

## **The proposed closure of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies**

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### **Background**

On 14 October, the School of Advanced Study (SAS) at the University of London launched a consultation exercise on its restructuring plans. These plans entail the closure of two of its nine Institutes – the Institute of Commonwealth Studies (ICWS) and the Institute of Latin American Studies (ILAS). These are the School's only regional studies centres, and the only ones that engage systematically with the non-European world.

It has long been apparent that SAS needs to be a more coherent and 'joined-up' national Humanities research centre, an aim that the director of the ICWS has long shared and advocated. But the directors of both ICWS and ILAS were systematically excluded from the planning process that led to the current restructuring scheme, a process which appears to have been going on for some months coordinated by the acting Dean of the School, Professor Jo Fox (who is also the director of the Institute of Historical Research) in consultation with the directors of a number of other institutes, none of which is threatened with closure. The director of the ICWS was only told of the planned closure of his Institute on 6 October, and was instructed that this was confidential information until a formal announcement was made to the School.

This announcement came on 14 October, at the launch of the 45 day consultation process legally required before large scale redundancies are made. This consultation process ends on **23 November**. If the plans go ahead, it is expected that redundancy notices will be sent out as soon as the consultation process is finished. The director, Philip Murphy, the Institute manager, Chloe Pieters, and the Institute events manager, Olga Jimenez, will all be made redundant and have not been offered replacement posts elsewhere in the School. The window for applying for the voluntary redundancy package offered by the University of London ends on **18 November** (ie before the consultation process ends), a clear indication of the desire of management to persuade staff to quit before then. All of this suggests a determination to force through the closure of the two Institutes rather than involving their directors in a genuine process of consultation about how their activities might be maintained. This time table suggests that the ICWS and ILAS will both close around Christmas. While newly released information suggests that SAS will assist ILAS in finding a new institutional home (vaguely defined), no such offer is being made to the ICWS.

As late as the beginning of September 2020, the School formally approved the submission of a major research bid to the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) on the Windrush scandal and Caribbean diplomacy, submitted by the director of the ICWS (as Principal Investigator) in partnership with the Black Cultural Archives in Brixton. The bid was worth well over

£500,000 and would have supported two research posts. It had involved a huge amount of work, partly funded by a seed-corn grant from the University of London's Convocation Trust. It was to be a major element in the School's sponsorship of black British history. The announcement of the closure of the ICWS has compromised the success of that bid – probably fatally. Either the School approved the submission on the bid in bad faith – knowing ICWS was to close – or it made the decision to close the ICWS after 3 September when approval was given. The implication of either scenario is disturbing. There are important reputational questions for the School of Advanced Study in its future applications to UK funding bodies, as well as deeply concerning questions around observance of established university governance protocols.

### **Arguments for maintaining the Institute of Commonwealth Studies**

The case for closure, such as it has been made ([see <https://london.ac.uk/sas-new-strategy>](https://london.ac.uk/sas-new-strategy) - <https://london.ac.uk/sas-new-strategy>), is highly unconvincing either on rational reorganisation or on financial grounds:

1. Although they are framed in terms of an intellectual reconfiguration, the fact that the reconfiguration plans essentially involve the closure of the School's only two regionally (as opposed to disciplinary) focused Institutes suggest a crude, short-term cost-cutting exercise. As the Acting Dean confirmed at the launch of the consultation on Wednesday 14 October, funding for SAS from co-funder Research England (RE) is assured for the time being. It has long been clear that the School needs to respond to the recommendations made in the previous RE review of the School in order to be confident of future funding. Combined with the financial costs to the University brought by the COVID crisis, this makes reform necessary. Yet in terms of the key points raised by Research England in its brief report, nothing points to the need to close Commonwealth Studies. Quite the reverse.
2. RE stressed the need to embrace interdisciplinary research and collaboration across the School. Interdisciplinary research has characterised the ICWS since its inception in 1949, covering the humanities and the social sciences. And while the SAS leadership itself appears to have paid no attention before now to the need to facilitate a cross-School cooperation, the Institute has embraced this, organizing a conference on 'diplomatic spaces' with the Institute of Classical Studies; initiating and managing the SAS PhD Research seminar series (in collaboration with the Institute of Modern Languages); and leading on Black British history, the Decolonisation seminar series, and the Windrush AHRC project, with limited and junior support from the IHR. The director of the ICWS has worked across the School, serving – in addition to his role in the ICWS – as deputy dean and as acting director of the Institute of Historical Research (IHR) and the Institute of English Studies (IES) at times when they were without a director. The need to create mechanisms for cooperation across the School has long been obvious and their absence is the result of a lack of intellectual leadership of the School in recent years.

3. Closure of the ICWS would also represent a demonstrable lack of commitment by SAS to regional studies, in direct contrast to the School's declared purpose of fostering scholarship & public engagement. We note with concern that the proposals make no mention of the extensive digital resources and electronic library hosted by ICWS, nor the extraordinary ICWS Library and its wide range of special collections. However, these resources need to retain a special identity within UoLondon collections, and the ICWS has fought hard for this. With the loss of the ICWS, the rationale – and protection of this unique reference library, both physical and digital – will be progressively eroded, to the detriment of students, scholars and researchers in Commonwealth studies. The practical management of resources pales into insignificance against the reputational damage to the School of Advanced Study retreating from area/world studies and Black British and British Asian studies.
4. Research England also stressed the need for financial sustainability. The ICWS has regularly returned a surplus on its budget over the previous decade, in contrast to some other institutes which run substantial structural deficits. Indeed, the public engagement and academic reach of the ICWS across the Commonwealth is comparable to the IHR's national profile, and on considerably less resources. Indeed, in the 2018-2019 Financial Statement of the University<sup>1</sup>, the Institute was singled out and praised for the contribution it made to the University of London's broad mission. The contrast between this affirmative report, and the current proposed closure is stark. The financial statement says:

*This year the School's Institute of Commonwealth Studies celebrated the 70th anniversary of its founding in 1949. The Institute is a national and international centre of excellence for policy-relevant research, research facilitation and teaching on historical and contemporary Commonwealth subjects. Its Library is an international resource holding more than 190,000 volumes, with particularly impressive Caribbean, Southern African and Australian holdings and over 200 archival collections. The University of London's Convocation Trust gave a grant to the Institute's latest research project 'Nationality, Identity and Belonging: An Oral History of the Windrush Generation and Their Relationship to the British State, 1948–2018'. The funding will support: a researcher responsible for forging collaborations with archives, museums, academic and non-academic experts and Caribbean heritage community groups; coordinating a 'day of evidence'; and producing a comprehensive report.*

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<sup>1</sup> 2018-2019 Financial Statement of the University,  
<https://london.ac.uk/sites/default/files/governance/university-of-london-financial-statement-2018-19.pdf>, p. 11.

The ICWS has consistently operated a budget surplus, in part, by pioneering new distance learning MAs in Refugee Protection and in Human Rights in partnership with the University of London WorldWide, the first Institute in SAS to do so. The SAS restructuring plan proposes moving those operations to the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies (IALS) effectively ‘asset stripping’ the ICWS and discarding what remains. Furthermore, the proposed move risks damaging the intellectual foundations and student recruitment to this multidisciplinary MA in human rights (originally founded in partnership with the Secretary-General of Amnesty International). Diluting its interdisciplinary character will ensure it becomes just another law-based MA, like most human rights programmes in the world, and losing its distinctive character and attraction.

5. The SAS consultation document claims that additional resources and support will be given to Black British History and research into the Windrush scandal. This seems at odds with our recent experience. As noted in the UoLondon Financial Report above, from November 2019, the ICWS was able, thanks to a small grant, to employ an excellent researcher to undertake a pilot oral history project on the Windrush generation, and to do preparatory work for Murphy’s AHRC grant. The Institute applied to the School over the summer of 2020 for permission to extend her contract, but was told that SAS could not afford to continue to employ her. This excellent scholar of Caribbean heritage is also an integral part of the research team in the AHRC application which is now gravely at risk, as a direct consequence of the SAS leadership’s proposal to close the Institute. These actions are redolent of a institutional mindset which is at odds with contemporary debates around decolonizing the academy, and the stress the University of London itself claims to place on diversity and inclusion.
6. The ICWS has provided leadership, academic credibility and effective delivery of conferences and workshops in London and at regional universities on Black British History since 2014. And for many years before then, it had run a pioneering seminar series on black British history. The extensive networks generated by these activities over a long period of time are in danger of being lost to SAS.
7. Our work in refugee law and in human rights, in decolonisation, and in Black History does indeed deserve further investment and growth. The suggestion that ‘a different configuration of the School will maximise their potential, their impact, and their reach’ is simply not persuasive. The suggestion of moving refugee law and human rights initiatives (and all the staff) to the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies, as “a more natural academic home”: The fact that IALS is already the base for the Refugee Law Clinic is indicative of cross-institute collaboration, the

declared desire of this change transformation document. IALS does not have ‘the capacity to provide better, more focused support to the academics currently associated with these projects’, nor does it have the institutional ethos. In addition, the HRC and RLI academics based within the ICWS were not consulted about this proposed move, and have declared their firm desire to remain in the inter-disciplinary environment of the ICWS, as a more conducive academic context for their work.

8. The implications of the public image of closing of the ICWS extends beyond the School of Advanced Study, the University of London and British academia. The proposed redundancies of Professor Murphy, the Institute Manager and other administrative staff poses a potentially disastrous loss of academic leadership and crucial administrative support in SAS, just as the UK faces the greatest transformation in its international relations and global position since the end of empire. Given the departure of the UK from the European Union, discussion of the possibilities and realities of the Commonwealth for British foreign policy will indeed increase in public, political and academic discourse. This was underlined to ICWS academics involved in discussions around the UK’s major Strategic Defence Review in the summer of 2020. This enhances the importance of serious and informed debate.
9. The ICWS has been remarkably innovative and nimble since the onset of the COVID pandemic, ensuring its expanding international intellectual reach by exploiting online discussion platforms and virtual conferences. This has continued the ICWS’ activist role in critiquing political decision making in the modern Commonwealth as a multilateral organisation, whilst also supporting the Commonwealth’s dynamic civil society organisations - such as the Commonwealth Journalists Association’s work on challenges to media freedom across the Commonwealth, and facilitating Commonwealth civil society collaboration on media governance issues.
10. The claim in the SAS planning document that there will be active collaboration across SAS Institutes to study, promote and celebrate the Commonwealth without the existence of the ICWS is disingenuous. Six of the nine SAS institutes are [subject areas centres](#) (History, Philosophy, English, Classics, Law and Modern Languages). Inter-disciplinary academic projects and events need overall ownership and academic grounding if they are to succeed. The ICWS already provides this, and has the external academic credibility and extensive networks to promote such activities and events. Nothing in the current SAS document suggests a credible picture of delivery, given the prevailing institutional ethos of SAS, and the reality of engrained silos of academic activity. Furthermore, the suggestion that some of the institute’s activities can simply be transferred to other SAS institutes ignores the lack of relevant expertise in those other institutes, the fact that those other institutes have no similar proven track record in interdisciplinary and transnational research, and the painstakingly built

and maintained networks and credibility of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies itself.

11. SAS claims to be responding to Britain's reconfiguration following the UK's withdrawal from the European Union, and the imperatives and demands of altered British relationships with the wider world. It is thus extraordinary that SAS proposes to axe its only two institutes with connections and intellectual credibility in the Global South. It is clearly symptomatic of a narrow fixation on the national academic environment and context – reflective of a narrow BREXIT outlook - not the claimed international mindset. We would like to point out the current publicly declared purpose of SAS, boldly emblazoned on the front page of its website (newly revamped, at considerable expense) reads, 'The School's fundamental purpose is to maintain and develop its institutes' resources for the benefit of the national and international research communities.' This was SAS's founding remit. It is hard to see how axing the ICWS will benefit research communities overseas. The negative message which will be sent to other Commonwealth networks or organisations, high Commissions which will be plain: that the SAS and the University of London does not appreciate nor understand the complex realities of Commonwealth links.
12. The School's description of how it will continue to support study of the Commonwealth without the ICWS is an insult both to those in the ICWS who have been engaging with the Commonwealth for so long, and to the Commonwealth community as a whole. It claims that its restructuring 'will place the study of the Commonwealth in a broader and more contemporary context', implying without any evidence or justification that the Institute's current mode of engagement is outmoded and anachronistic. The School also promises:

*From 2021, SAS proposes to convene an annual cross-disciplinary Commonwealth conference to coincide with Commonwealth Day. This event will draw out debates on global challenges and opportunities that face the Commonwealth, and on its historical legacy, alongside an exploration of the cultural connections between the UK and Commonwealth countries. This part of the conference will include artistic presentations and reflections on the cultural meaning of the Commonwealth.*

These themes have been at the core of a range of ICWS events in the past, most recently its ground-breaking global online conference 'Taking Stock of the Commonwealth' in June 2020. But without in-house academic expertise on the Commonwealth it is impossible to make this sort of work credible, effective or valuable. Simply to promise a 'Commonwealth Day' conference with 'artistic presentations and reflections on the meaning of the Commonwealth' is profoundly patronizing to the broader Commonwealth community that its real concerns about the closure of the ICWS could be fobbed off in this way.