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wcaa
World Council
of Anthropological
Associations

Melbourne, 13 April 2010
To the Secretary General
Organisation de Coopération et de Développement Economiques
Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
Directorate for Science, Technology and Industry
Committee for Scientific and Technological Policy
2, rue André Pascal
75775 Paris Cedex 16
France
sti.contact@oecd.org

RE: “Fields of Science and Technology” (FOS) classification: Anthropology

Dear Mr. Secretary-General,

I am writing to you as Chairperson of the World Council of Anthropological Associations (WCAA), and on behalf of the thirty major national professional associations who are represented in the World Council by their democratically elected presidents, together representing tens of thousands of practicing anthropologies worldwide.

In this capacity, I would like to draw your attention to the very serious misclassification of Anthropology in the ‘Revised Classification of Fields of Science and Technology’. This reclassification was conducted by the ‘Working Party of National Experts on Science and Technology’ under the auspices of the OECD (refer to <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/36/44/38235147.pdf>). The new classification wrongly categorises Anthropology (and Ethnology) as a sub-field of Sociology (see point 5.4). National and international professional associations in the field of anthropology were not consulted in the process, as far as we are aware.

To describe anthropology as a subfield of sociology is an inaccurate classification of this field of knowledge and misrepresents the origins, historical development and current standing of anthropology as a social science in itself. This separate status has long had institutional expression in university departments and research centres and in national research classification schemes throughout the world.

Anthropology is the holistic study of humanity (the human species) in its cultural, social and biological aspects. Unlike sociology, anthropology starts from a full recognition of the vast diversity of social and cultural systems among different human populations on this planet, and their interconnection with human physical evolution in diverse and changing environments. Therefore, anthropology deserves a separate category with at least three attendant major sub-divisions (social, cultural and physical anthropology).

Anthropology is especially relevant to the area of “development studies” because it is specifically equipped to evaluate the impact of economic development interventions on local populations with highly specific social systems, cultural values and practical concerns. This issue is extremely relevant to the core activities of the OECD itself, as it is to any other organizational entity with a prominent involvement in, and enlightened, non-predatory approach to international economic development and cooperation. Other social scientists are not comprehensively trained to assess the impact of international development from the unique perspectives of those groups of cultural others whose way of life and livelihoods are affected. Equitable, sustainable and long-term successful development in culturally diverse settings is dependent on in-depth knowledge of other cultures, based on broad-based anthropological and ethnological research as well as on more case-specific impact assessment studies. This knowledge is not just relevant to facilitate effective and ethical investment in developing countries. It is also crucial for negotiating cultural diversity reciprocally, in a world that may soon be dominated by high-economic-growth countries such as China and India.

I would like to convey our grave concern over the negative consequences this misclassification could have for the research, teaching and development activities that are carried out by anthropologists around the world, both at national and international levels.

Since the revised classification document itself states that the current FOS classification is not final but will need to be revised regularly, we ask that - in the course of the next update - "Anthropology / ethnology" be reinstated to its correct classification as a separate social science, with a unique appreciation not just for the social but also for the cultural and physical dimensions of the human condition. The WCAA and its member associations are ready to provide whatever assistance you may require in the process of reconsidering the classification of anthropology.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Thomas Reuter". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Prof. Dr. Thomas Reuter
Chairperson, WCAA