



Professor P. Ramsden
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Dear Professor Ramsden

GEES Subject Centre

As co-chairs of the GEES Subject Centre Advisory Board, we are writing to alert you to some concerns the Board has raised following discussion about the relationship between the GEES Subject Centre (GEES SC) and the Higher Education Academy's York-based functions.

Since the GEES SC was established in January 2000, it has succeeded in developing a strong reputation (nationally and internationally) for the quality of its work in enriching learning and teaching and for its focus on supporting the work of the disciplines it serves. Through the provision of a wide range of activities and services, it has successfully assisted the GEES academic communities to address a series of established and emerging agendas. Naturally, the Advisory Board (drawn from across the GEES HE communities) is keen to ensure that our Subject Centre is able to build on and enhance its contribution to our disciplines and to the learning experience of our students. However, we are concerned that some aspects of the operation of Academy York are in danger of impeding rather than facilitating the Subject Centre's work.

Since the HEA's establishment in 2004, it appears to the Board that an increasing amount of GEES SC staff time and efforts are being absorbed in responding to requests from York for views and information. One of the consequences of the growth in the scale of operations of the HEA appears to have been that Subject Centres are now tending to get caught up in a series of reviews, consultations, evaluations and monitoring exercises. Moreover, some of the projects led and initiated by Academy York (eg SNAS and the Portal) have proved time-consuming but not particularly well-managed or effective. These extra activities must inevitably deflect resources from the Subject Centre's principal task, namely meeting the direct needs of staff and students. We recognise, of course, that Subject Centres will on occasion need to assist with the wider work of the Academy, but taken too far this will in time damage the Subject Centres' key role. Importantly too, the external perception will be that the level of support available to the GEES community is lessening. The Board is therefore anxious about a possible reduction in support for the GEES disciplines and wishes to act now to avoid this becoming a reality.

The Advisory Board does also have some concerns about all Subject Centres being expected to focus increasingly on national agendas. While we recognise that there are potential benefits of this approach for the HEA as a whole (and indeed some advantages for GEES), nonetheless this increased "prescription" does tend to reinforce our concerns about a trend towards centralisation and the dangers of reduced priority being given to the particular needs of the

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GEES communities. It is our view that the HEA's principal strength, and major work lies in the network of Subject Centres. As indicated in the Oakleigh Report, these are the Academy's "flagships", but their work sometimes seems understated and under-represented in HEA documents and discussions. The GEES staff team continue to do an excellent job in supporting our subject-based communities but the Advisory Board is concerned by the clear trend towards the GEES SC appearing to "belong" to the HEA more than to its subject communities. We would therefore propose a philosophical shift towards an Academy York with a lighter touch and more facilitative style. It is this kind of management approach and practice which will allow our Subject Centre and the others to flourish and thereby best meet the needs of the HE community as a whole.

The points made above are not in any way intended to be critical of the individuals at the HEA who work at the Subject Centre interface. Indeed we know that the GEES team very much value the support and advice of colleagues such as David Sadler and Laila Burton and that they welcome the recent review by Linda Challis. Moreover, we would like to make clear that our intention is to alert the Academy to our concerns in a positive way and to contribute constructively to the dialogue about the relationship between Subject Centres and Academy York. In this regard, we would, therefore, very much like to invite a senior colleague from York to attend our next Advisory Board meeting (date to be agreed).

We look forward to hearing from you

Yours sincerely

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