Review of Area Studies work slate project

Record of Phase 2 Consultation Meeting 4

Wednesday 26th August, 9-10:30am; Health Faculties Consultation group
Venue: Western Tower Meeting Room
Attendees from Review Panel: Professor Stephen Garton, Professor Bruce Robinson, Professor Jeff Riegel, Professor David Goodman, A/Professor Robyn McConchie
Apologies from Review Panel: Professors Wolnizer, Garrett and Hearn
Attendees from Faculties: A/Prof Donna Waters (N&M), Professor Mary Chiarella (N&M), A/Prof Michael Dibley (Med), Professor Iqbal Ramzan (Pharm), Dr Dilhani Bandaranayake (Med), Dr Lyndal Trevena (Med), Ms Louise Freckleton (Global Health), Professor Stephen Leeder (Menzies Centre)
Apologies from Faculties: Professor Ruth Coligiuri (Menzies Centre); Dr Alex Broom (FHS), Mr Tom Rubin (Medicine)
Also in Attendance: Mr Tim Payne (Director Policy Analysis and Communication), Ms Aislinn Batstone

Key points raised in the meeting:

Consultation and stakeholder involvement from the beginning of the process

The point was made that lessons could be learned about what not to do, from large scale multidisciplinary projects where the University had become involved late in the piece and University stakeholders had not been involved in consultation about the development of key elements such as building design. Transparency and consultation are needed to ensure that there is broad-ranging benefit within the University.

Aims of the Area Studies project

It was noted that collaborations tend to be spontaneous and it will be crucial to provide structures and to remove impediments to spontaneous collaborations across disciplines. However it was also stressed that there is no point facilitating collaboration unless it is for a purpose. Any strategy should therefore aim to foster collaboration with strategic intent, with the future of research in Australia involving more large scale interdisciplinary projects. To add value to students’ education at the University and to improve the visibility of expertise at the University were also raised as key outcomes to be hoped for from the project.

Clarity about the definition of ‘Area’

Early in the discussion the point was made that we need to be clear about what we mean when we talk of Area Studies. Do we mean geographical, thematic or disciplinary areas? Clarity here is important because different strategies may be needed in each case.

Leadership

Leadership was one of the key themes raised in the meeting. Leadership, enthusiasm and purpose were seen as key requirements for multidisciplinary projects to work. Competition between researchers and between disciplines cannot be ignored. Researchers and disciplines must be able to
see potential benefits or they will not engage in these projects. This should be seen as part of the responsibility of the leadership of the project, and as one of the reasons why leadership is required. Money will not be enough if leadership is absent.

**How the Health Faculties would intersect with other Faculties**

Two possibilities were raised here, which were not seen as necessarily mutually exclusive.

On a ‘resource’ model, a researcher from a Health Faculty might use an Area Studies centre as a resource for an international project, or for a course which contains an international element. Visibility of expertise would be important here, with a key factor being simply that individuals across the University should know that there is a pool of expertise in different Areas that they can tap into if need be. Accessibility may need to be virtual given time constraints on individuals, and there may be a question of intellectual property in any research outcome from the project.

On a ‘product’ model, individuals from the Health Faculties might work more closely with individuals from other Faculties on a particular thematic problem relating to an Area, to produce research relating to that problem which is strongly disciplinary yet informed by the culture and language of the region.

**Identification of expertise within the University**

Researchers in Medicine have been asked to group themselves according to disciplinary themes, so that they are now accessible and searchable. Meetings of experts with similar interests are now possible. In Area Studies a simple way of identifying experts would provide more opportunity for collaboration. Easy identification of Area expertise was seen as a simple way of removing an impediment to cross-disciplinary research and a way of avoiding duplication across faculties. It would also facilitate the promotion of events across the University and assist in the presentation of the University’s external profile. Broadly speaking, this measure would assist in improving **communication** between relevant individuals and groups across the University, which would have flow-on effects for research, teaching, funding applications and events.

**Teaching & Language**

The Institute for Sustainable solutions was raised as a good model on the educational side with a Masters degree that would expose students to different perspectives on the issues of interest. The point was made that if an Area Centre has a research focus then there will be clear benefits to research students. But how might coursework students benefit? Some possible activities of Area Centres relating to coursework students were raised: access to language courses; guest lecturing from Area Centres into disciplines (and vice versa); and access to support for curriculum development.

There was some debate about the level at which Area Studies should be brought into the curriculum. While it was put forward that research students would perhaps benefit more directly from involvement with Area Studies centres and that limited resources should perhaps be targeted to them, comments were made that: there may be ways to bring Area Studies into the undergraduate level; that it is important to engage motivated students early and to show them how disciplinary and
area studies can be integrated; and that the earlier language acquisition can begin, the better.

In terms of bringing language and cultural studies into the curriculum in other disciplines, the point was made that it is unlikely that a single model would suit all faculties and they will have to be consulted to ensure that courses and opportunities are customised to students’ needs.

There was further discussion on the accessibility of language courses across other disciplines. Language courses were seen as something students would want to have access to. Students on overseas placements would get much more out of such placements if they had language skills. The example of a Harvard medical school program was raised, where students with basic Spanish were given advanced training before an elective term in South America.

However, a further key point about area studies and language acquisition at the undergraduate level, particularly in the professional degrees, was the fact that timetables do not currently easily allow for a student to follow any interest in a particular area or to learn its language.

In terms of skills at graduation and the desirability of graduates with Area expertise, while there may be professional advantages to having such an expertise, an individual would still have to meet the requirements of the accreditation body in any country where they wished to work.

Models

A large infrastructure model was not favoured but nor was an absolutely minimalistic virtual model. Leadership was seen as crucial and also ongoing funding and administrative support. It was agreed that highly worthwhile projects may not be able to be presented to the University management as profitable or even self-supporting, in which case ongoing funding for a centre would be required. In cases such as these, a high degree of commitment to the project from faculties and from individuals would be necessary. It was also pointed out that it would be disappointing if the business requirements of the University were such as to create a high degree of tension with the intellectual work of the group.

Areas to focus on

The Pacific was raised in this meeting as an area where we might have a responsibility to build up our levels of expertise, both because of its proximity to Australia and because of the relative lack of power and resources small countries in the Pacific have in comparison to other nations which might be of interest. It was also agreed that a key outcome of any area studies initiative should be to build on existing strengths, which would be made clearer by the mapping work being undertaken.