



Why **LSE** is **SPECIAL**

Pinning down what makes LSE distinct or special is an interesting challenge. The School has been seeking to do just that through its Strategic Review – with interesting results.

In the last issue of *LSE Connect* (winter 2012), the new Director of LSE, Professor Craig Calhoun, set alumni a challenge.

“I want to invite you to take part in a major initiative currently underway at the School,” he wrote. “As the new Director I am undertaking a Strategic Review...the starting point of this review is asking just what is most important and distinctive about LSE, and what should be our most basic purposes and goals.”

Alumni were invited to contribute small pieces, of just 300 to 400 words, on what makes LSE distinctive, and we promised to run a selection in the next issue and to put others on the web. Visit lse.ac.uk/LSEConnect where the online version of this article includes links to more of your contributions.

Staff and students were also asked to consider this, and to think about what people would miss if LSE were gone.

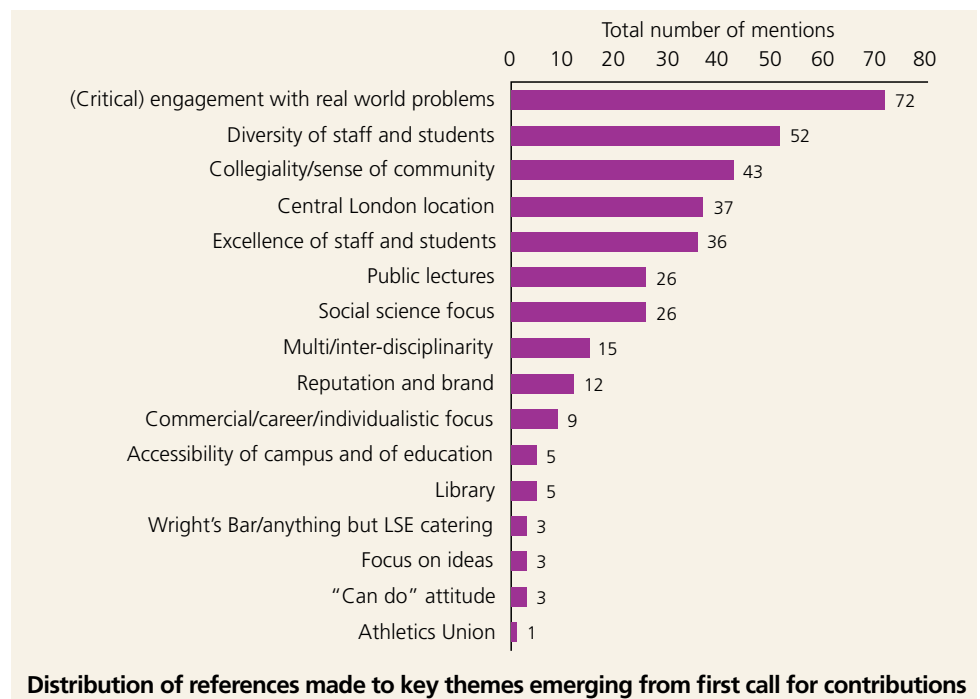
Nearly 200 people responded. The responses came from undergraduates and PhD students, from security guards and professors, from governors and from alumni of every generation. The oldest alumnus was from the class of 1949 and the most recent from the class of 2011.

In all, the responses were creative, wide-ranging, intelligent, witty and in some cases critical. Two were in verse. They showed a remarkable degree of agreement about what makes LSE distinctive. Analysis showed that respondents valued critical engagement, diversity, collegiality and cosmopolitanism.

The chart shows the distribution of themes to emerge. Critical engagement with real world problems surfaced as a dominant theme. “What we teach in LSE is not only ‘to know the causes of things’, it is also to take that knowledge and do good in the

world. Create change,” was the response from an MSc student in Social Psychology.

“There are few places in the world, let alone the UK, where an academic community is so seriously engaged with policy... and where policymakers so





willingly engage with their academic counterparts," echoed a PhD student in Geography and Environment.

Diversity of staff and students was also valued highly. "In one of my classes, I found out that 44 nationalities were represented among the 80 students. The faculty are diverse. This in itself creates a unique environment that is stimulating and challenging at the same time," said an academic from the Department of Management.

"The School is international and yet it retains something of a quintessential British quirkiness and eccentricity," commented a senior academic in the Institute of Psychology.

Excellence was valued by all. As one alumnus put it: "Being an undergraduate at LSE between 1954 and 1957 was a continuous joy, because I was surrounded by people who took ideas seriously. For the first time I met people – even academics – who took my ideas seriously. I found it disconcerting for at least the first year, but nevertheless I knew immediately that this was where I belonged."

A minority of responses (around 5 per cent) were critical. The School was thought to be too commercial, too close to the City and the financial world, too far removed from the intellectual heart of the university ideal, and prone to hubris as a result. Some thought there was too much administration, others thought not enough good administration. Still others felt there was segregation between cultures on campus.

The School's Fabian heritage – to know the causes of things – clearly sits behind everything else that is identified as a special feature. Respondents praised the fact that LSE is not only actively working towards, but also achieving, the mission the School was set up to fulfil: "LSE is a gift from the past to the future," said a senior academic from the Department of Accounting.

The Strategic Review has continued, with further calls for contributions during the Lent term. The results have been shared with alumni on the web (www.alumni.lse.ac.uk/olc/pub/LHE/news/news_45.html) and will feature in a special round-up in *LSE Connect* in December.

What makes LSE distinctive?

A sample of edited responses from alumni:

The intellectual rigour of LSE teaching and research; the abilities, enthusiasm and commitment of staff and students; the possession of a unique and inspiring history; its role as a beacon for the study of the social sciences; the encouragement to consider multi-disciplinary approaches; respect for unorthodox, radical, and alternative thinking; its prominent position in London's enviable array of educational opportunities; and – not least – the awesome but inspiring challenge of being an LSE student.

Brian O'Leary (BSc Econ 1972)

LSE is distinct in many ways. First, is its history and relevance to public policy. Founded by Fabian socialists, it played a leading intellectual role in the development of the Labour Party in the 20th century. In the immediate post-second world war years, these ideas came to fruition in the social-welfare legislation of the Labour Government. Whatever one thinks of these programmes today, they had a profound impact nationally and internationally. Even US President Harry Truman – not a socialist by any means – saw merit in the universal health care aspect of the programme in 1948, but was blocked from pushing a variant of it forward by his opponents in Congress.

Second, despite its history of being a left-of-centre institution, LSE has prided itself on being open to a full range of ideological persuasions in the analysis of social problems. For example, it was the home for many years of the eminent economist Friedrich Hayek, who is considered by many today as the intellectual godfather of the conservative movement. This diversity and the gathering of top academics has made, and continues to make, LSE the world's pre-eminent institution in the social sciences.

Third, LSE has long attracted a broad range of international students, many of whom have risen to top policymaking positions in their respective countries. As a student at LSE in the early 1980s, I felt I was in a mini-United Nations, and I learned enormously from

interacting with students from different parts of the world as I studied international relations.

Fourth, LSE is situated in the heart of London, making student life a very pleasant and exciting experience.

Gregory Aftandilian,

(MSc International Relations 1982)

LSE is a unique place to nurture our sense of purpose and enhance our competence, to pursue the betterment of the world.

Considering the scholarly level and publications of my former classmates at LSE and, more markedly, the nature of verbal and written discussions I have usually held with them – both inside and outside the classrooms – I believe that LSE is distinct because of its ability to attract the most diversified pool of intellectually curious students, who are vehemently interested in learning how to tackle some of the most challenging social and economic problems of the world. In my experience, the academic staff and researchers at LSE solidified that interest and constantly stimulated further theoretical inquiry – especially that which could positively influence policy.

Through exceptional teaching, this intellectual mantra that attracts students and researchers turns the premises of LSE into a very special place, where rigorous thought is put to the test and new enlightening ideas flow.

When looking at the home webpage of top universities in the social sciences, it is common to see that LSE posts some of the most provocative global debates. This portrays how, on many occasions, a research-backed discussion from the curriculum would set off in the classrooms – not always necessarily triggered by the lecturer, but sometimes by students themselves, prudently moderated by the former.

Today, six years after graduating from LSE, I work in a global firm and am thus exposed to travelling to virtually any part of the world. There has not been one country where I have not met a former classmate or an LSE alumnus; and there has not been

one city or community where I have not felt that sense of purpose, fostered at LSE, igniting inspiration and action for making use of practical or influential elements to pursue social and economic development.

LSE left me with an indelible wisdom which I am proud to always have.

Carlos A Canales

(MSc Local Economic Development 2007)

What has made LSE distinct in my experience were the values of social justice and equality that I learned as a young undergraduate in the 1960s and the critical analysis that has informed my thinking then and now.

As a student in the Department of Social Policy and Administration I was fortunate to be taught by innovative professors who inspired and encouraged critical thinking about major social issues. This was the Department whose architects were the founders of LSE – Sidney and Beatrice Webb, whose social science research into the poverty of 19th-century London set the stage for the post-war Welfare State “fathered” by Beveridge. Richard Titmuss, Director, was a Lincolnesque figure whose warmth and intellect inspired his students, and faculty such as Peter Townsend and Brian Abel Smith provided insight, intellectual rigour and a structural analysis that was transformative. This was the LSE shaped by Tawney, Laski and also Oakeshott, among others, and it drew dynamic students from all over the world – a multicultural mosaic and the next generation of post-colonial leaders, intellectuals and academics. The philosophy that informed the Department of Social Policy and Administration in those years was characterised by praxis: that post-war Britain needed citizens who would work for social change in the interests of the collectivity.

Joy Moore *(Diploma Social Administration 1963)*

LSE is a distinctive university both inside and outside the classroom. Inside, LSE teaches core skills: how to be curious and investigate, and how to express ideas, both in writing and orally. These continue to be essential tools for anyone willing to shape our society. The focus on these horizontal skills should be the essential part of what students get from their years at the university.

Outside, LSE provides students with an invaluable experience, based on the diversity of its students and the interaction that the university promotes. This should stay at the core of LSE. It means a rich environment to cultivate ideas, projects, professional ambitions, and learn about the world. Such a cosmopolitan and diverse vision is not easy to acquire elsewhere.

I would argue, however, that LSE has failed in other areas. In particular, even during these last few years, it has been unable to bring the majority of its brightest students outside the traditional professional career paths, mainly represented by consulting and banking.

Most frequently used words

Global, reputation, support, freedom, contemporary, excellence, compact, impact, society, sharing, curiosity, London, international, cosmopolitan, vibrant, engagement, credible, intellectual, unique, ethical, elite, open, liberal, trustworthy, heart, community, radical, British, world-class, rigorous, proud, quirky.

While undoubtedly these are sectors that provide significant professional and economic opportunities, a leading academic institution should be able to prepare its students to seek beyond the normal.

For me, the LSE of the future is one in which entrepreneurial path is encouraged and developed during the years at the institution. And while not having an engineering or a business school may be perceived as a limitation, it could also be seen as an opportunity to approach entrepreneurship in a different way, ensuring that social sciences become a full part of the new technological developments that are shaping our society. Not an easy task, but one which the new Director is perfectly fit to achieve.

I thank you for the opportunity to take part in this important debate.

Miguel Solana *(MSc Information Systems 2001),
vice president, LSE Alumni Association in Spain*

In my opinion, the essential characteristic of scholarship at LSE is that it remains independent and critical of contemporary society, both in Britain and throughout the world. Its criticism should be soundly based on reason and meticulous research, but also on passion. In this connection it is essential that the right balance is achieved between positive and normative research. In my field, accounting (a department at LSE since its foundation), in recent years the emphasis has been too much on positive research, which has the unfortunate effect of tending to endorse the status quo. It is essential that, somewhere in the world, there exists an institution that has the courage, the status and the resources to challenge the status quo, and put forward an independent critical view on what society should be like. LSE is ideally placed to play this role.

John Flower *(BSc Econ 1958)*

For me, what makes studying at LSE distinctive is being surrounded by people who believe in themselves, pursue their dreams and are encouraged to believe in them – an incredibly inspiring and empowering environment for young entrepreneurs.

From what I have experienced, other universities often give their students a pessimistic outlook on themselves and their position in the job market. “You have to do x, y and z in order to be able to find a job.” “You have to change.” The LSE environment, on the contrary, teaches you that you can do anything you believe in: “You can make an impact.” “You can do anything you choose. If

not now, you can learn.” Rather than trying to “squeeze” its students into society it encourages them to shape it!

Of course, this spirit is especially visible in the many events and services LSE offers for students with an entrepreneurial interest. LSE Entrepreneurship is open to all students and even coming from a communication and social psychology-based master’s programme I was able to attend the Entrepreneurship Masterclass Series 2009. I found it to be an extremely useful platform for learning from successful business founders (some of them LSE alumni), exchanging experiences with other students and hearing about ideas they “burn” for.

Eva Marisa Elsäßer

(MSc Social and Public Communication 2010)

Right now the United Nations and national leaders need convincing of a major project to get economies expanding. Why not a project to build inland seas in the vast deserts of this planet? The objective: to moderate global warming and to minimise world flooding from melting ice caps. Australia right now with its 50 degree temperatures and widespread fires would be a prime candidate for a feasibility study. It has huge deserts and plenty of sunshine for solar energy to power water pumps. The technology is available to dig canals as witnessed in the vast open mining projects.

As I approach 80 years it would be great to see a project undertaken, to serve all mankind, that would be greater than the building of the Suez canal, the Panama canal and the great dams. A project that could truly give hope to future generations. The feasibility study and the methods of finance I leave to LSE. God knows there are enough deserts and a growing volume of ocean water.

H K Culham *(BSc Econ 1954)* ■



Claire Sanders is Head of Communications and Public Affairs at LSE and editor of *LSE Connect*.

We welcome letters by post or email to Editor, *LSE Connect*, Communications, LSE, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE. Email: lsemagazine@lse.ac.uk. The editor reserves the right to cut and edit letters.