

Copy of Letter from Four former Secretaries-General of the Commonwealth

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Proposed closure of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies

We write as four former holders of the office of Commonwealth Secretary-General. We come from Guyana, Nigeria, New Zealand and India. Together we were privileged to have been involved in the leadership of the Commonwealth from 1975 to 2016, a period of over forty years. We know from personal experience how strong has been the 'golden thread' of education across the Commonwealth and how deeply embedded in that international relationship is the University of London, with links to many Commonwealth countries and countless of their students. The strength of that Commonwealth connection shines through any rollcall of the University's distinguished alumni, just as today it is evident within the leadership of the University, its staff and its many students. We were therefore profoundly shocked to hear that the University is intending to close the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, possibly in a matter of months, with little time for consultation or reflection.

At the outset, we acknowledge and sympathise with the University in the unprecedented challenges it currently faces because of the Covid 19 pandemic. We know that these include huge financial pressures. However, we are concerned that the hurried nature of the proposals concerning the Institute of Commonwealth Studies and the evident desire on the part of the School of

Advanced Study to limit the consultation process and not to explore alternative solutions, risks inflicting real damage on the University's unique international reputation, in return for minimal financial savings.

If the University's importance within the Commonwealth is beyond dispute, the beating heart of that relationship is the Institute of Commonwealth Studies. Since its foundation in 1949, the Institute has grown and evolved in tune with the development of the modern Commonwealth. It stands as a unique global resource dedicated to study of the Commonwealth, decolonisation and postcolonialism. Supported by a world-class research library, it has shown itself to be an international centre of excellence, in both teaching and research. A recent outstanding contribution to international knowledge has been the completion of the Commonwealth Oral History Project, with its digital resource of over seventy interviews with significant Commonwealth figures. Its work in human rights and refugee law has been no less distinguished.

The Institute's convening power is illustrated by its ability to attract international students and early career academics; its varied programme of workshops and conferences involving many Commonwealth organisations; and its large network of current and former research fellows. For example, it became a natural refuge for Chandrika Kumaratunga while in exile and before her return to win Sri Lanka's Presidency in 1995. Similarly, it became the place that Albie Sachs, grievously wounded by an apartheid bomb, was able to conduct pioneering work on South Africa's post-apartheid constitution and its constitutional court.

However, none of this is about the past: it is all about the relevance and importance of the Institute to the future. The Institute's work is valued throughout the Commonwealth and speaks to a United Kingdom outside the European Union, seeking a new direction as 'global Britain.' It has resonance within the UK, and beyond, in the lives of those who are a product of a former colonial relationship, seeking to live together in harmony, reconciled to the past and to each other. It is central to the global imperative to rise above resurgent nationalism and reinvigorate the forces of multilateralism and international cooperation.

We therefore urge the School of Advanced Study and the University itself to reconsider the proposal to close the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, to maintain its important Commonwealth links and embark on a wider and more

