

## Progress Report: HR Excellence in Research Award, 20 September 2024

### i) Background

SOAS University of London is a small, specialist, research-intensive university that has a world-class reputation for its research on Africa, Asia and the Middle East and their diasporas, and for leadership in the HE sector on how to make academic research more equitable and ethical, particularly in terms of relationships between the Global North and Global South. Our research is guided by the principles and goals outlined in our [SOAS Strategic Plan](#), our [2021-2026 Research Vision and Strategy](#), and our [2021-2025 Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Strategy](#), through which we are committed to creating a research culture that is supportive and inclusive. As of 1 September 2024, SOAS has 62 research-only staff, which constitutes 20% of all staff members with research in their contracts (306) and approximately 15% of all academic staff. Our researchers are supported by 30 professional services staff in research-enabling roles in our Research and Knowledge Exchange Directorate (RKED). This healthy number of staff with primary responsibility for research is largely due to our growing success in winning competitive external research grants, including research infrastructure investment (totalling £16 million in 2022/2023 and £16.5million in 2023/2024 – large amounts for a small university), including European Research Council grants, Future Leader Fellowships, and £7.8 million from Research England's Expanding Excellence in England Fund for a Centre for Anthropology and Mental Health Research in Action (CAMHRA), launched in 2024. This income and investment, in addition to internal Strategic Investment funding from the Vice Chancellor's group, have allowed us to create new post-doctoral fellowships (for example, through our Usawa scheme, which encourages Black candidates to commence an academic career after their doctoral study), thus contributing to building a strong, highly diverse pipeline of early career researchers (ECRs) into academia. We also have five Distinguished Research Professors at SOAS on research-only contracts – four of whom are from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds – thanks to funding committed by our Vice Chancellor in 2021 to support our racial equity goals; these new colleagues, alongside other senior researchers at SOAS, act as important role models for more junior researchers, especially those from marginalised, racialised backgrounds who have historically struggled to get a foothold in academia.

### ii) Governance Structure and Internal Review Process

SOAS first committed to the HREiR Award in 2012. In 2022, we retained the Award and passed our ten-year review. As many other HEIs have experienced, it is an increasingly challenging time for the sector, and SOAS has been through a major institutional transformation over the last HREiR period. What particularly distinguishes this 2022-2024 HREiR report from our previous one is our ability to now reflect on the cultural and organisational change that has occurred through the introduction of a new, three-College structure at SOAS, which – while still developing – has greatly improved research governance and our mechanisms for collecting and monitoring data. It was through this restructure that the first Research Culture Committee (RCC) at SOAS was created, chaired by the Deputy Dean for Research Culture, and which includes: all College Deputy Deans for Research, an ECR representative from each College, a mid-career and senior academic representative, colleagues from all our key HR departments (including Staff Learning and Development, Well-Being, and Remuneration and Reward), senior colleagues from the RKED (including our Ethics lead and Scholarly Communications officer), and representatives from the Doctoral School, Library, EDI team, and the PGR community.

The HREiR Steering Group is a sub-committee of the RCC that was established to implement and operationalise our HREiR 2022-2024 action plan; it has alternated as required between regular, bi-weekly meetings and specially convened meetings to discuss

particular dimensions of the action plan, and it reports into the once-a-term RCC meeting. The RCC in turn reports to the SOAS-wide Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee, chaired by our Deputy Vice Chancellor for Research and Knowledge Exchange (DVC for RKE), which reports up to our Senate and Board of Trustees, ensuring clear routes of communication throughout all levels of governance. Our DVC for RKE has ultimate responsibility for our work towards the Researcher Development Concordat and progress against our HREiR action plan. In February 2023, the DVC for RKE, Associate Director Equity and Accountability, and Deputy Dean for Research Culture presented our 2023-2025 research culture plan to the Board of Trustees and received their approval and mandate. Since an all-staff survey was undertaken in November 2022, and a Race Equality Charter and Athena Swan survey during 2023, we were concerned that undertaking yet another survey (focused on researchers, such as CEDARS) might cause survey fatigue at this time and would not deliver the qualitative insights we were seeking. We thus decided instead to run intensive research culture focus groups with key stakeholder groups at SOAS in March 2024 – one for ECRs (with two representatives from each of our ten Departments), one for mid-career researchers (with two representatives from each Department), one for Senior academic and professional services leaders at the Senior Management Team retreat, and one for research-enabling staff in the RKED. These focus groups have returned rich, specific data for us about what colleagues feel is working well and what requires improvement in our research culture. In-depth meetings with various stakeholder groups (for example, line managers of research-only staff; Heads of Department; and research-only ECRs) were also used to gather feedback and suggestions for improvement, which have helped to guide our work throughout 2022-2024 and have informed our 2024-2027 HREiR action plan. In our 2022 all-staff survey one of the most positive results was in the area of line management, with 75% of respondents saying their manager treats them fairly and with respect. However, only 43% of respondents felt that their line manager takes time to develop their skills. Since then, our HREiR Steering Group, our Director of People, and our Director of RKE have prioritised the improvement of induction, information, and training opportunities both for line managers and researchers themselves, with a bespoke research training package developed by our Research Culture Manager for 2024/2025, covering all aspects of the research project life cycle. The 2024-27 action plan reflects the prioritisation of this work.

### iii) **Achievements and Progress since July 2022**

During 2022-2024, the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers and the HREiR Award have been more widely communicated across SOAS than ever before. They have been added to: template job descriptions for the recruitment of all new staff, and the staff newsletter and intranet (reaching our entire staffing body of 1,146 people). They are also mentioned at all new staff inductions. A new, dedicated ECR mailing list was established by our Research Culture Manager in 2023/2024, sharing a range of training and career development opportunities, and a termly Research Ethics bulletin has been launched in 2024 by our Deputy Dean for Research Ethics. During 2022-2024 our Workload Allocation Management system (WAMS) was greatly improved and implemented under the leadership of the new Dean of the College of Humanities, which is bringing far greater transparency and parity to workloads, something that was raised as a significant issue in our 2022 all-staff survey. In 2022, SOAS was also able to implement a new internal research culture funding scheme thanks to £100,000 annual funding from Research England, which has played an important role in supporting researcher career development, through training, coaching, writing retreats, and Impact & Knowledge Exchange; in 2022/2023, 10 of the 13 awards went to ECRs, and in 2023/2024 out of 15 awards, 8 went to ECRs.

**Community building and inclusion of our researchers in the institution:** Through our new structure and our commitment to maintaining SOAS' unique reputation as a research-intensive university (through our SOAS Strategic Plan 2021-2026), we have put researchers at the heart of our vision and our work, with a particular focus on supporting ECRs. We have

focused on improved cohort-building, and in this period initiated a start-of-year welcome event for new and returning research-only ECRs and their line managers (bringing approximately 50 members of this community together), as well as an end of year celebration and feedback event to which all research-only ECRs are invited. These events have enabled post-doctoral researchers from across SOAS to meet one another in person to create a community, leading to new collaborative ventures (for example, an annual research-only ECR writing retreat was launched in 2022/2023). We have also ensured, through our committee Terms of Reference, that researchers of all levels (from PGRs to ECRs to established researchers) are part of the membership of all our new research committees, and are thus able to participate in and influence relevant policy-making across SOAS.

**Improved support for line management and development of our researchers:** Our HR management team has developed an online staff handbook to provide more clarity around policies and procedures for all line managers, which was launched in June 2023 (almost 50% of our total staff population of 1,146 are managers); in the 2024-2027 period a handbook specific to managers of researchers will build on this work. The Learning and Development team runs regular training for line managers, and we also have access to LinkedIn's training suite. Since 2024, staff development reviews (which are obligatory for everyone on a 0.4FTE contract and above) have been logged through the HR staff portal, leading to greater documentation and monitoring. All staff with research in their contracts are also strongly encouraged to complete an annual Personal Research Plan and are offered a one-hour meeting with their Department Research Convenor to discuss this confidentially (these are very popular and completion rates have been at 80% for the past two years). The Deputy Dean for Research Culture proposed a new research mentoring scheme to the Board of Trustees in February 2023 and this was approved and rolled out in 2023/2024, with 86 staff participating (37 mentors and 49 mentees). All research-only ECRs were encouraged to avail themselves of this opportunity, and evaluation took place in June 2024 via a survey (with a 39% response rate from mentors, and 30% response rate from mentees). Mentees were overwhelmingly positive about the scheme, using words such as "amazing", "inspiring", "constructive", "nurturing", "enriching", "productive", "illuminating" and "stimulating" to describe it and their mentors. The motivation behind the scheme is to promote a SOAS-wide ethic of senior colleagues supporting their more junior colleagues, particularly with their research development. Furthermore, 16 staff participated in the London-wide BEMentoring scheme for racially minoritised staff in 2023/2024 (10 as mentors, 6 as mentees); 4 staff members participated in the Outside Insight shadowing scheme in 2022/2023 and 5 in 2023/2024. In 2023 there were also 4 internal shadowing placements. The SOAS Learning and Development team also launched a Black Staff Management Programme in 2023/2024, undertaken by 8 people, who all said in the formal evaluation by survey that they would highly recommend it to others.

**Supporting diversity:** SOAS has one of the most diverse staff and student communities in the UK. According to HESA data from December 2021, 5.1% of SOAS' permanent staff are Black, in comparison to 3.4% at London HEIs and only 2.5% at UK HEIs. However, dovetailing with our social justice mission as a university, we constantly strive to do more. In line with our equity goals in our institutional scorecard, our Associate Director Equity and Accountability (2021-2024) launched a post-doctoral fellowship scheme called Usawa (meaning "equity" in Kiswahili) in the 2022/2023 academic year, funded by SOAS' Strategic Investment Fund. This has supported six racially minoritised post-doctoral fellows (three men, three women) in commencing their academic careers at SOAS as part of our long-term commitment to providing better opportunities for marginalised academics. Three of these post-docs are still at SOAS undertaking their work; the other three have secured Lecturer positions at Queen Mary University of London, University of Manchester, and the University of Edinburgh, revealing the success of the scheme in creating that first, supportive step for talented young scholars into permanent posts in academia. Other post-doctoral fellowships

created at SOAS through large grant capture have also supported the career development of minoritised staff, including those from the Global South, with those returning home (e.g. to Indonesia and Nigeria) frequently being promoted to more senior positions, and those who have remained in the UK securing permanent positions at prestigious universities (e.g. KCL). Strategic Investment Funding from 2022-2024 of £50,000 has also been invested in supporting our Black practice-based filmmaking PGRs focused on decolonising research topics through improvement of our film equipment and technical support for their research.

**Peer approach to developing research skills:** Research-only ECRs and doctoral researchers are welcomed into the SOAS community in a variety of ways – not only through their Departments but also through other networks. They have been encouraged to join our three new SOAS-wide research networks to engage in peer-to-peer learning and development: our Practice Research Network; Digital Research Network; and PARR (Provenance, Accessibility, Restitution and Repatriation) Network. Certain departments and Centres have created specific ECR networks – for example, in our new College of Law, Anthropology and Politics (CoLAP), and in the History Department and Centre for Cultural, Literary, and Postcolonial Studies (CCLPS) in the College of Humanities. All of these networks and seminars have helped to build researcher cohorts and a strong sense of community. During 2022-2024, the SOAS Careers team has also expanded their support from UG and PGT to PGR and ECR; they now offer regular training sessions on academic career planning and networking, academic CVs, and careers outside academia.

**Doctoral school improvements:** Our Doctoral School has also seen significant improvement in this period after our generally poor 2023 PRES Report results (based on responses from 184 PGRs), which led to the development of a proactive action plan for 2023-2025 with 30 key actions, the implementation of which are well underway. A major refurbishment of the Doctoral School is also currently in progress and will be completed by December 2024, leading to more work stations for our PGRs as well as a much more comfortable communal space in the Lady David Gallery for organising events.

#### iv) **Challenges and Lessons Learned**

**Staffing and support in a time of large-scale change:** During the period 2022-2024 we have been significantly hampered by a fluctuating staffing profile, particularly in professional services teams. This has resulted in delays to various initiatives – for example, the launch of our SOAS-wide Funder Liaison Network, which will be rolled out in 2024/2025. However, significant investment by SOAS in building our professional services teams and especially our RKED is starting to bear fruit. A new role – Head of Research Culture and Policy – was recruited for in 2023/2024 and our highly experienced colleague, Karen Kay, started work in July 2024, which is going to help tremendously in terms of the development of our Research Culture vision and strategy and the implementing of our HREiR 2024-2027 action plan.

**Workload and wellbeing:** For academic staff, major issues that arose in our 2022 all-staff survey were a strong feeling of overwhelming workload and a lack of well-being. Almost half of respondents (47.1%) considered their physical/mental health worse than before the Covid-19 pandemic and 45.5% felt their workload was unmanageable. During 2022-2024 these issues have started to be addressed on a wide scale through the improvement in 2022/2023 and implementation from 2023/2024 of a robust Workload Allocation Management system (WAMS) which is bringing much greater transparency to the distribution of workloads and the ability to move towards more parity. Although certain well-being strategic initiatives have been delayed due to staffing and resourcing issues, SOAS did launch a new Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) in July 2023.

**Building a strong and supportive employment environment:** Although, as noted above, we did not run a survey specifically around research culture during the period 2022-2024, the rich qualitative data that we gathered through the research culture focus groups has provided clarity on specific challenges that researchers at different levels have faced during this period, and thus where we need to improve in the future. For research-only ECRs, this is concentrated in the need for clearer, more supportive inductions (from a range of teams at SOAS), more cohort-building and social activities during their time at SOAS (given they are often on short, fixed-term contracts), and more support when coming to the end of their term (through help with applying for further research funding, lectureships, or jobs outside academia, and with earning a living while awaiting application outcomes). Indeed, research-only ECRs' primary anxiety and concern remains job security in a highly competitive and insecure HE environment generally. As can be seen from our 2024-2027 HREiR action plan (see below), we are trying to foreground support in this area to mitigate these issues.

#### **v) Strategic Objectives and Implementation Plan by Concordat Principles**

Supporting our ambitious plans for 2024-2027 will be: our new Head of Research Culture and Policy; a restructured, much more robust RKED; and our new Director of People, appointed during 2023/2024, who has worked closely and collaboratively with us on our 2024-2027 action plan, in alignment with the Institutional Culture plan he is developing, and has committed to many improvements from HR teams in relation to Concordat and HREiR work. As noted above, while our poor PRES 2023 results were a disappointment, they have galvanised our Doctoral School into creating a pro-active action plan that is already bearing fruit in terms of support for PGRs. EDI remains a significant priority for us given our social justice and equity principles at SOAS, and we have thus continued to enshrine these within our 2024-2027 action plan across the board. While our SOAS restructure in 2022/2023 has brought much improved governance around research environment and culture, we are also looking forward to the roll-out of our new SOAS intranet in 2024/2025, which will assist us greatly in the sharing of information relevant to the Concordat and HREiR, including our full offerings of training and career development opportunities for researchers and their managers through a new, dedicated Researcher Development Hub.

**Environment and Culture:** One of our main objectives for 2024-2027 is to run more in-depth surveys and feedback sessions focused specifically on our researcher stakeholder group so that we can gather far more specific, but also broader, quantitative and qualitative data on our research environment and on which we can act far more responsively. We will be running CEDARS in 2025 and we will also run regular pulse surveys, and continue running the research culture focus groups we initiated in 2023/2024 since these provide useful, in-person fora through which we can stimulate discussion and invite feedback.

**Employment:** A key priority for us in 2024-2027 is to address the precarity of research-only ECRs in a range of ways: support for post-docs applying for further grants; bridging contracts for post-docs awaiting application outcomes; 2-year minimum contracts wherever possible; and moving research staff to open-ended contracts following 4 years of continuous service. We will also build on the collaborations we have initiated with the Careers team in 2023/2024 to provide even better support to researchers seeking careers beyond academia.

**Professional Development:** In 2024/2025 our first, robust, annual Researcher Development Programme will provide regular wrap-around training for all researchers on a wide range of subjects, from conceptualisation through to the closing of research projects, providing opportunities for the sharing of innovative and cutting-edge practices, and the building of our researcher community across all levels.