

Letter to the Editor

QUESTIONS regarding the M.A. Proposed in Island Studies at UPEI

1) The proposal document commits the logical fallacy called "red herring" in addressing and dismissing a very serious objection. It says: "It might be argued that the next logical step would be the establishment of a major programme in Island Studies at UPEI. However, Island Studies is a catholic discipline that builds on, rather than replacing, other major disciplines. Other majors exist that would serve as stepping stones to an interdisciplinary graduate programme." (p 3). This is a fallacy of diversion because it distorts the strongest version of the objection, which is not that "it is necessary to build a major before an M.A." but rather that it is PRUDENT to build a major programme to determine questions of demand and student interest. The claim that many existing majors would serve to connect the M.A. programme with the minor instead suggests an attitude of shuffling off one's work to others, and lack of attention to academic quality overall. Questions of prudence are not properly considered and any sense of caution is lacking throughout the proposal.

2) Many claims are made regarding the "wealth of disciplines" in Arts and other faculties waiting to contribute to this niche area. This point is not supported in the list of names and possible contributors because many of these professors could APPLY their interests to the focus on islands, but may have better things to do with their time, prior commitments, and other obstacles. The potential for contribution is one thing, and a commitment to contribute to the programme and give up other things is another.

3) The proposal repeats a core idea throughout the document which appears to be based on a fundamental misconception: the claim that islands "provide a distinctive field of study" (p 6). Islands are not what philosophers call a "natural kind," a unique species of thing. It promotes an idea called "islandness" as the essence of

its enquiry, and "islandness" is a pseudo-category at best. Why should life on a small island with small territory be categorically distinct from life on continents, or large islands like Australia? If islands are accidents of geology, then they may simply be too various to form a focus for generating useful knowledge, public policy and other wisdom. Furthermore, islands may be isolated land, but they share the air and water systems with every other part of the world. "Islands" are no real focal point for a discipline. If there is no genuine focal point (are islands in little ponds worthy of study? Are icebergs temporary islands worthy of study? Are whales islands when they surface to float, and submarines when they dive back down?). When there are such ill-defined boundaries, it is unlikely that we are working with a discipline at all. Researchers in Island Studies don't share concerns as much as explore their own eccentric perspectives and concerns, perhaps reversing the meaning of the saying "No man is an island" by each becoming their own island of research, floating in an intellectual fantasy.

4) The document claims that the current Minor in Island Studies has been constructed with "minimal disruption of existing programmes" (p 3). This statement should be verified by a thorough review of the Political Studies department, which appears to have been seriously sucked dry by faculty diversion into this fantasy discipline. Many students appear to be unhappy with the Political Studies programme and are choosing majors where the professors can be relied upon.

5) The fantasy discipline of Island Studies is really not an emerging discipline. It is really conceived as a sub-discipline of Political Studies and may be best described as "applied Political Studies." It is not a discipline with its own methods of research, precise concerns, or new ideas which make sense. It appears to be a form of separatism

mixed with any variety of ideas from other disciplines, hashed together into an indigestible stew. If it is a sub-discipline of Political Studies, then it makes very little sense to portray this as an area which will unite the Arts faculty and allow extensive participation. It will enhance the careers of an elite, not bring us together. It will divide the Arts faculty.

6) A summer semester programme is simply not viable at UPEI, according to Neil Henry, VP Finance. Further, Geoffrey Baldacchino's summer course in 2000 (and possibly in 1999) was cancelled by the Extension Department due to lack of student interest.

7) The need for a "new faculty" member to anchor the programme is argued in abstraction from other needs within the Arts. It may be a good idea in the abstract, but the case must be made that this is a better use of scarce resources than other possibilities. How many departments in Arts would give up a new tenure-track position to this proposal? Perhaps Political Studies, but no other department would. Perhaps a case could be made to use sessionals instead, as it would reduce the huge losses projected in the budget (over \$209,000 in the first three years according to the budget on p 62). However, it is very questionable to think that sessional teaching at the graduate level is appropriate at all (primarily because of the extra expertise, and extra supervision time, etc). So either the proposal is too rich for UPEI, or the proposal is lacking in the academic qualities that an M.A. programme needs.

8) What if Geoffrey Baldacchino is NOT approved as a Canada research chair? Where is Plan B? And why should UPEI put an M.A. programme in place before he gets here? What is the rush? Furthermore, the budget must be projected out to the stage at which the Canada Research Chair sub-

sidy runs out (after 5 years). If the programme loses around \$400,000 in its first six years, and then has to fund another large salary, it may kill the programme entirely.

9) The space requirements analysis is very problematic. Along with Baldacchino, it requires seven more offices, and lounge space. Where will such space be found? It adds: "Lounge space for students of the graduate programme will be shared with undergraduate students in Arts. Most probably, the Political Studies student lounge will become an Island Studies/Political Studies lounge." In the fantasy discipline of Island Studies, the Dept. of Philosophy, which now shares this room (Main 401) and has installed a computer for its students to use, does not exist. Or perhaps the suggestion is that it should be dissolved and all its space turned over to the new programme.

10) The budget on p 62 is full of gaps and mistakes. It does not include revenue from the "international student fees" that will be charged for the three students from abroad, it does not project far enough ahead to see the real risks to UPEI from such a programme. It does not include the possibility that some students will withdraw or change their minds. It develops one scenario involving an average intake of 8 students each year, yet no provision for reduced tuition during the thesis writing period, or money for these graduate students to be employed as markers or tutors. It should also take into account a "worst case scenario" in which demand for the programme is closer to 2 students per year (the current Minor has only two students, and should serve as a benchmark). Student demand is gauged by examining numbers for the core course in Island Studies (last three years: 17, 35, and 21 students). There may be no connection at all between students who wish to take such a core course as part of their education and students who wish