SOAS LEARNING STRATEGY 2016/17-2019/20: TEACHING, LEARNING AND STUDENT EXPERIENCE

1. INTRODUCTION: OUR GOALS

SOAS, University of London, has a unique and important role to play in address the world's needs, as set out in the SOAS strategy. The Learning Strategy helps us develop those aspects of the SOAS Strategy that are related to teaching, learning, the student experience and student outcomes.

As well as taking forward our core mission, the Learning Strategy helps us respond to the changing external environment, especially in helping us respond to the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). It also supports our goals of research excellence and financial sustainability, by providing a vision of research-enriched teaching and the provision of an attractive teaching portfolio at all levels.

Following from this vision for our learning, teaching and student development practice, there are four key goals that in this strategy:

1. Produce high quality graduates, postgraduates and researchers who understand and engage with the world and the regions in which we specialise
2. Develop well rounded individuals who can make a difference in their communities and in the world
3. Improve staff and organisational capability for lifelong learning and ongoing renewal
4. Enhance our unique and fulfilling student experience

It is our aim at SOAS to ensure every student develops not only academically but also personally within a challenging but supportive environment. We aim not only to recognise the needs of our diverse student body, but to celebrate its strengths and unique attributes. The core of the student experience will be a student's chosen programme of study, supported by a range of co- and extra-curricular provision, an emphasis on independent learning, encouragement to challenge received ideas, and top quality pastoral care. In addition however, and as importantly, the experience of a community environment, myriad social and cultural opportunities through clubs and events, and the potential for engagement and activism form a key part of student life at SOAS.

Our vision for student academic and extra-curricular development is based on the 'student journey' from application to alumni status. This organising framework provides a focus for the way in which we seek to engage SOAS students.

The Learning Strategy covers a three year period from 2016/17 to 2019/20. While this is relatively short, it is in line with the changing external environment which will require the strategy to be flexible and adjusted on a regular basis. The Learning Strategy has both an outward- and inward-facing role. For those outside of SOAS, it helps explain our particular approach to learning and teaching, and illustrates our unique student experience. For those inside SOAS, the Learning Strategy will form the

basis for internal debate and the framework for action plans as we seek to further develop learning, teaching and the student experience.

2. CONTEXT

This Strategy responds to the SOAS vision and mission (as set out in the SOAS Strategy and discussed above). It is vital in helping us attracting the best students, in providing a framework to help our students make an impact in their chosen careers and, fundamentally, in supporting SOAS's reputation both nationally and internationally. It also reflects other internal strategies and goals, including:

- our Research Excellence Strategy

Research and teaching are fundamentally intertwined. At a superficial level, there are of course strong financial links between teaching income and the capacity for research, while our research success plays a role in many of the league tables that drive student applications. At a deeper level, however, teaching that is informed by research can be both more attractive to students and provide for a richer learning experience. We see our teaching as being enriched by our research success at SOAS. For individual academics, it is important that the general environment at SOAS can help them succeed both in their research and in their teaching, and this Learning Strategy sets out various goals. For PhD students, our GTA scheme can be important in developing the experience needed for a career in academia.

- our Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Strategy

The EDI Strategy details the key objectives in our role as an HEI and as an employer. It also covers our central functions such as estates management, communications, marketing and procurement. Most relevant to the Learning Strategy is that it includes clear objectives in how we will recruit and teach a diverse student population. Equality of opportunity and the absence of unfair discrimination are at the core of all the School's activities. In the EDI Strategy, there are the following targets: collect and analyse robust data on our current and future student body; recruit and support students from the broadest pool; identify and meet diverse student needs; further develop accessible and inclusive practices in our approach to teaching and research; and promote an inclusive curriculum.

- the Priorities of our Students Union

The Strategic Plan 2016-19 has a range of academic and non-academic priorities. These priorities include: a student-led, inclusive curriculum review; decolonisation of the curriculum; improvement in employability; improved support for students' mental health; improved accommodation; and improved financial support.

- the SOAS Students Charter
The Charter has been developed by student and staff members of SOAS. It seeks to support our pursuit of excellence in academic research, learning and teaching by setting out our shared expectations of each other's conduct. The fundamental principles of the Charter are that we will provide mutual support, seek to improve communications and strengthen relationships.

In addition to these, the Learning Strategy is also drafted in the context of external factors. These

include changes to global and UK Higher Education context, which have made student recruitment more competitive, increased the pace of change in programme offerings and given a greater role to league tables in student choice. The TEF is already leading to significant changes in the way that teaching quality and HEI performance are assessed. From year 2, the TEF will assess a set of core metrics on student satisfaction, progression and employability, coupled with a provider statement that sets out quantitative and qualitative information on a range of provision characteristics:

- teaching quality (involvement of students in evaluation; student engagement; prevent grade inflation; teaching observation; innovation and new technology; staff qualification and contract; promotion; student feedback);
- learning environment (transition support; investment; learner analytics; employer engagement); and
- student outcomes and learning gains (intervention to improve retention; learning gain; longer term employment outcome; employability initiatives; student enterprise; GPA and student progress; attainment gaps intervention).

3. OUR STUDENTS & OUR TEACHING

One of SOAS's great strengths is the combination of excellence and diversity among staff and students. SOAS has the highest percentage of black and minority ethnic staff of any UK HEI, with staff coming from over 90 countries. Approximately one third of our students are from outside of the EU, coming from more than 130 countries worldwide. SOAS students are exposed to a wide range of cultures, traditions and experiences making them excellent cultural navigators and able to excel in today's interconnected world.

SOAS has almost 5,000 on-campus students and more than 3,000 distance students. Of the on-campus students, there are approximately 2,800 undergraduates, 1,400 postgraduate taught students and 600 research students. This is a relatively high proportion of postgraduate students, and is another feature that makes SOAS distinctive. While selecting the most academically-able students, SOAS is committed to increasing the participation of students from a variety of backgrounds and recognises that special initiatives are necessary to encourage excellent students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

We recognise our contribution to the improved participation rates of the most disadvantaged students across the sector during the past 5 years, and continue to assess our performance against HESA benchmarks on widening participation of underrepresented groups. These measure the proportion of students from state schools, lower socio-economic groups, low participation neighbourhoods and those in receipt of DSA:

- Since 2010/11, we have steadily increased the proportion of students from state schools above the HESA benchmark, and at a faster rate than the UK average. Presently approximately 80% of all our students come from state schools.
- We continue to increase the proportion of young students from lower socio-economic groups, and at 35% of newly admitted students, have remained significantly above our benchmark since 2011/12.

- We have increased our proportion of students in receipt of DSA, and this figure now stands at 8% of all undergraduates, above the benchmark since 2012/13. The overall trend has been upwards.
- The target for students from low participation neighbourhoods has been harder to reach. From 2014/15, we have met the benchmark for proportion of young students from low participation neighbourhoods (LPN). However, we have underperformed in meeting the target for mature students from LPNs.

The results of the National Student Survey (NSS) identify our areas of strength and areas for improvement. Overall student satisfaction rates for SOAS are above the sector average, at 87% and, notably, 'Teaching on my course' scored an above average rating of 89%. These results put us at the top of London institutions, but must be improved, given that other institutions will also be seeking to improve. Results for 'Assessment and Feedback' and 'Academic Support' have been less strong relative to the sector average, although we have already put in place initiatives to improve them. Recent key initiatives, driven by previous survey results include: introduction of new training for staff on alternative forms of assessment (2015); better learning resources across all departments (2014); feedback on assessments within three weeks (2013); new canteen, improved printing facilities (2012); the introduction of online coursework submissions (2011); and the Library Transformation Project (2010).

We have a clear vision for student outcomes from study at SOAS:

> SOAS graduates are global citizens who can understand and engage with the world. They should not only be able to interpret and challenge world problems, but also develop solutions to meet them. All students will have the opportunity to study a language, and to engage in multi-disciplinary study, recognising that most world problems are not single disciplinary in nature. In addition, students will gain exposure to the wider environment as part of their curriculum. SOAS graduates think differently and in-depth about issues, are well-rounded academically, personally and professionally, and able to make a difference – whether locally or globally. We aim to facilitate the development of our students so that they have the skills and experience to enable them to influence and make an impact in their lives. In addition, we aim to support them to make effective career choices, as well as making them attractive to potential employers.

4. OBJECTIVES

There are four key objectives in the Learning Strategy. Each is set out below with more detailed aims that accompany it, and the relevant areas of action necessary to achieve it.

i. Producing high quality graduates, postgraduates and researchers from a diversity of backgrounds who can understand and engage with the world and the regions in which we specialise. All students should leave SOAS with:
- Subject knowledge informed by research
- Key research, communication, and life skills for success in global careers
- International exposure, often underpinned by regional expertise and some knowledge of an African, Asian or Middle Eastern language.

- Appreciation of the importance of understanding different cultures and contexts

Requirements:

Distinctive, research-enriched teaching portfolios at undergraduate and postgraduate levels based on our specialisms, complemented by undergraduate-foundation and pre-masters programmes. These will undergo regular curriculum review that involves students, considers inclusivity and ensures space for language, region and inter-disciplinary study. Our programmes will be delivered through innovative learning and assessment methods.

Widening Participation activities to ensure access and outcomes for promising students, whatever their background, complemented by inclusive teaching, learning and assessment methods.

Review of curricula, co-curricula and extra-curricula activities to promote an international experience or exposure, as well as exposure to the wider environment through guest speakers, case studies, interpreting national and global trends, and interactions with alumni working in relevant fields.

ii.   Developing well-rounded individuals who can make a difference in their communities and in the world. Our graduates should leave SOAS with:
- A sense of purpose, openness to new ideas and thirst for life-long learning.
- Ability to question and challenge in an effective and ethical manner.
- Leadership and teamwork experience, as well as other employment-relevant skills.

Requirements:

The expansion of internships and other opportunities for work experience, and an increased engagement with the career service and key employers across the student journey to ensure strong outcomes for all students.

Enhancing opportunities for student-led activities, undertaking group projects, for voluntary work and to develop leadership skills for all our students.

Enhanced pedagogy to facilitate participation, critical reflection and skills development, as well as robustness and resilience.

iii.   Staff and organisational capability for lifelong learning and ongoing renewal
- Further encouraging good practice in teaching and learning across SOAS
- Providing an exciting and demanding curricula

Requirements:

Effective mechanisms and opportunities in place for staff learning and development, impacting on the quality of learning and teaching. Effective sharing of good practice in teaching and learning across SOAS.

Ongoing review of external HEI environment and our programmes to identify opportunities and challenges for the delivery of teaching programmes. Making timely decisions and implementing any resulting changes (e.g. updating programmes to ensure relevance and attractiveness, improving administrative operations, creating new programmes to respond to new market needs, closing programmes that are no longer relevant).

iv.   A unique and fulfilling Student Experience
- Providing students and applicants with a positive experience from their initial contact with the School through to being an active member of the alumni community, so that students leave SOAS with both a positive experience of their time at SOAS and a sense of belonging and life-long association with the School.
- Enhancing students as partners, and enabling student success

Requirements:

Establishing a student entitlement statement, which sets out the expected levels of support and access at each programme level. Increased opportunities for students to provide feedback ('Student Voice'). Enhanced student engagement within and outwith the curriculum, including improved course representative system.

Maintaining an efficient and effective application system. Supporting alumni engagement, to develop a mutually beneficial relationship.

Increased support for student health and wellbeing, through strong and accessible pastoral support, advice and guidance. Enhancing our accommodation strategy, to provide students with the best possible options.

5. ENABLERS

A number of school-wide practices and strategies also support our Learning Strategy objectives

a. Reward and support teaching excellence (e.g. new promotions policy, enhanced teacher development in the Strategy, recognition and accreditation of teaching, promote as SDR topic).

b. Developing international partnerships to promote both outbound and inbound exchange of students.

c. Effective curriculum management: regular reflection on Regulations, Timetable, room management and supporting systems – in particular Student Records System Unite.

d. Relevant and timely data: collection, analysis and reporting of data on our current and future student body.

e. Accessible spaces for learning: Estate Strategy (e.g. SHNB, Campus Development Plan) and Learning Environments Strategy.

f. Effective Library strategy that supports teaching and learning, coupled with appropriate resourcing.

g. Technology-enhanced Learning Strategy: Moodle, Website Development, Distance and blended learning, lecture capture, mobile access and other digital technologies.

h. Internal financial mechanisms that maintain an appropriate and healthy portfolio.

i. Effective committee structure to support curriculum review and development of new pedagogies.

j. Effective mechanisms to evaluate programmes on an on-going basis.

k. High quality student-facing administration and professional services.

6. MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Implementation of the objectives of the Learning Strategy will occur through: our curriculum review initiatives; PGT common credit framework; Committees and working groups of the School; and ongoing curriculum review procedures (Annual Programme Reviews, Period Programme Reviews). The wide range of factors affecting the quality of teaching, learning and the student experience requires these issues to be addressed in a number of Sub-strategies, Faculty Plans and the Professional Services Plan, with particular attention to students with protected characteristics and from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Monitoring of progress will be the responsibility of Academic Development Committee, who will report to Academic Board annually on the KPIs below. The strategy will be evaluated in 2019-20, as part of the development of a refreshed learning strategy. The evaluation will consider the progress on each KPI over time and in relation to the sector. It will consider the effectiveness of each of the underpinning workplans, using both quantitative and qualitative evidence.

Strategic Aim/Underpinning Element	Proposed KPIs
Produce high quality graduates, postgraduates and researchers who understand and engage with the world and the regions in which we specialise	NSS Assessment and Feedback
Widening Participation activities to ensure access and outcomes	a) Percentage of young students from lower participation neighbourhoods b) Percentage of mature students from lower participation neighbourhoods
Develop well-rounded individuals who can make a difference in their communities and in the world	No. and % of graduates in grad-level jobs after 6 months – DLHE
Using appropriate and effective technologies and learning resources	NSS Learning Resources
Forward looking estates strategy including development of student accommodation	Bed spaces per student FTE
A unique and fulfilling Student Experience	Non-Continuation Rates
Developing a mutually beneficial relationship between the School and its alumni	Number and proportion of engaged alumni
Distinctive, research-enriched teaching portfolios at undergraduate and postgraduate levels based on our specialisms,	Percentage of target enrolment achieved in each of UG, PGT and PGR, Home, EU and international

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