

SOAS Charter on Racism, Antisemitism and All Forms of Cultural, Ethnic and Religious Chauvinism

SOAS is a community of scholars and students committed to academic excellence and social justice. We collectively abhor all forms of chauvinism and discrimination. We stand for anti-racism, and against antisemitism and all other forms of cultural, ethnic and religious chauvinism. We firmly believe in building the bridges of human solidarity so that we collectively can come together to address the transnational challenges of our time, including among others health pandemics, climate change, inequality, and social and political polarisation. We therefore welcome the renewed attention to discriminatory practices and the multiple separate calls to take a stand against racism, antisemitism, religious and cultural intolerance, xenophobia and the like.

Words matter! But as much as words matter, so do those who wield words and with what intention. Many wield noble words with malign intentions. An institution of higher learning, especially one as committed to social justice as SOAS is, has to be cognisant of this. It has to critically analyse the words, who wields them and with what intention. Many across the world speak of freedom and liberty yet deny it to others. Many across all of our communities demand religious freedom and tolerance yet deny it to others outside their own community. Many across our nations demand a fairer allocation of rights and wealth within our nations, and yet refuse to consider the importance of rights and wealth sharing across nations. This selective allocation of rights, support and affirmation has to be challenged.

Advocates of political causes may use academic freedom to articulate hateful words against other human beings and to advance racism and ethnic and cultural chauvinisms of any kind. Political advocacy may use the legitimate demands of anti-racism and calls against antisemitism, religious and cultural intolerance, to deflect from critical academic and political scrutiny. This occurs across the political, cultural and religious divide. Religious fundamentalists may equate religion and state, and demand not only acquiescence from all those within their nations who oppose their agendas but also silence others including scholars and journalists who subject their actions and words to critical reflection and scrutiny. Ethnic and racial chauvinists across the world act in a similar manner to shield themselves from criticism.

This has to be challenged in particular by universities and institutions of higher learning, for it undermines the very purpose of our institutions. Universities should be realms in which discussion of controversial subjects can be conducted in a collegial, non-partial and open-minded way, without suppression of views that do not reflect one's own or that of the self-declared majority. SOAS does not represent one particular viewpoint on political and cultural matters but invites open debate and discussion on issues of public concern. We do not form united fronts that silence those who disagree but value a plurality of opinions. And yet at the same time we will protect our campus from such pressures from all directions. In an environment of highly politicised culture wars, we will put aside whatever media narratives and always listen to students and staff when they talk of discrimination – because everyone deserves a fair hearing.

It is important in this regard to scrutinise the actions and behaviours of the stakeholders within the institutional community. Universities as a result of their character and purpose often attract passionate individuals who are advocates of one or another social or political cause. It is important that such stakeholders act in a manner that does not subvert the very essence of what it means to be a university. Universities are and should be a site for the contest of alternative ideas. They are not a political party or social movement. While noble values must indeed define universities and the interactions within and between them and other institutions and stakeholders across society, they must never become a homogeneous political entity that advocates a single view or agenda and denies all other competing voices.

This distinguishing characteristic – the essence of a university – is sometimes forgotten, even by some actors within the institution who advocate their views in a manner that undermines broader deliberation. This is sometimes done by using pejorative labels against critics, harassing them for having a different point of view, and pressuring them emotionally and sometimes even physically. Such behaviour in effect creates a culture of fear within the institution and is as damaging as external actors with malign intentions who subvert the building of cohesion within the human community.

It is imperative for SOAS, and for all universities, to stand firm against all of these tendencies that prevent a positive climate for the free exploration and interrogation of ideas. We accordingly adopt the following value statement to guide our decisions and behaviour.

As a university, SOAS provides a space that values diversity, critical enquiry and disagreement. As a community, SOAS is committed to tolerance, respect and collegiality. Discrimination in our world manifests itself in multiple forms. It manifests in the form of racism, antisemitism, cultural, ethnic and religious intolerance, xenophobia, gender inequalities, prejudice on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, nationality, age and disability. Such discrimination is not only morally reprehensible but also undermines the building of human solidarity necessary to address the challenges of our time. As an institution and as a community, SOAS stands firm against all expressions of discrimination, both implicit and explicit, and will act collectively to advance a world free of discrimination.

We commit ourselves to ensuring that we apply these values in a fair and impartial manner within and outside of our institutional boundaries. We will not allow our commitment to these values to subvert the essential purpose of a university; instead we will use it to enhance our collective purpose and actions to train new generations of students and scholars, to analyse our challenges as a human community and to craft solutions for these. Ultimately, we will use it to serve as a mirror to society and the world so we may collectively rise to address the challenges of our historical moment.