

## **57 years after the Robbins Report: teaching and research at the LSE – Part 2 of the podcast**

*This is the second part of the podcast. The first part of the podcast is available above.*

**Lee-Ann Sequeira:** Now if we move on to something that has come up. We put the word out there if anyone would like to post any questions to you and to this panel. There were some things that came up. I would like to read out a quote from the Contemporary Issues in Learning and Teaching blog that is part of a module in the Postgraduate Certificate (in Higher Education) at the LSE. One of the posters writes, "While universities emphasize both research and teaching activities as equally important in their strategies and future visions, academics reward systems are still based on research productivity. Teaching becomes an important objective of university strategies, but is being measured through student satisfaction surveys and student numbers in terms of enrollment and application, treating students as education consumers and customers rather than future generations that should be encouraged to develop their critical thinking further. The academic on the other hand has to prove that they are good teachers through student evaluations."

This has been written by one of the candidates on the PGCert who is an LSE fellow or assistant or associate professor. This is written by someone who has direct experience of this, has come up against it, and has, I think, highlighted some really interesting aspects here. Dilly, if I may ask you to address this, the PGCert candidate, in this case, raises an important point. Teaching to some extent has achieved parity with research in that research and teaching performance are now both being monitored and measured. This is something Simon, you alluded to earlier as well. This illustrates the similarity between research and teaching. They are both, now, one could critically say, performative neoliberal exercises, but there's also the inherent tension. What does this mean for the core values of higher education and academia and what is the impact of this performative evaluation culture on academic's mental health and well-being?

**Dilly Fung:** There are a lot of nuanced points made there.

**LS:** That's true.

**DF:** I'll probably just pick up that particular thread from it. Clearly, as Simon pointed out earlier, the external policy environment in which we're operating with the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) as key examples and all of the tables that are created highlighting which university is more successful than the others and do come down to various metrics. The National Student Survey (NSS) on the education side is a key example, which is UK-wide and where you can have comparative and do have comparative metrics from one institution to another.

My own view on the benefits and otherwise of having those metrics is that it can be useful to have metrics, it can be useful to have longitudinal metrics so you can see

the direction of travel and it can be useful to have cross-cutting metrics where you can benchmark against other areas. However, I absolutely advocate against drawing inferences that shouldn't be drawn from those metrics.

In particular, when it comes to the point that was made here about promotion being based on student evaluation scores, I think it's extremely important that we do not give too much credence to student evaluation scores per se. We know for a fact that those scores are affected. Research shows very clearly; affected by the person's gender, by the person's ethnicity by whether the person speaks English if it's an English study as their first language and so on. There are many factors, so it's a very uneven set of judgments that you're actually drawing on.

I'd like to highlight what I think is a solution to this activity. We are in the policy environment we're in. We are, however, very intelligent groups of people who can have much more nuanced discussions than we are necessarily being asked to do by those outside about what we think good is. What is good education? This obviously speaks also to the education research relationships. Here at the LSE, we've said good education for us is a research-rich education. We want the students' education to be research-rich. For me, and Claire Gordon and I have talked about this in our study - rewarding educators and education leaders - that what we want is to have a much more nuanced picture of people's contribution to the institutional mission in terms of the role that they have.

One of the best ways in my view that one can do that is through actually asking colleagues to write a narrative, a much more nuanced narrative that may include some metrics, but where the metrics are not dominant, which talk about the values of the person, the scholarship of the person, the impact of the person's scholarship - whether that's education-focused scholarship or whether it's a specialist research field on the educational provision, and a much more rounded, a nuanced story of the person cross-correlated with obviously statements that one already draws from peers and from external evaluators and so on around the contribution of that person to the field. (This) makes for a much safer ground than relying on student evaluation scores.

We are living in the policy environment that we're living in. We have to be realistic about the importance across the sector to offer these particular sets of metrics, whether they're for REF or for TEF. I don't mean to say we can't do what we do, which is to contribute critical, constructive comment on those things nationally. Of course, that's sort of the thing LSE wants to do all the time. But given where we are right now, we can still, as an institution, and I believe we're absolutely moving in that right direction here at the LSE through things like our Promotions Committee conversations that we have where we have a much more nuanced discussion about the contribution of the individual in the round and we don't rely on these particular sets of performative metrics.

**LS:** That's wonderful to hear. Thank you. Simon, did you want to comment on that?

**Simon Hix:** I've got very little to add to that. I agree very much with Dilly on all points there. Perhaps, I could emphasise a couple of things. Metrics, per se are not bad. I find it unhelpful that you characterise this as a neo-liberal exercise. I think it's too easy to throw it all out in a sense that ignores the world before we had any metrics.

Before we had any metrics, students did not feel empowered. We had very little on which to base any evaluation of anybody's performance, which allowed a lot of people to free-ride and get away with doing terrible things in a classroom.

Whether it's metrics on the research side or the teaching side it has actually provided much more accountability, legitimacy, fair evaluation, equal evaluation. I think it has had positive dimensions to it on gender, for example, which has allowed female colleagues to demonstrate that they're outstanding researchers or outstanding teachers against what was very much an old boys' network when you didn't have those more transparent, accountable measures. I think it's not about metrics per se. It's about what we do with them, how we treat them, and how we measure things.

I think that the contrast between the REF and the TEF I find really informative here. The REF is based on peer evaluation and actually reading research. It's not based on citation numbers. It's not based on what journal the papers are published in or what book series they're published in. It's very careful peer evaluation. As a result of that, I think it's gained a lot of credibility and legitimacy, both within the UK and globally, because we trust our peers to evaluate the quality of our research.

I think TEF isn't at that stage yet. Partly because TEF is based on a whole load of metrics that we quite frankly think is a load of baloney. The metrics involved in a TEF aren't up to scratch yet. That doesn't mean we throw them all out. I think that that suggests that we should have people like Dilly and people who know about this helping to design this stuff. I know Dilly is very much involved. I think we should get to a point where we can have a set of education-based metrics that have the same legitimacy and the same credibility that we have as the more research-based metrics around the REF. I would then be more confident with what we're doing.

In terms of our own promotion, again, before we had teaching scores, I remember my personal experience where we actually introduced teaching scores. It was terrifying the first year they introduced the teaching scores. I remember on one of my courses I had great teaching scores, and the other course I had terrible teaching scores. I thought they were exactly the same. Actually, it was a really good thing because then I went, "What am I not doing right on this other course?" I then thought about this and talked to the students. The next year I got much better teaching scores because I actually realised it's not necessarily about comparing one person against another person and their teaching scores. It's about the context in which you have those scores for your teaching or the student evaluations of your teaching.

I know from sitting on the Promotions Committee at LSE, there's a lot of very nuanced discussion about that. For example, everyone knows that you on average get lower teaching scores when you're teaching a big service course to many people and it's compulsory and people are forced to do it and they don't like being forced to do stuff, so they grumble. As opposed to an optional course they choose for something that they really love and it's research-led and the academics in the classroom talking passionately about their research. They on an average get higher teaching scores.

We're aware of that. We know that and all of this information, all of this knowledge, all of this experience is taken into account, when thinking about this evaluation. I think rather than saying we shouldn't do it at all. I think we should do it, but we

should be very careful how we do it and very nuanced how we do it, and apply our own social science understanding and knowledge and expertise on how we understand metrics, what we can use metrics for, what we can't use them for, rather than saying, "Throw them all out because they're neoliberal!"

**LS:** Coming back to that point that both of you have made that it's not just metrics it's, as you mentioned, Dilly, a narrative, a reflective statement. One of the things in conversations especially with early-career academics who, for a variety of reasons have significantly more important pressures on their time or a different kind of pressure on their time, (they) often feel that even engaging with this performative aspect of measuring and monitoring, while everyone I think likes metrics and there are definitely good reasons to have them in place, the performative aspect of them or that they encourage or result inadvertently whether it is teaching to the exam, whether it is spending time on the paperwork for promotions et cetera, or making submissions to the REF or ensuring that you publish in certain journals et cetera. How do you see early career academics and career academics factoring that both on the teaching and the research side?

**SH:** What I think you've raised a really serious point, really important point here is about the impact on stress, mental health and well-being as a result of these performance indicators. In and of themselves each individually is reasonable, if it's done properly and very carefully, but once we start adding them, the additive impact on people is huge particularly on junior faculty. We pick this up. I organised last year's meetings by a cluster group of all the assistant professors at LSE and Dilly and I are going to do the same this summer, just hear how are things going, to meet them. We meet a lot of very senior faculty, but we don't get a chance to meet a lot of junior faculty here. Junior faculty in a sense are at the coalface, both on the REF and the TEF and in the teaching in the classroom, and producing their research.

You did get a sense that the pressure was immense. The pressure was immense to produce world-class research to pass major review and get promoted, to produce excellent teaching because of the pressure of the student satisfaction and the turning around of assessments and so on. I never felt that amount of pressure. It was more self-motivated pressure rather than external pressure. That stress I think is potentially very damaging. I do feel for junior colleagues.

You raised a very serious point I don't really know what the answer is to that. I don't think the answer is, "We'll give you more chance to have more support for your mental health." [chuckles] Actually no, that's dealing with the symptoms rather than the causes. We need to actually think about what we do with the causes there. I don't really have a very good answer to that. Dilly may have a better answer.

**DF:** No. I'd like to think I could solve it single-handedly with a great answer because I think you made some extremely good points, but I think what I would say is obviously we just need to keep under review how we can streamline and minimise this build-up, as a cumulative effect through all of this process and practical ways in which one can look at those things.

Also what's equally important I think for every faculty member and particularly for more junior colleagues who are so important, so brilliant, they're working really hard and doing great things for the school and they're going to be our future. I think it's

really important that we invest in departmental leadership, in heads of department, in deputy heads of department who feel really empowered and enabled to tell a better story than you will be judged by these numbers and are properly equipped. Again some of the research that Claire Gordon and I have done has been into the experience of heads of department and just how difficult that role is and how they're constantly stuck between the things that are required from outside and their colleagues that are asking things of them from within the department.

I think it's really important that we give time, recognition, encouragement, developmental opportunities, peer engagement opportunities for our heads of department and other academic middle leaders, if you like, or leaders in our universities, so that they feel able easily to dispel any myths that are associated with some of these numbers and pressures because some of them are genuine but there is also an overlay of myth around - unless you do this, unless you get to this, unless you get to do this with this number you won't be able to. Some of that is just hearsay on the corridors as it were and not really related to the real position, that senior leadership and other decision-makers in an institution would make about that. That wouldn't be their position on it. Really encouraging and enabling our early-career colleagues to understand that there are these things, however, there is support, there is encouragement, there is mentoring for them when they need it. I think that will help.

**LS:** Yes, thank you.

**SH:** I very much agree with that. Leadership roles are very important, supporting our academic leaders is important. Just following on from what Dilly and I were just saying there, one thing that Dilly and I are both thinking about is how actually can we relieve some of the pressure on our junior faculty in particular. Both on the research side and the teaching side.

On the research side, we don't actually provide a lot of resources for our faculty to do their research through the staff research fund compared to many of our competitors. We're trying to find ways in which we can boost that and provide more resources, because if we can provide a bit more resources, a lot of the research in the social sciences is relatively small type research where you're often applying for relatively small amounts of money to do relatively small tasks whether it's travelling for interviews or presenting research or data collection or employing somebody to transcribe interviews or put together reading lists. Providing more small-type funds I think will enable, I hope a lot of our junior faculty not to have to spend a lot of their time filling in forms to try and chase small amounts of money. If we can get rid of that, that could save them a lot of time.

Then on the teaching side, I think what we've had a culture at LSE has been a gold-plating of external regulatory instructions, where diversification of assessment has meant that we've then ended up with diversification of assessment within almost every single course we teach at LSE, which is not actually what the regulators wanted. We now over-assess and over-assessment is a terrible thing. Not just for academics but also for students, and Dilly I'm sure can elaborate on this, she knows better than I do, but I know it from the coalface at LSE point of view.

I see that the over-assessment isn't great for faculty, are spending all of their time designing assessment, marking assessment, giving feedback on assessment rather than actually teaching in the classroom. From the student side, they're spending their time staying up all hours to deliver pieces of assessment rather than actually thinking and talking and actually learning collectively which is what we'd like them to be doing.

I'll give you a concrete example of this. In one of these meetings with these assistant professors, one young professor in one of our departments here, she said to me, "I come from a mid-ranked US university to the LSE. It was a good university. LSE is a better university. But there I was teaching twice as many hours as I teach here, but it was half as much work." Why is it half as much work to teach twice as many hours at another institution than it is here?

We make teaching very, very difficult which is-- I remember as head of a department saying to a college, "Can you teach another course"? They would say, "Oh my God! The thought of what that involves. Just actually all the paperwork, all the ..." I think it's about providing support, providing the infrastructure around support for academics, particularly junior academics, just get on the teaching. All our colleagues love being in the classroom. It's all the other stuff around that which we need to get much better at streamlining.

**DF:** Yes, I'd just like to thoroughly agree with that. That's absolutely something we're trying to encourage all of our colleagues, all of our departments to think about where are the inadvertent over-assessment patterns, how can we provide more streamlined pathways through degrees. But we really encourage colleagues to have that conversation with us because we know it will be a real benefit for everybody in the long run. As Simon says, it's not just education. Although clearly that's incredibly important, but it is to do with individual well-being both for students and for colleagues.

**LS:** Great. That's absolutely fantastic to hear about some of the things: clearer messaging to faculty, streamlining of the paperwork and bureaucracy, support and training for senior management in departments. I think **what was really nice to hear is acknowledgment, senior-level people like you talking about the fact that younger researchers, younger academics, they do have it more difficult. It's not about just putting in the hours and getting on with it. It is a different environment.**

I think for a lot of people to get that acknowledgment from senior researchers, from senior academics who have made it does speak a lot because they're not always hearing that at the coalface or in the corridors. I think that's really important, but at the same time, I think it's also really important to commit to some sort of timeline about that because every six months, every year, every cycle just kind of adds up for a lot of colleagues. Thank you. Thank you so much for that.

Here is a quote from *Shaping Higher Education: 50 Years After Lionel Robbins* edited by Nick Barr where Craig Calhoun, a former LSE director writes about Robbins and some of the thinking behind the report. He writes that the report advocated abolishing the salary distinction between senior lecturer and reader while

making clear that research distinction was required only for promotion to the latter and teaching excellence was sufficient for the former.

He goes on, "Every student should have a tutor or supervisor, Robbins argued, and they should not be allowed to degenerate into a mere formality." This was in '63 just to provide some context, and Simon this is a question for you. If this is the view that respected and eminent researchers and leaders at the university have, if teaching and research and the centrality of teaching was seen so much as a part of the history of the LSE, why do some of these ideas have a more limited uptake today, if you even agree with me on that point?

**SH:** Yes, having been here for such a long time, I find it a bit surprising that that's how you would characterise the recent history of LSE. My experience is completely the contrary. In that, I think the importance of teaching and the focus on teaching has grown in importance since I've been here. We might be there yet, and I'm very happy to acknowledge that. We haven't got it right yet. We still have a lot of work to do, but I think we're well past the conversation to say that LSE is just all about research - promotion is all about research, appointments are all about research, academic careers are all about research. As an undergraduate in the 80s, I remember showing up to see my tutor and he would often say, "Who are you again?" That doesn't happen now ... on average I hope. [laughs]

**LS:** I can agree with that.

**SH:** [laughs]

**LS:** Yes, I can agree with that.

**SH:** One thing I would say about what is nice about LSE compared to some of our other British universities that I've got to know since I've been Pro-director for research is we have a very flat leadership structure at LSE. We've got nobody between heads of department and Pro-directors. A lot of other universities have deans, and that's one aspect. We have this very tight relationship and communication between what's going on in departments and what the leadership of the school thinks about those things.

The second thing is we have people in senior leadership positions who are part of their academic career and expect to return to the backbenches. I expect to return to the coalface if you like. A lot of us have in very recent years, whether it's Dilly or myself or Eric Neumayer, a colleague, and David Webb, all of us have been directly involved in departments in experiencing teaching and research.

I think we have been part of the development of LSE over the last decade or so, and have been part of that process of thinking about how do we make teaching more important in terms of how we organise it, the resources we dedicate to it, both academic resources and professional services resources. Also, how do we make it more part of the career structure?

It's not that long ago that as part of your promotions package, you have to put what you're teaching. What are you teaching? What's your approach to teaching? What have you been teaching? What are your teaching scores? What's the satisfaction

(scores)? What's the story you tell about your teaching and what you do? That's now part of the promotion process. That wasn't part of the promotion process when I first went through it, and I went through lecturer to senior lecturer, to reader to professor. That step from assistant professor to associate professor is an overall evaluation, and not just of your research, it's also of your teaching, your approach to teaching and your attitude towards teaching. I actually think we're far closer to this vision of where we want to get to now than we were even just a decade ago.

**DF:** Yes, can I add to that? There have been examples both at the LSE, perhaps not many, but one or two, and certainly elsewhere in the sector where there's a shift happening continuously, I think, of very good researchers not being promoted because they were not making sufficient or appropriate quality contribution towards the educational side of their work. I think that sends a strong signal.

I think it's worth pointing out that across the UK and internationally and some countries in a very big way, for example, in the Netherlands, **there is a lot of cross-national or international discussion about how we can better characterise the educational input and impact if you like that an individual has**, and obviously move much more away from just the full reliance on evaluation scores and so on. I think those are certainly playing into decisions around promotion and reward, I think in a really positive way. I think we have a way to go yet. I think there's always a lag and I've seen this in other universities. There's a lag between in principle and in the paperwork and in the minds of the senior leadership team, of where we are and what the sub-narrative is within departments where some people will have heard a different narrative in the past - that only research is important and not education. There's a time lag. Maybe this podcast will help. I hope it will.

What we want to do is to really communicate with our colleagues that education is absolutely seen as a vital contribution that you're making to the school and we really want to see as part of the development of your career, ways in which you can articulate that contribution which we do see great examples of in the Promotion Committee, that go beyond the obvious scores metrics and so on.

**SH:** I absolutely agree with what Dilly has said there. I also would say that one thing I often say to junior colleagues is, having now been in academia for over 20 years, **you might look at me and think that the biggest impact I've had on the world is through my research, but actually the older I get, I realise the biggest impact I've had on the world has been through my teaching**, because of those generation, after generation, after generation of teaching, and I'm still in touch with a lot of alumni and former students that I've taught.

It's remarkable when I go and visit alumni groups or go and even visit people and we have speakers come in often, and they're very senior people, Prime Ministers or finance ministers or senior politicians, political scientists, often they have as part of their entourage a senior person who studied at LSE and they'll tell you, "I took this course on that, that's really shaped how I think, how I work, how I operate." It's not just my former students, but everybody's former students and you realise that we are training the next generation. Whether it's in business or in politics or in the not-for-profit sector. We're training the future of the world to shape the world. That's our strategy, so it's through that education process that we are having an impact on the world. Not just through research.

I think often as a junior college, you don't actually appreciate that, but these people in your classroom with you will go out there and do fantastic things and they'll take with them what they've learned in the classroom in terms of what they've learned from you, what they've learned from what they've been reading, what they've learned from their peers and what they've learned as part of that education process.

**LS:** So perhaps a new thing to measure scholarly impact?

**DF:** Yes, absolutely.

**LS:** That kind of transcends research, education and really kind of looks at ...

**SH:** Wouldn't that be wonderful?

**DF:** That could be my next paper.

[laughter]

Would you all like to co-write it with me? I'm looking at you, Simon.

**SH:** I'm sure it's going to be a four in the REF.

[laughter]

**LS:** Thank you so much, Simon. Thank you so much, Dilly, for joining us today, for taking time to discuss this highly relevant topic. Navigating the teaching-research nexus as an academic, and sharing your views and experiences with us. As I'm sure you are aware these issues are being debated hotly in university offices, common rooms, and journals. It sends an important message when the schools' two most senior people responsible for research and education at the school are willing to sit down and talk about the tensions and complementarities of the research-teaching nexus - wading into thorny topics and answering some difficult questions when there are no easy solutions. Thank you all for listening and thanks again to Dilly and Simon.