

## What does it mean to decolonise History teaching and research at SOAS?

SOAS is unique in the regional focus of its History teaching. It is the only History department in Britain and north America that does not teach courses on western history. Rather, our BA and MA History programmes focus exclusively on the histories of regions and people in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. In their 2013 study of the deeply western-centric focus of UK and north-American History departments, Luke Clossey and Nicholas Guyatt's singled out SOAS History as the only department in their sample "whose faculty complement most closely matches global population patterns."<sup>1</sup>

Recent discussions about decolonising teaching curricula, however, have drawn attention to the deeper ways in which colonial practices and their legacies structure learning spaces and knowledge production. A 2015 SOAS Student Union report highlighted the ways in which some teaching at SOAS was framed in terms of teaching 'outsiders' about Asia and Africa, through course material and questions that reinforced structural racism and the 'otherness' of the peoples and places.

This insider/outsider relationship, as well as the specific regional focus of SOAS's History teaching and research, reflect the institution's own imperial history. Founded initially as the School of Oriental Studies in 1916 (Africa was only added in 1935), SOAS was established for the specific purpose of training colonial officials for their postings across the British Empire

SOAS was the only institution in Britain dedicated exclusively to imperial training. Yet it was always one cog in a wider, deeply entrenched network of imperial education that had long shaped the curricula of Oxbridge, Edinburgh, and other, older colleges of the University of London. In key ways, SOAS's position as an imperial training institution – in particular the emphasis placed on language teaching in the School – created opportunities for questioning imperial ideologies that were not found easily in other 'non-specialist' imperial universities. Soon after it was set-up imperial civil servants were joined by students whose interest in Asia and Africa was not shaped, primarily, by imperialist designs.. The Indian revolutionary Har Dayal received his doctorate from SOAS in 1930; the famous musician, actor, and activist Paul Robeson studied Swahili and other African languages at SOAS from 1933-1934 and anti-imperial leader and later first Prime Minister of Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta, taught Kikuyu at SOAS in the late 1930s.

As early as the 1950s, SOAS historians proclaimed an interest in studying the history of Asian and African countries from 'their own perspective' and not through the framework of 'imperial history'.<sup>2</sup> This initiative was greatly facilitated by international scholarships that brought students from former colonies to study 'their own' history in the metropole. SOAS graduates took up posts across the world, in the west and in universities across Asia and Africa. While their training at SOAS had been shaped by racial, gendered and colonial hierarchies, many of these graduates played central roles in building more decolonised spaces around the world.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/may-2013/its-a-small-world-after-all> [Accessed 02/01/2019]

<sup>2</sup> Ian Brown, *The School of Oriental and African Studies: Imperial Training and the Expansion of Learning*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

Today, data about the ethnic background of the students studying History at SOAS contrasts starkly with national figures. The 2018 Royal Historical Society's report *Race, Ethnicity and Equality in UK History* revealed that 89% of students studying history and philosophy in the UK were white.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, in June 2018, 71% of students studying History at SOAS – at both BA and MA level – were classified as BME.<sup>4</sup> Significantly, the large majority of these students are classified as 'Home' students. While our relatively small community of research students are still drawn from across the world, the majority of our taught students now come from the UK.

The data on our students' ethnic background is clear evidence that teaching a more diverse range of histories attracts a more diverse student body. In choosing to study with us, students are no doubt influenced by SOAS's distinct history as an institution engaged actively with challenging imperial norms.

In significant ways, SOAS has much stronger links to the UK population than it has ever had in the past, reflecting the richly global diversity of this population in the twenty first century. This is something we celebrate, but which has also posed challenges for the geographic orientation of our teaching and research work at SOAS. While our student body may be more British than ever, our staff body is not. Linguistic skills are critical for the histories we teach about and the relative collapse of all kinds of language training, let alone training in non-European languages, in British doctoral programmes mean that very few colleagues have British PhDs, certainly none of our most recent hires.

This is the context in which we are grappling with the question of what decolonising History teaching and research at SOAS really means. We want to engage more clearly with the relationship between today's Britain and the histories we have long taught in SOAS while remaining true to the principle that has also long marked SOAS History, that one can teach global histories through a focus on Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

One way in which we seek to manage this is by working with our students to reflect on how their engagement with our courses is shaped by the history they were taught before they arrived at SOAS. The leap from A-level to university history is demanding for all students, SOAS students face a particular challenge. The deeply Eurocentric focus of British A-level, and even International Baccalaureate, syllabi means that very few of our new undergraduates have ever studied the history of the regions that comprise the central focus of our programmes. Where they have done so it has largely been through the framework of western colonial history.

We have reorganised the chronology of our core first year module in world history to make more explicit the central message of the SOAS History curricula – that Africa, Asia and the Middle East are not vassals of Western history but are regions with their own distinct histories and which have played a powerful role in shaping the world as we know it today.

Putting this course together has revealed clearly how the gradual whittling away of pre-modern history teaching in UK universities has had particularly adverse implications for our

---

<sup>3</sup> Royal Historical Society, *Race, Ethnicity & Equality in UK History: A Report and Resource for Change*, (October, 2018) p.29.

<sup>4</sup> This is the official terminology used in the documents I was shown. I did not receive a breakdown of the different groupings that might constitute this term. At postgraduate level the number of BME students drops to 40% while 63% of our research students define themselves in the SOAS paperwork as BME.

capacity to teach African and Asian history. We are passionately committed to ensuring that all our students have some knowledge of the pre-modern period in the regions we cover, and providing this in our first-year regional survey courses. But we have lost a number of important posts, including those focused on early and medieval Islamic history, which has undoubtedly affected our capacity to deliver this crucial part of students' training. These developments reflect how the legacies of imperial ideologies continue to shape our education in prioritising certain peoples' and places' history over others.

Rather than shy away from these problems in teaching provision, we want to make our students more aware of them. From September 2019 we will run a new course that uses the history of SOAS to explore the development of imperial education up to the present day. We want to think critically with our students about how the inequalities we are tackling at SOAS now are shaped by our imperial birth, but also by more recent government policies relating to school curriculum and to the marketisation of universities.

Reappraising our teaching programmes from the perspective of our students makes the question of pedagogy (as something different to curriculum) inescapable. Working with our students to think critically about how history has been used to both reproduce and challenge inequalities cannot be done within the deeply hierarchical context of the 'traditional' class room. We are working with the East London-based theatre company Tamasha to host a playwright in residency programme at SOAS History this term. Part-funded by the Arts Council England, we will welcome 5 writers to work with SOAS staff and student to produce 5 audio dramas that will explore the factors that shape our students' engagement with the histories we teach. We see the project to mark a broader new approach in which, as well as considering how our location in Britain shapes learning and research in SOAS, we also make working with local communities and organisations central to acts of knowledge production and dissemination.