

# Sexual Harassment at the LSE asks questions of #MeToo



Dr Theodore Piepenbrock, a happily-married father<sup>1</sup> and award-winning academic at the London School of Economics - whose ground-breaking research<sup>2</sup> long-predicted trends including the global financial crisis, Brexit and Trump - was stalked and sexually harassed by an obsessive and unstable American postgraduate student and teaching assistant (TA) who exposed herself to him in a research meeting. Dr Piepenbrock immediately spurned the TA's unwanted advances, terminated her employment with him and filed a sexual harassment grievance against her. In spite of corroborating independent eyewitness evidence, as well as evidence in which the TA admitted her sexual misconduct on social media, the LSE refused to investigate Dr Piepenbrock's grievance and initiated a university-wide cover-up.

The TA inverted the sexual harassment story to her mother in the US who then initiated a false grievance against the innocent Dr Piepenbrock, without her daughter's knowledge and against her wishes. The TA therefore felt she had no choice but to follow through with the false and malicious allegations and she launched an international defamation campaign against the innocent academic. Dr Piepenbrock was immediately presumed to be guilty by the LSE prior to any investigation, punished publicly, harassed and bullied into a career-ending illness.<sup>3</sup>

The TA's false and malicious allegations were eventually determined by the LSE to be not proven and the 30-year-old woman has since left the country and changed her name. The LSE's Director was forced to write a formal apology letter to Dr Piepenbrock<sup>4</sup> before stepping down as the highest-paid Director in the history of the LSE. Multiple senior LSE officials involved with this case have since left the LSE. Dr Piepenbrock has refused to accept the LSE's multiple increasing offers to settle out-of-court and he filed two separate multi-million pound lawsuits against the LSE for the loss of his career, which are believed to be the largest lawsuits of their kind in the history of Higher Education. Dr Piepenbrock, whose public lectures on his ground-breaking research commanded over \$10,000 per hour, intends that the majority of any damages awarded would go to charity and he simply wants to do his small part to ensure that such unethical behaviour does not harm other innocent victims (whether female or male) in the future.

Former Lord Chief Justice Woolf, who famously conducted a high-level inquiry into unethical practices at the LSE, condemned the LSE for lacking a culture of ethics.<sup>5</sup> Dr Piepenbrock's landmark High Court trial is the first test of Lord Woolf's ethics recommendations at the LSE.

In the #MeToo era, when sexual harassment/abuse against women is finally beginning to be rightfully addressed, how do we balance the needs to protect both women and men equally? Is it considered sexual harassment, if a female exposes herself to a male in the workplace? Is it considered oppressive and unacceptable for a female to widely disseminate unproven, career-ending accusations against an innocent male? Has #MeToo gone too far in this instance? Why has the first female Director in the history of the LSE<sup>6</sup> remained silent on this scandal? What will the female High Court judge decide on these critical issues in this landmark trial?

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<sup>1</sup> Dr Piepenbrock has been with his wife, a Professor at the University of Oxford for over 25 years. They have a 15-year-old son.

<sup>2</sup> Dr Piepenbrock's research was initially based at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the University of Oxford.

<sup>3</sup> Although the LSE has ranked as the worst university in the UK for teaching quality in 2017, 2018 and 2019 (ranked last at #127, #129 and #131 respectively) <https://www.thecompleteuniversityguide.co.uk/league-tables/rankings?o=Student+Satisfaction&v=wide>, it ironically harassed and bullied one of its top teaching faculty and winner of the LSE Teaching Prize out of the LSE.

<sup>4</sup> The LSE also offered to pay Dr Piepenbrock's considerable legal fees.

<sup>5</sup> Prior to Dr Piepenbrock's High Court trial, the official website of Lord Woolf's damning findings ([www.woolfse.com](http://www.woolfse.com)) was disabled.

<sup>6</sup> The current LSE Director is the first (non-interim) female Director in the history of the LSE.

## Lord Chief Justice of England and Wales, Harry Woolf

*“A disconcerting number of failures in communication & governance within the LSE.”*

*“The mistakes and errors of judgment go beyond those that could be expected from an institution of the LSE’s distinction.”*

*“The pattern is such that I am driven to the central conclusion that there were shortcomings in the governance structure and management at the LSE.”*

*“It falls down on the first hurdle in not having an embedded Ethics Code, adopted by the institution, which sets out clearly the values, principles & procedures which everyone associated with the LSE ought to comply. The establishment and embedding of this code is the highest priority.”*

*“The onslaught undoubtedly seriously damaged the LSE’s reputation. It caused significant distress to staff, students and academics at the LSE.”*

## Dr Theodore Piepenbrock

*“My family and I are pleased with the outcome of this landmark High Court trial. The judgment that the LSE was found to be in multiple Breaches of its Duty of Care as well as in Breach of Contract is entirely unsurprising as Lord Chief Justice Woolf’s high-profile LSE ethics investigation revealed serious ethics, management and governance failures at the LSE.*

*The High Court’s damning indictment of the LSE is crucial to litigating my upcoming multi-million pound Employment Tribunal case against the LSE. We will also make an appeal to demonstrate that the LSE stalker’s actions were both oppressive and unacceptable and that they caused foreseeable harm.*

*I would also like to thank the Director of the LSE for the formal letter of apology.”*

## Director of the London School of Economics

*“Dear Dr Piepenbrock*

*I have received... the report of the Grievance Panel... to consider your grievances against me and against other employees of the School.*

*Having considered the Grievance Panel’s report and recommendations, I am writing to acknowledge that the Panel concluded that there were failings... I apologise for those failings.*

*I also acknowledge that [the LSE’s investigator]... identified deficiencies in the way in which [the LSE’s HR Director] and others carried out the investigation against you. Again, I am sorry that these deficiencies occurred.”*

# Dr Theodore Piepenbrock v the London School of Economics

## Excerpts from High Court Judgment

***“It is now apparent that she [the Teaching Assistant, Miss D] had become infatuated with the claimant. This was observed by other staff including Professor Saul Estrin, the co-head of the department, who referred to her as showing “dog-like devotion”. (Para. 3).***

***“...Miss D’s style of dress was inappropriate, she would often be in short skirts and low-cut tops. ...Miss D was not dressing appropriately to represent the LSE.” (Para. 84). “...Miss D’s “obsessive” behaviour, her dress and how she acted towards the claimant.” (Para. 85).***

***“Ms Hay [the Manager of the LSE Department of Management] accepted that Miss D did not maintain confidentiality in respect of her allegations... She accepted that the claimant maintained confidentiality throughout. Ms Hay did not think it was right of Miss D to circulate this information. She said she found the behaviour bizarre...” (Para. 102).***

***“Professor Estrin described the claimant as charismatic, a good teacher. He introduced innovative and interesting teaching methods and was successful in delivering a popular and effective programme which had previously had its difficulties. He took the students very seriously and spent a lot of time with them.” (Para. 105).***

***“The claimant was a dedicated and popular Teaching Fellow, he had successfully delivered the course.” (Para. 116).***

***“Mr Gosling [the LSE HR Director stated]... For an academic, if found guilty of harassment and the allegations are sufficiently grave, that would be career ending.” (Paragraph 155). “Mr Gosling accepted that the process... could have been done quicker. The process itself created stress, it is incumbent on those who handle it at a professional level to deal with the matter as expeditiously as possible because they know it will cause stress. It is implicit in the process that what is complained of should remain confidential... if confidentiality is not maintained that can cause stress and distress.” (Para. 156).***

***“Miss D had developed something of an infatuation for the claimant.” (Para. 206).***

***“The evidence of the claimant, Professor Estrin... and Joanne Hay as to Miss D’s previous conduct and dress does provide an evidential basis for finding that if Miss D did behave in a provocative, even sexually provocative manner towards the claimant, it would not be inconsistent with her previous behaviour at the LSE. Miss D had demonstrated that she wished to spend time in the company of the claimant.” (Para. 207).***

***“I accept that Miss D’s conduct in Boston caused the claimant considerable concern.” (Para. 208).***

***“I am satisfied that there was nothing sexual in the claimant’s... requesting these conversations.”*** (Para. 212).

***“There is nothing in the evidence before the court to suggest that the claimant positively encouraged any behaviour or advances by Miss D...”*** (Para. 214).

***“My view is that those [LSE staff] who were purporting to deal with the matter were passing the buck, one to the other, disclaiming any responsibility for decisive action.”*** (Para. 218).

***“Nothing better demonstrates the absence of effective communication between those purporting to manage these issues at the LSE than the content of those redactions, namely the evidence of... the witness the claimant had urged the defendant to contact and from whom he had supplied a statement to the defendant.”*** (Para. 220).

***“This may well demonstrate a lack of insight on her [Miss D’s] part as to what is appropriate conduct...”*** (Para. 227).

***“Miss D should not have disseminated her complaint...”*** (Para. 230).

***“In my judgment there were a series of failures on the part of the defendant to properly manage the complaint of Miss D... with the result that the process was unnecessarily protracted, its length was compounded by the failure to take any effective steps to stop Miss D disseminating her complaint to staff and students at the LSE at a time when the claimant was ignorant of it. Each of these failures represented a breach of the duty of care owed by the defendant to the claimant.”*** (Para. 231).

***“She [Miss D] should have been told that the matter was confidential and should not be disseminated...”*** (Para. 232).

***“The delay in serving the redacted complaint together with the further delay in serving the unredacted complaint represent breaches of the duty of care which the defendant owed to the claimant.”*** (Para. 232).

***“The nature of Miss D’s complaint was serious and had the potential to severely harm, possibly end, the claimant’s employment with the defendant. Mr Gosling accepted that such a complaint would cause stress for the person against whom it was alleged. Knowing of the stress and anxiety which such a complaint could cause it was incumbent on the defendant to proceed as expeditiously as possible with the complaint and for the reasons identified above this it failed to do. The delay was compounded by Miss D’s dissemination of the complaint and the defendant’s failure to promptly stop that dissemination. In my judgment it was foreseeable that the delay in November, when the claimant was becoming aware that others knew something which he did not, was a situation which was likely to cause stress and anxiety.”*** (Para. 243).