

Review of Area Studies work slate project

Record of Phase 2 Consultation Meeting 3

Monday 24th August 2009, 2-3:30pm; Postgraduate Consultation group

Venue: Madsen Conference Room (449)

Attendees from Review Panel: Professor Stephen Garton, Professor David Goodman

Apologies from Review Panel: Professors Wolnizer, Robinson, Garrett, Riegel, McConchie and Hearn

Attendees: Academic staff: Professor Philip Hirsch (Sci), Dr Bob Fisher (Sci), Dr Jeffrey Nielson (Sci);
Postgraduate students: Olivia Dun, Wora Suleraroele, Mattijs Smits, Xuemei Lu, Eli Oshorov, Sopheak Chann, Surin Onpram, Ken Serey Rotha, Somatra Sean Kim, Soimart Runymanee, Nguyen Tuong Huy, Oulavanh Keosilignavony, Jo Gillespie, Robin Branson, Daravy Khiev

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

Key points raised in the meeting:

Value to Research Students

One student made the point that it had been extremely useful for him to attend an 'area' seminar outside his discipline, and that the informal communication with other students was a positive feature of this experience. However, the point was also made that such activities could not only be a forum for connecting students across disciplines but, more formally, could provide a framework for students to tap into existing disciplines to better understand their area of interest.

There was strong support in this group for multidisciplinary approaches to a region, with students seeing existing structures such as the Australian Mekong Resource Centre as providing different perspectives to students, widening their disciplinary horizons, allowing them to deepen their understanding of the region and do their own research in a more thorough way. Key elements that students would like to get out of any activities in Area Studies would be to better understand the context of their own research, to share perspectives and to understand the culture of their region of interest.

The point was also made that students from an area can benefit just as much as local students from Area Studies, because, while they may understand the culture of their own country, an area tends to encompass a number of neighbouring countries about which students may have much to learn.

Time pressures

The problem of time pressures on PhD students was raised as a potential obstacle to their involvement in the activities of an Area Studies centre alongside their own disciplinary work. There was some concern that cross-disciplinary seminars may involve the students themselves 'teaching' students from other disciplines about their own research, which may add to the pressures of papers and seminars students are already expected to give within their discipline.

The issue of time pressures on both students and academic staff also prompted the point that at least enough funding for a co-ordinating centre would be needed to avoid adding to existing workloads, and to maintain the momentum of Area Studies activities. These have been known to fail when

students and staff are too busy to continue to commit their time to the activities and are not able to see a continuing benefit.

In terms of adding a coursework requirement or opportunity to the PhD program, for example in order to enhance language skills or cultural understanding, students were in favour of the concept as a learning opportunity, but again concerned about adding to their workload, and also concerned that currently a coursework requirement within the degree is not seen under scholarship rules as a legitimate reason for an extension of the scholarship.

Difficulty identifying expertise at Sydney

The point was raised that difficulties can be experienced finding out who had expertise or interest in a particular area of research at the University. The University was referred to as a 'soup' of knowledge and some saw a role for management in helping both students and staff to navigate their way through it efficiently.

The University of Melbourne's 'find an expert' database was cited as a good example of a resource which enabled people both within and outside the university to easily locate people with particular disciplinary or country expertise.

An Area Studies centre might therefore serve as a centre of knowledge of what is going on in the University relevant to different areas.

International connections

One student raised the issue of how important an individual supervisor's reputation could be in making connections with institutions overseas. It was stressed that building trust and partnerships with international institutions should be an important part of the activities of an Area Studies centre. From a research student's perspective it is crucial to have access to these good relationships in order to properly conduct research overseas. However, the point was also made that affiliation with an Area Studies centre should in fact immediately enhance the possibilities for a research student, with access to a number of researchers each of whom would have their own connections with overseas institutions.

Another student raised the question of whether an Area Studies centre would see itself as in competition with, or co-operation with institutions from the area itself. While the University is in some sense in competition with other universities around the world to attract students, part of the activity of an Area Studies centre could be to send more students on placements overseas and to build more meaningful collaborations with institutions in the area.

While it was recognised that relationships between academics at Sydney and in the regions or countries in question would always be vital, there was a need for any Area Studies strategy to ensure that there were stronger formal university to university linkages.

Possible activities for students

Throughout the meeting, a number of possible activities for an Area Studies centre were raised,

which would be of benefit to postgraduate students:

- A source of information about relevant area expertise
- Assisting in student placements or in otherwise facilitating research in the area
- Making language studies more accessible
- Student seminar groups bringing together those with an interest in an area
- Guest lecturers who might explain the background of their discipline to a diverse range of students interested in the area
- Guest lecturers from the area
- Problem based learning group activities were seen as one way that students could gain a deep understanding of other disciplines

Cross-supervision

There was a great deal of support for the University to remove funding barriers to genuine co-supervision of HDR students across disciplines and for the Academic Board to recognise co-supervision. It was agreed that for Area Studies to really work, the problem of benefit-sharing across faculties needs to be dealt with. Funding incentives should be put in place to encourage cross-disciplinary/area supervision. It should not be left to individual academics to decide if funding is shared.

Models

The group was not in favour of a high degree of centralisation. The emphasis was more on the idea of networking and sharing of knowledge. It was also agreed, however, that some of the more useful activities of an Area Studies centre would need proper funding and leadership, a 'nucleus' with an excellent understanding of available resources at the University and the motivation and enthusiasm to keep the centre and its activities running.

Leadership

The importance of institutional leadership was raised as a key to the success of any strategy. This would require ensuring that funding is adequate for the task and that the strategy has a champion at the appropriate level of the University.

Value for graduates

One student raised the idea that the first graduates from an Area Studies centre would have to explain what they had studied, and to prove that there was added value in their 'Area studies' PhD. Ultimately this student felt that she would be able to describe herself as both a disciplinary and an area expert, which would enhance her prospects. However, this led to a discussion of whether value

actually would be added to the PhD by Area Studies. Given that most people really want to be specialists in a discipline, couldn't they independently educate themselves about a region, and draw on other disciplines themselves without the structure and expense of an Area Studies centre?

In response to this the point was made that it would be hoped that the value added by an Area Studies centre would be to the actual education and research training of students, and to their skills on graduation, and that it would be disappointing if funding issues and the feeling that a person could only enrol in one discipline, were to overwhelm issues of education at the University.

A further point was made in relation to the value of Area Studies programs for graduates: this was that, over the course of their studies, students would have the opportunity to network with others with similar interests and that these relationships would continue after graduation. Some students may even find themselves working in the area, far from the University of Sydney but with local ties to each other and back to the University.

Local vs International target market

One student raised the question of whether a centre would have as a target students from Australia or students from the area, making the point that curriculum design might vary depending on the origin of the target market. In response to this, the Panel commented that any initiative would most likely be targeted at both sets of students, and that the program would be enriched for all students if enrolments came from both local students and students from the area.

Which areas to focus on

The point was raised that we should focus on areas which are relevant to Australia – either of national interest, relevant to industry or relevant to our changing relations to other countries. However, it was also pointed out that part of what the University might want to do is to also focus on some areas that may be more innovative and may distinguish the University from its competitors.