



Union Forums

Agenda

Tuesday 2nd May 2023

5pm-7pm

JCR

1. Welcome and Introductions

2. Minutes of the previous meeting

3. SU Campaigns

- a. Caste Campaign at SOAS - A Step towards Inclusivity and Social Justice

4. Influencing SOAS

- a. Discount on Bring Your Own bowl at on-campus catering & cut down waste
- b. Support potential UCU marking and assessment boycott
- c. Start an official SU campaign to reform Mitigating Circumstances

5. AOB



Item Two: Minutes of the Previous Meeting



Union Forum Minutes

Date: 18th January 2023

Time: 13:30

Location: JCR

In attendance:

Gioia Scazza (GS)

Chair and Sabbatical Trustee

Yara Derbas (YD)

Sabbatical Trustee

Parwana Haydar (PH)

Sabbatical Trustee

Sushant Singh (SS)

Sabbatical Trustee

Tueurora Kaatahi (TK)

Student Idea Proposer

Matthew Jacob Pierce Zimmer (MJPZ)

Student Idea Proposer

Eve Landin (EL)

Governance and Comms Coordinator

Charlotte Morris-Davis (CMD)

Student Engagement Manager

Various other members of the SU (meeting open to all members)



Intro to SOAS

GS introduces the meeting. Runs through safe space policy, clubs, campaigns, and societies, democratic processes, representation processes in SOAS, democracy changes, and advice available through SU.

2. Roles discussion

a. Sustainability Officer

Sustainability Officer		
Speech for: Yara Derbas	Committing to SOAS SU being environmentally conscious. Focus on air filters.	
Speech against:	N/a	
Questions and answers:	Questions	Answers
	Any ideas for specific projects to work on?	YD says to focus on green week but make sustainability more embedded in everything we do. Raises issue of over-heating of the building.
	Thoughts on sustainable fashion	PH adds clarification on sustainability work already underway such as solar panels and clothes swap programs.

b. Mental Health Awareness Officer

Mental Health Awareness Officer

Speech for: Yara Derbas	Focus on raising consciousness around mental health issues, role to sign-post students in need to relevant services. Specifically, not a counselling role where the holder gives mental health support. Suggests holder should look at mitigating circumstances, look at a self-certifying process.
Speech against:	N/a
Questions and answers:	N/a

c. Anti-racism Action Officer

Anti-racism Action Officer	
Speech for: Yara Derbas	Link with campaigns on campus that are tackling racism. Build collective power around anti-racism. Come up with new campaigns around institutional racism and new changing needs of student body.
Speech against:	N/a
Questions and answers:	N/a

d. Sports Officer

Sports Officer	
Speech for: Parwana Haydar	Make sure all sports are running smoothly and have resources, equipment and support they need from the SU. To increase engagement among SOAS students with sports.
Speech against:	N/a

Questions and answers:	N/a
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e. Arts and Culture Officer

Arts and Culture Officer		
Speech for: Parwana Haydar	SOAS SU hasn't had culture officer before. States we have rich cultural and artistic community.	
Speech against:	N/a	
Questions and answers:	Questions	Answers
	Would these roles have a budget to work with?	PH states there would be access to some funds from the SU on a case-by-case basis but no budget allocated to role.
	What makes this officer different from the presidents of arts and culture societies at SOAS?	This is a role looking into encouraging arts and culture at, rather than focusing on specific areas of arts and culture.

f. Cost of Living Officer

Cost of Living Officer		
Speech for: Sushant Singh	Focus on accommodation, livelihood. How the university can help, how local politicians can help.	
Speech against:	N/a	
Questions and answers:	Questions:	Answers:

<p>Are there practical ways to help students with cost-of-living?</p>	<p>Campaigning for a specific cost-of-living budget, aimed at helping students from marginalised communities.</p> <p>More guidance on what students can do to deal with cost-of-living increases.</p> <p>To ensure the scholarship budgets are not reduced.</p>
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g. International Students Officer

International Students Officer		
<p>Speech for: Sushant Singh</p>	<p>SOAS is a diverse university.</p> <p>To address unique problems of international students.</p> <p>Focus on supporting students through the challenges of moving country and obstacles they face.</p>	
<p>Speech against:</p>	<p>N/a</p>	
<p>Questions and answers:</p>	<p>Questions:</p>	<p>Answers:</p>
	<p>How do you deal with roles that are duplicated? Eg. roles within SOAS that already cover int. students' needs.</p>	<p>This role will focus on Int. students needs through the lens of the SU.</p>
	<p>Question on fee difference for int. students than students from UK.</p>	<p>The role holder will hopefully focus on this issue and raise with the institution.</p>

h. Mature Students Officer

Mature Students Officer		
Speech for: Sushant Singh	To address the specific needs and issues of mature students. Increase inclusion and representation in areas of policy making and decision making.	
Speech against:	N/a	
Questions and answers:	Questions:	Answers:
	Mature students are not discriminated against on any level. Why should there be an officer to represent them?	YD replies saying role is not to advocate, just to represent them in any area of their work. Suggests there are obstacles in getting involved in SU activities and student experience as they are older, and may feel detached. SS adds that the role would be focused on how to make SOAS a more inclusive place for mature students. It is the duty of the university to include them in not only academic services but extra-curricular activities and other resources the School provides.

i. Alumni Officer

Alumni Officer	
Speech for: Sushant Singh	Being an alumnus of SOAS is life-time connection to uni. Suggests alumni network is great resource for students and ex-students throughout their lives.
Speech against:	N/a

Questions and answers:	N/a
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j. **SASS Officer**

SASS Officer	
Speech for: Matthew Jacob Pierce Zimmer	<p>Role of advocacy around the issue of security on campus.</p> <p>Heightened security presence recently, tensions with union strikes and student activism, monitoring students coming in and out of building.</p> <p>Issues of harassment around race and gender from security personnel.</p> <p>Security not here to make students safe, here to make management safe.</p>
Speech against:	N/a
Questions and answers:	N/a

k. **Afrikan studies Officer**

Afrikan Studies Officer		
Speech for: Tueurora Kaatahi	<p>Aim of the role is to highlight the A in SOAS. Revisit what SOAS is and what it stands for. Bringing awareness of what Afrika is and what Afrika stands for.</p> <p>Intends to create awareness through events, collaboration with other officers eg int. officers to give students an opportunity to study abroad and experience hands on the languages and cultures in Afrika.</p> <p>Promote social interaction and support among Afrikan students.</p>	
Speech against:	N/a	
Questions and answers:	Questions:	Answers:

Would this role be centred around trying to bring more funding back to Afrikan studies at SOAS?	The role holder would advocate for this, for inclusive theory.
What activities and programmes would you implement for increased inclusivity among Afrikan students?	There are already events for Afrikan students, but they are not relatable. To include fellow Black and Afrikan students in the planning of these events to make them more relatable.
Is inclusivity possible within the atmosphere of SOAS as an institution that has engaged in colonialism?	Acknowledges reality of this but says we are here to rewrite the narrative and make own history.

l. BDS Officer

BDS Officer	
Speech for: Matthew Jacob Pierce Zimmer	Continuation of support for BDS which was established in 2015 vote at SOAS SU. Advocacy role for Palestinian population on campus. Work closely with other roles such as liberation roles. Hold accountable the lack of commitment to BDS from institution. Uni currently funding Israel through funding Israeli institutions.
Speech against:	N/a
Summary:	YD notes the existence of the Palestine Society and adds that the BDS officer would also focus on tangible change and the material conditions for Palestinians.

m. Distance Learning Officer



Distance Learning Officer	
Speech for: Gioia Scazza	For students that are not able to be on campus. To support these students with admin and support. A bridge between the students, the SU and administration of the university.
Speech against:	N/a
Questions and answers:	N/a

Item Three: SU Campaigns

Item 3A: Caste Campaign at SOAS - A Step towards Inclusivity and Social Justice

The Campaign aims to address caste and its related issues. Caste comes to a severe category on the basis of which many of the South Asian Student community continue to face discrimination and other unjust behaviour (this can be carried through conscious and non-conscious attributes). The proposed campaign will be addressing caste to promote greater consciousness and awareness of caste-based discrimination; the need for anti-caste inclusive sensitisation practices and social justice.

Facts:

1. Caste-based exclusionary behaviour continues to be prevalent in our daily life, it does not stand the boundary of the South Asian sub-continent, and such practices are consciously or consciously visible in the SOAS student community.
2. Enabling caste-sensitisation for both administrative and academic spaces - addressing caste as a "protective category", similarly laying provision for "discriminatory caste actions" at SOAS
3. Giving due acknowledgement and appreciation to marginalised LGBTQIA+, especially to that Dalit-queer helping them to mobilise themselves and assert themselves in a casteist and patriarchal hierarchy that do not provide enough affirmative spaces for LGBTQIA+ individuals to assert stands.
4. Making awareness and provisions for Dalit History Month and Dalit LGBTQIA+ months (a much-needed aspect that we as people of SOAS need to address celebrating the people of a marginalised community and their work so that their revolutionary ideals continue to live on among us).

Impact:

1. Anti-caste establishment brings in critical ways to address social injustice, and creates an inclusive and safe environment for the people of caste.
2. Enable the student community to adapt appreciative approaches for both caste and race.
3. Help in mobilisation and self-development of the caste community at SOAS.
4. It will also make SOAS and SOAS SU an inclusive and safe space.

Response:

1. Leading Caste Campaign.
2. Enabling more active involvement of students from marginalised caste communities. in realising deeply entrenched caste-based issues at SOAS.
3. Laying out provisions for administrative redressal of caste as a protective category.
4. Creating a greater consciousness of caste-based discrimination.
5. Enabling caste-sensitisation sessions at SOAS.

Item Four: Influencing SOAS

Item 4A: Discount on Bring Your Own bowl at on-campus catering & cut down waste

Facts:

1. SOAS has resumed its on campus catering which is absolutely great!

Impact:

Everything used in the food stall (bowl, fork, spoon, etc) are single used which is very bad for the environment.

1. I have been bringing my own container and tableware if I know I am going to have lunch on campus. But I noticed not many people are doing it.
2. Paper bowls are dumped in the bin after only one single use, causing also the bin on lower ground floor of Paul Webley Wing always at the edge of overflowing.

Response:

1. I want to advocate for this idea of BYOB (bring your own bowl) at SOAS food stall.
2. I think not only should they have posters around the catering area advocating for bringing your own container and cutlery.
3. Offering discount for it will be a very effective way to encourage it.
4. I feel we also need a food waste bin in the lower ground floor of Paul Webley Wing, since food waste is sometime evitable (say, for example, when the chicken thigh comes with bones).

Item 4B: Start an official SU campaign to reform Mitigating Circumstances

We call for the SU to create an official campaign to reform SOAS's inhumane and unjust Mitigating Circumstances policy.

Facts:

1. The SOAS Mitigating Circumstances Policy states that "All mitigating circumstances claims must be accompanied by original, contemporaneous, independent third-party documentary evidence which must confirm the existence of the mitigating circumstances and state how the circumstances have impacted upon the student."
2. The deadlines for submitting this evidence should " be published by the Registry as part of the annual assessment calendar. These dates should also be published by departments to students. The deadline for the submission of claims is the Friday before the week of the appropriate Mitigating Circumstances Panel and all mitigating circumstances must be submitted by these deadlines.
3. Late claims will be rejected unless a valid reason for the late submission can be provided and in such cases the Chair's Action will be taken."
4. However, this timetable has not been published in an easily accessible location for this academic year, especially since the new website. The link to the 'Key School Dates Calendar' in point 2 of the Assessment Handbook takes you to an error page.
5. These requirements are significantly stricter and more opaque than other universities. For example, UCL provides two-week extensions for self-certification, and Birkbeck does not require any evidence at all for the first claim of an academic year (for any outcome) and clearly explains the process on their website.

Impact:

The current SOAS Mitigating Circumstances policy is actively harmful to the student body:

1. The Mit Circs team routinely rejects requests for extensions and deferrals based on technicalities, such as not submitting an application within the extremely tight window they prescribe, even when individual circumstances make this impossible (such as being in hospital). In addition, these timelines are not easily available to students.
2. The policy demands extensive medical evidence which requires students to gather medical opinions at their own expense during a cost-of-living crisis, and places extreme administrative burden on the NHS during its own crisis. Students are not believed about their own health and circumstances.
3. The policy excludes students with chronic health issues by demanding that medical evidence is "contemporaneous... [and] supports the difficulties you have been recently facing". When disabled students are having a flare-up, it is often difficult to obtain this evidence. Disabilities alone are not enough to apply for Mit Circs - SOAS considers SIP extensions (only 1 week) to be enough to cover any delays caused by disability even though these are designed to spread out work rather than compensate for health issues, flareups or crises.
4. When applications are inevitably rejected, students face a long wait to have their appeals heard due to an overburdened appeals team, with zero communication in the meantime. There are examples of students who have been waiting over a year for their appeals to be dealt with.

5. Any extensions that students manage to receive (including via self cert) are extremely short, usually one week.
6. All of the above has an extremely negative impact on student wellbeing and mental health, as students who are already facing crisis are forced to prove themselves over and over again while their academic future hangs in the balance for years at a time.

Response:

1. We call for the SU to create an official campaign to reform the Mitigating Circumstances policy.
2. This reform should aim to abolish or significantly relax the requirements for providing evidence, significantly extend the periods for submitting evidence and for extensions, and reform the Mit Circs team to focus on compassion and student wellbeing over arbitrary application of procedures.
3. Policies should be rewritten to be easier to read without having to cross-reference several documents and should be easy to find on the SOAS website.

Item 4C: Support potential UCU marking and assessment boycott

Amidst the #UCUrising dispute, a marking and assessment boycott (MAB) presents a strong tool of leverage for university workers to shift the employers on the issues of pay, workload, pay gaps and casualisation. As the Student Union, we make clear our support for such disruptive action, and actively engage in its implementation, building solidarity with university workers (academic and non-academic) towards a different, non-marketised higher education.

Facts:

1. Despite the days of strike action, UCEA - the bosses' club of higher education institutions have still failed to present any serious offer to HE (Higher Education) workers' unions.
2. Intensified and escalated action is evidently necessary - to follow through on the efforts already made and commit to shifting the functioning of universities away from profit, towards the purpose of a liberating educational process for all involved.
3. Due to anti-union laws, workers are currently having to rebalot to take further action into the final term + summer. The success of this ballot is vital for the dispute.

Impact:

1. As the SU has long stated, staff working conditions are our learning conditions.
2. Our education has always relied on the efforts of workers across the university, we simply do not learn without them.
3. Neglecting the causes of this dispute and missing the chance to shift the balance of power back to students and staff is not an option.
4. The insufficient strength or disruption of past strikes has failed to achieve necessary change, causing perpetual strikes, whilst staff continue to be burnt out, overworked, with our education clearly suffering as a result.
5. A strong course of action this year could not absolutely rule out future strikes but can create the leverage to win significant improvements for students and workers.
6. Not only does a MAB put huge pressure on university management, but also points the way to a better form of education, where assessment is not punitive - we all know the stress generated by exam season, and especially the unfairness of shifting exam formats through COVID.

Response:

1. Carrying out a successful MAB will require solidarity and coordination across the university community.
2. The student union can play an important role here - informing students about the reasons for it, reassuring students about the consequences and defending students from any retaliation from management.
3. Fundamentally, university workers must know that we back them 100%. We should organise more forums to discuss strategies in the dispute, social events to build community, protests to pressure management and spread the word amongst any students who are less informed.

4. We should also take inspiration from the growing number of workers taking strike action in different sections, particularly other education unions - we should invite representatives to campus events to share experience and build common strategies.