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Larry Kramer: "I wouldn't change any LSE position for a donor"

In the third and final segment of a three-part interview with LSE HE Blog editor, Lee-Ann Sequeira, Larry Kramer, President and Vice-Chancellor of the LSE, looks at how political and cultural events have shaped the polarisation debate in higher education, and the role the academy has played

This is the final part of a three-part interview.

Read part one: ["If it's lawful speech, don't ask us to condemn it"](#)

Read part two: ["Self-expression shouldn't become more important than human relationships"](#)

Lee-Ann: Do you think we're in a better place than we were, say, five to ten years ago, especially in terms of equality and diversity? Has the pendulum swung too far to the left?

Larry: Let's look at this in the US context first. So, in the US, the answer is: we have a long way to go. There's still a huge amount of racism, misogyny, and inequality. The real disagreement among those working to address them has to do with tactics. On the tactical side, proponents of diversity, equality, and inclusion (DEI) adopted tactics that turned out to be counterproductive. What's the evidence they went too far? Trump won the election. That's because a huge number of people, and not just white people, but Black people, Latinos, and Asians, all either voted for Trump or stayed home rather than vote for the Democrats. I don't think it was that the changes the DEI proponents wanted went too far, it was the way they argued for those changes: the accusations that if you didn't fully buy into everything they were saying, you are a racist; that if you cared about anything other than this, you are a racist. These tactics alienated people whose support was needed.

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In the US, DEI is mostly about race, although not exclusively. Over the course of my life, efforts to address racism came in waves. There was progress in the 60s and 70s with the civil rights movement, and then huge backsliding in the 80s. By the 90s, the issues had started to get more complicated and people started talking identity and identity politics. More sophisticated arguments and theories such as intersectionality were introduced, and whether right or wrong, lots of people just didn't understand them. It was in these years that the language began shifting to talk about discrimination as violence – not just real physical violence but something much broader. While intellectually legitimate, it became increasingly difficult for lay people to follow along. Ordinary citizens who felt immense progress had been made were suddenly being told that things are worse than ever and that it is because they are racists. As has always happened, that wave made some progress, planted lots of intellectual seeds, but faded as the agenda shifted to other issues – the war in Iraq, immigration, and so on. So race and identity issues didn't go away, but they receded in public perception. But not in universities. There, the intellectual critiques continued to develop, though mostly in the humanities and some social sciences.

Then in 2014 there is unrest in **Ferguson**, and it reawakens the focus on race and identity. That empowers the voices of people in the disciplines in which the intellectual critiques had continued to develop, which become much more prominent. But it produces an unforeseen and unfortunate side effect, which is it gives people on the right who are looking to cripple universities examples they can use to paint universities as extreme and out of touch with ordinary citizens.

Lee-Ann: Wouldn't some of those critiques hold water?

Larry: If you look at them with a clear eye and you really understand them, they're totally valid. But they are difficult for lay people to understand and are easily caricatured to look extreme and crazy. So, they have been used by opponents of universities to undermine public support for universities.

Then **George Floyd** happens. And those voices, which have been growing, become more dominant. And not just dominant, but angry and accusatory. And that triggers a massive pushback.

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I remember managing this at the Hewlett Foundation – trying to persuade staff that it wasn't a question of right or wrong intent or even goals, but concern that pushing in the way they wanted would make any apparent victories Pyrrhic. This was a lesson we should have learned from the earlier periods: if you go too fast with a public that is reluctant, you're going to provoke a pushback and risk losing more than you gain. Which is, of course, exactly what happened and gave us Trump the second time around.

Lee-Ann: That's quite the whistle-stop tour of race and politics in American higher education! Do you think universities should have done more or a better job in terms of translating these sophisticated and powerful ideas for the general public as well as students instead of employing arguably dangerous rhetoric?

Larry: A theory can be intellectually coherent and still impractical. And it's impractical because though the theory's coherent on its own terms, there are other things it's not taking into account.

So part of it is, yeah, you haven't translated this into language that enables people to see your point and accept it. But you may also need to temper your ideas if you want people to use them at all. Take anti-racism. I get the idea and its importance, but the truth is that not everyone is going to accept that race is the most important thing, that every racial disparity is a product of racism, or that you are a racist unless you make reducing racial disparities your goal. So if you want to persuade enough people to reduce racism, it may not be enough to just explain the theory in language everyone can understand; you may need to adopt a more pragmatic position.

Lee-Ann: Moving outside the ivory tower, how do you think we should engage other stakeholders, such as the government, political parties, the local community, donors, etc? In the US, alumni and the government have launched very public campaigns to oust university presidents.

Larry: Well, first, what happened in the US was extraordinary. Until last year, it had been really unusual for alumni to weigh in publicly that way, much less wage huge public campaigns to remove a president, and it was entirely unheard of for the government to do so. With respect to donors, a donor can only get the voice to have that much influence by having been very involved with the university. People who give a lot to a university do so because they've developed a relationship with the university, because they've come to feel like they are part of it. And like in any relationship, they

don't expect to agree on everything. Most of the time, they come to understand why the university is doing what it's doing, even if they don't agree; and sometimes, they disagree strongly enough that they decide to leave the community. But campaigning against university leadership has been a rarity. The Israel-Palestine issue this time around proved to be an exception.

Lee-Ann: It was not just Israel-Palestine, it was also anti-Semitism.

Larry: It was still all tied into how different universities were handling the protests and the protesters. What I found when we faced questions here in the UK, was that I needed to talk to our donors and alumni and walk them through what we were doing, how we were doing it, and why we were doing it. They didn't necessarily agree with me, but they understood and so stayed with us. We didn't lose any of our major donors or partners over this issue, although some of them are still not happy with what we did. And, to their credit, not one tried to use donations as leverage. LSE has been very good over the years in not letting donors exercise that kind of influence, and it is clearly part of the school's culture now.

Lee-Ann: Given that endowments in UK universities are nowhere close to what they are in US universities, does it mean alumni and donors have less power and less say? Or do you think the political climate is less charged here? Or something else?

Larry: I wouldn't change any LSE position for a donor. I would explain to them and hope that they come around. If they didn't, we would just lose the donor.

Lee-Ann: But then we come back to your analogy of the loaf. And given the amount of pressure the school is under, from cuts to government funding, etc...

Larry: I mean, what would I have been giving up? I may lose one slice of bread from this donor, so to speak, but I'd be giving up much more if I changed our position. It would create so many other problems, even if it mollified this donor. So that made it kind of easy. The position we took was, I believe, right for the school in the long term. If I was doing anything different, it was that I was willing to put in more time to make sure our donors and partners understood the school's position. But I did the same for faculty and students. I think we owe that effort to explain to everyone in our community.

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In those situations in the US, you notice they went after newly appointed presidents, who hadn't yet had time to develop trusting relationships with those donors. And that was certainly a part of it. On top of which, the massive publicity made it nearly impossible for those presidents to do what I was able to do, which is get time alone, out of the public eye, to really work it through. Even harder, many of the donors had by then taken public positions that were reported widely, which made it harder for them to change or back down. It was a kind of perfect storm for how to have everything go wrong.

Lee-Ann: Is it hard navigating British academia as an American academic?

Larry: First of all, I'm not navigating British academia, I'm navigating LSE academia, and LSE is really a global institution, as we've got faculty and students from everywhere in the world. Secondly, I spent time in universities here, in France, and in Japan, as well as in the United States – I've found academics everywhere in the world to be pretty much the same. Of course, the institutions are different, so the way things play out is different.

I do struggle a bit with parts of British culture, in particular the indirectness in communication. I'm never 100% sure I understand what someone is telling me, at least not yet. You know what they say about 'two peoples separated by a common language.' I sometimes find the British unclear; some of it is me not understanding nuances, and some of it is people being indirect. So that's a navigation issue, both inside and outside the university. But since I arrived here in the UK, I've felt that my academic identity feels comfortable here. England may not yet be a cultural home, but LSE is a very familiar intellectual, academic home.

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Lee-Ann: The student protests on 7 October, 2025 were decried as 'un-British' by Keir Starmer, the British prime minister, playing into the anti-immigrant sentiment in the country. Given the large number of international staff and students at LSE, some of whom took part in the protests, what's

unique about British values? In your position as president and vice-chancellor, should a global institution, something you've just alluded to, feel constrained by this rhetoric?

Larry: Well, the answer to that last question is no. And we know Starmer's worried about Reform, so of course he's going to say something like that. Dog-whistle rhetoric aside, what he was saying is that he thinks it unseemly to choose 7 October as the day to protest what Israel's doing in Palestine. I understand why people might think that, don't you? I also understand why others might think that's exactly why they have to protest: because yes, what happened on 7 October was awful, but to them, what Israel has done since is more awful, right? And if you have that view, it's a strong way to make your statement. But nothing about that is more or less 'British'.

Lee-Ann: The other thing is that Jewish students feel a sense of fear when they see these protests or are caught up in them.

Larry: Understandably so. The point I make to them when we meet is, look, what Israel is doing has a lot of people very angry. So they're going to protest in ways that are angry, and that's going to make you uncomfortable. There's just no avoiding that. Now, if there's overt antisemitism, or anything threatening to you as individuals, we will absolutely take action. But otherwise, the discomfort you're feeling is the discomfort that is legitimate for a protest to make you feel.

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Lee-Ann: Do people take it on board?

Larry: Some do, some don't. Some feel that the language and the anger is antisemitic and believe there is no ambiguity about that. And for all we know, some of the protesters may be antisemitic. All we know is that the language actually being used is lawful, and this takes us back to where we started. We won't punish lawful speech, but we will try to create a culture in which people might find ways to protest that don't have even the ambiguity. And that includes all the things we've talked about, as well as training to help people understand antisemitism and Islamophobia, and trying to keep communication ongoing.

Lee-Ann: Thank you, Larry, for your time and for sharing your thoughts and insights on these important issues.

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About the author



Sequeira,L

Lee-Ann Sequeira is Senior Academic Developer at the LSE Eden Centre for Education Enhancement, UK, and Editor of the LSE Higher Education Blog

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