



HIGH Societies

There's much more to student life at LSE than academic study, as **Jess Winterstein** found out when she talked to *LSE Connect* readers about society life on campus.

To gain an insight into the student body at LSE one need look no further than the many societies operating on campus, the range of which reflect not only the School's international reputation but also the diverse range of interests of its student body.

Societies operate under the auspices of the Students' Union (SU), which has had a dynamic and active life since its foundation in 1897. LSE's oldest student society is the Grimshaw International Relations Club, founded in 1923, but it was after the first world war that the range of societies was expanded by the Union with the support of the then director, William Beveridge. Today, the student body is as active as ever, with over 220 societies catering for a wide range of interests, from the political to the cultural, artistic, academic or career-focused.

With society stalls visible on Houghton Street throughout term, one need only visit campus to see how prominent the social aspect of life at the School is. Manuel Stotz (BSc Economics 2008), who joined many societies and was one of the founders of the Alternative Investment Society, recalls: "LSE sounded absolutely perfect from an academic stance, but I didn't know much about campus life. It was a pleasant surprise to find that societies play such an integral part of student life."

As the student body changes each year, so do its societies. While some have history – the

Mountaineering Club, for example, which was formed in 1945 on the School's return to London from wartime Cambridge – others are newer, but no less popular. The Finance Society, established in 2002, for example, now boasts around 3,000 members, around a third of LSE's student body. But whether formed decades or years ago, what they all have in common is enthusiasm and commitment. All of those who spoke to *LSE Connect* were uniformly passionate about their chosen activities.

For many, societies are a good way to meet like-minded people, and it is clear from talking to past students that the friendships made during this time can be deep and lasting. "The Mountaineering Club was very central to our life at LSE," recalls Denis Greenald (BSc Government 1950), who joined the society as a fresher and was actively involved for ten years. "Ours was the first 'Club' marriage in 1950 [to Gwen (née Guntrip, BA Sociology 1951, MA Sociology 1954, Certificate in Mental Health 1955), another member of the society], and the friendships we made then have survived down the years."

"I was persuaded to run for LSESU Social Secretary by the head of the Democratic Socialist Group," remembers Fiona MacDonald (BSc Social Policy 1991). "We all won our posts, and have spent the last 20 years being friends."

Rex Walford (BSc Econ 1955), who joined the Student Christian Movement (SCM) in 1952, echoes

this sentiment. "Working in the SCM brought lots of opportunities to meet students from other London colleges on working groups and committees... I was glad to be part of those times."

Taking on an active role within a society is also an ideal way to build on old skills and take on new responsibilities. One need only look at the range of activities offered by societies to see the level of professionalism and inventiveness on offer. From hosting lectures with high-profile speakers to organising visits abroad, those in committee roles are able to shape the activities of their society and take on new challenges. Running a society can be time-consuming, as alumnus Jack Maddox (BSc Econ 1957) who was a member of the Jazz Society, attests: "Naturally the demands of music and study sometimes clashed and discipline was necessary to keep the two together."

Despite this, there is no shortage of students willing to step up and take on this additional work. Current undergraduate Geoffrey Chung, president of the Finance Society 2009-10, highlights the professionalism some societies operate under. "We have a clear organisational structure and five divisions that cater to the different needs of our members," he said. "We also produce an online journal and magazine, and organised 75 events in last year's Michaelmas Term alone."

Beryl Carlyle (BA History 1949), reflects on her time as secretary for the History Society: "All this must have helped me in my career as an assistant principal and later principal in the Colonial Office [as well as] when I was involved in official entertaining before Nigerian Independence in 1960."

"I know for sure that my life after *Timeless!* is going to be much better than it was before," writes Siddharth Viswanath, an undergraduate economics student and



producer of this year's global charity show. "I'm far more organised now, I understand the merits of planning much better, and hopefully this will show in my work!"

Charity plays an important role in society life – last year's *Timeless!* raised over £10,000 for its two chosen charities. The annual Raising and Giving (RAG) week is one of the biggest weeks in the LSESU calendar, but events are run throughout the year in support of a variety of different causes and fundraising remains a key priority for many. Fiona MacDonald recalls the time they took the Tequila Society to the University of London Union to throw "the most successful charity event that ULU had ever seen, with thousands of pounds raised for charity."

Former chairman of the United Nations Society Peter Smith (BA Sociology 1960) also highlights the charitable aspect, remembering the society as being "instrumental in setting up the LSE War on Want Society at the School, whereby once a week we had bread and water for lunch, with donations going to the main War on Want charity."

It is clear that many retain a huge affection for their societies long after graduation, and one testament to how well LSE's SU societies manage their business is the fact that many alumni remain connected long after graduating from the School. From speaking at events to providing advice to current students, they continue to give their time and lend their experience where possible to their old societies.

Denis Greenald recalls: "The [Mountaineering] club flourished during the next two decades, with meets in the European Alps and Norway. Expeditions also took place to the greater ranges, the Karakorum in 1956 and the Peruvian Andes in 1963. Veterans of

these years were able to meet with current members at the 21st anniversary of the Club in the Lake District in 1966, and again at the LSE Jubilee in 1995."

Since his graduation, Manuel Stotz has also stayed involved. He tells me he has spoken at the last two Alternative Investment conferences, adding: "I'm not the only one who has maintained links – there are six or seven other alumni who are also interested."

This connection is extremely valuable to current students. Michael Lok, president of the Hong Kong Public Affairs and Social Service Society for 2009-10, who graduates in Law this summer, said: "Something we experimented with was to build up a relationship with the Alumni Group of Hong Kong. I believe that this relationship between the current and the past has been extremely helpful, both in terms of getting advice on progressing forward as well as providing more opportunities for our members."

A common thread with all those who shared their reflections with *LSE Connect* is that the friendships made and experiences gained have continued to enrich people in their careers and personal lives. "I joined the SCM largely by accident", says Rex Walford. "Joining was one of those chance events which, when one looks back, seem to be a key moment in determining the pattern of the future."

Siddharth Viswanath echoes these sentiments: "I really don't want to leave now. I've met some incredible and inspirational people throughout this process. Not just the kind who amaze you with their intelligence but the kind who are so passionate and creative that they really force you to improve yourself in spheres that you would never associate with LSE."

"Being involved in societies really helped develop my confidence and was extremely educational for me," agrees Fiona MacDonald. "It solidified my LSE experience, and made me a proud and engaged alumna." ■



Jess Winterstein is deputy head of press at LSE.

Thanks to all those alumni who got in touch to share their experiences of student society life.

Since this article was written, we learned with great sadness that Rex Walford has died (see www.alumni.lse.ac.uk for a full obituary).