

Provider name: SOAS, University of London

Student submission for TEF 2023.

The c Co-President for Democracy and Education, who has led on this student submission, has been personally affected by the course cuts take took place precisely in 2020.

As they have not felt like the students' voice has been heard, they have decided to be involved in the Students' Union and to manifest the student community's disappointment around the continuous course cuts and rearrangements.

There remain issues within different aspects of the programme design and wider academic-related student experience which are in the process of being responded to, but nevertheless stand as concerns for the Students' Union: the breadth of Afrikan curriculum and the provision of partnerships and experiences within this area.

1. Approach to evidence-gathering

We have used a mix of surveys, feedback and reports, set out from A to E below, covering the 4-year period from just before covid until January 2023.

A. Student Reps Network and College Student Voice Assistants

This is a network of current students who stood for election by their peers to represent their year group or programme. The Rep Network is run by the S.U. Students who become Reps cover all departments and levels of study. Surveys show Reps typically hold other responsibilities such as volunteering, caring, jobs and/or are active in other extracurricular activities.

Reps feedback is well-informed and valuable in considering the student experience: -

- As programme and department Reps they hear from and are mindful of student's experiences and bring student views into formal and semi-formal forums regularly.
- As a network, they compare how matters are being addressed elsewhere by talking to other Reps across year groups and departments.
- They can access a Rep Teams channel for discussion, sharing and peer support; attend termly College Assemblies for Reps; and get news updates at least monthly.
- Reps complete a term 1 report in January and the EOY report in term three. Reports are collated by the SU and feed-back as updates on actions and future planning.

This year the ability to solve issues has been a key motivation for many students taking up the role. In all five core training sessions for all Reps (Oct / Nov 2022), all participants contributed to a discussion on why they became a Rep and what they hoped to gain personally and for their fellow students. At every session two or more Reps with experience of SOAS described being motivated by the barriers experienced of the previous two years, and belief that they could help others.

B. CAR's College Student Voice Assistants (CSVA)

The CSVA role is a new paid role created in 2022-23, recruited through application and interview solely from current students with prior experience as a Rep. Funding was requested by the S.U and agreed by the school to cover these posts. There is one UG and one PG CSVA per college. The role is three-fold.1) To hold a termly College Assembly for Reps: an entirely student-led forum

for candid discussion and comparison without staff presence. 2) To take forward feedback from the CAR to Student Feedback Panel where senior staff leads from various school services are present, and to direct any feedback to the S.U as necessary. 3) To report back to Reps, closing the feedback loop.

The Assemblies discuss priorities, both academic and pastoral. They agree as a group what priorities they want taken forward, any change they wish to propose, and the CSVA writes up the notes as they go so Reps can add or amend anything.

C. Advice Caseworker report

The SU employs an Advice Caseworker. Students can approach them directly, and Reps and SU officers also make referrals. Their report on the overall numbers and the nature of issues regarding Mitigating Circumstances is included here as a dominant area of advice and support. Since cases are confidential and individual the overall report is the only way to publish conclusions on the experience of those who sought assistance. Matters could concern complaints, assistance navigating systems and resolving issues which impact on students either personally and / or academically.

Table: Annual SU caseload involving mitigating circumstances

SU "Mitigating Circumstance" cases			Taking undergraduate students only, the issues involved...		
	Total	Reason for enquiry:	Covid	Mental Health	Physical Health
2019 - 20	154 (UG=100)	18 = Regulations 11 = Support 19 = Declined	58	34	
2020 - 21	264 (UG=186)	24 = Regulations 47 = Support 33 = Declined	53	81	26
2021 - 22	198 (UG=129)	19 = Regulations 30 = Support 37 = Declined		91	

D. Annual Report (Black Student Support Coordinator)

Reporting from the Black Student Coordinator is taken from the S.U Annual Report of 2020,

2. Student experience. Background; restructures and the impact of Covid

2019-2020 [the first remote exams]

At the start of the pandemic SOAS was adjusting, having come through a major restructure (One Professional Service 'OPS').

The S.U had run well-attended full programmes for Black History Month and LGBTQ+ History Month as had high involvement in sports and society activity. We revamped the Student Rep system and established a positive working relationship with Student Experience, Engagement and Retention (SEER). This addressed feedback from students shown through various mechanisms that despite having the opportunities to feedback it was not always clear what was done as a result, and that Reps did not always feel listened to. The Rep review changed the structure. Staff in

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the SU and SEER continued to develop an annual cycle. SEER helped achieve more consistent academic department engagement with Reps across the school.

The school introduced a 'No Detriment' policy; numbers of applications for mitigation jumped up.

In the summer term the school announced another restructure of all the professional services simultaneously (Transformation and Change 'TAC'). The SU launched an all-student consultation on all the changes including all-student meetings of 200+ to ask questions of senior management; focus groups; and submitted open letters from students of 5 departments and 2 societies within a report consisting of 40 pages.

2020-21 [the remote year]

The whole year was conducted remotely.

The S.U Advice

Service hours were maintained, while there was reduced hours for staff in commercial services, sports, societies and representation.

2021-22 [the hybrid year]

An increased number of Reps were recruited in 2021-22, with 95% reporting they had been based in London. However, there were lower-than-expected levels of engagement in on online platforms (Teams). In EOY reports many remarked on the difficulty of getting feedback from students. Reps commented across departments about the lack of consistent in-person activities (academic and non-academic).

Students nationally had been told to come back to campus at the start of the year (consistent with government policy). However, as the covid 'omicron' break-out led to the government's 'Plan B' in December 2021, the return to campus was sporadic and inconsistent. Students expressed a lot of frustration and dissatisfaction, understandably. The 'Blended Learning' approach was implemented, however there was disagreement over what should be hybrid; what was appropriately in-person or online-only and whether there was fairness in the decisions made.

Views were expressed in the Feedback Panel,
for example:

"The half online, half hybrid nature of SOAS ... makes it incredibly difficult to navigate the world of support. Some offices are open, others aren't..."; "... one of the main issues was that language modules were only online which made learning difficult ..."; "Practical and technical challenges with this year's blended learning model were reported

Sports club, society and centrally led SU activities were also not back to the pre-covid level in 2021-22. The SU experienced a low-level of student engagement, evidenced in Rep feedback that they struggled to get feedback from their peers;

2022-23 [the real return to campus]

In the first year of students being fully back on campus we have seen much greater student engagement.

About half participated in their CAR, facilitated by their College Student Voice Assistant, in-person

SE1: How well teaching, feedback and assessment practices support students' learning, progression, and attainment

Assessment – returning to in-person exams

This academic year (22-23) there has been anxiety from undergraduate students over the sudden move back to in-person closed book exams. This has been raised through groups of Reps, particularly in the departments of Law and of Arts, where they organised surveys to formally capture student views. Concerns were also raised by other departments' Reps in feedback to their College Assemblies.

The Law survey, for example, drew responses from (48%) of students. Asked about the time taken to complete online exams in previous years, at least 62% (yr1) and 66% (yr2) took over 7 hours. Asked 'yes or no', 99% felt they were not prepared for in-person exams; on a 1-10 scale 76% rated '1' (unprepared), 12% rated '2', and 0% rated '6' onwards. They argue that online exams are the most inclusive for a cohort who may not have done in-person exams since GCSE level,

The concern included the late communication of the move, not simply the move itself: "...no preparation in terms of mock examinations... too late to start now... discussions should have been held last year with the input of teaching staff and the student body".

Mitigating circumstances and assessment; impact on progression.

Though this area normally concerns wellbeing, we raise it here because Mitigating Circumstances ('Mit-Circs') has become a significant area of importance for students over the last four years and impacts on the ability to progress. Working to achieve improvement of the Mitigating Circumstances policy has been a common manifesto pledge in S.U elections year to year. It has been the subject of campaigns, complaints, and a petition in spring 2020 signed by over 1,000 students. What to do when students raise 'Mit-Circs' issues is an example scenario within Rep training as it is such a common issue. Work has been done to review the policy following student feedback.

The S.U receives requests for support from students dealing with mitigating circumstances,

The volume of requests was very high but is reducing (

Monitoring of the nature of

enquiries shows of those concerning Mit-Circs, those with Covid-19 as the underlying issue are reducing rapidly.

Early on with Covid-19 the institution introduced a 'No Detriment' policy. Feedback confirmed it to be helpful to undergraduates.

We welcome the introduction this year of a new "Support To Study" policy formulated by SEER, for early identification of and intervention with students who may be struggling, at a time when intervention can make a difference. This should deal with the complexity of students' needs that

short-term mitigation cannot deal with. We hope this will reduce the stress of last-minute applications for mitigation and deferral, which simply delays the workload students face until later. The evidence of student mental health becoming a significant issue is an ongoing matter requiring resources and innovation for students to progress in their studies. This is shown in 'Table: Annual SU caseload involving mitigating circumstances' which shows the number of Mit-Circs cases made on mental health grounds has nearly tripled between 19-20 to 21-22.

SE2: ... course content and delivery engage students in their learning, and stretches students to develop their knowledge and skills
+ SE3: ... research in relevant disciplines, innovation, scholarship, professional practice ...contribute to student academic experience

#Why I Came To SOAS

The scholarship and expertise in the content and delivery of teaching at SOAS has long stood at the top of student's priorities, highlighted in consultations and Rep workshops year-on-year.

In May of 2020 the consulted students about the TAC, the second major restructure. We set up a *Padlet* online posing one question: "Why I Came To SOAS". This gathered student's testimonials. Students could click anywhere to contribute a heading and text; others could then comment under the same heading or start their own, unlimited in length.

The testimonials were cross-departmental, from UG and PG; mostly current but in some cases former and prospective SOAS students. They are deeply heartfelt because at the time SOAS was in a well-publicised financial crisis, and together with the sudden impact of Covid-19 there was existential concern. Students asserted in their own words what they felt most needed to be saved amid uncertainty. Despite being in our exam period the response was overwhelming. Alongside the Padlet there were online all-student meetings of with senior managers present to listen and respond to questions. The testimonials largely focused on three areas: i) SOAS' breadth of teaching and expertise; ii) its profound impact on a personal level; and iii) the importance of the sense of community.

These few examples are indicative of the tone and strength that comes across when reading them all. They show the personal investment students felt joining SOAS and the respect of teachers. The range of people who chose to contribute also speaks to the TEF Student Outcomes. Several alumni credited present jobs in specialist fields back to what they had learnt and did at SOAS.

NB: the headings are quoted in bold, with associated longer text in brackets if included.

- i) **"Internationally focused and experienced."** **"Subject matter and approaches unavailable elsewhere."** **"Unique Fields** (-SOAS was one of only three places in the world that offers courses in the field I have dedicated my life to)." **"Decolonial approach** (-because no other university could ever stimulate my critical thinking as much as SOAS)." **"Quality** (-came to SOAS because it was simply the best school to combine language with a variety of other fields, thus teaching a uniquely deep and wide knowledge base for areas often misunderstood in **"SOAS is the only place** (SOAS is the only uni I could find that did exactly the course i wanted to study which included a year abroad. the uni is so specialised in areas which arent studied anywhere else that i know of. if soas becomes like any other uni it will be real loss for the country. soas is nothing without its unique courses, students, and staff)". **"BA Music** (-SOAS is the only institution in Europe that focuses on Ethnomusicology/music culture rather than theory. The course was so amazing and taught me so much!)." **"SOAS is the place where you can learn Yoruba and Amharic without people asking if that's even a language."**
- ii) **"Life changing place** (-SOAS is a place for tough love. Where you can deconstruct yourself to then (re)build your knowledge, your ethics and your goals. With the teachers, the curriculum, the student body and academic resources at hand, you truly have the chance to explore

<p>iii)</p>	<p>beyond western concepts and forge the best version of yourself)", "To see the world as big as it can be" "SOAS changed my life." "Inclusive and Accepting (-I chose SOAS because it is a very inclusive and accepting university. I love how diverse our classrooms are and how we're constantly pushed and encourage to think critically and outside the box regarding past and modern pressing issues)." "Approachable teachers and Diverse faculty."</p> <p>"Came for the art history, stayed for the unique world views and community (-I chose SOAS over other art history programs ... because of its focus on regions that normally only get one or two lectures and even with its uncertain future I chose to continue because I genuinely don't think I can get such a concentration of critical post-colonial perspectives/passion for not just art history but what's happening around us globally in any other university)" "Community (-SOAS has a community vibe like no other - filled with lots of different communities within the larger one. This is something I have never come across before and will most likely never experience something like this again)." "Values and community (-I haven't started my studies at SOAS yet, but what made me ultimately decide to go there was the set of values shared by its community. To encourage students to adopt a decolonizing and critical point of view towards issues present in our world is huge, and sets SOAS apart from other elite universities. It is also important for me to meet people from other regions of the world than just the regular people we see at European universities)." (NB: JCR = Junior Common Room).</p>
<p>SE5: How supportive the learning environment is, and how far students can access the academic support they need</p>	
<p>Administration (general)</p> <p>Although not directly on teaching and learning, students regularly talk about problems with administrative background which present a significant challenge in joining the learning environment. Comments about slow responses, and difficulty knowing who is responsible, delays in enrolment, access to moodle (online learning), timetables, scholarships, fees, module sign-up, waiting times for Mit-Circs and counselling and so on, come up whenever students discuss their experience at SOAS. Many enquiries come to the S.U that should be dealt with elsewhere.</p> <p>This is in the context of SOAS having restructured administration both shortly before and during covid, making major changes to roles and job descriptions and seeing large numbers of professional support staff with institutional knowledge and experience leave. Processes have continued to be delayed and difficult to navigate for students. Another restructure of professional service roles in the academic departments began this month and could potentially be disruptive for students. The S.U raised serious concerns during TAC, commenting on every effected department and service regarding the impact on students.</p> <p>The impact has been reflected over time in feedback from a wide number of students. At College Assemblies the administration issues raised included timetabling, enrolment processes, out-of-date module choices on the website and communication of exam procedure (post covid), e.g: 'timetable release is too late (hindering ability to plan and arrange work shifts)'; 'lack of clear communication and issues with late enrolment'.</p> <p>Current term 1 reports summarise the key issues: "They were primarily related to Administrative issues around registration and module selection"; "Mostly administrative concerns about exam dates and formats, lecture recordings etc"; "The course content (modules- digital skills), workload, administration (timetables were a KEY ISSUE), support (SIP, assignments etc)." (SIP = Student Inclusion Plans)</p>	

In 2021-22 similar feedback was given in the EOY Rep reports naming lack of clarity about the school structure, whom to go to and for what issue, and being “bounced around between departments”. what SOAS could do to improve things

for new students; typical replies: “Admin, timekeeping”, “...not late in responding to students’ emails”.

Academic Advisors

There are areas where the system is working well, but feedback showed some inconsistency. Feedback noted some students experience “slow responses” and that some were introduced to their Academic Advisor as late as week 7 and 8.

Advice and Wellbeing Support

Areas of concern are ensuring enough counsellors, and sessions with counsellors, to get consistent support.

The Study Inclusion Plans (SIP) are very important. At the College Assemblies it was suggested that 1-1 mentoring for neurodivergent students be offered.

Black Student Support staff member

address institutional anti-Blackness, instances of racism, racial incidents, the diminishing of the ‘A’ in SOAS, loss of African languages and expertise, as well as overall problems reflected in the attainment gap, retention, and development for Black students.

The S.U Trustee Board approved the new staff post to provide Black students pastoral support in April 2019;

This post has now moved to the school’s Access Participation and Student Success team, The report is referred to here as it brings in previous experience of Black students and student-led initiatives adding context to the present situation.

Three departments also experimented with adding a role to their undergraduate and postgraduate cohorts. This is not standard across the school as it can be problematic to place representation onto individual volunteer shoulders. The Black Liberation Caucus, (an autonomous student group that is part of the S.U) is intended to allow groups of students to collaborate jointly and hold the union to account for actioning their agreed ideas. A Black Student Staff Forum in place for the last four years, open to students academic and non-academic staff.

Black students’ disappointment shown by the 2022 NSS shows the distance still to go. The expectations of students following initial steps circa 2019/20 were high but progress slowed. It is imperative that more is done to listen to Black students and reverse the sense of disappointment.

SE6: How well physical and virtual learning resources support teaching and learning

There is mixed feedback from students about online resources and virtual learning. Reps report varying practices with uploading lectures to BLE, the quality of recordings. current examples: *"Issues with website and Moodle"*; *"... online lecture, lack support for first year students to adjust new teaching and learning environment"*.

In some departments Reps reported high anxiety about the exams being in-person after two years of remote exams and learning.

SE7: How well the university engages with its students, leading to improvements to the experiences and outcomes of its students

Representation and Student Voice work

There has been a specific focus by the SU and SEER, working together to develop the structure of the Rep Network since 2019-20. This network is central to the accountable engagement of academic departments with students of all levels of study, and for students to understand what action is being taken because of their feedback.

A simple initiative now recommended to every department is that they have key staff meet the Reps informally within a week of elections (e.g. over a coffee) to 'break the ice', set expectations, and agree how best to work together. The current reports show 11 departments attended an 'ice breaker'. Further, they rated at 4.2 (of 5) how much they feel listened to in the formal meetings of their department. The average rating was 3.85 on 'feeling positive about the year so far'; and 3.77 on "ease of communication with students".

Changes in the Rep structure were made ahead of this year following review of Rep feedback, and another school re-structure of academic departments into a 3-College structure. The under-recruited Student Liaison and School-Level roles were deleted. We instead elected Programme Reps (1 p/50 student's p/year at UG level) and Department Reps (one per degree level). We created the new CSVA role for Colleges A, B and C. The Foundation College elect Class Reps who attend Foundation College Feedback Panel.

New Trans Non Binary and Intersex policy

An important example in which the school engaged with students to achieve a positive outcome has been the new Trans Non Binary & Intersex Policy. The impetus came directly from the student group at SOAS who had been let down in the past and who campaigned for short and long-term improvement. The policy was developed over months in collaboration with the Gendered Intelligence consultancy engaging with staff and students, the SU and other stakeholders.

The policy was launched at an event on the 17th Nov 2022 with guidance document for all staff, and guidance for supporting students. Speakers included students and staff members who identify as part of the TNBI community, allies from academic and professional services staff, the staff unions and the S.U Co-President Equality and Liberation.

Student participation on school committees

There are seats reserved for students on several institutional committees up to and included Board of Trustees. The structure of committees has been changed and it has taken time to access the schedules in order to understand each committee's purpose. This is something the SU is working on to ensure that not only are seats filled in future, but importantly that those on committees are properly briefed and engage in an ongoing discussion about what is happening across all committees.

3. Student Outcomes

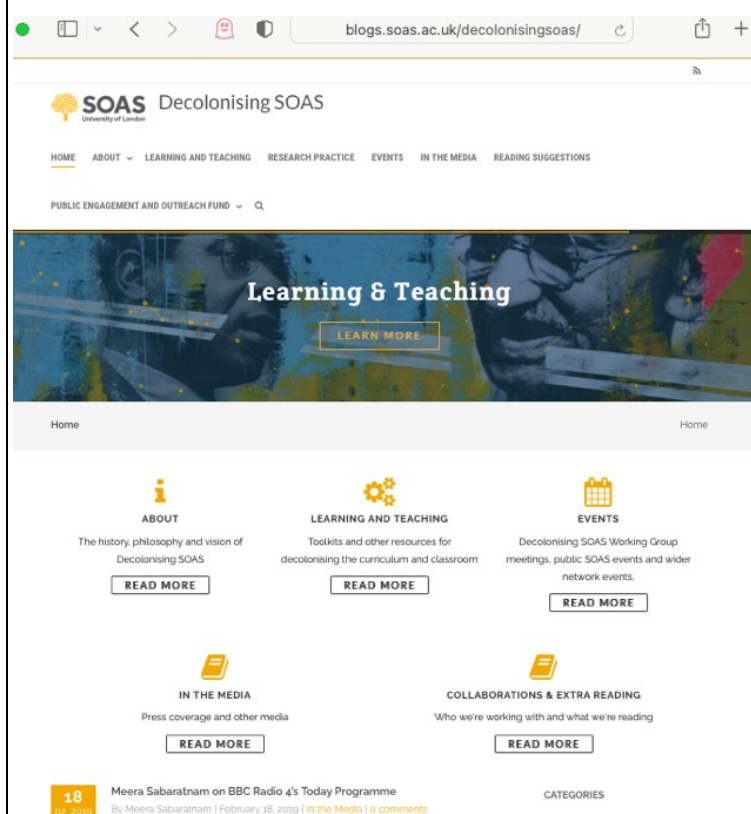
SO1 How well the university supports its students to succeed in and progress beyond their studies

Students can put their interests into practice beyond their studies in several ways. The S.U provides the space and resources for students to be creative and experimental and meet potential collaborators and friends. The freedom and ability to start societies around an almost endless range of themes is being experienced afresh since returning to campus. Societies have traditionally been a very flexible open platform to experiment from, test out ideas and find an audience. They form around campaigns, politics, social, educational, cultural, faith, art, musical and identity purposes.

The physical space the SU controls has been outgrown as the student population increased, nevertheless the space is well-used by students. Since the full return to campus this year live music has returned. Music students have given live performances such as the Chinese Music Ensemble and other societies which performed live at Festive Day in December. Students have also held stalls as part of a Festive Day.

Students also expand on their academic interests as writers, editors, and other contributors to the student-published Spirit newspaper.

SO4 ... educational gains the university intends its students to achieve, and how relevant these are to its students



The S.U offers many extra co-curricular activities. Many are organised by students themselves in the societies they are part of. Others are proposed by the Sabbatical Officers as part of their annual agenda(s).

Students compensate, with individual and collective work, for the lack and disinterest of the institution in providing and offering a decolonised curriculum as it claims it is invested in. In 2016 SOAS students showed their interest in the proposal of the then Sabbatical Officers of 'Decolonising the Curriculum', which has resulted in the proposal of 'Decolonising SOAS Vision', approved by the school's Academic Board in 2017 and followed by the realisation of the [Decolonising SOAS Learning and Teaching Toolkit for Programme and Module Convenors May 2018](#) which was approved by the Academic Board in 2018.

If on the one hand there has been an attempt in applying this toolkit within Departments at SOAS, not all the suggestions were taken into consideration over time, namely: department meetings, teaching Away Days, annual forums with staff and second-and third-year students to discuss their past experiences and smaller focus groups. In 2020, the academic curriculum of SOAS was significantly affected by course cuts which saw the Bachelor Programmes of *African Studies*, *Middle Eastern Studies*, *South and South East Asian Studies* and *East Asian Studies* taken down from the list of available courses at SOAS, and this impacted the continuation rate, especially among the students that had applied for those courses and had been moved to the *Languages and Cultures* programme which replaced them.

As a response, students, organised in societies, have started to utilise extra-curricular activities in the forms of weekly meetings, sport and music activities, conferences, film

screenings and open discussions that are often open to externals with the aim of opening the space of the university for dialogues on social, cultural, historical and political matters, in a challenging way to westernised perspectives.

SO5 How well the university or college supports its students to achieve these gains

Rep and CSVA training and opportunities

The offer of training The Staff Development team have offered The S.U is working with other departments to further broaden and develop professional skills training sessions over the last three years. In the first year, as a work in progress, Reps could join some skills training alongside school staff. The skills training (for students) was later opened up to students on the CSL and Peer Mentoring Schemes in the last two years.

Staff turnover meant we did not have the capacity this year to run as many sessions, however the Staff Development team have offered to work with us to curate a training programme through LinkedIn.

The CSVA role has created a means of progression for student Reps who wish to put their skills and knowledge to work benefitting a new generation of Reps, while gaining personal development themselves.

Awarding Gap/Black Student Support Coordinator

The institution has put in place different platforms to support Black Students, and even more broadly of the Global Majority with the aim being to bridge the social inequality gap. Nevertheless, SOAS students keep experiencing forms of discrimination from the classroom to social support, the latter represented by insensitiveness in the classroom when dealing with delicate topics that have directly affected some of the students, to sometimes the choice of the syllabi themselves.