



Sequeira,L

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Larry Kramer: “If it’s lawful speech, don’t ask us to condemn it”

Into his second year as President and Vice-Chancellor of the LSE, Larry Kramer has dealt with a pro-Palestinian encampment, academic freedom infringements, and visa restrictions for foreign students. In the first segment of a three-part interview, he tells Lee-Ann Sequeira, the editor of the LSE Higher Education Blog, how he is building a more thoughtful and resilient campus culture

Read part two: “Self-expression shouldn’t become more important than human relationships”

Read part three: “I wouldn’t change any LSE position for a donor”

Lee-Ann Sequeira: A study conducted by LSE Students’ Union showed that there is a perceived problem when it comes to free speech on campus, with one in four respondents feeling unable to speak up in class or on campus. As an academic developer (when I’m not editing the blog), I frequently hear academics on all sides confess to feeling silenced, conflicted, and hesitant about navigating these issues in the classroom; whether it’s about Israel-Palestine, trans rights, Brexit, or decolonisation, to name a few hot-button issues. You have outlined plans for the LSE when it comes to fostering academic freedom – the Campus Relations Group, training, a discussion series on polarisation you’re chairing. Could you explain what you’re trying to achieve?

Larry Kramer: The idea behind all these initiatives is to create a better culture for free and unfettered lawful speech within our community by fostering and building better campus relations. We’re not facing something new – the silencing problem has existed for decades. But it’s got much worse as polarization has gotten worse, and that’s a big problem.

When I was young, it’s not like we cared less about issues than people today. It’s not like the issues were less controversial than they are today. There was some silencing then and some efforts to shut down or cancel speakers, but it wasn’t anything like what we deal with today. So it does seem something has changed.



A series of intellectual arguments took speech, equated it with violence as a kind of metaphor or way of driving home the idea that speech can hurt. But that has got extended and become much more literal than it was originally meant to be. This created a culture in which people really feel that the stakes in opposing bad speech are much higher, and they can and should object to speech in the same way they would object to being punched in the face.



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And then you have social media which, in some ways, is the biggest threat. When I talk to students and faculty who feel silenced, their biggest fear is not that someone's going to say something in the room, it's that they're going to get called out later on X, or TikTok, or Instagram. The idea of free speech has been much more challenged, and then ironically, when free speech is protected, people still feel silenced.

The free speech part, I think we've dealt with as effectively as we can at LSE, which is to say that we've been very clear about our policy, which is that there's lawful speech and unlawful speech, and if it's lawful speech, don't ask us to condemn it, don't ask us to shut it down or punish the speaker.

(But now you have the problem that since lots of lawful speech is hurtful and upsetting, people think 'I'm just going to stay out of the debate altogether'.)

We need to and want to do better when it comes to lawful speech that is hurtful or offensive. It would be wrong to say to those hurt or offended, 'It's lawful, so just toughen up.' But if we're not going to regulate or punish or condemn lawful speech, then what's the solution? The Campus Relations Group is our effort to find a different answer. There are harms from lawful speech, and you don't want to lose the sense that it can be difficult to deal with.



Let's create a culture in which people try to communicate ideas rather than score points, and without unnecessarily hurting others.



It therefore becomes our task to try to create a culture that has two qualities. One of the qualities is that people are a little more thoughtful about the way in which they speak. Don't speak in ways that hurt somebody, whether intentionally or unintentionally, because of the words they choose or manner of speaking, as opposed to because of the idea they're trying to convey. Of course, sometimes that isn't possible. Sometimes an idea can only be conveyed in ways that are forceful and may hurt. But often that isn't necessary. Let's create a culture in which people try to communicate ideas rather than score points, and without unnecessarily hurting others.

By the same token, since it's going to happen – sometimes unintentionally, sometimes intentionally – we need to create a culture in which people are a little more resilient when it does. That's the second quality.

Building a culture with both these things is tough. So, the polarization series is about ideas, but it is also meant to signal the importance of this culture building. The student training we've put in place gives students tools and signals the importance of this work. The seed funding from the Campus Relations Group will, hopefully, fund lots of initiatives that may work in and of themselves from the bottom up.

All these things may help in themselves, but with lots of these initiatives happening, it also sends a signal that can itself help build and strengthen a different kind of culture. So eventually we get to a

culture in which what people care about is persuading and getting others to understand why they think the way they do, instead of trying to deny their expression because you disagree with them.

Lee-Ann: Speaking of sending a signal, there has been, at the LSE and other institutions, what some people would call a double standard. When Ukraine was invaded, the school put out a statement, there were scholarships for Ukrainian students, etc. A number of people on campus pointed out that we don't see the same happen with respect to other conflicts. Is that policy going to change under your presidency? Are we going to see a move towards **institutional neutrality**?

Larry: It was never a double standard formally. It was different people at different times doing different things. People tend to treat the institution as if it's always the same.

Lee-Ann: But there's a history. A precedent has been set...

Larry: So, we went through a particular period post-George Floyd. Institutions everywhere in the world made statements then, which opened the door to making statements on lots of other issues too. That then led to problems, because now statements were being made for some things but not others, and because some statements could be seen as trivialising serious issues or taking them too seriously. It became a constant struggle to know whether or when a statement had to be made and what needed to be said, and on issues on which people inside the community often deeply disagreed. This is an impossible situation for a university that has people on all sides of pretty much every issue, with a mission that requires protecting their rights to freedom of expression and thought. How can you do that when the university itself is weighing in on one side or another?



It became a constant struggle to know whether or when a statement had to be made and what needed to be said.



I think the right solution is the one that we and almost every other university has come to, which is that the institution as such is not going to make statements or take positions on matters that do not directly affect the university itself. The institution will instead exercise restraint in using its own voice in order to protect the freedom of everyone else in the university to use theirs, which is the spirit of the **paper** I put out in the summer of 2024.

If we do take an institutional position, it is going to affect how some people feel they can speak in a way that is different from the silencing problem, but broadly similar. Untenured faculty who are in precarious positions are going to worry about taking a position different from one taken by the institution itself, as will students and anyone else who feels their position is precarious. So, the institution as such just can't do that, and neither can I, because it is impossible to separate my voice as Larry from my voice as LSE president.



We decided we would not make any statements, and people said, well, you did it on Ukraine.



Your point about what happened in the past is important. This came up concerning Israel-Palestine, when I was still new to LSE. We decided we would not make any statements, and people said, well, you did it on Ukraine. They pointed to a **school message** sent out at the time. The people who had written that message said it wasn't intended to take a side, but looking at it in retrospect, one can see how it might be read that way. We learned from that. The school's leadership at the time listened to what people in the community were saying and realized how saying something on one issue made others with different issues feel wronged because their issue wasn't being taken similarly seriously.

(Also, for the record, it's not the case that we have **offered scholarships** only in that instance.)

In any event, my view would be that if we have made mistakes in the past by making statements and taking sides, we cannot and should not be bound to keep making the same mistake going forward. So we've tried to be clear, based on just this past experience, that from here on going forward, we will have to be consistent. And we have been so far.



Inconsistency in how you address disagreements inflames matters and makes things worse.



What's been interesting over the time I've been here, with respect to Israel-Palestine, is how the exact same demands come from both sides. I had a situation where one group demanded that we disinvite a speaker on the other side and condemn the group that made the invitation. We said no for the reasons I just mentioned. A couple of months later, I got the same demand from the other side. What was so striking was that, while coming from the other side, the demand was made using the very same language. I replied by copying the answer I gave to the first group and sending it to the second — the point being to convey to people on both sides that they had to stop asking the university to take their side, that our position is not to interfere or condemn so long as the speech is lawful.

To make that work, though you must be prepared to do so consistently. If you're consistent and clear, I believe, the tensions will eventually subside. Disagreement can be tough. But inconsistency in how you address disagreements inflames matters and makes things worse. If you're consistent, the people who want you to act may disagree, but there is less anger and resentment, and it hopefully directs people's energy to where it ought to go: to the substance of the issue, and not whether the speaker should be allowed to speak at all.

Lee-Ann: So, when there's clear polarisation, for example, on Israel-Palestine, or on trans-gender critical issues, it's quite clear that one doesn't want to take a side. When it's something where there is unanimous consensus, like the Ukraine invasion, how do you not take a position?

Larry: You still don't take a side. You have to be consistent. The idea is to make it a tradition, part of the culture, and more importantly, get it to work. I mean you can envision a situation where everybody's unanimous, and somebody thinks, 'Oh, it won't be a problem, I'll take a position this one time.' But you just have to remind them the slope is really slippery. What do we mean by unanimity? What if it's 99%? 90%? Then, well, you get the idea. There is just no need for us to take positions on matters that are not directly about our own work and operations.

Lee-Ann: But it becomes quite hard in the face of public opinion, being told silence is complicity, etc.

Larry: Silence is only complicity when you are not always silent. Otherwise, silence is just silence. That's true, at least, when it comes to things that are not about the university itself or what we do or

don't do. If we're asked to take a position on something external to the university, and we say the university as such doesn't take public positions on such things, then silence is just us doing what we said: not taking a position.

This is part 1 of a three-part interview.

Read part two: **"Self-expression shouldn't become more important than human relationships"**

Read part three: **"I wouldn't change any LSE position for a donor"**

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