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Slip of the tongue betrays true quality of elite

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LUND UNIVERSITY

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Lund, Sweden, May 12, 2016.

Dear reader,

This is an op-ed piece I wrote for *Times Higher Education Supplement* ten years ago, back in the heady days when blogs and bloggers were going to transform the world. It was requested by a colleague here on Academia.edu so I'll put it up. Refer to as:

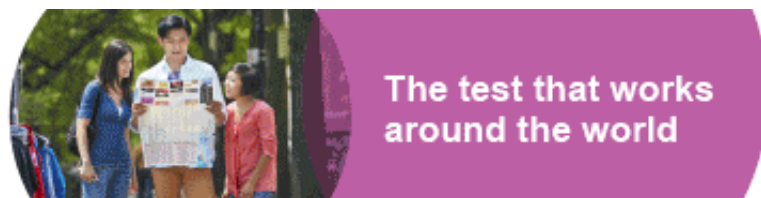
Ringmar, Erik. "Slip of the Tongue Betrays True Quality of Elite." *Times Higher Education Supplement*, August 18, 2006.

There is also, of course, my book on the topic: *A Blogger's Manifesto: Free Speech and Censorship in the Age of the Internet* — [available here](#).

Please get in touch if you have comments: erik@ringmar.net.

yours,

Erik

IELTS™

Slip of the tongue betrays true quality of elite

August 18, 2006



Erik Ringmar defends his comparison of LSE with London Met by arguing only the environment, not the teaching, differs.

What a terrible faux pas! How could I have said such a thing? To declare that "the London School of Economics is no better than the London Met" and at an open day where the whole point is to recruit students?

No surprise that everyone ganged up on me - the convener of my department, the big professors and professor wannabes, assorted administrators and the LSE's director himself. "The LSE no better than the London Met! Is the chap perchance mad?"

During their first year at an elite institution such as the LSE, students spend much of their time asking themselves what all the fuss is about.

They know about its reputation, the famous professors, the important books, the talking heads that constantly pop up on television.

But, the students ask, if the LSE is so great, why are many lecturers so boring, many exercises so useless, and why do the academics never seem to have any time for us?

The truth is, of course, that the in-class experience of an LSE student differs very little from the in-class experience of a student at any other university, including London Metropolitan.

Think about it. University courses are pretty much the same wherever you go.

The same kinds of reading lists contain the same kinds of books; the students tackle the same kinds of exercise and the same kinds of exam questions. Those who claim there are real differences are either deluding themselves or brazenly lying.

The same is true of the lecturers. After all, most of us got our PhDs from the same universities and only luck landed us jobs at institutions such as the LSE rather than elsewhere. And even if LSE academics are, on average, better researchers, they are not necessarily better teachers - and that, in the end, is what matters to students.

In fact, *ceteris paribus*, the more famous the professor, the less time he or she is likely to spend with students.

The conclusion is clear: if you want close interaction with faculty, go to a teaching university. It takes the average undergraduate about three months to figure this out. Yet very few transfer elsewhere. The students come because of the other students, to hook themselves into the network that their university provides.

This is where the LSE really stands out. Its student body makes it vastly different from other universities, not just in the UK but in the world. It has consistently recruited some of the smartest, most interesting, intelligent, rich, successful and all-round attractive people on the planet, the movers and shakers of the future, the cosmocrats.

As an LSE student, you are a part of this extraordinary group. This is the pool from which you draw your friends and lovers.

Compare the LSE and London Met by this standard and you'd be a fool to pick the latter.

But it's also a matter of being certified. When employers pick new staff, the actual content of an education is of little importance.

What an employee needs to know is to a large extent practical, hands-on stuff that universities can't teach you.

Besides, many employers don't trust universities, and so much of what students learn is pretty useless for their working lives.

The reason employers are interested in university-trained people is because they want bright and competitive young men and women who are prepared to subject themselves to hours and hours of mindless exercises under stressful conditions.

By picking the best students from the best universities, they get just this sort of person.

As students and teachers we may rebel against this logic, but there is nothing we can do about it. All we can do is to resign ourselves to the laws of the labour market, and so the LSE becomes a potential student's obvious choice.

An LSE diploma is not so much a proof of what students have learnt as of their ability to come out on top in cut-throat competition with their peers. A London Met diploma just doesn't tell the same story.

Poor old self-important professors, they really think the students show up in order to listen to their ramblings. *Sancta simplicitas!*

Ever since that fateful open-day speech, I have been treated as a whistleblower, as someone who betrayed secrets about the inner workings of one of Britain's most hallowed institutions. How silly. I'm blowing no whistles. I'm much more like a boy innocently commenting on an emperor's choice of clothing, thereby revealing, shall we say, a certain pretentiousness.

Erik Ringmar is professor at the Institute for Social and Cultural Studies at the National Chiao Tung University (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/national-chiao-tung-university>), Hsinchu, Taiwan. He was a senior lecturer in government at the London School of Economics from 1995 to 2006.

His new book, *I'm Blogging This: Free Speech and Censorship in a Digital Age*, is due to be published next year.

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