Orphans of the storm: the auction of the Australian women's studies program

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ANU

It doesn't take a conscience to whiptail away a Women's Studies program: just pragmatism. Women's Studies programs have always been easy targets. Now, the oldest continuous Women's Studies Program in the country has fallen foul of the same and the ANU's Women's Studies at ANU is feeling the chill wind of change and consequent financial cuts in Australian higher education. At a time of rising student numbers and shrinking university funding flows, attempts to extend principled support and financial commitment from University management, the Program's infrastructure has been reduced and is now a less than a decade ago. The Program long ago lost its separate budget, making it heavily dependent on the Deans of Arts, in the last year or so it has fallen back on its foundation, its library broken up and dispersed. Its half-time secretary has been sacked, and the Faculty's Research Unit on Women and Gender has been dismantled. The Program's fate - its culture and the physical manifestation of its independent identity - has been abolished.

The story of the rise and fall of the ANU Program is by no means unique. Universities all over the country are experiencing strained circumstances, and many departments and programs are suffering financial cuts, increasing student numbers, heavier work loads and diminishing support for academics. The humanities have been hit particularly hard. The Program was an outgrowth of a Chair in Women's Studies in 1990, and poverty-stricken New Zealand now has two such Chairs. Other Australian universities are appointing new staff and building their graduate as well as undergraduate Women's Studies Programs. That is, there are opportunities in the midst of the storms of change, for those institutions with flexible structures and creative faculty, students and leadership and management.

The ANU's Women's Studies at ANU is the case study of institutional failure to grasp such opportunities.

The Opportunity

Since its establishment in 1976, the Women's Studies Program at the Australian National University has flourished, fed by commitment from various departments across the university, as well as a generous funding from the government and the University. It originated as a single, year-long experimental unit co-taught by two male lecturers, one from each of the constituent schools from which it was established. The Program was created in response to a number of factors, including the high level of interest in women's issues throughout the broader academic community at the time. It was an opportunity for the university to establish a new academic discipline and to contribute to the growing field of women's studies.

The Program's establishment was an important step in the development of women's studies as an academic field in Australia and internationally. It provided a platform for research, teaching, and community engagement, and helped to raise awareness and understanding of women's issues. The Program's success was due in part to its ability to attract talented and dedicated faculty members, who brought a range of expertise and perspectives to the field. The Program also benefited from the support and engagement of students, who were enthusiastic and passionate about the subject matter.

The Problem

The Women's Studies Program at ANU was established in 1976 as one of the first in Australia, and it quickly developed into a major program. However, in recent years, the Program has faced significant challenges. These challenges include declining enrolments, reduced funding, and a loss of institutional support.

The decline in enrolments is a major concern. The Program was once a popular choice for students, but in recent years, the numbers have dropped significantly. This is a concern because it can lead to a lack of critical mass, which can have a negative impact on the Program's ability to offer a wide range of courses and maintain its reputation as a leading program in the field.

Funding has also been a challenge. The Program relies on a mix of internal and external funding, and it has faced cuts in recent years. This has had a direct impact on the Program's ability to offer a wide range of courses and support research.

The loss of institutional support is another concern. The Program has faced cuts in funding, and it has been stripped of its separate unit. This has had a negative impact on the Program's ability to provide the support and resources needed to thrive.

The Failure

Thus, on the eve of the major national reform in tertiary education reform in Australia in the late 1980s, the ANU Women's Studies Program was in a curious and paradoxical position: it was dynamic, retrospective, enjoyed strong student support, yet it was confronting a range of systemic and structural challenges that threatened its survival and sustainability.
2. Expand the Program's support through one or more of the following measures:

a. Increase faculty/staff through such innovations as additional full-time faculty in Women's Studies; several new half-time lecturerships, shared between Women's Studies and, for example, English or Art History; or all-female professorships in the Faculty of Arts to require expertise in women or gender.

b. Increase the number of Women's Studies courses ("Women...") taught regularly in the departments (thus relieving the pressure on the Program staff to provide most or all of the major).

c. Have the administration of the Program recognized as a half-time job with teaching load adjusted accordingly.

d. Have the Women's Studies Advisory Committee formally constituted as an administrative authority for the Program, with the Convener rotated among members of the Committee and teaching loads adjusted appropriately.

3. Phase out the Women's Studies Program, with staff reverting to their discipline of origin, hopefully still teaching about women but under Departmental auspices.

In broad outline, these options constitute three alternative strategies: hang in, go for broke, or close up shop. Call up final reserves of energy, Program staff decided to go for broke.

Meetings were held to discuss the problems and options, and with considerable determination, courage, and former students, and the encouragement of sympathetic staff, two major submissions were prepared, one addressed to the ANU Council, the other to the Vice-Chancellor. Each asked for a substantial upgrading of the Program's resources: to establish either an independent University-wide Women's Studies research and teaching unit, or to appoint a Chair and additional teaching staff in the existing Program.

Both submissions disappeared into the black hole of bureaucracy. Timing was apparently bad though it had to be imagined what would constitute good timing. The entire University administration was involved; a difficult situation with real big questions of amalgamation, splitting and clandestine. Ingredients (or any) planning at a somewhat slower level of management was put in permanent hold, except for cost cutting. All that emerged were a few informal and unstructured committees in which senior academic administrators recurred; it was their own difficulties. thoughtful and detailed submission did not, apparently warrant detailed written responses. The one clear response was the national campaign selecting expressions of support which were forthcoming throughout the year. Some individuals received placatory replies, but that was as far as this campaign for a national campaign for a national campaign to increase the visibility of the program's support to the administration's range of groups, which was put into the Program being substantially cut back.

The half-time Program secretary was reemployed. The Dean decided to close the Resource Unit on Women and Gender Studies making it unlikely that there will be any detectable increase in departmental-based co-ordinating units. The Dean implied that if either of the alternatives was not acceptable, the Program might not be filled. Colleagues are understandably reluctant to take on administrative responsibility for Women's Studies in addition to departmental tasks. Further, recent appointments to the Faculty (for example, in English, Philosophy and Drama) appear to have been based on the assumption that innovative teaching is not a necessary criterion. There is no reason to anticipate a change in any of these circumstances. There has been no formal move to abolish Women's Studies at ANU. Instead it is being whitewashed away by a series of uncoordinated, relatively minor economic decisions.

Moral

The structural decline of Women's Studies at the ANU is not simply a story of having to tighten belts in hard times. Nor is it an example of redundancies since, in terms of students numbers, intellectual vitality, and community interest, Women's Studies is well ahead of many traditional arts departments. Rather, it is about a Program consistently, even in good times, being denied the resources to develop on its own terms and to be treated equally with other traditional academic areas. Women's Studies has been tolerated, acceptance of approval have been voiced, its services have been exploited, but the concrete manifestations of legitimacy have been withheld. Women's Studies has always been a luxury and an anomaly, not integrated into the University's formal structures and processes. It has been considered as marginal, its vulnerability is systemic. If there is a redundancy in that equation, this is not, as has been suggested, a program to the teaching universe into Disciplines and Others, and consigns the Others to a status of university dependency and intellectual invisibility.

In the old days, there was relatively little room for debate about whether Women's Studies should be established in the community, a discipline or institutionally itself, in tertiary education, about whether, in the institutions, it should be a ghetto of women's studies or might be more appropriately integrated into the teaching discipline. It is hard to say whether there would be such a program as far back as the old dawn of national studies in tertiary education, without major changes to those traditions. But it is certainly a luxury that are crucial if the logic of the arts and sciences are to survive the demands for national accountability and for scholarship to serve market forces. The alternative is the ANU model of Women's Studies in the Arts Faculty an anomaly within a redundancies.

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