



Submission
of the
Victoria University of Wellington
Students' Association
on the
Te Herenga Waka- Victoria University of Wellington
Whiria Project

Prepared by
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To	Victoria University of Wellington University Council
From	Victoria University of Wellington Students' Association (VUWSA)
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Subject	Whiria Project

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1. Introduction

This is a submission written by the Victoria University of Wellington Students Association (VUWSA) to Victoria's University Council, principally concerned with the proposed Whiria Project. It will outline some of our concerns regarding the project: focusing on timing, issues with restructure of schools and impacts of the project's implementation on both students and staff wellbeing and academic success.

Furthermore, VUWSA's submission is also informed by concerns raised from student representative groups at Student Assembly and Student Academic Committee.

2. Timing

The University's decision to recommend what was perceived as a major academic restructure in the midst of a global pandemic is thoroughly disappointing. This decision is inconsistent with the ethical values of the University and shows a clear lack of regard for staff.

Over the course of the pandemic and lockdown, many students appreciated the efforts that academic staff went to, to ensure learning could continue. Students reported how empathetic and supportive many teaching staff were during this period. VUWSA ran a 'Staff Shoutout' campaign and received many reports from students about the positive things staff were doing. At the same time, we were at meetings where staff regularly expressed their concerns over workload and burnout and communicated their frustration regarding the University's response to this consistently to members of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT). Although workload is managed at the School level, to be aware of these burdens and further exacerbate the already present stress placed upon many academics and administrative staff at this time by recommending, what was perceived as a major academic restructure that threatens administrative and academic staff jobs, is quite frankly irresponsible on the University's part.

We note that risks were identified in the Whiria document. Key risks identified were:

- Social structure displacement
- Reduction of staff morale and engagement
- Reduction of teaching or research quality
- Disruption to critical processes
- Reputational damage

Given these risks were identified, VUWSA finds it bizarre the proposal went any further than SLT. Reduction of staff morale during a global pandemic would inevitably lead to a diminished student experience. It would reduce teaching quality at the very time we are asking lecturers and students to adapt to a proper blended learning experience. In addition, social structure displacement would have a large impact on students, as would any change that affects processes. We note with interest that the mental health of staff is not included in the list of risks.

3. Restructure of Schools

VUWSA are concerned about the proposal to remove “Schools”. Throughout 2020, students communicated with us that Schools were a place to access information and support. Many students were frustrated and disappointed by a lack of perceived leadership and communication during the first months of the pandemic, but many felt their schools were doing their best despite this.

Many students feel a sense of belonging in their School – suggestions to remove them would undermine a University structure students feel confident navigating. VUWSA are also concerned that any move to cut administrative staff in schools or faculties would make it significantly harder for students to access support and information.

We strongly feel that any move to change which faculty schools are placed in requires extensive student consultation. As a hypothetical example, if it were proposed Psychology be removed

from Science, then students (postgraduate and undergraduate) need to be consulted about this.

4. Lack of Consultation

VUWSA is disappointed that this so called “discussion document” was produced with no student consultation, especially as it seems to propose a quite radical change in structure for the University. This is particularly in light of the Vice Chancellor’s claim in the media that the document was informed with a “student perspective” in mind. This claim was made despite no consultation with VUWSA, the overarching body recognised for student voice on campus, on the proposal before it went on the staff intranet. Upon our request, VUWSA were given a “confidential” copy of the document on August 19th. However, due to the nature of this document, we were unable to distribute it with students to solicit their feedback.

To date, the only consultation with students has been a meeting between the VUWSA President and the Vice Chancellor and the Vice Chancellor attending a Student Academic Committee Meeting (initiated by VUWSA) to answer students concerns. Subsequent to this, the decision was made to receive submissions from students, more broadly with the dissemination of information in the student E-Newsletter on the 2nd of September. This effectively gives students only 12 days to read, understand and write a submission. VUWSA believe that there needs to be more comprehensive engagement with students to get an accurate “discussion” on the merits of this proposal.

5. Assumed Lack of Student Engagement

At the most recent meeting of the University Council, Vice Chancellor Grant Guilford outlined that student engagement had been modest. VUWSA identifies a number of reasons for this:

- The changes were not well advertised.

- Accessing the link for submissions on the University website was severely difficult, and could not be found without knowing the exact webpage the link was on.
- The document was previously only available on the staff intranet - and therefore not accessible for students for a long period of time.
- The initial period for consultation was short, with the majority of it scheduled to take place during the mid-trimester break.
- The document itself was inaccessible to many students due to its length and lack of executive summary. We note that the summary has since been produced.

We reject the assertion that students would not care about such a change. Student engagement was low because the way the document was presented made it extremely difficult to access, or read and understand, let alone give feedback.

6. Perceived Cost-cutting

Although we note the Whiria Project was not designed to be a cost cutting exercise, many students felt that aspects of the proposal were driven by a desire to cut costs. We are strongly opposed to cost-cutting or any reduction in staff, and believe that a reduction in staff will equate to a reduction in student experience.

7. Conclusion

Overall, VUWSA believes the process by which the Whiria project was handled has caused significant distress, distrust and dissatisfaction between students and the SLT. The lack of student consultation, timing and engagement with students on this proposal undermines the concept of “Students as Partners” and increases the perception that the University does not value the voices of its staff and students. Finally, if elements of the proposal are to be progressed, we implore the University to actively collaborate with its students and staff to ensure that the changes are desirable, well thought out and practical.