

my Open Day speech

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Dear prospective students and parents!

Welcome to the LSE and to the Government Department. My name is Erik Ringmar and I'm a lecturer in the department. This is my email. I'm writing it clearly so that you can contact me after this event if you have any further questions about anything I said.

Let me begin by asking what your status is. Have you applied to the LSE? Have you been accepted? Are you planning to apply? Planning to apply? Ok, very good! I'll give you a brief introduction to the School and to the Department. I know others may have done this today, but I'll do it again. My way.

We are a very large department. Comprising almost 50 academic staff members. We cover all fields of the study of politics — from political theory, administration, to comparative politics and area studies. We also cover a number of different methodological approaches. We don't do international relations, however, that is a separate department here at the LSE.

As far as the undergraduate programme is concerned, I am in some ways not a very good person to talk about it. I have been responsible for undergraduate courses for some 10 years by now, but I am not in charge of the programme as a whole and there is a lot about various course offerings that I don't know. Please look at the LSE web pages if you have detailed questions regarding individual courses or about the requirements of admission.

I know we are expected to 'sell' our programme to you. An undergraduate is today worth 3000 pounds 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 institutions such as ours, the truth is always the best recruiting tool.

LSE as intermediary

Let's begin by thinking about the School's geographical location. We are located half-way between Westminster and the City of London. The City, with all the banks and financial institutions — let me see, somewhere over there [pointing] — and Westminster — somewhere over there [pointing] — which of course is the centre of political power, with the Houses of Parliament and various ministries

and government offices.

What we have is the centre of financial power over here and the centre of political power over there. The LSE is located in the middle of these two centres of power. We are not part of either, but we are trying to understand both of them. We are studying politics and economics and the relationship between them — we are the London School of Economics and Political Science after all. What location could be more suitable for such an institution?

It is perhaps interesting to note that we share this location with two other institutions — the judicial system and the media. Around us we have a number of inns of court, lawyers offices, and the High Court. But we also have Fleet Street, the traditional centre for newspapers in London. Like the LSE, the judicial system and the newspapers are also studying politics and money, dealing with the conflicts they generate, and trying to hold them accountable to the wider society.

The LSE's particular contribution is that we study politics and economics in a scientific fashion. We aspire to talk truth both to political and to economic power.

the LSE as refuge

The LSE is of course one of the premier educational institutions of this country. It is *not* a business school as some people think. It is a social science university. There are departments of economics, finance and political science, but also many other social science disciplines — anthropology, sociology, social psychology, etc. In fact many of the most famous of the professors of the School have been in these disciplines.

Much of the success of the School can be explained in terms of its ability to attract refugees. There have been successive waves of refugees coming to the School, bringing their own perspectives with them. People fleeing intellectual, political or cultural persecution elsewhere.

The first generation were the people who fled from the old educational institutions of this country — Oxford and Cambridge. There, in the nineteenth-century, a typical undergraduate education consisted of things like theology and ancient Greek. At Oxford and Cambridge you studied ancient Greek for three years and then you went off to work in a bank in the City! The rationale for this bizarre curriculum was that the classical authors of Antiquity would teach you how to judge the world. You would not learn anything about the world, but you would become better at making decisions.

This was a rationale which the founders of the LSE — Beatrice and Sidney Webb — totally rejected. Their time — the late 19th century — was a period of great social upheaval — the industrial revolution, urbanisation, the rise of a working class. There were new *social* demands — there were *social* problems — that very urgently needed a solution. Studying this *social* question was what a university should be doing. The School was set up by people of a similar persuasion who came to London as refugees from the stifling intellectual atmosphere of Oxbridge.

Another wave of refugees came in the 1930s — Germans, Austrians, other Continental types — fleeing persecution in Nazi occupied Europe. This was when famous names like Karl Popper, Friedrich von Hayek and Karl Mannheim came to be associated with the School.

And the refugees continue to come to this day. We still attract people who are trying to get away from politically oppressive regimes — in China, for example, or in the United States. We also attract people who find it impossible to survive in the often stifling intellectual environment of other university systems. This is why we have such a lot of both students and staff from other European countries — Italians, Germans, even some Swedes.

As a refuge for refugees, the LSE has been able to get the smartest, most interesting, people. Both students and staff. The intellectual misfits, creative minds, the round plugs not suitable for square holes. This more than anything explains our intellectual power.

an elite institution

The LSE is often referred to as an ‘elite’ institution. What does that mean? In a way the elitism follows from what I just said. The School is lucky enough to be able to pick the very best scholars and the very best students. Then we put the two together in the same place and make the scholars teach the students.

This is a great idea, of course, but also one that in practice may be difficult to realise. After all, the greatness of a scholar is measured in terms of output — that is, research. It is more than anything the number of books and articles written that matters to academic promotions. 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.

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. This may surprise you but it something students tell me. Instinctively I rebel against this conclusion, but I have come to believe that the students who make this point are correct.

Think about it! The kinds of courses taught at undergraduate level are pretty much the same everywhere you go. The courses use the same kinds of reading lists, with the same kinds of books, set the same kinds of exam questions ... The lecturers too are not that different from each other. This is easily explained. Often after all we went to the same universities.

I have a friend at the London Metropolitan University who I did my PhD with. He is a very charismatic person. I cannot really, hand on my heart, say that I know that I'm a better lecturer than him. Most likely we say more or less the same things in our lectures. And he is funnier.

There are of course obvious exceptions to this rule. We have a number of scholars who are world experts in their fields and who also happen to be outstanding lecturers. In our department we have people like John Gray, Anne Phillips and Sumantra Bose. However, I cannot promise you that all world-famous writers necessarily are equally outstanding performers.

What I can promise is that our 'occasional teachers' are in a league onto themselves. These are the people in charge of your classes. The people you will interact with most closely. The lecture halls may be filled with hundreds of students, and of course it's impossible for the lecturers to learn your names. But the classrooms are small and you interact with your class teachers very closely indeed. They will talk to you and you will talk to them. They may even remember your names! The class teachers are our own PhD students and since we are able to get great PhD students, we have great class teachers. They are all very hard-working, conscientious, and approachable.

the student body

This may in some ways sound like a con, and some LSE students do indeed end up thinking so. They are disenchanted with the 'elite institution'-label and wonder what all the fuss is about. They prefer something less elite and more approachable and perhaps they even end up transferring to places like the

London Metropolitan University. I remember this reaction very clearly from my own time as a student at another elite institution — Yale University in the United States.

Let me suggest to you why transferring down would be a mistake. What makes the LSE unique not only in Britain but in the world as a whole — and into a vastly different kind of institution than all of its local competitors — is the quality of its student body. 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!

The Greek prime minister met his wife here. I had their daughter in one of my classes. You know how the Turks are competing with the Greeks? Well, now the Turkish elites are sending their sons and daughters to be educated here. Not to be outdone, the LSE is filled with lots of Mexicans, Singaporeans, Nigerians, Norwegians, Canadians, Lithuanians and Laps.

As an LSE student you will be a part of this extraordinary multicultural collection of bright and fun and ambitious people. These will be your friends and peers; you'll make girl and boyfriends among them. They are you! And for the rest of your life you will be a part of a network of LSE alumni spreading out across the globe.

Great American universities like Harvard and Yale may pride themselves in their multiculturalism, but they know little about it. At Yale we were some token foreign students in a corner of the classroom, but the majority of the students were regular, all-American, kids. This is not the case at the LSE. There may be more English students here than others, but we don't do 'minorities,' we are all minorities of some kind or another. Everyone is included, no one cannot take part.

This is why the official language of the School is broken English. Personally I speak this language perfectly fluently.

In fact the faculty is just about as diverse as the students — in terms of national origin, religious persuasion, even sexual proclivities.

Sometimes I like to think of the LSE as a secular version of the Vatican State. You know, the Vatican is physically located in Rome but it really belongs to the entire world. The LSE is the same. We are physically based in London, but we are really a world institution.

a rite of passage

A university education is in many ways a rite of passage, from childhood to adulthood. And no doubt the most important things that you learn at a university have nothing to do with your classes. Rather, it's about learning to take care of yourself; learning to cook for yourself, clean your clothes yourself, not to drink too much.

A particular problem is self-discipline. There is very little supervision at university. You are suddenly on your own, very far away from you mother and father. At the university you are suddenly free, you can do what you like! We have a system of tutors of course. A tutor is your personal contact among the faculty members, a resource students can use to the extent that they want to. If they don't want to, that's fine. Some of my tutees come to see me very rarely indeed. They clearly think they can take care of themselves. They might be right about this, or wrong, but either way there isn't much I can do about it. I certainly cannot make them study.

What this means is that all discipline has to be self-discipline. You have to learn to organise your life — including how to organise your studies. This may be a problem when all the exams are at the end of the year. Students can be left with the impression that they don't have to study until April or May. In the first year in particular, the marks of students tend to suffer as a result of this impression. It is often only by the third year that students have mastered the art of mastering themselves, and their marks improve radically as a result.

There are of course good reasons why all the exams are at the end of the year. Above all it allows us to take the marking very seriously. We set up an elaborate system for making and marking exams, and exam-marking is one of the most time-consuming aspects of the life of an LSE academic. Still, from a student's point of view, end-of-year exams may be a problem.

The multicultural atmosphere of the LSE can also be a problem. It could be that you aren't used to hanging out with a lot of foreigners and that you find it difficult in various ways. It could also be that you don't like life in London. I had a student a few years back, a guy from Yorkshire somewhere. He clearly missed his mother's cooking, didn't take to London, and after one term he went back home. I think he made the right decision. If multiculturalism is not for you, don't come here!

making a career for yourself

Going to the university is a matter of starting to make a career for yourself. Of

setting yourself up to make money and climb up social ladders. Fair enough. We all want to make something out of our lives and we all need some way to make money.

To make a career for yourself means above all that you need to find someone who can employ you. Universities are said to be good for this purpose, and I suppose they are. There is no doubt that a university degree makes you more employable.

At the same time it may be difficult to explain — to your mother perhaps — what the point is of what you have chosen to study. What is political science *for*? Meaning, what kind of a job can you get once you graduate? Clearly, to study politics at a university is *not* to learn any particular technique or to master a given body of data. For this reason it may be difficult to present yourself to a future employer and claim to know any particular thing that he or she might find useful. To study financial accounting, say, may be a lot more sensible. Here you learn stuff that is directly applicable. You become a professional in a way to don't become as a student of politics.

What we teach you is instead more than anything *how to think*. How to analyse problems, situations, and how to act under conditions of risk and uncertainty. In all of our courses what we do is to present you with ideas and to ask you to dissect them, take a stand in relation to them, to think for yourself.

Learning how think, analysis, is of course something that you'll have a great use for regardless of where you end up working. Not surprisingly our graduates invariably go on to have exciting, unpredictable, successful careers. This is not always the case with those more sensible types who study financial accounting. Let's fact it, accountants are the new proletariat of global capitalism!

At the same time, let's have no illusions about what is involved here. Many employers don't actually trust the university to convey the kind of information they approve of and prefer instead to teach their staff themselves. Often of course this makes a lot of sense. What you need to know as an employee in a company is to a large extent practical, hands-on, stuff which universities can't teach you. Not even the LSE. What this means is that much of what you learn at the university is pretty useless in career terms.

Why then are employers interested in university trained staff? It's simple, and it has to do with the way in which universities act as a sorting device.

Consider how difficult it is for employers to find the best people. What employers want are bright and very competitive young men and women who are prepared to subject themselves to hours and hours of mindless exercises under stressful

conditions. How can they find these people? Where are they? Obviously, they let the universities select them for them. Picking the best students from a university, these are the kinds of people they get.

In some countries, such as Japan, this rationale is next to explicit. You are *not* supposed to learn anything at all at the university, only compete. As LSE graduates you will be a part of this logic, whether you like it or not. You will all play your respective parts in perpetuating the British class system, or the class system of whatever country you happen to be from. This too is a meaning of the term 'elite' institution.

What can you do about it? Not very much of course. Except that you can stand up for the things that we actually did teach you. You can stand up for the content of your education and not just the form. The ideas, the insights, the thoughts and the dreams. You can stand up for a human, and humane, way of living; the sheer joy of thinking and of exploring.

Employers may try to take these basic pleasures away from you. In fact, I know they will. But together we will insist on their importance. As an LSE student we will make sure that these lessons stay with you for life.

questions and answers

I'm sorry I haven't been able to go into any details as far as our courses are concerned, and the requirement for being accepted, and all that. As I said, I don't actually know much about any of this. However, all the information you need is on the web page. Are there any questions?