

BOARD OF TRUSTEES MINUTES

THURSDAY 10 October 2024, 15.00-18.00

SOAS SENATE CHAMBERS, S219 AND MICROSOFT TEAMS

Present

Michael Hastings	Chair
Jo Beall	Vice Chair
Nizam Uddin	Vice Chair
Richard Millward	Honorary Treasurer
Adam Habib	Vice-Chancellor
Andrew Atherton	Member
Awino Okech	Member
Cedric Ntumba	Member
Emma Crewe	Member
Jenny Greenshields	Member
Joanna Newman	Provost and DVC Education
Kersti Börjars	Member
Elisa Van Waeyenberge	Head of College (CoDEF)
Laura Hammond	DVC Research and Knowledge Exchange
Rehana Ameer	Member
Sally Townsend	Member
Steven Pfeiffer	Member
Tom Yoritaka	Member
Yaa Ofori-Ansah	Member
Safia Shaikh	Member
Ekabali Ghosh	Member

In Attendance

Khadir Meer	DVC Finance and Operations
Justin Smith	Director of Finance and Procurement
Kanina Foss	Chief of Staff
Donna Fong	Director of Governance
Angelique Tjen	Governance Manager
Seth Cheek	Head of Planning (presenting items 11 and 12)
Hannah Bargawi	Global Director of Learning & Teaching (presenting item 12)

Apologies

Tawnya Cheatheam	Director Marketing, Student Recruitment and Communications
David Willey	Member

1. Opening Administration

B 24/25 1 1 Welcome and apologies for absence

The Chair welcomed everyone who joined the meeting in person and online and noted apologies from David Willey and Tawnya Cheatheam, for this first meeting of the academic year. He then welcomed the two new Student Union Board members, Ekabali Ghosh and Safia Shaikh and commented that this would be Awino Okech's last official Board of Trustees meeting. Although Awino will be attending the Board Retreat on 21st- 22nd November as the main speaker during the dinner.

The Chair also thanked those members who attended the Graduation ceremonies. He also commented that it was good to know that the graduation period went without incident with only a small protest related to the encampment.

B 24/25 1 2 Declaration of interests

The Board of Trustees confirmed there were no conflicts of interests for the meeting.

B 24/25 1 3 Review of Standing orders

The Board of Trustees noted the Standing orders.

B 24/25 1 4 Confirmation of the agenda

The meeting's agenda has been approved.

B 24/25 1 5 Minutes

The Minutes from the 6.7.24 Board of Trustees has been approved subject to the following requested amendments:

- On page 8, when research publications are mentioned, this is to be changed to "publications per member of staff"
- With the encampment update and the paragraph on BDS demands, the language is asked to be re-phrased so that it doesn't appear as if SOAS is dependent on speaking with the students.

B 24/25 1 6 Action Log

It was agreed that all actions can be closed.

B 24/25 1 7 Annual Schedule of Business

The Board of Trustees noted the Annual Schedule of Business and that this is a “live” document.

2. Presentation

B 24/25 1 8 The Leicester Inquiry: SOAS Engagement with a City in Crisis

Subir Sinha, Director, SOAS South Asia Institute, gave a presentation on the riots and violence in Leicester during August and September 2022 between Indians and Muslims. This is a SOAS funded research project. The presentation is below.



BoT Leicester.pptx

3. Part B – Items for Discussion

B 24/25 1 9 Vice Chancellor’s Annual report

The Vice Chancellor presented his report and highlighted:

- The Institutional Scorecard has been adopted. This will be discussed further below.
- Enrolment and planning was a success and despite Postgraduate numbers being lower, the university is still financially within its budgetary parameters.
- Fundraising is positive with potential income from the United States of America (USA) on Jain Studies, various alumni events around the world which generates income e.g. Steven Pfeiffer speaking at (USA events) and a prominent South African family who will be visiting the university with a view to provide donations. Stephen Pfeiffer mentioned that the USA SOAS alumni are the second largest proportion of alumni.
- Research grants to the university have also increased.

The following areas were also discussed.

The Institutional Scorecard:

This is a year of transition as the university develops the next 5 Year Strategy. This effects the scorecard and targets for the year as we close out the last strategy and prepare for the next five year period. The 5 Year Strategy will be discussed at the Board Retreat in November. The aim is to have the preliminary Strategy prepared by January 2025 and then for the Strategy to be adopted formally through our Governance in April and May 2025 in preparation for implementation in early 2026.

Management of precinct areas to alleviate encampment issues:

The Vice Chancellor explained that discussions are underway with the University of London to transfer ownership or management of the precinct and pathway areas to SOAS. This is because the SOAS buildings are owned by SOAS but the pathways are owned by the University of London. When the protestors arrive and the encampment settled, it was University of London that had to take legal action even though it was the SOAS community who were affected.

Semesterisation:

The university is preparing to move from 3 terms to 2 terms during an academic year. This has the advantages of providing assessment and feedback to students earlier instead of having to wait till the end of the year to understand progress. The terms would be from September to January and from January to June with the summer break between June and September. With the preparation for semesterisation, the university is also looking at replacing exams with assessments that are closer to preparation for real life work. All faculty staff are keen on semesterisation. Many of the university's competitors have already moved to semesterisation.

Clearing and financial planning:

It was asked how the university can adequately financially plan if students are accepting and enrolling so late before the start of the academic year. It was explained that the UK university system works in this way and that compared to the university's competitors, the university is in a good position because it has a unique selling point.

Action:

Provide the University list of abbreviations to the Board of Trustees.

B 24/25 1 10 Strategic Risk Register

The Director Governance provided an update on the SOAS Strategic Risk Register. The Board of Trustees agreed the following changes:

- A reduction in the risk "Employment relations with trade unions" as there have been no disputes or compulsory redundancies and relations with the trade unions have improved.
- A new risk "Cyber security attack" has been introduced as this is wider than simply IT security and the university needs to look at specific mitigations.

The risk related to the impact of Israel/ Palestine was discussed. The Chair asked why the UAE was not also considered a risk and on the list of risk countries that SOAS partners and works with, as the university should be consistent and consider countries that are associated with causing or inciting conflicts. It was also raised about whether the university should also be considering human rights. The Vice Chancellor explained that the country risk profile is related to security of staff, reputational risk and the political climate of the UK. China is on the list because of the UK political climate not because of the country's treatment of human rights. Also the Audit and Risk Committee provides assurance and robust challenge on the countries to be listed as risk countries. In addition the country risk profile is internal and not made public.

Action:

The issue on Country risk profile can be discussed further at the Board Retreat or at a later Board of Trustees meeting.

B 24/25 1 11 Interim Admissions and Enrolment 2024 update

The Head of Planning presented the early view on admissions and enrolment for this year. He explained that the gap in student places is largely due to the reduction in overseas student numbers despite the student numbers through clearing being better than target. However this

has not impacted the university's finances as this is still within contingency. Also if we compare with previous years and look at trends, the university is in a strong position this year. The university's marketing and recruitment has been very successful.

B 24/25 1 12 University Rankings and NSS Improvement Plan

The university has not performed well under these rankings. The Head of Planning explained that we are focusing on NSS because if this improves then the university rankings will also improve. The Global Director of Learning & Teaching presented the university's plan to improve the NSS scores.

The university is focusing to improve the 3 worst scoring areas i.e. "Student voice", "Assessment and feedback" and "Academic support". There is an institutional Action Plan fed up from local action plans to address these three areas. Throughout this year the Plan will be tracked and monitored by the Senior Management Team (SMT) committee so that completed actions can be recorded and the impact of actions recorded where possible. This is an improvement from previous years and we are in a period of change. There are simple things like improving the waiting time for assessment feedback which can change institutional culture and improve student experience and these as well as longer term actions are included in the NSS Action plan. It was reiterated that SOAS has good teachers committed to teaching and the NSS is about students and teachers working collaboratively.

The Student members provided feedback that they would like to see more support to postgraduate (in particular PhD) students when they are applying for jobs and they also explained that only students already engaged and wanting changes, respond and complete the NSS. With the NSS, the response rate is being addressed as the university is looking at different ways to engage with students. With support on postgraduate students applying for jobs, the university is looking at ways to enable the curriculum to become more practical and work focused and the university is exploring the proposal to co-create areas of the curriculum with students.

It was acknowledged that the university is doing the same as other high ranking universities by considering student experience and making improvements by working with the student body. However like these universities, SOAS needs to get the communications and narrative appropriate so that students can feel proud of their university. It is important to learn from the universities who are top of the league and the NSS. The university also needs to take collective responsibility for the scores so that everyone works to improve it.

4. Part C – Update from sub-committees

B 24/25 1 13 Senate

The issues were discussed and are covered under the Chair's brief.

The Emeritus professors were noted and it was suggested that the university should organise an event to celebrate them all together.

Action:

Director MSR&C to look into arranging an event for Emiritus professors.

B 24/25 1 14 Resource and Planning Committee (RPC)

The Chair of the RPC and Honorary Treasurer explained that the university is in a good financial position, as it ended the year with a £6.3m surplus and a high profit. This is the third year that the university has performed well financially. This enables the university to build the International Scholarships fund with £8m going towards it. However the university needs to be more dynamic and invest more in CAPEX and not diminish the university's savings. This would be similar to the university's competitors and the Russell Group universities. The university also needs to increase raising funds through alumni.

B 24/25 1 15 Audit and Risk Committee (ARC)

There was an extraordinary ARC meeting as the outgoing external auditors, KPMG did not complete the 2023/24 plan. UNIAC, the new auditors, were only able to provide limited assurance based on their additional review leading on from the KPMG work. UNIAC highlighted strategic risk management as an area of strength and data quality as area for improvement as not all the audit actions from recommendations were completed. Data quality will be reviewed as part of the 2024/25 Audit plan.

The Governance for Country Risk profiles related to partnerships was explained. This is for the proposition and updates being presented at Executive Board and ARC and after both have commented and approved, the Board of Trustees provide final approval. The purpose of this process is to ensure that the university is sighted on the areas and countries it works with and manages any risks related to security of staff and reputational risk.

AOB

The University President's reception is taking place after this Board of Trustees meeting.

5. Date of Next Meeting

The Chairman concluded the meeting by thanking everyone and confirmed the date of the next meeting which is the Board Retreat on 21st – 22nd November 2024.