

# *The British Academy*

## **Contribution to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) consultation on Strategically Important and Vulnerable Subjects (SIVS)**

### **Introduction**

1. The British Academy, the national academy for the humanities and social sciences (H&SS), is pleased to respond to HEFCE's request for advice as part of its first stage of consultation on Strategically Important and Vulnerable Subjects (SIVS).

### **Key points**

- **The importance of collaboration.** Given the limited public funds available to support initiatives and interventions to safeguard 'SIVS', the British Academy shares HEFCE's view that it is essential that there is a 'joined up' approach across research funders (the funding councils, the research councils, charitable foundations and other research funders), prospective beneficiaries (government agencies and departments, business), providers (universities) and representative bodies for the subject communities (national academies and learned societies).
- **The definition of 'strategically important and vulnerable'.** This is not straightforward. It will need to be defined in such a way as to ensure that it is not short-term in view or focused solely on economic considerations. Rather, the aim should be to seek to define the concept, in order to ensure that it captures what will probably be a range of factors that will be critical in maintaining provision in areas central to the UK's future social, economic and cultural success.
- **The development of a monitoring mechanism to identify emerging trends and national threats to provision.** It is inherently difficult to predict the choices that future students make. What if they decide against studying subjects where there are particular skills shortages? What happens if they choose not to study subjects because they are perceived to lack a direct vocational application? While funders, providers and representative bodies for HE all have a role to play in promoting the value of their disciplines to prospective students, it will be essential that HEFCE has a mechanism in place to monitor emerging trends in student numbers and can readily identify potential threats to national provision.
- **Providing levers and incentives to universities to encourage them to collaborate over SIVS.** There also needs to be a mechanism to ensure that the individual decisions taken by universities to close or shrink academic departments in response to changing student demand do not collectively damage the provision of disciplines that are essential for national purposes. We consider that HEFCE is well placed to

help encourage and broker dialogue and collaboration between universities where national provision in critical areas is under threat.

- **Sustainability.** To ensure future provision, there will need to be an integrated programme of interventions and activities rather than a series of disconnected initiatives one after, and on top of, another. This integrated programme will need to ensure that there are interventions in place at key stages of the pipeline, maintaining the supply of graduates, postgraduates, postdoctoral researchers and highly skilled academic staff.

## General Points

2. At any one point the HE sector in the UK will be aiming to achieve a number of discrete but broad goals. These goals will include excelling in all academic endeavours, educational as well as research. Better cultural and historical understanding is an important goal alongside economic growth or the prolongation of human life. Such larger strategic interests are served by having a world-class university system across the full range of disciplines for teaching and research. We would therefore emphasise that the definition of 'strategic' should not be construed in narrowly economic or functional terms.
3. Furthermore, the concepts of 'strategically important' and 'vulnerable' need to be disentangled. Some subjects may qualify under both heads – Russian might be an example – but in principle they are distinct.
4. We do not yet know how the changes to the funding system for higher education teaching will impact on the number of students, and whether there will be increased demand for some courses at the expense of others. Relying on a system of funding for HE teaching that is determined more heavily by student choice carries risks in terms of volatility in demand – particularly for subjects that may not have an immediately visible vocational application. In one sense, any subject that is non-vocational, and this includes core academic subjects in science as much as in the humanities and social sciences, may be vulnerable in the new market-led system.
5. For H&SS disciplines deemed by the previous government as both 'strategically important' and 'vulnerable' (modern foreign languages, area studies and quantitative methods in social science), their vulnerability may be increased should there be further reduction in provision and the closure of more university departments. The British Academy has repeatedly stressed its concern that individual decisions taken by Vice-Chancellors in response to the new funding system may unintentionally compromise the fragile health nationally of these disciplines. This will not only be damaging to the UK's international role and to its research base, but will also have wider detrimental impacts on UK social, cultural and economic well-being.

6. For these reasons, the British Academy believes that a mechanism should be found to ensure that the individual decisions taken by universities to close or shrink academic departments, which may be rational in their own limited contexts, do not collectively damage the provision of disciplines that are essential for national purposes. The Academy would be happy to work with the funding councils and representative bodies for universities to discuss ways in which this threat might be averted.
7. We welcome HEFCE's recognition of the importance of 'graduate flow' from both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes as an indicator of risk<sup>1</sup>. However, we would highlight that although the SIVS initiative is likely to be targeted largely at the provision of undergraduate teaching, the link to postgraduate activity and the need to develop a home-grown generation of future teachers, lecturers and researchers must also be monitored. There may be subjects, such as Economics, where vulnerability arises in specific contexts, such as recruitment to postgraduate research programmes.
8. In this context, we commend the role played by the ESRC and the AHRC to increase capacity in priority areas. For example, the ESRC is concentrating a significant element of its studentship provision in priority areas, such as economics, management and business studies, and language-based area studies. The AHRC is equally committed to ensuring that its studentships help to sustain key areas of national need, such as languages.
9. The issues associated with SIVS are complex, requiring multi-faceted and multi-level approaches to both monitor and address them. We welcome the commitment set out in Sir Alan's letter that the funding councils, the research councils, the national academies, learned societies, and other relevant funding bodies should work together where possible to ensure coordinated efforts to address problems effectively. We agree that the challenges will require action, not necessarily always by way of funding, and that collaboration is crucial.
10. A major issue in all consideration of SIVS is whether a degree of rationalisation will be needed in provision. For example, where a subject requires extensive library resources or specialised equipment, there may sometimes be a case for coordinating or reducing the number of institutions where it is available. Similarly a subject whose provision is scattered across a number of small units may acquire resilience from a consortium or more concentrated approach. Any process of coordination or reduction will require extensive negotiation between institutions and with national bodies such as HEFCE. Without such negotiation and coordination there is a serious risk that some subjects might disappear entirely without anyone having intended that outcome.

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<sup>1</sup> As indicated in the letter from Alan Langlands to Adam Roberts in April 2011, to which this contribution is a response.

## **Specific Disciplines and Skills**

11. The British Academy has been given funds from the government for a new programme to support Languages and Quantitative Skills (L&QS), with the aim of implementing a new programme supporting languages and the use of rigorous, especially quantitative, methods in the humanities and social sciences. This programme not only reflects the Academy's concerns about deficits in language and quantitative skills in UK education and research, but also that of Government.
12. The Academy has, for a long time, been concerned about the deficit of skills in languages and quantitative methods in the UK and their potentially harmful impacts on our social, cultural and economic well-being. Recognising that these longstanding deficits are rooted in the way in which these disciplines and skills are taught at every level, from school to undergraduate degrees, the programme aims to build capacity to address these deep-seated challenges. Through a targeted programme of research support, partnerships and interventions the Academy will supply leadership to help strengthen skills in these vital areas, which are necessary to maintain the UK's competitiveness.
13. Funding for the L&QS programme totals £5m over 4 years. Much of what the Academy aims to do will be undertaken in partnership with others, such as the research and funding councils, as well as charitable foundations and other learned societies. For example, the British Academy is pleased to be a co-funder, alongside HEFCE, the ESRC, and the Nuffield Foundation, of a £8million programme aimed at building capacity in quantitative skills. In order to explore potential for further collaborative efforts to address language and quantitative skill deficits, the Academy is planning to organise workshops for both languages and quantitative skills respectively, bringing together key stakeholders, funders and partners to scope the current situation, identify areas for further action and collaboration in order to address the breadth of the issues which will be outlined below. The Academy is willing to consider ways in which its L&QS programme might be developed to contribute to an effective strategy concerning SIVS.
14. The following points address some specific areas which the Academy wishes to make a particular case for consideration under the SIVS initiative.

## ***Languages***

15. There is an important distinction to be made under this heading between the acquisition of linguistic competencies, or 'language skills', and a fully developed understanding of the culture and history of which the language is a vehicle, or what we can call 'language scholarship'. While the Academy fully supports the need for the development of language skills more generally, it is in our view the national provision of language scholarship in the UK that falls directly within the SIVS criteria.

16. Whatever the language, research and teaching competencies are built up over extended periods of time, and it is not possible to turn capacity off and on again quickly. Language scholarship is a long-term investment, for the individual, for the institution, and for the university system at large. As stated in our position paper *Language matters more and more*, the Academy is concerned about declining numbers of school pupils taking languages at GCSE and at A-level. Since 1996, the number of language A-level candidates has fallen by 25%, compared to an overall increase of 24% in all subjects.<sup>2</sup> The decline in language learning at school not only means that there is an ever diminishing pool of potential candidates to study languages, but will also work against efforts by universities and subject communities to promote language degrees to prospective students.
17. The Academy fears that student demand for languages will remain low in the short-term because it will take time to arrest the ongoing decline in language learning at school. Given that student demand is low, there may be further closures of language departments, or concentrations in a few institutions or areas of the country, which may unintentionally compromise the fragile health of these disciplines. This will not only be damaging to the UK's international role and to its research base, but will also have wider detrimental impacts on UK social, cultural and economic well-being.
18. For these reasons, we stress the importance of HEFCE's role, in collaboration with others, in monitoring these developments and in playing a brokering role between universities to explore how provision might best be maintained.
19. There are three categories of language which can be identified in this connection:
- i) There is a need to develop world languages that are not, or are only rarely taught in schools – such as Chinese, Arabic, Japanese, Russian, Hindi and Urdu. We can no longer assume that English is the global language par excellence: 75% of the world's population does not speak English at all<sup>3</sup>. The desirability of protecting and extending the educational provision for these languages can be justified on grounds of relevance to business, to security and diplomacy and our general understanding and appreciation of the world's cultural diversity.
  - ii) There is a need to ensure continuity for those (principally European) modern languages that are already taught in schools and which have a long history of being taught and researched in British universities. Because of our membership of the European community, the justification – and urgency – here is political and economic. But there are also compelling reasons for

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<sup>2</sup>For further information, see the British Academy Position Statement, *Language matters more and more*: <http://www.britac.ac.uk/policy/Language-matters-more-and-more.cfm>.

<sup>3</sup> CILT, the National Centre for Languages: [http://www.cilt.org.uk/making\\_the\\_case.aspx](http://www.cilt.org.uk/making_the_case.aspx).

seeking to maintain and extend the long-standing history of European cultural exchanges and cross-fertilisation.

- iii) The languages identified under (i) and (ii) all have very large numbers of speakers and a significant presence on the internet. There is therefore a case for them to be taught quite widely across the university sector. There are in addition highly specialist needs for national capacity in languages such as Pashto, Kurdish, varieties of spoken Arabic, Korean, Turkish etc whose importance is out of proportion to the number of speakers. These specialist languages are taught in very few universities around the UK, meaning the protection of our national capacity in these areas is essential.

20. The strategic importance and value of these three categories fall primarily under the following four heads:

- i) Defence and diplomacy: We live in a thoroughly globalised world and the capacity in the UK HE system to teach and study certain languages is vital for a nuanced and sophisticated understanding of countries where we now have – or can expect to have – defence and diplomatic interests.
- ii) Business and emerging markets: The UK's social and economic future relies on our ability to compete on the international stage. When our competitors operate in English and in a range of other languages, and we operate only in English, we have little or no competitive advantage. With an increasing number of companies having international dealings, mobility and language skills are being viewed as vital by employers. As stated in *Language matters more and more*, "The proficiency that graduates with language and international experience bring goes beyond just the acquisition of a single language, demonstrating in addition initiative, motivation, independence and an ability to engage with those who have different backgrounds and experience."
- iii) Multilingualism and multiculturalism: In addressing the issue of language, it is important to emphasise that courses in these languages should cover not only skills in the use of the language but also an understanding of the cultures, ideologies and traditions which these languages give access to. Those with language skills and international experience, in whatever field or discipline, can demonstrate a level of intercultural understanding and sensitivity which holds immeasurable value for the individual and society at large. In an increasingly multilingual and multicultural UK, such understanding will have significant rewards both at home and abroad.
- iv) Understanding the history and cultures of others. The cultures of other parts of the world (including history, literature, religion and value systems) offer

rewards that are to be prized in their own terms, but also which enrich our own cultural understanding and help protect us against insularity. The UK also happens to have comparative advantage in research and teaching excellence in the study of other cultures. It is important that UK scholars and students continue to have the tools that give us access to these traditions.

21. We would also stress that area studies, distinct from the study of language, are significant in their own right. Understanding foreign societies is not an easy task; but a necessary one, providing invaluable strategic guidance to both H&SS and STEM subjects. As stated in a 2008 Subject benchmark statement by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, “Graduates in area studies are well-placed to enter an ever more globalised job market. Area studies programmes encourage in their students a strong sense of perspective and flexibility in thinking, and their graduates are well attuned to diversity. The particular combination of specialist knowledge and transferable skills that area studies graduates offer is vitally important in a wide range of employment sectors, including government, business and commerce, diplomacy, communications and the media, at both international and national level.”<sup>4</sup> It is clear therefore that we must continue recent successful advances in area studies. For the reasons outlined above, the range of area studies undergraduate degree programmes available across many UK institutions is both welcome and necessary.
22. The Academy therefore welcomes the recognition of languages and area studies under HEFCE’s SIVS initiative thus far and would stress the importance of continuing to do so. Addressing the various concerns expressed under the languages and area studies headings will require coordinated efforts from organisations such as ourselves, other relevant funders, and HEIs together with HEFCE. Without continued provision in both language and area studies teaching and research, there will be damage to scholarship and to Britain’s national interest. Through our L&QS programme in particular, the Academy is keen to work alongside these organisations to explore ways in which threats to language and area studies might be averted.

### *Quantitative skills and empirical methods*

23. Quantitative methods are central to many areas of social science and provide complex statistical analyses of large and complicated data sets, which underpin estimates of many social patterns, trends and quantifiable impacts of social interventions. These can lead both to world class ‘blue skies’ research and to effective evidence-based policy. The critical need for quantitative research is not confined to any particular discipline or subgroup of disciplines but, rather, applies across the full breadth of social science.

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<sup>4</sup> The full statement is available at:

<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/statements/areastudies08.asp>.

24. The UK has, over the last six decades, invested in high class social scientific data at a level unrivalled in almost any other nation. Some of these data sets have been collected through research funding agencies, for example the 46, 58, 70, Millennium and (future) 2012 birth cohorts; others by national statistical agencies, for example the Census or the General Household Survey; and still more by government departments, industry and commerce. In addition, administrative data can be used as important sources for the understanding of many social issues. These data-sets are increasingly not used in isolation. Advances in computing and in matching techniques mean that there will be enormous opportunities for analysts to link data-sets from different sources to provide greater traction on social issues.
25. In addition to analysis of large scale surveys, there is a growing recognition that social interventions can best be evaluated using experimental and quasi-experimental design. These typically rely on quantitative data and require sophisticated analysis.
26. Advanced skills in quantitative methods are further needed in order to fully exploit the UK's rich data resources, especially longitudinal studies. Many of these datasets have a highly complex structure which requires special analytical tools. New methods are also needed for the analysis of emerging types of data, for example transactional data and data from repeated sampling of individuals' behaviours and experiences in real time (as in ecological momentary assessment).
27. Methodologists (or social statisticians) are needed not only to develop new methods, in collaboration with social scientists, but to implement these methods in user-friendly software, and to provide training to social scientists so that they can apply them in their own research.
28. The ESRC has provided support for methodological research through the National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM). However, it is difficult to recruit researchers with strong quantitative skills to work on NCRM and other methodological projects. There is a need for an initiative to attract graduates from mathematics and statistics to pursue postgraduate study in the social sciences.
29. The greatest risk to achieving the challenges above is the lack of suitably skilled analysts. There is considerable evidence from many studies that there remains a real need for specialists of four main types:
  - i) a relatively small number of methodologists able to break new ground in statistical methods and who have a clear mission to develop methods for use with social scientific data;
  - ii) a cadre of informaticians, able to manipulate and manage data from a single large source or from multiple sources;
  - iii) a large population of social scientists grounded in a particular discipline and able to undertake detailed analyses of large and complex data sets; and



- iv) a population of social scientists able to interpret and understand statistical results and statistically based argument.

30. The reasons for the vulnerability of the skill set in quantitative social sciences results from a number of causes. These include:

- i) the ageing of the world class cohort of quantitative social scientists who have led the UK's work in this area;
- ii) a lack of training of high level quantitative social scientists particularly in the 1990s;
- iii) a lack of emphasis placed on quantitative methods in some social science courses;
- iv) the increased sophistication of data analysis techniques; and
- v) a large increase in the availability of data and the power of computing leading to a greater potential for analysis.

31. This means that there is an urgent need for initiatives:

- i) to embed advanced statistical analysis within undergraduate social science courses;
- ii) to train, at both the doctoral and post-doctoral level, an increased number of students for whom quantitative methods are the norm for addressing research questions in their chosen discipline;
- iii) to develop a range of training courses to be available to upskill researchers, at all stages of their research career, in the newest statistical methods and data-sets; and
- iv) linked to the National Centre for Research Methods, to formulate a national plan to increase the number of methodologists.

32. These areas of initiative require collaboration from a range of funders, including HEFCE, the Research Councils and ourselves; foundations such as Nuffield and Leverhulme; and government agencies, most notably the Office of National Statistics and its equivalents in the devolved administrations.

## Conclusion

33. At a time of severe constraints on public funding, the Academy recognises the importance of a joined up approach to sustain strategically important capability. It welcomes the efforts taken by HEFCE, AHRC, ESRC and other parties (such as the Nuffield Foundation) to work together on a package of activities to address this issue. And the British Academy is happy to continue to work with these bodies on how the threats to these skills might be averted.

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