

How do commuting master's students understand and create a sense of community and social life at the LSE?

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Background

Because of our own experiences as commuting students, we wanted to understand how commuting master's students created or perceived a sense of community and social life within the university, given the limited amount of time they had to develop social relationships. Commuting students are an understudied and often an unacknowledged population, and thus their experiences need research attention. Within this study, we defined commuting students as those living in travel zone 3 and beyond, who travelled to university for at least 2-3 days a week. To establish what is meant by 'social life,' we inquired about departmental events, LSE-hosted events, and clubs/societies.

Methodology

We interviewed nine master's students from four different departments (Psychological and Behavioural Science, Health Policy, Social Policy, and International Development), who commuted from zone 3 and beyond. To recruit participants, we emailed different departments who helped us to get in contact with students who met the eligibility criteria. We conducted semi-structured interviews using a topic guide. All interviews were conducted and recorded on Zoom due to the COVID-19 social distancing measures; participants gave their verbal consent at the beginning of the interview. We used thematic analysis to analyse the data (Attride-Stirling, 2001). There were several challenges to our study. Initially, we were planning to have participants complete a photo-journal of their busiest day on campus as well as conducting interviews. However, due to the coronavirus lockdown, campus was closed, and everything took place online, thus we dropped the photo-journal. Additionally, with the limited number of participants, we were not able to get a holistic view of departmental impact on the students' sense of community.

Literature Review

"Sense of belonging [is] defined as student's sense of being accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment" (Goodenow, 1993 p. 80). Student identity, engagement and motivation are highly dependent on the degree to which students feel a sense of belonging (Ostrove, Stewart & Curtin, 2011), and are crucial in shaping their success within their course (Lent, Brown & Gore, 1997). Sense of belonging can be developed and enhanced through activities such as participating in induction weeks, extracurricular activities and university sponsored events; these kinds of events can also provide a sense of camaraderie between peers (Alfano & Eduljee, 2013; Matheson & Sutcliffe, 2018). However, commuting students have limited access to these

activities as they have reported spending time on campus only to go to class (Fernandes et al., 2017). Commuting students are also less likely to report attending university-sponsored events (Newbold, Mehta, & Forbus, 2011). There are several reasons behind the decreased engagement of commuting students: students who live off-campus often have a full-time job and are not employed by campus organisations, and their ability to participate in campus life is also affected by family responsibilities, transportation, and time and financial constraints (Burlison, 2015).

However, previous research does not consider commuting Master's students and their experiences. Additionally, the majority of the studies were conducted in small cities in the United States. Thus, more research on these students in the UK context and specifically about London is needed.

Data Analysis

We found three core themes when analysing the data: Inclusion, Effects of Commuting, and Involvement with Events/Departments.

Inclusion: Participants expressed feelings of being invisible and unacknowledged as commuting students. They also reported a lack of diversified events, such as non-alcoholic events and family-oriented events.

P4: "...this was the first time that I had actually been acknowledged... I felt like it was almost like an assumption that everyone lived within Zone 1, Zone 2. And I... didn't feel like anyone acknowledged that there was a significant journey for some of us."

Effects of Commuting: Participants reported multiple effects of commuting such as being unable to stay out late, having to plan in advance for social events, and putting in more personal effort to socialise.

P7: "...I have to plan depending on how late it [event] runs, or what clothes I may need to change into or organising staying over with a friend and with that carrying overnight things... so it does definitely impact my ability to agree to spontaneous events... [it] relies on me planning my socialising."

Involvement with Events/Departments: Participants expressed that they built communities at LSE through interactions at departmental events, Student Union services (sports clubs, societies, SU gym), LSE services (public lectures, Faith Centre, Language Centre) and even through communal spaces on campus. Participants expressed feeling like they belong more to their department than to LSE as a whole. Participants also shared criticisms about LSE events and societies:

P3: "I find this with department run things and also Student Union run things is that they don't give people enough notice to make plans. If you are a commuter, you tend to plan your week a lot more."

P5: "I wanted to attend a lot of public lectures by famous professors, but tickets ran out very fast... there are queues for these events usually from 7 AM when people queue for these tickets but I'm not at the university... so I couldn't attend these events."

Findings

All participants reported feeling part of a community in their department, but not a part of LSE. The findings partially match previous literature stating that students are less willing to attend events due to the length of their commute. However, it contrasts previous literature stating that more engagement with university services resulted in feelings of belonging and community; we found that none of the participants felt like they belonged to LSE, even those who had studied here as undergraduates.

Recommendations

These recommendations have been created through participant feedback about how to improve events and foster belonging:

- LSE should vary event times to allow more students to attend.
- LSE should create a "Bring Your Family to University" Day to integrate students' families into the LSE community.
- LSE should find a balance between events involving alcohol and not involving alcohol to be considerate towards other students' religious or personal beliefs (e.g., café days, brunch events).
- LSE should provide sleeping spaces/rooms on campus to allow students to stay overnight if needed.
- LSE should better advertise services and spaces useful to commuting students such as lockers, showers, refrigerator and microwave locations.
- The Student Union should include events and activities specifically targeted at postgraduates, as participants reported that they were overwhelmingly only attended by undergraduates.
- LSE should notify students about events well in advance.
- Event ticketing could be moved online so that students do not have to collect tickets in person, which can be difficult for commuting students.

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