Response to Consultation from Department of Sociology

We welcome the opportunity to comment on the document, *The Future Academic Structure and Academic Organisation of the University*. We support the request from the Faculty of Science that ‘the University delays the proposed deadline for responses to enable effective discussion and consultation’ both within Departments and Faculties. The timing of the release of the current document has not allowed for effective discussion of strengths and weaknesses of the current structure and a full analysis of the risks, benefits and costs of the proposed reorganisation.

The present document contains some ambiguities and thus there are many questions that need to be addressed before Departments can provide an effective response. These include budgetary issues, the decision making structure, control over core activities (teaching, research); and the issue of job security.

Starting with the budgets, we have questions relating to the budgetary autonomy of Schools. Questions include: Will Schools have the autonomy to decide on how to use their budget without recourse to the Centre? How will School budgets be allocated and what mechanisms will there be to ensure that this fairly reflects their income and needs? Will disciplinary sub-units have the autonomy to decide on how to use their budget without recourse to the Head of School?

Our second concern relates to the administration of the disciplinary sub-units and the Schools. For example, Will the current Departments have input into the implementation of the proposed reorganization? Will Schools be able to determine their own structures and select their disciplinary sub-unit leaders internally? What will be the role of the disciplinary sub-units in the administration of the School? Will the sub-units be able to preserve the integrity of their current teaching programmes in new Schools? By what processes can major administrative roles be reduced?

The suggested School structure, while hopefully allowing for greater flexibility, interdisciplinary research and teaching as well as facilitating the development of Centres, might also, with regard to the decision- making structure, undermine School performance and its ‘disciplinary sub-units. Schools should have the autonomy to determine their structures and select the leaders of their ‘disciplinary sub-units’ to manage their resources and activities. It is essential that there is an effective structure for representing the disciplinary sub-units’ interests within the School as well as in the University. The Heads of Schools must have representation on the University Executive board or its equivalent.

The proposal seems to be driven too much by the University’s desire to centralise the decision making process and to ‘operate in the market place’. Not enough attention is paid to research links, academic interests and new research horizons. For example, the recent calls by Beck, Castells, Giddens and Urry for a re-conceptualization of the social sciences toward a more ‘cosmopolitan outlook’ means that the proposed School of Social Science (A5 or B5) should include Geography, CLMS and Criminology. Such a School would enhance the development of research links around some of the central topics in the social sciences of today and tomorrow: globalization, post-colonialism, migration, democracy, language and health.
Restructuring that releases academics for research by ‘easing their administrative burden’ and aims to improve our core activities of teaching and research is welcome. However, we are concerned that re-structuring into Schools could threaten our disciplinary identity. Losing our identity as the ‘Department of Sociology’ could jeopardise our national and international reputation and image, and therefore our professional standing with knock on effects to teaching and research income. Since any change to the existing structure potentially puts these core activities at risk, threatens established identities, reputations, stability and security - as well as costing time and money in itself– we would like to see a more clear comparison of the benefits and costs involved in the current and proposed structures and a more detailed analysis of the possible outcomes.

Looking at the proposed School Structures A5 and B5; neither option is totally satisfactory from the perspective of Sociology. While we welcome incorporation with Economics (option A), we also regard it as essential that strong operational links should be maintained with Criminology. We are concerned that option A might, unless appropriate provision is made, undermine the delivery of our joint BA Criminology. On the other hand, option B places Sociology in the School which would have the smallest income. Taking into account the research interests of the departments concerned and economies of the scale (essential, for example, for the expansion and the internationalization of DL postgraduate programmes), we are of the opinion that B5 should include CLMS and/or Geography.

In response to Consultation Question 10; relevant experience in other universities (e.g. the University of Birmingham, Kings College London, University of Surrey) indicates that sub-units called Departments can function effectively within a School structure. Our first preference is for the Department of Sociology to continue to exist as a named entity with a new School.

Other key issues are the potential deployment of staff and protection of individual interests. Although the Vice-Chancellor’s covering letter promises that there will be no redundancies and no downgrading of academic and administrative staff, we would like to see these assurances formally guaranteed in a binding document. Specifically, Document’s point 55, that 'support staff would be significantly affected by a shift to a unitary School structure' needs explanation and clarification. We would also welcome reassurances that staff will not be redeployed outside of existing subject units. It is essential that the level of existing teaching, support and administrative structures should be maintained, and, as far as possible, reinforced.

Finally, we would like responses to several questions about resources, time and costs of the implementation of the new structure. What resources will be provided for the Department to cope with any costs of restructuring? What is the timetable for the implementation strategy? Who will be responsible for the implementation? What is the estimated cost of the whole process? What can be learned from the Birmingham University’s (apparently unsuccessful) move to the School structure?