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## SCHOOL OF ORIENTAL AND AFRICAN STUDIES

### GOVERNING BODY

Friday 2 October 2009

### MINUTES

Lady Barbara Thomas Judge (Chair)  
Professor M A Knibb (Vice-Chair)  
Mr M French (Honorary Treasurer)  
Professor P Webley (Director & Principal)  
Mr A Bhanji  
Sir David Brewer  
Professor I Brown  
Professor S Chan  
Professor M Craven  
Professor Sir Ivor Crewe\*  
Dr B Fortna\*  
Sir Graham Fry  
Professor G Furniss  
Mr J Griffith-Jones\*  
Professor B Harriss-White

Mr J Hughes-Hallett  
Mr K Kutay\*  
Professor P Jaggarr  
Mr N Lerner  
Mr S Lillo  
Professor N Rao  
Mr B Sellers  
Professor S Subedi\*  
Ms Z Weaver\*  
Dr H West  
Ms E Wright

In attendance: Ms S Neocosmos (Interim Registrar & Secretary)  
Professor M Hutt  
(Dean of Faculty of Languages & Cultures)  
Mr G Appleby (Director of Finance & Planning)  
Ms J Halliday (Deputy Secretary)  
[minute secretary]

*\*those marked with an asterisk were unable to be present.*

#### 1 Membership and terms of reference

The Governing Body **noted** its membership and terms of reference and the Procedures for the Conduct of Meetings (Standing Orders, Annex XIV) [Appendix A].

The Chair welcomed the new members and the new Interim Registrar & Secretary.

#### 2 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 12 June 2009 were **approved** and signed.

#### 3 Matters arising

(i) *Minute 38: Degree Awarding Powers*

The Vice Principal reported that a team of QAA assessors had visited the School on 29 and 30 September and 1 October 2009. They had held meetings with staff and students and with four members of the Governing Body. During the visit, the assessors had requested various documents for clarification, which the School had duly provided. At the end of the visit, they had indicated to the School their schedule for forthcoming visits which included attending several School and Faculty boards and committees, including the next meeting of the Governing Body on 9 December and meetings of some of its sub-committees. They had indicated that they hoped to produce their final report by September 2010 (or by December 2010 if the need for further scrutiny delayed this date). The Vice Principal expressed thanks to the School's Academic Development Directorate for managing the process well on the School's behalf. The Governing Body members who had met the assessors indicated some of the areas raised at that meeting.

(ii) *Minute 38: IFCELS*

The Vice Principal reported that IFCELS had been restructured as a result of the review and that this had reduced the deficit, which would be further reduced by improved student recruitment in the area. Work was in progress on making progression routes more explicit between IFCELS and the Faculties. Revised financial forecasts for IFCELS would be presented to the next meeting of the Resources and Planning Committee. The Governing Body thanked the Vice Principal for her excellent management of the review of IFCELS.

(iii) *Minute 40: Finance*

The Director of Finance & Planning reported that a redraft of the Financial Strategy had been considered at the School's Executive Board Away Day where key issues had been agreed. The revised Financial Strategy would be considered with the revised Faculty Plans at the next meeting of the Resources and Planning Committee.

(iv) *Minute 41: Strategic Planning: KPIs (staff)*

The Interim Registrar & Secretary reported that contracts of employment did not make either staff development review (SDR) or staff appraisal mandatory. The School had a system of SDRs which was being reviewed. Performance against KPIs 7 and 8 was not part of the conditions for promotion. The Governing Body asked that a report be made to the Human Resources Committee on the extent to which the SDR system was being operated across the School.

(v) *Minute 45: International partnerships*

The Vice Principal reported that a follow-up paper had been drafted on international partnerships and would be presented to the relevant School committee this term.

#### **4 Director & Principal's Report**

Governing Body received a report from the Director and Principal [Appendix B] and the following additional comments were noted:

(i) *HEFCE: ASNs, cuts and the future*

It was emphasised that the funding climate for the next few years was going to be extremely harsh. All the major political parties had indicated that there would be severe public spending cuts.

(ii) *Admissions 2009-10*

Governing Body noted that enrolment was still in progress but early signs were that undergraduate home student numbers were close to target; overseas undergraduate student numbers were about 20 below target; home Masters student numbers were on target; overseas Masters student numbers were currently below target. It was noted that problems obtaining visas meant that some students were requesting deferred entry for a year and could affect the actual take-up of places. The School was lobbying the UKBA about the visa procedure and a lay governor reported how student visa problems were impacting in both commercial and academic circles.

(iii) *Research council grant outcomes*

It was reported that the Government's approach to higher education, with the emphasis on STEM subjects, was undervaluing the humanities and social sciences. Governors ought to use any influence they had to promote the value of the latter.

(iv) *The London International Development Centre (LIDC)*

The Governing Body was extremely pleased to note that the LIDC Leverhulme bid was one of only two applications nationally that had been funded. The money would provide five years' funding for academic posts, including a Chair. The Governing Body expressed its congratulations to the members of staff concerned in obtaining the bid.

(v) *Personalia*

The Governing Body congratulated Professor Graham Furniss, the Pro-Director, on being elected a Fellow of the British Academy.

(vi) *Change of title*

The Director & Principal reported to the Governing Body that he was seeking their approval for a change of his title back to 'The Director'. The Governing Body **approved** this proposal and the consequent proposal that the Vice Principal's title be changed to Pro-Director.

## 5 Governance

(i) *Draft revised Charter & Articles*

The Interim Registrar & Secretary presented the proposed changes to the Charter & Articles, reflecting the outcomes of the Effectiveness Review of the Governing Body last session [Appendix C]. Since the distribution of papers, the School had received informal advice from the Privy Council Office. The only proposed change that they advised be not put were the amendments changing the awarding body from the University of London to the School, in anticipation of the School obtaining degree awarding powers, ie Article II, 1 (b) and Article VIII. The Governing Body **agreed** that these clauses be amended back to their current status. The Governing Body **agreed** in principle all the other proposed changes to the Articles, including changes resultant from the change in titles agreed above. The secretariat would bring a paper back to the Governing Body at its next meeting in December 2009

with a formal resolution to approve the changes which would then be submitted to the Privy Council for approval.

(ii) *The statement of the Governing Body's Primary Responsibilities*

The Governing Body **approved** the statement of its Primary Responsibilities [Appendix D], subject to the amendment of paragraph J 1 (Reputation) to read: 'To ensure that the good name and values of the School are safeguarded.' It was noted that the Statement of Primary Responsibilities followed the model Statement provided by the Committee of University Chairs (CUC) in every respect, apart from the addition to the SOAS Statement of the responsibility for Health & Safety, which the Governing Body was happy to endorse.

(iii) *The statement of the Governing Body's Reserved Powers*

The Governing Body **approved** the statement of its Reserved Powers [Appendix E], subject to the amendment of paragraph E 2 to read: 'To approve the Students' Union budget and receive the audited accounts.'

## 6 **HEFCE**

The Governing Body **received and noted** a letter from HEFCE on its assessment of institutional risk, noting that the School had been deemed to be 'not at higher risk' [Appendix F]. The Governing Body noted that this same paper and the recent HEFCE Assurance Review were on the Audit Committee's agenda for Monday 5 October. The Governing Body noted that the benchmarking data would feed into the ongoing discussion on KPIs. In response to HEFCE's point about the need to invest in the School's estate and infrastructure, it was noted that substantial monies had been allocated to be spent on the refurbishment of the estate.

## 7 **Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)**

The Governing Body received an update report on KPIs [Appendix G]. Governors were concerned that some of the School's positions appeared to be unsatisfactory and slipping in some areas of league tables, although the limitations of the league table methodology were recognised. Governors asked for a written report on the action the School was taking to analyse and improve completion rates. Governors asked for more detailed information as to why certain indicators were going down (such as student satisfaction, completion, good honours) and why the School had not performed better in the Times ratings of its specialist subjects (such as Asian Studies, Middle Eastern & African Studies). Governors asked for more information on year-on-year trends and on the School's performance relative to other institutions.

## 8 **Strategy and Priorities**

The Director & Principal introduced a discussion on strategy and priorities. He set the discussion against the following background:

- the economic and wider context
- government policy towards higher education

- the institutional context.

With regard to the first, the impact of the recession was noted, which reduced prospective students' ability to pay, although it was noted that exchange rate fluctuations could have a beneficial impact on the School's work, such as in the area of distance learning. The demographic issue was noted, that is the 1% reduction year-on-year in 18 year olds over the next ten years.

Secondly, the Government's approach to higher education was noted. The key features of this were that higher education was being seen in more instrumental terms than in earlier times, that it should be able to demonstrate that it had economic benefit, that it should be producing graduates with higher level skills. STEM subjects were favoured in government policy terms over the humanities and social sciences.

Thirdly, SOAS was small and had a specific profile which made it more vulnerable than other larger universities which also offered STEM subjects. The School had however worked in the last few years at improving its financial strategy and was now making surpluses year-on-year. There was a difficult balance in the School between one Faculty (Law & Social Sciences) which had high student demand and high SSRs, and the other two Faculties (Languages & Cultures and Arts & Humanities) which had lower student demand and numbers. This amounted to an internal subsidy of two of the Faculties by the other. The strategic plan (the Vision and Strategy document) was posited on the School being able to grow out of these historic problems. However, the sustainability of this approach to growth was now threatened by government policy. The Director & Principal gave details of specific initiatives and approaches the School would be using to meet these challenges, such as deploying language learning more widely across the School curriculum, considering more differential pricing of programmes, fundraising for scholarships, etc.

Governors were invited to comment on whether they considered the School's priorities and strategy to be radical enough or whether different approaches might be used. There was some debate about the School's portfolio, that is whether it should continue to be a provider of both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes or become a postgraduate-only institution. There was scope for growth in Masters programmes, given that these student numbers were not government-regulated, although it was recognised that this was a highly competitive market. Governors were pleased to learn that there had been a portfolio review and that data had gone to the Deans to consider and expressed their wish that action be taken to rationalise and refresh the portfolio. Governors would be interested to know to what extent undergraduates progressed to postgraduate study at SOAS.

Governors identified a key strategic issue as being whether the School should grow or not grow and asked that in these considerations the School should estimate the financial consequences of each approach. These and other issues would be addressed in the sub-strategies which would be considered through the School's committees and reported up to the Governing Body in due course.

## 9 Sub-Committees

The Governing Body **received** the minutes of the meeting of

- (i) the Health & Safety Committee on 27 May 2009 [Appendix H].

## **10 School Policy on Student Occupations**

The Governing Body **received** a report on the occupation of the Directorate offices in June 2009 [Appendix I]. The Director & Principal brought governors' attention to two particularly disturbing aspects of the event: (i) that the occupiers were not solely SOAS students but also many outsiders and, it was believed, some students from other institutions and (ii) that confidential documents had been used to put information on the web, and that staff's personal papers and possessions had been disturbed and in one case a personal set of keys had been stolen. This had meant that the locks had had to be changed on the Directorate offices and elsewhere. The Director & Principal expressed his pride in the School's students and their concern for social justice but pointed out that occupations were damaging to the School, and that the School was not a legitimate vehicle for a protest by outside groups against government policy. The Governing Body **noted and unanimously approved** the minor amendments to the School Policy on Student Occupations. Governors asked the executive to consider further how to deter outside groups from using the School as a site for occupations or similar direct action and what measures might be taken in future if they did so. The Director & Principal asked the student governors to take back to the Students' Union Executive a consideration of what stand they should take in such matters.

## **11 Date of next meeting**

The next meeting of the Governing Body would be held on **Wednesday 9 December 2009**, starting at 11.00am followed by lunch.