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March 10, 2016

Prof. Brian Schmidt
Vice-Chancellor
Australian National University

Dear Professor Schmidt,

First can I extend my own congratulations on your appointment as Vice-Chancellor of ANU. I wish you well in the position, and in particular in the challenge of burnishing ANU's fine international reputation for the accomplishments of its faculty and students.

As a member of the committee to review the School for Culture, History and Languages I have received several communications from faculty, past and present, to let me know of their dismay about the decisions that have been taken to reorganize the School and in particular, to reduce faculty numbers quite dramatically. As it has been explained to me, while the plan states that 15 people will 'transition', which I take to be a euphemism denoting involuntary departure for some or all from the University, in fact when others on contracts and recent 'early retirements' are considered the total number of positions lost in recent times will be much higher. Without quibbling over short or long term numbers it seems to me that it is inevitable that this will damage ANU's decades-long eminence in these fields.

It is in fact astonishing to me that a University that has one of the world's great Asian and Pacific studies programs, organized around the deep study of culture, history and language, seems to be in the process of destroying the program when many universities in the rest of the world are building Asian studies.

It is not at all clear to me how the recommendations of the Review or our conclusions have informed these decisions and indeed whether the exercise was in reality a nominal one and that other plans were already in train at the time.

This aside, in my view it would be a major backward step to dilute the expertise and jeopardize the profile of ANU as one of the pre-eminent universities internationally for its expertise in the humanities and social sciences focusing on Asia and the Pacific. As Director of Harvard's Asia Center with a long research career in China, and a professor of both medicine and anthropology I have long been familiar with the ANU, its research and graduates as beacons of excellence, public scholarship and expertise in the field.

It saddens me to read the overview of the management plan. It concerns me equally that our careful deliberations and advice would appear to have been, if not superfluous, then certainly set aside. Perhaps this was done in the interest of unwinding problems that seem to have been caused largely by structural decisions taken by the University in the past and a lack of appropriate oversight, resources and governance at an executive level to ensure that these were appropriate, viable, sustainable and academically sound.

But whatever the reason I would ask you to rethink the management plan. Surely there is a way of proceeding that does less damage but rather strengthens what is already one of the great strengths of ANU.

I am happy for my letter to be shared with staff but wanted to do you the courtesy of writing personally rather than in broadcast mode and leave this to your discretion. I have only shared it with fellow review committee members at this stage.

With good wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Arthur Kleinman', written in a cursive style.

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