

Item 10.a Area studies

UKCASA, the umbrella association for Area Studies work in the UK, continues to operate with an interim President, Alan Hallsworth. Much of the detail below is based on discussions with the Honorary Secretary of UKCASA, Jon Oldfield.

A key concern for Area Studies in general is what will happen post-REF. There are a number of reasons for this concern. Despite lobbying efforts, fewer numbers of units were returned for the Area Studies UoA this REF. With the end of LBAS and UKRI funding cuts (more on this below), along with institutional decisions such as the University of London's closure last year of both the Institute of Latin American Studies and the Institute of Commonwealth Studies (as noted in the last report), and the multiple difficulties posed by BREXIT and COVID -- particularly for PGRs, the challenges are real.

GCRF/Newton Funding (for Official Development Assistance [ODA]) cuts Letters went out to GCRF Area Studies PIs a couple of weeks ago announcing huge cuts in funding, with often only 25% of the original grant being honoured. There is no current funding beyond 2022. There was no consultation with PIs about this, most of whom are involved in 3 year projects, and there has been significant damage done to relationships with partner organisations, not to mention a major detrimental affect on morale of researchers in this field. The Newton Funding letters are not out yet but it is anticipated that similar cuts will be made. Moreover there is considerable uncertainty surrounding the likelihood of no-cost extensions to all grant funding where the pandemic has impacted fieldwork. On a general level, this sets a very problematic precedent, if grants can be awarded, signed off, and plans made accordingly (particularly with third parties) and then the funding can be withdrawn due to changing political priorities – this is clearly something which will concern all researchers.

Effect on PGRs of the current situation has been of particular concern. For 2 cohorts now it has been impossible for Area Studies PGRs to do any meaningful language-based work/gain in-country experience – essential for their dissertations. There is potential (and certainly there appears to be funding) within the Turing scheme (as once the UG collaborations are set up it is often easier to add on PGR opportunities) but the tortuous application process for Turing, mid-pandemic, (and the fact it has to be repeated annually??) has raised the question of whether the money is being used to best effect.

One possible approach would be to divide the language instruction and in-country experience (while travel restrictions are in place). Given the excellent practice demonstrated in Modern Languages by the cross-university collaborations in Year Abroad, the question was raised as to whether a similar cross-institutional approach for remote/UK-based language instruction at PGR level could be provided.

On a more optimistic note, the strong endorsements made recently by the Government about the importance of UK research are welcome. There is currently (understandably perhaps) a gap between the rhetoric and the practice, and we hope this will be addressed. As in the suggestion above about institutions working together to fill the gaps for language instruction for PGRs, the key to success in addressing these multiple challenges will be collaboration, not competition.