

# Orphans of the storm: The attrition of the ANU women's studies program

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It doesn't take a conspiracy to whittle away a Women's Studies program: just pragmatism. Women's Studies programs have always known that they were marginal and vulnerable. Now, the oldest continuous Women's Studies Program in the country has fallen victim to its University's need to find money fast. 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 despite a year-long campaign to extract principled support and financial commitment from University management, the Program's infrastructure has been reduced and is now less than it was a decade ago. The Program long ago lost its separate budget, making it heavily dependent on the Dean of Arts. In the last year, its journal subscriptions have been cancelled, its library broken up and dispersed. Its half-time secretary has been removed, and the Faculty's Resource Unit on Women and Gender has been closed. The Program's office – its centre 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 straitened 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 particularly hard hit. Still, Griffith University appointed 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 innovative and lively leadership and management.

The story of Women's Studies at ANU is a case study of institutional failure to grasp such opportunity.

## The Opportunity

Since its establishment in 1976, the Women's Studies Program at the Australian National University has flourished, fed by continuing student and outside demand for its teaching and services. It originated as a single, year-long experimental unit coordinated by an historian, with teaching contributions from staff throughout the University. This experimental unit was made permanent in 1977, and the course offerings were gradually expanded. By the late 1980s staff had expanded to two full-time lecturers, and a half-time secretary. As part of the effort to "mainstream" Women's Studies into the general curriculum, the Program originated the Resource Unit on Women and Gender to develop relevant teaching bibliographies for the whole Faculty of Arts, and supervised the Unit's half-time Research Assistant.

The Program's transdisciplinary undergraduate major offered a core of four annual and two biennial semester units with additional Departmental cognate units. It ran a fourth year program for an Honours degree in Women's Studies which produced a University Medallist. It had been accepted into the University's new Graduate School and offered a Graduate Diploma, Master of Letters, and higher degrees by research. In addition to formal supervision, Program staff were regularly consulted informally by students from many disciplines whose work involved women, gender, or feminist theory, topics not dealt with elsewhere in the University.

It ran a graduate/visitor seminar program, and hosted numerous Faculty Visitors and short-term international and Australian visitors. The bibliographies from the Resource Unit on Women and Gender were popular not only in the Faculty of Arts, but elsewhere in the University and throughout the Women's Studies community. The Unit had also produced a dossier on the range of Women's Studies programs around Australia, and was beginning to prepare an index of Australian Women's Studies research activity.

During its 15 years, the ANU Program has been well regarded in the academic community. It was highly respected by the Canberra public and the Commonwealth and ACT Public Service. Student numbers and loyalty were consistently strong, and there was considerable interest in the new postgraduate degrees. The teaching program was recognised as innovative and of high quality. The research of the academic staff was well respected by their peers. This visible success of the Program had, of course, been achieved through the considerable personal investments of the Women's Studies staff, including intensive involvement in teaching and supervision, and carrying a large (and largely invisible) administrative load.

It was in this last bud that the worm lay. In day to day practice, the Program was vigorous, but the structure within which it was growing was unable or unwilling to support it and was not compelled to do so by the logic of its own formal procedures.

## The Problem

The Women's Studies Program at ANU was established in 1976 as one result of a prolonged student campaign for educational reform. Unlike the second round of Women's Studies programs in the 1980s which were stimulated mainly by the lobbying efforts of women staff, most of the pioneering courses in the 1970s originated from active student demand. The differing natures of the various programs around Australia, and their fit within their universities' overall structure, is explained in part by this difference of origins. All of the programs have a somewhat oppositional stance towards their *almas pater*, but those of the second type may have a more comfortable organisational existence because they are more formally constituted.

Being of the earlier type, created in response to student demand, the ANU Women's Studies Program was from its beginning an organisational anomaly. Although the ANU was a new (post-Second World War) university, it is structured on the traditional discipline-based, department/faculty model. In the early 1970s, the teaching Faculties had produced only one alternative form, an interdisciplinary Human Science Program, attached uncomfortably to the Prehistory and Anthropology Department.<sup>1</sup> The Women's Studies Program was established on this singular, largely unformulated and unsatisfactory model. Because the first lecturer appointed to the Women's Studies Program was, by training, an historian, the Program as a whole was attached to the History Department for administrative purposes. There was no pretence that the Head of the History Department should take intellectual responsibility for the Program, but the lines between teaching and administration are notoriously blurred.

This curious organisational form, 'attached for administrative purposes', was chosen because, to the either/or dualistic under-

standing admired within traditional universities, there could only be two options and the other was unacceptable: to make Women's Studies a department (or proto-department, as happened later with the establishment of a Fine Art Program). From the beginning, there has been energetic opposition to any suggestion that the Women's Studies Program might be developing the courses, structures and privileges of a real department. The opposition arises from a denial of the intellectual legitimacy of Women's Studies, and it is based on several grounds: because it is about women (and therefore partial), because it is overtly political (and therefore partial in another sense), because it is an activity forced upon the university by students (and therefore substandard), or because it is transdisciplinary (and therefore undisciplined).

Misogyny and reaction remain, but the argument about transdisciplinarity came into question in the mid-1980s, with the development of inter-disciplinary majors in the Arts Faculty. These majors, called Field Programs, were usually made up from sequences of designated departmentally-based units. For example, an Aboriginal Studies major was composed of specified first-year history and anthropology units, followed by a selection of linguistics, prehistory, anthropology and politics units. Program majors were designated inferior by the ruling that all Arts degrees must contain at least one departmental major. Debate as to the definitions of department and discipline and the question of their appropriate interrelation exercised the Faculty for some years, without any conclusion except that Women's Studies wasn't a discipline and it couldn't be a department. To complicate matters, it wasn't an inter-disciplinary field program either because its core courses were not departmentally based but autonomously transdisciplinary. The departmental structure of the institution remained inflexibly intact, and Women's Studies remained marginal, dependent upon the good will of the Dean of Arts and the Head of the Department to which it was 'administratively attached'.

The Program has no independent, formal administrative structure. Occasionally it attained honorary departmental status; for example Faculty agreed to accept a Women's Studies major in place of a Departmental major for some students undertaking the combined Arts/Law degree. However, these concessions are explicitly exceptional, and it will require a separate submission to Faculty to seek a similar exception for the new BA/BSc degree. Advertisements for academic staff were couched in terms of responsibilities in the Program, but on appointment lecturers were attached to the department of their original training (identification of which becomes progressively more difficult as graduates trained in interdisciplinary studies enter the academic job market). Out of the need for wider consultation, the Program staff set up its own informal administrative structures, modelled on formal departmental structures: a Program Committee of staff and current students, to meet once a semester, and a University-wide Advisory Committee to meet as needed to advise on matters of broad policy and development of the Program. Neither of these committees had any formal power, and all decisions were implemented by the Program's staff after approval was gained from the Head of History. As well as creating excessive work and frustration for staff, this lack of formal structures effectively disenfranchised Women's Studies students. Unlike undergraduate students in departments, they had no direct representation in University deliberations.

For students, Women's Studies staff, and other female staff, the traditional structure of the university and the traditionalist mindset it induced created other difficulties, which flowed over to affect the Women's Studies Program. Belatedly, sexual harassment came to be treated as a serious University problem. Sexist harassment and intellectual silencing, however, have been largely ignored. For some students, Women's Studies was initially simply a refuge from disciplines which failed to acknowledge half the human population, and obstructed those who sought such knowledge. Staff were also affected by the harassment and silencing.

The everyday culture of conventional departments preserved the preexisting knowledge bases and boundaries, and penalised individuals who sought to go beyond them.

The traditional departmental structure of an institution like the ANU results in interdepartmental jealousies and boundary disputes. Despite superficial acceptance of innovative programs outside the disciplines, deep mistrust of interdisciplinary scholarship remained. Consequently, it was difficult for staff in departments who supported Women's Studies to translate their support into concrete action. Only a few staff were able to offer regular cognate units, or to contribute in other substantial ways to teaching, supervision, or examination. The Resource Unit on Women and Gender prepared nearly 40 teaching bibliographies in the humanities and social sciences. This commitment to 'mainstreaming' Women's Studies did not, however, result in the development of new departmental courses that could contribute to the Women's Studies major, nor were many existing units significantly revised to include relevant material. Program staff were rarely consulted on appointments, including selection committees. The University remained resolutely opposed to making expertise on women and gender a relevant criterion for academic appointments in the humanities and social sciences, despite a recommendation to that effect in the University's 1984 affirmative action report.

Little help was forthcoming from the Institute of Advanced Studies where the two most relevant Schools, Social Sciences and Pacific Studies, between them managed only 2 female tenured staff in 1990 as compared with 77 tenured men. (The total representation of women staff (tenured and untenured) in these two Schools actually declined from just under 15 per cent in 1987 to just over 12 per cent in 1990. The decline in female staff was not universal: during the same period, the representation of women in the Institute overall rose slightly.) In sum, it would seem that Women's Studies was an expensive luxury that the ANU would only consider once all the traditional scholarship had been covered. In terms of teaching and attention to students, scholarship and administration, the University showed little inclination to provide sustained institutional support for the Program.

## The Failure

Thus, on the eve of the major national reforms in tertiary education, in the late 1980s, the ANU Women's Studies Program was in a curiously contradictory position: it was dynamic, respected and enjoyed strong student support, yet it was consigned to an unstructured limbo that denied it access to other sorts of support. Staff had once, naively, believed that when the value of their work in developing the Program was demonstrated, resources would be forthcoming. Some resources were indeed made available, but they tended to be short-term favours that could therefore be removed easily. In the developing climate of change, there should have been opportunities to advance the Program and bring benefit to the University as a whole. However, in the event, staff were hard-pressed to maintain the Program, let alone embark on new initiatives. It was clear that there was too much teaching and administration for two junior lecturers plus a half-time secretary. The Program needed resources and strategic alliances simply to maintain the status quo, and would have required a dynamic injection of institutional and personal recognition and support to pursue any new developments. Program staff belatedly realised that the Program was not viable without an intellectual and political commitment from colleagues and University management well beyond what it had been receiving. Effectively, the Program, and through it, the University, were being heavily subsidised without acknowledgement and with no prospect of improvement.

A painful reassessment of the situation revealed few options:

1. Maintain the status quo with staff demoralised and slouching towards burnout.

2. Expand the Program's support through one or more of the following measures:

a. Increase staffing through such innovations as - an additional full lectureship in Women's Studies; - several new half lectureships, shared between Women's Studies and, for example, English or Art History; or - all future appointments in the Faculty of Arts to require expertise in women or gender.

b. Increase the number of Women's Studies courses ("Women in...") 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 recognised as a half-time job with teaching load adjusted accordingly.

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

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

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

Meetings were held to discuss the problems and options, and with the enthusiastic support of postgraduate, undergraduate, 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 senior teaching staff in the existing Program.

Both submissions disappeared into the black hole of bureaucracy. Timing was apparently bad though it is hard to imagine what would constitute good timing. The entire University administration was (and continues to be) fully occupied with the really big questions of amalgamation, splitting and clawback; innovative (or any) planning at a somewhat lower level of management was put on permanent hold, except for cost cutting. All that emerged were a few informal and avuncular chats in which senior academic administrators recounted stories of their own difficulties. Thoughtful and detailed submission did not, apparently, warrant detailed written responses. On another front, students mounted a national campaign soliciting expressions of support which were forthcoming throughout the year. Some individuals received placatory replies, whose assurances were overtaken by economic events later in the year. The overall outcome of the campaign was to increase the Program's visibility to the administration's razor gang, which resulted in the Program being substantially cut back.

The half-time Program secretary was redeployed. The Dean decided to close the Resource Unit on Women and Gender making it unlikely that there will be any detectable increase in department-based cognate units. The Dean implied that if either of the Program's lecturers were to resign, the post might not be filled. Colleagues are understandably reluctant to take on administrative responsibility for Women's Studies in addition to depart-

mental tasks. Further, recent appointments to the Faculty (for example, in English, Philosophy and Drama) have ignored competence or interest in gender/women/feminist theory as a selection 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 whittled 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 redundancy since, in terms of students numbers, intellectual vitality, and community interaction, 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 wherewithal to develop on its own terms and to be treated equally with traditional academic areas. Women's Studies has been tolerated, expressions 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 constituted as marginal, its vulnerability is systemic. If there is a redundancy in this story, it is the administrative structure which divides the teaching universe into Disciplines and Others, and consigns the Others to a nether world of administrative dependency and intellectual invisibility.

In the old days, there used to be vigorous debates among practitioners about whether Women's Studies should establish itself in the community sector or institutionalise itself in tertiary education; about whether, in the institutions, it should be a ghetto of core courses or integrated into existing courses; and whether it should concentrate on undergraduate or graduate programs. In the event, all the options were taken. Particular programs developed an organisation that was not so much a choice as an adaptation to existing circumstances.

The story of the Program at ANU indicates that institutions organised on traditional department/faculty lines are structurally inhospitable to interdisciplinary programs, intellectually hostile to new, transdisciplinary knowledges, and politically resistant to educational reform. In the face of this, it is hard to say whether there can be such a thing as an effective model for Women's Studies in traditional universities, without major changes to those traditions. But it is exactly such changes that are crucial if the humanities and social 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 redundancy.

### Notes

1. That discomfort grew to such proportions that in 1988 Human Sciences requested a transfer to the Science Faculty and its staff were relocated to the traditional departments. Like Women's Studies, it has lost its intellectual and functional visibility.

# The Women's Research Centre at the University of Western Sydney, Nepean: Political and ethical considerations

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## Introduction

The Women's Research Centre at the University of Western Sydney, Nepean was established in May 1990. The Centre brings together the teaching and research interests and expertise of women across disciplines to investigate issues and disseminate information of specific relevance and benefit to women.

The Centre creates a forum for research initiatives and consultancy work across a wide range of educational, social, historical, cultural, political and economic issues pertaining to women.

- The objectives of the Centre are
- to contribute to the understanding of problems in industry, the community and government pertaining to women - particularly in western Sydney;
  - to undertake research and consultancy work on the needs, and for the benefit, of women;
  - to contribute to the development and transmission of knowledge;
  - to create a database of information relating to women's issues;
  - to promote the interchange of information between women's organisations in western Sydney and nationally;
  - to contribute towards policy decisions pertaining to women;
  - to promote links with other university women's organisations;
  - to promote links and the interchange of information with trade unions and industry.

This paper raises political and ethical issues related to the establishment and continuing operation of the Centre. Trends in higher education and local factors which require consideration and negotiation in achieving funding for the Centre will be outlined. Problems and successes faced by the Management Committee in its first year of operation will also be addressed and a brief description of current project being undertaken will be provided.

## Background

The Women's Research Centre was born within the political and economic climate of radical restructuring in higher education advocated in the Federal Government's White Paper (Dawkins, 1988). This context of restructuring is crucial in understanding the Centre's creation and rationale within a new university since it identifies the imperative to establish a research focus within the newly created universities.

The White Paper on Higher Education (Dawkins, 1988) advocated, inter alia, that the higher education sector be restructured to eliminate the binary system of universities and colleges of advanced education. The document 'encouraged' the amalgamation of existing institutions into larger and, in theory, more efficient institutions so that they could become part of the Unified National System funded predominantly by the Federal Government.

Colleges of advanced education were established in the mid-

1970s to provide vocational training for students destined to move directly into business and industry. Staff were employed by these colleges on the basis of their ability to teach the necessary vocational skills and knowledge. There was no stated intention that the academic staff of such institutions should undertake pure or even applied research on the scale that existed in universities of the period.

Although a certain amount of research was conducted by college academics, the institutions themselves were neither acknowledged as research institutions nor were they funded for research. The absence of a research tradition within the former college sector led to considerable concern among college academics when the higher education sector underwent significant restructuring during 1989 and 1990. Such problems were highlighted during and after the transformation of colleges into universities as staff attempted to develop research skills and gain research funding in order to meet changed criteria for selection and promotion.

As part of the higher education restructure, the former colleges of advanced education - Nepean CAE, Hawkesbury Agricultural College and Macarthur Institute of Higher Education - came together in a network member configuration to form the University of Western Sydney. The establishment of the University meant that considerable attention and effort were required in the area of research to bring it into line with the range of activities in, and compete for funds against, existing universities. Moreover, the White Paper made it clear that universities were expected to attract significant proportions of research funding from the private sector and that they could no longer expect the Federal Government to fully finance the whole higher education operation in Australia.

This history, then, set the parameters within which research centres such as the Women's Research Centre were established: the change in focus from teaching to research in former CAEs; and the expectation that universities would attract funding from outside sources.

In response to pressure embodied in the White Paper, the University of Western Sydney, Nepean (UWS, Nepean), established in January 1989, set up a number of programmes to encourage research activity. These included internally funded research seed grants, conference scholarships, visiting fellowships and research centres. The Women's Research Centre is the youngest centre, established in May 1990 as the third research centre. The Centre for Industrial Research & Technology (attached directly to the Faculty of Science & Technology) and the Communication, Health and Education Research Centre (attached directly to the Faculty of Health Studies) were established in 1989. Each Centre receives funding from UWS, Nepean of \$12,500 per year for three years after which they are expected to become self-funding. In contrast to the other two Centres, and reflecting the inherently inter-disciplinary focus of research within women's studies, the Women's Research Centre is not attached to a particular faculty. This situation constitutes one of the great strengths, but also one