



Adding value to the LSE experience

Lord Browne's review of the funding of undergraduate education in the UK will report over the summer. The review team was set up on a cross party basis, so the recommendations will stand a good chance of being accepted. It seems highly likely that the level of fees will be reviewed – especially in the current circumstances where the government's finances are under pressure.

Politicians of all parties have been setting out their stalls. There is a widespread willingness to consider change, and to channel more resources into universities, but many have raised the 'value for money' question. Can we say that undergraduates are being taught well? Indeed, can we say that they are being taught enough?

At LSE, we have been wrestling with that question from a slightly different perspective. We are concerned that some of our graduates emerge from somewhat narrow degree programmes knowing little about the big issues being debated in the outside world. They may be well trained in accounting or anthropology, but have had little exposure during their time here to other disciplines. They may also have spent most of their time with fellow students in the same department.

In an attempt to offset this narrowness we have introduced a new course – known as LSE100: Understanding the causes of things – which all undergraduates, no matter what their degree discipline, will have to take. We are piloting the LSE100 now, but the class entering this September will be obliged to take it. This is an addition to their workload: we have not cut back on any other parts of the curriculum.

The format of the course will be unusual. There are six modules, with the lectures given by some of our most senior faculty members. So, for example, there will be a module on climate change with lectures from Nicholas Stern. Danny Quah and I

will be co-teaching a module on why there are financial crises.

The course will, we hope, be a manifestation of LSE's long standing core values. We will be encouraging students to engage with real world issues. (We expect the content of the modules to evolve over time.) There will be a strong emphasis on interdisciplinarity. We think all our students should be functionally numerate and that they should all have a good understanding of the main techniques used in the social sciences. Indeed 'thinking like a social scientist' was one of the early working titles of the initiative.

Another distinctive feature of the course is that the issues we choose are global in nature. That is obviously true of climate change and financial crisis, but there will also be one on why big turning points in world affairs, such as the ending of the Cold War, are so difficult to forecast. There will be another on the importance of cultural differences, designed to show how it is not possible to understand the different ways in which different societies work without considering the cultural background.

In addition, we will be encouraging argument and debate – another LSE tradition. The students will work in groups and be required to make presentations to their peers. Employers tell us that our graduates are less strong in teamwork and presentation skills than they might be, so LSE100 will also help with our employability agenda.

The early signs are that students are reacting well to the course. To make the workload more manageable, we have spread the course over the first and second years.

So at LSE we do have an answer to those politicians, and indeed parents, who ask whether, if they are to pay more, they will get more 'added value'. I am confident that LSE's answer to that question is a good one, and that LSE100 will soon become a distinctive feature of the LSE experience. ■

Howard Davies is director of LSE.

