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Dear Professor Thomson

Proposed closure of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies (ICwS)

I write to express concern over the announced intention of the University to dismantle ICwS and to transfer its teaching and research elsewhere in the School of Advanced Study. The University has also announced closure of the Institute of Latin American Studies which I also deplore, but with whose situation I am less familiar, having spent my career focusing on education in the Commonwealth.

First, I am puzzled by the decision if - as I have been given to understand matters – it has been taken largely on financial grounds in the face of the need to reduce a serious deficit in the School of Advance Study. Yet apparently the Institute has broken even or had a surplus in most of the more recent years and so is seemingly being picked on as a sacrificial lamb to atone for shortfalls not of its own making? From outside this seems unjust. But beyond that it would seem to be counter-productive, first because the savings appear to be minimal if - as the background documents claim – most of the ICwS work would continue under other auspices; and second because research funding and student interest (and fees) attracted to the well-established ICwS may not be readily transferable to other institutes in the university. Hoped-for financial savings could well turn out to be illusory.

Second, the Institute is a centre and as such has a value greater than the sum of its constituent parts, possessing excellent library and archival resources; combining teaching and research programmes; having whose value to academics, students, and friends beyond the university lies in the fact that through a Commonwealth lens it combines and interfaces a range of disciplines in the humanities and social studies. The canvas of its interests spans the Commonwealth's present and future as much as its past – and it is the current political social and economic issues with which Commonwealth countries are grappling today that will provide the focus of activity attracting support from donors. While they will no doubt recognise that present and future problems can often be better understood by reference to historical origins and antecedents, they will not be easily persuaded that an institute of historical research is an appropriate location for funded work on Commonwealth futures.

Third, it seems that the University and SAS have under-estimated the actual and symbolic importance of ICwS to scholars and practitioners beyond the University of London. ICwS is regarded by the global community of scholars engaged in Commonwealth studies, whether in the humanities or social sciences, as the leading institution in its field. And beyond academia, the Commonwealth community in London – diplomats in High commissions, journalists interested in international affairs, the many Commonwealth professional associations, the Commonwealth Secretariat and Foundation – value the outreach function of the Institute in providing a platform in London for discussion of contemporary issues in politics, human rights, and development, all the more in demand since the Commonwealth Institute closed its doors and the Royal Commonwealth Society became so diminished in capacity. This wider Commonwealth community represents a web of contacts and friendly interest groups that the University could potentially exploit to its own advantage in pursuing its strategic priorities.

Finally, I believe the University will damage its own enviable reputation as an institution engaging with the wider world and playing a leading role in nurturing the development of university provision in newly independent Commonwealth countries. The University itself has a proud record in

preparing and smoothing the way for transition from colonial dependence to independence and interdependence. One would hope that it would not forget its own past but would see a strengthened Institute of Commonwealth Studies as one of the vehicles through which it could re-examine its own records and achievements and actively engage in the lively current debates about decolonisation.

If these considerations are found to carry weight they point to the desirability of putting any irreversible decisions on hold and allowing time for consultation with friends within and outside the University on alternative options for securing the future of Commonwealth studies in the University, taking account of your urgent need to address your financial deficits. Reportedly, this is a course you now hope to pursue and if such is indeed the case it is a most welcome development.

I write in a personal capacity from a background of long acquaintance with the work of ICwS in several different capacities in Commonwealth educational co-operation over the last five decades: as 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; member and chair of education/ HE commissions on education in four different Commonwealth countries in Africa; 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 all good wishes

Peter R. C. Williams OBE