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Interdisciplinarity without frontiers

Like many others, we have just received copies of the ESRC Strategic Plan for 2009-14. The ESRC's vision highlights the three 'I's – impact, innovation and interdisciplinarity. As Directors of the five Language Based Area Studies (LBAS) centres, established as a strategic initiative by the ESRC/AHRC/HEFCE/SFC with current funding for 2006-11, we enthusiastically support the ESRC emphasis on all three 'I's. The LBAS initiative is already just such an innovative interdisciplinary project across the social sciences and humanities.

It seems to us, however, that the ESRC has missed a trick or two.

We are surprised that the ESRC's strategy seems to make so little of the humanities-social sciences interaction that can play a vital role in addressing so many of today's urgent research themes. For example, biomedical advances risk not making their mark if divorced from socio-economic research, but also if divorced from an understanding of culture and language – to say nothing of the need for adducing historical and cultural factors in research on conflict. In addition, we are disappointed that the ESRC has not highlighted more prominently language/communication, without which dimension there is a risk that UK research in an interconnected world will fall short in achieving world-leading international impact.

LBAS research, with its credibility firmly anchored in a knowledge of the languages, builds vital capacity and feeds directly into the UK public and private sectors, both through its impact – in such areas as international security, global economy, health, migration and culture, politics and new media – and through employment of our graduates.

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