



Art Association of Australia and New Zealand

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To: Professor Grant Guilford  
Vice-Chancellor  
Victoria University of Wellington

Thursday, 21 June, 2018

Dear Professor Guilford,

I am writing to express my strong opposition to the proposed changes to the School of Art History, Classics and Religious Studies at Victoria University of Wellington and, in particular, to a severe and ongoing reduction of the Art History programme. I write as President of the Art Association of Australia and New Zealand (AAANZ), the key professional body for art historian in the Australasian region. The AAANZ represents over 240 members involved in the teaching of art history and theory, as well as curatorial staff from the museum sector, and publishes the leading peer-reviewed journal in the region, *The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art*.

The change proposal is wrongheaded on many counts. It does not advance any clear vision for the future of Art History at VUW and the changes will threaten the survival of the Art History programme. The Art History programme at Victoria University of Wellington is regarded as one of the leading programmes in Australasia. It has produced some of the finest graduates in the discipline, many of whom have gone onto successful careers at museums, universities and similar institutions both in New Zealand and internationally. It is recognised for its excellence in both teaching and research, and was ranked highest nationally in the 2012 PBRF round. The current staff in the program have a demonstrated track record of producing important research publications. Over the next year, for example, staff in Art History will publish three books, and will be responsible for a major international exhibition opening in at the Royal Academy in London.

The recently proposed elimination of a Senior Lecturer position, however, will have dire consequences for the continued viability of the Art History programme. The removal of any one of the current staff members will result in the complete absence of a vital component of art historical pedagogy and research at VUW, leading to a further decline in student numbers and confidence

Art history as a discipline is a fundamental part of any quality humanities faculty. It is a central component of a general education in the arts, as a glance at university curricula around the world will demonstrate. An understanding of art and

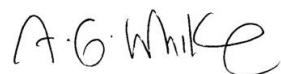
its history tells us a great deal about not only the artistic achievements of any culture, but also its social history and sense of human identity. The creative and problem-solving skills provided by art history's techniques of visual analysis are becoming critical in our image-based, global culture. Moreover, as the world's knowledge increasingly moves to the spatial and visual realm, visual literacy becomes central to any claim to global citizenship. The discipline of art history, furthermore, plays a vital role in the culture of any country, and is central to the vast economy of the art world, worth over \$60 billion (according to a 2018 report by Art Basel).

Indeed, art historians are an essential part of the rapidly expanding museum and gallery industry, and art history programmes such as those at VUW train the next generation of staff in these organisations, offering the specialized skills necessary to the continuation of expert curatorship in New Zealand. In a city such as Wellington with a healthy visual arts sector, it shows a singular lack of foresight to withdraw support from such an important centre of training and research. The cuts proposed also place into question the university's commitment to the humanities and its claim to being one of the world's leading 'capital city universities'.

All of the points raised above pose serious questions about the rationale for reducing the academic staff in the Art History programme and the decision-making process that led to this proposal. Given that the School of Art History, Classics, and Religious Studies has been targeted due to a budget crisis brought about by declining numbers in all its programmes, it seems mightily unfair to punish Art History with a proposal that will cause a loss of staff and of popular courses, lead to an additional decline in student numbers, and make further staff redundancies inevitable. The strength of the program, the importance of the discipline both within the University and more broadly means there simply is no clear, defensible justification for the current proposal. The only conclusion one can reach is that the discipline has been unjustly targeted due to a misperception or complete misunderstanding of the significance of the VUW Art History programme.

In light of the above I ask you to urgently reconsider the proposed discontinuation of a Senior Lecturer position. In the absence of any clear plan for the future of Art History at VUW, such an ill-considered move can only threaten the future viability of the discipline and lead to the loss of more staff.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "A.G. White". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping "W" and "E".

Dr Anthony White

President

Art Association of Australia and New Zealand