

Note of the meeting concerning the proposed closure of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London, 5 November 2020.

Present: Stephen Twigg, Secretary General, CPA

Rita Payne, President Emeritus, Commonwealth Journalists

Lord Howell of Guildford

Nicholas Watts, IFCO, ICWS Fellow

Anne Gallagher, DG, Commonwealth Foundation

Wendy Thomson, VC University of London

Jo Fox, PVC research and SAS Dean , University of London.

The meeting convened to discuss the University of London's (UoL) proposal to close the Institute of Commonwealth Studies (ICWS).

The Vice Chancellor and Acting Dean outlined the rationale for reviewing activities in light of the financial position of the School of Advanced Study, in which ICWS sits, and detailed the effects of COVID-19 on the University's operations and income. In this rapidly changing context, it is not sufficient solely to preserve but to adapt to the new circumstances.

The Dean explained the School's national role and the work being undertaken to develop a forward looking strategy that responds to changing research landscape in the humanities. With declining income, and leaner staffing, priority is being placed on direct academic work over institutional overheads. Existing work streams within ICWS (such as the refugee law and human rights initiatives and work on decolonisation and Black British History) would be well supported elsewhere in the School, building on the legacy of ICWS in a sustainable way. With the current financial situation, the School chose to prioritise academic initiatives over administrative infrastructure, resulting in the proposal to rehouse key work streams and save the ICWS administrative costs.

However, while those financial constraints remain, the consultation process has made clear the need to work toward some entity that builds on and continues the UoL's work in Commonwealth Studies and supports its library collections. The consultation process has brought new partners to the fore that might make that possible.

Issues raised:

Lord Howell advocated for a centre of academic scholarship and research into Commonwealth Studies. He emphasised the importance of 'soft power' influence and the centrality of the Commonwealth network to its transmission and influence in coming years.

Rita Payne spoke to the importance of the ICWS Media Freedom initiative for the Commonwealth Journalists Association and the need for such work to continue. She believed there were donors who would be interested in supporting Commonwealth studies and offered to help with fundraising. The member of staff that was involved in the work on media freedom has retired without resources to replace.

Anne Gallagher of the Commonwealth Foundation underlined the need to work together to reinvent the vision for ICWS, classing its proposed closure as a 'wake-up call' for all interested parties who should assume 'collective responsibility' for future study of the modern Commonwealth.

Nicholas Watts, also a Fellow of ICWS, but attending in his capacity as Chair of the Independent Forum of Accredited Commonwealth Organisations, stressed the value of the Commonwealth to civil society and attested to the importance of the ICWS brand. It was suggested that, in any future incarnation of ICWS, a bolder vision was needed that engaged critical issues of political stability, peace, access to the rule of law, security and defence.

The Vice Chancellor welcomed the interest in the work of the School on the Commonwealth, the opportunity for reaching a collective view on the future role and focus, but stressed the importance of establishing an outcome that is financially sustainable. She explained that the purpose of the current consultation was to reduce costs across the university and required compliance with the agreed process for organisational restructuring. Moving forward, the Vice Chancellor proposed establishing a steering committee to consider what a revitalised ICWS might do, examine what partnerships should be created to underpin its work, and to find a new funding model. This group would report back in six months with recommendations in these three areas.

Agreed actions:

- That given the collective responsibility of all interested parties to continue Commonwealth Studies, further discussions take place to explore options and potential partnerships;
- That the UoL Development Office follow up with Rita Payne (and others) to approach potential donors and sponsors;
- That the Vice Chancellor consider the establishment of a small steering group to bring forward proposals for what a revitalised ICWS might do, examine what partnerships should be created to underpin its work, and to find a new sustainable funding model.

END JF/WT