

UCML Executive Committee

Friday 12 November 2021 10am-12pm

Via MS Teams



Item 10a: Area Studies

I've not got much to report this time, mainly because the interim President of UKCASA, the umbrella association for Area Studies work in the UK, stepped aside earlier this year, and so the last six months has been very quiet. There haven't been any further meetings, in part because some of the key individuals have been completely ensconced in the REF panel duties (the chair of panel UoA 25 being Susan Hodgett, and the deputy chair being former UKCASA president Tony Chafer). While there are definite plans to elect a new president in the coming few months, clearly recently momentum has been undermined because of this. Tony in particular has been moving things forward nevertheless and post-REF it is expected that UKCASA will return to business as usual.

Regarding the issues raised in my last report, concerning the future of Area Studies post-REF (fewer units returned for UoA25), funding cuts both nationally and within individual institutions, and also the urgent issue from last time regarding the lack of opportunity for PGR fieldwork (and language acquisition), concerns have been fed in to various channels.

Jon Oldfield (Hon Sec of UKCASA) has had discussions in particular with Helen Abbott, Prof of Modern Languages at Birmingham, and reported favourably about a subsequent coordinated initiative amongst HEIs in regard to cross-university collaborations, in which we understand other individuals in UCML were involved so will not repeat here.

If I may also use this space once again to emerge from AS rep *per se*, and to report on my role as Chair of the Expert Panel for the Mandarin Excellence Programme -- in relation to our previous discussions, and the letters provided both by myself from the MEP and from UCML, relating to the demise of the Pre-U qualification. I had a meeting at the DfE this week, specifically relating to Chinese school qualifications, but we discussed these within the broader MFL context, and there is continuing concern about the apparent lack of consistency in content and/or grading of MFL exams compared to non-language subjects, and what the knock-on effect of this will be. This is particularly true of Chinese, and I am due to write another letter this week on the back of this, to Cambridge Assessment, to see if we can still retain the pre-U Chinese, at least until the A-level is fit for purpose.

Finally, and relating perhaps to the above paragraph, a further recurrent issue in Area Studies reports is the overlap with other language areas, and how to define this -- this is also still unresolved, particularly given the lower activity levels around UKCASA. I suggest for now that we continue to monitor this, once UKCASA is back to full strength. It may in fact be that, with the increasing need for collaboration in provision of ab initio language training for Area Studies PGRs (if in-country fieldwork continues to be problematic) that this may be a specific area for the AS Rep to focus on in future reports.

Frances Weightman, 9/11/21