

## Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

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# Strategic Review of the School of Social and Political Sciences Discussion Paper

### Introduction.

Lifting the profile and performance of the social sciences is a major objective of the University of Sydney, as is made clear in its current Strategic Plan 2011-15 at Strategy 1, initiative (i):

‘Continue to discuss ways in which we might better profile and coordinate teaching, research training and research in the social sciences, particularly with key stakeholders in the Faculty of Arts. This might involve consideration of such questions as the structure of the School of Social and Political Sciences and the formation of a Graduate School of Social Sciences’.

The Faculty’s own Strategic Plan 2011-15, recently endorsed by Faculty Board, has set as one of its key strategic goals to achieve ‘an integrated, dynamic and sustainable Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences that takes advantage of its diversity and breadth to become among the best of its kind in the world’. One of the strategies to achieve this is to ‘Conduct a strategic review of the SSPS, with a view to determining the organisation and structure that will best deliver excellence in administration, teaching and research in the social and political sciences’. (Strategic Goal 1, Strategy 2).

This discussion paper is intended to help stimulate conversation and thinking about the challenges and opportunities we face at this critical juncture in the history of the social sciences at the University of Sydney. It includes a number of specific issues for discussion and structural models for consideration

### Context.

The School of Social and Political Sciences (SSPS) was created in 2008 as a result of the Review of Social Sciences conducted by the then Provost, Don Nutbeam, in 2007. The School was created through the agglomeration of **Government and IR** (GIR) and **Political Economy** (PE) coming from the Economics and Business Faculty (E&B), **Sociology and Social Policy** (SSP) and **Anthropology** (Anth) from the Faculty of Arts and the **Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies** (CPACS). Following the White Paper published in 2010 these units were joined by the **Centre for International Security Studies** (CISS) and the **Graduate School of Government** (GSG) in 2011.

Since 2008 FTE staff numbers have grown rapidly from an initial number of around 55 academics and 10 support staff to around 90 FTE academics and 16 support staff at the end of 2011. The principal factor driving the growth of FTE has been the increase in student enrolments to around 2300 EFTSL in 2011. High demand for units and courses in SSPS has seen a \$20m turnover in 2008 move toward a projected \$50m in 2012 - aided by the higher CSP banding for social science subjects. Indeed such has been the pace of growth, that SSPS would now be the 7<sup>th</sup> largest *faculty* (out of 16) at Sydney by FTE and the 9<sup>th</sup> largest in terms of student load.

Unit	Continuing academic staff – inc confirmed new arrivals	Fixed-term academic staff	Dedicated support staff <sup>1</sup>	EFTSL – as at 15/9/11	notional 2011 staff-student ratio (SSR) <sup>2</sup>
Anth	10	1 (0.3)	0	248	24
CISS	6	1 (0.2)	3 f/t	77	12
CPACS	3	0	2 p/t	82	27
GIR	26	1	2	812	30
GSG	2	0	2	40	20
PE	8	4	1	403	34
SSP	23	3	0	705	27
<b>Totals</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>10 (16)</b>	<b>2367</b>	<b>27</b>

Growth at this rate produces its own challenges: insufficient infrastructure, the lag between growth in student numbers and staff recruitment and administrative overload to name three. However the development of critical mass in key disciplines such as Sociology and Politics as a result of the White Paper process and rapid recruitment of new staff also creates an opportunity for rethinking social science research and teaching at Sydney, and by extension the structure of SSPS – as flagged in the White Paper. In particular it encouraged us to ask ourselves whether the optimal model for the social sciences is the *multidisciplinary school* (as per SSPS) or the *single disciplinary school*, as per the Faculty's latest unit, Economics – or some combination of the two.

Altering structures will not in and of itself resolve some of the issues noted above such as the chronic lack of space or high SSRs; but they might achieve other ends that are valuable to the development of the social sciences at Sydney such as greater ownership by disciplines over their own research and teaching, clearer incentives for developing new and attractive courses, and greater visibility for key disciplines within and beyond the institution.

The aim of this review is to take up the opportunity provided by the growth and success of SSPS to consider some of the alternatives. Any subsequent formal proposal for changing the structure of SSPS would of course be carried out in line with the University's 'managing change' process as outlined in the Enterprise Agreement.

In considering the options below we need to keep in mind three key questions:

1. What set of arrangements best serve the interests of our students (both UG and PG), in terms of supporting and helping maintain high quality teaching programs, access to vibrant intellectual communities and the ability to take advantage of our research strengths and expertise?
2. What set of arrangements best enables us to take advantage of the expertise and research strengths of our academic staff, as well as helping to seed, promote and enable new areas of research and teaching strength, especially through inter (and intra)disciplinary collaboration?
3. What set of arrangements best serve the interests of the Faculty and the University in terms of creating greater capacity for and visibility of our work in the social sciences more generally, including our engagement with policy makers and the public and private sector?

<sup>1</sup> this number does not include the 6 SSPS admin staff who service the generic needs of the School as opposed to individual departments and centres.

<sup>2</sup> the notional SSR = student load divided by FTE. This differs from the annualised Faculty SSR figure, which only considers the staff actively contributing to the teaching in any given semester/year (i.e. not those on leave, on secondment, on temporary research contracts etc). Thus in practice the Faculty SSR figure is always higher in any given year than the notional figure.

**Structures and scenarios.**

Several possibilities present themselves for discussion at this point:

**1. Single School Model**, e.g. either

**a)** Single School structure with departments (i.e. the status quo, albeit with those changes required to improve administrative support, research performance better coordination of teaching and public engagement);

or

**b)** Rationalised Single School structure – as per the current school but creating a larger, more inclusive grouping of disciplines within a new ‘Politics and IR’ domain (ie. GIR plus some or all of PE, CISS, GSG, CPACS). The name of this new, larger group would need to be developed in consultation with the relevant constituent units.

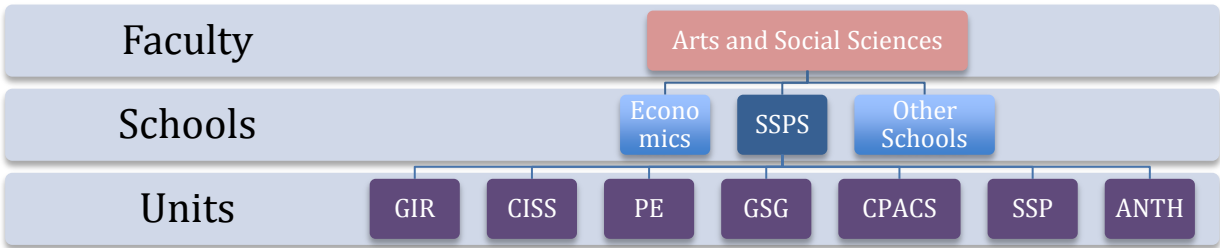
**2. Two School Model**, e.g. either

**a)** Two School structure with departments and centres;

or

**b)** Two School structure without departments (i.e. as per Economics)

**Option 1(a) – Single School, separate departments/centres:**



Maintaining the current configuration, i.e. separate departmental units within SSPS preserves relative autonomy to units that often see themselves as having a different mission, vocation and/or staffing profile to disciplinary groupings such as GIR and SSP. CPACS emerged out of the Peace Foundation and the desire to develop peace research as a distinct intellectual contribution; CISS which speaks to the sponsor’s desire for an engaged, policy relevant research community; GSG which specializes in public administration and professional education.

This model would maintain the separate cost centre status of CISS and GSG, which in turn recognizes their different missions. It promotes collaboration of the large disciplinary groupings (Politics and Sociology) with smaller entities.

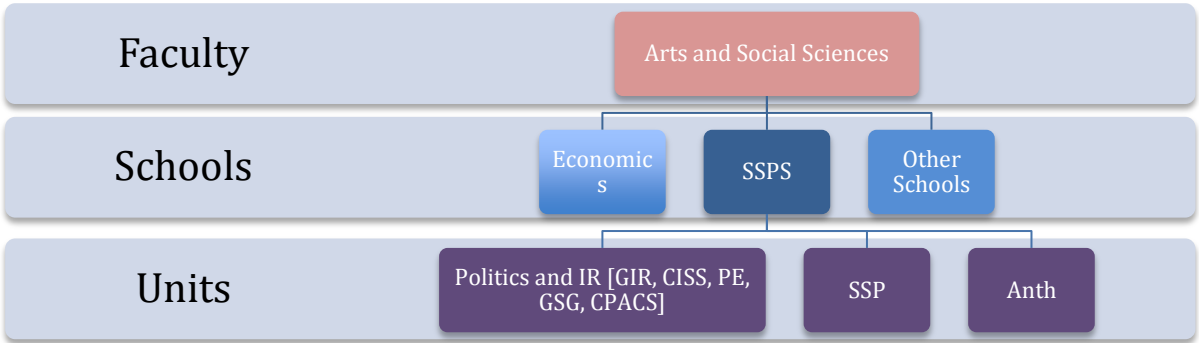
Both the BPSS and BIGS degrees are structured around contributions from most of SSPS’s constituent departments. The structure also speaks to the shared ownership of teaching and research in certain aspects of politics – notably as regards Human Rights and Democratisation and Sydney Democracy initiatives. Development Studies also cross-sects the School, and research initiatives such as Biopolitics of Science and Social Transformation and International Migration have the potential to link researchers across the School, and indeed the Faculty and beyond. Given that

the School is really only 3 years old, should we be allowing more time for new modes of collaboration to emerge, taking advantage of the plurality of units, and focusing resources on those that fit more broadly into wider Faculty and University strategic initiatives (eg. democracy, China Studies, South-East Asia studies, IR, development studies etc.)?

Potential disbenefits/risks of this arrangement might be:

- Does the current model offer a fragmented image of, in particular, the broad area of Politics and IR at Sydney? Is ‘critical mass’ being sacrificed to differentiated missions and profiles? Politics, broadly construed, should be an immediately identifiable strength at Sydney, given the number and quality of staff in the field. Might however the sub-division of the discipline via myriad departments and centres undermine this message for key audiences: potential students (UG and PG); potential staff recruits and funders? Does it undermine the strategic management of our research and teaching in this field?
- Are we losing efficiencies that might be gained from consolidating units, courses, support staff, training opportunities, workloads? Even if the differential missions of the various units in the School made some unevenness in staffing and administrative arrangements justifiable, how sustainable or equitable are these arrangements over the longer term?
- Are there overlaps and duplications within and between units within the discipline of Politics and IR? International security is a distinct area of research and teaching, for example, but there is always the danger of replicating provision across the School without careful coordination between it and international relations and peace and conflict studies, for example; other areas of potential overlap include (International) political economy; public policy and governance, Australian politics and foreign policy, democracy and democratisation.
- How do we address the chronic unwieldiness of SSPS as an administrative unit if we retain this model? SSPS is the largest school in the Faculty by EFTSL, and the second largest by FTE. SSPS administration is the most under-resourced in the faculty. The acquisition of support staff via CISS and GSG is a continuing benefit for those units, but given the semi-detached nature of their activities, the School itself remains as before. So the support head count grows in SSPS, but not in ways that address the lack of administrative support at School and departmental level.

**Option 1(b) – Single School with new, larger ‘Politics and IR’ grouping of disciplines and centres.**



In this scenario, a larger grouping of ‘Politics and IR’ (or whatever name was deemed appropriate) would be created within SSPS comprising all the academic staff currently divided by departmental boundaries. As in most large departments, there would be sub-divisions and sub-disciplines, centres

and institutes, including the distinctive majors and programs of study currently offered where the group wanted to continue with them.

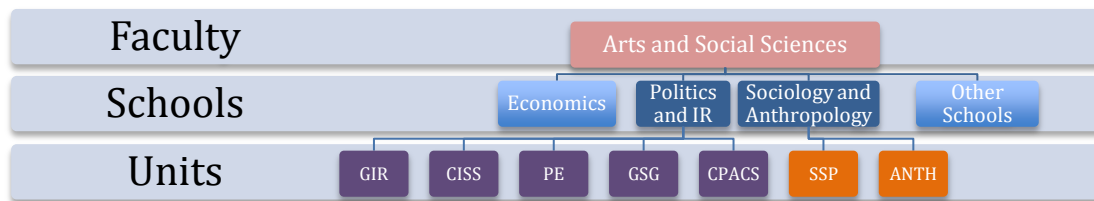
The creation of a single, - albeit pluralistic - department would highlight a distinctive community of scholars and students working broadly in Politics and IR, broadly construed, and enable us to make our research and teaching expertise in this area more visible to potential students, staff and the wider public culture – especially policy makers and other important users of our research and teaching.

A large Politics grouping could also stimulate and provide incentives for greater collaboration and cooperation across areas and sub-disciplines. It would promote the rationalisation of course offerings to provide a clear, coherent set of courses and units based on a unified process of curriculum development and management (albeit without losing the diversity of offerings we are able to mount, given the plurality of disciplinary areas we have). It would ease the workload burden for smaller units in terms of rationalizing the number of Departmental Coordinators required for PG coursework, research and teaching & learning etc. It would also promote the use of support staff to the benefit of the broader group as a whole, as opposed to parts of it. The greater integration of Level 9, 8 and 7 staff in particular would provide an opportunity for a greater return on their expertise and skills than is currently possible given the limited ambit of their roles. There would be a greater integration of PGRs and ECRs as separate programs are brought under a single heading.

Potential disbenefits/risks of this arrangement might be:

- Would the loss of the limited autonomy enjoyed by the smaller departments mean that units and programs wither? Political Economy, for example, is a larger group at Sydney than is usually found in departments of Politics and IR elsewhere in the world. This is testament to PE's success in creating new student flows and interest for a sub-field that otherwise tends to have less visibility than the larger disciplinary grouping. How would membership in a larger politics group affect the visibility of political economy as a distinctive sub-field for research and teaching purposes? Similarly, CPACS is concerned with 'peace research' as opposed to international relations or security studies per se. How would their research and teaching fit into a broader Politics and IR grouping without losing the core of their own approach and mission? Assuming CISS and GSG maintained their status as distinct Centres, how would their relation with (or within) a larger Politics grouping be understood?
- How would greater consolidation of Politics research and teaching make a difference in terms of bringing decision making closer to the disciplinary groups? With financial management remaining at School level the scope for an enlarged Department of Politics and IR to exercise greater autonomy would on face value remain the same as the smallest departments in the Faculty. It may also stifle new initiatives as the financial benefits of developing new courses and programs currently accrue to the School, which makes it more difficult for colleagues to see the direct benefit to particular departments or programs.
- How would the problem of overload at School level be resolved? A new, energetic grouping in Politics would be expected to develop new units and courses, recruiting more EFTSL; but without further reform of staffing this would add to the already stretched workload of the SSPS administration team.

## Option 2(a) – Two Schools, with separate departments/centres

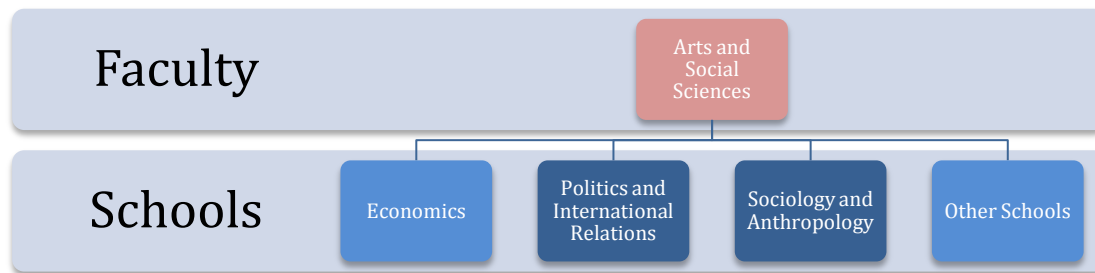


In this scenario SSPS is split to create two new Schools, one of which would be 'Politics and IR' (or whatever name was deemed appropriate), the other Sociology and Anthropology. This would signal the centrality of core disciplinary groupings in the social sciences and put them on a level par with Economics. It would give greater control over financial matters bringing the risk/reward equation into more direct alignment than is possible in the existing model. A large and diverse School of Politics and International Relations would quickly establish itself as perhaps the premier academic unit in Australasia and a serious player internationally. The same should be true of a School of Sociology and Anthropology with the increased visibility and profile that comes with school status.

Potential disbenefits / risks of this arrangement might be:

- Where would a new school of Politics be situated? Without some change in the space situation there is a risk that it would be unable to function effectively or to develop in the ways anticipated here. If the School remains an archipelago geographically then the risk is that it is likely to remain so pedagogically and administratively.
- If one of the drivers for change is to create fewer borders, then this model would potentially be a backward step. Instead of fewer borders there are more – with the addition of a border between politics and sociology/anthropology, as well as the retention of departmental/centre silos with the attendant issues associated with Option 1(a).
- Would not two Schools be more intensive administratively than one? Two Schools implies two Heads of School, two assistants to the HOS, two finance teams, including most probably two Finance Officers, and so forth? If one driver of change is the desire to make the most of limited resources, then there is a danger here of further replication and proliferation.
- Would the new Schools remain receptive to interdisciplinary initiatives and programs? What for example would happen to the promising Human Rights and Democratisation initiative which is currently located in SSPS drawing on staff interests from Sociology, GIR, PE and so on? What of Development Studies, which has considerable potential but which is currently superintended by Anthropology? Would Politics retreat from these and other initiatives because they are located in another School?

## Option 2(b) Two Schools, with consolidated departments (as per Economics)



In this scenario the two Schools mimic the organisational structure of the School of Economics. This is to say that each becomes a distinct singular organisational entity for financial, workload and administrative purposes. There would be no departments as such, though as in Economics, sub-fields and sub-units, centres and institutes, research and teaching clusters would feature. Thus within a new School of Politics and International Relations there would be sub-field activities (including centres and/or institutes) around IR, security studies, political economy and so forth – but these sub-fields would not be the organisational unit which manages staff time or resources. Rather the School would, as in Economics, be the primary administrative and financial unit.

The advantage of this model is that it gives primacy to the disciplinary group in broad terms, maintaining and promoting the visibility of the discipline as opposed to the various sub-fields as per the departmental model. The benefit would be in terms of coherent course planning and management, an inclusive as opposed to exclusive approach to the membership of sub-fields so that all those working in say international security or political economy could opt into activities associated with these sub-fields, not just members of the relevant department or centre. Greater control over the delivery of teaching and the organisation of research in disciplinary terms might in turn be expected to improve the visibility and profile of each discipline, which will in turn have knock on benefits in terms of marketing courses, raising the profile of research for external audiences and attracting key student groups such as PGCW and PhD students.

Potential disbenefits/risks of this arrangement might be:

- Would the creation of a unitary school structure promote the decline of formerly autonomous and thriving sub-field units? Would it be possible to maintain and promote vigorous and distinctive centres and institutes under this scenario? In short, would unitary governance mean homogenisation, and the loss of the current plurality of approaches, methods, missions, and vocations?
- Two schools means two sets of administrators as per the model above. Given the pressures on budgets at Faculty and University level is this viable?
- Would the move to two unitary schools create difficulties for current and future inter-disciplinary research and teaching?

### Additional Issues.

Research performance - Little mention has been made here of research performance, not because we should be indifferent towards performance when it comes to weighing up the best structures for the social sciences, but because measuring research performance presents difficulties where FoR

codes are shared between academic units across the Faculty (and not just across disciplines within Schools) and reputational biases in league tables like QS are difficult to address in the short term.

Would the move to larger units produce improvements in research performance? It's difficult to be sure. Critical mass is often regarded as desirable in the social sciences where team and collaborative projects are valorised by funders and researchers. But teams and collaborations are as often as not the result of intellectual affinity, which can and do cross departmental boundaries. They can also be promoted as much by helpful spaces and by the physical juxtaposition of research groups and clusters as by structural reorganisation. Given the current emphasis on inter- and multidisciplinary research within the University, it also needs to be asked whether the move toward larger *disciplinary* – as opposed to interdisciplinary - groupings is not rowing against the tide rather than with it.

There are, however, other kinds of research excellence that we should be concerned about and need to factor into this review: external research funding; PhD recruitment; attracting post-doctoral students, advanced researchers, and high quality visiting academics. What is clear is that there is room for improvement across each of these areas, and that whatever structures are proposed they need to address how key groups and users of our research and teaching are going to benefit from whatever changes are contemplated.

Unit	PhD completions – 2006-10	HERDC publications score 2006-10	External research grant funding 2006-10	ERA 2010 score
Anth	9	73.7	\$852,554	3
CISS	0	33	\$705,688	4 <sup>3</sup>
CPACS	1	74.7	\$133,000	n/a <sup>4</sup>
GIR	27	218.6	\$4,706,645	2/4 <sup>5</sup>
GSG	1	9.7	\$0	n/a
PE	7	129.9	\$0	1 <sup>6</sup>
SSP	13	153.5	\$7,231,574	3

Infrastructure – consideration of the optimal structure of SSPS and the social sciences will only get so far before it comes up against the issue of space and geography. At present SSPS is split across two main sites, Merewether and Mills, with an archipelago of other spaces for the spill-over of staff who cannot be accommodated therein (Transient, Edward Ford, Brennan-MacCallum, Quad) or for units that are sufficiently self-contained as to be locatable elsewhere (GSG in the Law School; CPACS in Mackie; HRD in Old Teacher's College). The unitary school models advertise a 'closer' working pattern than the present; yet that seems itself to be predicated on the availability of the kinds of space that make such a move achievable. One of the reasons why we have, for example, differential access to support staff is geography. How might the geographies be redefined in light of this review? What space is available for 'unitary' schools to operate in a 'unified' fashion? Without a major investment in new and different kinds of spaces, it has to be a concern that the creation of unitary schools would be impracticable and unproductive.

<sup>3</sup> Most of CISS's work is listed under 1606 – Political Science

<sup>4</sup> CPACS output is shared across too many FoRs to produce a meaningful ranking for ERA purposes.

<sup>5</sup> 1605 – Policy and Administration/1606- Political Science

<sup>6</sup> 56% of output in 1499 (Other Economics) derives from output in PE. The remaining output from PE is spread across a number of FoRs, including 1605 and 1606.

Financial management and incentives – In the current context in which operating margins are needed to help pay for the University’s new capital projects, the net effect is inevitably a decrease in the financial autonomy of the University’s constituent units. If this is true at faculty level, how much truer is it at school and departmental level? Some of the models discussed above promise ‘greater incentives’ or increased ability to manage financial affairs. What is the incentive to change structures in terms of financial risks and rewards? This will depend, ultimately, on the ability of the university to leave more revenue at the faculty and school levels.

Graduate School of the Social Sciences (GSSS) – The White Paper also signals the desirability of a Graduate School. It’s not clear from the document what functions such a body would play, though presumably with the closing of the Institute of the Social Sciences some of the latter’s work would be taken up by the new body. What has yet to be established is whether such a body would take on admissions, training, professional development and other functions that are currently undertaken by departments, the school and the Faculty. How in any case would the development of a cross disciplinary body such as this affect the desirability of the models discussed above?