

Evaluation Report on the Centres for Excellence in Language-Based Area Studies

By Professor Pamela Moores OBE, Aston University

Executive Summary

This evaluation was commissioned by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) acting on behalf of the joint funders of the Language-Based Area Studies (LBAS) Initiative, namely the ESRC, the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). The evaluation was designed to provide accountability to the funders regarding their five year investment, from October 2006, in five multi-institutional, collaborative Centres. Their aim was to build national capacity by creating a new cadre of world class researchers equipped with the necessary language skills and subject expertise to enhance UK understanding of four strategically important areas: the Arabic speaking world; China; Japan; and Eastern Europe including areas of the former Soviet Union. The five Centres were established on the following basis, with total funding amounting to £15 million:

BICC: British Inter-university China Centre

Host institution - University of Oxford: Total funding £3,726,598.50

Other partner institutions: University of Bristol, University of Manchester

CASAW: Centre for the Advanced Study of the Arab World

Host institution - University of Edinburgh: Total funding £3,081,685.41

Other partner institutions: University of Durham, University of Manchester

CEELBAS: Centre for East European Language-Based Area Studies

Host institution - University College, London: Total funding £2,690,690.50

Other core institutions: University of Oxford, University of Birmingham

Network partners: University of Bath, University of Cambridge, University of Kent, University of Manchester, University of Sheffield, SOAS, University of Warwick

CRCEES: Centre for Russian, Central and East European Studies

Host institution - University of Glasgow: Total funding £2,775,331.49

Other partner institutions: University of St Andrews, University of Aberdeen, University of Edinburgh, University of Paisley (now University of the West of Scotland), University of Strathclyde, University of Newcastle, University of Nottingham

WREAC: White Rose East Asia Centre

Host institution - University of Leeds: Total funding: £2,772,837.88

Partner institution: University of Sheffield

The Centres adopted different organisational models, but the common focus was on postgraduate training and research, and postdoctoral career development. The rationale was that collaboration between institutions would facilitate sharing of expertise and resources to increase capacity. The goal was to build multidisciplinary strength and breadth in expertise on the designated regions through investment in studentships, postdoctoral fellowships and academic posts; training in languages and research methods, with an emphasis on the complexities of conducting research in specific cultural contexts; and establishment of strong links with users of research.

The evaluation involved review of extensive documentation including Centres' initial proposals, contracts, interim reports and reviews, and final award reports. This was complemented by fieldwork to gather evidence from a wide range of staff and student groups, Advisory Board members, external stakeholders and practitioners. Referees were appointed to assess nominated outputs, and impact case studies were developed. Findings led to the following conclusions and recommendations.

Conclusions

The need to develop increased understanding of the world beyond UK borders is not in question; it requires long term investment. In a context where the proportion of UK students participating in advanced language study is declining, the challenge of increasing capacity in language-based area studies is substantial. Academic groups remain small and vulnerable despite the significant progress achieved over five years of investment, particularly in the context of increasing competition between universities. Yet the demand from government, business, NGOs and the media, for expertise on each of these important regions continues to grow.

The joint LBAS funding brought a significant boost to levels of activity and to development of high quality expertise and impact. Performance against objectives was strong, and the calibre of early researchers and output supported through the project was excellent. The initiative's overall successes and weaknesses are summarised below in relation to its principal objectives and the evaluation criteria specified by the ESRC.

Centre Design and Implementation: Collaboration through multi-institutional Centres has been effective in delivering multidisciplinary programmes of advanced training and support. The Centres and their networks have raised the level, breadth and dynamism of academic activity and capacity. The value of collaborative Centres in providing resilience is clearly demonstrated, irrespective of precise models or structures. When provision in one university becomes vulnerable, on-going membership of the collaborative enterprise provides support while an individual institution reviews its priorities. Nonetheless, Centres can only succeed over the longer term if constituent universities continue to demonstrate high level commitment to the designated subject areas, prioritising LBAS involvement in institutional strategies and internal re-structuring. In order to sustain success, it is essential that firm commitments from all parties are secured, including investment in on-going support both by funders and individual institutions.

Study, Training and Capacity Building: The Centres have built capacity at postgraduate and postdoctoral level by investing in studentships and early career posts; collaborating to provide high quality postgraduate training in research methods, fostering an interdisciplinary and international outlook; supporting research students with stimulating intellectual networks and opportunities; and equipping talented doctoral fellows to progress to academic posts. Programmes of high profile conferences, workshops and events have enhanced academic output, international reputation and visibility, and raised awareness within the UK.

Language study provision has been significantly extended and enhanced. However, innovative curriculum development and resources should be further shared, and systematic development of open access learning materials for lesser taught languages prioritised with a view to developing on-going provision capable of responding to the learning needs of researchers at different stages in their careers. Students emphasize the enormous and continuing time investment required to develop and maintain the necessary linguistic proficiency.

Training and research has covered a broad range of disciplines across the social sciences and humanities, including study of socio-economic and political structures, and cultural, historical and religious issues. The Centres and their constituent partners have developed distinctive areas of expertise and their own particular strengths. Good progress has been made towards achieving levels of expertise capable of responding to national needs, by strengthening the knowledge base to an extent that will enable further expansion, subject to on-going investment.

Academic Research and Outputs: Review of outputs highlights the ambitious, innovative research and high quality publications delivered by outstanding early career researchers across a wide range of disciplines and on topics of relevance and importance. Their work demonstrates the value of equipping scholars intellectually and linguistically to conduct research effectively in the target country in specific cultural contexts. Established academics have developed clusters of multi- and interdisciplinary expertise, enhancing their grant income and impact. Output is generally regarded as making a significant contribution to strategically important fields, being of high quality and international reach.

External Engagement and Communication: Outreach and external engagement have been prioritised, producing numerous examples of productive engagement in fields where expertise is in high demand. Sustained partnerships and high profile events have proved particularly effective. Beyond the funding period, lack of professional administrative support and inadequate attention to website development may have compromised communication in some cases, limiting external influence and access.

Relevance, Benefit and Impact: Adoption of a strategic approach to building partnerships with practitioner communities in order to benefit from synergies in delivering research has been especially fruitful in delivering impact. Engagement with a wide range of interest groups has generated support and influence, informing effective strategies for knowledge-exchange and delivery of expertise that meets the needs of end-users. The evaluation identified many examples of very significant benefit and impact.

Alignment with Funders' Strategies, and Synergies: The LBAS Centres have engaged closely with funders' strategic priorities, promoting multi- and interdisciplinary research, international partnership working and knowledge exchange. They have showcased internationally recognised expertise which is of influence and importance in the UK and target countries. They have also been highly successful in leveraging additional funding streams from cultural organisations and a range of international sources; securing major research grants; and attracting institutional and external investment in the creation of new academic posts, additional language tutor posts, fellowships, studentships, library provision and resources.

Adding Value through Collaborative Centres: The creation of multidisciplinary collaborative Centres has proved an effective means of concentrating and sharing expertise to build critical mass. However, the challenges of steering and coordinating wide-reaching inter-institutional collaboration should not be underestimated. Continued high-level institutional support and the strong leadership of a single overall Centre Director supported by Co-Directors in core partner universities are crucial; continuing administrative and IT support likewise. Regular meetings of an Advisory Committee composed of key stakeholders in order to stimulate dialogue, reconcile divergent perspectives, and facilitate shared goals and understanding, are important to securing mutual engagement, sharpening strategy and exercising influence.

Recommendations

To Centre leadership and participating universities:

- Host universities should recognise the considerable demands of the key role of Centre Director, offering continuing support to Directors to sustain cross-institutional collaboration.
- Participating universities should consider opportunities for strengthening LBAS capacity when making strategic decisions: giving consideration to facilitating cooperation between provision in Modern Languages and Area Studies (as appropriate) when undertaking internal re-structuring; and considering future LBAS capacity when monitoring the allocation of awards within relevant Doctoral Training Centres.
- Centres should give priority to effective communication, including professional administration, and website design and maintenance.
- Meetings of the main Advisory Committee for each Centre should take place at least once per year in order to develop effective strategies in response to a changing external environment.
- It would be beneficial to share expertise on innovative curriculum development to facilitate intensive language learning, and adopt integrated approaches to acquisition of cultural knowledge and language competence in the four core skills through use of authentic materials.
- Centres offering expertise on the same languages and regions would benefit from communicating and collaborating directly and systematically, particularly in their development of open access learning resources, which should be made accessible in future, wherever practical and appropriate, through shared portals.
- Centres should participate in demand-raising and promotion initiatives such as the HEFCE-funded programme *Routes into Languages*.