

## **Finding undergraduate students' expectations for the Academic Mentor (AM) programme in the Department of Economics and the impacts of AM on the sense of community**

Callum Renton, Salma Rizkia Ichwan, Tianyun Liu

See this project presented by the researchers: <https://youtu.be/szQIIQe57hg>  
If this project has informed your practice, let us know at [lse.changemakers@lse.ac.uk](mailto:lse.changemakers@lse.ac.uk)

### **Research questions**

What is the role of Academic Mentors in promoting a sense of community among undergraduate students in the Economics Department?

Given that many students do not meet their Academic Mentors, what are the students' expectations for the relationship? Why do they not meet them?

### **Background**

#### **Motivations**

A series of factors motivated our project: (1) NSS Survey data shows relatively low student satisfaction within the Economics department and LSE more broadly; (2) Peer feedback indicates low satisfaction towards the AM programme; (3) The Department reports that many students meet their AMs less than twice per term, which is lower than the suggested frequency. (4) The Department seeks to maximize student experience given the current resources.

#### **Key Definitions**

- Sense of community - A sense of belonging to all of The Student Body, The Department of Economics, The LSE more generally.
- A sense of belonging is characterised by feeling positively connected, involved and welcomed by the relevant groups.
- 'Students' refers to undergraduate students in the Department of Economics.

### **Methodology**

#### **Focus groups**

We conducted 3 focus groups in total, each with 3 third-year students, 4 second-year students and 3 second-year students. The questions were semi-structured as a deviation from planned questions was permitted to gauge sentiment. The duration varied from 35 minutes to an hour.

#### **Survey**

The survey consists of 21 questions and are divided into 3 sections: (1) Current mentor/mentee relationships; (2) Expectations (3) Engagement with LSE and the sense of community. We obtained 89 complete responses from 26 first-year students, 30 second-year students and 33 third-year students.

## One-to-one interviews

Three individual interviews with first-year students, and one with a third-year student, using the same semi-structured questions as the focus groups. The duration of these interviews was around 40 minutes.

## Key Findings

### 1. How students formed expectations for the mentor/mentee relationship:

**Most students do not understand the full responsibilities of AMs.**

Four students being interviewed said that they do not understand the responsibilities at all. More students have a limited understanding of them. Many students said that they did not understand the role of AM after reading the initial email from the department introducing the programme.

**Students form their expectations based on friends' experiences (including external to LSE) or previous experiences with mentors.**

### 2. Students' expectations for the mentor/mentee relationship and AMs:

**Students would like to have a friend-like relationship with their AM.**

Many students report that they feel the relationship is "not personal" and that they would like the relationship to be more informal and personal.

*"I am the one doing the talking. Not much two-way communication." -- 1A*

*"[I would like to know] more about the mentor himself. I feel like I don't know him on a personal level." -- 3A*

**Students expect the AMs to take initiative in their relationships**

Many students expressed that they expected their AM to put in more effort into this relationship.

*"More emails from the AM may encourage more meetings because in this way the mentors would appear more approachable." -- 3B*

**Students expect the AMs to have rich knowledge about LSE.**

Students expect the AM to have very in-depth knowledge about studying at LSE, such as course choices and society choices.

*Student 1B said "My mentor is a PhD student who didn't do her undergraduate at LSE, so it limits the effectiveness. I'd meet her more if she is more helpful." He also mentioned that he wants to have very detailed "module choice advice - difficulty, usefulness for the following years, how these courses integrate, the tactic of when to do easy modules and hard modules etc."*

### 3. Students' expectations for the format of AM meetings:

The majority of students would like to have meetings that last 10 - 20 minutes.

49% of survey respondents would like to have 2 compulsory meetings per term.

72% of survey respondents would like to have lunch socials with their AM and other mentees.

56% of survey respondents would like the AM to initiate routine meetings.

45% of survey respondents do not want to have group meetings. 43% of survey respondents would like to have group meetings, but with the choice to arrange one-to-one meetings.

Academic advice, career advice and the sense of community are the top three objectives that students want to gain from the AM programme.

#### **4. Students' current experience with the AM programme:**

##### **The relationship feels forced and awkward.**

Students report that they feel the relationship only exists because it is required by the Department. Some students report that they get "routine" questions in every meeting and many students share the view that *"I feel like AMs don't really care about me, and don't really want to see us."*

##### **Students are introduced to wider opportunities by the AMs.**

Students report that their AMs introduced them to Masters programmes and research opportunities.

##### **The importance of UG Tutors.**

A common pattern we found in our interviewees was that for second and third-year students, if the AM is also a UG Tutor, the individual generally feels satisfied with the relationship. Otherwise they feel the relationship is formal and disengaged. In addition, many students have a closer relationship with their UG Tutor than their AMs.

##### **Conflicts between the responsibilities of AM.**

AMs have the responsibility to check students' attendance in class. However, this makes students "afraid" or "careful" when meeting their AMs.

##### **Introducing the AM programme with the First Year Challenge makes students feel more engaged.**

Current first-year and second-year students were required to complete the First Year Challenge with their AMs, which makes them feel the initial contact is more "friendly" and "engaging".

#### **5. The barriers that prevent mentor/mentee relationships from working as expected:**

##### **AMs are too busy to pay enough attention to each student.**

AMs are assigned with too many mentees and they have other work, which prevents them from maintaining a close relationship with mentees.

##### **Students do not understand how to make use of the relationship.**

When asked what prevented them from having an ideal relationship with their AMs, 18 survey respondents chose "I do not know what to discuss with my mentor."

##### **Students have a passive role in the mentor/mentee relationship.**

61% of the survey respondents did not communicate their expectations for the relationship with their AMs. Our interview data show that students expect more efforts from the AMs and they lack the willingness to improve their relationships with the AM.

##### **Changing AM in different academic years.**

#### **6. The role of the mentor in the students' sense of community:**

##### **AMs are the main connection for most students to the Department.**

Students reported wanting their mentor's role to expand further into the community as a means of improving their sense of belonging to the Department.

### AMs offer a support network for students.

Whilst virtually all interviewees were unaware of the official responsibilities of their AM, most were reassured by the existence of the programme. Notably, those with their UG tutor as their AM reported feeling more comfortable

### Students enlarged their social circles due to the AM programme.

Students with their UG Tutor as their AM made connections with other Economics students through their mentor.

## Recommendations

### Mentor/mentee Relationship

- **Mentors should put more emphasis on building relationships with the students in their first year.**

The beginning of first-year is the optimal time to make an impact on students and Academic Mentoring should play an immediate role. (1) Mentors should be the first contact from LSE well before arrival; (2) Socials should be organised with mentors during LT week 1; (3) Mentors should aim to involve themselves more in students' lives in the first year.

- **Educate students on how to fully utilise the AM programme**
  - An email at the start of every year to remind the students of the topics that AMs can help students with. For instance, 1st year: transitioning to uni life, course choices. 2nd year: internships, Master/PhD Application
  - A video featuring senior students talking about their experience with the AM programme
- **Create a system where all students have only one academic mentor throughout their time at the LSE, unless exceptional circumstances occur.**

66 out of 89 survey respondents feel that they want to have the same mentor for the duration of their study at the LSE.
- **Increase incentives for AMs to better fulfil their responsibilities.**

AMs are busy and need motivations to work well with the students. The Department could set up an award for the best AM of the year.
- **Consider expanding the UG tutor roles with assistant staff.**

Our focus groups indicated a large discrepancy in actual/perceived treatment between students that have UG tutors as their mentor and those that do not. Increasing the number of staff dedicated to mentoring would provide an effective solution.

### Sense of Community

- **Introduce a family system in the economics department**

The family system provides the opportunity for first-year students to have contacts with the people who have been in their shoes, and as they become 2nd and 3rd year they will help the new students adjust to university life. Having a consistent group of people in the department that students belong to will help build a sense of community in the department. AMs can monitor that these meetings happen regularly.

- **Keep having socials with AM and other mentees**  
Small group socials with other students who have the same AM can help students connect with each other. 72% of survey respondents would like to have lunch socials with their AM and other mentees.
- **Continue the first-year challenge - but increase mentor involvement**  
First-year challenge provided opportunities for students to meet their fellow coursemates and AMs, allowing students to find their community. Mentor engagement with the challenge is inconsistent yet provides an opportunity for students to connect with the department.
- **Consider space as an alternative method for improving a sense of community.**  
Although not directly relevant, nor sought after, students regularly commented on the lack of dedicated space for Economics students. It is believed that a physical space purely for students in the department to socialise would improve their sense of community. Students describe the bean counter, an example of a current social space, as “totally overpriced”