

# Conclusion

## An Insider's Perspective

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### Where We Are Now

In autumn 2019, the idea for this history volume began. Funding was obtained and a team of researchers were recruited for the task of writing the first history of the LSE Government Department. We were confident that by looking backwards and tracing the origins of political science at the LSE, we would cement the importance of our discipline as fundamental to the very identity of the 'London School of Economics AND Political Science'. In so doing, we would also contribute to the enthusiasm surrounding the 125th anniversary of the School.

By January 2020, we had acquired some of the necessary archival material from the Library, interviews had begun, and the research effort was in full swing. Yet, by early February 2020, news was spreading fast of the new virus, COVID-19. Stories of catastrophic health crises from Wuhan, China, and then from the European continent began to radically shake LSE leadership. The prospect of a lockdown became less a question of 'if' and more one of 'when'. In the first 10 days of March, we were setting up Zoom accounts in the Government Department and preparing our 'business continuity' plan for working from

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**Figure 20:** Professor Tony Travers, lecturing outside during Welcome Week 2020, to observe COVID restrictions. Credit: James Robins.

home. On 10 March, LSE Director Minouche Shafik sent an email to all staff, noting that ‘given the exceptional circumstances, LSE’s position is to extend our current policy of not penalising students for non-attendance from three to four weeks, to cover the remainder of Lent Term’. But events moved rapidly. The next day, the SMC (School Management Committee) consulted with Heads of Departments about moving all teaching activity online. Discussion centred around whether we could pivot so quickly to make this happen within one week (16 March) or whether two weeks was needed. The SMC announced on 12 March that teaching would move online from 23 March (or before) and would remain online for the remainder of the academic year. All summer exams and assessments would also be delivered online and public events were suspended. While the campus and halls of residence would remain open, staff were encouraged to work from home. The pace of the crisis escalated so that by 22 March, the School had significantly scaled back its campus

operations to about a dozen (mostly security) staff, thus resembling its typical closure arrangements over the Christmas holiday.

This was just the beginning of the disruption to follow for the remainder of 2020. Except for the School moving to Cambridge for six years during the Second World War, never had the School faced such an upheaval. With just weeks of planning, all examinations were given online. Summer School was cancelled entirely, and the School effectively became something of a ghost town over the summer months. Meanwhile, as international travel came to a standstill, academic and professional services staff continued to work throughout the summer in order to plan a 'return to campus' and some face-to-face teaching in autumn 2020, alongside the provision of all lectures online. Within the Department, individual members of staff were given 'risk assessments' to gauge whether they could 'safely' return to deliver face-to-face teaching. Heads of Department and Department Managers were faced with the daunting and uncomfortable task of assessing whether the pre-existing vulnerabilities of colleagues (health, age, home environment) posed a significant enough risk to warrant moving all their teaching online. Overall, the pandemic found its way into almost every aspect of the home and work lives of staff.

Perhaps one day a full history will be written on the impact of COVID-19 on the LSE. But this is not that day. Rather, my intention here is to provide some flavour for the backdrop of this concluding chapter. I find myself in a similar position to Ralf Dahrendorf, when he noted in his preface to *A History of the London School of Economics and Political Science, 1895–1995* that because he was 'an actor in the story which is told', he could not offer 'an impartial and objective account'.<sup>1</sup> As the current Head of the LSE Government Department and as someone who has been affiliated with the School since 1988,<sup>2</sup> I offer the same caveat. This concluding chapter thus follows Dahrendorf's lead in being written by one who is closely associated with the Government Department. Yet, unlike the chapters which precede this, the narrative in this concluding chapter also benefits from something of a 'social immersion' in the Department—or perhaps more informally (and for better or worse), an insider's view of the history of the Department over the past three decades, and including the tumultuous effect of COVID-19 on the LSE, and on the Government Department more specifically.

But, as part of this beginning to the end of the History volume, it is useful to observe, in brief, the basic components of the Department. As a snapshot of where we are now, the Government Department in 2020 is the academic home for 850 students (505 BSc, 305 MSc and 40 MRes/PhD). In the 2019–2020

<sup>1</sup> Dahrendorf 1995: vi–vii.

<sup>2</sup> As a UCLA PhD student, I was a visiting scholar in the Business History Unit in 1988. From 1989 to 1991, I was a Research Officer in the (former) Social Science and Administration Department, and then began my current employment in the Government Department from 1992.

academic year, 353 Government students were from the United Kingdom, but the rest came from no fewer than 79 other countries. The Government Department offers more BSc programmes than any other department in the School, with BScs in Politics, Politics and Economics, Politics and History, Politics and Philosophy, and Politics and International Relations. Together with eight MSc programmes, the teaching provision in the Department is among the most diverse of any department in the School. As for faculty, the Department has, in 2020, some 43 permanent academics, as well as 16 Fellows. In terms of sub-disciplinary strengths, the Department has six: Comparative Politics, Conflict Studies, Political Behaviour and Political Psychology, Political Economy and Institutional Analysis, Political Theory, and Public Policy and Public Administration. These numbers and lists are significant, as they capture a diverse, complex and at times unwieldy Department, and as such, will become relevant in the sections below.

And so, as we return to the three themes of this volume, the continuing effect of the pandemic is something of a prism through which these themes may be seen. In the Introduction, we set out three prominent themes for this history: (1) a transition from an era where one individual dominated the ethos, culture and direction of the Department to one in which it has become multifaceted—that is, a product of the visions and priorities of a number of scholars; (2) a periodisation within each chapter, which highlights dramatic events from each period (the birth of the LSE, the early imprints of Harold Laski and Michael Oakeshott, the 1960s protests and into Thatcherism, and finally the steady move towards professionalisation and into the COVID-19 global pandemic); and (3) the Government Department as a microcosm for significant developments in Britain (professionalisation of higher education, the centrality of London, the growing focus on Europe in the decades leading up to Brexit, and the issues pending for British higher education, post-Brexit, post-COVID). The following sections reflect upon each of these themes, in turn.

### From One to Many

In both Chapters 1 and 2, we observed that a small number of prominent individuals were of fundamental importance in creating the vision and intellectual leadership for what later became the Government Department. We saw that three figures—Graham Wallas, Harold Laski and Michael Oakeshott—each, in his own way, had a vision for the ‘political science’ component of the School’s two disciplinary pillars. But it was Beatrice Webb (as quoted in Chapter 1) who first seemed to recognise the core dilemma faced by these pioneers of political science. Lamenting in 1896 the ‘wretched’ candidates she was interviewing for Lecturer in Political Science, she wrote in her diary that it was ‘a trifle difficult to teach a science which does not yet exist’. No doubt Wallas, Laski and

most certainly Oakeshott all had some mental vision for the ideal collection of ‘political science’ (or, for Oakeshott, ‘government’) scholars. Oakeshott no doubt sought young academics whose outlook on the political and scholarly landscape resembled his own, and to some extent this drove his recruitment for the early Department. Such a strategy may have benefited from a single vision which could lend cohesion to a subset of politically minded scholars within the larger LSE community of scholars. And, it worked to some extent through to the middle part of the 20th century.

But, by the 1960s and certainly the 1970s, the Department had acquired a more diverse set of scholars, and the internal cleavage between Political Science and Public Administration became more apparent. As discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, the ‘post-Oakeshottian divide’ and then the pressures to professionalise both created tension within the Department, with silos emerging among scholars with different approaches to methodology and the direction of modern political science. Oakeshott’s vision had given way to diversities in approaches and interpretations for what constituted ‘political science’. Yet, even as late as 1995, Dahrendorf argued that ‘modern political science’ at the LSE had never even taken ‘hold at the School, or in most British universities for that matter’.<sup>3</sup> Interpreting ‘modern’ as uniquely American, Dahrendorf maintained that none of the following three core elements of this approach was ‘found to any significant extent at LSE’: political analysis, political survey research and the ‘economic analysis of politics’.<sup>4</sup> For Dahrendorf, modern political science had failed in Britain for reasons of substance and method: (1) the strength of traditional political philosophy; and (2) ‘[w]hen it comes to application, modern political science has turned out to be less effective than modern economic science’.<sup>5</sup> And so, by 1995, political science in the United Kingdom remained dominated by political theorists or political historians—at least, as viewed by Dahrendorf.

What Dahrendorf failed to capture in 1995 was that the Department had begun changing (‘professionalising’) from the last decade of the century (if not before), and with these changes came what Dahrendorf would characterise as modern (American) political science. As Chapter 4 describes, the arrival of Brian Barry to the Department in 1987 might be seen as a pivotal time in the move to ‘modern political science’. Barry’s arrival coincided with the convenorship (from 1987 to 1990) of a prominent Oakeshottian—Ken Minogue. The balance in the Department had shifted away from a focus on the history of political thought, although political history retained its supporters. For Barry, there was room for both, as seen in an anecdote from Anne Philipps. Before joining the Department, she had served as external examiner for political

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<sup>3</sup> Dahrendorf 1995: 226–227.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*: 227.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

theory courses in the Department, which entailed assessing the marking notes from all the examiners:

I was marking what must have been a first-year course, which was a kind of history of political thought course. Brian Barry had been drafted in as the second marker for this course, and he was notoriously dismissive of the history of political thought. I mean, his view was: ‘why on earth would you be in the slightest bit interested in what Plato said or in what Machiavelli said? What matters is having good, clear, strong arguments about the issues of today.’ So, he had no interest in the history of political thought, but he had to do this second marking. And I remember his marking comment for one of these undergraduate essays, which was on Machiavelli and which he gave a very generous 80% to, was ‘sounds good to me, but what do I know?’ Which always struck me as a very endearing illustration of both his dismissiveness and his willingness to accept that somebody might nonetheless be doing some very good work.<sup>6</sup>

So, whereas Barry was an undisputed force for modern political science, he also accepted the multiplicity of approaches to the study of politics. From Barry onwards, the Department acquired more of an embedded diversity of perspectives on, and approaches to, political science. Over the next three decades, while professionalism transformed recruitment, teaching, administrative structure and research, there was little in the way of a cohesive force within the Department to alleviate the tendency towards (at times, fractious) silos. Indeed, there were key features—namely the MSc programmes—which cemented fragmentation within the Department. From an era where the Department centred around a single individual, the Department became one identified by a number of scholars but dominated by no one. In some ways, this allowed a multidisciplinary array of research interests to grow, but it also made the management of the Department tenuous at best, and certainly divisive at times. By the early decades of the 21st century, the unresolved question in the Department was where it was headed.

In the decade following 2010, the Department continued to professionalise, but staunchly resisted one rather managerial invention—namely that of the strategic plan. When I assumed the role of Head in 2019, my one overriding task (as given to me by the School’s SMC) was to devise and implement the Department’s first strategic plan. Whereas every other department in the School had one, Government’s failure to agree on a common future made this task seemingly impossible. In early 2019, Michael Bruter, as Deputy Head of Department for Research, drafted the Department’s ‘Research Strategy’ document, which was the first serious effort to summarise the research strengths and weaknesses of the Department. From his survey of colleagues in the Department,

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<sup>6</sup> Phillips interview 2020.

Bruter found that we felt that individual scholarly talent and diversity in the Department were key strengths, but at the same time our main weakness was the ‘energy we waste to cope with counter-productive divisions’, along with ‘intolerance’ of others in the Department. Bruter pithily remarked: ‘Strikingly ... the main weakness of our Department is entirely of our own making.’

After about nine months of arduous work, and during Britain’s first COVID lockdown, the Department approved its first Strategic Plan, in a contentious and anonymous electronic vote of 32 for, 7 against, and 4 abstaining. If anything represents the Department’s solidification of ‘modern political science’, it can be found in its strategy. For one, the BSc in Politics and *History* was replaced with one in Politics and *Data Science*. Second, the silos created by the MSc programmes were unified in a single MSc in Political Science, with streams in Political Behaviour, Political Economy, Comparative/Conflict Politics and Global Politics. And, third, diversity among subdisciplines was formally recognised in the six research pillars of the Department (Comparative, Conflict, Political Behaviour and Political Psychology, Political Economy and Institutional Analysis, Political Theory and Philosophy, and Public Policy and Public Administration). Time will tell whether this plan will alleviate the ‘main weakness of our Department’. In the meantime, completion of our Strategic Plan enabled us to move forward with clarity and focus to launch the largest single recruitment of new faculty—some six new assistant professors in 2021. Again, COVID dramatically shaped our processes as we conducted all the 26 ‘job talks’, countless bilateral meetings with candidates, as well as deliberations and decision-making by Zoom. One could hardly imagine a more dramatic contrast from the ‘old days’ of recruitment, where a single pub conversation might yield a successful appointment.

### Professionalisation and COVID-19

Each period covered by Chapters 1 through 4 highlighted at least one dramatic event or sequence of events, from the birth of the LSE and ending with the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–2021. Rather than summarising these, my intention here is to focus on the last period, which falls squarely during my time in the Department. In Chapter 4, ‘professionalisation of higher education’ was the defining feature of the past three decades, and it is this professionalisation as well as the current period of COVID that is my focus here.

We saw in Chapter 4 a number of examples of professionalisation in the Department (reflected more broadly in other universities): more formalised recruitment practices; rigorous training for doctoral students; the commercialisation of higher education, as seen in extensive use of marketing, branding and managerialism; competition among universities, and the widespread use of rankings by research output (beginning in the 1980s with the Research Assessment Exercise and later becoming the Research Excellence Framework); and the shifting emphasis towards student satisfaction, predicated on the notion

that students had become customers in the market for higher education. Others have described these trends in depth<sup>7</sup> (and some have also included the proliferation of awards and prizes for books, teachers, researchers, etc.), and argued that they have been spurred by broader ‘massification and accountability pressures.’<sup>8</sup> Certainly, higher education is no different from other areas of the public sector which have seen an escalation in the pressures of accountability, at least since the late 1970s.<sup>9</sup> However, UK higher education has seen the added effect of a shift from ‘effectively free’ higher education from the 1960s to the 1990s, to one where undergraduates face fees of around £9,000 per annum, with post-graduates’ fees ranging from about £15,000 to £25,000 or higher (in 2020). For some observers, this has meant that students are now ‘customers exercising choice in paying for a product in a market’ rather than ‘citizens exercising a social right’<sup>10</sup> to higher education.

The most recent example of professionalisation, the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), builds on the university rankings model of the REF, but added to this the expectation that to inform their choices, students deserve a more transparent measure of the ‘teaching quality’ offered by universities. A fair amount of controversy has surrounded the TEF, and with the LSE receiving the lowest ‘Bronze’ award in the first TEF round (2017), the pressure was intense to find ways to improve our ranking. Given the close correlation between scores obtained on the National Student Survey (NSS) and the TEF award rank,<sup>11</sup> the most immediate way to improve was through the annual National Student Survey. From 2013 to 2020, the School’s overall student satisfaction score took a significant dip, just at the time when national focus on the NSS and the TEF had grown. In 2013, the LSE’s score of 88% was slightly above that of the sector average of 86%. However, between 2013 and 2018, the gap between the two widened considerably, as the School’s satisfaction scores nosedived to 70.8%, while the sector’s was 83.5%. Across the LSE and within the Department, significant changes in practices, resources and approaches all focused efforts on improving student satisfaction.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>7</sup> For an excellent historical overview of these trends as they pertain to British political science more broadly, see Grant 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Gewirtz & Cribb 2013: 80.

<sup>9</sup> Wright 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Anderson 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Bivariate correlations between three NSS metrics (‘teaching on my course’, ‘assessment and feedback’, ‘academic support’) are all over 0.95 (Department for Education 2017: 6).

<sup>12</sup> The ‘elephant in the room’ which many dismissed as a driving factor behind this large dip in satisfaction was, of course, the fact that the LSE campus had become a building site, as it demolished the old East Building, Anchorage and Clare Market, and replaced these with the new 13-storey, purpose-built Centre Building. It is no surprise that LSE student satisfaction in 2018 was

These efforts paid off in 2020—the LSE closed the gap in achieving an overall satisfaction of 83.7%, with a sector average of 83%.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps ironically, in summer 2020, when the Government Department had much to celebrate in achieving a 10.2 percent increase in overall student satisfaction (to 82.6%) relative to 2019, we were all working from home and frantically seeking to find ways to deliver some face-to-face teaching in the midst of the COVID pandemic. Our considerable achievement in improving student satisfaction was unfortunately obscured by the overwhelming challenges we all faced in keeping our Department delivering high quality teaching in whatever ways we could (both online and in person, with COVID restrictions).

Whereas this may constitute a success story in the Department's long progression towards professionalisation, it is important to recognise (as we did in Chapter 4) that professionalisation has not been an entirely welcome phenomenon in the Government Department. Certain features of the professionalisation trend have created tension within the Department (e.g. marketing, managerialism, the pressures on publishing from the REF). But, it has been student satisfaction, both in student surveys (internal and with the NSS) and then culminating in the TEF, that have challenged colleagues to question fundamentals, such as: What does it mean to be an academic at a 'research-led' university? How do we balance both the career- and REF-driven pressures to produce high-quality research, with the competing pressure to satisfy student demands for helpful feedback on assessments, the provision of a vibrant 'learning community', well-organised courses and curriculums, and other criteria comprising student satisfaction? For some colleagues in the Department (and around the School), high-quality research and high-quality teaching were not necessarily compatible, or at least not in a sustainable way.

At the level of the Department, three features illustrate the increased focus on student satisfaction. First, the messaging from the School and within the Department helped to create a stronger culture of awareness of students as customers, who were paying hefty fees. Second, the Department had, by 2019, acquired the largest, most specialised team of administrators, in its Professional Services Staff (PSS). And so, positions such as 'Undergraduate Advisor', 'Communications and Events Manager' and 'Web and Digital Media Manager' now collaborated with management teams for both undergraduates and postgraduates to provide day-to-day (and longer-term) attention to the needs of students.

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at its lowest, since the very students who completed the survey in this year had spent their entire undergraduate degree coping with the disruption, mess and unsightliness of the massive construction project. Undergraduate and postgraduate students graduating in 2018 had never even had the chance to walk down Houghton Street during their degree programmes.

<sup>13</sup> Coincidentally, the sparkling new Centre Building also opened its doors in time for the 2019–20 academic year, which may have influenced NSS scores for early spring 2020.



**Figure 21:** Government Department students during COVID (Centre Building).  
Credit: James Robins.

Third, the Department had, by 2019, acquired faculty positions in the form of 'Educational Career Track' (ECT) professorial lecturers (Paul Apostolidis<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Associate Professorial Lecturer and Deputy Head of Department for Education.

and Vesselin Dimitrov<sup>15</sup>). Over the period of the School closure from COVID in the Lent term of 2020, through the summer and Michaelmas term in 2020, these three factors were pillars upon which the Department heavily relied during the upheaval of COVID. The commitment of faculty to sustaining high-quality teaching was perhaps most visible in the large array of short videos prepared by course instructors for our ‘Welcome’ website—certainly unprecedented among our faculty. As many MSc students were joining the Department from their homes in other countries around the world, these videos replaced normal ‘taster’ and introductory sessions. Additionally, the PSS team—many working from home—were specialised and trained to address the array of student needs, even under COVID. As we were alerted to students who either had tested positive with COVID or were forced to self-isolate, the PSS team kept close tabs on the welfare of these students. And, finally, the considerable logistical and pedagogical challenges in transforming lectures, seminars and classes to various formats (online, hybrid, face-to-face with masks and social distancing), and moving exams online were overseen by Apostolidis and Dimitrov. Despite the global pandemic, as well as previous years of internal divisions, the Department collectively ‘pulled together’ to ensure that, as far as possible, students were well-served in terms of their university education. If this sounds a little bit like boasting, it is. Even as some of my colleagues themselves fell ill with COVID, collectively we demonstrated a unity of purpose I would not have anticipated.

As a penultimate note to this section on the balancing of research and teaching, it would be remiss to not also mention the proactive stance of Government Department students themselves. Perhaps the most conspicuous example is the emergence of the LSE *Undergraduate Political Review*, or UPR, in 2015. This was the brainchild of a second-year student, Jack Winterton, who sought ‘to create one of the best student-led publications on issues related to politics’. His idea was ‘to create a student publication that [would not] replicate other journals, but rather try and find new ways to engage with discussions on the topic of politics’.<sup>16</sup> His motivation, and that of other students, was to establish a research-led platform for undergraduate research, which would share the research space of academics in the Department who sought to ‘know the causes of things’ (the LSE motto). The UPR (<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lseupr/>) hosts its own annual research conference, organises students into research teams to write publishable papers which they present at academic conferences, and publishes its own student research journal and blogs. With each new editor-in-chief,<sup>17</sup> the activities of the UPR have expanded. The emergence of the UPR serves as an organic and thriving example for how the passion for high-quality research (particularly

<sup>15</sup> Associate Professorial Lecturer.

<sup>16</sup> Winterton telephone interview 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Beginning with Winterton, these include Joshua Manby, Hannah Bailey, Karina Moxon, Adam Hudson and Jintao Zhu.

motivated from ‘knowing the causes of things’) can converge successfully with the ‘learning environment’. I hesitate somewhat as I write this, for fear that it sounds too much like a ‘sell’. It is not. I have personally watched the birth and growth of the UPR and have pondered its appeal among students. In my view, the appeal is that it allows students to identify with and be active participants in the research endeavours of professors. Commercialisation and professionalisation have not, at least in this example, dampened the intellectual curiosity in the real world of politics that also inspired Sidney and Beatrice Webb.

Lastly, we return to question the benefits from professionalisation. Certainly, not all my colleagues would agree that aspects of professionalisation—like the focus on marketing and branding, and the introduction of university league tables—have enhanced the scholarly environment that one hopes to find at universities. I have sympathy with these views. The memory of my early days in the Department—when my colleagues joined together for Wednesday lunches in the Senior Dining Room (complete with complimentary wine, which rather lessened my productivity for Wednesday afternoons), and personal interactions with colleagues and students featured more prominently than paper-trails—evokes something of a nostalgic feel. From the perspective of Government students from previous decades, we can also discern sentiments that highlight the unique intellectual rigour of the LSE in the late 20th century, along with its links to real-world politics. Michael Fougere remarks: ‘I think in many ways the biggest thing I learned at the LSE was how to think, how to analyse, how to look at the world. Many of the questions I studied and issues I looked at still have an impact on how I see the world.’<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, Kennedy Stewart points to the ‘exposure to international students, speakers, thinkers, diplomats ... and the intellectual rigour of the people you are surrounded with and the commitment to thought ... [I]t taught me how to think. It taught me to identify problems and to ask “why” questions, “why things happen,” and that guides everything I do.’<sup>19</sup> As current mayors in Canada, both Fougere and Stewart epitomise the application of university education to governing and governments, as envisioned by the Webbs.

The question is, has professionalisation diminished the ability of the Department to evoke a sense of community among scholars or lessened the passion of students ‘to understand the causes of things’? If 2020 has revealed one thing—both with experience of COVID and the completion of our first Strategic Plan—it is that the sense of community among colleagues in the Department is alive and well. Both in times of crisis and looking to the medium- to longer-term future, the Department retains both community and vision. And as for students? From the UPR, it is clear that some students are just as passionate as in decades past about pursuing the LSE motto. This has not diminished. What professionalisation has done, in my view, is to provide something of a safety net

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<sup>18</sup> Fougere telephone interview 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Stewart telephone interview 2020.

for other students who might not conduct research as proactively or who might not foster a sense of curiosity about the causes of things. For students who may complete their LSE education with a simple sense of satisfaction that they received what their fees had purchased, professionalisation has no doubt lessened the scope for organisational/institutional failures by the Department or the School to have hampered their educational progress. Is this enough? In my view, it is.

But, more broadly, and as we have sought to explain, professionalisation has several dimensions. In one important respect, it is putting into practice the recognition that public institutions—of which universities form part—have to meet high standards of accountability and transparency (e.g., we have to explain to students why they obtain the marks that they do, rather than simply expecting them to take what is given at face value). Since, for the most part, political scientists are proponents of well-functioning public institutions, we can hardly excuse ourselves from this modern practice.

### The Department as a Microcosm

Our third and final theme is that the Government Department represents something of a microcosm for significant developments in Britain (professionalisation of higher education, the centrality of London, the growing focus on Europe in the decades leading up to Brexit and the issues pending for British higher education, post-Brexit, post-COVID). Of these, my focus in this last theme is on the centrality of London, and the LSE situated in the heart of London.

As a broad generalisation, it is often said that the South East dominates the UK economically, politically, financially, and culturally. The independent, non-partisan Centre for Cities urban research unit gauges that ‘the UK is by some measures the most geographically unequal developed economy in the world. While cities and large towns in the Greater South East of England are among the most productive and prosperous places in Europe, most in the North and Midlands lag far behind.’<sup>20</sup> The intention here is not to digress into a discussion of regional inequalities, but rather to note that London as an international city features prominently as a locus of economic, financial, political and cultural activity. As the LSE sits just a short distance from Parliament, the City of London, and the West End, it is not surprising that the geographic location of the LSE is a critical factor in its success. The following quotes each provide unique perspectives for the importance of London as home for the Department. First, Tim Besley, Professor in the LSE Economics Department, explains the significance of the LSE’s home in the centre of London:

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<sup>20</sup> Centre for Cities 2020.

... [W]e sit literally between the City of London and the City of Westminster. So ... on the one hand you have the financial sector and on the other hand you have Government and we sit right between those two. So somehow, we are well positioned to capitalise on that. But in a more practical sense, you're based in London and there are other universities in London, so it's not just LSE. You can organise your day around [going to] ... Westminster and be back at your desk [for the] afternoon. You can fill in your teaching around that, so it's a lot easier for those of us who are sitting in London to be fully immersed in the policy process in a way that it's not possible [for others] ... But I think also, [and] I think this is very important about the LSE in general and the Government Department: the LSE also values that stuff. I mean, some places I can think of and particularly universities think you're not serious if you're too much engaged in policy, because you ... should really be doing the more ivory tower style of research and I think it's sort of in the DNA of the LSE. And [in] the Government Department [it's] one of the elements or components of that DNA that we do support people who want to do their research in a way that allows them to engage in policy. We all take that for granted at LSE because we sort of assume it's true everywhere. But I can tell you, it's not. And that's a very important asset of LSE, and the Government Department has a key role in maintaining that asset.<sup>21</sup>

Similarly, Patrick Dunleavy comments on the fundamental importance of the Department being situated in the heart of London:

... I think that it would make a huge, huge difference [if we were not in London] because it's very, very handy to be proximate to the centres of power, particularly if you're doing political power or if you're doing parliament, public administration and public policy, parties, elections, and so on—all of which have been big areas for us over many years. I don't think we'd have had the same student body if we hadn't been in London, and we've had a very distinguished roster of people who've done their PhDs with us, some of whom are quite leading figures in the profession.<sup>22</sup>

As one of those 'distinguished PhDs'; former Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer, Anneliese Dodds; remarks that, coming from Edinburgh, 'LSE was a great environment to be doing ... comparative work, so I think it was mainly the draws of doing comparative social science that was the most attractive

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<sup>21</sup> Besley telephone interview 2020.

<sup>22</sup> Dunleavy interview 2019.

[element] to me about being at LSE. I hadn't lived in London before, so that was kind of very, very exciting.<sup>23</sup>

And, finally, from the perspective of an alumna who moved onto Oxford University from the LSE Government Department, Hannah Bailey notes that:

... having studied at Oxford, I can now say that it definitely doesn't compare in terms of the atmosphere. There is something about the LSE being in London, having the professors in the Government Department that it has, that really makes it in tune with the current political landscape in a way that I think other institutions aren't ... Even if you are not researching anything to do with the UK or London, just being in that hub really gives the LSE a particular buzz. I remember even one of my lectures was held in the Houses of Parliament with an MP talking to us about her work on a select committee. That was very exciting, and you don't get that anywhere else. We also had two election nights at the LSE. And it's really exciting being in the heart of London, reporters would come flocking in, we would all sit in the lecture theatre [as] we all waited in the projections at 10pm. It also gives you a lot of opportunities as a student. For example, I worked on an election night for ITV as part of an LSE scheme. I stayed up all night at ITV and we had people calling in for every constituency telling us the results for that constituency, and I had to type it into the computer, and it would pop up on the TV screen. That was so exciting. I really enjoyed that. I don't think you get these opportunities at other institutions outside of London.<sup>24</sup>

Without a doubt, much of the vibrancy of the LSE stems from its location in London and added to this is the institutional legacy of the Webbs and their followers to promote within university study the understanding of government, policy, and politics. As Besley notes above, engagement with policy is part of the 'DNA' of the LSE, and particularly the Government Department.

A corollary story of 'geography' is the movement of the Department from its island site in Lincoln's and King's Chambers to Connaught House in 2007 and then to the purpose-built Centre Building in 2019. The architecture of the Centre Building focused on creating collaborative space for 'learning environments' to thrive, for students to engage more with faculty and for social interactions to take place more organically both indoors, but also in a number of outdoor terraces and garden spaces. As a Department, we also hoped to use both the indoor and outdoor spaces to enhance our sense of community within the Department. Anne Phillips remarks that 'it's made a big difference in terms of a sense of staff and student engagement; just actually feeling part of the same community'. But she also notes that COVID has deprived us of taking

<sup>23</sup> Dodds telephone interview 2020.

<sup>24</sup> Bailey telephone interview 2020.



**Figure 22:** From King's Chambers (above) to the Centre Building (below).  
Credit: LSE Estates and Jean-Paul Meyer.

advantage of the open spaces in summer 2020, but anticipates that post-COVID, ‘people will gather more on those balconies and that will also be a different kind of way of being at LSE.’<sup>25</sup>

The location of the Department itself from the antiquated, ‘quaint’ and wholly inadequate island site to the Centre Building provides something of a visual for the professionalisation discussed earlier. Marketing and branding associated with the architectural beauty of the Centre Building is far more attractive to prospective students than the depressing architecture of Lincoln’s and King’s Chambers, not to mention its dangerous stairwells, as noted in Chapter 4.<sup>26</sup> It is most definitely bittersweet that we had only months to enjoy our new home in the Centre Building before COVID hit, and sent us all working from home. However, working from home has transformed the image of our Department (and, for that matter, of academics throughout the world) beyond the physical infrastructure of our office and our building in London, to the small screens of our home computers. We are, individually, in 2020 (and into 2021) the Government Department in a new pixelised form, appearing through Zoom boxes in homes all over the world. Certainly, this has challenged us all in countless ways—from teaching to research to balancing pressures of family with those of working from home.

As a final comment, I will end with a multimedia example for how the Department has adapted to represent itself to the world. In the first COVID lockdown, as we had forfeited our geographic location in the new Centre Building and in London, we embarked upon an innovative way to convey the very spirit of policy-relevant research, in the form of multimedia content. Using Zoom interviews and VFX, we created a film in the style of ‘dark Netflix’ to inspire prospective students and to showcase the research that colleagues were already undertaking on the crisis of governments as they faced COVID-19—for instance, questioning the democratic limits to emergency powers during a pandemic, and how to gauge the success or failure of governments in saving lives as opposed to saving ‘the economy’ (<https://youtu.be/U8JENWpppG4>). Perhaps this is an example of marketing and professionalisation that traditionalists would eschew. But, for the Webbs, who sought to link theory with policy and action, our willingness to embrace whatever means necessary to be policy-relevant in a turbulent world would mark the best of the LSE tradition.

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<sup>25</sup> Phillips interview 2020.

<sup>26</sup> My own story of these stairwells involves my husband, who, as he was carrying the pushchair of my son, slipped and fell down the stairs in King’s Chambers. Thankfully, all survived intact.

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