PRESENTATION TO COUNCIL IN RELATION TO THE 1993 ANNUAL REPORT

1. It is my pleasure to present the 1993 Annual Report for the Research School of Social Sciences. I hope you will find it an interesting document to read. We do make an effort to present the account of our activities in a reader-friendly form, and any comments on that aspect (as well as any other) from Council Members would be useful.

2. In presenting the Report, I should like to speak rather more broadly than usual about the School. With our preparations for the 1995 Review process, and our current University Strategic Planning exercise, we are all more than usually preoccupied with cataloguing our strengths and weaknesses overall - and I thought that it might be useful to talk briefly about those matters.

3. On the 'strengths' side of the ledger, there are three things I want to mention. The first is the excellent group of recently appointed young, non-tenured staff in the School. This is an unusually talented and energetic cohort. Two of them, in Economics, won in successive years the prize for the best student at Harvard. One in Political Science received an analogous award (The Robert McKenzie prize) in his field from the London School of Economics. Of three new appointees in Sociology two have just had accepted papers in one of the top two international journals in sociology and the third has a paper forthcoming in the world’s best criminology journal. This is an exceptional group and deserve the kind of research support (both material and psychological) that RSSS provides.

4. The second area I wish to mention is the School’s Reshaping Australian Institutions project. This is proving to be a success on virtually every front - as an exercise in outreach (we have so far made eight secondments to the School under the RAI’s aegis, most for periods of one year, and there are twenty or so others on sabbatical fellowships or visiting the School as research affiliates); as an exercise in public profile (I should mention here the ABC radio series that the Prime Minister kicked off earlier this year, and the highly successful series of public seminars on the Mabo decision); but most importantly as a demonstration of the School’s unique capacity to deliver a large research effort across the whole range of Australia’s institutions (17 strands) and the whole range of the social science disciplines. There are three book series - two under the C.U.P. label and one with Allen & Unwin - associated with the project, because no one series could accommodate the expected output.
5. The third area of success I should like to mention is the economics program. Claims about disciplinary excellence are often hard to back with evidence. In the sciences, it has become customary to use citations for this purpose. In the social sciences, citation evidence is less reliable generally, but economics is one field where citation evidence is fairly reliable because most of the main work in the discipline is carried in journals, and that which is not is routinely cited in journal articles. Within the RSSS, there are roughly ten economists. Seven of these have double digit citations annually, and six receive more than twenty citations annually. One of them receives almost 200, another almost 100, two receive between 40 and 50 a year. To put this in context, in our search through other Australian economists reveals that only one economist outside the ANU receives more than thirty per year, and only one other receives more than twenty. Most articles and most academic economists are never cited. Our estimate is that the RSSS presence is responsible for about half the country’s citations in economics; and this with fewer than 2 per cent of the country’s academic economists. There must be well over 600 economists in the Australian system; only ten of them are in RSSS. Of course, citations aren’t a perfect measure of quality by any means, but they are a measure of international visibility and there can be no doubt that RSSS plays a crucial role in maintaining that visibility in the field of economics. At the risk of seeming immodest, I do have to say that this is a truly prodigious performance. (secured alongside the extensive involvement of the economics personnel in arenas of public policy advice).

6. I want to turn now to an area of vulnerability in the School; its a matter that relates to Council initiatives and I wish to express concern about it. In the wake of the Stephen Committee Review, Council decided to accept as a goal a 30% tenure requirement for the year 2000. RSSS, in accord with that requirement, has drastically reduced its tenured staff complement from 38 in 1990 to 23 currently, putting us now at around the 30 per cent level. For example, in my own three years as Director there have been 10 retirements or resignations from tenured staff: I have made no tenured appointments in that time (though there are some in process). The situation in some disciplines is clearly not good: they are dangerously close to being below critical mass. There are currently on the ground one tenured demographer, two tenured political scientists, two tenured sociologists. I am concerned about the School’s capacity: to maintain its disciplinary excellence; to mount quality graduate programs and increase our graduate student numbers; to extend our outreach; and to meet the expectations of disciplinary and professional leadership within the Australian system, when the core tenured complement is becoming so small. I have to say that, in my view, 23 tenured positions is too few, when divided across the disciplinary range to which the School is committed. We must either cut out entire disciplines, or increase the tenured complement somewhat. That is a predicament of which council should be aware.