

# Threat to UOW's green credentials

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'Crazy' cuts to sustainability teaching, research which brought in \$3.6 million

Six months ago, Professor Chris Gibson was the toast of the University of Wollongong after securing \$3.6 million in federal funding for a project on how the Illawarra would adapt to a clean energy economy.

Today he's staring down the barrel of losing his job after UOW's job-cutting team identified his discipline as not profitable enough.

He's not alone - UOW is considering completely axing Human Geography as a discipline, citing low enrolment numbers, meaning about 11 academic staff may lose their jobs by Christmas.

UOW figures seen by the *Mercury* show its profit margin is 29 per cent - short of the 60 per cent margin demanded for a discipline to be assessed as "viable".

Earth Sciences is also proposed to be deleted as a major under UOW's cost reduction plan, underway because of a large hole in its budget after international student revenue came in \$35 million under UOW's forecast for 2024.

The cuts to sustainability research and teaching would be a blow to UOW's environmental credentials - including global university rankings - as well as its much-lauded role in the region's transformation.

Professor Gibson's work on how the Illawarra will adapt to low-carbon industries - including how to make sure regional communities are not "left behind" - won him \$3.6 million in funding as an Australian Research Council Laureate.

His "prestigious" fellowship was lauded by UOW in May as "the pinnacle of recognition in Australian research", for "ground-breaking" work that showed "the depth and vitality of the research taking part on our campuses".

## Essential work

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Professor Gibson said the work was "essential" for the region but this did not seem to be recognised in the cuts.

"It's research that's all about the region's future," he told the *Mercury*.

"It's about what jobs are likely to be lost or phased out in the region, which jobs are being created, are the promises of jobs going to be seen with actual numbers on the ground, how do local people feel about it, how is the process working?"

"All these are big questions for our region, they're big questions for the nation, and they're the research questions at the heart of this laureate fellowship, this major investment.

"We've got a real problem on our hands if we proceed with energy transitions as if it's just a sort of technical issue, and not actually understand the geographical impacts - how our energy transitions are likely to impact on regions, making sure regions aren't being left behind.

## **Ideal region**

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"The key pitch to the funding body was that this is an ideal region in which to invest in this research, to build a team, to build a real centre of excellence for research on the regional impacts of decarbonisation."

The School of Geography and Sustainable Communities has already been merged earlier this year into Social Sciences, but now the whole discipline of geography and sustainability is on the chopping block.

Professor Gibson said decisions may be being made without enough awareness of what UOW's schools and disciplines actually do.

"The management of the university are talking about the need to ... urgently rectify the budget, make difficult decisions - I just think that's a recipe for hasty and crazy decisions really," he said.

"They're going on a set of numbers on a spreadsheet, without noticing or really understanding what it is that they're likely to cut.

"In our case, we feel pretty strongly that these are the sort of questions we look at, things like energy transition, regional inequality, making sure we transition to a more sustainable society in a way that's fair.

"These are pretty profound and important questions we need to be training our students in. It's pretty essential stuff for the future of our region, the future of Australia, but at the moment, that doesn't seem to matter when it comes to the proposal for cuts."

UOW has said the discipline was being considered for removal because of low student numbers, following some efforts to boost enrolments.

Sustainability research and education is an area which UOW regularly promotes as one of its strengths.

Last December UOW boasted of performing "exceptionally well" in the global QS university sustainability rankings - up to 62nd in the world and 11th in Australia, with environmental research and education cited as reasons for its placement.

UOW achieved this with a 91.8 rating for environmental research and 75.4 for environmental education.

Professor Nicholas Gill, a leader with the NSW Bushfire and Natural Hazards Research Centre, whose work focuses on environmental management and resource use, is another human geographer in line for the chop.

He said geography and sustainability was one of the best performing research areas in the university, and feared UOW was losing sight of its role for the public good.

"Traditionally, universities have been willing and governments have been willing to support that sort of teaching - they recognise you have to offer courses that meet a need, a broader public need, but aren't necessarily churning out the numbers," Professor Gill said.

"I think what we're really seeing is a retreat from that, which is a shame, not just for us but for other disciplines who also have that broader public good, in what they do."

## **Skills for region's jobs**

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Professor Gill said this was a line of study that had clear real-life employment prospects, including planning work with councils.

"Our graduates are walking out the door [and] getting jobs in cultural heritage management, waste management, water management, sustainability jobs generally," he said.

UOW's assessment of "viability" has been criticised by the National Tertiary Education Union as failing to properly value the research work done by academics, over-emphasising teaching income as the measure, and under-valuing research.

Under the metrics being used by UOW management, a discipline is "unviable" if its profit margin is less than 40 per cent, "marginal" from 40-60 per cent, and viable if profit is greater than 60 per cent.

This is the case for "low-cost" disciplines such as Human Geography that don't involve large amounts of field work, technical support and other equipment and consumables.

As a "high cost" discipline, Earth Sciences is subject to different metrics: "viable" is profit greater than 50 per cent, marginal is 30 to 50 per cent, and unviable is below 30 per cent. Earth Sciences has a profit margin of 23 per cent, UOW's figures say.

## **Enrolments too low**

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A UOW spokesman said the university needed to significantly reduce expenditure and staffing in some areas.

"Human Geography is an area of ongoing low enrolment in which courses have already been suspended due to low demand," he said.

"The current and projected revenue cannot support the level of staffing, despite significant past efforts to improve viability including creating opportunities for service teaching in other areas. It is also important to note that the university will continue teaching in other areas that relate to sustainability and climate change, including bachelor programs in business, environmental science and marine science.

"No decisions have been made. The feedback we receive through this consultation process will inform any revisions we make to the proposal. We will be working closely with potentially affected staff so that they have every opportunity to have their say."

CAPTION: Professor Chris Gibson, whose work brought in \$3.6m in federal funding, faces his area of geography and sustainability being axed by UOW.

CAPTION: UOW geography and sustainability staff who may soon lose their jobs: Associate Professor Natascha Klocker, Senior Professor Pauline McGuirk, Professor Nicholas Gill, Associate Professor Jennifer Atchison, Associate Professor Sonia Graham and Dr Laura Hammersley. Picture by Adam McLean

CREDIT: Ben Langford

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