Future Academic Structure and Academic Organisation of the University

Response from the Centre for American Studies

Over the last ten years, since its formal beginnings in 1997, the Centre for American Studies at Leicester has worked hard to develop its reputation: core members have been elected to American Studies national committees and associations, and have hosted international events such as the 52nd Annual British Association for American Studies Conference (270 delegates) in April 2007 and the American Politics Group Conference (40 delegates) in January 2007. The ranking of 2nd for American Studies at Leicester in this year’s *Guardian* League Tables is an indication of the amount of work we have put into developing the degree, both in terms of its disciplinary range, interdisciplinary coherence, and in terms of the quality of delivery.

We currently have eight core academic staff drawn from four departments (Historical Studies, English, Politics and History of Art & Film), a number of adjunct staff offering American-based modules and working on US-focused research (in Historical Studies, Politics, Film Studies, Modern Languages, and Media & Communication), and we have two very committed administrative staff who ensure the degrees (including the accredited year abroad in the USA) run smoothly. Given that the Centre is a virtual department (with research of academic staff going to ‘home’ departments), we believe it is paramount to protect the identity, cohesion and semi-autonomy of the Centre, as well as retaining its own dedicated support staff. Student feedback has consistently highlighted the service and focus provided by the American Studies office; the high showing in the *Guardian* league table was in no small part a reflection on the efficiency of the office, particularly in its relation to the year abroad.

These developments form the context for our collective response. The comments below follow the pattern of questions in the consultation document, but we would ask for further information on the proposed relationship between bigger units (proposed schools and existing departments) and smaller units (such as the Centre for American Studies, which draws staff from a number of disciplinary bases). It is noticeable, for example, that – bar one brief mention to ‘entrepreneurial centres’ – the word ‘centre’ does not appear in the restructuring document.

1. What is your view of the importance of the four principles for any future academic reorganisation?

We would welcome any proposal that would help encourage interdisciplinary research initiatives; it could be argued that existing structures stand in the way of research ventures across existing departmental boundaries, particularly in terms of who ‘owns’ the research and income generation. However, we have significant questions about the implementation of these principles, particularly in relation to the management and administration of undergraduate programmes. For example, the proposed school model potentially serves the purpose of easing the administrative burden on some staff, but will inevitably increase the burden on others if they are dealing with a pan-school administrative task, such as admissions and enrolment. There are certain processes that must be maintained at the local level, such as the need for each academic unit to have its own Examinations Officer and External Examiners. American Studies has its own
dedicated External Examiners, who between the two of them need to cover a number of disciplines, and an Examinations Officer who must liaise with, and coordinate a range of responses across, the four contributing departments. Given the complexity of examinations for American Studies (drawing on modules with different departmental codes in Year 2 and the Final Year) it is difficult to conceive of their administration occurring on anything but a local level. We would argue that the American Studies programme will suffer if the proposed structure removes the local control we have over examinations, as well as other elements such as the year abroad and the management and coordination of the degree programme.

We are sceptical that the new schools could do without local managers. One problem with the school model (with the new Head of School line-managing all the academics in that school – over 100 for proposed A1) is that it ignores the fact that each departmental unit will need to continue to operate in a semi-autonomous way in order to preserve identity and cohesion. This is important for staff in terms of collegiality and, particularly for American Studies, in terms of students who need a firm sense of ‘home’ as they move between constitutive disciplines.

While this point does not bear directly on the Centre for American Studies, we believe that by abolishing the notion of ‘the department’ the University is less likely to find candidates who are willing to head up an academic unit. Already there is the perception that becoming HoD is a major sacrifice to that person’s research; to be head of a non-departmental academic unit will lack the autonomy and control of a HoD while retaining the responsibilities the role entails. Not only would this be a loss of prestige to current departments, but it flattens the academic structure with some negative consequences in terms of morale and motivation. It is important to retain some layering in order that local managers can ensure smooth functioning of academic units: the larger the unit the less likely it is to function smoothly unless there is a dedicated Head who retains some budgetary control.

2. Do you agree with the analysis of the academic organisation of universities?

On one level the proposal to create a new School (A1/B1) out of the existing Faculty of Arts seems unproblematic, but we are sceptical about the benefits of delayering and whether the new model will actually shorten lines of communication (it would make the Head of School a much more distant manager than existing HoDs) – see 1 above.

The issue of governance is already complex for the Centre for American Studies, which is a teaching unit but not a department and therefore must belong to a ‘parent’ body. Thus, the Centre is currently located in the School of Historical Studies; its Board of Studies is chaired by the Dean of Arts and answers directly to the Faculty of Arts; the Director of American Studies is partly managed by the Dean and partly by his/her HoD; the research of core American Studies staff is owned by their home department; their teaching is coordinated between American Studies and their home departments; and all the staff’s administration goes to American Studies. Moreover, although American Studies is in the Faculty of Arts, some members of staff are located in the Faculty of Social Sciences. Although the new model just replicates this split, if school boundaries are to be firmer than faculty boundaries then it will lead to further problems of ‘belonging’ for American Politics staff, as it will for Historical Studies staff who see themselves as social scientists.
3. Do you agree with the specific proposal that the current faculties and departments should be replaced by schools?

More evidence is needed to convince American Studies staff that there would be advantages to the proposed model, particularly in terms of the abolition of departments. It is important to differentiate between large subject areas (Historical Studies and English) and smaller subjects (American Studies and Film Studies) and the ‘department’/‘centre’ nomenclature serves to do this. There are is also comparative evidence to suggest that the school/department model can be synergistic: for example, the University of Exeter has three Departments of English, Drama and Modern Languages within the School of Arts, Languages and Literatures, and other sub-units within these Departments. Such a variegated model differentiates between large and small units, just as ‘departments’ and ‘centres’ do on the existing model at Leicester.

4. Do you have suggestions to make about the internal organisation of schools?

We believe that it is important that there is a layered system within the school. The Centre for American Studies works very well as a small unit coordinated by a Director of Centre, with its own Director of Teaching, Admissions Officer, Examinations Officer, Year Abroad Officer and support staff for these various functions. We believe the new structure would need to replicate this model for American Studies to continue to function as a semi-autonomous (and smooth running) academic unit.

Some of the mergers suggested do not seem overly problematic: where two units are coming together, an appropriately chosen School name (such as the existing Department of Physics & Astronomy) could adequately reflect the contributing disciplines. However, there are some Faculties, namely A1/B1 and A5/B5 where a wide variety of subjects are placed together. This issue is exacerbated in the case of A1/B1. While we agree that having a range of variegated units in the Faculty of Arts – Schools (Historical Studies, Modern Languages, Archaeology & Ancient History), Departments (English, Museum Studies, History of Art and Film) and Centres – is complex, it is important to retain distinctions between ‘parent’ units and ‘smaller’ units. The Centre for American Studies is different from other research centres (such as English Local History and Urban History) in having a dedicated undergraduate programme and its own students, but with a very strong identity in the Faculty of Arts, with the Director sitting on the Faculty Heads of Department Committee.

5. Do you agree with the argument that the optimum number of schools is nine?

No, 9 does not seem an optimum number. The 15 or 12 school models seem more viable, creating smaller schools that can be better managed by a Head of School, who would be drawn from the Faculty ranks and able to continue some of his/her research while staying in touch with staff. The 15 school model would, for example, allow two large departments within the Faculty of Arts – Historical Studies and English (the largest contributing elements to American Studies) – to exist independently as Schools, with the Centre for American Studies (and possibly a Centre for Film Studies) a unit in either one of these Schools, but with close relationship to the other school (as well as with the social sciences), and with a trans-school Board of Studies.
6. Do you have a preference for option A or B?

They are both the same for A1 and B1. But see comment 5 above

7. What alternative subject grouping might there be in schools?

See 5 above

8. What title might each of the proposed schools have?

We would ask that an independent School of Historical Studies and an independent School of English be considered, with American Studies and Film Studies being semi-autonomous Centres in either one of these schools, but maintaining close links to the other school and to the social science disciplines.

9. Do you have other suggestions about the number of schools and the grouping of subjects?

See 5 above.

10. What might the disciplinary sub-units be called?

We would want to keep either:

(i) ‘School’/‘Centre’ on the 15 school model, or
(ii) ‘School’/‘Department’/‘Centre’ on the 9 school model

In both of these options we would want to retain dedicated Heads of Department who maintain some budgetary control over their academic unit.

All the other terms – ‘divisions’, ‘subject centres’, ‘disciplines’ – are inadequate replacements: they do not reflect the integrity of teaching/research units and would lead to a loss of prestige in the eyes students and staff. ‘Institute’ is the best of these terms, but it is an inadequate synonym for ‘department’. In some universities ‘institute’ is used instead of ‘centre’ to suggest a small unit or cluster: for example, at the University of Nottingham the Institute of Film Studies is a small unit in the School of American & Canadian Studies. Moreover, ‘institutes’ may suffer the same problems that often beset ‘centres’, leading at times to being missed off databases and surveys, both university-wide and nationwide: for example, in the National Student Survey American Studies at Leicester has been aggregated with History.

We would propose that, if the 9 school model is adopted, the larger units should be called ‘departments’ with their own Heads within the new school structure (e.g. History, English, and Archaeology & Ancient History) and other smaller ‘centres’ with their own programmes managed by a Director (e.g. American Studies and Film Studies). We would reserve the word ‘department’ only for those units with their own teaching programmes with a significant number of FTEs.

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On behalf of staff in the Centre for American Studies