Review of Area Studies work slate project

Record of Phase 2 Consultation Meeting 2

Wednesday 19th August 2009, 9-10:30am; Arts, Law and Education Consultation forum
Venue: The Refectory, Quadrangle (Capacity 60)
Attendees from Review Panel: Professor Stephen Garton, Professor David Goodman, Professor Jeff Riegel, Professor Geoff Garrett, Tim Payne
Apologies from Review Panel: Professors Wolnizer, Hearn, Robinson and McConchie
Attendees from Faculties: Associate Professor Anne Dunn (Acting Dean/Faculty of Arts); Associate Professor Luke Nottage (Law/ANGeL); Professor Linda Connor (Arts/Anthropology/SSPS); Professor Adrian Vickers (Arts/SLC), Professor Raewyn Connell (Education & Social Work); Professor Simon Tormey (Arts, Head, SSPS); Professor Anders Ahlqvist (Arts/School of Letters/Celtic Studies); Dr Pamela O’Neill (Arts/Celtic Studies); Dr Richard Smith (Arts/Film Studies); Professor Stephanie Donald (MEOCO/SLAM/Film/Media/China); Professor Roland Fletcher (Arts/Archaeology/SOPHI); Professor Robert Aldrich (Arts/History/SOPHI); Dr Andrea Williams (Arts/European Studies); Dr Andrew McGarrity (Arts/Asian Studies/Indian Sub-continental Studies); Dr Vek Lewis (Arts/Latin American Studies); Fernanda Penaloza (Arts/Latin American Studies); Dr David Bray (Arts/Sociology and Social Policy); Dr Bronwyn Winter (Arts/French Studies & ICLS); Associate Professor Elise Tipton (Arts/Asian Studies/Japanese Studies/Korean Studies, SLC); Dr Elizabeth Rechniewski (Arts/French Studies/SLC); Dr Penelope O’Donnell (Arts/School of Letters); Dr Yiyan Wang (Arts/Modern Chinese Literature & Culture, Critical Theory and Cultural Studies); Dr Yi Zheng (Arts/Department of Chinese Studies)
Invited: All who made submissions; all on mapping list
Also in Attendance: Mr Tim Payne (Director Policy Analysis and Communication)

Key points raised in the meeting

Different ‘Areas’ may require different models

The point was made early in the session that it may be premature to be discussing specific models, without first providing greater clarity about the ‘Areas’ that are under consideration. Different Areas may be suited to different models and administrative structures depending on the level of existing strength, its current location within the University, the nature of the Area and the location of strengths at other universities in Australia and elsewhere. Specific concerns were raised about the apparent demise of Australian Studies at the University of Sydney.

A need for a better understanding of strengths and weaknesses

Following on from the questions of ‘which Areas’ and on ‘which criteria’, there was general agreement that there was a need for a better access to information about the breadth and depth of existing Area as well as disciplinary activity. Various participants expressed concern at the difficulties they had experienced trying to identify people with expertise in fields relevant to them.
Definition of Area is important

There was considerable discussion of what is meant by ‘Area Studies’ and whether the traditional concept remains relevant. Questions were raised about the ‘evolving’ or even ‘disintegrating’ nature of Areas with the example given of films which might now feature multiple languages and involve characters and interwoven cultures and relationship that are meaningless within ‘Areas’ conceived on geographic grounds. The point was made that it need not be an either/or question about whether the University does ‘International Studies’ or ‘Area Studies’ and should do both, with the Area approach adding value to International approaches because you need to look at Area/regions and then potentially countries within these to make sense of international developments in the discipline. One participant pressed for Sydney to not be locked into imperialist models or approaches that have been used by rich Western/Northern Hemisphere countries and institutions, but to reinvigorate Area Studies by focusing more on relationships that cross geographical boundaries, or on disciplines applied to Areas. This view was countered by another participant who argued that there are now ‘new imperialisms’ and that Area approaches remained relevant. Another stressed the need for history to be given a prominent voice in any Area Studies Strategy.

How best to build Area strengths

Competing views were expressed about whether the best way to build up an Area Studies capacity was to start with undergraduate courses and build from there, or to start with Research and Research Higher Degrees and build down from there through honours to undergraduate programs. Some had experienced success using the former approach, while other were not convinced and thought that focusing on research and branching out from there was the more likely path to success.

It was pointed out that different approaches would require different degrees of restructuring of the status quo – for example, to create undergraduate Area Studies capacity may require significant change to internal regulations of degree structures, while staff and research interconnections may require less change. The formation of an Area Studies program may therefore have to be a staged process.

Are there ways other ways to connect staff and break down ‘silos’ and barriers?

There was considerable discussion of the numerous barriers and obstacles to collaboration at Sydney - even within a faculty - let alone between faculties or institutions. Barriers raised included the funding models for both undergraduate and postgraduate students; difficulties identifying potential collaborators; administrative difficulties establishing new courses; lack of administrative assistance to support cross-disciplinary collaboration which might be seen within the department/faculty as not core business; competition for research grants which typically favour disciplinary approaches; joint appointments often resulting in a loss (financial or otherwise to the ‘home’ department; and the Academic Board’s policies regarding supervision of PhD students – precluding true co-supervision. Those that have sought to achieve collaboration under the current arrangements spoke of having to invent incentives for Unit managers to support their activities. Whatever else is done as a result of this review, there appeared to be agreement that if cross-department/faculty/discipline/institution collaboration is seen as desirable, then systematic incentives must be put in place to reward such behaviour. In relation to the supervision of PhD students it was noted that the Academic Board’s Review of the PhD was recommending supervisory panels and that if implemented, this could remove some of the obstacles to cooperation that are currently seen to exist in this area.
‘Project’ versus ‘Centres’ approaches

The idea of taking an ‘Area Project’ as opposed to ‘Area Centres’ approach was proposed as a possible alternative. Rather than the imposition of rigid ‘one size fits all model’ which was described by one participant as a potential ‘monster’, a number of participants saw value in the adoption of a ‘responsive’ and ‘fluid approach’ which fostered and promoted innovative approaches. The University of Western Australia’s Institute of Advanced Studies and Sydney’s Institute for Sustainable Solutions small grant scheme were suggested as possible examples.

The focus of such an approach would be on defined projects, with limited life span, with funds allocated through an application-based process. One participant raised concerns, however, that the University should not in effect establishing an internal ARC process for projects and requiring staff to prepare yet more applications. Another suggested that rather than projects per se, the Project approach could focus on providing short-term support for collaborative networks. Another questioned what such an approach would mean for the continuity and visibility of expertise in the Area and in particular whether it would provide the best environment for higher degree by research training.

A ‘Network’ approach: inter-university collaboration and engagement

A number of participants commented that the models put forward to prompt the discussion were very Sydney or Institution centric. They stressed that more emphasis was needed on how any Area Studies centres established at Sydney might link with expertise in other Australian universities and elsewhere in the world.

Following the meeting a participant made the following comment: “One way to achieve this might be for Sydney to provide support for “convenors” of “nodes” (rather than “directors” of “centres”) that are part of an international network of partner institutions. RIBG funding could be used to support this type of activity in the research domain, as these networks should meet the definition of “international consortia”. This also has the advantage of being a less hierarchical model, and fostering opportunities for student exchange and language immersion experience, in areas where this is deemed important. Student and staff exchange programs with partners would facilitate educational and staff development opportunities in developing country institutions that are less well-resourced than Sydney University, particularly for areas like Southeast Asia, Africa and the Pacific.”

The role of Languages in Area Studies

There were strongly divergent views about how important the study of a language, or expertise in a language of a country or area, was for Area Studies. One participant argued that Area Studies would fail if the study of languages was made mandatory, suggesting that knowledge of a language was no more important to the understanding of a region or culture at the undergraduate level than understanding geophysics, for example. Most others argued that you cannot possibly do Area Studies properly without a knowledge of the language or languages and culture or multiple cultures of the area in question. For example, how can a researcher who has never been to a continent and knows nothing of the language, peoples and cultures of the place, and who has based their whole research on data about the area obtained through a third party; claim to be an Area expert? Effective crosscultural communication with those living and working in various ‘areas’ of the world was seen by most as a central component of area studies, whatever one is communicating about (geophysics, health, bridge building etc).
Moreover, it was pointed out that the ability to research in other languages is important given that whole bodies of knowledge and investigation exist in other languages, which may not be available to scholars without the capacity to access them. Time limitations precluded exploration of how widespread the division of opinion actually is regarding the place of language studies in Area Studies.

Following the meeting, the participant who had argued against mandatory language study wrote that: “I am emphatic that some graduate researchers need language expertise. That does not mean the only way to achieve this is to enforce language training for all UGs. That straitjackets Area Studies was my phrase. We need to devise ways to rapidly develop language competency for those who need it when they need it. An Area Studies program does not and should not require language competency in UG courses.”

Value to students

Some concerns were raised about what an ‘Area Studies’ PhD would mean for a student in terms of their employability upon graduation. On participant suggested that they might be disadvantaged if not seen to have a strong disciplinary grounding. Another argued that a knowledge of a language and culture, combined with disciplinary expertise served to amplify a student’s prospects. It was noted also, that in the Review Panel’s consultation session with the Faculty of Economics and Business, participants had reported that their contacts with potential government and non-government employers of graduates suggested that at the undergraduate and postgraduate coursework level, employers were looking for students with disciplinary expertise, but who also had a solid understanding of the cultures they would be dealing with in their professional lives.

Broader challenges facing Australian PhD

Numerous participants lamented the state of the Australian PhD and in particular the low levels of funding available to support PhDs, the rigidity of the Commonwealth’s funding rules and their focus on quick completions rather than high quality outcomes. This was seen as putting Australian PhD students at a competitive disadvantage internationally and also leading to many of our best honours students preferring to do PhDs in North America, the United Kingdom or Europe.

Concluding comments

At the end of the meeting consensus seemed to emerge on a number of issues with most participants appearing to agree that:

- ambitions for area studies should inform all decisions made about the structure and activities of area studies centres. For example, if one aim is to improve the quality of postgraduate education then this should be a driver for the activities and structure of the centre.
- different objectives require different approaches but generally a large infrastructure or highly centralised model was less favoured, with a more minimalist or joint appointments model being preferred, at least as a starting point;
- significant obstacles to collaboration between departments and faculties currently exist at the University and that an Area Studies approach is unlikely to succeed unless these are addressed;
• there is a need for far better information about existing Area and other strengths and for this to be readily accessible to people inside and outside the University;
• the traditional definition/conception of Area Studies and models used by other universities may not be the best way for Sydney to proceed;
• the models in the Discussion Starter were too ‘institution centric’ and that the approach Sydney takes should include external partnerships as a key element.