Review of Area Studies work slate project

Record of Phase 2 Consultation Meeting 1

Thursday 6th August 2009, 11:30 – 1pm; Economics and Business Consultation meeting

Venue: Economics Dean’s Boardroom, Room 210 Building H69

Attendees from Review Panel: Professor Stephen Garton, Professor Geoff Garrett, Professor Jeff Riegel, Professor Robyn McConchie

Apologies from Review Panel: Professors Robinson, Hearn, Wolnizer and Goodman

Attendees from Faculty: Professor David Hensher (Institute of Transport and Logistics Studies); Dr Michael Paton (Learning and Teaching), Professor Alex Frino (Finance), Professor David Grant, Associate Dean (Research); Ms Rebecca Connell (Faculty Research Manager); Dr Leanne Piggott (Centre for International Security Studies); Dr Dilip Dutta (Economics); Professor Gail Pearson (Business Law); Dr Hui Zheng (Finance); Dr Richard Seymour (IBUS)

Also in Attendance: Mr Tim Payne (Director Policy Analysis and Communication), Ms Aislinn Batstone

Key points raised in the meeting:

Demand from students and employers for ‘area’ expertise

Faculty representatives reported on discussions with government and industry employers which suggested strong interest for graduates with a sound understanding of the areas/countries with which they engage. The Faculty has undertaken some marketing research which similarly suggests strong potential demand from students for approaches that combine disciplinary training with an international dimension. One participant reported that when the economics department had had strong links and programs with the languages department, there had been strong demand from students to combine the study of economics with the study of a regional language and/or culture.

There was a general consensus that both students and employers were seeking courses that would give students skills and knowledge that went beyond the discipline to include a deep understanding of a country, region or global issues beyond their discipline. On the student side, the Faculty has had success in encouraging study groups around areas e.g. in South Asia studies. On the employer side, in general, employers want graduates who understand what is going on in the world and more specifically in the countries or regions with which they will have contact in their working lives.

The point was also made that it is important for area studies to capture and enhance the skills of students from disciplines such as science who may have a side interest in an area or who may end up doing research in or alongside an area.

Teaching

At what level would it be best for students to introduce area studies into the curriculum? It was agreed that postgraduate students could get much out of an understanding of other disciplines. It was mooted that the question of area studies at the undergraduate level would depend on the particular discipline
and perhaps on the individual student’s interest and commitment. The point was raised that it may be a problem to leave it too late to introduce an area studies focus, particularly in terms of language acquisition. There was a consensus that cross-disciplinary teaching is difficult at Sydney due to the current operating structures and the mindset of the individual faculties which are in turn influenced by internal funding drivers which are seen by some as encouraging competition rather than collaboration.

‘Area’ versus ‘thematic’ studies

There was some discussion about whether the concept of area studies, with its geographical focus was out-dated and that a key to Sydney defining where its competitive advantage lies, could be in extending the definition of area to encompass non-geographical groupings like “Emerging Economies” or “Global Cities”, or to take a more thematic approach such as “Future of Alternative Fuels”. Both were recognising as valid ways of doing interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary studies.

Models

General

Participants stressed the need to ensure whatever approach the University takes, it does not stifle innovation and entrepreneurship by being too prescriptive about what model or models would be acceptable. The point was made that there should be capacity within the framework to support different models and to allow different groups to organise themselves in the way that works best for their area. Striking the right balance between a “bottom up” and “top down” approach was seen as a key challenge for the Review Panel.

The importance to success of people, rather than models, was also stressed. That is, it matters little what model is used unless you have the right people with the requisite drive and entrepreneurial skills that will be required to achieve success. Great people can make a success of a poor model so long as there is clarity about the desired direction and enough flexibility in the framework to allow for development and innovation. On the other hand, a great model is likely to fail if not underpinned by the right leaders.

It was suggested that one possibly sound approach could be for the University to establish an overarching framework or ‘umbrella’ body to oversee area studies activities across the University. The purpose of this framework would be to encourage academics to pursue innovative approaches to the pursuit of area studies, rather than to make all approaches fit pre-determined models. Such a body would set the institutional strategy for the encouragement of area studies approaches and then provide incentives for groups of academics to bring forward innovative proposals. It might also have a role in determining what areas the University should be focusing on and for determining the types of area studies activities that could be pursued by different centres at different stages of their development.

Staff appointments

There was some discussion of the merits of single versus joint appointments. While single appointments can work well where there are sufficient resources to support them and area of research or teaching is relatively well defined, in terms of breaking down faculty barriers joint
appointments are seen to assist. However, joint appointments were acknowledged as far more administratively complex. They will only work if both sides are clear about the terms of the appointment and if the individual appointees do not feel compromised or overloaded by the splitting of their lines of reporting and accountability.

**Infrastructure**

While large infrastructure investments are unlikely at the moment for the University, a minimal degree of infrastructure, both physical and virtual, will be absolutely necessary for the success of any area studies centres.

**External engagement and research activity**

While it is extremely important for a centre to be visible and to act as a point of contact for external enquiries, it is also crucial that the reality of the centre’s activities match up to the presentation and that substantive collaboration is taking place.

**Risk**

Two elements of risk were raised: financial risk and the risk of failing to meet agreed strategic objectives. While a large-scale investment in infrastructure and long-term support may pose a greater financial risk, to some it seemed to pose a lower risk of failure against objectives than taking a minimalist, low investment approach.

However, a small-scale approach was seen by some as having the advantage of achieving immediate buy-in from academics, which may lower the risk of failure. A step-by-step approach with incentives and success driving the growth of a centre through different models was seen as a positive approach with low risk.

**General concerns raised**

- The potential need for the area studies concept to be reinvigorated to reflect contemporary global realities
- Sydney’s internal funding allocation of funding promotes competition rather than cooperation between faculties.
- The danger of stifling creativity by imposing a structure where it might be better to allow innovation to emerge with support but without a great degree of interference.
- Concern that a centre may replicate what already exists (particularly if imposed in a top-down manner).
- Concern that an areas approach may add to the proliferation of small research centres with overlapping activities and a lack of critical mass.
- Concern that a faculty ownership model may, in certain circumstances, present an obstacle to inter-disciplinarity.
• The challenge of achieving true collaboration between very different disciplines – e.g. the science and technology disciplines with the social sciences.

**Keys to success and aspirations for Sydney**

• Clarity about the University’s vision or objectives for area studies.

• A strategy arrived at following a rational assessment of where the University’s global comparative or competitive advantages lie, or where it wants them to lie.

• A recognition that in the end, demand drives supply and that any strategies must reflect and be responsive to levels of likely demand for the services that will be provided.

• That in deciding its strategy Sydney needs to look forward to where it wants to be in 5 or 10 years time, not to catch up to where other universities were 5 years ago.

• The quality of the people selected to own/drive whatever area studies centres or approaches might be pursued.

• Strong support for encouraging rather than stifling innovation and entrepreneurialism through the adoption of a flexible framework, under which a variety of approaches to area studies might flourish.

• Incentives must be created so that good ideas come out of the woodwork and people start talking to each other – not just financial incentives but positive examples that demonstrate to academic staff the the rewards of cross-disciplinary research and the fact that disciplinarity can be maintained effectively.

• The need to focus on and encourage networks beyond the boundaries of the University

• Researchers with ‘side-interests’ in areas should be captured, for example in the areas of science and technology – technical solutions may not work if culture/geographical background is not understood. Government is beginning to understand this and funding will reflect it.

• We should aspire at the University to break down faculty barriers where appropriate

• That there are national interest imperatives in deciding which areas we focus on.

• That area studies are compatible with global studies because global issues are refracted through and can be better understood through the study of specific areas.

• The importance of faculty buy-in.