

Tab 1

# **Proposals to address issues with GTA/TF pay and working conditions at SOAS University of London**

## **Background**

Through discussion between SOAS fractional teaching staff – Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) and Teaching Fellows (TFs) – both formally through University and College Union (UCU) workshops and informally between current and past staff, it has become evident that there are wide ranging issues with the current state of our pay and working conditions at SOAS. In this document we outline some of the key issues and provide specific solutions. We hope these proposals can form the basis of fundamental reform to GTA/TF employment at SOAS.

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# Overview of proposals

We find several issues with the current pay and working conditions for fractional teaching staff, which we describe in detail in the following sections. To address these serious problems, we make the following proposals:

1. **Increase the multiplier on teaching hours from +1.5 to +2:** SOAS fractional staff are significantly **underpaid** when compared with other London universities (**graduate teaching assistants at UCL and KCL receive approximately 40% and 48% higher pay for the same work**). This is a shameful practice which undervalues the work we do. Increasing the size of the multiplier is a step towards addressing this discrepancy.
2. **Significantly increase the time allocated for marking assessments:** SOAS payments for marking assessments fall far behind those of other London universities, with both KCL and UCL being paid approximately 2.5 times that of SOAS (per 3000-word script marked). These unacceptable marking conditions must end; there must be a significant increase in our pay for marking responsibilities via a reduction in the marking rate (scripts/hour).
3. **Expand office hours to general support hours and extend the allocation bands:** the upper band of office hour allocation should be extended to account for the diversity of student support we provide and for GTAs/TFs with particularly larger student numbers. This would not change the allocation of hours for staff with less than 100 students.
4. **Cap the number of students per tutorial/class at 15:** the schoolwide determination of class sizes is highly inconsistent between departments. Large class sizes create additional unpaid work for us and have a negative pedagogical impact on teaching quality. Moving to a consistent cap on class sizes across the university can address these issues.
5. **Give teachers a right of refusal for over 3 consecutive classes or 4 total classes in a day:** we are often allocated many consecutive classes with no breaks in between, in some cases **5-6 classes may be scheduled consecutively**. The high intensity of work negatively impacts teaching quality. We propose for staff to be informed of their teaching allocation at least a month before classes begin, and to be given the right to refuse high intensity working conditions.
6. **Reform the GTA/TF recruitment process to ensure contracts are received before the start of term:** there have been massive failures with GTA/TF recruitment this academic year 2024/25, with **most of us expected to work without contracts and many not being paid in the October payroll**. Sadly, the mess this year is no outlier; it is an annual occurrence. This is a deep institutional failure that necessitates fundamental changes to the recruitment process at SOAS. These involve starting recruitment for GTAs/TFs much earlier and allocating clear owners for the entire process.
7. **Move to a Full-time Equivalent (FTE) contract format for all GTAs/TFs:** the current hourly paid contract causes several issues, particularly for teachers on student visas. This form of contract is not standard practice across the higher education sector, with UCL an example of a London university that offers FTE contracts to their GTAs/TFs. The change will allow teachers to take on additional classes if they desire and make the contracting process more straightforward – which supports the previous proposal.
8. **Implement mandatory paid inductions for GTAs/TFs:** our responsibilities as GTAs/TFs are rarely explained to us and this causes deep uncertainty and anxiety. Inconsistency across the university means that GTAs/TFs often do not know which responsibilities are ours and which belong to the module convenor. In some cases, this leads to deeply exploitative workplace relationships. We believe that department-specific inductions, where responsibilities are clearly communicated, are necessary to address this.

# Detailed proposals

## 1. Overall Pay Deal

### Issues

- **Disrespectfully low pay relative to other London universities:** SOAS pays its fractional teachers appallingly little for the work we do relative to other London universities. Using contracts given to us by GTAs/TFs at these universities and policies published on the relevant institution websites, we have calculated that the standard GTA/TF at **KCL is paid a staggering 48% more** for commensurate work. Relative to **UCL** things are not much better: our peers there **are paid 40% more** than we are for equivalent work (*see accompanying “Contract Comparison” document for detailed breakdown of our methodology and calculations for both cases*). We demand that this disgraceful, disrespectful pay gap be closed immediately. Fractional teachers perform a core part of the work that brings in the student fees from which SOAS functions – we demand our fair share of the money we bring in!

### Solutions

- **Pay rise:** we demand a pay rise to bring our salaries in line with UCL and KCL, equivalent London universities. According to our calculation, this will represent **a 42% raise for the standard GTA/TF** (*see attached “Contract Comparison” document for calculations*). Specifically, we propose that the multiplier on teaching hours be increased from +1.5 to +2 hours per teaching hour (bringing it in line with both KCL and UCL); that the current office hours rubric be reformulated as “Student Support” hours to reflect the administrative work we do replying to student emails, and extended to reflect massive student numbers and corresponding workloads; and that the marking rate (number of scripts/hour) be significantly reduced, aligning it with both UCL and KCL (see subsequent sections for a more detailed breakdown of these demands).
- **Implementation:** these changes should be made immediately and implemented from the start of Term 2 in January 2025.

## 2. Marking pay and working conditions

While marking is not included in GTA/TF contracts, fractional teachers carry out the bulk of assessment marking and are paid according to the following table.

**Assessed Coursework:**

**Exam Marking:**

Exam scripts will be remunerated at the rate of 2.5 scripts per hour (0.4 hours per script).

(word count)	paid per hour	(plain time hours)
1499 or less	3.5	0.29
1500-4000	2.5	0.4
4001 or greater	1.5	0.67

Where the pay is based on the hours worked multiplied by the staff members hourly rate (excluding holiday pay). Fractional teachers have major concerns with our pay and working conditions for marking, with a group of us carrying out an informal survey in summer 2024 on these issues, which received over 30 responses across Departments and Colleges. The results of this survey are incorporated within the issues section below.

### Issues

- **Extreme underpayment:** comparing SOAS marking pay to other London universities shows that we are grossly underpaid relative to staff carrying out the same work at other institutions. Both UCL and KCL provide an hour's pay for marking a script that falls within the 1500-4000 band in the table above. This translates to a chasm of **around 150% between our pay and that of staff at these institutions for the same work**. In reality SOAS fractional staff spend considerably more time marking than we are paid for, with the marking survey finding that none of the respondents thought that the time given per assessment accurately reflected the time taken to mark, and over 80% responding that it did not.
- **Excessive workload:** many of us have especially large marking workloads, in some cases well over 100 assessments per term. Because marking takes much longer than is assumed by the SOAS marking rate, and the deadlines for this work are very tight, many staff members struggle to meet their deadlines, particularly around the winter marking period. Indeed, with how long it takes to receive the scripts and mark them, all while allowing enough time for the convenor to moderate them, we typically have to devote an enormous part of our schedules to marking. This is on top of our other teaching and research responsibilities (note: fractional teachers are part-time workers and we are therefore highly likely to have other responsibilities).
- **Unclear marking responsibilities:** because marking is not included in our contracts, there is an inconsistent communication of work expectations, with less than half of the respondents to our survey saying they knew about marking responsibilities before signing their contract. Furthermore, less than half the respondents were aware that marking was not a part of the contract they signed and that they were not obliged to mark.
- **Student dissatisfaction:** SOAS has consistently scored low on questions related to marking, assessment and feedback in the **National Student Survey (NSS)**, and this outcome is clearly linked to the poor working conditions of fractional staff when it comes to marking. **When asked how often does feedback help you to improve your work? Only 55.7% and 56.5% of**

respondents gave a positive answer in 2023 and 2024 respectively, compared to the benchmark values of 68.3% and 68.1%.

## Solutions

- **Fair pay for marking:** we demand a significant shift in marking pay to address the disgraceful gap between SOAS and that of other London universities. We also propose increasing the marking boundaries as the current boundaries are large and there is a significant difference between a 1500-word essay and a 3500-word essay. Specifically we propose amending the hourly pay table for marking as follows:

Script Length (word count)	Number of scripts paid per hour	Rate per script (plain time hours)
1000 or less	2	0.5
1001 – 2000	1.5	0.67
2001 – 3000	1	1
3001 – 4000	0.75	1.33
4001 or greater	0.5	2
Exam Script	1	1

- **Extending marking deadlines:** we propose that for GTAs/TFs marking over 100 assessments, an additional two weeks should be allocated for marking, rising to four weeks for over 150 assessments. It should be highlighted however that high marking load is directly related to departments with large class sizes. Once classes are reduced to a more reasonable size, it is likely that far fewer teachers would have over 100 scripts to mark.
- **Including marking explicitly in the contract:** the way marking is paid causes confusion and uncertainty. We recognise it makes the most sense for GTAs/TFs to mark the work of the students they teach, and it therefore makes sense for marking to be included explicitly in our contracts from the beginning. This will reduce ambiguity and make our marking responsibilities clear from the outset. This is conditional, however, on the increase in marking pay we have outlined, as under the current pay structure many staff would not be able to carry out marking responsibilities due to insufficient remuneration for this type of work.

## 3. Office hours for high teaching workload

The current office hours policy for fractional teachers is:

## Office Hours

Eligible fractional teachers will receive payment for office hours per term on the basis of the table below.

### Office Hours Calculation

TOTAL STUDENTS (ACROSS ALL TUTORIALS GROUPS) X NUMBER OF TEACHING WEEKS DELIVERED	Plain Time Hours
0-150	6
151-300	8
301-450	10
451-600	12
601-750	14
751-900	16
901-1050	18

e.g. a GTA teaching 15 students for 10 weeks ( $15 \times 10 = 150$ ) would be allocated 6 plain time (office) hours.

A GTA teaching 50 students (independent of the number of tutorial groups) over 5 weeks ( $50 \times 5 = 250$ ) would be allocated 8 plain time (office) hours.

## Issues

- **Upper limit on the band:** currently the table stops at 18 office hours. However, in reality, many fractional teaching staff teach 150-200 students per term. If a teacher is responsible for 150 students per term, the calculation is  $150 \times 9 = 1350$ . Given that there is an increment of 150 units between bands, if the office hours table extended further, it would assign the staff member in this instance 22 plain time (office) hours. For 200 students, it would mean  $200 \times 9 = 1800$ , which translates to 28 plain time (office) hours. There is no justification for the band having an upper limit, as the increase in the number of students significantly raises the corresponding support workload. In fact, fractional teaching staff typically support students on- and off-line, way beyond our plain-time (office) hours, leading to unpaid labour.
- **Student support outside term time:** many students continue to email their GTAs/TFs outside of term time, because they are unaware of the fractional nature of our contracts and that we are typically not employed by SOAS once term finishes. This often happens after the release of assessment marking, and in the exam seasons. Currently, many of us continue to respond to our students long after our employment expires out of good will, again, undertaking unpaid labour.
- **Student dissatisfaction:** SOAS has consistently scored low on questions related to contacting teaching staff in the National Student Survey (NSS) and this outcome is clearly linked to the issues outlined above. When asked 'how easy was it to contact teaching staff when you needed to?' only 68.4% and 70.6% of respondents gave a positive answer in 2023 and 2024 respectively, compared to the benchmark values of 84.8% and 86.3%.



## Solutions

- **Consolidate all student-supporting activities into “Student Support” hours and expand the band continuously without an upper limit:** we suggest that all types of student-supporting activities be consolidated, as there are different types of support that students need which cannot be easily delineated into one activity or another. The consolidated support hours, along with the **extension of employment period with FTE type contract**, will allow GTAs/TFs to engage more meaningfully with our students and give them the support they need outside of term time. We cannot emphasise enough the positive impact this will have on student satisfaction at SOAS.

## 4. Workload: class sizes and consecutive classes

### Issues

- **Excessive class sizes:** in several departments at SOAS, it is common for GTAs/TFs to have to teach tutorials/seminars with **20-30 students per class**, with classes exceeding **30+ students** in several instances. All first-time fractional teaching staff take mandatory training on Preparing to Teach at SOAS with Learning and Teaching Enhancement, which emphasises the importance of active learning strategies pivoting on student engagement. It is, however, **impossible to create a learning environment with student participation and active learning when classes are excessively large**. We are often so busy with logistical problems, such as the room being too crowded, stuffy, and sometimes not even having enough chairs and desks to accommodate all our students that we do not have the time to get everyone involved in the lesson. Beyond this, it is entirely impractical to expect us to be able to engage 30 students in a 60-minute class while covering the requisite course material. Students are acutely aware of this and the negative impact it has on their learning; many ask us if they can switch to another class with fewer students, and many more simply stop attending classes after the first week.
- **Ambiguous fractional policy:** the fractional policy does not provide precise definitions of tutorials and seminars. It states that “normally 30-40 students make up a seminar group”, which is “normally a discussion-based group”. Whereas a tutorial is defined to be “a student-lead [sic] learning activity” that “will normally be up to a maximum of 15 students”. These ambiguous definitions create room for the allocation of excessive large classes.
- **Consecutive classes:** many fractional teaching staff are assigned consecutive classes concentrated on one or two days. Often these are booked into different classrooms, or even the different buildings. Because teaching more than 2-3 classes consecutively (especially in different classrooms) can be extremely exhausting, it can directly harm the quality of teaching, creating inconsistencies across classes.
- **Rescheduling classes:** GTAs/TFs can request timetable changes during the period when the provisional timetable is circulated up to around two weeks before the start of the academic year. However, the later we make such a request, the more difficult it is to accommodate. Currently, College Hubs and Heads of Department (HoDs) typically start the GTA/TF recruitment process around June-July, resulting in fractional teachers being hired late, often only a week or two before the term starts. Many of us struggle to get a contract and have our staff account set up, let alone find the time to check our timetables and request a change to our teaching schedules. Even when we do manage to request a change, it is often denied on the

basis that there are not enough classrooms or the requested change clashes with student timetables.

## Solutions

- **Cap maximum number of students per class at 15:** we propose that class sizes be capped at 15 students per class. This will allow us to create engaging, active learning environments that will dramatically improve the student experience at SOAS, which current NSS scores show is severely lacking. Practically this will mean that classes for large modules with many students will have to be shared between multiple GTAs/TFs, rather than being assigned to just one teacher.
- **Right of refusal of consecutive classes and excessive workloads:** while some GTAs/TFs may prefer to have an intensive 1-2 days of work, rather than having it spread out, this very much depends on individual circumstances. We therefore demand the right to refuse more than 3 consecutive classes and more than 4 total classes in a day. Practically speaking, GTAs/TFs should be informed of their teaching allocation at least a month before classes start, allowing time for classes to be rescheduled where appropriate. From a pedagogical perspective, assigning many classes consecutively, and/or on the same day, without our prior agreement directly harms the quality of teaching and student experience at SOAS. Nobody should be forced into massive teaching workloads without any consultation.

## 5. Working without contracts and underpaying

### Issues

- **Getting contracts late:** it is unwritten institutionalised practice at SOAS that GTAs and TFs are expected to work for several weeks and sometimes months without contracts. This year the problem has been particularly acute, as the process of generating contracts has been split between College Hubs and HR: the Colleges tell HR how to structure the contracts; HR then generates the contracts. It is crucial to emphasise, however, that this mess happens every year for most fractional teachers; it is not an isolated issue. It is implicitly understood by most HoDs and College administrators that fractional teachers are expected to work without a contract for a period on “goodwill”, due to incomplete information on student enrolment numbers before the start of the academic year. We cannot state strongly enough that this uncertainty causes widespread anxiety amongst fractional teachers.  
These practices would not be acceptable in the vast majority of workplaces in the UK, moreover, they are an outlier for the higher education sector in general. For instance, UCL offers rolling contracts to GTAs which specify the number of working hours and general responsibilities long before the start of the academic year. They subsequently allocate these hours to specific modules, classes, and tasks to align with student enrolment that term. This example illustrates that the incredibly negligent workplace practices at SOAS are not at all necessary, although they are normalised and treated as such.
- **Errors in contracts:** it is highly unusual for a fractional teacher to receive their contract without errors. We typically have to chase College Hubs to correct the faulty information in our contracts. Frequently, our emails are ignored, and we can only resolve the issues by visiting College offices in person. This places a massive administrative burden on us which directs our time and focus away from what we are employed to do – from teaching. Moreover, it is common for fractional teachers to have to accept erroneous contracts – which we later

have to correct – just to ensure we are paid on time. Clearly it should not be our responsibility to correct contractual errors, errors that should not exist in the first place.

- **Late and underpayment of wages:** in combination, the previous two points mean that fractional teachers are frequently paid late and more often than not incorrectly. Indeed, **it is institutionalised practice for SOAS to underpay its GTAs and TFs**. The burden is placed upon us to badger College Hubs and HR into paying us what we are entitled to as per the collective bargaining agreement. Sadly, many fractional teachers cannot handle the stress of this process and resign themselves to accepting underpayment.
- **Lack of communication/human interaction:** this problem has come to the fore recently. The reorganisation of the GTA/TF recruitment process has placed HR in charge of generating our contracts. When we inevitably have an issue, relating to working without a contract or being underpaid for our work, we have no mechanism of contacting HR outside of the online ticketing portal. Besides being absurdly inefficient, the process of sending messages into a black hole and waiting for weeks on end for a reply is exhausting and upsetting. Moreover, the specificities of individual contract problems cannot be easily remedied with sporadic digital messages. It is normal for a fractional teacher to log a ticket and receive a reply weeks later which says their case has been remedied when it has not been at all. The lack of human interaction makes the process unnecessarily stressful and inefficient.

## Solutions

- **Moving to a “given then updating” contract model:** we demand to be given contracts before we start working. Practically, this will mean restructuring the recruitment process; HoDs and College administrators will have to send recruitment requests for GTAs/TFs to the recruitment panel shortly after course/module structures are decided upon by departments (traditionally this has been done in February, although we note that SOAS is moving from a term to semester structure, so the specific dates are subject to change). We would like to emphasise that this is already the practice for hiring new full-time academic staff (who are never expected to work on goodwill without contracts) and propose that it be extended to recruitment for all GTAs/TFs. Delays at the start of the recruitment process severely disrupt our lives and livelihoods once the new academic year begins.

Whilst we acknowledge that the nature of the higher education industry means that student numbers and precise department work schedules are uncertain at the start of term, we totally reject the notion that GTAs/TFs should have to work on “goodwill”. It is entirely feasible for us to be given contracts before we start working that are subsequently updated to reflect complete work schedules as they emerge. Indeed, because the contracts we are issued with (late, of course) are typically riddled with errors, we generally have to get them reissued through the VT system anyway to avoid being underpaid. We therefore propose that SOAS move to a “given then updating” contracting model for GTAs/TFs.

Goodwill does not pay the bills! – That we need to state this is a damning indictment of workplace practices at SOAS.

- **Training for College Hubs:** clearly several of the administrators in charge of structuring our individual contracts do not understand the collective bargaining agreement and SOAS fractional staff policies. There is no other explanation for the widespread errors in our contracts every year. We propose that College administrators should be given mandatory training to ensure they understand the different types of work GTAs/TFs do and the specifics of how we should be paid for it. It is deeply concerning and thoroughly unacceptable that SOAS makes its teachers work to correct their own contracts when we should be focussing on

teaching and research. We demand that this status quo, the shameful, systematic underpaying of GTAs/TFs be rectified immediately.

- **Taking ownership of the process:** we acknowledge that after the aforesaid solutions are implemented, there will still be contractual issues on the margins. To ensure that these can be resolved efficiently, without causing distress for the staff members involved, we propose that a group of administrators take ownership of the entire GTA/TF recruitment process (across College Hubs and HR). Responsibility must be clearly assigned so that we know exactly who to go to resolve whatever contractual issues we might have. Moreover, the ticketing portal model should be removed from this process. It is a complete failure that creates more work for everyone, including HR. Given the complexities with our employment – complex work/pay structures, student-visa work-limits, etc. – it is often impossible to resolve our specific contractual issues through digital messages. Such problems can only be efficiently dealt with in-person. We therefore propose that a process be implemented which allows GTAs/TFs on the margins to schedule in-person or online meetings with HR/College Hub colleagues to resolve their issues. It cannot be emphasised enough that the implementation of these proposals will reduce workloads for everyone.

## 6. Work limits for GTAs/TFs on student visas

### Issues

- **Arbitrary work-limits imposed on fractional teachers on student visas:** fractional teachers on student visas are capped at the 20-hour/week limit by the Home Office. At SOAS, this typically translates to a limit of 7 or 8 teaching hours per week (8 times 2.5 multiplier equals 20 hours, before accounting for marking, office hours, etc.), which unfairly restricts international workers who want to teach more classes. This is an arbitrary assumption, since the various forms of work we do extend well beyond the teaching weeks: we have to familiarise ourselves with the content of the classes we teach before terms begins, for which we are currently paid under “course prep”; we have to respond to student emails throughout the academic year; and, crucially, we mark during the summer term once classes have finished. There is no legal or practical reason that our contracts cannot be extended to reflect our actual work schedules and thereby allow a greater allocation of teaching hours to those who wish to teach more classes.
- **Intensified financial pressures:** fractional teachers on student visas are typically PhD students who pay roughly 4.6 times more in fees than their British colleagues. Moreover, they are less likely to receive material support from relatives in the UK. The arbitrary restriction on teaching hours thus discriminates against staff members who are often already under intensified financial pressures.
- **Precluding extra teaching roles at other universities:** the calculation for the student visa work-limits, as it stands, typically precludes these fractional teachers from taking on additional roles at other universities to assuage their personal financial pressures.
- **Administrative workload:** when a fractional teacher on a student visa wishes to do extra, non-GTA/TF work at SOAS, they are responsible for calculating their combined working hours to ensure that they do not exceed the visa limit. This creates an administrative burden that directs their time away from teaching and research.
- **Class sizes:** when a fractional teacher on a student visa complains about having overflowing classes, they are typically told that they cannot be given extra classes to mitigate this issue

due to their visa work-limits. This creates a two-tiered system based on nationality whereby non-British teachers have less flexibility when managing their class sizes. It is a shameful example of institutionalised nativism at SOAS.

- **Overall discrimination based on nationality:** all the previous points clearly demonstrate that SOAS unfairly discriminates against its fractional teachers on student visas based upon their nationality. This is despite claims in SOAS's own EDI strategy document that "Equality of opportunity is at the core of all the SOAS activities" and promises to "Foreground an intersectional approach to EDI at SOAS that is attentive to how inequalities are reproduced and sustained at the axis of race, gender, and class" (SOAS EDI 2021-2025, pg. 5, 8). Indeed, it is crystal clear that SOAS is in breach of its own EDI policy in relation to fractional teachers on student visas.

## Solutions

- **Switching to an FTE contract:** we demand that SOAS switch to a full-time equivalent (FTE) contract structure. It is notable that UCL offers such a contract to their GTAs/TFs, so there is no reason whatsoever we cannot be offered the same. Specifically, we propose that teachers employed for **one semester be given a 5-month contract**, and that those working **two semesters receive a 10-month contract**. This will more reasonably reflect the distribution of the work we do across the academic year. Crucially, it will allow GTAs/TFs on student visas to teach more classes should they wish to. It will rectify the shamefully unjust institutional nativism at SOAS vis-à-vis these staff.
- **Intersection with class size limits:** the implementation of an FTE contract structure will allow GTAs/TFs on student visas to pick up some of the slack from the implementation of strict, reasonable limits on class sizes at 15 students per class (see proposal 4), and thereby contribute to significant pedagogical improvements at SOAS.

## 7. Paid mandatory in-person inductions

### Issues

- **Lack of instruction about workplace responsibilities:** fractional teachers frequently feel abandoned when they start working at SOAS. We are seldom told what responsibilities we have as employees, how or when we will be paid, and who we can speak to if we have workplace issues. This was confirmed in the marking survey we conducted in summer 2024, which revealed that fractional teachers feel that they receive inadequate information about their workplace responsibilities, and often feel frustrated by the lack of support networks within their departments.

### Solutions

- **Mandatory paid inductions for all GTAs/TFs:** we propose that all GTAs/TFs, both new and returning, be paid their basic hourly rate to attend a department specific, in-person induction session at the start of every academic year. These sessions should explain workplace standards and responsibilities to GTAs/TFs, which change every year with shifting course/module structures within departments and university-wide policy updates. It will also give new staff a chance to meet their colleagues, helping build genuine academic communities within departments.

Making the induction sessions mandatory and paid will strengthen attendance; making them in-person will enhance staff engagement.

## References

National Student Survey data: provider-level, accessed 08/11/2024 from:

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SOAS EDI 2021-2025, accessed 08/11/2024 from:

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