Case Study: Challenging Inequality and Casualisation through a Global Community of Researchers

SOAS University of London is a world-class research institution whose scholarship is rooted in the political, social, economic, historical, and cultural dynamics of Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and their diasporas. Our key research themes – Global Voices, Heritage of Humanity, Global Interactions, Sharing a Small Planet, Global Diplomacy and Governance – bring together and build critical mass in areas where we are able to make a real difference. Our internationalism and commitment to justice, diversity, equality and the highest ethical standards infuse our work.

In order to reflect our values through our research practices and build a truly global research community, we are focusing on decolonisation, de-casualising academic labour, and building co-operative and democratic support systems, training and career development for our research staff across the world.

Decolonising SOAS' Vision

Global academic research in the humanities and social sciences has been historically embedded in concepts and practices rooted in colonial and imperial hierarchies. At SOAS, we believe that to develop a more egalitarian, representative, intersectional, dialogic, and accountable set of research practices, we must expose and challenge the deeper structures, categorisations and norms that underpin conventional research in these domains.

In this light, we are working to:

- Increase awareness of the intellectual, methodological, and ethical challenges emerging in research in diverse contexts and encourage and equip researchers to address them;
- Increase scholarship opportunities for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic, gender non-conforming, sexually diverse, differently abled, and other disadvantaged or marginalised groups to lead and to participate in research, knowledge production and dissemination;
- Enhance the open access SOAS Research Online repository and promote free-of-charge open access research through collaborations that favour accessible dissemination strategies and do not perpetuate barriers to the sharing and the critique of scientific knowledge;
- Reconsider and adapt our institutional policies and research development practices in regard to how we work with each other within SOAS, foster collaborative partnerships, and build and strengthen reciprocal relationships with research partners and communities;

- Engage directly with research development and funding bodies to highlight issues with the design of research frameworks and funding schemes and to develop best practices together.

De-Casualising Academic Labour

Academic staff on short-term, temporary contracts now make up more than half of the labour force in the average British university. SOAS is no exception. Casualisation is a sector-wide problem that has become a national concern. If we are to live up to our SOAS values, we need to tackle this issue systemically. SOAS has embarked on creating more equitable and inclusive working conditions for its academic staff, introducing measures and mechanisms in relation to those employed on academic contracts which currently include:

- An agreement that sets norms for the allocation of hours to temporary hourly academic workers for different kinds of work, and associated contracts;
- An Academic Performance Framework that sets expectations for those employed on academic contracts;
- An Academic Education-Focused Route that offers a career pathway, with associated reward and recognition, for teaching-only positions;
- A revised Staff Development Review (SDR) that takes a plan-based developmental 'coach approach';
- A Workload Allocation System (WAMS) that offers a consistent set of tariffs across the institution and counts as work activities that were previously invisible;
- Revised promotions criteria that broaden the scope of research to include impact, knowledge exchange, and place more emphasis on citizenship.

We have established a De-Casualising SOAS Working Group with representation from senior management, the Research Students Association, and academics on a variety of contract arrangements to produce a set of recommendations in relation to three primary areas:

1. Equity in access to, allocation and management of paid work opportunities for doctoral researchers, as part of their doctoral training.
2. Better management of staff on temporary teaching and research contracts, with a particular focus on career development, inclusion and voice.
3. Pathways to permanent employment.

Co-operative, Democratic Support Systems

We believe in the democratic input of research staff and value their feedback, encouraging them to be active contributors to evaluation initiatives, focus groups, and research committees.

In line with our values, SOAS provides a robust, engaged and inclusive professional development programme for doctoral and early career researchers (ECRs). Our lunchtime ECR

Forum allows early career researchers to meet others from across the departments and centres and to network. The Forum met remotely at the time of the Covid-19 pandemic. After the pandemic we plan to alternate face-to-face and online activities, accommodating the needs of our researchers who are often conducting fieldwork abroad.

By opening up SOAS's seedcorn funding scheme to ECRs, we encourage them to put in grant applications and we offer grant proposal writing workshops with guidelines by our 'grant heroes'. We have recently redesigned our research planning template - the Personal Research Plan (PRP) - with a focus on putting in place a stronger coach-approach mentoring scheme, aiming in particular at supporting the research development of underrepresented groups, specifically BAME and female researchers. We have developed a version of the PRP that is specifically aimed at ECRs.

To provide effective research environments for the training and development of researchers, we encourage our Departmental Directors of Research and Principal Investigators (PIs) to participate in training to enhance their management skills. Our tailored courses, including our "Staff Development Review" and "Managing a Team" workshops and toolkits for experienced PIs or consultants, allow research managers not only career development guidance for themselves, but also how to get the best out of their team and support their team's career goals.

We believe that managers of research should provide structures through which discrimination, bullying or harassment can be appropriately reported and addressed, which is why we have spearheaded Dignity@SOAS with a campaign to promote our anti-bullying and harassment policies and procedures and advertise the availability of our Dignity Advisors, staff trained specifically in these areas.

Capacity Building for Effective Impact and Engagement

Our research strategy is geared towards fostering a new generation of researchers who can understand and engage with the world as global citizens, equipped to apply scholarship for the benefit of society and the economy. We want to ensure our researchers' work has lasting effects and offer research staff extensive Epigeum *Enhancing Research Impact* training.

To allow our researchers the tools to promote and engage their work with external parties and wider society, we provide various forms of media engagement training including workshops on contributing to ['The Conversation',](#) and on policy and media engagement through our [Influencing the Corridors of Power](#) initiative. This gives them the chance to build external networks and open doors with key voices and decision-makers at early career stages.