

A bit of LSE in action

Virginia Beardshaw always wanted to be an action researcher. Here she reflects on how LSE nurtured her interests and led to a career focused on effecting real-world change.

I came to LSE for its Diploma in Social Administration, which in 1975 was the launch pad for people pursuing careers in social policy and the welfare state. It wasn't just the course itself – I chose LSE because, in the mid-1970s, the School advised governments on all aspects of social policy, pensions, housing and the NHS. Then – as now – it was a hugely influential place, and I had a wish to be a part of that.

My instincts were good: LSE was the place to be. The first days at the School were both stimulating and disconcerting. It's not a typical "campus" university, so in commuting to and from Houghton Street each day students are immersed in real-life, working London.

When I arrived, the department was still feeling the loss of Professor Richard Titmuss, who died a couple of years earlier. But I benefited from Brian Abel-Smith – a former student of Professor Titmuss's – who was hugely influential in shaping health and social welfare in the UK.

I wanted to be an action researcher, conducting analytical work that would have a practical impact on social issues, especially in relation to health and social administration.

One compulsory aspect of the course that benefited me in this regard was a placement I undertook with two classmates. We interviewed predominantly elderly residents in Somers Town by Euston on their need for primary health care. That in itself was an exercise in cultural observation: they would only let the two of us who were female researchers through the door!

Our final report was used by the (then) brand new South Camden Community Health Council. Looking back, I recognise that was a small LSE "moment" in the spirit of Beatrice Webb – we were already producing research with a real-world impact. It also had an impact on me, nurturing my interest in practical health policy, which I have followed through as a career.

After completing my diploma, I campaigned for Health Action International, scrutinising the marketing of pharmaceuticals in developing-world countries before becoming a founder fellow of the King's Fund Institute. I led its first Commission, looking at the health services in London, again using the techniques I developed at LSE. The timing of our report was prescient. A year after we started, William Waldegrave, Secretary of State for Health, commissioned his own enquiry. Our findings heavily influenced the resulting policy. Again, it was a little bit of LSE in action, I hope.

For the past ten years I have been proud to lead I CAN, a charity supporting children with speech, language and communications needs. Its origins aren't a million miles in time or purpose from those of LSE: Octavia Hill, a prominent Victorian social reformer, believed that it was the duty of the more affluent members of society to help the poor and the vulnerable. That sounds familiar! In 1888 she tasked Allen Dowdeswell Graham, a London clergyman, to create something in the same spirit of enterprise for the common good.

I have very personal reasons for my attachment to I CAN and the importance of communication – my children have language disabilities. On a daily basis I see how central the ability to communicate is.

Over the past decade we have achieved an unprecedented focus of attention on the issue of children's speech and communication needs by contributing significantly to the Bercow Review in 2008, which made a series of recommendations to the government. We also launched a social enterprise to help deliver training and resources to a wider network of children, families and schools. I like to think that, once again, it's relevant to LSE, having an impact on society and informing the relevant policy conversations.

In the 2015 New Year's Honours I was appointed CBE – the same day as LSE professor Julian Le Grand was knighted – which I regard as recognition of everyone's commitment and dedication at I CAN. I remember much from the day at Windsor Castle, but one salient moment shines through. My son Laurence asked deadpan: "If you are a 'Commander', where is your fleet?"

In 2010 I became a School governor. Getting involved with the governance of LSE, learning about and supporting essential projects, and meeting fellow governors has been immensely rewarding. I've

reconnected with the School in other ways too. I now attend the wonderful array of LSE public lectures with world, political and thought leaders, free of charge. As governors we often reminisce on our student days, although I've yet to find anyone who remembers the rock cakes in the Refectory in the Old Building. I'm told there was a special secret ingredient, so if anyone has it...

In August I also became the new chair of the LSE Annual Fund, the annual giving programme for alumni. I'm excited about building on the excellent foundations laid by my predecessor, Peter Jones, and the Annual Fund team, and about working to strengthen the School with a network of alumni across the globe whose experiences and careers, like my own, have been in some way shaped by this extraordinary institution. ■

Virginia Beardshaw CBE (Diploma in Social Administration 1975) is chief executive of the children's communication charity I CAN, an LSE governor and chair of the LSE Annual Fund.

