

UCML Executive Committee

Friday 26 April 2019

12.30 – 16.00

Room C60b/c, InfoLab21
School of Computing & Communications
Lancaster University, LA1 4WA



Item 10a – Area studies report

My last report noted that the key issue facing Area Studies at this time is REF-related, and specifically the statement from UK Council for Area Studies Associations (UKCASA) aiming to encourage HEIs to submit any area or region-focused research to the Area Studies panel (UoA25).

The most recent UKCASA meeting also concentrated solely on this issue. For ease of reference I'm once again appending the original statement (circulated at the last UCML Exec) to this brief report.

Given the specific requirements of recent funding initiatives like GCRF, and of course that Area Studies work is particularly interdisciplinary in nature, there is continued concern about the discrepancy between this clear trend and the 'rigid' disciplinary nature of most REF panels. The Interdisciplinary Champions role is welcomed but again, particularly in an international research environment, colleagues are concerned about how effective they can be. The AS panel has already agreed that extra expertise will be required to deal with the increased workload they will inevitably face.

There is continued concern among members that AS work which involves overseas fieldwork/impact may not be adequately recognized in Impact Case studies, but given that the AS panel is headed by UKCASA members, *this* panel is very aware of these issues, and urges institutions not to be too cautious or negative in ICS submissions to UoA25. The AS panel is also very aware that certain languages (and fieldwork) are particularly time-consuming and complex, with consequences for the number of outputs that can be produced. It was stressed again that, despite what institutions sometimes assume, quality of research is all that is taken into account in the REF assessment, not the publication outlet, language of publication, or impact factors/hierarchies of journals etc.

Frances Weightman, 9/4/19

Appended

Statement from the UK Council of Area Studies Associations (UKCASA)

Why should universities consider submitting to Area Studies in REF2021?

In a post-Brexit 'Global Britain', a deep knowledge and understanding of other countries, regions and peoples of the world will attain heightened levels of strategic importance for all sectors of the UK economy and all parts of society. The work of Area Studies departments across the breadth of the UK's Higher Education sector will form a key component of our collective response to the challenges that UK society will face. The UK Council of Area Studies Associations [UKCASA] wishes to encourage universities to submit their area- and region-focused research to UoA25 Area Studies in REF2021.

This Unit of Assessment offers a number of key features which are attentive to the disciplinary, conceptual and methodological challenges of this important work.

1. Interdisciplinarity.

Interdisciplinarity has taken on increased importance for REF2021. With its focus on understanding a country or region, Area Studies draws on relevant disciplines and methodologies from both the humanities and social sciences for understanding the country, region or issue under study. As such, it is by its very nature both multi- and inter- disciplinary and encouraging of trans- disciplinary initiatives that explore creative ways of working across disciplinary boundaries. The world is made up of a mosaic of peoples and communities, each characterised by a complex relationship to local milieu and diverse – and changing – links to regional and global processes. Area Studies, with its wide embrace of disciplinary specialisms in addition to multi- and inter-disciplinary approaches, is well placed to explore such diversity. Area Studies actively encourages of multi- and inter- disciplinary approaches, as well as innovative, 'risk-taking' trans-disciplinary work.

2. Innovation.

Area Studies promotes innovative approaches to contemporary/historical foci - working across disciplinary and sectoral boundaries - and embraces innovative output. It is not just tolerant of, but actively encourages, and seeks to reward, innovation and excellence in both traditional and non-traditional formats.

3. Diversity

In REF the Area Studies UoA facilitates and encourages submissions from multi- and inter-disciplinary departments, as well as from research clusters that draw in staff from several different departments. The UoA takes a broad view of what constitutes area studies, which includes, but is not limited to: political, social, anthropological and historical studies; language studies (including translation and discourse analysis); literature, culture and thought; film and media studies; visual cultures; postcolonial studies; indigeneity; and thematic work (e.g. gender, migration studies).

4. Impact

Area Studies colleagues typically possess extensive networks in the countries/regions in which they work and collaborate with local people, institutions and organisations. Engagement with non-academic communities can take many forms and may incorporate local-level activism through to national-level policy advocacy. The increased significance of the Impact Case Study (the importance of which has increased to 25% of the Grade Point Average in REF2021) means that there are considerable benefits to be derived from allowing Area Studies units to develop and submit such activity in a coherent manner. The impact agenda in Area Studies often has an international focus, which presents challenges that the Area Studies sub-panel appreciates and to which it is sensitive.

5. External funding

Within the humanities and social sciences, Area Studies has a strong track-record of attracting external research funding. The opportunities for such funding have increased in recent years with the creation of the DfID/ESRC Global Challenges Research Fund.

In conclusion, the health and vitality of Area Studies will be essential to the UK's success in confronting rapidly evolving global challenges. UKCASA thus encourages universities to submit area studies research to the Area Studies sub-panel. We are confident that the sub-panel will recognise excellence wherever it is found and in whatever form - be it outputs, impact and environment - whilst acknowledging that excellent research is not determined by the type of publication, or the language, in which it appears.