

## HEALTH POLICY

## Call made for social justice in health policy

Never shy of tackling a tough question, the University's Menzies Centre for Health Policy and the Oxford Health Alliance (OxHA) Asia Pacific Centre hosted a seminar to ask how Australia's new health policies are approaching the core issue of social disadvantage in health and illness.

Co-chaired by Professor Stephen Leeder and Associate Professor Ruth Colagiuri, the seminar looked at the three national health reform initiatives commissioned by Health Minister Nicola Roxon, and asked whether Australia could meet its target of being 'the healthiest country' by 2020.

Mike Daube, deputy chair of the National Preventative Health Taskforce and president of the Public Health Association, detailed the directions being taken by the taskforce. Fran Baum, a commissioner on the WHO's Commission on Social Determinants of Health and a longstanding champion of abolishing inequalities, took issue with the 'healthiest country' policy. She stressed the need to commit to a social justice approach and spoke about the folly of addressing illness in isolation from its socio-economic context.

Tony Hobbs, chair of the Primary Health Care External Reference Group, argued that a well-resourced, integrated primary care system based on a whole of government approach and positive community engagement were critical to enabling Australia to address issues of social equity in relation to health. John Catford detailed the advocacy case for how we might convince governments to act on these imperatives and Geoff Gallop, NHHR Commissioner and director of the University's Graduate School of Government, emphasised the importance of "starting the wheel of reform in the right place".

During the general debate, audience members underlined the urgency of ensuring that Australia's health policies take account of social determinants of health. Are there synergies between the three reform agendas? On what issues do they diverge? Are the commissioners talking to each other? Will the reports simply pay lip service to social justice or will they tackle this fundamental issue?

And the pragmatists wondered what the health minister will do when these reports, and the multiplicity, complexity and implications of their various recommendations for government spending and structural barriers, land on her desk.

**A/Professor Ruth Colagiuri  
Menzies Centre for Health Policy,  
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## VICE-CHANCELLOR'S WORKSLATE

## Area studies: the way ahead

One of the most intriguing items on the Vice-Chancellor's work slate published earlier this year was a proposal to set up a group to explore the feasibility of University-wide 'area studies' programs.

As geographically-based centres of interdisciplinary research and scholarship, area studies units traditionally bring together specialists from the social sciences and humanities such as historians, political scientists, geographers, sociologists and linguists.

The idea dates back to the end of the Second World War, when America reacted to its perceived lack of knowledge about the rest of the world – and to the military threat posed by the Soviet Union and China – by introducing an area studies strategy at many universities.

Sixty years on, is it still a worthwhile idea? *Uni News* asked Professor Stephen Garton, who is chairing the review panel set up to investigate the proposal.

**Q: What are the advantages for the University of adopting an area studies model?**

A: I think one key advantage is that we could increase our capacity for interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research. We would then be able to harvest some of our great academic riches – great scholars and great students who are currently in separate parts of the University. And I think we have the capacity to think beyond the conventional social science focus of area studies to embrace a much wider range of expertise, notably in the sciences, health sciences and the professions. In some regional areas of study we have a lot of scholars and research students who are working in isolation. If we can bring them together it gives the University a greater capacity to build its knowledge base for the next generation and tackle the big questions of the 21st century that pertain to particular regions.



These questions are going to require multidisciplinary teams of a size and diversity of expertise that can really tackle major world problems.

I do think that one of the big research agendas for the 21st century is going to be large-scale interdisciplinary research. But you don't want to destroy disciplinary research and education: you can't move into an interdisciplinary world unless you have strong disciplines.

**Q: And the problems or disadvantages?**

A: The challenge for the review committee is to think through what would work at the University of Sydney. There are a number of different models for area

studies around the world, and we need to think very carefully about what might work and what might not work here. The worst thing that could happen is that we impose a rigid model from somewhere else that is inappropriate for Sydney and actually harms research and education.

**Q: Is there a danger that we might be led to concentrate academically on areas of strategic importance – such as the USA and China – at the expense of less advantageous areas?**

A: I don't want to pre-empt anything, but the University will obviously have to make strategic decisions about which areas to concentrate on. We can't concentrate equally in all areas, and we obviously have more expertise in some regions than in others. We also need to look ahead over 20 or 30 years and think what might be some of the emerging areas of interest and start preparing for them. We currently don't have that much expertise in say Africa, where some major questions about poverty, health and social stability are acute, but should we start laying the groundwork for future engagement there now? The University has to consider what strengths it has and how we can capitalise on them, and how we can contribute to broader research and public benefit in the world. Choices will be made, but they need to be made in the full understanding of what is in the best interests of the University.

**Q: Area studies is not a new concept; is it still valid in 2009?**

A: There's a debate in the broader academic community about the utility of the area studies model. Area studies emerged in the post World War Two era, and grew into a major form of academic organisation, especially in the USA. In the 1970s and 80s, however, there was a backlash against area studies, with critics

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## Going Dutch: philosopher lands Spinoza Chair

Philosopher lecturer Moira Gatens has been appointed to the Spinoza Chair at the University of Amsterdam for 2010.

Professor Gatens, currently an Australian Professorial Fellow in the philosophy department, is well known as a feminist theorist and social and political philosopher. She is also a renowned expert on Benedict de Spinoza, the 17th century philosopher whose writings were considered to have laid the groundwork for the Enlightenment.

As a young student Professor Gatens says she was drawn to reading Spinoza who, unlike many other philosophers, "didn't exclude emotion or exclude imagination". The Spinoza Chair is a two-month appointment, during which time Professor Gatens will deliver two public lectures and a series of seminars.

She has also been invited to present the annual Spinoza lecture at Spinoza House in Rijnsburg, where the benches Spinoza

worked at in his trade grinding optical lenses are still in place.

"This is a wonderful recognition of Professor Gatens's status as a major figure in contemporary philosophy," said Professor Duncan Ivison, head of the

School of Philosophical and Historical Inquiry.

"Previous holders of the chair include some of the leading philosophers in the world, and this is an indication of just how good Australian philosophers are."

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