

## **University of Birmingham, Department of Sociology**

### **Submission to Senate and Council regarding the Recommendations of the Executive Board of the College of Social Sciences**

#### **Executive Summary:**

The Department believes the Sociology Review Group to have presented a flawed report and that its recommendations do not have a secure evidence base or appropriate vision for social science at the University of Birmingham.

The Recommendations to Senate and Council, if acted upon, would damage social science at Birmingham, damage the educational experience of current cohorts of students, weaken the University's civic mission and damage its reputation in the national and international academic community.

The Department proposes that sustainable excellence in sociology and social science at the University of Birmingham requires attention both to the quality of social science subjects and to the overall shape of social science:

- Excellent interdisciplinary social science requires strong disciplinary sociology, economics and political science.
- Discipline-based sociology thrives in an interdisciplinary context, but interdisciplinary social studies is not a substitute for sociology.
- Discipline-based sociology cannot be sustained on the basis of three members of staff. The Department proposes that a staff establishment of 10-12 (and equivalent support staff) would be appropriate and that this number is supported by a proper consideration of the evidence.
- The Department proposes that the evidence supports undergraduate applicant numbers at around 75 FTEs and the continuation of course modules in media and cultural studies, which are recognised internationally as major strengths of UK sociology. These modules should remain in an undergraduate degree in Sociology. Equally, the MA in Media, Culture and Society is successful in recruiting overseas students and should remain.
- The Department accepts that the current undergraduate degree in Media, Culture and Society cannot continue in its present form. However, it does not believe that the alternative that it proposed has been properly considered by the Review Group, and neither have the implications of its withdrawal for programmes in the College of Arts and Law. Since the Department recommends maintaining its modules in Media, Culture and Society, this decision can be reviewed. It therefore recommends only the temporary suspension of the undergraduate degree in Media, Culture and Society.
- Members of the Department have no particular commitment to a departmental structure and are happy to be a recognised, discipline-based sociology group within another Unit. They recognise that the initial appointment strategy adopted by the University when setting up the Department was flawed and gave rise to a 'bottom heavy' department that can be resolved by merger.

#### **The Department respectfully asks Senate and Council to:**

- 1) Reject the proposals of the College of Social Sciences Executive Board as being based on a flawed review process and evidence base.**
- 2) Institute a new, transparent review of Sociology that includes all stakeholders, lifts the threat of redundancies and addresses the institution's wider strategy for the social sciences.**

## **Detailed Response:**

We are shocked and dismayed by the recommendations to Senate and Council made by the Executive Board of the College of Social Sciences. If implemented, the recommendations will cause significant damage to students, social science at Birmingham and the wider reputation of the University. We urge Senate and Council to reject the recommendations and establish a proper review of Sociology in the context of a strategy for the social sciences. Such a review should lift the threat of redundancies, meet its terms of reference, and be collegial in its consultation.

### 1. *Review Process:*

- 1.1. The Department was willing to be fully engaged in the process and prepared briefing papers that were presented to the Heads of the Colleges of Social Sciences and Arts and Law and to the PVC for Research and Knowledge Transfer in summer term 2008. However, the Review was delayed for a further year and, in the meantime, the Department was advised that its suggestions would need to wait until the Review commenced.
- 1.2. Having eventually been established, the Review Group had no member of Sociology on it, and a request from the then Vice President (Education and Access) of the Guild of Students to sit on the Group was refused. In addition to Deputy PVC Stephen Shute, as Chair, the Group consisted of 3 College administrative staff and 3 academic staff, all of whom were members of senior management at University or College Executive Board level.
- 1.3. Two respected senior external sociology advisers were appointed, but were denied the opportunity to meet the Department and its students (as is usual in review processes) and met with Panel members only once (and even then this consisted only of the Chair and two non-academic members).
- 1.4. The Department requested the opportunity to see the Report of the Review Group before it was discussed at College Board, so that it could make representations and correct errors and misunderstandings. This request was denied. The current 'consultation' is no such thing: if Council ratifies the recommendations, the consultation will occur under University ordinances regarding redundancy processes.

### 2. *Research Analysis* (see Appendix 1):

- 2.1. The Review Group and Professor Peck adopt the analysis provided by Professor Skelcher without addressing the Department's arguments against it. The issue of 'selectivity' in an RAE submission is not only how Grade Point Average may be improved by leaving individuals out, but also what selectivity says about the underlying performance of a unit.
- 2.2. The Department of Sociology had the highest proportion of staff submitted in the College (and, indeed, the University), while other Units of Assessment in the College of Social Sciences had some of the lowest proportions of eligible staff selected for the RAE. This was as low as 50% in the case of one submission (and even lower in the case of component units within submissions). The Department has consistently asked Professor Skelcher to estimate this effect (eg by providing a proxy maximum score of 1 for each output item on a non-submitted, but eligible member of staff; we attempt a proxy analysis in appendix 1). Were this to be done, the 'profile' of other Units of Assessment within the College would likely look worse than that of Sociology.
- 2.3. The University's commitment to a strategy of sustainable excellence and research-led teaching is belied by the high proportion of staff in the College who were not submitted in RAE 2008, when compared with Sociology.
- 2.4. The distribution of profile scores is assumed by the Review Group to lie with specific individuals consistently underperforming (ie all output items marked below 2), whereas the Sociology Subject Panel report clearly indicated that the outputs of individuals were not consistent and attributed this to the fact that many members of staff were in their first RAE.
- 2.5. Reference is made to a weak trajectory of individual performance since RAE 2008. However, the only 'engagement' the Review Group made with the research activity of individuals was a request for a simple list of publications, with no discussion of the context and plans that underpin a 'trajectory'. In

any case, even if the 'trajectory' was thought to be weak, problems of mentoring (in a Department with few experienced senior staff) had been reported to the University - and to Professor Peck in particular - with request for assistance from before the last RAE submission. This was part of the Department's request for early review. However, no action was taken by Professor Peck and the review was delayed.

- 2.6. Reference is also made to a weak performance of the Centre for the Study of Ethnicity and Culture. We note that there was a review of Research Centres in the College carried out during 2008 by the Director of Research, Professor Skelcher, but that the Centre was not included in this and was to be treated as part of the forthcoming review of the Department. We note that it was not, in fact, included in the Review and the Centre was suspended by decision of the College Board in July 2009. We note that this suspension of the Centre was not communicated to members of the Department, or to members of the Centre. Thus, a crucial aspect of the activities of the Department has been subject to a decision outside any due process.
3. *Analysis of Teaching and Student Recruitment* (See Appendix 2):
    - 3.1. Professor Peck's report to Senate and Council provides data on recruitment, but it is highly selective, with trend figures affected by the closure of the Department of Cultural Studies and Sociology in 2002, from which significant recovery was made before the sector-wide impact of student fees. Applications to Sociology recovered and rose in 2008 and in 2009. It is clear that there is currently weakness in recruitment to the undergraduate degree in Media, Culture and Society (indeed, this was first highlighted by the Department back in summer 2008, when it requested discussion of the situation). However, Sociology numbers are buoyant and compare well with the sector.
    - 3.2. The Sociology 'offer' is lower than that of POLSIS or Economics. However, in the context of the proposed transfer of the undergraduate degree in Sociology to the Institute of Applied Social Studies, it should be noted that it is higher than Social Policy.
    - 3.3. The appropriate comparison, however, is between all subjects and their comparators at other Universities. This is done in appendix 2, where it is clear that the College pursuit of excellence, and its endorsement of over-recruitment in POLSIS and Economics, involves support for programmes whose offer is set lower than that of their comparators (which is why over-recruitment in the current academic year occurred in these subjects).
    - 3.4. Professor Peck's over-hasty transfer of student numbers from Sociology to other subjects prior to the Review Group's report was not based upon a proper analysis of the reasons for over-recruitment. This revealed a willingness on Professor Peck's part to have the shape of College determined by undergraduate recruitment and simple 'headline indicators', in much the same way as his endorsement of RAE GPA score and rank order is an orientation to 'headlines', without regard to the impact of selectivity.
    - 3.5. The Department accepts that there are difficulties in teaching the undergraduate Media, Culture and Society degree, but this derives from its status as an interdisciplinary degree dependent on input from other Departments in the Colleges of Social Sciences and Arts and Law, which requires broader commitment from other Departments to deliver. This commitment has been weak and that has had consequences for how the degree has been placed in the market. The Department provided a robust solution, which was endorsed by Professor Ryan's review of the Department's teaching portfolio, although that endorsement is not mentioned in either the Review Group's report, or in Professor Peck's report.
    - 3.6. The Review Group's recommendation that the Department should withdraw from all teaching in media and cultural studies is based upon a severe misunderstanding. The courses associated with this degree do not 'distort' the undergraduate Sociology programme, they contribute to its distinctiveness and are research-led. This has been something that has been commented upon very positively by external examiners in their reports, but these seem not to have been considered by the Review Group. Moreover, the Sociology RAE Sub Panel report for the discipline as a whole identified the sociology of culture as a very distinctive new area of sociology. Of course, it is one in which the University of Birmingham has a world-reputation, notwithstanding its apparent willingness to squander it.

- 3.7. Finally, while it would follow that the Department of Sociology cannot continue to offer an undergraduate degree in MCS without substantial input from the College of Arts and Law (which now, apparently, is not forthcoming), it can continue to offer an MA programme in MCS since this would require fewer modules and is an area of research expertise in the Department. Since the current MA programme recruits 19 students, of which 15 are overseas, this is a substantial asset that would help support the current staff establishment.
- 3.8. We recommend that a proper review of undergraduate teaching in the general area of Media and Cultural studies is undertaken across the Colleges of Social Sciences and Arts and Law. We regret that the proposal to withdraw the undergraduate degree in Media and Cultural Studies has been made, but note that our own proposals allow that decision to be revisited in due course. However, we do note with concern that the decision to withdraw the degree will have major consequences for the undergraduate degrees in Culture, Society and Communication offered by the College of Arts and Law, which rely upon modules within the inter-linked degree in Media, Culture and Society. We note that these consequences are not discussed in the report, despite the membership of the Head of the College of Arts and Law on the Sociology Review Group.

#### 4. *Status of Evidence*

- 4.1. We believe the recommendations to be out of line with the evidence submitted to the Review Group.
- 4.2. The Review Group Report and Professor Peck's Report each draw upon the external advisers' statement that what mattered was the maintenance of sociology as a vibrant discipline, not the structure in which it was located. They rightly observed that many strong sociology groups are found in Schools of Sociology and Social Policy. The Department's own submissions back in summer 2008 made a similar point. We do not argue to keep a Department of Sociology, but to keep a distinctive sociology activity.
- 4.3. No evidence provided to the Review Group suggested that this could be done with as few as 3 dedicated members of staff. We believe that a minimum complement would be 10-12 and we think it likely that the external advisers made a similar recommendation. In his Review of Teaching, Professor Ryan recommended that, "subject to academic viability, the staff complement be maintained at its current level of 14 staff", but this is not mentioned in the Review Group Report.

#### 5. *Consequences*

- 5.1. We believe that the consequences for existing students will be severe, just as they were when the University closed the Department of Cultural Studies and Sociology in 2002.
- 5.2. The prospect for incoming students is also unattractive. The proposal is that 3 members of staff will be able to teach core modules in the undergraduate degree in sociology. The remaining modules will be an aggregation of modules provided for other purposes and within other programmes across the College. They will not be benchmarked against subject-guidelines for sociology, and they will be part of 'progression' arrangements within other degree programmes.
- 5.3. It should not escape attention that what is being proposed is similar to, but less coherent than, the current arrangements for the undergraduate degree in MCS. The evidence from MCS is that a degree organised in this way is not attractive to incoming students, even where the external market is buoyant.
- 5.4. The emphasis in the College of Social Sciences is upon applied research – for example, in management studies, public and social policy, development and international studies, and in education studies – and this, we must suppose, is from where options will be drawn. The programme will not look like programmes at comparator universities, even those where sociology is not organised within a stand-alone department.
- 5.5. Equally, the University's emphasis upon 'sustainable excellence' must also give regard to the shape of the social sciences. The shape of the College of Social Sciences will be very different to that of other comparator universities, which all have strong, 'core' social science disciplines such as economics,

political science and sociology. With the closure of sociology, Birmingham will have the 'shape' in the social sciences of a second-tier university, not the first-tier to which it aspires.

- 5.6. The University prides itself upon being the first civic university in the UK, yet the shape of its social sciences are poorly matched to the community in which it is based. With close to 50% of the population from ethnic minority backgrounds, the absence of appropriate sociological research and education and a properly functioning centre for research in ethnicities will be very severely felt. Indeed, Birmingham will be the only major city in the UK in which none of its universities have a thriving presence of discipline-based sociology.

The new HEFCE Research Excellence Framework endorses research excellence with impact. It is ironic that calls for 'evidence-based policy' should find our own College of Social Sciences to be making policy recommendations to Senate and Council on a seriously flawed evidence base. We believe that these flaws could easily have been corrected if the Sociology Review had been conducted in an appropriate way. Professor Peck states that, "it would not be plausible to have a fully rounded College of Social Sciences without the presence of the discipline of sociology". Nevertheless, that is what he has recommended to you.

**Final Note:** The Department has been placed in a very difficult position by a series of comments in Professor Peck's Report to Senate and Council, which are also in the Review Group's report. *Inter alia*, these comments state the Department to be divided and characterised by poor morale, to have problematic supervision arrangements for PhD students that have been subject to complaint, and to have been unable to provide a Head of Department since January 2009. In addition, the Centre for the Study of Ethnicity and Culture is stated as having been assigned a crucial role for research leadership in the Department and that it has failed in this role since RAE 2008. The Department deplores the fact that this list of 'symptoms' and 'consequences' has been described, but that it is not stated that they all have a single cause relating to a serious personnel matter that is subject to a confidentiality clause. If the cause could not be stated, the Department believes that neither should its consequences be stated, and believes there to be a serious breach of ethics involved in doing so, since it is unable to respond.

## Appendix 1: Research Analysis

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the Department is being subject to special and unfair treatment. While its RAE performance was not good, it was not strongly out of line with that of other Units of Assessment in the College of Social Sciences. Moreover, as a Department that was established in October 2004, it did at least have the explanation that the unit was set up half-way through the RAE census period, and was skewed toward staff being entered for their first RAE. This was recognised by the Chair of the Strategic Review of the Department undertaken in 2004, Professor Judith Petts (current PVC Research and Knowledge Transfer and Chair of the University Research and Knowledge Transfer Committee), who stated that: “*the University needs to recognise that the outcome of 2008 may be modest relative to the leading departments. The panel cannot emphasis strongly enough that should this be the case, the University must hold its nerve and continue to support the department.*” It is clear that the Review Group has neither held its nerve, nor paid sufficient attention to the cogency of Professor Petts’s argument.

Crucially, the Review Group and College Board have reacted to a crude measure of RAE ranking and Grade Point Average score. Yet, it is aware that these scores are affected by the proportion of staff in a unit selected for submission to the RAE. Although HEFCE does not have this information, the University has it for its own submissions. Clearly, where staff were not selected for submission, it was because their research outputs were considered not to meet the basic threshold for submission. While the University’s overall ‘selectivity’ was high, that of the College of Social Sciences was well below the University’s average and varied between close to 100% (Sociology) to approximately 50% (Business Studies). These data have not been made available, despite representations to the Review Group that they would be necessary in order to provide a proper evaluation of the department’s performance in the light of that of other units in the College. This includes the serious underperformance of some units, measured in terms of submission rates to the RAE.

Making some rough estimates of selectivity in other units, even in financial terms, the QR funding per FTE in Sociology of £9,445 would not look significantly different from the rest of the College: Business Studies would move to £8,641; if POLSIS submitted only about 90% of its staff complement, the equivalent QR funding would be £11,433; assuming a 75% submission rate, Social Work/Social Policy would yield £13,435, while a 75% submission rate in Education would yield £11,123.

Unit of assessment (UOA) name	Staff	2009-10 Mainstream QR allocation (£)	Funding per FTE	Staff	2008-09 Mainstream QR allocation (£)	Funding per FTE	Funding change 08/09-09/10
Town and Country Planning	11.0	£195,061	£17,733				
Economics and Econometrics	21.4	£376,113	£17,592	16.7	£134,556	£8,057	£241,557
Business and Management Studies	47.0	£812,827	£17,283	23.5	£224,702	£9,562	£588,125
Politics and International Studies	28.0	£355,670	£12,703	20.0	£583,583	£29,179	-£227,913
Social Work and Social Policy & Administration	26.1	£467,908	£17,914	15.7	£171,034	£10,894	£296,874
Sociology	18.0	£170,018	£9,445				£170,018

Development Studies	7.8	£94,480	£12,051				
Education	46.8	£694,080	£14,831	49.6	£1,810,282	£36,498	£-1,116,202
European Studies	19.5	£330,388	£16,978	19.0	£497,193	£26,168	£-166,805
Public policy submission 2001				51.1	£591,566	£11,577	
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>225.6</b>	<b>£3,496,545</b>	<b>£15,497</b>	<b>196</b>	<b>£4,012,916</b>	<b>£20,516</b>	<b>£-516,371</b>

Once selectivity is taken into account the difference in RAE performance across the College, when translated into QR per FTE, is substantially reduced. Moreover, the serious financial issues generated by the RAE settlement – namely, the funding reductions between RAE 2001 and RAE 2008 in Education and in the area of Politics (Politics and International Studies + European Studies) are not subject to review.

If a more focused analysis is provided of performance within the School of Government and Society, then, again, with even minimum account for the special circumstances of Sociology as a newly formed unit, its performance does not look out of line with that of other units within the School:

<b>OUTPUTS</b>	<b>4*</b>	<b>3*</b>	<b>2*</b>	<b>1*</b>	<b>0</b>
Politics and International Studies	5	35	41	18	1
Sociology	6.3	17.1	32.9	39	4.7
Development Studies	5.6	25	38.8	30.6	0
European Studies	5.8	23.3	44.2	17.4	9.3
<b>ENVIRONMENT</b>	<b>4*</b>	<b>3*</b>	<b>2*</b>	<b>1*</b>	<b>0</b>
Politics and International Studies	0	60	40	0	0
Sociology	10	50	40	0	0
Development Studies	20	30	40	10	0
European Studies	60	40	0	0	0
<b>ESTEEM</b>	<b>4*</b>	<b>3*</b>	<b>2*</b>	<b>1*</b>	<b>0</b>
Politics and International Studies	0	100	0	0	0
Sociology	0	10	90	0	0
Development Studies	0	40	60	0	0
European Studies	60	30	10	0	0

Sociology had a *higher* proportion of 4\* outputs than other units, while research environment scores were equivalent to those of POLSIS and Development Studies, despite the fact that the Department of Sociology had only been set up in 2004. Only the esteem score was significantly worse, but here the explanation is straightforward; esteem scores disadvantage early career academics, and Sociology had a much higher proportion of staff in this position than other units.

A School of Government and Society without Sociology will be a strange entity, but the peculiarity of the Review process is that, despite the terms of reference, no consideration is being given to the shape of the wider College and its constituent Schools. The consequences of the closure of Sociology, as an activity within the School of Government and Society and the College, has simply not been addressed. However, what is clear is that the closure is not warranted in the light of performance when compared with other units.

The University lies in 24<sup>th</sup> place in a rank order of RAE Grade Point Average for social science subjects. Documents were supplied to the Review Group indicating why weakness in sociology might be associated with weakness in Birmingham social science more generally. The analysis derives from ESRC reports on the shape of social sciences and its distinction between ‘importer’ and ‘exporter’ subjects. The latter include Politics, Economics and Sociology, while the former include Education, Business Studies and Social Policy. It is clear that Birmingham has a higher proportion of academic staff in ‘importer’ subjects when compared with similar universities. One of the weaknesses of ‘importer’ subjects as identified by the ESRC is that of research capacity. In this context, the weak research environment performance of the University’s social science activities is significant. To some degree, the fragility of the situation at Birmingham has been masked by apparent improvements in some areas, but those improvements are put in a different light once it is recognised that they were bought at the cost of greater selectivity.

## Appendix 2: Student Recruitment

A further factor that seems to have influenced the College Board is the impact of the over-recruitment of undergraduate student numbers by the College of Social Sciences in the present academic year, largely in Economics and Politics. This was defended by the Head of College in terms of an increase in student quality (as measured by A-level grades and equivalent). In other words, the offer scores of Sociology (and Media, Culture and Society) candidates are not as high as those for Economics and for Politics. However, when comparison is made between Birmingham and other Russell Group departments, it is clear that Birmingham’s Economics and Politics departments have offer levels *below* those of their comparator departments, whereas Sociology has offer levels broadly in line with, or above them.

University	Economics		Politics		Sociology		Social Policy	
	Offer	N	Offer	N	Offer	N	Offer	N
University of Birmingham	ABB	233	ABB	140	BBB [MCS: ABB]	51 50	BBC	45
University of Bristol	AAA - AAB including grade A in Mathematics	80	AAA-AAB (offers normally towards top of range).	40	ABB	55	BBB	20
University College London	A*AA to include grade A* in Mathematics		AAB-ABB					

University of Leeds	AAB		AAB		BBB		BBC	
London School of Economics	AAA, one of which must be Mathematics	200	AAB	25	BBB	31	BBB	3
University of Manchester	AAB	190	AAB	50	BBB	42	-	-
Newcastle University	AAB	?	AAA/BBB	?	BBB	?	-	-
University of Nottingham	AAA	113	AAB	109	BBB	70	BBB	10
University of Sheffield	ABB	?	AAB	?	BBB	?	BBC	?

It seems that the overall increase in ‘quality’ that the College of Social Sciences seeks to achieve is at the cost of the shape of the social sciences in the College. Moreover, it is only achieved by ‘undercutting’ the offers of comparator universities. In this context, the over-recruitment of undergraduate students by the College is clearly a consequence of the relatively low offer levels in key subjects. The Head of College ‘celebrated’ this over-recruitment and made it ‘permanent’ by transferring staff posts from Sociology to POLSIS and Economics, thereby pre-empting the conclusions of the Review Group. However, it should be clear that this ‘unplanned’ over-recruitment was not based upon success, and that the improvement of the College’s overall ‘offer’ is bought at the cost of a serious distortion in its shape. The transfer of Sociology student numbers to Economics and Politics will also have a major impact upon widening participation, owing to the considerably more diverse make-up of the Sociology student body. The shift of the undergraduate programme in Sociology to a merged unit with Social Policy, without the equivalent FTEs to support it, is the crudest form of ‘asset-stripping’ and will severely damage the educational experience of students.

The Department repudiates its representation by the Review in terms of two distinct activities, namely sociology and media/cultural studies. The Department is a single entity offering two undergraduate degree programmes in Sociology and in Media, Culture and Society. However, these two degree programmes are overlapping and share a number of compulsory courses. The closure of the MCS programme will have a significant impact upon the integrity of the degree programme in Sociology, precisely because media/cultural studies is a central area of teaching and research across the Department. Moreover, recent reports on the discipline – for example, the RAE Sociology Sub-Panel report – identify cultural sociology as one of the internationally most significant sub-fields of the discipline.

Sociology is also an ‘exporter’ subject to a number of different interdisciplinary areas, including media/cultural studies. The Department has previously proposed that one way of tackling issues of shape and necessary investment in the Department might be by creating a new unit responsible for an interdisciplinary undergraduate programme in film, media and cultural studies (which would require significant input from the College of Arts and Law in order to match comparator programmes). The Department was clear that this proposal did not imply that any of the current research areas of the Department were less central to a discipline-based Department of Sociology. The Review Group failed to provide proper consideration of these possibilities. They could have formed the platform for the strong sociology presence that the Review group conceded was vital to the health of the social sciences at Birmingham