



3 August 2011

EJ Park
Human Resources Administrator
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Victoria University of Wellington

Email: ej.park@vuw.ac.nz

Re: Political Science and International Relations Change Proposal

1. This submission on the Political Science and International Relations (PSIR) Change Proposal is made on behalf of the Victoria University of Wellington Students' Association (VUWSA). VUWSA is the official representative body of students at Victoria University of Wellington and has been advocating on their behalf since 1899.
2. This submission is based on feedback from PSIR Class Representatives and students from a number of PSIR courses. VUWSA opposes the proposed changes to PSIR at Victoria for the reasons outlined below.
3. It must be noted that VUWSA is not opposed to changes to academic programmes that are justified and respond to the academic needs of students or the demand expressed by students for changes in course offerings. VUWSA believes that this PSIR change proposal meets neither of these criteria.
4. VUWSA has strong concerns that the proposed changes do not provide enough clear detail to determine what the academic implications of staffing changes will be for students.
5. Related to 4. VUWSA also has strong concerns that staffing changes to PSIR will significantly narrow students' choice of study within PSIR and compromise the reputation that Victoria's International Relations programme currently enjoys.
6. Whilst the change proposal does not imply that courses will be cut, from a close reading of the proposal, it can be inferred that, in the adjustment of staffing and the strategic change of direction, course offerings and pathways will be affected. Students have already been told that with one staff member leaving at the end of the year certain courses will not be offered from 2012. Of particular significance is that at least one of these courses provides a strong theoretical gender analysis into PSIR issues and others focus directly on international development. By changing the focus of PSIR through the employment of academics with alternative specialisations, this proposal, not only restricts the options and pathways available for students in PSIR.

7. This change proposal also ignores the commitment Victoria made in 2010 to ensure students would have a pathway of study through Gender and Women's studies. Furthermore, it has flow-on implications for students majoring in Development Studies. This, again, is of concern because Victoria has a very strong and robust reputation in this programme particularly at postgraduate level. Conclusively, the fact that courses may not be offered with changes to the staffing of PSIR means that the proposal does have strong academic implications and these implications not only affect PSIR but other cross-disciplinary areas of study.
8. To this effect, this proposal ignores the strong student demand for PSIR courses that currently exist and risks a major shortfall in teaching capacity in the future. It basically signals to prospective honours, masters and PhD students a narrowing of topic choice simply due to the reality that an alignment is needed between student topic choice and supervisor subject expertise. Four of the five new positions have a sole focus on the Asia Pacific region, with three of them focusing on security and conflict issues in that region.
9. VUWSA believes a more robust process must be adopted by the University before any changes are implemented. This includes sending this proposal through the Faculty and Academic Board to be considered and vetted so to ensure the best outcome. Given that the proposal suggests a change of academic direction through the employment of specialised staff, a logical next move beyond acceptance is the offering of new courses. However, as is common practice as Victoria whenever a new course is offered an old course is removed, to imply that this proposal is solely a managerial and structural change is *highly* questionable. It does have academic implications and these should be debated robustly.
10. VUWSA urges the University to withdraw this change proposal and enter into a robust debate as to how can comparative politics be encompassed in PSIR without severely reducing the focus of current academic pathways. PSIR has been a leading research and teaching specialisation at Victoria for over seven decades. Over the last year, students have talked to the VUWSA about nominating PSIR staff for Victoria teaching awards. It is clear that they current programme is doing something right. Something that not only attracts students but clearly links into the overall vision of Victoria University of Wellington. There is no clear rationale behind this proposal that justifies such a restructuring of academic staff which, in turn, would see an adverse narrowing of academic pathways for undergraduate and postgraduate students.

Yours sincerely



Seamus Brady

President

Victoria University of Wellington Students' Association