies, it will likely obligate us to offer fewer IR courses, in turn shifting students into even larger courses. The resulting workload increase is a matter of

serious concern, in our view.

- ‘Duplication’ of SPIR IR staff due to “the ability to contribute to the international relations and politics of Asia Pacific in other colleges in the ANU.” This appears to refer to the College of Asia and the Pacific (CAP). No evidence has been provided to substantiate claims of duplication. In fact, there is no duplication: SPIR does not teach any courses on Asia and the Pacific, and CAP does not teach the topics taught in SPIR. To our knowledge, no SPIR IR staff have been consulted on their ‘duplication.’ This lack of consultation and the designation of one unit as ‘duplicated’ without a clear, university-wide assessment, raises concerns about fairness, strategic consistency, and alignment with the Fair Work Act. These concerns have intensified with the Vice Chancellor’s 19 August announcement that no similar OCP will be applied to CAP.⁷ To be clear, we do not wish such a process on our excellent CAP colleagues. Rather, we highlight the *ad hoc* and unsystematic nature of the Renew ANU process as a clear example of poor governance that has produced significant inequity.

Recommendations

We have proposed the following alternatives aligned with good governance and ANU’s stated principles:

- Ensure equitable resource contributions across colleges.
- Reduce non-salary expenditures before cutting staff, especially consultants. We have high analytic capacity in the university and want to help make the ANU thrive.
- Retain successful and efficient programs, empowering proven models to succeed rather than dismantling them.
- Engage meaningfully with academic staff and students when proposing changes, providing evidence for any decisions.
- Align decisions with evidence. This necessitates transparency.

Conclusion

Improved governance is urgently needed at ANU. The current CASS OCP risks undermining student experience, research output, international reputation, staff wellbeing, and financial stability. A more effective approach would recognise successful units, provide sufficient staffing, and base decisions on evidence and consultation, ensuring alignment with ANU’s mission and the expectations of its community and stakeholders.

⁷ www.anu.edu.au/about/renew-anu/change-proposals-and-consultation

