

**SOAS People
Strategy and Plan**
2024/25 to 2026/27

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Foreword from the VC

People are at the heart of any strategy or institutional turnaround programme. Mobilising our people, harnessing their talents, and empowering them to deliver and address the institutional issues are key to our success

We also need a workforce that is loyal to the organisation and to each other. Such loyalty is engendered when an institution is seen to be empathetic and caring and develops and rewards staff in a fair way. Individual and collective productivity, institutional care and responsiveness are integrally tied and feed off each other. This, then, is the gold standard for our people strategy.

But how do we get there from where we are? We are still somewhat polarised as a community, and many feel aggrieved by an institution they believe does not care about or is not responsive to their interests. Part of this emanates from recent financial difficulties; another facet emanates from the recent pandemic and the changed environment that has emerged.

Perhaps our biggest challenge is the differing views on the purpose of the institution and the

political and social character of the community we aim to build. Our community is, at one level, extremely cohesive in that it shares a collective agenda of education, research and scholarship about Africa, Asia and the Middle East, and a commitment to a more socially just and inclusive world. On the other hand, it is heterogeneous, with many different views on how we get there and what the social norms of our community and university need to be.

We all speak of empathy, love and human community, and we also commit to academic excellence, social diversity and inclusion, and financial sustainability. When these different values come into tension - not contradiction - our priorities tend to diverge, and some feel more entitled to articulate their choices compared to others. The net effect is that our community is more politically and socially fractured than it needs to be, and a pathway needs to be crafted to become the empathetic, caring and productive community we seek.

This is more difficult to achieve than political rhetoric and some of the academic research suggests. The way forward lies in educative and acculturation interventions, but this will not enable us to address our institutional cultural deficits sustainably unless we also develop collective and individual accountability and are prepared to call it out when colleagues do not uphold the norms and rules of the institution.

It is this complex balance of educative, acculturation and accountability mechanisms that over time will transform our institutional culture, allowing us to achieve our collective goals - teaching, research and deliberative scholarship, and also our social justice purpose, serving as bridge between London, the UK and the broader majoritarian world.

This understanding is at the heart of our People Strategy, which can only be implemented over multiple years - three in this case. Interventions need to be sequential, with some being undertaken prior to others, with clear monitoring and assurance enabled throughout. A timetable of institutional interventions is therefore detailed at the end of the document.

I welcome the development of this initial People Strategy. It will inevitably evolve, and I invite all members of the community to come with us on this journey.

Adam Habib
Vice-Chancellor



Introduction from the SOAS People Director

It is a pleasure to present our first
SOAS People Strategy

Following the Executive Board's
agreement on the framework
and approach in February 2024,
we began a conversation with
the community about issues and
priorities facing SOAS. Around
a fifth of our colleagues from
across the whole university
engaged with the process, and I
am grateful for everyone's input.

I have been struck by the
consistency of feedback around
priorities and ideas that will make
the biggest impact in bringing the
community together, providing
support to colleagues and beginning
to create an environment in which
we are all proud to work.

Clearly there is a need to focus on
our culture, how we interact and
support one another, how agile
and adept we are to change and
emerging technology, how our job
roles and processes are designed
around the student journey and our
ambition to become a research-
intensive university.

Our current, sometimes fractious,
culture has evolved over decades
and this work will take some more
time to fully unpack and understand,
before we attempt to create a set of
core principles and values together,
and then agree on the rights and
responsibilities for all of us, in
exchange for the privilege of being
a member of the SOAS community.
Therefore, this important discussion
will continue and will become a key
component of the project we will
undertake on our refreshed SOAS
Strategy for 2026 – 2031.

John Macey
Director

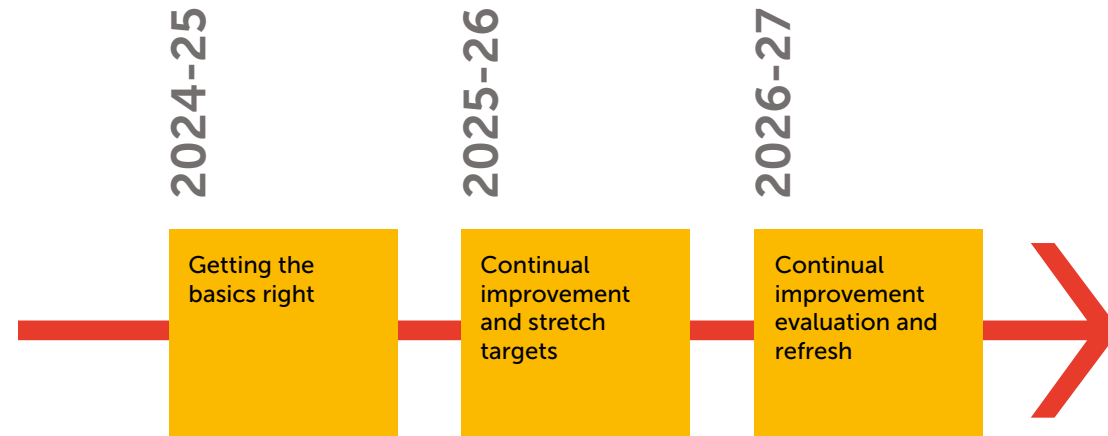
It is vital that we commence a journey of improvement, so this initial people strategy will focus on getting the basic services and interactions right, as well as improving staff engagement, leadership and management capability across the organisation over the next two to three years.



Feedback about our challenges and potential solutions was broadly consistent during the consultation.

Future plans have been grouped together into five key themes:

1. Modern, high-quality People Services that underpin the successful delivery of SOAS aims and objectives
2. Becoming a London HEI employer of choice for professional services and the academy
3. An engaged workforce and integrated community
4. High-quality leadership and management capability
5. An inclusive culture based on respect and social justice underpinned by SOAS values and behaviours

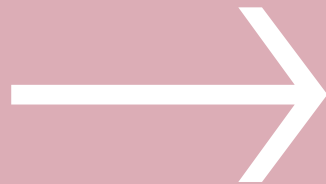


Key areas of focus, along with their performance metrics and measurements, are detailed in this strategy document. At a high level, we have also developed four key metrics to gauge our progress, which are presented at the start of this document. More detailed metrics and high-level risk analysis are provided towards the end to ensure we are prepared for potential challenges.

4

Key

Metrics



Recruitment time to fill

Request to recruit submission to offer: 12 weeks or less.

Staff grievance resolution time

Submission to outcome: three months or less.

Collegiate relationships with TU partners

Our Risk register score reducing towards, and staying below 12

Overall staff engagement

People Insights Survey: Overall staff Engagement Score is 70% or greater.

Detailed People Strategy and Metrics



1.

Modern, high quality People Services that underpin successful delivery of SOAS aims and objectives

SOAS aspires to be The World's University, ensuring high-quality student experiences and outcomes to deliver groundbreaking research and impact.

To achieve this, our community must be supported by innovative, user-friendly and effective support processes and people. SOAS community feedback has highlighted that, too often, we are unresponsive and overly bureaucratic.

We must shift our focus towards user experience, ensuring responsive support in recruitment, onboarding, development and effective coaching for line managers and staff teams.

We can become a sector leader in HR and People Services, such that a role within SOAS professional services becomes known for operational excellence and a mark of quality.

In response to community feedback, we will focus on operational excellence in all that we offer.

What we will do	How we will do it	How we will measure
Create sector-leading recruitment services that are intuitive, user-friendly and effective.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Integrate the recruitment and operations to ensure a seamless process from advert to onboarding. Utilise tech solutions to reduce manual interventions. Review of our recruitment literature and messaging/ correspondence for the right tone and accuracy. 	Improved satisfaction among recruiting managers – survey.
Create highly effective search campaigns ensuring right-first-time appointments that engage our future colleagues.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Upgrade SOAS recruitment literature to ensure clear picture of our opportunities and challenges, increasing the probability of candidate 'fit'. Design bespoke recruitment campaigns for hard to fill roles. Reduce 'one-stage' recruitment processes, introduce appropriate candidate testing and pre-employment screening. 	<p>20% reduction in recruitment budget spend on 2023/24 budget.</p> <p>20% reduction in professional services turnover.</p>
Create proactive and empathetic responses to employment relations issues, resolving a greater proportion of challenges informally and resolving quickly where formal processes are required.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve capacity among HRBPs to ensure greater responsiveness. Training for HR in mediation and conflict resolution and creation of 'how to' guides for managers. 	<p>20% reduction in overall formal casework based on 2023/24 level.</p> <p>Average resolution within 3 months of ER cases.</p>
Ensure appropriate turnaround times to colleague questions, tailored to the situation.	Introduction of ticketing system enabling accurate measurement and visibility of all requests.	20% reduction in response times.

2.

Become a London HEI employer of choice within the Academic and Professional Services communities

A leading university must attract and retain the most capable colleagues. This requires effective pay and benefits, wellbeing support, reward and recognition approaches and personal growth opportunities. Community feedback highlights that we are lacking in these areas, and this is reflected in the 2022 Staff Survey data.

In Professional Services, given our relative size, it is not always possible to retain colleagues longer term, particularly given the traditional 'pyramid' shape within the grades. However, we can ensure a high-quality career experience, generating future generations of professional leaders for the sector.

For the Academy, we must also ensure clear routes to career progression and support and guidance in the application of our performance framework.

What we will do	How we will do it	How we will measure
Attract high quality applicants to all our vacant roles.	Proactively market the benefits of working in HE, specially SOAS, and share our successes as a university in our recruitment literature.	Halve the number of staff leaving SOAS within 12 months of joining.
Review our local reward offering, recognising the national pay bargaining arrangements, ensuring we remain competitive.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reviewing our non-pay benefits and grow our offering utilising technology. Introduce a SOAS benefits platform. Annual review of local pay such as London Weighting, ensuring our offer reflects the relative success of SOAS at maintaining its financial position. 	50% colleague engagement with benefits platform. Union agreement to local settlement by the end of Term 1 annually.
Ensure appropriate recognition for high performance, citizenship and contribution to our mission.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review our Reward and Recognition policy to ensure fit for purpose. Establish data collection mechanisms to monitor use, including from an EDI perspective. Establish new recognition mechanisms to ensure whole community inclusivity. 	Meeting sector benchmark in staff survey score of 57% for reward and recognition.
Create a culture of staff support and wellbeing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tackle instances of continual high workload through measurement (e.g. WAMS for academy and appropriate measures for PS), exploring appropriate interventions and solutions on a case by case basis. Set up a team of trained Wellbeing champions from each staff area. Train and support a cross-SOAS team of mental health first aiders. 	Meeting sector benchmark 63% wellbeing scores, through the staff survey.

3.

An engaged workforce and an integrated community

To be a high-performing university, we must ensure we benefit from the skills, experience, knowledge and talents of the whole community.

Colleagues who believe in our mission and are engaged and committed to giving their best will generate significantly improved organisational performance. Our 2022 staff survey results and subsequent feedback from the community suggest we are below the benchmark in colleague engagement, which we must turn around.

Engaged colleagues are more likely to collaborate, solve problems, and generate more effective and durable solutions to institutional challenges. We believe this will also improve our student experience and student satisfaction scores.

What we will do	How we will do it	How we will measure
Improve employee voice and respond to comments and concerns in a timely way.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure more timely data through more regular surveys by moving away from a 2-yearly mega-survey, toward more regular pulse-checks. • We will produce real time data analysis and open up ownership of and responsibility for staff engagement to all of SOAS leadership. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Survey tool procured and implemented. • Baseline survey undertaken in autumn 2024. • Improve staff engagement score to 70% by 2025/26
Create a joined-up 'one SOAS' team, building relationships across team boundaries and remove barriers to collaboration.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connect teams across professional services and between professional services and the academy through the creation of working groups (or task to finish groups) that focus on specific SOAS live issues. • Re-invigorate the professional services Extended Leadership Team of department Heads. 	Staff survey – engagement greater than 70%
Ensure our researchers (PhDs, Postdocs and PIs) receive a high quality experience at SOAS and develop a wide skill set beyond immediate field of study.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a Research Leadership Skills curriculum ensuring colleagues develop skills in research integrity, grant writing, financial and people management. • Develop career management tools for researchers and support around the ending of FTCs. 	Successful outcome from the submission of the 2025 HREIR plan.

4.

High quality leadership and management capability

Community feedback suggests there is a gap in knowledge and confidence levels in some areas of leadership. High-performing organisations require leadership that inspires and engages. This is true of those at the top of organisations, but leaders throughout the community are just as critical.

We must, therefore, support current and future leaders by growing and nurturing early career colleagues in research, teaching, or one of our support functions.

All of our managers and leaders must be equipped with the capability, confidence and personal insight to effectively support and grow others, role model our values, and collectively deliver our mission.

What we will do	How we will do it	How we will measure
Equip Heads of Department to undertake their important leadership roles, leading by example, growing and developing future HoDs and other leaders.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a HoD development programme and on-going support ensuring expectations are transparent and HoDs are confident and appropriately skilled to ensure success. • Review the Head of Department appointment process and identify options for improvement where available. 	<p>Head feedback that they feel equipped and supported.</p> <p>A Head of Department succession plan for 50% of departments by 2025/26.</p>
Establish a pipeline of early leaders through apprenticeship schemes.	Identify 3 roles in professional services into which we can recruit apprentices. Source apprentice training partner and access the apprentice levy for funds.	<p>2 apprentices in post by term 3 2024/25.</p> <p>A further 2 in post by T3 2025/26.</p>
Create a suite of high quality learning and development materials for the leadership lifecycle, based on SDR feedback and data	Redesign our offering for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aspiring managers • Manager to Leader • Senior Leader personal development plans based on 360 feedback • Ensure mixed Academic and PS cohorts. 	Launch of new curriculum. 75% satisfaction scores from SDR participants.
Establish career conversations as part of the SDR process and ensure SDR conversations are valuable and developmental.	Review SDR process to ensure it enshrines career planning and mentoring as part of the process.	Ensure 90% SDR completion
Ensure our Principal Investigator population are equipped for the role of research leader, including creating and leading teams.	Create bespoke PI including and handbook and mentoring programme	PI feedback from staff survey.
Succession planning exercise for senior roles and ensure focus on and accelerating under represented group	Personal development for future leaders	At least 9 Black academic colleagues at Professor level

5.

An inclusive culture based on respect and social justice, underpinned by SOAS values and behaviours

To ensure SOAS remains a great place to work and study we must continue to develop and grow our organisational culture, essentially by creating an environment of inclusion and belonging where everyone can flourish.

Community feedback suggests some residual fractiousness and distrust among colleagues as well as a tendency to solve problems through formal processes rather than collegiately.

A prerequisite for a connected community is a shared understanding of our values and expected behaviours, and a shared vision of what we aspire to be.

In part this will be measured through validation and recognition, through external accreditation.

Ultimately our aim must be to create a sense of shared purpose and community cohesion within a professional, academic environment of integrity and respect.

What we will do	How we will do it	How we will measure
Establish a shared understanding of the rights and responsibilities of all members of the SOAS community.	Establish and agree our SOAS values – setting out the expected behaviours and culture we wish to create which are adopted university-wide and published within the new SOAS 5-year strategy in 2025.	Publication of the SOAS values in the launch of the refreshed SOAS strategy in 2025.
Deliver our agreed EDI activities and strategy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Obtain Athena Swan Bronze renewal and create a meaningful plan to work towards a Silver award thereafter. • Obtain our Race Equality Bronze award. • Become a Disability Confident Employer. • Obtain the HR Excellence in Research award. 	Awards on schedule.
Refresh our EDI Strategy to evolve our mission to work towards an inclusive and representative community, leading the field in HE.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agree targets beyond sector comparisons, as befits the specific global role and mission of SOAS. • Embed EDI principles in all of our governance and operational machinery so that inclusivity becomes the responsibility and focus of the whole community. • Embed Staff Wellbeing as a key facet of inclusivity. 	Refreshed and agreed EDI Strategy.
Develop a partnership working agreement with trade union colleagues and SOAS leadership.	Engage with local union leaders and full time officials to explore whether a written agreement governing how we will interact, communicate and behave in relation to workplace changes, negotiations and resolution of disagreements, is possible.	Creation and sign off of a partnership working agreement by 2026/27.

Metric score card

Activity / Measure	Baseline data	Target 2027/28
Recruitment time to fill	16 weeks	12 weeks
TU relationship - risk score	16	12
Staff Engagement score equals sector average (70%)	60%	>70%
Recommend SOAS as good place to work score at sector benchmark 63%	40%	63%
20% reduction in recruitment agency spend (allow 2% inflation p.a.)	£470k	<£375k
Prof Services turnover <15%	22.6%	14%
20% reduction in grievance cases	31	<24
Performance and Development Review completion 100% of eligible staff	60%	100%
Meet sector benchmark for reward satisfaction 57%	42%	>57%
Meet benchmark staff survey score on wellbeing 63%	43%	>63%
Staff reporting they are clear on expectations / objectives increased by 20%	67%	80%
Staff reporting 'I feel like I belong here' improved by 20%	56%	67%
Staff reporting colleagues work together to fix problems improved by 20%	46%	55%
Reporting co-operation between departments meets sector benchmark of 41%	27%	41%
All T&R academic colleagues publishing in line with APF	N/A	100%

Key risks

Risk to delivery	Mitigation
High turnover of HR staff.	Continue to engage the team in plans and successes, empower the team to problem solve and reduce turnover.
Lack of bandwidth from IT team to support digitization and system update, due to multiple projects.	Continually engage with IT business partner and regularly review the HR/ IT roadmap in light of other tech priorities.
External or national disputes and industrial action.	Engage with union colleagues locally to mitigate.
Sector contraction, reduced student numbers or adverse financial climate resulting from external pressures, resulting in necessary cost savings, including redundancies	Continually work with finance colleagues to properly cost plans. Adjust plans in light of changing financial circumstances, inform RPC of changes.
Hostile internal trade union relations.	Continually engage and consult with local TU reps to ensure continually open dialogue, building trust.
Lack of engagement of SOAS managers and leaders in new systems, processes or ways of working.	Continual engagement through SMT forum, articulate the benefits of changes to colleague working life.
Daily workload prevents focus on strategic improvement.	Carve out time for delivery of plan. Good governance from Exec board and RPC to monitor progress.
Lack of, or incorrect resources or skills.	Continual review of skills required and create a business case for change or additional resource if it becomes necessary.

