

[Commonwealth 'has overcome colonial past'; Former secretary-general urges the University of London to reconsider plan to close academic institute](#)

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A "GUILTY conscience" over colonialism may be behind misguided plans to close the Institute for Commonwealth Studies, a former secretary-general has warned.

The Commonwealth should not be viewed "through the perspective of colonial history", according to Chief Emeka Anyaoku, who said there was a "danger" in focusing on the past. His remarks come as the Institute for Commonwealth Studies, which is part of the University of London's School of Advanced Study, faces closure.

The university's vice-chancellor said that plans to shut down the institute were due to the "real and pressing financial challenges" that had been exacerbated by the pandemic.

But Chief Anyaoku, who was secretary-general of the Commonwealth from 1990 to 2000, said he believed there were some who saw the institute as outdated and unfashionable.

"I suspect that there must be people there whose focus is on the past, who are not able to see the future potential of the Commonwealth," he told The Daily Telegraph. "The danger in focusing on the past is that one is thereby not able to see the future. I think there are people who might think there is - in my view incorrectly - some guilty conscience.

"It is not correct to view the Commonwealth through the perspective of colonial history. It grew out of colonial history but it has overcome that history, and become something new and modern, and I think people should perceive it in this light."

Chief Anyaoku and three other former Commonwealth secretary-generals have written to Prof Wendy Thomson, vice-chancellor of the University of London, urging her to reconsider.

"Since its foundation in 1949, the Institute has grown and evolved in tune with the development of the modern Commonwealth," their letter says. "It stands as a unique global resource dedicated to study of the Commonwealth, decolonisation and postcolonialism."

The director-general of the Commonwealth Foundation, one of the Commonwealth's three major intergovernmental agencies, said she was "dismayed" to learn of the institute's planned closure and urged the university to reconsider.

"It is well understood that these difficult times require hard decisions," Dr Anne Gallagher said. "However, the proposal to close the institute certainly appears to lack strategic foresight, most especially for a university which has built its reputation on innovation and excellence in teaching, outreach and research."

Earlier this month, the University of London unveiled its "new strategy" for the School of Advanced Study. It explained that due to "significant" financial challenges, it must "now consider all means of preserving viability and securing its future".

The Institute of **Commonwealth** Studies and the Institute of Latin American Studies are earmarked for closure, with "key academic initiatives" and staff being moved to other areas of the school.

Prof Thomson said no one had suggested to her that colonial guilt was behind the closure plans. "I completely understand the concerns of **Commonwealth** scholars and officials and will be meeting several as part of our consultation into the proposals," she said.

"I will be reassuring them that while the names of institutes may be retired, key work into topics such as refugee law, postcolonial history and black British history will continue elsewhere in the School of Advanced Study.

"Our proposals demonstrate our intention to prioritise key academic work ahead of institutional structures."

She said the institute's collection would stay in the Senate House Library and there were proposals for an annual conference to mark **Commonwealth** Day.