

## UCML Executive Committee

Friday 2 November 2018      12.30 – 16.00  
Monnet Room, Europe House  
32 Smith Square, London SW1P 3EU



## Area Studies

- 1) 27-29 September 2018 saw a successful conference **Area Studies in Flux – Institute of Advanced Studies** held at University College. This conference was convened by the IAS and SSEES in collaboration with PKU, Beijing, and was designed to go beyond Euro/US-centrism to explore 'area' from diverse vantage points and emplaced disciplinary traditions. The programme was admirably varied, with 23 individual papers, a workshop, and a keynote from Prof Françoise Lionnet. The papers were arranged around 4 key themes, defined by the organisers below:-

**Area and Disciplinary Thinking** How does the idea of area trouble assumptions about the production of knowledge and its disciplinary boundaries? How are place and field intertwined? How have Area Studies been configured from different locations? How does their emplacement in multiple and diverse locations challenge or reproduce power structures, inequalities and hierarchies?

**Movements and Flows** How might a focus on mobility, flows and connections reshape our understanding of the dynamics of area? How useful is it to think about Area Studies and/in flux? What are the implications of a reconceptualisation of Area Studies as turbulent, transgressive and changeable?

**Imaginary of Place and Space** How have imaginative worlds in fiction and fantasy (novels, films, visual arts, music) been productive for conceptualising place and space within the fields of area studies? How might they be in the future?

**Thinking Area Differently** How do alternative space-makers (for example language, migration, religion, technology, infrastructures and networks) constitute/contest historical definitions of area and create new ones? What is at stake in such shifts?

*(NB: I am including this detail here as I think it gives an interesting overview of the current major challenges facing Area Studies as a discipline)*

- 2) Conference aside, the main issues for Area Studies have been related to preparations for **REF2021**, and specifically the issue concerning which panel submissions should be made to. UKCASA has been taking the lead on the debates in this area.

Announcements have been welcomed that the chair of the REF panel (criteria phase) in Area Studies (panel 25) is Susan Hodgett and the deputy chair is Tony Chafer (who also is president of UKCASA).

Following on from the April report where it was noted that UKCASA was preparing a statement encouraging submission to the Area Studies panel in REF2021, I have included the final version

of this statement as an appendage overleaf. It was circulated on various mailing lists over the summer.

Several of the points in this were reiterated in the UKCASA response to the consultation on REF (I can forward more details of this if it is of interest). The main points of concern were the question of overlap between panels (and whether or not an interdisciplinary champion is an adequate assessor where there is significant overlap) and the challenges of producing impact case studies for international work, and querying to what extent non-UK/EU impact will be evaluated. Other interesting queries raised: whether a new translation of a monograph submitted to a previous REF could be entered; a note that research activity involving difficult languages/extended fieldwork is also more 'costly' than UK/monolingual work, and should be noted as such).

Frances Weightman, 23/10/18

## **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.