

Academic Affairs Report SOAS Student Union 2013-14:

Introduction:

David and Mustafa have been covering this role by splitting up between us the School related meetings we were mandated to attend. David has been attending the Learning and Teaching Quality Committee (LTQC) and the Academic Development Committee (ADC), whilst Mustafa has been sitting on Academic Board (AB).

These are some of the main issues we have been talking about and presenting to the different boards.

I. Exam feedback

Many students are disappointed at how SOAS does not provide necessary feedback at the end of year exams. Only very few students are aware that if requested, exam feedback can be provided. Moreover, this is a long and complicated process discouraged by most faculties and lecturers. Lecturers in particular are against providing standardized exam feedback to every exam paper (huge increase of work for them). The SU values the possibility of receiving exam feedback provided to every student who needs it in an easier, and more transparent way. The School should guarantee the possibility to students to ask for personal feedback on their exams paper. The SU has been talking about this issue at both LTQC and ADC. Extensive advice and exchange of ideas on how to find a solution has been made with the members of the Academic Development Committee (ADD - Mandy Bentham)

II. Modes of assessment

Many students find that the weighting of coursework is heavily biased towards those people who are better at writing essays and at expressing themselves through written work. In most of the courses, oral, graphic, and artistic skills are not taken in consideration as valuable ways of assessing students.

There are courses across Faculties where oral presentations are marked. These provides students with the possibility of being assessed on something other than written coursework through the year; it enables them to develop skills in oral-public presentation of material; and also pushes students to take presentations more seriously, thus providing a better quality in their work and better following discussions during the tutorials. Other courses such as 'Critical Theory' in the Religion Department assess students in more creative ways (assessment can be presented in form of diary, painting, recordings etc). Many courses across faculty could be more creative in the way they assess students. The Student Union should pressure the School to think for alternative ways of course assessment other than written essays and exams.

This issue has been presented at Faculty level and at LTQC. No main move in direction of any resolution.

III. Diagnostic assessment for Postgraduates

Postgraduate students feel uncomfortable with the fact of being assessed for the first time only in February, thus having to wait until the second term to understand how they are doing and if they are grasping and mastering concepts in the right way. Postgraduate students express the need for some sort of diagnostic assessment to be made in the first term, as to give them an idea of how they have worked so far.

IV. Panopto Lecture Capture

The lecture capture technology has been purchased for the major lecture theatre's (G2, BLT, KLT) and Linda O' Sullivan is the key person in ADD to speak to about the technology. Last I met her, we spoke about how they were in the process to proposing a paper to buy a full campus licence, but don't know what has come about it. The pilot has worked successfully with some of the law and social sciences and languages courses but overall I think Linda has been trying to push for academics to come and train for the program but in general they don't seem to be keen. I think with the shift to Senate house now we could definitely put this in our educational demands (although we already have a point which refers to this, but maybe make it more explicit?).

V. Periodic Program Review

The SU has been working hard in making sure that the PPRs are participated by students. this is a good method to gather feedback on the courses and structures of the programs which are being reviewed. Every department undertakes the PPR every 6 years. It has been very hard to get students to participate to the PPR's. Antonia Bright has been working very hard on this, but a better help from the wider Union and Academic related officers is very important.

VI. UNITU

The SU is working together with the ADD leading a project to implement better student representation on a School wide level. Unitu provides a forum through a social media structure by connecting individual students to their course reps and their departments. The project is led by the SU, but has been extensively discussed with the ADD (Mandy Bentham and Linda O' Sullivan) and the School (various departments are being contacted and will be during the summer). The plan presented so far involves a year of pilot program in which the UNITU system will be tried on few departments before being integrated to the rest of the school, potentially by 2015. Costs and ownership of the project are being discussed presently between the Unitu providers, the SU and the School.

BOARDS:

Learning and Teaching Quality Committee and Academic Development Committee

LTQC monitors the current quality of learning and teaching activity at Soas (how faculties act in regards to student enrollment, the offers made. ADC is instead interested into evaluating new modes of implementing changes to the current structure in place (i.e new courses, monitoring the effectiveness of new student services such as the personal advisor system, monitoring the use of technology etc..)

These meetings are mostly participated by managerial staff working in the Academic Development Directorate. Little is asked from students apart from guaranteeing the functioning of the PPR (Periodic Program Review). Student involvement in these committees is crucial and should be made more aware and participated. The SU should (and will) provide more training for students who are to sit on these committees in order to be more present in the discussion.

Academic Board –

Attended both the Academic Boards for this year and here are two main points from the last meeting that the new academic affairs officers should be aware of when attending the next ones. Generally, these meetings are highly structured, and are steered by Webley, I would recommend that the Union provides some sort of training on how to participate effectively in these meetings – Jan Aiery is the Secretary of the Board and if the coming officers need any previous information or to understand on what the procedures to submit papers etc are then she can help you out! David and

I talked about making a statement in the Academic Board about the Democratise SOAS campaign, but the governing body had still not met by that time, so I think the Academic Board could be a potential platform to voice our concerns about more student representation. The membership of the Academic Board was reviewed (see below), but no changes were made.

Research Excellence Report, Richard Black –

So Richard Black has been working on this report which has been comparing research output coming from all departments since 2008 and what they have achieved until now. It shows how much money is being poured into research and what departments are doing well and what departments are miserably failing. Now in the summer I think he's going to make recommendations to bring up the levels for research (see the preliminary recommendations section). Even in his Powerpoint he compared SOAS, with LSE and the idea of this report was to bring SOAS up to par with LSE and other leading institutions around the country in terms of league tables. Now, I would recommend that the new Sabbatical Officers and the Academic Affairs Officer – speak to Richard Black and get more information about this report (especially the PowerPoint, which was not circulated after the meeting) and keep up to date with the recommendations that are going to come about over the summer.

Effectiveness Review: membership of Academic Board –

Basically, there came a recommendation from the 'review of academic board' (discussed in the previous meeting) that HOD's should sit on the academic board as opposed to chosen members of various faculties. This way – HOD's could directly relay the information of what goes on in this board. Many argue that not many academics are informed about the board and its proceedings.

Important to note that Webley steered this discussion, and it was over in less than 3 minutes – there were no objections from anyone and it was resolved that the current membership will stick as it is. So go back to the papers, and look at what the recommendations were. This fits neatly with the SOAS Democratise Campaign and there demands for the opening up of the governing body to academics and student representatives.

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