

The value of area studies

On 10 November 2010, the British Academy's International Engagement Day considered 'The Role of Area Studies in Higher Education'.

Liz Lightfoot gives a flavour of the discussion.

AS NEWS BROKE of the demonstrations in Tahrir Square, a cry went up in newsrooms across the UK: 'Find someone who knows about Egypt!' The hunt was on for experts to explain what was happening – just as in June 2009 when Iranian protesters took to the streets to denounce the election results.

Many of those who offer comment and analysis of world events in the media are area studies specialists dedicated to the academic study of individual countries or regions of the world, usually, but not always, alongside the study of indigenous languages. Behind the scenes, area studies lecturers are likely to be found advising government ministers and civil servants, often through Chatham House, the independent think tank.

Professor Rosemary Hollis, a visiting professor in the Department of International Politics at City University, found herself inundated with requests as the events in Egypt spiralled up the news agenda. Another Middle East expert widely used by the media to put the protests in context was Professor Fawaz Gerges, the Director of the Middle East Centre at the London School of Economics.

But important though area studies specialists are to the media, and to companies trading internationally, relief organisations, governments and civil servants, the subject is suffering a crisis of confidence. The closure of several small specialist departments, and the sharp decline in the number of students leaving school with the knowledge of at least one modern foreign language, have fuelled the unease.

Higher education is moving into a new market era in which students will pay far more of the costs of their courses through the new tuition fee system. The survival of area studies departments and area studies posts within other discipline departments will depend more than ever on the number of undergraduates and postgraduates that the courses can attract. There will inevitably be reorganisation and economies, as university managements endeavour to balance the books. Even the most successful departments will be vulnerable to cost cutting if they are small and less able to bring in the big research contracts.

Languages

The British Academy's Position Statement, *Language matters more and more*, urges decisive action to support the study of languages following the steep decline of take-up in schools since 2004 when they were made optional from the age of 14.

Keeping in mind the issues presented in the Position Statement, area studies specialists need to work even harder to demonstrate the importance and relevance of their work in the increasingly global economy and interconnected world, according to delegates at the British Academy's International Engagement Day on the role of area studies and Britain's need for international expertise and language skills.

Putting the best case

The purpose of area studies has been defined as 'enabling students to acquire a unique depth and breadth of insight into the social, cultural and political dynamic of a region'. Would the name 'regional studies' be more apt, asks Maxine Molyneux, the director of the Institute for the Study of the Americas? Or perhaps the specialist fields would be more attractive to students if labelled branches of 'global studies' it was suggested at the conference in London. The word 'global' might also chime with university managers seeking to market their institutions as international in order to attract overseas students.

The very breadth of the intellectual tool-kit that area studies undergraduates are required to assemble is at once the subject's strength and its weakness. On the one hand, area studies achieves the interdisciplinary approach to scholarship which gives rise to some of the most innovative research, technological and scientific advances and artistic invention. On the downside, area studies cannot be pigeonholed into one particular discipline or department, be it economics, social science, history or geography.

Faced with a higher education funding system geared to subject areas, and research funding awarded to discipline departments which can be compared with each other for ratings, it is hardly surprising that area studies so often has to fight for what it can get. But there is a lot to fight for, says Professor Michael Worton, the Vice-Provost of University College London. 'We need to be a little more streetwise and a little bit more opportunistic than we have been in the past. We need to look in the longer term at retaining more power in the decision-making process, and not see ourselves primarily as the recipients and victims of government funding decisions.'

Area studies: a demanding intellectual pursuit

Anyone who suggests that an undergraduate degree in Japanese Studies at the University of Cambridge, Arabic and Islamic Studies at the University of Oxford, Middle East and Mediterranean Studies at King's College, London or East European Languages or Culture at University College, London is less intellectually demanding than degrees in history, geography, maths or English fails to understand the demands made of area studies students.

Consider what a typical undergraduate at the University of Cambridge reading Japanese might be expected to study in four years, says Dr John Swenson-Wright, the Fuji Bank University Lecturer in Modern Japanese Studies at Cambridge.

'The student will do a compulsory regional, comparative Asian history course in the first year, together with a fast-paced intensive language programme; electives in the second year that include sociology, political science, economics, linguistics, international relations, film and literary studies, more history, "kanbun" or classical literary

Chinese, and of course all of this in a context where the language study continues apace. In the third year, the student has the opportunity and the challenge to apply this knowledge in the field, either by studying or working abroad, while all the while grappling with the sometimes daunting task of preparing their dissertation field work for the writing assignment in their fourth year,' he said.

The strength of area studies is that it provides a flexible education comparable to the liberal arts approach that has proved especially successful and attractive to university students in the United States. At a time when many argue that university studies have become unduly single subject focused, area studies courses provide the perspective and comparative analytical tools favoured by the generalist without sacrificing the rigour and transferrable skills of the specialist, Dr Swenson-Wright says. 'It might not be going too far to argue that area studies is loosely comparable to the approach of PPE – Politics, Philosophy and Economics, or Modern Greats.'

Who needs area studies?

As the world shrinks in the face of the integrating forces of globalisation, the need for students who can function comfortably in different foreign environments, with the confidence that a mastery of the local language and culture provides, is self evident, argues Dr Swenson-Wright, who has published widely on the relationship between the United States and North-east Asia, and is an Associate Fellow at the Asia Program of Chatham House.

These days area studies graduates might find themselves working overseas for an NGO, reporting from the field in Afghanistan, Korea, Iraq or Colombia, or as an entrepreneur seeking to break into new business markets where language skills and cultural familiarity are so often the key to commercial success.

Britain needs more area studies graduates and post-graduates, not fewer, as they become absorbed in single-subject departments. Leading universities in Japan, Korea and China are promoting multilingual training in the arts, social sciences and humanities across the Asian region for their best students.

Dr Swenson-Wright argues that the UK is also at risk of critically falling behind the rest of the world in training students likely to form the next generation of scholars. 'In my own department of East Asian studies, the majority of my colleagues are from overseas, and a similar pattern can be seen amongst our graduate students where we have seen rising figures for enrollment of students from Asia, but strikingly few from the UK.'

Developing area studies expertise takes time, especially since it requires intensive training in one or more language. 'If the UK wishes to prepare its graduates for work overseas, or for engagement with critically important regions of the world, then it surely needs a long-term strategy to foster training and expertise in this area.'

International relations and diplomacy

Figures in the field of international relations have argued for a wider approach that incorporates local knowledge and draws on cultural and linguistic awareness, alongside the focus on politics, history and economics.

In his address to the British Academy International Engagement Day, Dr Swenson-Wright said that many critics are inclined to point to the lack of trained Middle East specialists in explaining American's failure to manage successfully the transition from war to peace in post-conflict Iraq. 'The obvious need for linguistic expertise and cultural knowledge is nowhere more apparent than in the response to the post-9/11 challenge of radicalised Islamic fundamentalism. The



Sir Adam Roberts, President of the British Academy, welcomes participants to the British Academy's International Engagement Day, held at the Law Society on 10 November 2010. Photo: David Graeme-Baker.

US government's acceptance of this is reflected in the expansion of Arabic studies and the recruitment of substantial numbers of Arabic linguists and area studies specialists to work in the military, diplomatic and intelligence services.'

Local knowledge requires regular dialogue with experts from the region and an advantage of the area studies focus is that it provides a point of contact between scholars in the UK and their counterparts in the region, he said.

Centres of excellence: the Latin American case

The late J.H. Parry, a historian and expert in Latin American affairs, was successful in persuading the University Grants Committee in the mid-1960s to establish five centres of Latin American Studies in the UK. In the wake of the Cuban Revolution, Parry, then Vice-Chancellor of the University of Wales, chaired the committee that published a report in 1965 strongly critical of the neglect of Latin America in British higher education and the general ignorance of the continent. The centres – which became known as Parry centres – were encouraged to build up library resources and highly qualified personnel and postgraduate programmes.

Nowadays the more market-driven model of funding, one which reacts to world events and sudden interest in regions, leads to the neglect of historic centres of excellence and short-term funding for projects that do not always lead to sustainable programmes, according to Maxine Molyneux, professor of sociology and Director of the Institute for the Study of the Americas.

By the funding of one or two new area posts here and there or small centres at universities with no prior expertise, library resources or language proficiency in the region, the funding councils have at times created just what the Parry institutions sought to overcome – the isolated scholar, she argues.

UK higher education has become less Euro-centric since the 1960s and there has been a significant increase in the coverage of other countries in degree programmes. But while Latin America features more within different subject syllabuses, the spread has been accompanied by a thinning out of the principal knowledge centres, Professor Molyneux says.

Boom and bust

The topicality of area studies centres and their relevance to the modern world works in their favour when particular countries or regions suddenly rise up the news and policy agendas. In both the UK and the US, for example, there was a significant increase in resources for the study of Arabic and Middle Eastern affairs following the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Sadly, however, when interest begins to wane, so does the funding. Continuity of support is essential to avoid a 'boom and bust' scenario, stresses Professor Tim Wright from the school of East Asian Studies at the University of Sheffield. 'The problem with providing a national resource is that no one knows where the next area of concern and demand for expertise will come from. Will it be a need for Kurdish

specialists, or people with deep knowledge of Afghanistan, Egypt or Pakistan? We need to be sure that the UK research base contains all the necessary resources on which to draw. Student demand and short-termism are not good principles on which to build well resourced centres with disciplinary and linguistic skills and wide contacts with the region which take a time to acquire, he says.

Support for strategically important subjects: a success story

In 2004 the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) was asked by the government for advice on protecting vulnerable subjects. The council commissioned a report by Sir Gareth Roberts, the late research physicist, which was published in 2005. He advised against an over-interventionist role that would prevent institutions from stopping teaching in some areas. Such pressure would undermine the authority of universities and their ability to adapt to new circumstances.

Instead he suggested that HEFCE should take targeted action in a number of areas that included modern foreign languages and quantitative social sciences. Following his report a £350 million programme for 2005-11 was launched to promote student demand and secure the provision of courses in vulnerable subjects.

Around £25 million went to help fund language-based area studies centres, covering Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Russian and East European languages, spread across several universities. The initiative was welcomed by the British Academy, but it warned in 2006 that short-term fixes were not the solution and pointed to the need for a continued national policy that would secure the long-term future of the centres at the end of the five-year period of funding.

Sustaining international expertise

Many experienced academics working within an area or regional context are embedded within subject departments, adding a fresh, world dimension to other disciplines such as history, politics, economics, geography or music. Though some may find themselves working in isolation, many have links with specialists in other areas of the world within the department or with academics working in their own area in other subject departments.

The challenge, especially at universities without area studies centres, is to protect the posts when they become vacant and resist pressure from departments to choose the best economist or historian who may not be an area specialist, resulting in the gradual erosion of areas posts.

The University of Oxford has set up a model for interdisciplinary studies which has so far proved successful in defending areas posts, according to Professor Roger Goodman, the head of Oxford's social sciences division and the Nissan Professor of modern Japanese studies. In 2004 the university established a new School of Interdisciplinary Area Studies which is a full department within the social sciences division.

Costs are shared between the different areas, and income is pooled. 'There is cross subsidy to deal with short-term ups and downs, instead

of the boom and bust system which has contaminated area studies for many years,' Professor Goodman told the British Academy's International Engagement Day. In the first five years the school doubled its staff from 70 to 140 as more centres joined the model and research projects expanded.

It has given area studies specialists a strong sense of identity as area studies scholars with standing in their own departments, he said. 'We need area studies specialists to invest more in making and developing joint networks with overseas collaboration. The model to be avoided at all costs is the Harvard model where each area studies institution protects its own area and there is very little cross-disciplinary work.'

Funding: a dilemma for area studies

It is not enough to see area studies as an endangered orchid that needs the right weather conditions to survive, according to Helen Wallace, a Centennial Professor in the European Institute at the London School of Economics and Political Science. The system is becoming more market driven in terms of student preferences and area specialists need to be more robust in making the case, she said.

Professor Wallace said the panel on the future of area studies she chaired at the International Engagement Day came to the conclusion that there was a need for better organisation. 'Very powerful cases were made for people in different branches working more closely together. Many of us were struck by the Oxford model, but not all universities would be likely to support it. There was a strong feeling that we need greater collaboration between universities,' she said. Equally, universities cannot afford to run too many loss-making departments, however crucial they are to the wellbeing of the country. Area studies specialists need to be prepared to talk in the language of the market, and to address new niche fields of study, in order to attract postgraduate and overseas students.

Area specialists complained that the Research Assessment Exercise, which informed the allocation of funding for research, forced some interdisciplinary work into subject categories where the disciplinary demands are different, thus distorting the research picture.

The ability of HEFCE, or a successor body, to intervene in the market to protect strategically important and vulnerable subjects would depend on two things – whether it would continue to have influence and a role to play, and the amount of money that would be left to deal with market failure.

To the future

In the coming years when universities face both funding cuts and exposure to a new market in student demand, there may be pressure to break up area studies departments and disperse individual faculty

members to other disciplines. This would be disastrous and should be strongly resisted, warns Dr Swenson-Wright.

'We would lose the distinctive benefits in terms of both knowledge and practical expertise that area studies departments provide,' he said.

Disbanding area studies departments would remove an internationally competitive resource that gives the UK a comparative advantage in the global knowledge business.

The nurturing of the next generation of area studies specialists can start at school level with the provision of secondary school lessons in difficult but strategically important languages, such as Mandarin or Arabic, he suggested. Collaborative exchange schemes between students in the UK and other countries would provide language training abroad for our students and increased opportunities for foreign students and scholars from the region to travel to our universities.

Language-based area studies was not only important to industry and the economic wellbeing of the country, it was crucial to science and global health. 'If there is one thing that is going to change global health it is effective epidemiology and you can't have effective epidemiology unless you have language-based area studies. And yet we are absent in most cases from all the enormously important epidemiological studies.'

The language and area studies communities needed to move into much greater advocacy, said Dr Swenson-Wright. 'We don't have to be driven by the HEFCE or research agenda. There is much that we can do. We need to be thinking more about the nature of the kind of collaboration we are having with government and industry, both national and international.'



Liz Lightfoot is a freelance journalist. She prepared the British Academy's booklet, *Working with Africa: Human and Social Science Research in Action*, which was launched at the Academy on 3 March 2011.
