

# dimitri's Sabbatical Officer Report - mid-January 2018

## Priorities

The **Enough is Enough** campaign continues as we organised consent workshops for incoming Study Abroad Students, and Welfare Contacts have been organised for both Late Licenses and society events. Hopefully groundwork we have done for an Enough is Enough podcast on SOAS radio will see fruition this Term; and we'll get started on staff involved!

We have started up our **Preventing Prevent** campaign again, with a brief submission to the Joint Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights' inquiry into Freedom of Expression at University. We have supported efforts by Dr Alison Scott-Baumann to strengthen the appeal case being prepared by pro-bono lawyers in the *Salman Butt v Secretary of State for the Home Department* case. A lot more will be happening this term, especially around building a public and visible campaign against the Prevent Duty, censorship and surveillance in education; so get in touch!

Of course, other pieces of groundwork are kicking off this Term with the **catering consultation** opening on Monday 15th January; it's high time you let the University what you need and want for the future of food at SOAS. Relentlessly, the **Justice For Workers - End Outsourcing** campaign continues after having secured UNISON Union representation on all the in-house working groups. Hasta la victoria siempre, la lucha continua!

## Crises

The **Research Students' Association** and PhD students at large have worked hard to defend both their spaces and ease of mind; the University tried to barge through significant changes to the floorplan of the Doctoral School and hike-up surveillance of PhD, particularly international, students. Thanks to collective action by PhD students, we are now in a position to have the University listen to us about student needs for PhD students before any changes are made to the Doctoral School set-up. Furthermore, we are waiting on the University to get back to us about consultations around the set-up of a new online management system for all-things PhD, including attendance. PhD students have, yet again, shown that our only guarantee for securing student space and needs at SOAS is through collective action.

There is a general crisis in Higher Education; we have started work on the NSS Boycott for this year with other Students' Unions who are still keen on pushing for an education system which isn't uniquely guided by obscure 'market forces' and the so-called 'Office for Students'. However, to get us out of this crisis, which the Government seems to be intent on institutionalising; we must be all the more bold. Hence why your Students' Union is inviting you to join us in re-building the 1970s '**Wages for Students**' campaign.

## Student-led projects

We had a really successful **Week of Action** and **Settling-In Week** both of which were made exciting by the tireless work of our Students' Union Part-Time Officers. Shout out to them! Students living in Dinwiddy and Paul Robeson Halls have started laying the groundwork to recreate the **Residents' Council**; so if you live there, get involved and secure your housing rights in Uni halls!

# Mehdi's Sabbatical Report

The start of term two has picked up where we left off at the end of the first term. The changing climate in SOAS continues to push us in ensuring that the student voice is prioritised and empowered. Throughout the next term, crucial decisions are going to be finalised that will impact the life of students at SOAS to a large extent and as such mean that we must ensure that student voices are represented and put at the centre of all aspects concerning the school.

Reporting back on the first term, it was one full of noise and activity. We hosted the most ever Late Licenses in a term as we had six successful nights. This is going to continue as we plan nights in the next few months to celebrate LGBTQIA+ and Women's History Month. For anyone who seeks to get involved in organising any nights in the JCR then please do get in contact and we can make it happen!

The plan for the next term for me is to focus on the internal structures of our student led societies as many of them are yet to be updated. We have at SOAS over 200 societies, however many of them are yet to be updated with the correct details and as such have led to a lot of confusion. Many students have raised with me serious concerns over the lack of clarity and transparency in how student societies are operated at SOAS. As such, I will be embarking on a mission to meet with all the societies and updating all their details on our website and as such giving a new platform for students to ensure that the resources that we have allocated to them are being used on them and not on old societies which are no longer existent. This is also going to need reform to our registration process, which has not been changed to 2011.

In addition, a major concern for students has been the upkeep and management of the JCR and Bar which over the past month has been put through serious testing. Due to the large amount of activities and events we host in these spaces, they have been suffering severely in cleanliness and crucially accessibility as clutter and rubbish are everywhere you look. As such, I have planned to do a major clean up of the spaces and planning for a new management plan for them in order to avoid this happening again.

A major week we have coming up this term is the Sports Varsity we are hosting with London Metropolitan University in February. I will be dedicating a lot of time into ensuring that this is promoted through recording a series of videos and podcasts on the benefits of Sports for students and encouraging them to get involved. This will seek to institutionalise a place for sports at SOAS by ultimately getting our own sports facilities.

Finally, this is the beginning of the end for my role within the Union as we are coming up to Election time! This is a very exciting part of the year and as such I will be dedicating a lot of time into facilitating the elections and encouraging students to participate and vote. For anyone who is interested in running and wants to know more, I will be scheduling meetings with anyone interested running to walk them through the process and giving my insight into the role and what it entails.

## Nisha's Sabbatical Report

The Students' Union had an incredibly hectic start to the academic year, as the co-presidents and executive team worked to welcome students (back), help them to settle into their studies and then continue to push for Students' Union [priorities](#) at all levels of the School. Together with students, representatives and staff from across the school, I put on a number of education related activities and workshops as well as educational programmes. I also worked with other members of the Students' Union as well as UCU and Unison to fight against aspects of Ian Pickup's 'One Professional Service'. Overall, due to the active engagement of many members of our community I was able to make headway on a number of aspects of my [manifesto](#), but there are a number of agendas that I plan to continue working on this term.

There were a number of educational workshops that I ran in term one in collaboration with members of the Students' Union as well as external campaigns. This included a workshop titled 'Race and Racism in the University', which was run by the BME Officer from UCL Students' Union, Ayo, and a session called 'Alternative Education: Lead Your Learning' that was led by a collective focused on ingraining social justice in our education system. Both were geared towards introducing new students to anti-Eurocentric perspectives and radical approaches to education. In addition to these sessions, I ran a workshop with student representatives around alternative assessment at SOAS during the second half of term 1. During this workshop, student representatives arrived at a framework for assessment that dissected the barriers students face, the consequences of these systemic issues and looked to ways of constructing a more supportive learning environment on campus. This work will feed into ongoing campaigning by the Students' Union for SOAS to provide more critical and creative education.

During the first term, the Students' Union also ran the Saturday School programme. This initiative provided an opportunity for students from around London to go through a six week programme during which they did lessons on power structures in society that they then applied through a final media-based project. The Saturday School was coordinated by a paid team of SOAS students, who developed the curriculum for the programme, reached out to sixth form students and iteratively reflected on their work over the course of the project. The Saturday School will continue in term two, developing the content and curriculum based on their reflections and feedback from Saturday School students. In addition, this term the other co-presidents and I will be working with the Saturday School team to develop a plan of action to ensure the sustainability and growth of the Saturday School and toward the end of the term we will be opening applications for the facilitator positions.

Toward the end of first term the Academic Affairs officers and I also began researching students' experiences of the mitigating circumstances procedure at SOAS. We had 160 responses from students across the school, out of which we are working to develop a set of proposals for changes to the policy and procedure to ensure mitigating circumstances meets the needs of students. We are currently in conversation with different bodies across the school, including support staff and Student Advice and Wellbeing, to ensure these proposals will work practically to resolve the issues students face, particularly the increased stress and anxiety that often comes with applying for mitigating circumstances. These proposals will be published and circulated among the students before the end of January and should pass through the Learning and Teaching Quality Committee by May.

The Students' Union has also been working on lobbying the school on the proposal for One Professional Service. I worked with the other co-presidents and the exec team to circulate information about the proposed changes to support services, which culminated in the walkout on the 24th of November. With our position on departmental co-location and increasing the number of frontline staff clear, Halimo and I have been attending the restructuring working group every Friday. Support and administrative staff have had a strong voice within these meetings, bringing up issues with processes in the school, arguing that unless these are resolved many problems faced by staff and students, such as issues with enrollment, module sign-up and mitigating circumstances, will remain. The working group has also received feedback from different departments across the school relating not simply to the academic administrative structure but also around changes to distance learning, Student Advice and Wellbeing and Widening Participation. During the final meeting of the restructuring working group on the 12th of January the Students' Union will be calling for a written assurance that satisfactory and personalised frontline staffing for department offices should be agreed \*before\* agreeing any additional One Professional Service management roles. We will also be asking for clarity on how decisions about the structural changes to departments we have not covered in our WG meetings, such as Widening Participation, Student Advice and Wellbeing and Marketing, will be taken. The Students' Union will continue to push for a structure that works for students, as well as greater transparency and accountability within the School's senior management team.

This term I will also be working with students, reps, the Academic Affairs officers to implement an NSS Boycott at SOAS. In 2016/17 the SOAS Students' Union, in line with the National Union of Students and National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts (NCAFC) campaign took the decision to boycott the National Student Survey (NSS). This decision came as part of a much wider campaign against the on-going marketization of education, with national efforts focused particularly on decoupling the link between the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and a university's ability to raise tuition fees. As fees continue to rise in 2017 - to £9,250 for home undergrad students and £16,250 for international undergrad students - and our debt is sold off to private companies, it is vital that the Students' Union continues to fight for a free education. The results of these reforms, combined with previous waves of marketisation, can already be seen with dozens of campuses announcing job cuts (some, including University of Manchester, explicitly citing government reforms as the reason). I will be working with other officers and students to develop and action plan on carrying out the boycott at SOAS, as well as engaging with officers from other Students' Union's to ensure there is a united voice within the student movement opposing marketisation.

Overall, there have been a number of projects that I was able to initiate due to the active involvement of both other members of the Students' Union and SOAS. Many of these require further work, particularly to ensure that they are sustainable in the long-term, as with the mitigating circumstances changes, alternative assessment proposals and Saturday School. I hope to continue working with the many amazing staff and students at SOAS to make positive change.

## **Halimo's Sabbatical Report**

The past three months have been filled with interesting challenges and developments as I have settled into my role. One of my key priority campaigns which is Decolonising SOAS has made some significant advancements in attempting to meet its aims for the year. After many months of trying to get the Decolonising SOAS vision passed, it was finally approved in november by academic board. This means that the campaign has secured funding to enable us to continue our decolonial work with the help of financial support. The funding will go towards positionality workshops, the development of a toolkit to help decolonise curricula as well as other decolonising activities that will be organised for this academic year.

Specifically, the toolkit, which is one of the most interesting work being produced by the working group aims to address the coloniality and whiteness of our curriculums, thanks to the work of dedicated academics and other working group members it is almost near completion, the next steps are for it to be disseminated amongst course convenors who will then use it to formulate their course content. In addition to this i have been working on figuring out the logistics of implementing positionality workshops, i am working towards getting some workshops in place for term 3. I have also been focusing on increasing the presence of the campaign on campus via events and stalls.

Since mid november myself and Nisha have been taking part in the one professional services restructuring consultation process. The purpose of the consultation is to gather feedback about the OPS restructuring proposals that were released to students and staff in early november. We specifically participated in a working group focusing on improving aspects of the proposal that related to the student academic experience. This working group emerged as a result of the widespread criticisms of the proposals. The working group is made up of academic and student support staff, heads of department as well as the students union. Discussions that took place highlighted the need for frontline support staff in co-located departments and improvement of processes and systems. Although the consultation process has now formally come to an end with the revised proposals going to executive board to approve on the 29th of January there is still some feeling that of uncertainty about how the revised proposals will be formulated and the extent to which the new proposals will ensure improvements are implemented. That being said, the fight continues, we hope to mobilize students to ensure a commitment to the demands of the wider SOAS community from executive board, these demands being investment in frontline support for students and academics.

This term I plan to revisit and work on delivering promises from my manifesto. Particularly, I hope to focus on improving mental health services available to students, especially services available to students from liberation groups who for certain reasons have found it difficult to access and engage with such services. I've sought to increase my knowledge of what is currently on offer by meeting with staff from Students Advice and Wellbeing, Ultimately with the aim and vision to set up some form of tailored support for liberation groups whether that be one to one counselling or establishing support networks. Also, I have been focusing on other aspects of students wellbeing, for example as it's Dry January stalls and workshops will be running this month to support students who are thinking about abstaining from alcohol, even if only for a short period. These stalls and workshops will be run by integrated camden alcohol service starting from the 16th of January. Additionally, this term I will be working on improving the current SU harassment policy at SOAS. Amongst all of this, I am also currently organising events to commemorate holocaust memorial day on the 27th of January.

Moreover, there were some key highlights last term worth mentioning. The BME Mentoring Scheme is up and running, the scheme was put in place based on the recommendations of the attainment gap working group and was considered a useful practice in trying to tackle the attainment gap at SOAS. Also worth a mention is the end of term late licence that took place on the last day of term. Myself, Nisha and Mehdi spent the month of december organizing the late licence. We had performances from SXWKS as well as Djs to set the Vibes fo what we hope was a relaxing and enjoyable end to first term.