

## **Students' Union Educational Priorities 2017/18**

**Every year the Students' Union develops a number of educational and non-educational priorities. These reflect the manifestos of the co-presidents and ongoing strategic priorities of the Students' Union. The Students' Union priorities also provide a mechanism through which to maintain the accountability of the co-presidents as each of us work to deliver on the following objectives.**

### **This year's educational priorities are:**

- Fight for Free Education**
- Commit to Alternative Education**
- Decolonise Education & the Institution**
- Close the Attainment Gap**
- Bring Back the 'A' in SOAS**
- Democratise SOAS Governance**

### **Fight for Free Education**

Rising tuition fees, crippling student debt and the scrapping of maintenance grants have all been part of the government's agenda to marketise education. This process of marketisation is characterised by the current state of the higher education sector, in which universities are forced to compete against each other for both students and 'excellence'. A university's excellence is measured by their performance in the Research Excellence Framework and the Teaching Excellence Framework. While these frameworks operate under the auspices of creating incentive for universities to improve research and the 'student experience', the scrapping of maintenance grants and cuts to disabled students' allowance shows there is little actual concern within the government for the wellbeing of students. Instead we, as students, are treated as consumers by our universities while we face a future of compounding debt and job insecurity.

As fees continue to rise in 2017 - to £9,250 for home students and £16,250 for international students - and our debt is sold off to private companies, the SOAS Students' Union is prioritising the fight for a free education. In addition to the ongoing national campaign to scrap tuition fees, the Students' Union will be raising awareness across the SOAS community about marketisation and the impact that this government agenda is having. Over the year we will work with the SOAS community and other universities to develop effective ways of not simply opposing but undermining and proposing alternatives to the government's marketisation agenda. The SOAS Students' Union will be reaching out to other universities in order to develop a strong network and national voice to shape and discuss the future of the university.

The Students' Union will also be looking to improve transparency around the hidden costs of education at SOAS. We will fight for an end to uncapped international students fees, which are currently subject to rising over the course of a student's time at SOAS. The Students' Union will work to ensure that the school brings an end to installment fees, continuing the campaign launched by the postgraduate taught student officers in 2016/17. Finally the Students' Union

will look into alternatives to the library fines system as we hope to ensure that students are not overburdened with debt, but also continue to respect the value of the library as a resource for our community.

### **Commit to Alternative Education**

SOAS prides itself on its critical and alternative approach to global issues. However, too often the structure of our classes, the type of assessment used and even the content of our courses reinforces a hierarchical version of education in which the student is simply required to reproduce their lecturer's knowledge in an exam. This does not allow students to develop and learn, but rather encourages them to act as consumers of their education. By committing to alternative education the Students' Union will focus on developing critical and creative educational programmes and events.

The primary focus of the alternative education project is re-launching the SOAS Saturday School. The Saturday School aims to engage young students from around London in a space within education wherein students are enabled to both explore and activate their potential. We believe that for many students conventional education models can hinder them from creative actualization, self exploration and take away their autonomy over learning. The Saturday School aims to provide students with the space and the power to explore their own interests, discover their own potential for positive social impact and develop a strong set of leadership, entrepreneurship and life skills that are otherwise excluded from standardized school curricula. The Saturday School is a model for alternative education, focusing not on academic excellence but on students developing collaborative and creative learning paths.

The Students' Union will also facilitate discourse within the SOAS community around building not simply critical but also creative approaches to education. Part of the alternative education project will involve facilitating and encouraging students' educational initiatives, from literature collectives, to film festivals to collaborative learning. In addition to facilitating student initiatives, the Students' Union will run workshops, panel discussions and other events to engage all members of our community in thinking about what education should entail and how it should be experienced. These discussions will feed into and inform SOAS' work to improve the inclusivity of assessment.

### **Decolonise Education & the Institution**

The Decolonisation agenda at SOAS has been a key focus of the Students Union since the emergence of the Decolonising SOAS campaign in 2015. The campaign seeks to address and interrogate colonial legacies and how this manifests within our institution. There are three key strands that the Students' Union marks as areas in which SOAS can make reparations for its colonial past.

Curriculums across universities and schools in the UK have widely been acknowledged as being dominated by western thought. Decolonising education seeks to critically examine the way in

which knowledge is produced within our university as well as encouraging a diversity in thought which would entail an increased focus and exploration of global intellectual and philosophical traditions. We hope that this will then be reflected in the makeup of our reading lists and the structure of assessments in teaching and learning at SOAS.

Colonial hierarchies continue to manifest in the racialized hierarchy of staff at SOAS. For example it is predominantly women of colour who are employed on precarious fractional contracts as opposed to white males within the institution who occupy higher level positions with greater job security in the university. The Students' Union hopes to address the unequal and racialized hiring practices at SOAS by launching research into the school's hiring procedures. From there we hope to develop a strategic plan to tackle this issue over the course of the year.

Colonialism is inherently premised upon economic exploitation. As such decoloniality demands economic justice. The institution can never be decolonised if it is not free and accessible to everyone. The fight for a decolonised education is very much intertwined with the fight for free education which is a call for a removal of fees, in addition to the end of outsourcing and precarious working conditions. The removal of economic barriers does not only require the removal of fees, there is also a necessity for adequate levels of economic support to be in place for students who need it most i.e mainly BME and working class students.

### **Close the Attainment Gap**

In 2016 the Students' Union produced a report about the BME attainment gap at SOAS entitled 'Degrees of Racism'. This research project found that BME students were less likely to achieve a 'first' due to the racially hostile environment of the institution's learning and teaching practices as well as the difficulties in accessing support services at SOAS. For example, the report found that BME students' confidence, motivation and engagement are often negatively affected by racial exclusion and discrimination in the learning and teaching environment at SOAS. Barriers to accessing academic and welfare support, and barriers to accountability both reduced the opportunity to regain confidence and motivation. The Students' Union will continue to work on implementing the recommendations of the report in order to tackle the attainment gap at SOAS.

In addition, the Students' Union will seek to implement positionality workshops for students and academic staff. The workshops focus on interactions that take place in the classroom and embraces a decolonial approach to incorporating positionality and lived experience. Therefore, the workshops encourage students and staff to critically engage with their own positionalities and that of the reading material. They demonstrate how to approach theory and discussions with sensitivity and open a space for constructive and considerate dialogue between students and staff as peers. We hope this approach will reduce microaggressions that can render the classroom environment unsafe. In a broader sense, we hope that it will encourage students of diverse identities to pursue academia with more passion, rigor, and ownership, with an eye toward decolonizing institutions for future generations. Additionally we hope that the workshop will be conducive to an environment in which BME students feel a greater sense of inclusion and belonging.

The Students' Union will also assess the accessibility of education at SOAS by undertaking a survey of the mitigating circumstances process at SOAS. This survey will target not simply students, but also support staff and academic members of staff on their experiences with the mitigating circumstances procedure. The outcome of this survey will be accompanied by a detailed outline of recommendations for the mitigating circumstances system, making the process more clear and transparent as well as ensuring there are support mechanisms in place for students going through the procedure.

### **Bring Back the 'A' in SOAS**

Bringing Back The 'A' into SOAS is an initiative that seeks to emphasise the importance of African voices at SOAS. The Students' Union is specifically concerned with the scaling back of the Africa Department at SOAS with the department often being the first target of course cuts made by the school over the years. The Students' Union wants to shine a light on the disintegration of the department and work towards strengthening and elevating a core aspect of our SOAS community. The Students' Union sees this as particularly important in light of restructuring, wherein the African department - as well as the Near and Middle East, South Asia and Southeast Asia - have become submerged in the new department of Languages, Cultures and Linguistics. In order to address this issue research is being commissioned into examining the extent to which the Africa department has been underfunded and the impact of this on its current state as well as its future.

### **Democratise SOAS Governance**

The democratise SOAS governance campaign is primarily targeted at improving transparency and accountability both within the school as well as in the Students' Union. As such, the campaign will involve improving and developing student representation within a restructured SOAS, re-starting all student-staff fora and ensuring that channels of communication between the Students' Union and its members are open and clear.

This year we are looking to revitalise the student rep system. There are three main aspects to this programme:

- **Training:** Student reps training will be focused on specific priorities within the Students' Union. This is to ensure that reps have a more in-depth understanding of these objectives and feel equipped to play an active role in taking these campaigns to their department. Student reps will also be provided with more in-depth training on communication skills and will be given space to develop action plans.
- **Support:** The Students' Union is committed to providing better support for student reps by providing them with more clear channels of communication. This will namely be achieved through the addition of a 'Log an Issue' section on the website. Reps will be able to register an issue with the Students' Union that is guaranteed a response within 24 hours by either the Co-President Democracy and Education, the Academic Affairs' Officers or the Research and Representation Coordinator. Issue will tracked by a

progress log, so that both the reps and the union are able to see any developments and ensure that it is resolved.

- **Workshops:** Instead of regular meetings, student reps will be provided with the opportunity to have input on key issues within the school in three workshops organised and coordinated by the Students Union on inclusive assessment, decolonising the curriculum and restructuring.

This programme is designed to ensure reps are able to act both independently and collaboratively to help shape curriculum, support and decision-making within their department. As part of our efforts to revitalise student representation, the Students' Union will ensure that during the transitional year of restructuring all student reps are invited to department meetings. Moving forward, the Students' Union will develop a new 'Student Rep Code of Conduct' for the new school structure.

In addition to increasing student opportunities to influence decision-making within the school, the Students' Union will also work to ensure accountability is improved at SOAS through the student-staff fora. These fora are an opportunity for all members of the SOAS community to come together and discuss ongoing issues and campaigns. The agendas of the student-staff fora will be determined by all members of the community. These regular open meetings will provide a space both to open up dialogue across the school as well as to take action on key issues. The student-staff fora will thus act as a measure through which decisions taken by senior management or union executives are scrutinised by the entire community.

The Students' Union's co-presidents will increase accountability within the union by developing the channels of communication between the Students' Union executive and the members of the union. This will include regular emails and reports from the co-presidents as well as the opportunity to question the sabbatical officers' work during the Union General Meetings. By improving accountability within the union we hope to increase the active participation of the members of the union in our democratic processes.



