

**Institution: SOAS**

**Unit of Assessment: 27 Area Studies**

**a. Context**

Over the period 2008-13, the six area studies departments of the Faculty of Languages and Cultures at SOAS have sought to have a significant impact on a range of non-academic user groups and other beneficiaries and audiences both in the UK, and in our specialist regions of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. In particular, key user groups have included museums and galleries, non-profit organizations, such as the Arts Council and other public bodies such as the European Union and the UN. The focus of the unit is primarily cultural but the impact has also been evident in refugee policy and interfaith religious understanding. The main types of impact sought have been to apply the insights of knowledge created in research for understanding aspects of refugee experience, the importance of translation in inter-cultural understanding, cultural presentation in museums, the film industry, and news media.

The range of impact covers the areas of 'Religion', 'Translation', 'Museum Exhibitions', 'Refugees', and the 'Media'. Religion: **Abdel Haleem** through his lifetime of research on the Qu'ran has been an active contributor to the *Building Bridges* programme chaired by the Archbishop of Canterbury. This programme holds annual seminars for textual study alternating between Muslim and Christian venues in different parts of the world to promote interfaith understanding, and he has received an OBE for the success of his efforts in interfaith public engagement. Translation: Another element of impact for the Faculty has been translations of major works that have had wide dissemination outside academia. Two outstanding examples are **Abdel Haleem's** English translation of the *Qu'ran*, which is now a major bestseller and distributed in the thousands by Middle East governments in hotels around the world, and has become a primary focus of interfaith discussion. The product of years of work, the translation has greatly enhanced understanding of Islam throughout the non-Islamic world; another important example is **George's** long period of research on and translation of *Gilgamesh*, which as a Penguin Classic also has reached wide audiences outside of academia, including the rewriting of the story into modern novels such as Joan London's *Gilgamesh* (2001) based on the George translation, and a play based on the translation published by Edwin Morgan in 2005. **Orwin** over the last ten years has worked with the Poetry Translation Centre and Arts Council, Radio, and London African societies in bringing African poetry to a wider audience, through translation and by bringing poets, particularly from Somalia, to the UK to perform their work and engage with British poets, stimulating creative activity and multi-cultural understanding in the UK. It is the deep knowledge of these languages and cultures and the particular works that has enabled the translations to have such wide and sustained impact. Museum Exhibitions: **Gerstle** has collaborated with the British Museum over the last ten years to conduct AHRC and Leverhulme-funded research projects which have led to two major exhibitions accompanied by research catalogues that reached a wide general public in the UK and Japan, the most recent in 2013 on Japanese erotic art. In both cases, the projects and exhibitions have opened up new fields, which would not have been possible without the collaboration between researchers from SOAS, Japan and within the British Museum. The first focussed on the ukiyo-e art tradition of Osaka Kabuki, forgotten even in Japan with the dominance of modern Tokyo, and the second the dispelling of the taboo both within and outside Japan over Japanese traditional erotic art (Shunga). In both cases, the research projects and research funding led by Gerstle stimulated the museum to agree to the exhibition. **Lo's** work with the British Library and scholars in China has brought a major collection of Chinese watercolour paintings from the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries into the public domain, after being completely forgotten. The resulting multi-volume publication has offered China a new view of its own history through these many landscapes and cityscapes commissioned by the British and using Chinese artists. Refugees: **Hutt's** work on refugees in Nepal has had an impact on the administration of UNHCR-refugee camps in Nepal. His work has been praised by those outside Nepal working on refugee policy while at the same time has been attacked in Nepali government blogs, indicating the impact of his work. **Al-Ali** has worked on the problems of Iraqi female academic refugees and women's rights in the Middle East. Through in-country and regional training of academics and women's rights activists, as well as mentoring numerous Iraqi research projects, Al-Ali has substantially progressed promotion of equal rights in Iraq through the perspective of Gender Studies. Media and

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**Film:** **Dovey** has worked with the film industry in promoting the distribution of African films in the UK by establishing African Film Festivals, and within Africa itself, where African film is in fact less appreciated. **Murtagh** secured £7000 funding from the Indonesian Embassy in London and the Indonesia Investment Promotion Centre to organise the London Indonesian Film Screenings 2013 and a Workshop on Indonesian Cinema at SOAS. The series of nine film screenings attracted a total audience of 850, and included discussions with Indonesian directors Teddy Soeriaatmadja and Riri Riza and Indonesian and British film critics. **Standish** has worked with InSight Education and Film London on a series of public film screenings and lectures *Beyond the Frame: Cinemas of Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, funded by the UK Film Council Lottery Fund. **Tan's** work with the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust has been supported by a SOAS Strategic Initiative Fund and has informed the role of Shakespeare productions in China. Meanwhile, **Yaqin's** AHRC project on 'Framing Muslims' has worked with ENGAGE, a not-for-profit company founded in 2008 with the aim of challenging Islamophobia in the UK and improving Muslim participation in media and politics. The project has had considerable impact in raising questions among journalists about how Muslims are represented.

As is common across the arts & humanities, not all researchers in the Departments are focused on an external impact agenda, with individual scholarship remaining an important part of our mission. However, impact is achievable in relation to particular areas such as creative industries, gender studies, film, religion and translation, and the high profile success of individuals in the Faculty has encouraged others to consider how their research could be extended to engage with the larger world outside of universities. Further, as explained below, considerations of the impact of research is now one element of staff development review and of peer review of research applications and mentoring.

**b. Approach to impact**

The Faculty of Languages and Cultures adopts a multi-pronged approach to engaging with external users, which includes active and sustained collaboration with non-academic users in the development and implementation of projects. Two examples of long-term research and engagement with outside institutions are **Abdel Haleem's** work over many years with *Building Bridges* for Interfaith understanding, and **Gerstle's** work with the British Museum over ten years. Such engagement has usually started through individual initiatives, as is evidenced in the range of examples outlined above. In addition, researchers are encouraged to make use of our structure of Centres to support the outreach work of projects, whilst the SOAS Strategic Initiative Fund helps researchers consider how to increase the impact of their projects. One example is **Tan's** work with the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust that has been supported by a SOAS Strategic Initiative Fund grant. **Fuehrer's** project on Hokkien was supported by grants from SOAS and Taiwan in collaboration with Prof. Yang Hsiu-fang, National Taiwan University and the Ministry of Education, Taiwan. This project will publish in 2014 the first textbook on Hokkien language that will have great practical impact in East Asia. **Orwin's** work with the Poetry Translation Centre (supported by the Arts Council) was facilitated by the Faculty's initial support in hosting this Centre under the AHRC funded SOAS-UCL Centre of Excellence for Asian and African Literatures (2000-2005) and in hosting its activities before it became independent. Such outreach is fundamental to our activities.

In order to promote such engagement, a variety of incentives and forms of support are available to staff. For example, the SOAS Vision and Strategy for its 2016 Centennial and beyond explicitly recognises 'volunteering' as an organisational priority, and for a number of staff, active engagement with non-academic bodies on a pro-bono basis is supported and facilitated. SOAS organises a wide range of externally-focused events that bring together academic researchers with non-academic users. The activities of the Faculty's Departments and Centres openly engage with the wider public in London through regular weekly collaborations with outside organizations such as Embassies and cultural, social, religious organizations focussed on Asia and Africa, providing SOAS space and specialist expertise for performances as well as fora for cultural and political activity. These activities have established SOAS as a major hub for engaging with the multi-cultural communities of London.

Such activities are supported in particular by Centres, which have the remit to engage in outreach as one of their primary purposes. The various Centres in the Faculty and School, such as Gender Studies, Translation Studies, Cultural, Literary and Postcolonial Studies, Film Studies, and

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the various Regional Centres (and new Chinese and South Asian Institutes) are important sites for administrative and collegial support to staff pursuing research and impact beyond academia. All have elements of outreach as part of their role and virtually all of the research activities are open to the public. For example, the new Centre for Film and Screen Studies aims to engage directly with the film industry in its programmes.

Another important way that SOAS supports public impact is through the exhibitions at the Brunei Gallery that focus on aspects of the wide range of cultures that SOAS covers. Since 2008, many Area Studies researchers have organised such exhibitions and the research-related public events that accompany them. A representative example of how research events enhance these exhibitions is the programme that accompanied the Tenri University show in April-June 2013, '1000 Years of the Art of the Japanese Book'. There were workshops, musical performances and other cultural events, arranged in co-operation with Tenri University and supported by SOAS. This is only one example of the Brunei Gallery exhibitions and events programmes that SOAS hosts regularly three or four times a year in collaboration with outside organizations. SOAS's location in central London enables these events to have considerable public impact.

We also engage strategically with external users where possible, drawing on our wide portfolio of research on Africa, Asia and the Middle East. An example of an important project supported by SOAS and the EU is the Executive Training Programme (ETP) with funding from the EU to promote engagement of European businesses with Japan and Korea. A key element of this programme is the bringing of specialist research knowledge from SOAS to bear in the training of business people in dealing with Japan and Korea. This is organized by the SOAS Enterprise office and involves SOAS academics from the full range of disciplines, including literature, religion and art delivering a bespoke and intensive training programme for 60 selected participants in advance of an extended placement in the region (45 in Japan and 15 in Korea).

**c. Strategy and plans**

Given the diverse nature of research in the six Area Studies Departments within the Faculty, with work taking place over a range of countries in Asia, Africa and the Middle East, our focus has been on developing a strategy in relation to impact that creates a foundation for engagement with non-academic users to occur, rather than supporting impact with specific non-academic users in particular regions. First, our goal is to ensure a clear process for the development of impact plans for individual research projects, including relevant advice from within and outside the Faculty on how this might best be achieved. The aim is to include this within internal peer review of research proposals prior to their submission to funding bodies. Second, we aim to develop and maintain a system to identify and track evidence of impact, both as a way of recording successes, and in order to disseminate best practice. Although this work is primarily being undertaken at an institutional level within the Research and Enterprise Office (REO), the unit is responsible for identifying project areas, specific pieces of work, events and opportunities that arise and alerting the institution to them, and liaising with the REO as they evolve. In addition, the unit is seeking to test out the application of different kinds of resource to the proactive creation of impact and assess the results. For example, the Strategic Initiative Fund was applied to support **Tan's** project with the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust. To support two of **Gerstle's** externally funded (AHRC/Leverhulme) projects SOAS extended the contracts of two Research Assistants/Fellows by a total of eight months to enable the successful completion of the British Museum exhibitions, which had been scheduled beyond the ending of the external funding. These decisive actions by SOAS ensured wide public impact.

Moving forward, our goal is to develop more systematic ways of engaging with external users, including through strategic partnerships with key organisations both in London, and where appropriate, overseas. For example, whilst work in the Brunei Gallery has engaged with a wide range of external organisations, and individuals have deep links with institutions such as the British Museum and the British Library, we are seeking to formalise such links more at an institutional level, so that they become embedded in our research planning and do not rely on individual connections. In addition, over the past year, SOAS has made a significant investment into two new regional institutes on China and South Asia, which will promote excellent research (based on direct engagement with original language sources, something core to the SOAS approach) in tandem with the development of key strategic partnerships in each region. We have also secured

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recent philanthropic donations of £1million for the London Middle East Institute, which enabled the Institute to move into a new building and greatly expand its outreach to the wider Middle East community in London, including through a revamped magazine aimed at popular audiences ('*The Middle East in London*').

A further dimension to our institutional strategy in relation to impact involves discussion of the incorporation of activity relating to impact into existing systems and procedures for staff development, reward, promotion, probation, performance assessment, etc. The formulation of plans for impact is now embedded within the great majority of external grants, and the Faculty and School more broadly are keen to ensure that, where appropriate, achievable impact plans are incorporated into all research activity planning, whether internally or externally funded. Plans involve the specification of intended audiences, communication plans for the outputs of the research, funding for specific enhancement activity, and a plan for evidence collection.

**d. Relationship to case studies**

An important element has been the supportive atmosphere for researchers to maintain long engagements with their regions and relevant institutions. This is the case with **Hutt's** work on refugees in Nepal, **Al-Ali's** work on human rights in Iraq, **Orwin's** work with African poets and the UK Poetry Translation Centre supported by the Arts Council, and **Yaqin's** 'Framing Muslims' project that has drawn on a vast network of researchers and those working in the media. As mentioned above a key support network for research and outreach is the various Centres within SOAS. **Dovey** has been encouraged to develop her initiatives on African cinema by her Department and the Film and Media Centre, both within Africa and in the UK, and supported most recently by the Leverhulme Trust. She has served on the juries at major film festivals in Kenya, Uganda and Durban, and through public lectures and workshops spreads knowledge about African film, which is, ironically, less well known in Africa than it is in Europe. She also continues to play an active role in supporting the production, distribution, and exhibition of serious African films in the UK. One example is in negotiating, in 2011, a £20,000 grant from Shell to help with the mainstream UK release of two African films – *The Athlete* and *Otelo Burning*. She interacts regularly with African filmmakers, sharing her academic research with them and running workshops translating her research into terms accessible to African film practitioners. A good example is the Master Class on African Film Adaptation that she ran at the 2011 Tarifa African Film Festival in Spain. SOAS African Film Podcasts of African film and video (<http://soasradio.org/african-film-podcasts>) is run by SOAS students, and led by Dovey, offering reviews of contemporary and rare African films, reaching a wide audience. **Abdel-Haleem's** case concerns a lifetime's work of study of the Qur'an, that has resulted in an extremely well-respected translation that to date has sold 253,164 copies worldwide. It was approved by Al-Azhar University, the most prestigious university in the Muslim world, and this helped with impact. The government of Abu Dhabi bought 15,000 copies of the paperback as a first instalment for distribution in hotels and other places. Recently a former professor at UCL wrote to congratulate Abdel Haleem and SOAS on the publicity after finding one in her hotel room! Prior to that, the Libyan Call to Islam Society bought 10,000 copies for free distribution. An individual in Qatar bought 1,000 copies of the bilingual edition, and so it goes on. The translation is particularly praised by readers for being 'accessible' and easy to read as well as a good tool for interfaith relations. Professor Abdel Haleem was awarded the OBE in 2008 for his contribution to Arabic Literature and Culture and to interfaith relations.

In these ways, the Faculty has been able to support individual initiative to maintain sustained engagement with and impact on a variety of public spheres.