

Institution: SOAS University of London

1. Context and mission

SOAS University of London is the UK's only specialist higher education institution focused on the study of **Asia, Africa, the Middle East and their diasporas**. Spanning arts, humanities, languages and social sciences, academic expertise at SOAS is deeply and uniquely rooted in engagement with other parts of the world. Our internationalism and commitment to justice, diversity, equality, inclusion and decolonising knowledge and research practices infuse all that we do, including our major contribution to understanding of plurivocal British cultures.

We currently have 5,988 undergraduate and postgraduate students studying on campus and 3,126 students registered on distance and online programmes.

The **SOAS Mission** is to:

- advance knowledge and understanding of Asia, Africa, the Middle East and diasporas through cutting-edge research and scholarship;
- demonstrate the interconnectedness and changing contours of the world;
- use skills and knowledge to transform inequalities, prejudice and discrimination, change mindsets, discourses, policies and practices;
- work towards decolonising knowledge acquisition and exchange, from research and teaching to writing and publishing;
- build equitable partnerships with activists, artists, civil society organisations, governments and universities, around the world; and
- foster a new generation of researchers and thinkers who can understand and engage with the world as global citizens.

The assessment period has been **transformative for SOAS's research infrastructure and culture**: moving from paper to electronic application, accountancy and research management processes; professionalising and expanding numbers and functions of research support personnel; and embarking on institution-wide research literacy programmes focused on funding opportunities, and research management, ethics, reporting and data storage; and the priority we have given to research signalled in the physical transformation of the research office from a cramped room in an outlying building to a hub space in the everyday heart of campus. The results of these efforts are evident in the increase in income, stream-lined management of research, and ambitious investments in institutional culture and capacity.

Working towards the public celebration of the SOAS centenary in 2016, we collectively refined five **institutional-level research themes**—Global Voices; Heritage of Humanity; Global Interactions; Sharing a Small Planet; and Global Diplomacy and Governance—to crosscut the three faculties: Languages and Cultures; Arts and Humanities; Law and Social Sciences.

The following year, SOAS restructured to align financial and planning decisions with academic activity, and the possibility of inter-disciplinary collaboration in teaching and research, turning three faculties into **six schools** (Arts; Finance and Management; History Religion and Philosophies; Interdisciplinary Studies; Languages, Cultures and Linguistics; Law) and **five departments** (Anthropology; Development Studies; East Asian Languages and Cultures; Economics; Politics and International Relations).

Our regional expertise is showcased in **inter-disciplinary centres and institutes** focused on Africa, Central Asia, China, Middle East, Japan, Korea, Palestine, South Asia and South East Asia. Thematic centres include those focused on Jewish, Christian, Islamic and Zoroastrian Studies. These hubs facilitate research, knowledge exchange, academic hospitality and many hundreds of public-facing events each year. To enhance our outward-facing presence, SOAS established **two new interdisciplinary institutes** to offer an expert resource for the wider world of business, policy and media. The SOAS China Institute (launched 2014) and SOAS South Asia

Institute (2015) bring together more than 50 regional experts. Until 2020, the School of Interdisciplinary Studies housed centres for International Studies and Diplomacy, Gender Studies, Environment and Development, and Global Media and Communication, now located in departments.

The **SOAS Brunei Gallery** is a magnificent exhibition space, a locus for engagement with diverse publics, including from local schools. We host two award-winning creative enterprises established by alumni, Chouette Films and PositiveNegatives. The **SOAS Festival of Ideas**—one of the key new initiatives emerging from the School's investment in its critical, interdisciplinary profile—showcases SOAS research expertise and national and transnational networks on a global scale. In the year of the pandemic, the Festival, now online, brought together cutting-edge scholars, artists and activists from around the world to reflect on the theme of 'Decolonising Knowledge', involving the community around SOAS and organisations working with marginalised groups for the betterment of community life.

SOAS hosts many **large research consortia** and **innovative re-granting programmes**, including the influential Anti-Corruption Evidence (ACE) consortium (£6.0m, five years), the Research and Evidence Facility on migration in the Horn of Africa (€6.5m, five years), the Arcadia-funded Endangered Languages Programme—which has supported 450 language documentation projects with a five-year grant renewal of £7.2m in 2015—and the £1.8m Global Research Network for Parliaments and People, which has awarded over £800k to scholars, artists and activists' creative and research projects. SOAS also co-convenes the Engaged Research Fund of the Open Society University Network (OSUN).

Against this positive backdrop, SOAS has faced a challenging period as a small institution in a changing higher education landscape. There have been losses of academic staff, especially in the Humanities. In May 2020, the School embarked on a substantial and positive set of reforms, emerging more resilient and financially stable. During this period, collaborative research governance, collective efforts to create an enabling and supportive research culture and the deployment of specialist expertise amongst our academic and professional services have helped to protect our research.

In the wake of a pandemic that has revealed anew the world's stark inequalities, our core commitment at SOAS is to continue to develop and promote more egalitarian, representative, intersectional, dialogic and accountable research practices, in a thriving and sustainable institutional research environment. As we rebuild, research is at the very heart of our new strategic agenda.

2. Strategy

In the assessment period, SOAS pursued a three-part strategy to: (a) grow externally funded research activity, with ambitious research income growth targets and enhanced support for successful grant applications; (b) introduce policies, processes and practices to create a more equitable, enabling and inclusive research culture and enhance the quality of our research output; and (c) amplify impact and public engagement.

- To **achieve growth in research income**, SOAS invested significantly in structured support for grant development, which saw a marked impact on research income, with growth from £4.3m in 2013/14 to £8.5m in 2018/19. This trajectory was underpinned by a striking increase in annual new grant awards, for instance from £2.7m in 2013/14 to £24.6m in 2017/18, with rising success for highly competitive grants, evidenced in a 50% success rate in ERC awards in 2018/19, and prestigious Future Leader Fellowship and Leverhulme Research Leadership awards.
- To **create an enabling environment for researchers**, research leave was reformed to give a generous allowance of one term after eight, with two terms post-probation leave for early-career researchers (ECRs), researcher development activities developed,

including research coaching, mentoring, publication and career-development workshops, including activities aimed specifically at ECRs and PhD students, and a new workload allocation model (WAMS) was developed that integrated research into workload planning. **Associate Director of Research** (ADR) positions were created to lend focused support to strategic priorities: ADR (Researcher Development and Ethics, including a dedicated focus on ECRs), ADR (Impact and Public Engagement) and ADR (Resources and Research Environment). The role of departmental research co-ordinators was strengthened, becoming **Departmental Directors of Research** with clear job descriptions and teaching remission.

- To **amplify our impact**, an Impact Working Group was established, launching a new Impact Strategy in 2019. Our promotions procedure was revised to more fully embrace impact and engagement. A dedicated impact team was created, with an Associate Director post dedicated to impact and engagement, and support both for documenting and for creating impact, including new initiatives such as the Influencing Corridors of Power project, which draws on SOAS research expertise to produce timely briefings for the media and members of both Houses of Parliament.

Our **strategy for the next five years** continues in pursuit of our mission with ambitious new plans to enhance our research excellence as a globally connected institution with partnerships with world-class researchers in the Global South. We will continue to build on our success in increasing research income, redouble our efforts to create a truly inclusive and enabling research culture, through new initiatives to amplify the voices of researchers from historically marginalised groups, address the ‘broken pipeline’ of Black students into academic careers and through the expansion of research coaching, ideas-incubation, sponsorship and mentoring, and other activities geared at producing research of highest quality published in the best journals and presses, cited widely and used by those addressing the global issues of our times.

As part of this strategy:

- **Impact and knowledge exchange will be embedded in all we do, equipping our researchers with skills to become fluent interlocutors and influencers.** We will continue to invest in impact, with a dedicated impact team, online impact training and workshops on public engagement and knowledge exchange, using expert external facilitators, peer-to-peer exchange and mentoring. The creation in 2021 of a high-profile impact and engagement advisory panel and further targeted catalyst funds will help increase engagement with UK and international stakeholders to amplify our influence;
- **Research partnerships will gain greater primacy, placing the principles of equity, transparency and inclusion and our decolonising mission at their heart.** SOAS researchers will build on experience in creating strong, enduring and equitable partnerships with partners in Asia, Africa and the Middle East to engage in co-design, collaboration and co-production. Our strategy will include further collaborations with civil society organisations, governments and philanthropic donors, strengthening existing ties with cultural institutions and international agencies—from the British Museum and the British Library to UN agencies and the World Bank—building new relationships with leading research-intensive universities in the Global South;
- **SOAS Research Online and new Open Access digitisation and publishing ventures will take priority as we seek to open up our knowledge to the world and enhance our visibility and presence in global fora.** Our annual £20k publications fund extends the support UKRI offers us for Open Access publications; we will go beyond this, not only committing further resources to increase access through platforms like Knowledge Unlatched (Language Science Press), but also establishing our own open access journal with Cambridge University Press (proposal agreed) and providing support for Open Access self-publishing. Proactive engagement with our researchers has led to a 30%

increase in repository deposits in the last year; our goal is for as much of our research as possible to be freely accessible online to be used without restriction;

- **Public engagement and knowledge exchange will enable us to better serve London's diaspora communities and facilitate stronger connections with Asia, Africa and the Middle East.** Our researchers are encouraged to act as catalysts to amplify influence, with dedicated School support. Our strategy seeks to connect us more deeply with communities in London, with our researchers engaging with civic and arts organisations and local government across the capital to engage diverse publics and continue opening up SOAS to London's diaspora communities. Our public engagement and knowledge exchange work will engage our networks in Asia, Africa and the Middle East in influencing business, government and civil society on the global issues of our times, making use of our convening power, co-convening with prominent global south and international partners and engagement in international fora on issues like climate change, sustainable finance, women's empowerment and financial inclusion;
- **We will seek to decolonise our research practices and redress structural inequities in research relationships.** SOAS adopted a Decolonising SOAS Vision in 2017, supporting further recognition and debate about the wide, complex and varied impacts of colonialism, imperialism and racism in shaping our university. We committed, inter alia, to research practices of reflective intellectual collaboration with Global South colleagues, as co-producers of knowledge, and ongoing public conversations about the past, present and future significance of imperialism and colonialism. Our Decolonising SOAS Research Statement sets out further commitments, including increasing scholarship opportunities for marginalised groups to participate in and lead on knowledge production and dissemination and engaging with funding bodies to decolonise research design frameworks and funding schemes. We plan to launch a Decolonising Research Consortium by the end of 2021 to raise awareness around ongoing colonial practices, apply critical analysis to research and funding frameworks in the UK and Europe, and contribute to developing new approaches directly informed by the perspectives and experiences of diverse local partners.

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2.1 Equality, diversity and inclusion

SOAS is deeply committed to creating and maintaining **a culture of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion**, with our Pro-Director (Research & Enterprise) and ADRs serving as Chair and key members of our institutional EDI Committee. We have carried through this commitment in the construction of our REF submission, with procedures informed by EDI best practice. We have sought diverse membership REF committees/panels. Equality impact assessments have been conducted and actions taken to mitigate against impacts. We have raised awareness of EDI principles and sought to address biases through mandatory REF-specific EDI workshops.

Our 2016-20 EDI Strategy established institutional commitments, further advanced in our **2020-26 EDI Strategic Plan**. Our Athena SWAN Bronze was renewed in 2019 and we are working towards the Race Equality Charter. We have built institutional capacity to support these commitments, appointing Equalities Champions and establishing an EDI Network. Our Culture@SOAS initiative convenes a cross-institutional action group of staff and students to work together to promote a positive and inclusive working culture.

2.2 Structures supporting interdisciplinary research

Interdisciplinarity is deeply embedded in our ways of working. Interdisciplinary interests in climate change, conflict, security, corruption, corporate governance, democracy, diplomacy, gender, sexuality, humanitarianism, protection of linguistic diversity, environment, natural resource management, political economy, poverty and racial justice bring together scholars from across the School. In recent years, we have evolved structures to support bid development for interdisciplinary research and won **several large interdisciplinary programmatic awards**.

These have provided a structured opportunity for interdisciplinary research, including on digital humanities, computational linguistics, nutrition, culture heritage, mental and public health. Membership of the London International Development Centre and the Bloomsbury SET has enabled further connections with the natural and medical sciences, such as research on antimicrobial resistance in Africa with LSHTM and Royal Veterinary College.

The principal **structures supporting interdisciplinarity** are our school- and department-level research centres. Through seminars, workshops and conferences hosted by our centres and institutes, interdisciplinary research interests are fostered and advanced, with funding from the School's strategic fund and a variety of internal catalyst funds. Initiatives such as our 'Lunch and Learn' research development series combines panels of experts with biographies of complex interdisciplinary research programmes, aimed at equipping the next generation of researchers with insights and inspiration.

Our world-class **National Research Library** provides a locus for interdisciplinary archival and special collections research, bringing together experts from across the arts and humanities. SOAS has a larger postgraduate student body than many universities; many postgraduate students pursue interdisciplinary studies, creating collaborative research-led teaching and supervision partnerships across our disciplines. Our dedicated **Doctoral School** has developed innovative interdisciplinary research methodology training modules and fosters interdisciplinary doctoral enquiry.

3. People

SOAS' **academic staff body** is made up of 257 academics on teaching and research contracts, of which 7% are early-career researchers and 15% on fixed-term contracts, of whom more than a third are from ethnic minority backgrounds (36% BAME, 2% undeclared). 44% of our academics identify as female; our gender pay gap of 6.5% (mean) and 5.4% (median) is one of the lowest in the sector. 7% of our academic staff have declared a disability.

3.1 Staffing strategy

The School's strategy for academic staff recruitment and development has been shaped by a twin commitment to excellence and equalities. Staffing strategy is led in the academic departments by a combination of strategic development of areas of critical mass and innovation that enable SOAS both to deepen existing areas of expertise and open up new and emerging fields of enquiry. Department-level research centres, committees and clusters serve as focal points for **researcher development**, organising manuscript workshops, writing retreats, bid-writing support, publications peer-review. Departmental Research Directors play a key role as facilitators of institutional initiatives such as 'coach approach'-inspired Personal Research Plans and research mentoring. Our **promotions guidance** was reworked in 2019 to reflect a more rounded perspective on research achievement, to include research leadership, impact and influence; a proactive approach is taken to promotions, with mentoring and research coaching playing a role in developing talent.

In light of confidential feedback from REF2014, the School's **research leave policy** was reviewed and substantially enhanced. As of 2015, staff on academic contracts have been eligible to apply for one term of research leave after eight of normal duties (previously, 1 in 12) and an additional term if they have taken parental leave between six and 12 months. Our ECRs have a three-year probation period with two terms of research leave on completion, and support in career development via a reduced teaching load. **Horizontal networks** (e.g., a large grant holders' network) and **task groups** (e.g., a research finance working group) provided lateral mechanisms for collaborative research management development.

The School supports all its staff with a wide range of **development opportunities**, from training in coaching and conflict resolution to the development of individualised career development

plans. We also offer an institution-wide development programme for our ECRs and research students, with regular fora for both groups, ECR PRPs and events such as a virtual bookfair with publishers, masterclasses and writing clinics. The **Research and Enterprise Office** also support fellowship applications for ECRs, including BA postdoctoral fellowships, UKRI FLF and ERC starting grants. SOAS was awarded the HR Excellence in Research Award in 2012, with successful reviews in 2014, 2018 and 2020, and re-accreditation in 2016.

3.2 Support and training of research students

SOAS' institution-wide training programme for research students includes our own courses and workshops on research methods and skills, online and offline, and various intercollegiate training collaborations. A **Doctoral School** was established in 2012, to support our **large** (c500 students p.a.) and **diverse** (on average, 59% female and 53% BAME) research student community, academically and administratively, throughout the entire PhD journey. Our research students are equipped with **dedicated resources**, including a beautifully restored building as a work and social hub, advice from researcher development specialists and various grants (c£500-£1,000) that facilitate milestones of our PhD programme, such as overseas fieldwork, conference presentations and student-led events. Both departments and the Language Centre offer a wide range of Asian, African, Middle Eastern and European languages to SOAS postgraduate students.

Each student undertakes a **bespoke programme of training** through the annual cycle of planning (Training Needs Analysis), recording (Log) and evaluation (Annual Review). PhD training takes place principally at the disciplinary level, led and overseen by the Directors of Doctoral Studies in the respective departments. This is complemented by interdisciplinary and transferable research skills training open to all research students. Departmental doctoral training is often interdisciplinary: the School of Law, for example, offers classes on legal history, legal anthropology, critical race and feminist and queer studies.

Doctoral researchers are encouraged to develop a **publishing profile** and to submit publications to SOAS Research Online and the student-led Journal of Postgraduate Research. Many of our research students work as **Graduate Teaching Assistants** and they are provided with in-house teacher training and support for HEA Fellowship applications. The **Careers Service** offers tailored advice and guidance to research students, organises workshops on various career-related topics and information on career planning. Staff development offers supervisor training and support. The **regional centres** organise conferences and interdisciplinary events, which provide an excellent opportunity for postgraduate students and staff to network. We currently have some 200 memoranda of understanding with international organisations, allowing **postgraduate exchange** across 39 countries in Asia, Africa and the Middle East, managed by a dedicated Global Engagement Office.

SOAS is a member of the AHRC's CHASE Consortium, the ESRC's UBEL DTP, the Bloomsbury Colleges group and the Bloomsbury Postgraduate Skills Network. We benefit from and contribute to training-sharing schemes and events within all these intercollegiate networks.

3.3 Equality, diversity and inclusion in research careers

Over the assessment period, SOAS has placed **particular emphasis** on equality, diversity and inclusion. Starting in 2013/14, a Model Equality and Diversity Employer (MEDE) working party was established in partnership with the trade unions. MEDE set in train a **series of improvements**: mandatory recruitment and selection training; compulsory unconscious bias training; achievement (one of the first four institutions nationally) in 2014 of the ECU Gender Equality Mark; followed by Athena SWAN Bronze, renewed in 2019; participation in the Aurora programme for women's leadership; establishment of an Access and Inclusivity Forum; and other interventions aimed at creating a more inclusive working culture. From 2018, this work has been strengthened with the Culture@SOAS initiative, addressing broader issues of inclusion, dignity and voice.

Our appointing procedures follow best practice in **recruiting for diversity**. We recognise the dynamics of ableism, sexism, gender binarism, heteronormativity and structural racism, as they play out in higher education, and have put in place a number of measures—including a standing Race, Accountability and Listening Action Group—that actively seek to provide an institutional response to structural drivers of inequality in academic career progression. We collect comprehensive employee data and use relevant demographic comparators to identify and address barriers in career progression. DORA principles are embedded in hiring, promotions and rewards. **Measurable improvement in our performance** has come as a result of initiatives such as mandatory unconscious bias training for interviewers and promotions panel members, enhanced monitoring of attendance at recruitment and selection training and a gender-balanced representation on interview and promotions panels. A special circumstances panel, chaired by the Pro-Director, considers cases where equalities should be considered in judging volume of research output in promotions. This has enabled us to recognise a broader spectrum of care considerations, mental health and disabilities.

We have seen results in the gender breakdown of grant applications, including for internal awards, and in promotions outcomes. More than 50% of our most recent internal research grant awards were made to women; women accounted for 75% of our recent ERC grant successes. In the 2019/20 promotions round, 52% of candidates and 57% of promotions were women; 43% of candidates and 41% of promotions were people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups.

4. Income, infrastructure and facilities

4.1 Income

During the assessment period, our researchers were awarded 355 grants with a total value of £80.3m. Both the grant number and volume show a **significant increase**, compared to the previous period. For instance, the total income for REF 2021 is £45.9m, compared to £19.1m for 2008-13. The overall volume included a significant amount of partners' costs, as we were leading more than 20 large grants with multiple external/international partners. On average, we won 1.4 grants and £323k per academic FTE. £38.5 million in donations helped to sustain our vibrant research environment.

Research income has increased year-on-year since 2013/14, nearly doubling from £4.3m in 2013/14 to £8.5m in 2018/19. This can be attributed to the School's significant investment in systems, software and people. We created **dedicated pre- and post-award teams** and a **research strategy and information unit** producing training materials, regular newsletters, a successful bid library and facilitating regular workshops on all aspects of the research life cycle. This produced better capacity to support larger research programmes and a more sustained focus on project and data management as well as impact, knowledge exchange and public engagement activities. We invested in **Open Access advocacy and compliance**, with support from the Scholarly Communications Team and discussions at early stages with researchers. We did a **complete overhaul of our research ethics policies and procedures**, providing greater alignment to the Concordat on Research Integrity, instituting a mandatory referral process for institutional ethical approval, compulsory Epigeum Research Integrity training, embedding safeguarding checks within the ethical review process and refining procedure for investigating allegations of misconduct in academic research.

Internal funding schemes focus on building collaborations, proof of concept, promising knowledge exchange ideas, and accelerating and enhancing impact: Seed-corn Fund for exploring potential research collaborations (c£120,000/a); Impact Acceleration Fund (c£30,000/a); Impact Case Study Enhancement Fund (c£20,000/a); Knowledge Exchange Fund (c£30,000/a); and Impact and Knowledge Exchange Fund (c£60,000/a, starting from 2019/20). We also invested c£200,000 in enhancing our **capacity to manage research grant applications**, procuring and implementing the pre-award module of **Worktribe** that seamlessly combines previously cumbersome processes and captures a wealth of research management

information, which is scrutinised and analysed regularly. Significant investment has also been made in creating a **central contracts database**, for partnerships emanating from research grants and enterprise/knowledge exchange activities.

4.2 Infrastructure and facilities

In 2015, the **Research and Enterprise Office** was significantly enlarged and restructured. A bespoke research management system was developed to consolidate the notification, development, ethics and approval processes, which two years later led to the implementation of Worktribe. We saw engagement with the REO grow significantly, with an **unprecedented increase** in award volume and applications (1,215 submitted applications worth £300m from 480 researchers). The REO also strategically targeted large-grant opportunities and prestigious fellowship schemes—such as ERC, MSCA, GCRF and BA—whereby blue-skies thinking and uniqueness of researchers' specialities were encouraged, aligning with our focused areas of expertise.

The Paul Webley Wing is a part of the Senate House complex, recently acquired and refurbished by SOAS. It houses state-of-the-art conference facilities and an expansive atrium for events and exhibitions.

The SOAS Library is one of only five National Research Libraries in the UK. It houses over 1.3 million volumes and a major collection of archives, manuscripts, rare books and special collections, an expanding Digital Library and a growing network of electronic resources. Special Collections hold c2,183m of rare books, journals and other printed materials, and c2,955m of archives and manuscripts in over 130 different languages; there are 500 original collections of archives. Approximately 750,000 pages have been digitised to date and made freely available. The Library develops research collections, focusing on materials in the languages of Asia, Africa and the Middle East as well as European-language materials relating to those regions. The broadening research interests of the School are reflected in collections on migration and diaspora, gender, food studies, film and media, financial management and international politics and diplomacy.

The Brunei Gallery is an exciting SOAS venue that hosts a programme of changing contemporary and historical exhibitions from Asia, Africa and the Middle East. It exhibits work of academic significance as well as artistic merit and interest. The Gallery's aim is to present and promote cultures from these regions and is a resource available to academic staff. Exhibitions showing the work of SOAS researchers in recent years include: Living Zoroastrianism (2018); Music, Faith and Diplomacy across the Silk Road (2017); and The Spiritual Highway: Religious World Making in Megacity Lagos (2014). SOAS also has excellent relations with the British Museum, the British Library and the Victoria and Albert Museum. A recent exhibition, 'The Empire of the Sikhs', told the story of a cosmopolitan empire that almost ended British rule in India in more than 100 dazzling artworks and objects, attracting some 30,000 visitors.

SOAS Radio is an independent radio-station and production company. It broadcasts live radio weekly and produces music and speech podcasts with a focus on Asia, Africa, the Middle East and their Britain-based diasporas. Notable guest recordings include Luisa Diogo, Noam Chomsky, Fatima Bhutto, Yash Chopra, Danny Choo, Ken Loach and Amadou&Mariam.