

Hello SOASians!

We've made it to the end of another incredible SOAS year and in the SU we are saying tearful goodbyes to the Union fish, eating our final samosas and welcoming in the new Sabbatical team! This has been a challenging but rewarding year, supporting the SOAS community to fight for fair pay and decent working conditions, kicking cops off campus after our very own Johann Barbe spent a night at Her Majesty's Pleasure and fighting for more space and funding for the Union. I have been lucky enough to be at SOAS for one extra year, and in this time my belief in the SOAS spirit has been reconfirmed. From putting bee hives on the roof, to running cutting edge conferences, to fighting for migrant rights, to the Ramadan tent, and so many events, fundraisers, talks, sports matches, demonstrations... The list is endless. Thank you all for making SOAS the unique and wonderful place it is, and for making this an amazing year. Here is a short report on what I have achieved this year, a year which has gone past all too quickly.

Accommodation

We have made huge progress in this area. One of our strategic priorities this year was to push for dedicated accommodation support, and after months of arguing for this the school has agreed to recruit an accommodation officer from September. This has also initiated a review of accommodation support and provision at SOAS, and the school is now seriously considering ways to increase the number of rooms they can offer to students, particularly those in their first year.

We have had ongoing conversations with the school about offering a UK Guarantor scheme to international students, which they were initially on board with. However a ruling by the Office of Fair Trading regarding academic sanctions which has undermined many of the current university guarantor schemes have pushed discussions back. The SU will continue to fight for this in the coming year as we feel it is a priority issue and that SOAS should be offering more support to international students, particularly in the area of housing.

Putting welfare at the top of the agenda

Throughout the year we have consistently argued that student welfare is not being strategically supported. After looking in depth at the Advice and Wellbeing department, we presented a paper to the Student Experience Committee arguing for a review of SOAS welfare services and for funding for more staff. We have also been asking the school to undertake more research in this area, and to prioritise student welfare at a time when mental ill health among students is on the rise, disability support allowance is being cut and the cost of living is rising.

Peer support

Together with the schools Mental Health and Wellbeing Adviser, Sachiko Kishi, we have designed a new peer support system which matches up volunteers from 2nd and 3rd year with new students in their department, to offer support and a friendly welcoming face to students whether arrive at SOAS. We are currently running a pilot in Anthropolgy and History (thank you to everyone who signed up!) and hope to extend the scheme to all departments next year. Sign up to the SOAS New Student Scheme by emailing sk110@soas.ac.uk

Promoting Positive Mental Health

Together with the Advice and Wellbeing team we have run hugely successful series of events, including the Wellbeing Tent during Freshers' Week, Mental Health and Wellbeing week which kicked off discussion across the school about ways to improve our surroundings, communications with others and work ethic to promote positive mental health and Wellbeing for Exams - with the ever popular chill out room (to become a permanent feature perhaps?!) I have also attended various departmental meetings to discuss the epidemic of student anxiety, particularly relating to coursework, coming up with ideas for addressing this in a holistic,

school wide movement. It has been rewarding to see how well this issue has been understood and taken on, and I hope that the school will continue to recognise and address the needs of students suffering mental ill health.

Attitude is Everything

We have put in place an action plan to improve the accessibility of the JCR, bar and SOAS SU events, through training, improved website, 2 for 1 tickets at parties and other ticketed events and laying a contrast flooring in the JCR to try to improve access routes during busy times in the union. We hope to be accredited by Attitude is Everything for a bronze award in August.

Free Graduation

Together with students from the Free Graduation Campaign, the SU has been pushing for an option to graduate free of charge. We discovered that most other universities do not charge students for graduation, and have been looking at ways to make this possible at SOAS. Whilst SOAS offers a beautiful ceremony and reception that many other universities do not provide, we feel it is unfair that students paying so much for their education should have to pay to graduate. This will remain a priority campaign for the union and we hope that students will be able to graduate for free by summer 2015.

Industrial Action

This year we have stood in solidarity with our cleaners, our academic and support staff and our fractional teaching staff as each have fought to improve their pay and working conditions. In spite of the disturbances these struggles have caused this year, SOASians can be proud of being part of a community that pulls together for a common good, in what often appears to be an increasingly fragmented world. I have been incredibly impressed by messages of student support pouring in through emails, Facebook messages and in person on our picket lines. With your support, our cleaners have secured additional holiday pay, sick and a pension, and are no longer the 'invisibles' that they once felt they were as contracted migrant workers, but are one of the most vital and vibrant groups in our community. As a result of the Fair pay in HE campaign and the resounding student solidarity shown across the country, our lecturers have accepted a 2% pay increase for next year - double what they were offered last year – an increase that would not have happened had they not had the strength to challenge Higher Education Institutions, strength underpinned by student support. Our Fractional staff are in ongoing discussions with the school about improving their workload and pay, and as messages of support pour in from around the globe, I hope that they will continue to receive support and solidarity here, from SOASians new and old. This is not just their fight, it is our fight too.

And finally...

On top of all this, we have launched our incredible new website, which will be a hub of information about union events, support and news, won an additional £44,000 of funding from the school for sports facilities and a new member of staff to help with sports and societies, secured additional space from the school in the Russell Room on the lower ground floor (a.k.a the chill out room!) and lobbied our MP Frank Dobson on DSA cuts, the closure of ULU and the criminalisation of student protest.

What a year! Thank you to our incredible part time officers, many of whom have worked incredibly hard this year to make both the union and the school a better place, and trully heartfelt thanks to Johann Barbe, David East, Peter Baran and all the other union staff who have given friendship, love, hugs and dried the occasional tear. It's been an emotional year!

Wishing the very best of luck to everyone, including our new sabbatical team, Georgie, David and Kabir who are going to do an amazing job, continuing students and graduating students - we are all SOAS

Peace and love
Leah