

# A fresh engagement

The new Director of LSE, **Professor Craig Calhoun**, asks alumni to join him in a quest to define what makes LSE distinctive, and to determine its future direction.

It was wonderful to arrive in London at the beginning of September: it was among the sunniest Septembers on record, all Britain was basking in the glory of the Olympics and above all, I was moving to LSE.


Alumni around Britain and around the world will remember their arrival at the School: learning where everything was, mastering the almost incomprehensible acronyms, making new friends. The thrill of meeting a professor whose work you'd read for years; the frustration when there were two great public events at the same time and you had to choose. I'm delighted to have shared this experience with all of you.

Part of the great pleasure of LSE is the intellectual energy of the place: very smart students stretching their minds, brilliant researchers exploring new ideas. Of course pleasure also comes from the arguments and debates among people with different views, and the gradual growth of common understanding among people who come from widely separated parts of the world.

LSE has changed over the years. It has added new departments and research centres addressing major global issues. It has increased its enrolment – and its fees. It has been changed by shifts in British higher education policy and by growing demand for new kinds of knowledge to make policy, make careers and join in public engagement in a new and tumultuous global era.

LSE is one of the world's most prestigious universities, among the top in ranking after ranking. But just being highly ranked isn't LSE's goal – that's simply an indicator of how well we are doing. The goal remains, as it was for the founders, to make a better society – and to do this by pioneering new knowledge, educating students who become innovators and shape a changing world, and engaging a broader public in debating and understanding the big issues of the day.

LSE isn't just any university. It is *our* university and it is a very distinctive university. It puts the social sciences at the centre and links them to crucial professional fields. It imparts skills but also a critical intellectual perspective. It is amazingly global and it is a force in British society. I could go on ...

**Is there any hope for people with a thirst for knowledge and not capital greed anymore?** Yes, lots of hope and it's crucial to both scholarship and real action, even in the face of greed. 

**Who is the most important person within the School?** The penguin, judging by the number of fans

**Would you repeat the experience of the IPKNYU to increase major collaboration and interdisciplinarity @LSE?** Interdisciplinary engagement is high on my agenda – one of the reasons I came to LSE. Loved IPK.

**What will you miss having moved countries – either institutionally or generally?** Better sandwiches in New York, but it's a pleasant surprise that London is a great place

**What do you think makes a great university teacher?** Love of knowledge combined with love of students, real work being clear and organised, and a sense of humour.

A close-up photograph of a hand holding a small, light-colored, textured object, possibly a piece of fabric or a small animal, against a dark background. The object has a soft, fuzzy texture and is being held gently between the fingers. The background is dark and out of focus.

And I think each of us could go on. In fact, I'd like to ask you to go on. I want to invite you to take part in a major initiative currently underway at the School. As the new Director I am undertaking a Strategic Review. That sounds formal, and the exercise is certainly a serious one; it will determine the direction, shape and size of LSE in years to come. But 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. On this basis, we will set about evaluating how we work and identifying the best possible ways to pursue those goals. This will require creativity as well as material resources. It will be a task for social science analysis based on evidence and also for imagination. But at the centre is this question: what makes LSE special and especially valuable. Why would it matter if LSE disappeared tomorrow?

In true LSE fashion this question has to be answered through discussion and debate, recognising and learning from many different views. I've launched the strategic review in meetings open to all staff and students, in focused discussions of the Council and the Court of Governors, in written letters and in the charge to a special Task Force. I want to ask alumni to join in, and I plan to visit as many alumni associations as possible to hear your views.

In fact, the strategic review grows partly out of discussions I was able to have even before I took office, when visiting alumni in several countries. Alumni were nostalgic and proud; they were supportive and they clearly wanted the School to thrive. But they also asked me repeatedly to help make sure that the School still had a sense of its mission, a clear sense of purpose.

I think we do have a sense of purpose, but we do need to clarify it and make sure that our ways of working are harnessed and co-ordinated to support it. I think LSE is extraordinary and well worth our time, energy and investments. But I also know we work in a turbulent environment and that both preserving what we hold dear and being creative in new ways will demand action that is strategic, not just reactive.

With alumni, as with staff and students, I have begun a learning process that will inform how LSE moves forward over the next several years. We face big questions, including how we respond to changes in financing in the UK, upheavals in Europe, and increased global competition. But the strategic review is not only about how we respond to external pressures (and opportunities); it is about what we want to achieve and how we pursue our goals proactively. It is also about assessing what we do well and what we can do better.

My primary long-term goals are to sustain and where possible enhance LSE's many existing strengths and to focus the School's identity and sense of purpose. These are the bases of the extraordinary global reputation that

LSE enjoys. Building on this basis, I want the School to be outstanding in research, dedicated to offering students an exceptional education, and engaged with public issues – in London, Britain, Europe and the world. Achieving this will require us to set priorities and focus our efforts. We need to make investments ranging from classroom space to research centres. Above all, we need to invest in our people – through new faculty positions and crucially in financial support for students.

I would like to invite alumni to join the debate. Please contribute small pieces, of just 300 to 400 words, on what makes LSE distinctive. We will run a selection in the next issue of *LSE Connect* and put the remainder on the web as part of our debate on this subject.

Beyond this, please stay in touch. I am eager to take questions and share views. Indeed, I'm willing to do this in new ways as well as face to face and through old-fashioned letters. I have already done one live Twitter session, and Dr Sivaramjani Thambisetty offers the views of an academic on that exercise in the column on this page.

I will be holding another session next term. I know that timing is difficult for alumni who live around the world, but I will again make sure that you have the hashtag in advance so that you can supply questions.

I very much look forward to hearing your views and sharing thoughts in the coming years. It's great to be new to LSE. ■

## View of a Twitter debutante

### Dr Siva Thambisetty on tweeting with the Director

Earlier this year the UK Prime Minister David Cameron and I shared something in common – we both started tweeting! While his motivation was his party conference, mine was to admire the spectacle of the new Director of LSE taking questions from his 4,500 followers and anyone else so inclined via Twitter. Asked why he tweets, and what he thought are the benefits of Twitter for academics, Professor Calhoun replied: "encourages brevity". Bearing this in mind, and for those of you who were doing more worthy things between 3 and 4pm on the first day of term, I thought I would briefly highlight aspects of the conversation that are significant and worth mentioning.

Professor Calhoun had already stated his misgivings on the UK policy that saw long queues of international students waiting out in the pouring rain to register with the police. He had done so effectively – with police registration quickly streamlined. But the Director is aware of the continuing need to push back on the squeeze on foreign students and tweeted in response that he is already raising the question with the Prime Minister, relevant ministers and the press. In response to a question by a non-EU student who is struggling to find a job owing to the visa policy, he said: "It is contrary to national interests to have a visa policy that deprives country of talent and energy".

In response to a question from me, Professor Calhoun said that he felt that the need to prioritise raising funds for more scholarships for students will probably be the most satisfying of the [many nagging] challenges to overcome. With respect to poorer students' access to LSE, he said that he would love to see LSE education available to all students on demonstrated [academic] merit. Significantly, Professor Calhoun agreed that universities have an obligation to engage with academic institutions in developing countries, and would like to see more engagement on the lines of LSE's links to Cape Town and the African Initiative.

My favourite tweet, however, was in response to a final-year PhD student who asked for advice on putting her thoughts on paper and finishing her thesis: "Writing is like running, keep up the momentum but bit by bit not in binges." It's hard enough to blog, but an academic who is not afraid to expose his views on Twitter is a breath of fresh air. The use of technology breaks down institutional barriers to communication and can generate real progress by giving greater visibility to compelling challenges.

*Sivaramjani Thambisetty is Regional Champion for India at LSE. Follow her on @SivaThambisetty*

## What makes LSE distinct?

**Please send 300 words to [lsemagazine@lse.ac.uk](mailto:lsemagazine@lse.ac.uk) or write to Editor, LSE Connect, Communications, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE. Contributions will appear on the LSE website.**