

SOAS: A Brief History and Profile

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‘What sort of place is SOAS? What other university is it like?’ I am often asked these questions and the answer is quite simple. SOAS is unlike any other higher education institution in Britain or indeed in Europe. Its teaching, research, and outreach programmes are designed around the specialized study of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. It is equipped as no other British university to speak with academic authority about the languages, cultures, societies, and politics of these regions.

By Colin Bundy

Originally founded as the School of Oriental Studies in the University of London, SOAS was intended to train officials for overseas service in the British Empire and to encourage the scholarly study of Asian languages and cultures. The School admitted its first students in 1917 and by 1927 was offering degree courses in a score of ancient and contemporary Asian languages as well as in history (of India and the Near and Middle East). In 1938 a department of Africa was created (alongside the other regional departments) and the School’s title was expanded to the School of Oriental and African Studies. However, the academic standing and development of the School was decisively shaped by external events, especially by the war of 1939-45.

By 1941, Britain was at war with Japan. Military and Intelligence departments placed a premium on the acquisition of Japanese language skills, and SOAS provided this service. As the demands of war increased, there was a

heightened awareness of the national need for deeper knowledge of the wider world. In 1944, the government appointed the Scarborough Commission ‘to examine the facilities offered by universities [...] for the study of Oriental, Slavonic, East European and African languages’. The Scarborough Report (April 1946) identified the growing importance in international affairs of Asia, Africa, and the Slavonic world, and led to substantial funding for the study of these regions. Subsequently, SOAS embarked upon two decades of academic expansion. Under the dynamic leadership of Sir Cyril Phillips (Director from 1957 to 1976) it added new academic disciplines: economic and political studies, anthropology, law, and geography. Phillips also created five regional centres to promote and extend interdisciplinary studies and research. The School’s new standing was marked by substantial grants from foundations including Ford, Leverhulme, Nuffield, Gulbenkian, Rockefeller, and Wenner Gren. The *SOAS Bulletin* was firmly established as a leading journal in Ori-

entalist scholarship and new journals – the *Journal of African History*, *Journal of African Law*, *Journal of Development Studies*, and (jointly with other universities) *Modern Asian Studies* – marked its impressive and varied areas of expertise.

In the 1980s, SOAS was painfully affected by the funding squeeze imposed by the Thatcher Government on British universities, and shed some 60 academic posts. Recovery came in the shape of growing student numbers in the 1990s. In 1990 there were some 500 undergraduate and just over 400 postgraduate (Masters and PhD) students: in 2000-01 the total number of students at SOAS rose above 3,000 for the first time. New academic departments created in the 1990s included Art and Archaeology, Development Studies, Music, and the Study of Religions. The other major development of the decade was that the federal University of London entered a very different relationship with its constituent colleges. The colleges, including SOAS, no longer received their funds via the central university, but directly from

national funding bodies. SOAS became a self-governing institution, responsible for its own finances and institutional planning.

Today, SOAS has some 3,800 students, almost half of whom are post-graduates. The student body is also strikingly international: some 16 per cent of the undergraduates and 50 per cent of postgraduates are drawn from outside the UK and the European Union. A recent development has been the introduction of strongly recruiting Masters programmes that are thematic or comparative – such as Violence, Conflict and Development or Migration and Diaspora Studies.

SOAS remains a research-intensive institution, and last year attracted over EUR 10 million in competitive research funding. Specialist and deeply informed knowledge about the world beyond the rich ‘north’ has arguably never been more important than it is now, in a world shaped so profoundly by global economic and political forces, but still dangerously divided by cultural, religious, and ideological differences. ◀

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