

November 10, 2020

Copy of Email

FROM: Peter Williams, Hon. President, Commonwealth Consortium for Education

TO: Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon  
Minister of State for the Commonwealth,  
FCDO, King Charles St., London SW1A 2AH

Dear Lord Ahmad

I write to express my considerable distress at the proposal by the University of London to close the Institute for Commonwealth Studies in the School of Advanced Study. I hope the UK Government through the FCDO and Department for Education can find ways to avert implementation of this most unfortunate decision, which would appear to have been taken to achieve marginal (and probably illusory) savings at the expense of the broader national interest.

For several decades now the UK has shown apathy and a degree of disregard - some would say carelessness - in its approach to conserving, replenishing and mobilising its store of knowledge and insights regarding Commonwealth institutions and relationships. Governments have rather passively stood by while important public and private platforms for discussion of Commonwealth affairs have been allowed to disappear (Commonwealth Institute) or seriously decay to become mere shadows of their former selves (RCS). The Institute of Commonwealth Studies is one of the few survivors of a once substantial infrastructure of institutions promoting discussion and debate on Commonwealth matters. Valiant as their efforts might in trying to fill the gap, bodies like the Ramphal Institute, Round Table or Royal Overseas League do not have the same capacity, or focus, to conduct in-depth study and teaching on Commonwealth affairs; nor are they able to host scholars or attract students from other Commonwealth member countries to study pressing contemporary issues through a Commonwealth lens.

The future of Commonwealth Studies is very much tied up with the fate of the ICWS as the premier institution in this field; and Heads of Government have recognised the link between studies of the Commonwealth, shared knowledge and understanding of Commonwealth countries and relationships, and public support for the Commonwealth in upcoming generations of young people. There are matters of national and pan-Commonwealth interest at stake here that are of greater long-term moment than the need for one esteemed university to balance this or next year's budget at a time of crisis.

Quite apart from the serious harm that the field of Commonwealth studies would experience if ICWS were to disappear, the UK will suffer major reputational damage if it

stands by, allowing this to take place at a time when when we are in the Chair of the Commonwealth, when the Black Lives Matter movement is focussing attention on past and present relationships among the peoples of the Commonwealth, and when the UK is looking, in a post-Brexit era, to balance its European ties with strengthened alliances across the globe. The timing could hardly be worse.

I do hope Government will play a full part in helping the University of London to find ways to put any decision to close ICwS on hold while consultations take place on identifying a sustainable future for the Institute - taking full account of the fact that, far from being the seat of financial crisis in the University, it is (at least as I have been given to understand) one of the few parts of the School of Advanced Study that is actually in financial surplus.

I write this in a individual capacity but from a background of having been Professor of Education in Developing Countries in the University of London Institute of Education; Director of Education in the Commonwealth Secretariat for 10 years and on the education advisory committee of the Commonwealth Institute; Secretary/member of the Commission on Commonwealth Studies which was appointed by the Commonwealth Secretary-General and reported to the Auckland and Edinburgh CHOGMs; and founding secretary and currently Hon President of the Commonwealth Consortium for Education.

With very best wishes

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