

57 years after the Robbins Report: teaching and research at the LSE – Part 1 of the podcast

Lee-Ann Sequeira: Hello and welcome to the Common Room, a series of podcasts by the LSE higher education blog. I'm Lee-Ann Sequeira, your host for this podcast. Today we will be discussing the teaching-research nexus - the relationship, and balance between teaching and research in academia. What are the tensions and complementarities and how can academics successfully navigate this connection?

I am an academic developer at the Eden Centre for Education Enhancement and the editor of the LSE Higher Education Blog. This is a topic that is particularly relevant as research-rich education is one of the strands of the LSE 2030 strategy and it's also related to several blog posts on the LSE HE blog around the value of higher education, precarity, the student experience, government regulations etc.

To discuss these issues and share their own personal experiences, we have with us Professors Dilly Fung and Simon Hix. Dilly is the Pro-director for Education at the LSE and Professor in Practice at the LSE School of Public Policy. Simon is the Pro-Director for Research at the LSE and the Harold Laski Professor of Political Science in the Department of Government. They're both very well known in their fields, having published papers in leading journals, written books, advised cross-sector organisations, and government committees, and can be heard and seen providing expert commentary in multiple fora. Welcome, Dilly. Welcome, Simon. Thank you for being with us today.

Simon Hix: Thanks.

Dilly Fung: Hi, good to be here.

LS: Great. One of the things we'd like to start off with is looking a bit at the history of the LSE with respect to research and teaching. So, Lionel Robbins, the noted LSE economist and chair of the committee that produced the Robbins Report in 1963, was unequivocal in his support for teaching - that teaching could be seen and should be seen on par with research. This was one of the key recommendations of the Robbins Report.

In 2020, research remains in the ascendancy, though there is greater importance being given to education over the last few years. In the span of 60 years, how did we get here - with the balance considerably swinging towards research? Simon, you've been at the LSE for 23 years. You did your undergraduate degree here, your master's degree here. Is it fair to say you probably have the LSE in your DNA, if I might put it that way? How would you explain the shift?

SH: I wouldn't necessarily characterise it as a shift. I think there's been a rise in research quality and research excellence and increased funding for research in that period. When I was an undergraduate here back in the 80s, it was clear that academics were far more interested in research than teaching. I actually think today, academics here at LSE take teaching far more seriously than they did back then.

I think the real challenge for us now is not necessarily where the attention lies, I think we have top-notch academics who are outstanding researchers and also focusing on outstanding teaching. The challenge for us is to think about how we bring those two things together. I think that's the new challenge going forward rather than seeing it as a trade-off between the two.

LS: What would you say about the balance at the school though? Is there still a considerable slant towards research? Is that reflected in things like the structure, the promotions, the way we recruit, what's rewarded, the school's reputation?

SH: I think if you talk to academics, and I still carry on teaching first-year undergraduates, and I always have carried on teaching throughout, from the point of view of the academics, if you actually look at their workloads, it's quite clear that the teaching takes a huge chunk of their time and effort - teaching undergraduates, Master's, preparation for that teaching, meeting with students as a mentor, supervising research, supervising dissertations ... So in terms of workloads, it's absolutely clear that our colleagues feel that a large chunk of their work is dedicated towards teaching. But it's true that in terms of recruitment, we are primarily focused on research quality and we're looking for the best and most outstanding researchers in the field when we're recruiting them. We compete globally for the best academics. There I think it's about competing over quality of researchers.

You actually don't know when you're often appointing relatively junior colleagues ... (And overwhelmingly our appointments are at the junior level and I think they should be at the junior level because I think for a range of reasons - the next generation is always better than the previous generation; of course, there's far more greater gender and ethnic diversity with the next generation coming forward; plus, you're getting a whole new talent pool bringing new ideas to LSE, so I think we should carry on recruiting at the junior level.) ... and at that level, you haven't got a lot of teaching background or experience to go on. I think it's more appropriate that we take into account teaching quality in the promotions process, rather than in necessarily the appointment process when we're appointing essentially our tenure-track faculty. Dilly might disagree. Dilly and I actually haven't talked about this particular issue.

LS: Great, well, this is a good opportunity for that. Thank you. So Dilly, if I may come to you now, and say, this may be your second year at the LSE, but you've taught at and led education development units and programmes of educational change at several research-intensive universities in the UK. So one, would you concur with Simon in the time you've been here, and would you say the situation at the LSE mirrors what's happening in the sector?

DF: Very good questions. To pick up on Simon's points, I do agree with Simon that we have many individual colleagues across the school who are both great researchers and very committed to student education. It's a great joy for me to move around the LSE and meet many colleagues from different disciplinary backgrounds who I think that description would apply to. However, I think I would distinguish somewhat between the positions of individual people and the systemic processes that affect issues of status and opportunity.

I've done some research with my colleague, Claire Gordon, just a few years ago into, for example, the Russell Group in the UK, the research-intensive universities and the

situation there with regard to reward recognition and status for educators vis-a-vis researchers, if you like, or academics who are predominantly employed and promoted because of their research profile. From the evidence of that study and many other related studies, we have seen that there are many individuals who consider themselves to be scholars, who are academics who often are involved in research of some kind, who nevertheless want to really commit to education as a priority, and indeed in their career, to become education leaders, and have seen systemic barriers to recognition of (a) - the value of that focus in their work and (b) - technically opportunities for promotion and reward. Just to finish that particular point, if you just look at how people are promoted to the very senior roles in our universities, particularly in our research-intensive universities, there is a variation. If you look, for example, across the Russell Group, and indeed more widely across Europe, in the research-intensive universities, for example, you see that the vast majority of people who are appointed to those very senior leadership roles, Vice-Chancellors and the like, are almost always research stars and people who have come through that recognition through research.

So my work, I'm sure we'll have more opportunities to talk about this. My work has been very much on trying to establish and develop much more nuanced descriptions of what research and education are and the way in which they relate, so that we can understand the contribution that individuals have made in a much more nuanced and contextualised way.

LS: Great, thank you for that. Moving on to something that has come up in quite a few at the LSE and that's about the tensions and complementarities, something you've already referred to Dilly. What do you see as one of the key tensions and one of the key complementarities in engaging in research and teaching as an academic? So preferably at a school level, but even if you want to talk about something that's sectorally relevant or even internationally relevant.

SH: Dilly, you want to go first on this one?

[laughter]

DF: Yes, okay. I'm quite happy to respond to that. I would say that ... Just picking up tensions, first of all. I think there are tensions that are both personal for individuals and institutional - operational, organisational tensions. I think for individuals it's well understood that every individual academic, educator, researcher, has only so many hours in a week and we all know how important it is to get work-life balance right. We're really committed at LSE to improving wellbeing among staff as well as among students. It's very easy when you've got multiple priorities, like being a great researcher, but also wanting to be a great educator to find that the hours that you have to work every week just impossible because you don't want to let anybody down. You want to really do a great job across the piece.

From an individual point of view, they can come and we've seen that very much in the research, in the data that we've gathered through interviews, through focus groups that they can absolutely come that experience where people just say, "I cannot do everything." We have to prioritise. We have to understand what each individual in their given employment context realistically should be being asked to achieve, but looking at it from an organizational point of view, how do we put

together teams of people who are collectively achieving what the institution needs to achieve - great research and great education without putting too much undue pressure on any one individual.

So this is where leadership and our great heads of department can take a real lead in each of their departments to get the balance right. And where also there are opportunities as we've taken at LSE to introduce more specialist roles such as what we call our Education Career Track (ECT) role, which goes all the way up to a professorial title as it were but with a particular education focus. The balance between role types and what we're asking any individual to do is really important.

You mentioned also complementarities if you like. You started off by talking about the relationship between research and teaching. I very particularly in work that I've done, for example, in my book, *A Connected Curriculum for Higher Education*, very particularly say: don't let's talk about research and teaching; let's talk about research and education, because what we used to do in the past, we used to say: what is the relationship between research and teaching?" Then we used to individualise it all the time. Then we would come up with aspects of the relationship between research and teaching, which were what we used to call research-led teaching. We would then be a bit reductive in our thinking about the relationship by saying: if I'm thinking about the relationship between research and teaching, my focus should be on can I teach the things that I research about and can I keep students up to date with my latest research?"

It's a fabulous thing to do. However, what students really benefit from is a whole educational infrastructure programme designed – the course is designed, the way in which assessments are designed, the way in which a community of scholars can engage with one another within a department - that whole educational design piece can lead to a situation where students really feel connected with research, really feel connected with researchers, but it goes much beyond the individualised articulation of "I am a researcher, I'm a teacher? How can I put those things together?" It's about a more organisational, holistic way of thinking. What does a really great education look like in the 21st century for all of our amazing students?

LS: That's wonderful. That's interesting. If I understand correctly, you feel that moving beyond this articulation of research and teaching - the research-teaching nexus, you see that there are greater complementarities at the possibly meso-level for research and education that result in greater benefits for the education. Thank you. That's great to hear.

I'm possibly thinking about it more from an academic's point of view. How does finding this balance or complementarities, you mentioned research-led teaching, how easily does research flow into teaching from an academic's point of view or education? Because yes, when you're looking at it at a programme level, it's beyond teaching.

DF: Sure. I'm sure Simon will have a good answer to this. But my own view is that there is a lot from individual to individual. So some academics can very easily see that immediate relationship between their research and the teaching that they have, and that will often happen when academics perhaps are teaching on Master's programmes, which includes some real specialist areas (and of course, with PhD

students, with doctoral students as well), specialist areas that they feel have a very close synergy with their own research. I think that's true. I think there are others depending on context who, maybe just for practical reasons of having to deliver a curriculum, as it were, are being asked to teach in areas that are not close to their own research, and so they're having to stretch that relationship and maybe think about it in a rather different way. I'm sure Simon has some thoughts about this.

LS: Thank you. Simon, yes.

SH: A few things. I agree a lot with what Dilly has said there. I'll talk about the education side in a classroom in a sec. The first thing, I think, to add to what Dilly said is about the tension we face here. The external environment in which we operate as a higher education institution and the careers of our academic faculty. Our academic faculty are our core resource, that's why students want to come here. It's why we get our research funding. Keep maintaining world-class academic faculty is the one thing we have to carry on being able to do at the LSE.

There's two really difficult external challenges for us: one is British-based and one's global. The British one is an external regulatory environment of the REF and the TEF. This is the one part of government not talking to another part of the government in that you've got the REF is saying, 'We're going to reward universities for outstanding research and only for outstanding research,' and the TEF is saying, 'We're going to reward universities for outstanding teaching, not education, outstanding teaching.'

The universities then have these external incentives on them. Dilly is in charge of the TEF. I'm in charge of the REF. Monitoring on the REF, the incentive structure is to produce world-class academic research papers and books in top journals and to spend as much time and effort doing that so we can carry on doing that. And the TEF is to say, we need to spend more time and attention in the classroom, providing feedback, marking, assessing, thinking about curriculum, meeting with students and so on. But there's a limited number of hours in a day and facing that external regulatory environment, what a lot of universities are doing is dividing up their academic careers into people who are teaching-based people, and people who are research-based people. Ironically, we're heading away from Robbins' idea because of this regulatory environment, which is forcing both within universities, and I fear between universities, a division in academic careers, between people who are primarily researchers, who do a bit of teaching, and people who are primarily teachers who might do a bit of research. We have created the Education Career Track at LSE and a career structure for that, but I do worry about this being a schism within an academic discipline. I think this is an unintended consequence of where this regulatory environment is pushing us.

Now, add to that a global academic job market that we operate in. In that global academic job market, we spend a lot of our time fighting off offers from other top universities for our top faculty, and we want to hold on to them. Of course, this is having a dramatic effect on salaries. There's some difficult gender dimensions to that as well but it does mean that our top research stars, what gets you those jobs at Stanford and Princeton and Harvard and those offers from those places is being a world-class researcher, not being a world-class teacher. I might not like that, Dilly

might not like that, but that, unfortunately, is the world in which we live in. That's the world in which our senior world-class academic faculty are living in.

So if we say to them, 'It's all about you getting outstanding teaching scores. Why are you not getting teaching scores and you need to spend more time in a classroom?' They will say, 'Thanks, I'm off to Stanford.' We need to be very careful about how we balance this. I think we do. I think there has been a renewed emphasis on education here. I think that's really important. I fully support that.

I also think it's worth bearing in mind that we actually have three different career structures at LSE now. We have the mainstream if you like, the core academic tenure track faculty, which is both research and teaching contract. We have the ECTs, which is primarily teaching contract but doesn't preclude research, and we have research contracts. If anything, it's the researchers that are on research-only contracts who certainly feel like they're second or third-class citizens in this place.

I want to just correct in a sense a little bit of the sense that there's all this focus on research, which doesn't feel like that if you're on a temporary research contract in one of my research centres for example because they say, 'We're second-class citizens compared to your core academic faculty who are the stars' because they have both research and teaching in their contracts. When it comes to then is thinking about bringing research and teaching together in the classroom - it's been a joy actually to work alongside Dilly in this aspect because I came into this role with a commitment that we should try to bring together much closer research and education. I've been teaching for a long time, 23 years at LSE and before that, I was at Brunel University - and all the way along I've tried to think about creative ways to actually get students involved in doing their own research. Whether that was first-year undergraduates, final-year undergraduates, master's students, executive-ed students, I always thought that it's so critical that students experience what it's like to do a piece of their own research. No matter how small, no matter how large, because you cannot be, I think, a proper consumer of research and advanced research in the social sciences unless you've actually personally experienced what it's like to do some research. I think that's really critical and we should make that part of our core USP at the LSE as a world-leading research institution.

DF: I agree with that. Absolutely.

LS: Great. That, thank you, Simon. That's quite interesting that you focused on relatively, not relatively, they are structural kind of issues. Also, this idea of second-class citizens and researchers feeling that way because that's often the rhetoric we hear on the teaching side as well. Interestingly, the division of labor that has come across in a false schism as you say. So hopefully as we talk about this and we discuss these issues, we are able to provide some insights into, as you've already done, how we might look at approaching these things as well as what it's meant to you in your careers.

To talk about the next question, which is drawing on your personal experience. How did you navigate this research-teaching nexus in your respective careers?

SH: I mean, I've always of course on a standard academic-type contract had a teaching role. I mean, I love teaching. I find it really exciting. I also find it helps with

the research in terms of generating new ... If you actually have to teach research and teach cutting-edge research, not just your own research, other people's research, you start to learn what some of the key aspects, key takeaway points, key insights are much better than actually having to just read it yourself.

I also think that what I find most exciting in a sense, my stage of my career, I like teaching first-year undergraduates and Exec. Ed. (Executive Education). Partly because they're both bright-eyed and bushy-tailed! The first-year undergrads are so excited by the opportunity to learn about new knowledge, new ideas, and new things. The same with Exec. Eds. In a sense, I find it much easier to be research-led teaching almost at that level because then you're able to really introduce new innovative ideas about how to teach, what you're teaching, why you're teaching it, and how research works with that. All the way along when I've taught, I've always taught a mix of first-year type intro courses and more advanced level courses. And particularly in the more advanced level courses, I've always tried to have research as part of that teaching. For example, a course I used to teach here at LSE was on EU politics to Master's students. One of the things we did, and I think it was one of the first to do that is they had to do a piece of research as part of this course. What they had to do was write an analytic narrative about the passage of a piece of EU legislation. They had to go and collect the documents, interview people and tell a story about the passage, why it ended up where it did, what the preferences of the different actors were, applying some of the analytical tools they learned, some game theory and things like that they learned on the course to really see how actually some of the research they will only really applied in practice to a series of case studies.

LS: If I can just come back with another question to you, Simon. Looking at your career, casting an eye back if you will, has there been a time when you had to make a decision and prioritise either research or teaching?

SH: All the way along I have to be honest and say the priority has been research, but that doesn't mean there hasn't also been an effort to really deliver excellent education as best I could. But primarily if there ever had to be a trade-off, it would be the time spent preparing teaching that would suffer. I think that's a challenge a lot of top researchers have. Particularly when you're working collaborative projects, you've got to turn around research for collaborative projects with tight time tables or with data analysis, it doesn't work out and you've got to keep at it and spend time doing it and at various points in my life pulling all-nighters to get things done to deliver on research projects or grants or collaborative work.

Apart from the sleepless nights before lectures to first-year undergraduates when I first started teaching, I can't say that I've ever had sleepless nights preparing teaching. I have had long-nighters preparing research. In that sense, the work-life balance has taken a hit more because of research commitments than teaching commitments.

LS: Thank you for that honesty. Dilly, if I could ask you in your career at numerous universities, numerous rules, some which are very new to universities, you're kind of trailblazing in that sense. How have you dealt with the issues that come up? How have you struck a balance?

DF: Good question, unlike many people who work in higher education, I actually started my career in further and adult education. I actually think I draw quite a lot of my ideas from some of the experiences I had back then, working on courses with either six formers, A-level students or adult returners to education who are accessing or wishing to access universities, where there's more flexibility in the curriculum and really designing opportunities for students even at that relatively early developmental stage if you like in whatever their careers would become, to get out there investigate, work with collaborators in the community.

One of the things I taught was communications or communication theory, but also communications studies, and this is often a subject that is referred to as being one of these soft subjects if you like, which is absolutely not the case because it's got very strong theoretical framing and there's some very demanding practical and intellectual skills that need to be developed.

I had students going out at the age of 18, going out into the local community, identifying a commissioning body like the local doctor's surgery for example, who needed a new communications artifact to be developed in order to move forward with their own particular organisational agenda. The students had to go through a whole series of investigations and allegiances and connections with those external partners in order to create something which then had to be evaluated and promoted and so on. There was a lot of peer review involved in that which is another aspect of research that we underplay, I think, in our educational design and peer review. I think the fact that I saw such transformational learning for individuals given space to get out there and imagine something, investigate, collaborate, connect and communicate to outward audiences. I saw such great examples right on very early on in my career that in through all of the academic and higher education roles that I've held, I've been very committed to trying to encourage everybody to see the additional possibilities outside the standard - we do some lectures and we do some seminars or classes and we ask our students to sit exams or write term papers or whatever. Because I've seen if you are more creative about it, just how transformational that can be and how very deeply students can develop intellectually as well as personally and practically as it were through those sorts of experiences.

I don't see a trade-off between intellectual depth and the more traditional teaching at all and these proactive outward-looking tasks that are more similar to the things that researchers have to do.

LS: Thank you. Thank you very much.

The next part of the podcast continues below.