

# Lecturer's blog sparks free speech row

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Telling prospective students that the academic staff are too busy with research to have their minds on teaching is considered a little unconventional at a university open day.

Erik Ringmar, a senior lecturer in government, went on to tell sixth formers thinking of applying to the London School of Economics (LSE) that the real teaching was done by PhD students. The in-class student experience was no better than they would get at the far less prestigious London Metropolitan University - in fact they might see more of the academic staff there.

 In fact his remarks were part of a passionate plea for a "great institution" and he went on to tell his audience in March that as LSE student "you will be a part of this extraordinary multicultural collection of bright and fun and ambitious people".

But his comments proved too much for some colleagues, especially when he posted his lecture on his blog. The convenor of the department of government, George Philip, reprimanded Dr Ringmar and ordered him to remove defamatory material from his blog.

Dr Ringmar was also reprimanded by Sir Howard Davies, the LSE director, who said his blog was damaging to the school. "I think you should reflect very carefully on your behaviour which I find most disappointing," he told Dr Ringmar in an email reported by the student newspaper, the Beaver.

The issue was not about freedom to blog but whether someone could "publicly abuse his employer and colleagues without consequences", added Sir Howard.

A terse statement from the LSE today said: "Following complaints made by staff about the content of Dr Ringmar's lecture to the open day, and further complaints about offensive and potentially defamatory material in Dr Ringmar's blog (at that time connected to the LSE website) that came to light after the lecture, Dr Ringmar received a reprimand from his convenor. We note that Dr Ringmar appears to have removed the objectionable material from his blog and regard that matter as closed."

Dr Ringmar accused the LSE authorities of "total hypocrisy" saying the instruction to close down his blog went against freedom of speech. "I feel very intimidated - they are trying to bully me".

He said he had refused to use the official PowerPoint presentation at the open day but "there was no intention to slag off the school or say anything destructive or bad".

He added: "The big story here concerns freedom of speech at a time of the commercialisation of education."

Despite the LSE statement, Dr Ringmar said he had not removed material from his blog, including a posting questioning why so few foreign staff were promoted to senior academic posts.

An LSE spokeswoman responded: "Dr Ringmar has had a number of different versions of the lecture on his blog and the latest version is not the lecture that was given."

Dr Ringmar, who has received numerous messages of support from students, says in his latest posting: "It seems this blog no longer is officially banned by the government department at the LSE. This is very good news of course. I'm glad the people responsible

have come to their senses. Three cheers for the powers-that-be! What great powers-that-be they are!

"However there is still an investigation which is looking into my crimes and misdemeanours, and powerful members of my department and the school still insist on their right to censor particular entries in this blog.

"If I overstep the boundary I can be called in for reprimands. This is not free speech! A university which publicly endorses free speech while secretly censoring it is hypocritical. The LSE must stand up for the principles it claims to believe in."

In his lecture to prospective students Dr Ringmar said: "I know we are expected to 'sell' our programme to you. An undergraduate is today worth £3,000 and there is competition between universities for this money. Unfortunately I don't have a sales pitch. In fact, I don't even have a PowerPoint presentation.

"However, I will try my best to talk truthfully about the student experience at the school as I have come to understand it. When it comes to a great institution such as ours, the truth is always the best recruiting tool."

But he warned them: "If you want a high-flying academic career you have to publish. This means that the first-class teachers usually will have their minds elsewhere than on undergraduate teaching. They might be away on conferences, and even if they are not absent in body, they may be absent in mind. This is too bad of course. In fact it could indeed be that students have more opportunities for interaction with faculty members at lesser institutions - like the London Metropolitan University, say - where research is less heavily emphasised. I don't know."

He added: "What I do know is that the in-class student experience often differs very little between the LSE and a place such as the London Metropolitan University."

But the PhD students who did the teaching in small classes were in a league of their own - "very hard-working, conscientious, and approachable," he said.

The reason for choosing LSE rather than London Met was the students, said Dr Ringmar.

"We are able to recruit some of the smartest, most interesting, intelligent, rich, successful and all-round attractive people on the planet. That is, we are able to attract people just like you!"

This "extraordinary multicultural collection of bright and fun and ambitious people" was drawn from all over the world. "This is why the official language of the school is broken English. Personally I speak this language perfectly fluently," said Swedish-born Dr Ringmar.

