

## BOARD OF TRUSTEES MINUTES

**THURSDAY 15<sup>th</sup> May 2025, 15.00-18:00**

**SOAS SENATE CHAMBERS, S219 AND MICROSOFT TEAMS**

### **Present**

Michael Hastings	Chair
Nizam Uddin	Vice Chair
Richard Millward	Honorary Treasurer
Adam Habib	Vice-Chancellor
Jo Beall	Vice Chair
Khadir Meer	DVC Finance and Operations
Cedric Ntumba	Member
Emma Crewe	Senate representative
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
Sally Townsend	Member
Tom Yoritaka	Member
Yaa Ofori-Ansah	Member
Tawnya Cheatheam	Professional Services representative
Lindiwe Dovey	Senate representative
Steven Pfeiffer	Member
Safia Shaikh	Student Union representative

### **In Attendance**

Kanina Foss	Chief of Staff
Donna Fong	Director of Governance
Angelique Tjen	Governance Manager (minutes)

### **Apologies**

Andrew Atherton	Member
David Willey	Member
Justin Smith	Director of Finance and Procurement
Ekabali Ghosh	Research Students Association representative

## **2. Opening Administration**

### **B 24/25 5 2 Welcome and apologies for absence**

The Chair welcomed everyone who joined the meeting in person and online and noted apologies from Andrew Atherton, David Willey, Justin Smith and Ekabali Ghosh.

The Chair opened the meeting by thanking the SOAS leadership team for managing protests during the year and noted that it is currently the examination period at the university.

### **B 24/25 5 3 Confirmation of the agenda**

The meeting's agenda has been approved.

## **1. Presentation**

### **B 24/25 5 1 SOAS Research and impact on Strategy**

The DVC RKE and the Director of Research & Knowledge Exchange provided a presentation which updates the Board on Current Research at SOAS, the Research Strategy and the next five years. This presentation follows on from the Research update at the Board of Trustees retreat last November.

The following was highlighted:

- Information available through Sci-Val shows that SOAS has a large footprint globally of where citations are picked up, and we have an estimated 900 publications with partners
- There are global challenges for Research generally but SOAS has had success in attracting new awards and “locked in” investment for the future which has strengthened the research culture at SOAS. This includes the success of the European Research Council Advanced grants.
- SOAS has exceeded achievement of the £6m target in new awards, receiving c£20m in the past three years
- SOAS has also been recognised through impact awards for its work in holding events for school students from migrant backgrounds and supporting them with integrating and understanding their path to higher education.
- SOAS has led the “Building bridges: Transforming Collaborative Research Between the UK and East Africa” project.
- Research income has been on an upward trajectory since 2021.
- There are global challenges including withdrawal of USAID and the politics in the USA and increasingly in the UK regarding international students.
- SOAS is responding by diversifying its Research income while “doubling down” on areas in which it has a competitive advantage.
- It is also reducing its high dependence on publicly funded teaching by:
  - Growing research income from research grants and contracts and enterprise to a combined total of £24M (from 15M currently).

- Optimising 'research power' for REF 2029 by targeting volume and quality to increase Quality Research funding.

The Board of Trustees noted and discussed the following points:

- There will be a focus on disciplines and areas that are becoming more popular as these areas will attract more research income.
- That SOAS will be in direct competition with other HEI's in the UK in research grants for data science areas, however it will also be important for SOAS to focus on research topics in humanities to address some of the current questions being asked globally eg: climate change; food security etc...
- SOAS will focus on its areas of expertise and compete with other HEs in these areas by demonstrating its expertise and attracting funding or specific areas rather than through direct competition.
- Although philanthropy and research are diverging in the world, both these areas are being focused on within SOAS.
- The Board of Trustees and the honorary awardees should draw on their networks to help promote SOAS to increase philanthropic gifts and other areas of income.
- The REF rankings are important to postgraduates and SOAS will work to increase these rankings. SOAS is becoming renowned for collaboration where academics help each other and researchers want to come to SOAS.

## **2. Opening Administration**

### **B 24/25 5 4 Minutes of the meeting held on 20th March 2025**

The Minutes from the 20<sup>th</sup> March 2025 has been approved by the Board of Trustees

### **B 24/25 5 5 Action Log**

It was noted that all actions to date in the Action log have been closed.

### **B 24/25 5 6 Annual Schedule of Business**

The Board of Trustees noted the Annual Schedule of Business.

### **B 24/25 5 7 Chair's Business**

The Chair asked the Board of Trustees to note that Andrew Atherton will be completing his term of office and the 17<sup>th</sup> July meeting would be his last meeting.

The Chair also asked the Board of Trustees to note that Rehana Ameer has stepped down from her position as lay member.

## **3. Part A Items for noting or approval**

### **B 24/25 5 8 Academic Year update**

The Provost and DVC Education presented the update which outlines the delivery and implementation plan for the new SOAS Academic Year Calendar, transitioning from a term-based system to a two-semester academic calendar for September 2025. The new academic year will consist of two semesters, each including a reading week and an assessment and exam period, followed by a 10-week summer session. This transition aims to enhance the student experience and align SOAS with national and global higher education trends. There will be more assessments and less exams. This change also responds to student survey feedback which will enable students to have early feedback and guidance throughout the year.

The programme is owned jointly by the Provost and Deputy Vice Chancellor (Education) and the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Finance and Operations), ensuring executive oversight and robust governance. This requires cross-institutional collaborative effort to ensure the right people in the right teams focusing on the highest priority tasks and protecting the Student Records replacement project (SRS-T) and other high priority projects are unimpacted by these changes.

The following points were noted and discussed:

- There is minimal risk of the student body legally challenging the change from terms to semesters due to insufficient consultation, as the change is within SOAS regulations which enables SOAS to make this change and students have been consulted.
- It was noted that the setting of semesters is impacted on when Easter falls annually, potentially with semester 1 ending on a Friday and semester 2 commencing on the following Monday, and the impact of this on the marking of exams. The Provost and DVC (Education) noted that plans to space assessments out would help to alleviate this issue from occurring.
- The student reaction to date has been that this change is simply administrative and they have been positive about the continual feedback that they have been able to give.
- This change to the academic year will facilitate more equitable partnerships as many potential international partners are already on a semester system.
- The year 2025/26 will be the first year this is implemented and will be taken as a learning period.
- it was noted the project management costs are specifically for expertise and resources to ensure any changes in systems are seamless and aligned. These costs cover consultants with experience and expertise to enable a seamless transition and to enable people to continue doing roles as business as usual

The Board of Trustees noted and acknowledged the academic year update and all the work that is undergoing to prepare for the new academic year.

## **B 24/25 5 9 SOAS Charter on Racism, Antisemitism, and All Forms of Cultural, Ethnic, and Religious Chauvinism**

The Vice Chancellor presented the Charter on Racism, Antisemitism and All Forms of Cultural, Ethnic and Religious Chauvinism. The current charter was developed and approved in 2021.

It is good practice for the University to regularly review key statements which are published externally. There are no changes to the current Charter, which still remains reflective of the institutional position on these matters.

The Charter has been reviewed and endorsed by the Executive Board and the Senate. The Senate has requested that a working group is established to review the Charter to review and potentially extend the scope of the document. The Board of Trustees agreed with this approach with two Trustees, Nizam Uddin and Safia Shaikh, having expressed an interest in being involved in the review.

It was noted that this Charter was useful in helping SOAS reflect the plurality of debate required in the recent Freedom of Speech discussions that have been seen as successful.

The Board of Trustees has approved the Charter in principle with an understanding that it will be brought back to a future Board of Trustees meeting if required, following the working group review.

#### **4. Part B Items for Discussion and Approval**

##### **B 24/25 5 10 Vice Chancellor's report**

The Vice Chancellor provided an update on the following areas:

- Teaching and Learning
- Research
- Public Lectures and Deliberations
- Financial Sustainability
- Recruitment / Marketing
- Equitable Partnerships
- International Visits and Fundraising.

The following points were highlighted:

- The panel discussion on Academic Freedom was a success and has enabled discussions to move to the next stage and become part of business as usual at the university. It shows that difficult discussions can be successfully progressed at SOAS.
- There are conferences and public lectures upcoming including Elisa Van Waeyenberge's Inaugural lecture on 4<sup>th</sup> June (invitations have been sent to Trustees).
- Our latest forecast for 2024/25 unrestricted surplus is £4.3m, an increase of £1.3m compared to the Budget target of £3m, due to release of unspent contingency of £1.2m. The budget planning cycle for 2025/26 is well under way. We remain committed to delivering a £3m annual unrestricted operating surplus going forward, sufficient to deliver the Capital Expenditure plan whilst maintaining liquidity above 60 days.
- The Budget for 2025/26 remains tight as 2025/26 represents 'peak investment' year in relation to the multi-year CAPEX programme. Student numbers and student accommodation remains a concern as is the Government White Paper proposing a fee levy on international students. The White paper can be discussed and considered

through SOAS governance i.e. Executive Board (EB), Resources and Planning Committee (RPC) and Board of Trustees if required.

- Our UG applications are down -3% year on year, with Home up (+2%) and Overseas down (-13%).
- The College of Law, Anthropology and Politics is developing two new equitable partnerships: a joint MA Global Affairs and Eurasian Studies with Nazarbayev University in Astana, Kazakhstan, and a joint MA Sociology in Global Citizenship with National Sun Yat-sen University in Kao-Shiung, Taiwan. Both programmes are aiming to accept their first intakes in September 2026.
- Our new philanthropic income currently sits at over £7.3m, including a recent second donation from Hyundai Motor Group and an additional gift of approximately £1.5m to support postgraduate and PhD scholarships for students from the African continent.
- Significant progress has been made with a donation from a philanthropist and SOAS alumnus. A Letter of Intent has been signed indicating a commitment to making a substantial unrestricted donation to SOAS. This donation is currently unrestricted so the allocation of funds will be decided through SOAS governance which includes EB, RPC and Board of Trustees.

In discussion of the VC's report, Board members noted:

- their support to attend international recruitment events
- have requested that a paper is presented to the next Audit & Risk Committee in relation to the Government White Paper on immigration, and the potential risks this poses to SOAS

## **B 24/25 5 11 Partnerships update**

The Chief of Staff provided a presentation to update the Board of Trustees on SOAS Partnerships. It includes an overview of the three types of partnership that SOAS engages in – traditional, developmental and equitable – the purpose of each type of partnership, the conditions under which we will engage in such a partnership, and examples of each type of partnership.

SOAS' exploration of equitable partnerships (which currently focuses on the co-development, co-teaching and co-accreditation of academic programmes) is important for pedagogical reasons and as a way to mitigate the brain drain, but it also has the potential to reduce our reliance on international student fees by entering new markets at new price points. It therefore brings together pedagogical benefits, developmental impact and improved financial sustainability of UK institutions.

The presentation also provides an analysis of the financial performance of SOAS' equitable partnerships. So far, these partnerships have been financially successful and are likely to deliver further growth over coming years. Our biggest remaining challenge is to go to scale on joint programmes independent of government support and prove the commercial viability of the model.

The following points were raised and discussed by the Board of Trustees:

- More analysis of risk and losses were requested for future updates on partnerships. The Board of Trustees should be able to consider the strategic nature of current and proposed partnerships, for example, the traditional partnerships have low student numbers and the equitable partnerships provide a new model with new price points. The Board of Trustees should have visibility of risks, losses, benefits and future decisions on partnerships so that they can consider the return on investment and decide whether to continue the loss making partnerships etc, and also to ensure that that the partnerships remain aligned with SOAS' strategy and values.
- Currently as SOAS is partnering with other institutions, costs are lower as teaching as well as income is shared.
- The success of partnerships can only be judged after 3-5 years, once they have been embedded and operational for a few years.
- Currently the partnerships underwritten by Governments like the Taiwan, Kazakhstan and Saudi partnerships, are working well.
- There is additional review and governance as all new partnerships and partnership renewals are subject to SOAS' partnerships governance framework, with equitable partnerships also requiring approval by the EB and the RPC. Partnerships with institutions in high-risk countries are also subject to SOAS' Country Risk Procedure and require approval by the Audit and Risk Committee (ARC).

**Action: The Chief of Staff will provide an annual report on Partnerships to the Board of Trustees which will include information on risks, losses and detailed finances.**

**Action: The Vice Chancellor will follow up with the following Trustees: Jenny Greenshields, Jo Beall and Richard Millwall so that the detailed requirements for the annual report can be gauged.**

## **B 24/25 5 12 College Reorganisation**

The Vice Chancellor presented the paper with the proposal for the reorganisation of SOAS' college structure, specifically the dissolution of the College of Law, Anthropology and Politics (CoLAP) and the establishment of a standalone College of Law and a renamed College of Social Sciences. This proposal emerged from the strategic planning process initiated in October 2024 and was agreed by the Senior Management Team (SMT) at its workshop on 24-25 March 2025. The reorganisation aims to address some of the ways in which CoLAP has been relatively less strategically and operationally efficient, as well as introducing additional benefits.

The proposal is being advanced separately from the broader Strategic Plan so that preparations can be made in time for implementation in the 2025/26 academic year.

The Board of Trustees discussed whether the name for the College of Social Sciences appropriately addresses the importance of subjects like Finance and Economics to the Business market and covers AI. It was agreed that Social Sciences is part of SOAS's unique selling point and that this name aligns with Colleges at other HE institutions. It was also highlighted that students identify with Schools rather than Colleges so the College of



Social Sciences would make no difference to recruitment or marketing. Also innovation including AI should be part of all subjects taught at SOAS so again having AI under the College of Social Sciences should not have a negative impact. AI is just one area of innovation for which SOAS should be involved in and SOAS should be future proofing itself on these areas.

The Board of Trustees approved the following:

- Establishment of a standalone College of Law
- Renaming of the College of Development, Economics and Finance (CoDEF) as the College of Social Sciences, and to incorporate the Department of Politics within the College
- The Department of Anthropology and Sociology, the Centre for Gender Studies and the Centre for Global Media and Communications will be relocated to the College of Humanities, in a new School of Anthropology, Media and Gender.

**Action: The Vice Chancellor will provide a future presentation to the Board of Trustees on how Business studies and Finance are growing within SOAS. He will also provide an update on how AI is progressing within SOAS and influencing courses. The presentation will include the status of these courses compared to its main competitors i.e. LSE, Kings and UCL. This can be provided in the first Board of Trustees meeting in October 2025.**

## **5. Part C Updates for Subcommittees**

### **B 24/25 5 13 Senate**

The Senate minutes of 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2025 and the Sustainability Strategy 2025 have been noted by the Board of Trustees.

### **B 24/25 5 14 Resources and Planning**

The RPC minutes of 4<sup>th</sup> March are noted.

The Board of Trustees were also asked to note that the 2025/26 Budget would need to be approved at the next Board of Trustees meeting on 17<sup>th</sup> July. The aim is to increase student numbers and thus income whilst keeping expenditure steady. Student accommodation is currently a financial risk and the strategy and negotiations are underway to mitigate this risk although any new arrangements would be more onerous on SOAS.

The Board of Trustees were also informed that the Investment Committee should be operating better and managing SOAS funds better with two investment advisers appointed as experts on the committee.

### **B 24/25 5 15 Audit and Risk**

The minutes of 21<sup>st</sup> January 2025 are noted.



## **B 24/25 5 16 Governance and Nominations Committee**

The Board of Trustees were asked to note that SOAS is in the process of appointing two new lay members for the Board of Trustees. The process for recruitment is underway and CVs have been received although should any Trustees wish to recommend anyone, the shortlisting will begin on 27<sup>th</sup> May so CVs need to be submitted to the Director of Governance before then. The skills and competency of Board of Trustee members have been approved by GNC.

In addition, the Board of Trustees approved the second term as external members of the Board of Trustees for Jo Beall and Sally Townsend.

It was noted the first term for College Dean and SOAS Professional Services representative has concluded, and a process is underway to replace the positions currently held by Elisa Van Waeyenberge and Tawnya Cheatheam respectively underway y.

### **Date of Next Meeting**

The Chairman concluded the meeting by thanking everyone and confirmed the date of the next meeting which is the on 17<sup>th</sup> July 2025.