

Academic Expertise and Public Debate
SOAS

Policy

This policy is intended to provide guidance to staff on the use of academic expertise in public debate.

The [SOAS Vision and Strategy 2016-2020](#) sets a clear goal for the School to maximise “make an impact in the global and local communities with which we engage”, including through “influencing public debate; informing public understanding; increasing connectivity; engaging with governments, organisations and individuals (including the diaspora); undertaking public and community outreach; and supporting cultural exposure and promotion”.

In this context, there is an expectation that SOAS researchers will use their expertise outside the strictly academic context; they are expected to inform and influence public debate and understanding from the perspective their scholarly expertise brings to an issue. Leading public debate and promoting public understanding, however, brings particular responsibilities. It involves academic staff in public debates where issues may be controversial, and debates heated and emotional.

Principles

1. All SOAS members of staff are entitled, as any other member of the public, to air their views in public debate, and use their private resources for such purposes.
2. SOAS staff engaged in research and teaching also have the right of academic freedom; that is the right, without constriction by prescribed doctrine, to freedom of teaching and discussion, freedom in carrying out research and disseminating and publishing the results thereof, freedom to express freely their opinion about the institution or system in which they work, freedom from institutional censorship and freedom to participate in professional or representative academic bodies.
3. SOAS staff, and particularly those who are contracted to undertake research are, in addition, encouraged to engage with the public and participate in open debate in areas in which they have academic expertise.
4. In cases in which staff engage in public debate within their field of specialist expertise and/or on the basis of research which conforms with the School's expectations around academic rigour and research ethics, they are entitled to use their SOAS affiliation as evidence of their expertise on the issues.
5. Staff should be careful when using the SOAS affiliation in public debate. It requires, for those who use it, the obligation to ensure that the views expressed are based upon respect for evidence and detailed scholarly analysis, and are views capable of being justified or defended by reference to accepted standards within that field of scholarship. In case of doubt as to the use of SOAS affiliation, members of staff should seek advice from the Pro-Director (Research and Enterprise).
6. As new knowledge is discovered, or new interpretations of existing knowledge come to light, the initial position may change - it is a normal part of the scholarly development of ideas. Whatever position is adopted, however, staff have special obligations to ensure that their opinions are based on respect for evidence and detailed scholarly analysis and review, together with the relevant principles which are encapsulated in the School's [Research Ethics Policy](#).

7. In public debate, such as opinion pieces or columns in the media, it is generally not possible to provide a detailed scholarly justification of the position adopted, nor to present every possible perspective on an issue; but it is expected that the position adopted should be defensible and that justification for it should be either available or able to be given at a level which would be of acceptable standard in the field of scholarship.
8. Engagement in public debate may, on occasion, expose a member of staff to various forms of harassment, including ad hominem attacks, questioning of their integrity, and threats to their research funding or even personal safety. On such occasions, staff can expect to be supported by SOAS. This does not necessarily imply endorsement of the particular views they have put forward, but means defending their right to speak as a SOAS staff member in their areas of expertise, and support for the general notion that public debates need to be informed by academic expertise and conducted with due regard to factual analysis and scholarly interpretation.