

CHANGE MAKERS PROJECT 2019/20

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The undergraduate social transition into LSE

What is the student experience of the transition into LSE and how can this be improved to enhance a sense of belonging in the undergraduate population?

1. Introduction

Our project will focus on the transition of first year students in MT. We began this project as first year students about to complete our first term, who came together to address a shared concern about the quality of the first term experience. We finish this project as students finishing the end of the second academic year, reflecting on our mutually challenging experience of the university transition with a determination to address our persisting concern. The issue we intend to investigate is the **facilitation of initial transitional provision of pastoral support from LSE** to help freshers feel settled and begin to develop a sense of belonging. We conclude by recommending the implementation of an **undergraduate student family system**.

Our research first examines the **problem of the transition**. We initially identify and examine the difficulties of the **university transition** more broadly. After reviewing relevant literature, we turn to examine the overall picture of LSE student wellbeing and community to illustrate and problematise the **'support deficiency'** which exists in the LSE student community. Our research aims to address potential efforts to address this problem **within the university as a whole**, rather than within individual departments or halls, to encompass the overall student experience.

We follow this with our own **quantitative survey**, which examines the prevalence of this support deficiency within the transitional experience of first year students. This explores the **overwhelming environment encountered** by 'freshers' during Michaelmas and their **lack of access** to existing pastoral support systems. It identifies (a) barriers which prevent struggling first year students from accessing support (b) the absence of connections between first year and older students and (c) the utility and benefit students did derive from building a **meaningful connection** with an older student and seeking support.

Secondly, we reflect on these issues and results to both discuss and **test a solution**. Bringing together the survey and literature review, we propose an undergraduate family system. We set out by examining existing literature and studies on the benefits of **peer-to-peer mentoring**, as well as mapping the features of existent **UK 'family systems'** in other top universities. We bring these together to design and qualitatively test a **pilot family system** with real first year undergraduates over the course of Michaelmas Term 2019 (11 weeks).

Our pilot analysis brings together our own **personal anthropological reflections** as older 'parent' students, observational outcomes and features of the system (codified from recorded transcripts of family sessions), as well as **explicit feedback** from the 'children' participants. Our pilot experience unquestionably indicates that this system would provide **significant benefit and improvement** to the undergraduate transitional experience to the LSE, as well as **alleviate the support deficiency** within the student community more broadly.

Overall, our project represents a sustained effort to refine and improve the efforts of the LSE to better **nurture the student spirit of belonging**, particularly from the outset of undergraduate study. Within the context of tackling the **persistent problem of loneliness** at the LSE, our project seeks to identify and reduce the generalised overwhelm which characterises the transitional student experience.

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1. Problem: our own experiences

Nancy

Michaelmas term was easily the most hectic, confusing and overwhelming experience of my life. Transitioning into an academically intense university culture and finding my own feet was disorientating and difficult. I was struck by the notable absence of institutionalised support for freshers grappling with the plethora of challenges faced in this period of change and adjustment. Whilst support existed for specific 'issues' to be reached out to in times of crisis, there was no real support system or guidance for the everyday challenges.

I was extremely lucky to know a law student in third year, who I reached out to regularly for academic help, emotional reassurance, lifestyle guidance. This direct, holistic support from someone who had done it before was genuinely

Natalia

As an international student, coming to the LSE was without doubt the biggest 360 of my life. Not only did it mean starting university but moving to a different country where I knew no one. The first couple of weeks I especially struggled to find out where and what events were taking place. Later in the term I realised Facebook pages were the key but knowing this earlier on would have been appreciated. Nevertheless, socially, I believe I was in a position of advantage as I was accommodated in the biggest undergraduate LSE halls where numerous social events took place. Reflecting back, I can't imagine how sad and lonely people in other halls or living at home would've felt. This propelled the idea of establishing a family system which would smoothen this challenging transition.

Academically, I experienced the most frustrating experience of my life. I felt completely lost and overwhelmed by the difficulty of the modules and getting to grasp the university

'life-saving' throughout MT. However, I grew concerned that many would not have this connection with an older student to guide them through these trying times. Whilst I was aware that different peer support systems existed in various departments, I sensed that more could be done to better support the transitional period.

dynamics. I was well aware that LSE had several schemes in place to try and help, however none of them seemed to actually work or even take place. I found myself stopping anyone in the library who seemed like they studied my degree and asking them if what I was going through was normal. What I needed was someone in the year above telling me everything was going to be fine.

2. Literature review

a. Experience of the university transition

It is widely acknowledged in broader literature that the student transition to university is challenging and requires support structures to alleviate the difficulties of settling into a new academic and social environment (*Briggs et al, 2012*)¹. Open questions regarding a students' identity, academic writing, academic progression and what the university 'is', remain ill-defined and hinder a students' transition and academic progress (*Gourlay, 2009*)². Beginning university consists of complex paths of risk and responsibility for new students (*Christie, 2008*)³, and during transition students can often feel 'disempowered, lack confidence and feel completely unprepared for university study' (*Hirst et al, 2004*)⁴.

Regarding the academic transition, it is noted that students can struggle to 'decode' new and unfamiliar practice, experiencing confusion or mixed messages regarding academic conventions; many of which are implicit or 'hidden' within the new curriculum (*Burke and Hermerschmidt, 2005*⁵; *Gourlay, 2009*). Students' transition experience involves navigating "the demands of balancing this against competing priorities such as family, work and the social aspect of university life" and access to "emotional resources" (*Gibson et al, 2017*)⁶. Student resource concerns primarily pertain to immediate day to day existence, sustenance, space to study and time to develop the required 'cultural capital' (*Moore 2012*⁷; *Gibson et al 2017*).

Gibson's study also detailed a "sense that individuals feel isolated in decisions around the need to support their journey to becoming a student, part of the wider agenda to position education as an individual, rather than a collective good"⁸. Indeed, *Brigg's* (2012) student respondents noted chiefly that they wanted to be treated as individuals, not as 'items' in a vast system. Further, it is also suggested that "the actual experiences of students entering university have somehow failed to attract the level of

¹ Briggs et al, "Building Bridges: Understanding Student Transition to University." (2012) *Quality in Higher Education* 18 (1): 3–21

² Gourlay, "Threshold Practices: Becoming a Student Through Academic Literacies." (2009) *London Review of Education* 7 (2): 181–192.

³ Christie et al "A Real Rollercoaster of Confidence and Emotions': Learning to be a University Student." (2008) *Studies in Higher Education* 33: 567–581.

⁴ Hirst et al, "Repositioning Academic Literacy: Charting the Emergence of a Community of Practice." (2004) *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy* 27 (1): 66–80.

⁵ Burke & Hermerschmidt, *Deconstructing Academic Practices Through Self-reflexive Pedagogies. Literacies Across Educational Contexts: Mediating Learning and Teaching* (2005, Philadelphia: Caslon) Press.

⁶ Gibson et al, "Exploring transitions into the undergraduate university world using a student-centred framework" (2017) *Teaching in Higher Education: Critical perspectives* 24(7)

⁷ Moore, "Capital." In *Pierre Bourdieu: Key Concepts* (2012) edited by M. Grenfell, 98–113. Durham: Acumen.

⁸ Ibid, p 823

academic scrutiny that is necessary to appreciate this transition” (Owens, 2009)⁹, providing further rationale for this area of study.

b. Utility of family systems

Next, we examined existing academic literature on the utility of ‘family’ support systems at university for tackling these transitional strains.

There is a bulk of evidence to suggest that student peer networks and mentoring is a beneficial approach to supporting the student transition. Networks of student support amongst students, or ‘social capital’ (Ribchester, Ross & Rees, 2014)¹⁰ is widely highlighted as a crucial aspect of success when making the transition into the student world (Gibson et al, 2017¹¹; Tinto, 1997; Maunder et al 2013). Interactions with student peers are in fact key to the process of new starters developing a ‘self concept’ of themselves as students at university (Briggs et al, 2012)¹²

However, honing in specifically on the utility student ‘family’ or mentoring systems, there exists a significant body of literature which explored as a one strong solution to help students meet transitional challenges and enhance the first year experience (Glaser et al 2006¹³, Elliott 1994¹⁴, Hall 2003¹⁵, Hall 2000¹⁶). Family mentoring programs are cited as having a number of benefits for both the first year student and the more experienced student mentor. The multitude of benefits for first years in transition include: preventing the negative effects of stress (Jacobi, 1991¹⁷); academic success (Rodger & Tremblay, 2003¹⁸); enhancing the sense of belonging and identity with the university (Evans & Peel, 1999¹⁹); early access to information about resources on campus (Clark & Crome, 2004²⁰); and initial social connection (Pope & Van Dyke, 1999²¹).

A study undertaken by Hall (2000) makes the suggestion that (1) students having difficulties with the university transition actually made little use of support services on campus, but where they did, (2) their **fellow students** were their most used source of support. Moreover, (3) the use and helpfulness of fellow students was a significant distinguishing factor between students who made a successful transition from those who did not. Therefore, (4) mentoring programs might be an effective way to link students to

⁹ Palmer, O’Cane & Owens “Betwixt Spaces: Student Accounts of Turning Point Experiences in the First-year Transition.” (2009) *Studies in Higher Education* 34: 37–54.

¹⁰ Ribchester, Ross & Rees, “Examining the Impact of pre-Induction Social Networking on the Student Transition into Higher Education.” (2014) *Innovations in Education and Teaching International* 51 (4): 355–365

¹¹ Gibson et al, “Exploring transitions into the undergraduate university world using a student-centred framework” (2017) *Teaching in Higher Education: Critical perspectives* 24(7)

¹² Briggs et al, “Building Bridges: Understanding Student Transition to University.” (2012) *Quality in Higher Education* 18 (1): 3–21

¹³ Glaser et al, ‘Students Supporting Students: The Effects of Peer Mentoring on the Experiences of First Year University Students’ (2006) *Journal of the Australia and New Zealand Student Services Association* 27

¹⁴ Elliott, ‘Orientation and transition takes more than a week’ (1994) *Journal of Australian and New Zealand Student Services Association*, 3, 15-19

¹⁵ J Hall, (2003), ‘Mentoring and young people: A literature review’ (2003) SCRE Research Report 114, University of Glasgow

¹⁶ R Hall, ‘The first year experience at university. A study of transition to university in arts and science students at the University of New South Wales’ (2000) *Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Science and Technology*, University of New South Wales

¹⁷ Jacobi, ‘Mentoring and undergraduate academic success: A literature review’ (1991) *Review of Educational Research*, 61(4), 505-532

¹⁸ Rodger & Tremblay, ‘The effects of a peer mentoring program on academic success among first year university students’ (2003) *Canadian Journal of Higher Education* 33(3) 1-17

¹⁹ Evans & Peel ‘Transition from secondary to tertiary: A performance study’ (1999) *Higher Education Series*, 36, 1-12

²⁰ Clark & Crome, ‘Personalising the transition experience: Induction, immersion or intrusion?’ (2004) *University of Auckland*

²¹ Pope & Van Dyke, ‘Mentoring....Value adding to the University’ (1999) *Journal of the Australian and New Zealand Student Services Association*. No. 13

more experienced students. *Clark et al (2013)*²² conducted a study, examining the effects of student peer mentoring and the extent to which it can aid the transition into university. It concluded that support from senior students supporting their participatory junior counterparts in entrance to first year at university can have positive outcomes from both social and pedagogic perspectives.

A study by *Glaser et al (2006)* tested the effectiveness of one pilot peer mentor system. Her results indicated that those mentees who had used the program more frequently were more likely to rate the program as helpful in each of the measure aspects (adjusting to the teaching style; making social contacts; accessing university services; feeling part of the university community). The group who had utilised the programme the most also reported higher levels of success in making the transition to university. Moreover, feedback indicated that the peer mentoring program and particularly its **prominence** during new students' first weeks at university made a distinct qualitative impact on the experience of new students. This was because the presence of volunteer peer mentors /programs with emphasis on social adjustment left a strong impression that there are both fellow students interested and concerned with the welfare of new students. Another additional important finding was that ratings of the 'helpfulness' of mentors were higher than those of the program, suggesting that the mentees had felt that their **relationship with their mentors** was more important than the content of the mentoring program.

This existent literature and research therefore indicates that student peer mentoring, 'family' systems - pairing new students with older, experienced volunteer students - are a particularly useful tool for alleviating some of transitional challenges faced by first year university students. *Glaser's (2006)* study importantly suggests that (a) the prominence of the programme in the students' first few weeks and (b) personal relationship developed with the mentor are the most significant and impactful components of a mentoring programme in helping with the university transition.

c. Family systems in other UK universities

We then chose to look at existing student mentoring systems in UK universities of a similar academic calibre and intensity to the LSE, in particular the logistics and effectiveness of undergraduate 'family systems' utilised in Oxford, Cambridge and Durham.

The primary target for investigation here was Oxbridge, with both universities operating long-standing, well known and institutionalised 'family systems' which pair up first year students in Michaelmas term with students in second year. This practice is traditional and operates within individual colleges (as both universities are collegiate) on a subject matching basis. Other universities also operate this programme, namely Durham, which is also collegiate.

The system itself does differ slightly from college to college (as it is implemented at this level) but works off the same principle. Students in first year pair up, either being placed with or proposing to their college wife or husband, or same-sex partner (as introduced by Emmanuel college, Cambridge in 2018). This pair then become parents, and the following summer they are paired with up to 2 or 3 'children' who will be studying the same or similar subject as them, around results day. Parents will make contact with their newly adopted children before they arrive, via email, facebook group, or in some instances 'hand crafted

²² Clark, Andrews & Gorman, 'Tackling Transition: The Value of Peer Mentoring' (2012-3) *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, Special Issue/ Winter, p 57-75(19)

letter' to congratulate them and welcome them to Oxbridge and give them some pre arrival tips (eg. what to bring, mistakes to avoid).

On arrival, children are greeted by their parents, sometimes through a formal 'family meeting' event with eager new parent couples displaying their children's names on signs as if at an airport. From here, freshers (children) are given significant support with the settling in process from contact with the parents. A long standing tradition is the 'family meal', or an arranged 'parenting night' at Durham, taking place in the first or second week, where children are invited to dinner at their parent's houses to get to know one another, ask questions, drink together and bond as a family. Parents are also known to take children on a guided tour of their college. At Oxford, it is reported that these events are **timetabled into the freshers' schedule**, making families a compulsory as well as conventional practice.

The purpose of these families is clear in all accounts, the main idea being that they begin with an established contact: a supportive and experienced fellow student to turn to if one is feeling a bit lost in the first few weeks. The system links you up with an older student on the same course who can **offer guidance and answer any questions about academia or uni life**. It is also reported that having family siblings in your year means you might meet people who you otherwise wouldn't have had contact with.²³

The family system is highly praised and valued in every institution it successfully operates in. A Cambridge student describes the transition as 'intimidating for anyone' but with the help of the college family it became "**very easy**"²⁴. Oxford students comment that no matter what approach the college parents take within their role (whether that be party mentors or academic mentors), "having decent parents, or otherwise, can have a **huge impact on a fresher's experience**, particularly in Michaelmas term". When functioning properly, the system is heralded as excellent: ensuring freshers have an **approachable point of contact upon their arrival**, answer more **peer-oriented questions** and "guiding them through the baptism of fire that is Michaelmas term of first year", college parents can serve to be "truly invaluable".²⁵

d. Family systems: advantageous characteristics

From our review thus far, we can discern certain characteristics which make the family system a strong option for a student support system.

1. Initial contact & consistency

Children paired with parents before or upon university arrival can establish a key connection with parents, having regular and consistent contact from the outset ie. family meeting, family meal, campus tours. This concentration of contact during the overwhelming start of term (rather than sporadic meetings) helps to foster a reassuring and comfortable relationship within which help is significantly more accessible to children, and they do not need to actively seek out help.

'Mandatoriness' can help to establish this.

²³ <https://www.thestudentroom.co.uk/showthread.php?t=5317186>

²⁴ <https://www.alumni.cam.ac.uk/news/college-families>

²⁵ <http://cherwell.org/2018/03/11/college-families-bizarre-or-beneficial/>

2. 'Family' mode

Paired with consistency, the *family* language (parents & children) cultivates a dynamic of personal attachment and responsibility toward first year children, which might otherwise be absent from more neutral positions of 'peer supporter' or 'mentor'. It also feeds into a sense of belonging and approachability: freshers are likely to feel more inclined to make contact with their '*mother*' than a student mentor. The 'nuclear' family unit also makes for closer bonds and more supportive, intimate relationships.

- This can be contrasted with many of the systems in place already at the LSE which a) use neutral, non-emotive roles or b) have non-nuclear groups, such as the law 'families' system, which have upward of 50 students in one family.

3. Holistic & flexible

The defining open-texturedness of the 'parent-child' formatted relationship means that student parents "have a huge impact on freshers' experiences" no matter which support they choose to provide. Crucially, parents can support children holistically in a way that is catered to the child's needs, compared with a more closely circumscribed role such as student academic purely for academic support, or in a strictly emotional crisis role such as a counsellor.

4. Relatable & peer-orientated

"Guiding them through the baptism fire of Michaelmas term first year" is a task that is most usefully administered by student peers who have recently had the same experience. Student parents who have only recently endured this difficult first term are in the best position to give support and guidance to fresher children. Their parallel experiences mean they can provide meaningful reassurance and advice.

- This would foster a better sense of student community by directly responding to improvements identified by the consultation report: to "*help you know that you are not the only one experiencing what you're going through.*"

5. Non-stigmatic

Related to the 'holistic' parent role and the regularity of the family system, relying on parent support would be less stigmatised for a student child compared to accessing other more emotional support services such as counselling. It provides children a non-judgemental space to openly talk about anything troubling them, including emotional or mental health without feeling pressured to label an explicit problem for which they must actively seek help.

These culminate to both (a) **provide stability & reassurance** to first year students and (b) **build a sense of belonging** amongst the student population.

e. 'LSE-based' problem

To conclude our literature review, we examined why the LSE in particular should indeed problematise this sociological phenomenon of the challenging university transition. Relevant literature strongly indicates that LSE has a significant student wellbeing, community and satisfaction deficit across the student population.

Examining the UK NSS Results, whilst the 2019 National Student Survey saw LSE student satisfaction rise from 71% to 78%²⁶, the LSE is still ranked as one of the lowest universities for student satisfaction in the UK.²⁷ The LSE's NSS score from 2018 (71%) fell **14%** below the expected benchmark, and was the lowest of all Russell Group universities.²⁸ Indeed, Imperial, UCL, KCL, Warwick and Durham all record student satisfaction levels of 80% or above.²⁹ This clearly illustrates the LSE's deficit in ensuring a satisfying student experience compared with other universities in the UK. Further, there is evidence that the LSE has a particular problem with student loneliness. The Beaver conducted a loneliness survey in October 2018³⁰, responses from 110 students indicated that **87.3%** of respondents had felt some degree of loneliness at the LSE. Breaking this down, the largest group of respondents (26.1%) **26.1%** rated themselves 4 on a scale of 1 ('not at all lonely') to 5 ('very lonely'), and over 60% marked themselves at a score between 3 - 5.

A more in depth look at this problem was conducted in the *Mental Health and Wellbeing at LSE: Student Consultation Report* by the LSESU (2019)³¹. This was LSESU's consultation with students on overall mental health and wellbeing at LSE. 500 responses were received to the consultation, and the respondents were 66% undergraduate, with 60% international students and 40% home students.

- Analysis revealed the two overarching themes that affected students' experiences: **academic culture** and **lack of community**. These both have an "extremely detrimental to students' health and wellbeing and lead to students experiencing a profound level of stress, isolation and unhappiness."
- The report explores options to improve mental health through promotion (availability of physical space and de-stigmatization campaigns) prevention (more inclusive education and learning communities) and provision of mental health support, namely the counselling service.
- The consultation results are "clear": students do not believe LSE as an institution supports their mental health and wellbeing.

Codifying the problem

The Student Consultation Report reveals two broad themes of academic culture and lack of community. Using these report themes as a framework, the report identifies why students feel reluctant to reach out for help:

1. The LSE competitive culture embeds the notion that students must cope alone unless their issues are **severe enough** and **distinct enough** to need a remedy. This is driven by:
 - Student culture - According to **159 of 500 students**, competitive academic culture means that LSE perpetuates a culture where pressure is high due to the expectation to achieve. This further embeds the expectation to cope with the pressure and stress without help. Students report being "*hesitant to use the resources*" because they feel like their problems are not severe enough to make use of the provisions in place.

²⁶ <https://beaveronline.co.uk/7-increase-in-student-satisfaction-marks-nss-win-for-lse/>

²⁷ <https://www.thecompleteuniversityguide.co.uk/league-tables/rankings?sortby=student-satisfaction>

²⁸ <https://beaveronline.co.uk/lse-student-satisfaction-continues-to-drop/>

²⁹ Beaver, see [1]

³⁰ <https://beaveronline.co.uk/loneliness-survey-reveals-systemic-problem-at-lse/>

³¹ <https://www.lsesu.com/pageassets/democracy/resources/LSESU-MHW-Consultation-Report.pdf>

- Limited resources - Many believe existing support should only be used in times of real crisis, as the resources are stretched and underfunded. This is particularly true of the counselling service, where waiting times are long and help is **capped at 6 sessions**, fear of 'using up' sessions embeds the idea that students should only reach out in times of serious crisis.

2. Lack of a support culture amongst students.

- **210** out of 500 discussed that they had felt isolated due to a lack of university wide community. Lack of community was the most prevalent theme throughout the consultation.
- Lack of community breeds isolation which "aggravates competitive academic culture". One respondent summarised: "*a bigger sense of community would actually help you know that you are not the only one experiencing what you're going through while you complete your degree at LSE*"
- **10%** of respondents asked for more academic interaction between students.

3. METHODOLOGY / RESULTS (A)

a. Survey

To examine the prevalence of this problem amongst the first year cohort, we first conducted a 1st-year undergraduate survey to gather data concerning how supported students felt by the existing provisions, honing in particularly on the experiences of 1st year undergraduates - "freshers" - during Michaelmas Term and this transitional period.

Our survey aimed to uncover:

1. To what extent 'freshers' students had felt **overwhelmed** during their first term
2. To what extent students had made use of any of the **pastoral support systems** currently in place at the LSE.
3. To what extent a **gap** existed between student overwhelm/struggle, and student awareness, access and *use* of those services?
4. If a gap did exist, for what **reasons** were students not accessing and utilising these services?
5. To what extent did students have and make use of connections with **older students** on their course?

Response / engagement

To reach the largest number of first-year students possible, we circulated an email to LSE's hall wardens and committees for them to, in turn, forward it to students' LSE emails. We successfully gathered **114 responses** - a sample size of about **10%** of the first year student population.

- The sample gathered was relatively diverse across departments: the sample contained at least one student per department, with no more than 14% of the sample being from the same department.
- Furthermore, **50%** of the sample were international students (roughly 70% of the LSE student population is international).
- Whilst we made best efforts to encourage as much engagement with the survey as possible through our advertisement, inevitably the survey was subject to **voluntary response bias**.

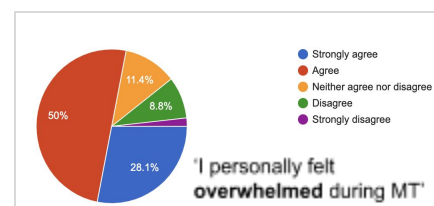
Respondents to the survey are *likely* to be those who are more likely to engage with school initiatives or concerned with issues of pastoral care.

- Additionally, whilst the vast majority of first year students live in halls (student accommodation), we will not have captured a minority who live at home.

Results

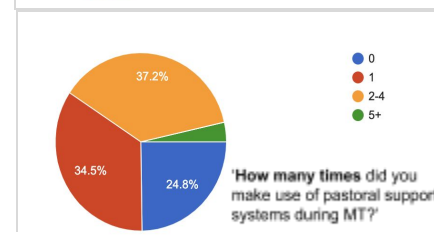
(1) First, in response to statement “***I personally felt overwhelmed during Michaelmas term***”

- **78.1%** agreed or strongly agreed
- Less than **10%** disagreed.



(2) Next, we asked respondents ‘***How many times did you make use of any available pastoral support systems during MT?***’

- (This included academic mentors; class teachers; students mentors; departmental tutors)
- **60%** had only made use of pastoral support systems either **once** or **never**.



(3) Next, we asked respondents:

If you felt overwhelmed at points during Michaelmas term but didn't make more use of pastoral support systems, what were your reasons? Please give an indication of your overall relationship with LSE pastoral support systems by rating the following statements from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

- Responses included (tallying *agree* and *strongly agree* responses):

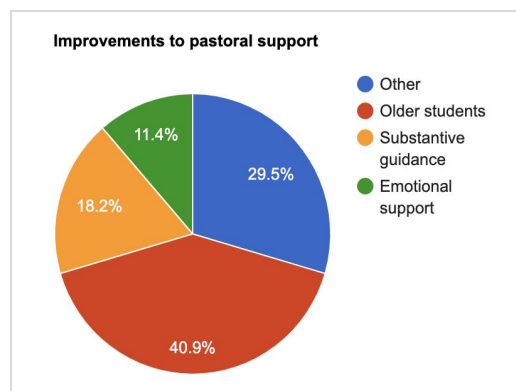
Did not make use of support because they felt they did not have specific questions .	70%
Did not believe their issues were serious enough to seek support.	63%
Did not make more use because they saw existing support as too formal a channel .	50%
Turned instead to their peer group and friends for support.	70%

(4) We then asked about students’ relationships with older (2nd, 3rd year) students.

- **55%** of respondents had **no meaningful relationship** with an older student (45% did)
- **67%** of respondents had **never sought support** from an older student.
- **78%** of those that had a meaningful relationship had **sought support** from that student.
- **97%** of those who had both sought support + had a meaningful relationship had found it helpful.
- **66%** of those who had support from an older student outside of a meaningful relationship had still found it useful.

(5) Finally, we asked students to voluntarily suggest what support system(s) **they wished had been available** to them during freshers. We received **44** responses (out of 114 respondents).

- **18** (41%) respondents **explicitly** stated they wished they had **better connections** with older (2nd and 3rd year) students to support them.
- **8** (18%) respondents made reference to wanting **more guidance** on the substantive challenges of settling in, for example
 - 'Academic transition from sixth form to university'
 - 'Time management'
 - "Academic support on ways to approach the workload, how to effectively read and make notes, and what support is there for me (i.e. office hours)"
 - 'Forum for frequently asked questions'
 - 'Clearer guidance on understanding the course structure; what to focus on'
 - 'Answers to simple things like where to sit and eat lunch'
 - 'How to adapt to university note taking'
 - 'More awareness of existing support systems'
- **5** (11%) said they wished they had more **emotional/personal** support, particularly empathy and **relatableness** to the challenges they faced:
 - Mentor who 'really knew me'; 'better contact'
 - Mentors had 'never reached out'; 'did not know what to ask'
 - "I just wish I was made aware that everyone was struggling with work, not just me."
- **Remaining responses** included:
 - Improving academic mentors; LSE life teachers
 - Improving mental health services and counselling
 - Improving the provision of non-alcohol/clubbing based social events to meet people



Analysis

The survey results illustrate a few key points:

1. **The vast majority of first year students feel overwhelmed in their first term.**
2. The majority of first year students make **little or no use** of existing pastoral support systems during MT.
3. This was often because of the formality of support; feeling as though they needed a specific question to seek support; feeling as though their experience was not serious enough to warrant support.
4. The majority of students preferably turn to their **peers** for support **rather than formal structures**.
5. Over half of first year students **do not have a meaningful relationship** with any older student.
6. Effectively **every** student who had built a meaningful relationship with an older student found that support from them useful / helpful.
7. Of those who suggested improvements, the majority wished they had **more contact** with older students.
8. Others suggested more 'everyday' substantive guidance and personal support, both of which could be provided by older students.

Despite their being student-to-student mentor type systems in place within departments, there is still a **critical gap** between (a) students' overwhelming experience and (b) students properly accessing and benefitting from existing support. Given the content of the improvement suggestions which showed this connection to older students to be a key improvement which students would like to see, it suggests that the LSE is lacking a strong inter-year student-to-student support system.

Building a **stronger student-to-student pastoral system** would be the strongest option given the barriers that prevent students from accessing support:

- The formality of many pastoral channels seems to be daunting to students, who feel they should only access support if they have particularly serious issues or very specific queries, despite feeling overwhelmed.
- It would appear that facilitating stronger interpersonal relationships between first year 'freshers' and older (2nd and 3rd year) students would be the strong supportive option.
- Linking freshers with regular but more **casual** and **informal** contact with an older student to provide 'across the board', everyday support with any substantive questions and personal support with the transition.
- This could effectively **overcome the barriers** of 'formality' and 'lack of severity' that prevent students making use of existing pastoral systems.
- Whilst 'student mentor' systems already exist in a piecemeal way, varying across different departments, it appears that these could be strengthened and standardised university-wide to ensure every first student is **positively linked up** to support from an older student.
- It also appears that student mentor systems might benefit from being more personally and emotionally oriented, to give first year 'freshers' guidance and reassurance from older students' personal experiences with the struggles of first year.

Bringing together our survey results with the literature review, we see a clear deficit in the sense of community between students and a culture of support. Our survey further illuminates that first year students find Michaelmas term particularly overwhelming, as well as find it hard to access or make use of existing student support systems. It also indicates that connection to an older student who has been through the same as them would be the most useful improvement.

b. Proposal:

Given the survey response data, in conjunction with existing data and literature, we propose an **undergraduate student family system**. This would facilitate an informal student-to-student channel to link first years with older students.

- It should be a system organised at a **university-wide level**, to avoid disparities in support across different departments, accommodation or nationalities.
- Ideally, **every** first year student ('son' or 'daughter') is assigned a 2nd or 3rd year student ('mum or dad') within a nuclear family unit, who they meet with regularly on a consistent but informal basis to share their struggle / overwhelming experience, and receive support and guidance from their parents.
- Parents should be linked with children on the basis of their **course**, so they can give specific academic support. As far as possible, the family unit should be cross linked so the other parent attended the same **halls** as the child.

- Older parent students would be able to offer **guidance, support and empathy** across a spectrum of topics, from the mundane to the more serious, practical to emotional, to help alleviate the overwhelm of first year students.
- Older parents would be able to **share their own struggles** in first year and provide reassurance to freshers that they are not alone in their difficulties, and speak from their own experiences on how to navigate the challenges of the first term.
- This would greatly alleviate existing problems emanating from **poor student support culture** and **soften the competitiveness and isolation** that students experience due to the academic culture, as indicated by existing data .

4. METHODOLOGY / RESULTS (2)

a. Family system pilot study

Finally, we tested the family system model with first year students using a pilot study, to explore whether the model would prove beneficial for LSE first year students.

METHOD

During Week 0, we advertised and recruited two first year students to take part in our pilot study as children. We matched the children to each of our subjects, and also matched diagonally on first year halls of residence.

Participants:

PARENTS	CHILDREN
Nancy - 2nd year, Law, Passfield in year 1	Emma - 1st year, Law, Passfield
Natalia - 2nd year, Maths Statistics and Business, Bankside in year 1	Juan - 1st year, Maths and Economics, Bankside

The family system pilot study took place over 5 consecutive weeks, starting in week 1, with some intermittent follow up sessions and a celebratory family dinner. Each session was approximately 1 hour long at lunch time, in which we bought our first year children lunch and discussed a variety of topics.

During our first session, we met our 2 children and explained to them the format and objectives of the study. As well as detailing practical arrangements, we both shared how we struggled through Michaelmas Term of first year to find our feet, friends, routine, academic stability and sense of belonging. We emphasised how we both felt that having regular support and guidance from a second year student, preferably in the same area of study and/or halls of residence would have been of great benefit to us, and how we wanted to provide this to them to see if it would indeed make a difference to their first term experience.

Key attributes of family system design

The design of the pilot study was closely informed by our review of the key themes of LSE student culture and barriers to student support. We used these attributes to format the pilot study, in order to both emulate existing family systems and circumvent pre-identified obstacles to student support at the LSE.

1. Holistic & Open

We endeavoured to create an environment and structure that promoted an open ended discussion of the pressures, difficulties and issues that the children were facing each week. Whilst other pastoral services provide specific, purposive support for particular problems, our role as parents was to provide a listening ear to the general condition of the student's wellbeing.

- In our first session, we explained and really emphasised that we were there to listen and support them with *any* problems that they wanted to bring ie. our support was not confined to solely academic, emotional or social. It was truly open-planned support.
- We initially broke the discussion down thematically into academic, social and wellbeing, however as the weeks continued, these melted into a more naturally-led general discussion of all different areas.
- We made sure to ask open-ended questions and encouraged them to elaborate on their experiences and problems. ie. *How was your weekend? How are you doing with workload at the moment? How did you find last week, what has been on your plate?*
- We also emphasised that they could contact us at any time or day (they did not have to wait for our regular weekly encounter) through social media.

2. Horizontal

Our 'student guided' approach. Although labelled as 'parents', we did not want to box the discussions into a paternalistic format but allow an open-ended, student led format where we would focus on whatever issues the students wanted to bring each week. We made it clear that the children could dictate the regularity of the sessions, the location, time and subject matter, in order to best tailor the pilot study family meetings to the support they wanted or needed.

- We re-arranged specific times of meetings frequently at the beginning (weeks 1 - 3) to fit it into the children's new schedules and be flexible to their commitments. Later in the study, we missed a couple of weeks due to illness and other commitments.
- We checked with the children every other session that they were happy with the location of our meetings (Garrick Cafe) and the regularity (they were happy with once a week)
- Given the holistic / open-natured format of the support, the discussions each week were increasingly led by the children's own concerns. As parents our conversational efforts were never to dictate topics but to prompt discussion.

3. Empathy & reassurance

One of the key tasks in a parent role was to listen to the children's concerns and support them by letting them know that they were not alone and we had also experienced the same in our first year. A lot of the role consisted of providing reassurance: an understanding of the overwhelm, confusion and issues that Michaelmas term threw at them. We endeavored to relate our own experiences in first year to our children's experiences and ensure them that the individual struggles they were facing were completely normal.

- From Week 1, there were an astounding amount of parallels between the children's experience and ours: every single issue that came up was familiar to us to some degree.
- When sharing a problem, we ensured that the children felt listened to and understood by letting them know *"Don't worry, I went through the exact same feeling /experience in my first year, you are not alone"*. Each week's discussion was rich with these type of conversation, but some examples include:

- Week 1: Emma explain how she was finding the dense reading for law very confusing, overwhelming and difficult ie. having to read the same sentence about 5 times to understand it or not understanding at all. Nancy firmly reassured her that she also remembered crying over the textbook a lot in the first few weeks because she didn't understand it and it is completely normal and okay to feel like this at the beginning.
- Week 2: Juan expressed confusion about all the different societies and which ones to join. Natalia brought up that she similarly remembers not having a clue which societies to join and being overwhelmed by choice and socially pressured to join financed based societies without really understanding what they were.
- Week 2: Emma spoke to Nancy about having panic attacks, negative thought patterns and anxiety. Nancy massively empathised with Emma's experience and shared her own battles with anxiety attacks and maintaining a healthy mindset in the intense university environment.
- Week 3: Juan spoke about not feeling like he has found his people in Passfield and was concerned that he hadn't found the right group of friends. Both Nancy and Natalia empathised with Juan and told him about how they both really struggled to find their place socially and find good people who they truly liked.
- Week 4: Both Juan and Emma spoke about dealing with formative essays and problem sets and feeling as though their work was only mediocre and not as strong as they really wanted it to be. Natalia and Nancy both expressed full understanding of this experience, having both endured the difficulty of coming to terms with lower academic performance at LSE.
- Week 11: During our celebratory end of term family meal, Emma shared feeling completely burnt out and exhausted and unable to do any more work in the final weeks. Nancy reassured Emma that every single law student feels this way by week 11 and she had not been able to get out of bed for 3 days straight (because of exhaustion) in her own final MT week last year.

4. Peer-orientated advice

In conjunction with this, we were able to provide our own personal advice and guidance on how to navigate the jungle of Michaelmas term challenges.

- Again, this happened throughout all the family lunches but some good examples include:
 - Week 1: (An advice heavy week) Tips for living in halls, for example taking a tupperware to catered dinner to get an extra portion for lunch the next day, how to get your dinner saved for later or where to keep your bike.
 - Week 1: Juan expressed some concern about the difficulty of certain problem sets and Natalia redirected him to office hours where he could find more help and individual teacher advice as well as the drop-in sessions of LSE Life.
 - Week 2: In response to Juan's confusion about how to pick societies, Natalia advised it was worth only joining societies that you'd be really passionate about and actively be involved in - ultimately committee work, not membership, is what matters for your CV. For this reason it is better to channel your energy toward 1 (or 2) societies that you really care about and get an active role. However, she also advised that first year is a good space to figure out what societies you like by trying out lots and then running for positions in 2nd and 3rd year, therefore not to stress about committee positions in first year. Nancy

advised to prioritise interests and to utilise all 3 years and put energy into different societies in different years.

- Week 3: Nancy gave advice to Emma about good mindsets for getting rejected from society applications. She recalled having to learn that rejection is really normal and doesn't need to mean failure because applying is good practice.
- Week 3: Regarding procrastination, Nancy and Natalia advised working on accurate forward planning and setting achievable targets by being realistic about how long work takes so you can still feel accomplished. We advised normalising and becoming comfortable with always being behind because it's nearly impossible to be on top of everything at the LSE.

5. Family mode and consistency.

Both conducting the relationships in an informal, family-like way and embedding the family lunches in the fabric of the children's routine were critical when it came to building a sense of belonging to the family group. Evidence of this includes:

- Hugging the children when we first met them, and using the introduction session to set the tone of warm, emotionally supportive dynamic ie. they can talk to us about anything.
- Referring to them as 'the children'.
- Making and communicating about the lunches in the family group chat.
- Always buying them lunch first and eating lunch together each session.
- Telling them our own stories and having a laugh about them.
- Making the sessions at the same time (usually 1pm, but lunch time ish) and same day (Monday) each week so it became part of the weekly routine.
- Making the sessions always in the same spot (Garrick cafe table by the window)
- Making the sessions mandatory for all 4 of us to attend for at least the first 4 weeks.
- Organising a celebratory end of term family meal out to eat pizza.

RESULTS

Over the course of MT, we met with the children every week from week 1 to 4, week 6, week 8 and week 11 (for the meal).

a. EXPLICIT FEEDBACK FROM CHILDREN

In week 4, we asked for feedback from the children by asking them if they were to refine, improve and **run their own family system** for first year students next year, what would they do differently. We framed it in this way to reduce researcher bias. Their response consisted of the following:

1. They praised the informal setting

- This we believe reflects both the format of casual weekly lunch and also the holistic, open-ended and non-prescriptive nature of the parent-child relationship. Being able to regularly share issues and get advice within a casual, stigma-free conversation is conducive to a more genuinely supportive relationship.

2. They liked it being once a week.

- The regularity and consistency is critical for building and solidifying the relationships. It helps to be embedded in the students' timetable deconstructing this idea of the meetings being a chore. At the LSE there is this idea of anything that isn't going to help build up your CV is a waste of time and demotivates students from signing up to more social/wellbeing activities. Meetings over lunch will make students less reluctant to participate in the scheme as they need to have lunch anyway at some point in the day, as we saw through our pilot study.
- 3. They said the most useful aspect was having someone to reach out to for help about anything. Not necessarily telling them what to do, but just reassuring them and being there for them.**
- This is a testament to the supportive relationship we hoped to set up.
- 4. More for qualitative subjects (law), there should be more academic advice upfront.**
- Emma emphasised how it would be useful to have the best academic support and advice upfront and unprompted, so first years can be armed with a good set of tools, expectations and approached from the outset
- 5. Social guidance**
- During your first year, especially the first term, it is easy to get overwhelmed if the never-ending list of social activities that LSE, Halls, Societies, and London has to offer. On top of keeping up with uni work, exercising, sleeping, eating etc., having someone that has already gone through that can help in giving advice on what events are worth going to, how to even find out about all these events etc. Juan especially struggled with this which proved to be very parallel to Natalia's first year experience. Having someone say "*you will be fine, I went through exactly the same*" proved to be very reassuring and positive.

FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

1. Parental purpose

From the outset, we felt a strong sense of purpose and usefulness as parents. This was due to the packed, vast amount of advice we were able to give, questions we were able to answer and problems we were in a position to help with.

- We envisaged our sessions being around 20 minutes or half an hour, but every single lunch lasted 1 hour or more because there was always more to talk about.
- Analysing the transcripts, in each full hour session we talked about an average of 13 distinctly different topics.
- Every single session contained at least one discussion related to: academic work, workload, friends and societies.
- We both reflected as parents that we found it very rewarding to be on hand to listen to all of the children's various questions, issues and confusion and be there as both a listening ear and a reassuring voice. We felt particularly useful as 'sounding boards' for their worries and general stresses of uni life, being able to hear them out about their week and their struggles was rewarding.
- We saw huge parallels to our own experiences: Emma was primarily working out how to balance her workload and stay calm under the looming pressure of assignments, whereas Juan was

struggling more with settling in socially. This reflected Nancy and Natalia's prior experiences respectively and was reassuring also for parents that these challenges were universal.

2. Reliance & support

Over the course of the session, the children became increasingly comfortable to ask for help and share their struggles as they knew we were looking out for them and checking in on them once a week to listen to everything.

- Emma became comfortable enough to ask Nancy for advice on personal matters for which she had not sought advice from anyone else.
- We supported Juan through his turbulent decision to move out from Passfield Hall to another hall because he had not made good friends there, we were able to check up on his progress with this each week.
- We were able to follow up on issues from previous weeks, follow narratives and ask about particular societies / friends / pieces of work which created a feeling of continual support and care.
- Outside of the weekly lunch, the children also felt able to message us with questions and problems through the week, toward the latter end of the study they sought increasingly personal advice.
 - This was indicative of the comfortable and open nature of the relationship that had been developed through affirmative support throughout the weeks of confusion from the beginning.
- Emma was able to contact Nancy over messenger for extra help and advice. Whilst the first 3 times were about practical study tips, the next 7 times were for time management and mental health / lifestyle advice.
- Emma fed back to Nancy's help over messenger:
"Thank you so much, you have no idea how reassuring it is to know that there is someone that gets what we're going through, it really helps."

"Thank you for that [advice], I actually really needed this."

3. Sense of belonging

Over the course of Michaelmas term, all the features of the family system culminated to foster a genuine sense of family and belonging within our group. It felt as though we really established a 'home base' for them. Evidence of this includes:

- In the beginning few sessions we often split off into twos to speak, whereas in week 6, 8 and our Christmas meal we spoke much more often as a 4. Similarly, whilst at the beginning the children did not converse with one another, toward the end they would often have conversations amongst themselves.
- Whilst the first sessions did not touch upon personal life, the later sessions became more personal. In week 6, we ended up speaking nearly exclusively about our dating lives, and in week 8 we all spoke about our personal lives back home and what we were all doing for Christmas holidays.
- When we bumped into each other on campus we would always stop to have a chat.
- During our family meal, our parental reflections were that we truly felt like a family. We laughed and made origami butterflies out of napkins and all shared about our families and friends back home and our pasts.

- When we suggested that we should have a family meal next term (just for fun, outside of the study), both children really enthusiastically agreed that they would like to do this.



5. IMPLEMENTATION

Our recommendations:

- An undergraduate family system that is administered at a university-wide level, not dependent on academic department, halls or nationality.
- 2 first year children are paired with 2 second year parents prior to Michaelmas term, each parent-child pair is matched on degree programme / department. Aim to match on at least 1 other characteristic in the family (halls or nationality)
- Families meet once a week for lunch together, preferably at a fixed time each week.
- Families must compulsorily meet weekly until week 5.
- Second year mums and dads must provide an open and supportive forum where children bring their problems, questions and struggles and parents can support them by providing a listening ear and give anecdotes of their own first year and advice.
 - Raise your children well!
- Parents should endeavour to support the children with all aspects of university life: academic, social, wellbeing and emotional.
- Parents collaborate with children to create a format which works best for them
- Parents and children must arrange 1 fun outing outside of lunch in Michaelmas term.
- Considerable flexibility is given to parents / children outside of these requirements to create a family which suits the particular characters and needs.

Implementation obstacles

To implement a family system into the LSE student body, there are challenges specific to the LSE context which will need to be addressed and circumvented:

1. Non-collegiate

These findings will prove useful in terms of modelling a similar family system in LSE, however we must take into account the fact that LSE is not a collegiate university, unlike Oxbridge and Durham. It is more difficult to administer a family system university-wide because the student

community is more disparate and the lack of belonging which makes it harder to implement voluntary support systems.

⇒ The system set up must be considered and altered accordingly: our suggestion is for families to meet on campus, unless participating in a particular social plan such as the family dinner. Campus is central, common ground to all the members where families can meet during mutually free daytime slots in their timetables.

2. **Oversaturation & culture**

The competitive, academically intense culture at the LSE means that students are reluctant to commit to such schemes because they are too busy and oversaturated with other things to think about. Implementing a system which students will commit to and regularly attend with no academic or career-orientated incentive is a prominent hurdle for LSE students.

⇒ We identified through our pilot study that meeting and orienting sessions around 'lunch time' can help to tackle this issue. Considering that lunch time is allocated and *recognised* as a break time from intense studying and activity for everyone, it hopefully allows students to feel as though they can afford to attend, and attend consistently on a weekly basis, without sacrificing precious study / activity time.

3. **Mentor effort and incentive**

Whilst our pilot study highlighted the beneficial and distinctly rewarding experience for older 'parent' students, we do envisage and recognise the difficulty of recruiting and motivating older students to participate in the scheme. This is a hurdle which will need to be examined and tackled in more depth and detail, if our program is adopted.

Our suggestion on this is first that this program, if implemented properly, can hopefully constitute something of a 'cultural shift' for the LSE which facilitates a stronger ethos of inter-student support. Once established, the system will be self-sustaining across "generations" of student families: students will have both parents and children, as well as first years having grandparents.

For initial implementation, a well-thought out recruitment and marketing campaign will need to be designed and executed to get older students on board. We suggest this could initially consist of another 'trial year' with a larger pilot group, which then expands to eventually encompass the full student population via a 'phased-approach'. The parent cohort could begin with 2nd and 3rd year students to make up numbers.

We believe the 'family-orientated' design of the system itself fosters a sense of quasi-compulsory participation or at least incentive to participate in the weekly nuclear family sessions. However, marketing and implementing the system well will be another component of establishing a feeling of 'mandatoriness' around the scheme itself to ensure consistency of participation. We consider this could consist of sessions being actually 'timetabled' into students' schedules up until week 5.

4. **Term dates**

Another potential issue is freshers week. Some second year students only arrive in London a few days before term starts, yet Fresher's week takes place a week before this. This may be a

potential issue if it were the case that both parents in the family happened to be elsewhere during Freshers. We envisage that parent students in 2nd year will be in contact with children (freshers) prior to either of their arrivals at the LSE, so they can discuss arrival dates and organise a first meeting.

Conclusion

After working on this project across 2 full academic years, we both feel extremely proud and passionate about this project, our pilot study and our proposal for a university-wide family system. Having experienced the overwhelm, confusion and isolation of the first Michaelmas term first hand, as well as seen our pilot enhance the experience and alleviate the struggle of students in the cohort following us, we have full belief that our proposal could significantly shift LSE culture. If implemented carefully, the family system has the potential to catalyse an evolution in the LSE ethos: from one of competitiveness and isolation, to one of solidarity, support and crucially empathy.

We hope you too can see the possibility for this shift, facilitated by a family system, and will consider the implementation of our proposal for a larger pilot for the class of 2020-21 (COVID permitting) and eventually LSE wide.

Thank you!

- **Nancy & Natalia**



The image is a promotional poster for 'LSE Change Makers'. It features two female students sitting at a table, focused on writing on sticky notes. The student on the left has blonde hair and is wearing a black top, while the student on the right has dark hair and is also wearing a black top. They are surrounded by various school supplies like pens and sticky notes. In the background, other students are partially visible. The poster includes the LSE logo (The London School of Economics and Political Science) in the top left and the LSE Students' Union logo in the top right. The main title 'LSE Change Makers' is prominently displayed in the center, with the text 'Interested in getting funded to enhance student education and experience across LSE through independent research? Open to all LSE students.' below it.