

The alumni factor: LSE's greatest asset in India

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Sivaramjani Thambisetty, LSE's regional champion for India, makes the case for greater alumni involvement as part of a reciprocal policy of engagement with and in India.

Loomba, Noon, Parekh, Patel, Popat, Sharma, Patel, Uppal and Vara. The musicality of these names would not be out of place in a television drama either in the UK or India. These are the last names of the nine MPs accompanying Prime Minister David Cameron on his [trade delegation](#) to India along with a number of leading corporations and universities. This trade delegation is serious business, whether it is about the potential sale of Eurofighter helicopters, the relaxation of damaging visa rules, or the premier league (no, not cricket, the other one). The list is evocative of the UK's priorities and hopes for an even more fruitful relationship with India. So it is no surprise that David Willets, the Universities Minister, and LSE Director Professor Craig Calhoun should be part of the delegation.

From B.R. Ambedkar, K. R. Narayanan and Krishna Menon to Kaushik Basu, Bhiku Parekh and Ramachandra Guha, LSE's association with the architects of modern Indian policy spans its institutional life. There are many excellent academic clusters at the School – the [International Growth Centre](#), [LSE Cities](#) and the [India Observatory](#) – that do very important work on and in India as well as several [individual Indianists](#). The story of the Tata family propping up LSE during financially dire times [in 1912](#) is inspiring as it suggests a long cherished belief in the value of education as a tool of emancipation. While we celebrate our past and present scholars and their ideas, we should also prepare strategically for the present moment of transformation in Indian higher education.

There is a palpable sense of excitement in the School about plans for [continued excellence](#) and potential [expansion](#) of social science research and engagement with and in India. As regional champion for India, I have given some thought to our engagement shaped by conversations with academics at the School, alumni volunteers as well as representatives of a number of competitor British and American universities with a presence in India. Here I outline one issue that I believe is central to our future with and in India—boosting alumni involvement. This issue spans our commitment to the fine grain of internal institutional choices as well as our external vision.

The strength of our alumni is of course directly related to how LSE is perceived in India and the way in which we recruit the best students. Developments internationally, and in India, are giving Indian students who can afford to study abroad a staggering range of options. A number of our competitors have offices in India that facilitate anything from student recruitment to research and policy engagement. LSE, however, does not have a big advertising (as opposed to brand) presence in India preferring instead to focus on selective student recruitment. This contributes to what one alumnus in conversation referred to as “the enigma factor” that he felt largely worked in LSE's favour when it comes to student choice.

In some cases the India offices of other UK universities were set up to help establish alumni associations. In contrast, the number and seniority of LSE's Indian alumni and the visibility they enjoy in public and business life is perhaps the most important asset that the School has here. Well organised local chapters are testament to the continued affection and esteem members have, sometimes even decades after they graduate. That said, we can do more, much more, to engage with our alumni in compelling ways that keep alive the personal investment they make in a well-deserved reputation that nonetheless needs constant tending.

Currently, LSE's engagement with its 2,390 alumni in India feels intervallic rather than strategic. We run a well-advertised programme that allows visiting academics to engage with local alumni groups, but the take-up rates could certainly be improved. As far as I can see, this is not because our academics are not interested in interacting with alumni groups, but because it is difficult to place tangible value to these interactions since they are not part of a wider reciprocal strategy for engagement. This is something we can and should change at the institutional level.

However, revitalised plans for engagement will need to balance the deeply personal and the intractably institutional. Many of us have links with Indian institutions, key alumni or policymakers and often customise our interaction to involve all three entities. Relationships built over such interactions often remain personal and are not easily translatable to the institutional context. There may also be a reluctance to dilute or over-burden hard won local contacts by opening them up to institution-wide access.

Rules of engagement are crafted with global applicability, so cultural insights become difficult to act upon. I spoke to the Indian representatives of a leading British university about the pre-departure events they organise for students. The events bring alumni and new students together to introduce life in the UK. Also invited, crucially, are Indian parents, who are intricately involved in the choices that their children make and more often than not underwrite or even entirely fund such studies. LSE's own pre-departure events are similarly organised, but attendance is limited to students. This might feel like a minor point, but it is in such details that we lose opportunities to involve stakeholders with significant influence over our future alumni.

Another alumnus tells me that expiry of the LSE email account soon after graduation makes it difficult for alumni to maintain contact with each other. Migration to a system such as Harvard University's post email address will remain a cherished way for alumni to identify themselves as such. Of course, not all problems are as easily fixed. Data protection concerns prevent interested faculty or indeed other alumni from easily accessing the contact details of their peers in a systematic way. Some protection is certainly necessary, but I wonder if we cannot proactively design consent mechanisms to enable us to build meaningful links with our most valuable asset—the goodwill of our alumni.

Recent and startling [research](#) by Professor [Shailendra Mehta](#) appears to show that alumni involvement in governance compared to faculty involvement in governance was a key variable in the success of many American universities run on a not-for-profit basis. Nineteen of the top 20 universities in the US are controlled by alumni gauged by at least 50 per cent representation on Boards of Trustees. Traditionally, alumni involvement in governance has not been a strong point for British universities; 10 of the 27 members of the LSE Council are alumni. There may of course be other explanations (such as size) for the success of American universities, including Yale, Harvard and Princeton, in addition to securing significant alumni involvement in governance. According to Professor Mehta, alumni-dominated governing boards fuel competition for prestige in ways that cannot easily be replicated by faculty-dominated governing boards. Greater involvement of Indian alumni on all fronts – funding, student recruitment, policy engagement and institutional governance – is a strategic opportunity we must explore further.

Return to India At LSE for more updates about Professor Calhoun's trip to India.

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