Tom Kirk   March 3rd, 2025

# What 73 influencers want to change and what we're changing in response

The 7th cohort of influencers have recently completed the LSE's Advocacy, Campaigning and Grassroots Activism MA module. Course convenors, Tom Kirk overviews what he and Duncan Green learnt from them and how it will change the way they work with activists and organisations going forward.

Offered since 2018, our course has sought to equip students with the tools to unpick complex systems and analyse how power works, with the ultimate goal of crafting their own influencing strategies to create change. This change can be whatever the students want, although we gently steer them away from taking on world peace or the entire patriarchy (they only have 2,500 words….).

Each cohort provides us with a snapshot of what they consider important and how they think it can best be addressed. Over the years, this has included everything from changing international laws and national policies, to securing better service delivery and nudging consumer habits. Given that they are at an elite institution and likely to one day be in positions of power, we think they're worth keeping tabs on…

What 2025's cohort want

This year's cohort of influencers chose a range of issues we've categorized as 'problems' in the table below. We encourage students to begin by exploring the systems that produce these broad problems using various analysis tools. By doing this, we hope they will identify points of entry for influencing efforts. These points are then converted into one or more SMART goals or asks that they then design tactics to achieve.
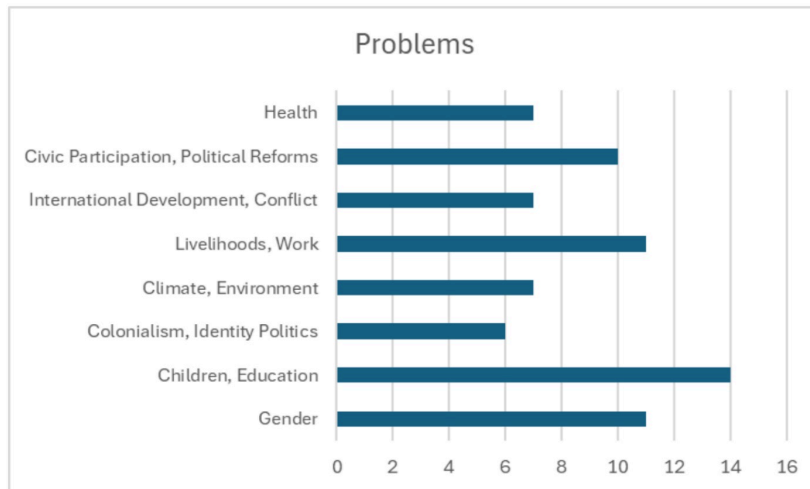
As in previous years, problems related to gender (e.g. period poverty, FGM, HPV vaccines, GBV), and education (e.g. curriculums, access, religious schooling) were the most popular to take on. Yet, in a new development, civic participation and political reforms (e.g. voter apathy, local governments, consultations, citizenship laws), and livelihoods and work (e.g. working hours, rights, basic income), pipped colonialism and identity politics as problem areas of interest. We suspect this is in part a reaction to the global swing towards right-wing and populist politics, but also perhaps because they believe civic participation is a precursor to progress on the aforementioned issues.

Turning to the types of change sought, the overwhelming focus was on the state and its laws and policies. Perhaps proving the famous maxim on death and taxes, this often meant looking to change tax policies, and in one case those on assisted dying. It also encompassed the opportunities that states give their citizens to hold them to account through consultations and at the ballot box, and how it regulates the private sector.
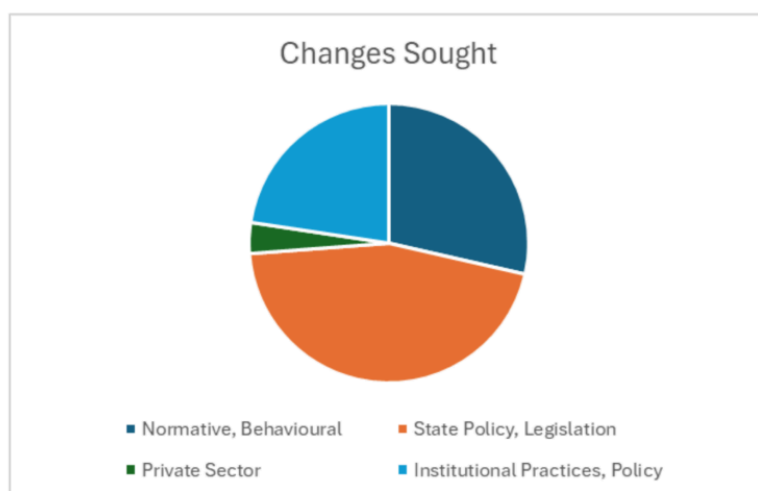
It was heartening to see that many chose to focus directly on, or to substantively include, an effort to change social norms or behaviours. The course's message that most influencing challenges require changing how large numbers of people think about or perceive an issue seems to be landing. Interestingly, however, working on norms was particularly prevalent among strategies that

sought to address problems at the local or regional levels. Does this point to a belief that global governance mechanisms and states are norms setters rather than takers?
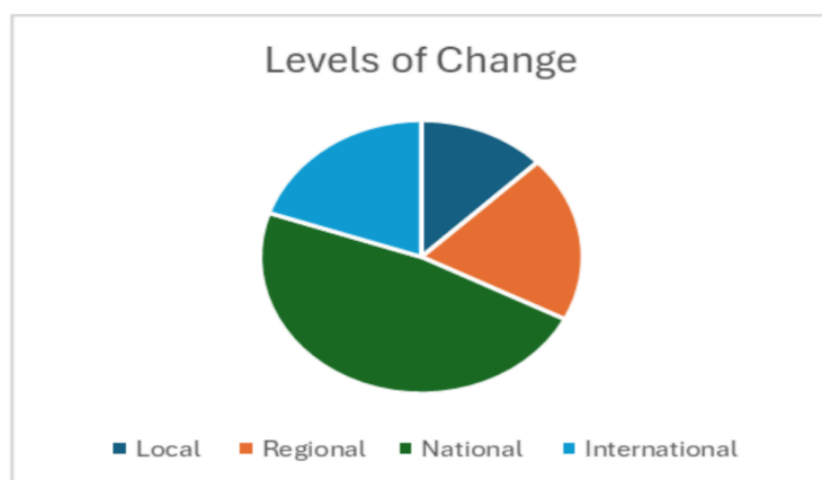
Despite the focus on the state, this year saw an increase in those choosing to change things globally, with several worried by the perceived failures of international laws and global governance architectures, including around efforts to build coalitions to tackle war crimes, and existential threats from AI to climate change.

Many of those seeking change at the local level were focussed on LSE itself! This included wanting to decolonise its teaching, to make it more accessible for marginalized groups and to get better information on healthy options in the School's cafes. This, we suspect, was somewhat inspired by members of last year's cohort who took part in impactful insider and outsider activism focussed on the School's investments in companies deemed to be complicit in the Gaza conflict and other issues.

How they sought to get it

A detailed analysis of the tactics our students chose is beyond us at present (one day perhaps). But it certainly seems that this cohort believes influencers need to be more creative than the mass demonstrations popular only a few years ago. This manifested itself in two ways:

First, they were much better at getting under the skin of their influencing targets and discerning what makes them tick. This resulted in nuanced messages and better choices of messengers to deliver them, with many students referencing decision-makers' histories, voting records and publicly available statements to justify their choices. Several even turned to close family members to get things done and reach those seemingly isolated from everyday politics.

Second, Popovic's idea of dilemma actions caught their imaginations. These are tactics that force your opponents, usually the state or its coercive arms, to do something that makes them look foolish or to do nothing and look weak. And they often involve a good dose of humour to ensure they go viral. For example, getting kids to protest for the right to protest, forcing police to publicly

ticket them, or making security guards chase activists biking around a runway used by private jet owners.

What we need to work on

We found some common weaknesses, which are at least partly down to us.

Power literacy is at the core of the course. We argue that most change processes require shifting power inequalities and provide several tools to analyse who has power and where it might be engaged (e.g. the powercube, stakeholder mapping, Rowland's framework). We encourage students to be selective – cherry picking the best ones for their topics and explaining their choice to us (their markers).

For some, talking in terms of power and shifting it is a simple, almost intuitive, exercise (perhaps if you come from power this is easier?). But for others, the tools seem to swamp judgement – their goal seems to be to deploy as many of the tools as possible within a single strategy. This often occurs in ways that repeat what has already been established or that do not advance the reader's understanding of what the influencer is trying to do.

This, we suspect, is due to our failure to provide enough guidance on which tools are good for what, and in instilling the confidence in students to dismiss or even adapt and critique the tools. This is admittedly a high bar. Yet, in our experience, those able to confidently pick/discard tools and even to deploy them in unexpected ways, tend to produce more plausible influencing strategies that are clearly focussed on shifting power.

Another persistent issue is students presenting their tactics as ends rather than means. For us, tactics must always be designed in service of a SMART goal or ask. This means they do something or advance some ongoing process that will contribute to someone, usually a power-holder or decision-maker, thinking or doing something differently. Put another way, tactics are means to ultimate ends.

Where some seem to get lost is explicitly connecting their chosen tactics to these types of changes. This is especially prevalent when using online tactics to raise awareness of, or build a community around, a problem. Indeed, it's rare that those with power don't already know about an issue or have not heard of how it affects people. The challenge is to convince them that there is a constituency concerned about it.

Going forward, we need to do more to show how influencers can harness the power created by increased awareness and connectedness. For example, getting those newly awakened to an issue to change how they talk about it, or asking a crowd to turn up to a public stunt or to maildrop a power holder.

All said and done, another really great year (some of the presentations were so brilliant that Duncan – always a bit lachrymose – teared up), but also loads of ideas for how to improve the course. We hope some of you reading this may join us and we're always keen for your thoughts.

Find out more about DV455 here and maybe join us later this year!

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