

Ethics Code Consultation

Town Hall Meeting, 23 February 2012

The Ethics Code Consultation Group (ECCG) held an open 'town hall' meeting for all members of the LSE community in the Shaw Library on Thursday 23 February 2012. A number of governors, academics, support staff, and students at different levels attended. The discussion was chaired by Dr Daleep Mukarji, Chairman of the ECCG, and attended by the Director, Professor Judith Rees. Also in attendance from the ECCG were Hazel Johnstone, Simeon Underwood, Janet Hunter, and Alex Peters-Day.

The discussion focussed on two discrete aspects of the proposed LSE Ethics Code. The first was the overall structure of the Code, and the core principles that it is to embed. The second was the Ethical Framework that is supposed to link those principles to detailed individual School policies and procedures.

A number of points were made in the discussion. They are presented here to inform the wider School community, and to prompt further debate on the questions raised:

Structure and Statement of Principles

What do we mean by 'Ethics Code'? How should this document relate to individual policies? How should it fit with the School's Strategic Plan? How should it be implemented? Will there be consequences for non-compliance? Beyond the issue of consequences, how will the new Ethics Committee ensure individuals live by the Code? Can it be summarised briefly? Should staff and students be asked to sign up to it when they join the School? How would it be embedded across the different stakeholder groups?

Are there historical or hypothetical scenarios that the draft Code could be tested against? For example, if someone wanted to donate £5m to the School, but had strong views about what uses the funds could be put to, to what extent would the School be able to accommodate those?

An Ethics Code will only become a reflection of the School's real culture if there is a real stress on leadership at every level. Students used to take the School's motto, *rerum causas cognoscere*, very seriously, so that might be highlighted; the School is about always looking behind what confronts us.

Money and power are very seductive, but the LSE can't exist without access to money or power. Much of what the School does in the area of ethics is very good, for example the detailed Research Ethics Policy, but the financial pressures on the UK HE sector are unlikely to dissipate soon, so there needs to be careful thought about how to handle money matters in particular. The Ethics Code might usefully guide academics to think more broadly about the School's work and its role, to encourage them to get involved in areas they do not normally think about. It should ideally avoid assuming that there are too many situations in which the 'right' answer is obviously 'yes' or 'no'. Engagement is fundamental to what the LSE is, and the definition of engagement should be spelled out, to protect both the institution and individuals.

The LSE values and commitments are more specific to the School than the Nolan principles. Of most importance are the commitments to integrity, intellectual freedom, engagement, diversity, and good governance. Is the Nolan commitment to 'selflessness' really relevant to all staff and students? The School operates a number of individual-level incentives to encourage good work. Nolan is aimed more at trustees and senior office-holders. If transparency is a core value, there is no need to worry about how something will look 'if it gets out'; everything will already be 'out'. There is a difference between ethical conduct and managing the School's reputation, although clearly they are linked.

The School is not a business, although it needs strong business discipline in many areas. It is a complex ferment of individuals with their own convictions, interests, research agendas, etc. This should be upfront. The emphasis should be on the LSE as a community of scholarship rather than as a business to be managed.

Although the School is not a business, it could still do more to consider the value of its own 'brand'; private companies are very good at this, and it informs their decisions about engagement with other organisations. The School has failed to recognise the reasons why people might seek to buy association with it.

On a practical point, few people will read the whole document, so there needs to be a short summary up front.

Ethical Framework

There is no mention in the illustrative draft of LSE Halls of Residence. To what extent will the Code apply to students' interactions in the places where they live?

Financial matters such as procurement and investments should be given greater prominence, since money caused the situation that led to this exercise. There should be a clear statement that any money coming into the School will be used on the School's terms and nobody else's. There was a danger with sponsored research for example that it could have a hidden agenda or could be subconsciously influenced by donor agendas. Some charities never allow donors to name things after themselves, for example.

Leadership and governance should be the first section to highlight its importance and its impact on the other areas.

There are tensions between some of the areas, for example between intellectual freedom and community relations, or between excellence and engagement. Engagement should be based clearly on the School's principles so as to avoid the accusation of compromise.

Should there be a section on staff recruitment and disciplinary procedures? In addition should there be more detail on areas not directly under academic control such as LSE Enterprise? Should it be a stated responsibility of academics to inform themselves about what is going on in other parts of the School? LSE Enterprise has been praised for having its own ethics code, and it has agreed to be bound by the LSE Ethics Code.

The ECCG will take suggestions on membership of the permanent Ethics Committee if submitted to ethics@lse.ac.uk.

There should be some reference to a whistleblowing procedure in the Framework.

Committees might be asked to highlight particular ethical quandries they had faced in the past. More might be done to ensure committees take the consultation seriously - a joint meeting of committee chairs, for example.

There is a balance to be struck between FOI requirements and the independence of academic research. Should the School explicitly support the right of staff to think and work independently?

The notes from this meeting should be put online.