

President's Report to SLAS AGM, 21 April 2022

Thank you for coming along to this AGM; the first in-person AGM since 2019; and thank you for reading this report if you're catching up afterwards. We really appreciate your taking the time to engage with the running of the Society. The AGM is an important opportunity for the Society's officers and the *BLAR* editors to provide an account of our activities over the last 12 months, as well as for you to ask any questions in relation to those activities. And on this specific occasion, we also need you to debate and cast your vote in relation to the new Constitution, about which I will say more shortly.

This is also our first conference with an in-person dimension since the University of Leicester conference in 2019, as we had to cancel the 2020 in-person conference at the University of Amsterdam because of the pandemic, with the SLAS committee and the team at CEDLA pulling together a replacement virtual conference in record time. And in 2021, because of concerns with what travel and other restrictions would still be in place at the time of the event, we also opted for a fully virtual conference, this time run entirely by the SLAS committee.

In order to facilitate some of the same opportunities for socialisation that an in-person conference offers and that standard platforms such as Zoom or Teams do not, the committee elected to invest in having a virtual conference site designed on Gather, with a view to being able to continue to use the site for other SLAS-sponsored events such as the Digital Humanities group led by Patience Schell, as well as committee meetings, thereafter. Indeed, some of you will be using the platform to access this year's hybrid conference as well. While getting to grips with a new platform and new ways of socialising in the context of an academic conference offered some teething problems in the first instance, we are hopeful that this year's conference will really see optimal use being made out of the platform, working in harmony with the impressive, 'state-of-the-art' facilities at the University of Bath.

The 2021 conference also offered us an ideal opportunity to experiment with other possibilities that going virtual can offer. We thus ran it in afternoons and evenings over five days rather than the usual two-day in-person event. This allowed better access for participants based in Latin America and also aimed to combat the fatigue that comes with many hours spent on 'Zoom calls'. We also kept the costs of attendance to an absolute minimum and used the opportunity to make some of the events open to the general public in order to make the event as inclusive as possible. All in all, we were very pleased with what we managed to achieve last year, and my thanks go, in particular, to the conference team – Patience Schell, Marieke Riethof, Eamon McCarthy, Paul Merchant and Jannine Poletti-Hughes – as well as to the University of Aberdeen CPD office who supported the running of the conference.

This year sees us experiment with another new format – a fully hybrid conference over two days, with all panels, roundtables and keynotes accessible both in-person on campus at the University of Bath and via our Gather platform. This is no mean feat and I'm sure everyone will join me in congratulating the Bath team – Juan Pablo Ferrero Penny Miles and Mariana Lucía Villegas Monroy – for all their hard work in making this happen. The conference is

entitled 'Latin America in Times of Political Mistrust and Global Pandemic', and it will be running just over 70 panels, as well as other formats of gathering, across the full range of different disciplines that Latin American studies embraces. It bodes to be a highly memorable and much needed social and intellectual highlight in the SLAS calendar.

Looking to the future, our next conference in 2023 will almost certainly be hybrid in some way (host institution TBC), in order to continue to draw on what we have learned over the last three years in terms of both inclusivity and thinking through the balance between the need to meet in person and our commitment as academics to reducing our carbon footprints. As a committee we are continuing to debate this issue in the light of our Climate Action Plan. Overall, we aim for a significant reduction in academic travel across all of our activities, coupled with maximum benefit for our members. In the light of this both SLAS committee and *BLAR* editorial meetings have shifted to virtual formats for all but one meeting per year, normally timed to coincide with any in-person annual conference. This also has the advantage of saving significant amounts of the Society's income for more productive use supporting the SLAS community. We are mindful however of the value of in-person networking opportunities provided by in-person conferences, particularly for PGRs and ECRs, and are thus looking to continue to encourage hybrid annual conferences that combine SLAS and PiLAS, rather than running two separate conferences per year with in-person elements. We of course welcome approaches from institutions wishing to host future annual conferences, and we would be open to proposals for fully virtual events where this is deemed to be advantageous by the hosting institution, for example, where that institution is based outside of the UK.

Behind the scenes, the SLAS committee has had quite a busy year. In May 2021, after a great many years on the committee and at least sixteen as Treasurer, John Fisher had to step down because of ill health. While I was able to keep things ticking over for a while as second signatory on our accounts, we were extremely fortunate that committee member Jannine Poletti-Hughes, Senior Lecturer in Accounting and Finance at the University of Liverpool, was willing and very able to step into John's shoes at short notice. Jannine was elected as interim treasurer by the SLAS committee in June 2021 so that she could take over the running of our accounts and we are delighted that she has been willing to stand for election as treasurer in the current round of elections to SLAS committee and officer roles. She has also made good progress on developing a new expenses policy and moving us onto online banking for easier payment of grants to SLAS members. It has been hard to have had to say goodbye to John under such difficult circumstances, and we wish him the very best and thank him heartily for his many years of service to SLAS. We would also like to extend our thanks to Antoni Kapcia who is also now stepping down as auditor for SLAS's accounts after five years of service. Going forward, our accounts will be audited by an accountancy firm whose name will be displayed on the SLAS website in due course.

The Treasurer's report will provide all the details of our finances for the past year. It is worth highlighting here that we have been fortunate that expenses caused by the ongoing pandemic have been offset by savings elsewhere. For example, running our own conference cost us a significant amount of money, but this was offset by the lack of travel expenses for SLAS

committee members and *BLAR* editors, meaning that we have been able to continue to provide the usual level of support to the SLAS community through the funding opportunities that we offer. SLAS finances have been stable for quite some time, with our capital reserves moderately increasing year on year. However, changes in our main income stream – the publication of *BLAR* – are starting to have an impact on this comfortable status quo. Plan S and the requirement by many UK funders to move towards fully open-access publishing will see gradual reductions to the income derived from publishing academic journals and this clearly has a knock-on effect on the financial wellbeing of scholarly societies that depend on their journals to fund their running costs and other activities. SLAS is in a strong position going into this situation. However, it will require careful stewardship over the coming years to ensure that we continue to thrive. This will entail continuing to look hard at expenses incurred in the running of the Society in order to have the least impact possible on our ability to offer funding opportunities to SLAS members.

This brings me to *BLAR* itself. While Ann Varley as Coordinating Editor will offer you more detail from the perspective of the editorial team in her report, the key issue that I want to report on here is the fact that our five-year contract with the publisher, Wiley, expires at the end of 2022. While a final decision has not yet been taken, the need to renegotiate the contract, in the context of the radical changes in the scholarly publishing landscape outlined above, has given us an opportunity to consider all options. SLAS members should be reassured that, whoever publishes *BLAR* going forward, the best decision possible will be taken to ensure the Society remains as financially secure as possible. I would like to take this opportunity to extend my sincere thanks to Ann, to the other editorial team members – Ainhua Montoya, Juan Pablo Ferrero, Penny Miles and Ed King –, and to the *BLAR* editorial assistant, Ken Lestrage, for their continuing hard work in editing the *Bulletin* for us, particularly in a context of such significant change to publishing, and to related working practices. I would also like to thank Sarah Ritchie, Associate Journals Publishing Manager at Wiley, for her infinite patience as we work our way through these issues, and Jo Crow, who stepped down as *BLAR* editor in the course of 2021 after four years, for all her hard work.

One project that the SLAS Committee has worked on over the last year has been the revision of the Society's Constitution. While we will present these changes and offer the opportunity for debate and a vote elsewhere in this AGM, I would just like to outline the reason for the proposed changes. Overwhelmingly, they seek to simplify, clarify and up-date the way the operation of the Society is presented in the Constitution (now also combined with the Standing Orders), and, importantly, to revise it in order to make it more inclusive. Changing a constitution is never something to be taken lightly, and it is also a significant undertaking in terms of work. However, I am grateful to the Committee for their support in this, particularly to the officers – Eamon McCarthy, Marieke Riethof and Jannine Poletti-Hughes –, and to the EDI working group members – Katy Jenkins and Rebecca Ogden – for their sound advice and helpful suggestions. I would hope that the assembled SLAS members were comfortable in supporting the proposed changes.

PiLAS, the Postgraduate branch of SLAS, has continued to thrive over the past academic year, with Oliver Wilson-Nunn as President and an organising committee based at the

Universities of Cambridge, KCL, UCL, and Birkbeck. Some of the regular PiLAS activities such as the archives and collections workshop have managed to return in-person with the relaxation of Covid restrictions, yet the reach of PiLAS has been enhanced by the regular virtual work-in-progress sessions. The PiLAS annual conference, entitled 'Repair, Resistance, and Resilience in Latin America', is scheduled for 7-8 July in a hybrid format with the in-person element at the University of Cambridge. PiLAS's website is now fully integrated into the SLAS website to improve continuity and lessen the burden on each year's PiLAS team, and the group also has Twitter and Facebook accounts which work very well to promote their activities. Discussion is ongoing about how we might productively combine in-person PiLAS and SLAS conferences to reduce travel but optimise networking opportunities for PGRs.

As President of SLAS I have represented the organisation in the context of national organisations and associations, notably the UK Conference of Area Studies Associations, the Arts and Humanities Alliance and the Alliance of Modern Languages, Area Studies and Linguistics Subject Associations UK. I have also weighed in on behalf of the Society to support fellow Latin Americanists whose working conditions and jobs have been under threat, often working in concert with Prof. Catherine Boyle, president of the Association of Hispanists of Great Britain and Ireland, in this respect. I have also been kindly represented at other events by SLAS committee members such as Eve Hayes de Kalaf who attended an ECR-focused event at the British Academy on our behalf.

As this report testifies, the SLAS committee has been busy in the last year, but it also demonstrates how SLAS can and does work for the field in the UK, working to ensure that we can help our members to thrive as Latin Americanists. I want to pay tribute to my colleagues on the committee, whose commitment over the last year has ensured the smooth running of the Society. While I have mentioned many of them by name already for their various different contributions, I would like to reiterate my gratitude to Jannine Poletti-Hughes for stepping in as Treasurer when we needed her most, to Marieke Riethof for her endless support and advice in the Vice-President role, to Patience Schell as wise Past-President and Gather 'champion', to Eamon McCarthy for being an amazingly efficient and knowledgeable Secretary, and to Geraldine Lublin who has supported him in editing the website in recent months. Both Geraldine and Katy Jenkins will be stepping down from the SLAS committee after two years and eight years respectively. We would also like to thank Katy for her hard work over the years, particularly in relation to EDI initiatives. We will shortly be joined by Peter Watson, Catriona McAllister and Karol Valderrama-Burgos as ordinary committee members and we look forward to working with them. And finally, I would also like to extend my thanks to Christy Palmer who provides technical support for the SLAS website and also runs the SLAS Twitter account.

Thank you all for coming along to the AGM and/or reading this report. I hope those of you at the conference here in Bath have a wonderful and productive couple of days, and that everyone present, in person or virtually, returns to their 'day jobs' restored and inspired.

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