

The influence of participation in national societies on the student experience of LSE international undergraduates

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Project description

It seems common for international students to seek contact with their co-nationals while at university abroad, especially in their first weeks of university. Given the common background, culture and language, and very often prior acquaintances, co-nationals seem like a safe group of students to turn to when the first flash of homesickness comes. National student societies provide a forum for meeting and maintaining contact with friends that come from the same country, which is often helpful, as it gives the students a this particular, origin-based type of the sense of belonging they lose when they leave their home country. On the other hand though, these communities may also provide foundations for international students to cluster in national bubbles, preventing them from immersing in the breadth of cultural diversity, which is often cited as one of the reasons for which students decide on going abroad in the first place. It is not uncommon to spot groups of nationals chatting in their own language for the whole of lunch break at the campus, which is, of course, perfectly understandable and acceptable on one hand, but on the other not as inclusive as it could be, because by sticking with their co-nationals, students not only miss out on international acquaintances, but also discourage others from getting familiar with their culture as well. Therefore, it is worth asking whether sticking to your co-nationals, which is partly endorsed by the existence of national societies, is overall a beneficial phenomenon, or does it hinder the university experience in closing some individuals to forming new connections and exiting their comfort zone of hanging out with co-nationals or even friends whom they have known for some years already and with whom they went abroad to the same university.

Methodology

The research focuses on qualitative analysis based on deep interviews with 2nd and 3rd year undergraduate LSE students. This should allow for analysis of the experience of students that have already been through the majority of their studies at LSE, and who have already been heavily involved in their national/cultural societies. The interviews are based on 5 broad questions:

1. What were your main motives for coming to study in London, and at LSE in particular? Take into account various factors that have had an impact on your decision to apply and choose your place of study, and please describe this impact.
2. How did you decide to join your national/cultural society at LSE? What factors did you take into account and what did you expect from this particular community?

3. Judging on your closest group of friends at university (say 5-10 closest people), how many of them are from the same cultural/national background as you are? How do you approach this ratio and did it have an impact on your experience and development, and how? How would you describe your attitude to the personal connections you've made during your time at LSE?
4. Please describe the nature and amount of duties you have had while being involved in your national society and the impact they have had on how you managed your time, studies and other parts of your life. How does this experience compare to other activities you have been involved in while at LSE?
5. Are you thinking of coming back to your home country after finishing your studies? Do you think that your involvement in the national community is a factor that will have an impact on your future career, and in what ways?

Each of the interviews naturally evolved in its own, distinct way, subject to the responses of the interviewees. The interviewees have been members of the LSE SU Polish Business Society, the LSE SU German Society, and the LSE SU Chinese Society.

Conclusions and recommendations

Question 1: Most interviewees underlined the importance of international exposure in deciding to come to London, and to LSE in particular. LSE was, however, often the only school they have applied to in London, which they have mainly explained by the School's strong background and performance in their chosen subject.

Recommendations: This responses to this question highlighted that the students, if they get involved in their national societies, are willing to have a more international experience when they come to university. It would, therefore, be best to promote cooperation between different national and other types of societies to take advantage of the national societies' structures in building an international community at LSE.

Question 2: Most students did not have any expectations in regard to their national societies, and these societies were usually one of the many communities they have entered during or after the freshers' fair. Importantly, most students got involved in their national societies because of social aspects – they initially started to get involved through social events organised by the national communities and through friends from the same background as theirs, and only then ended up as part of the committee around their 2nd year.

Recommendations: National and cultural societies seem to be better at socialising and linking people of similar background. This suggests that perhaps other societies could put more emphasis on integrating and socialising 1st year students, perhaps in cooperation with national societies. This could be done with the help of SU, who could link the committee representatives responsible for the "events" part of the societies' activity.

Question 3: Most interviewees have at least a half of their closest friends at university coming from the same country as theirs. They are usually satisfied with these ratio, although some of them feel that they may have had a more international experience at LSE. On the other hand, they highlight that people from their national background are often great help in

career advice and mentoring, since co-nationals tend to help each other out when it comes to career and life in London.

Recommendations: The responses to this questions suggest that even though national societies are not career-oriented societies by definition, they are still a great help the it comes to linking students with alumni who have gone onto successful careers after graduation. Career-oriented societies could, therefore, co-operate with national societies in this respect to help link students with more senior students and alumni.

Question 4: During the period they have been most involved in their national community (usually the 2nd year), the national societies took a considerable amount of work and time from the students' schedules (usually at least a few hours a week, very often at least an hour each day in the most intense periods, such as when preparing for the organisation of the German Symposium or the Polish Economic Forum). During this time the students naturally tended to spend more time with their co-nationals, cutting down on other activities and even contacts. Sports societies have been listed as the communities that linked international students well.

Recommendations: When organising big events, there could be more co-operation between the national and other societies. Incorporating e. g. career-oriented international societies into the national societies' projects could not only make the events more worth-while and interesting, but also could bring together students of various background interested in similar topics and help confront the developments in particular countries with a more international perspective on the matters debated during the forums. Sports and leisure societies, aside from their main activity, could also be even more appreciated as the communities that link students and could benefit from help from the SU in organising social events, as they seem good at integrating students across years, departments, and nationalities.

Question 5: Most interviewees say they are considering coming back to their home country, but usually not directly after university – most would like to work in London or travel somewhere else first. Nevertheless, interviewees tended to admit that the links they have made through their national societies give them perspectives or contacts they could potentially take advantage of when they come back to their home countries. This indicates that national societies have the advantage of linking them with professionals and employers back home, which could potentially facilitate careers in the future.

Recommendations: Being involved in one's national community does not seem to promote a tendency to come back home after studies – rather, it can potentially facilitate one's transition back to their home country in the future, which suggests that national societies are perhaps good at linking alumni with students and in fostering relations between students across years and generations. The School could look more closely into how national societies promote this mechanism and whether other communities also act as linkages for students after university. National and other, e. g. career-oriented societies could co-operate to help build a strong alumni network that would be both international and inter-sectoral in terms of employment and plans post-graduation.