

Enhancing Participation in Classes and Seminars

Aleema Arfat

Accompanying student and staff quick guides based on this project are available from <https://info.lse.ac.uk/current-students/part-of-lse/change-makers/research-gallery/Class-participation-project>

Background

My research project has focused upon and explored a matter that is very close to my heart, that is the topic of class / seminar participation. Being a student, who has always been shy and nervous in articulating her views in classes and seminars, has undoubtedly been the primary reason for my enthusiasm to study this issue. In addition, classes and seminars unquestionably form a key part of studying at LSE, wherein discussion of the key debates surrounding a particular topic take place. If students are not able to participate for various reasons, this is likely to impact one's experience of what the LSE is all about.

My research question is: **Which factors encourage and discourage class / seminar participation?** This specific question has been the key aspect of my study because I have aspired to, via the knowledge of these factors, produce a set of recommendations for students and teachers to draw upon in classes / seminars that can help in improving participation.

Methodology

To gather my data, I used two research methods: surveys and semi-structured interviews. The surveys consisted of quantitative and qualitative questions; the semi-structured interviews focused on the experiences of the participants, a form of qualitative data. I received 23 survey responses, from which 6 students were interviewed. In order to analyse my data, I employed the approach of "thematic analysis", whereby I read through the responses and grouped them into various themes, for instance, factors relating to the teacher, to the students themselves, and to the class itself.

In addition, I explored the data collected by the Teaching Quality Assurance and Review Office (TQARO) at LSE. In specific, I examined the connection between three factors and class participation with regards to five different departments, which is presented via a chart (see Figure 1).

Findings

I begin by discussing the results from my exploration of the data from TQARO, which reflects that despite the fact that students are highly pleased with there being seminars for their lectures, with the readings lists, and with the teacher's efforts in terms of involving students, their personal contribution seems to be lower than the rating of these factors. My research has thus been beneficial in bringing forth the various factors that may account for this lower participation.

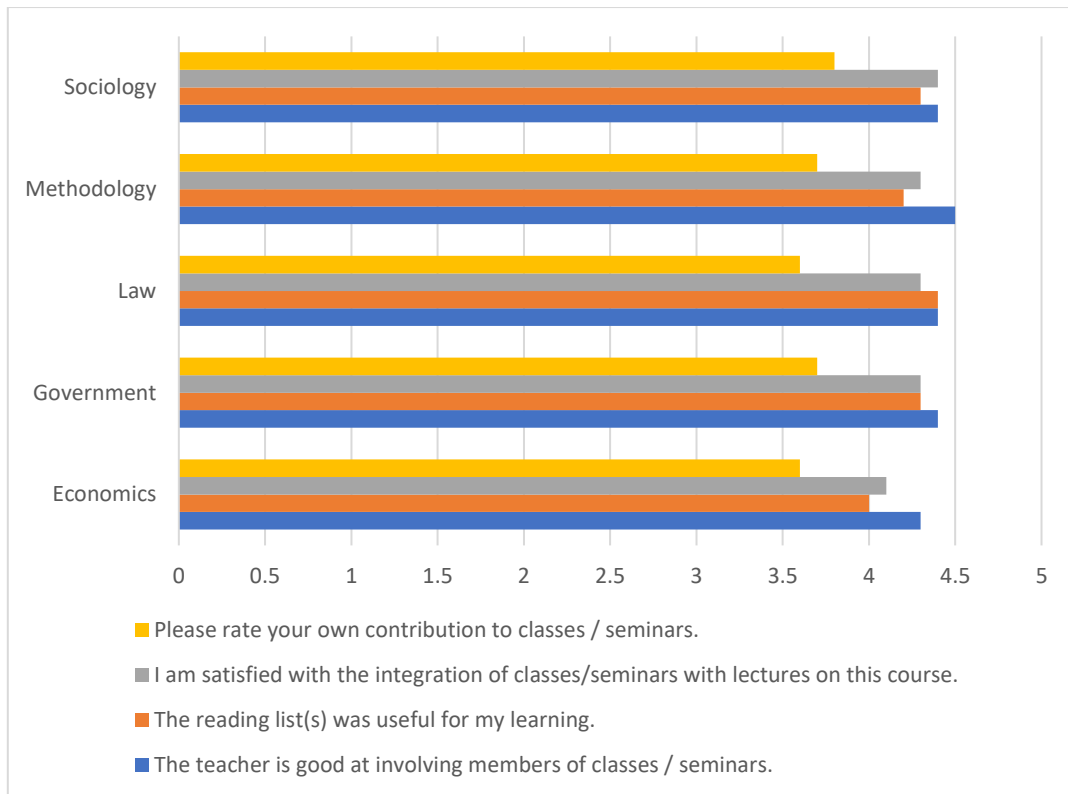


Figure 1: Source: LSE TQARO Results for Class Survey (Lent Term 2019)

My survey reveals that 39% found class / seminar participation as “probably” being important in succeeding and 35% found it as “definitely” being crucial in succeeding. This indicates that students see it as a vital element, which further implies that there must surely be other factors that may discourage class / seminar participation; the survey and the interviews uncovered several of these. Nonetheless, due to the space constraints, I will present some of the factors that are seen as crucial by a number of students (points 1, 3, 4), those that are noteworthy, even though not mentioned several times (2, 6, a, b, c, d (merges 3 factors), e, f, g (merges 2 factors), h), and a factor that is interesting and was unexpected (5).

Which factors encourage class / seminar participation?

1. Completing the readings
2. Teacher allowing discussion / participation
3. Knowing who the students in class / seminar are
4. Small classes / seminars
5. Small room makes it a comfortable setting
6. Organisation of classroom – for instance, circular tables

Which factors discourage class / seminar participation?

- a) Anxiety and stress
- b) Having an introvert nature
- c) Teachers who respond to students in an impolite manner
- d) Students who are judgemental / over-competitive / keep talking
- e) Students not raising hand
- f) Raised hand is not acknowledged
- g) Reading lists that are long / complicated readings
- h) Wanting to listen to other students

“...the classroom size and the classroom environment plays a part in me feeling comfortable ...which effects...whether, I would...even raise my hand to ask questions.”

Recommendations

For my recommendations, I have created two separate guides, for both students and teachers. In this section, I have laid certain points from the guides. Before doing so, I present the steps that the LSE should take in light of my findings. These recommendations are based on the factors above, as well as, upon the views and experiences of and recommendations provided by my participants.

What next steps should the LSE take?

- > Encourage students and teachers to use the guides as a reference for classes / seminars – perhaps, the guides for teachers can be incorporated in the training of teachers, whilst the guides for students can be provided to them at the start of their year.
- > Ensure that the actual classrooms relate to the size of the group of students (i.e. smaller classrooms for smaller groups)
- > Ensure that classes are small
- > Class arrangements that allow participation – for instance, circular tables and not rows

What should students do?

- > Complete their readings / work beforehand
- > Give others a chance to speak and listen to their views
- > Be respectful towards the views of other students

What should the class / seminar teachers do?

- > Provide guidance on approaching complicated texts
- > Emphasise the key values and expected behaviour, such as, respect; kindness; raising hands
- > Acknowledge students raising their hands and respond positively to their views
- > Involve all / quiet and shy students – e.g. discuss their participation with them; group work

Acknowledgements

A huge and a heartfelt thank you to my family, who have continuously supported me throughout this project. A sincere thank you to Claire Gordon, the head of the Eden Centre, who encouraged me to do a Change Makers project and provided her kind support. In addition, I would like to truly thank the Change Makers team, including Ellis Saxey and Lydia Halls, as well as, the Data Library, who have constantly dealt with my endless queries. A warm thank you to my supervisor, Aiko Holvikivi, whose guidance has been enlightening. Lastly, a sincere thank you to my participants for their thoughtful contributions and insights. Overall, I am thrilled to have been given the opportunity to be a Change Maker at the LSE.