

## How can we improve freshers' transition into the LSE? University-level undergraduate student family system

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See this project presented by the researchers: [https://youtu.be/50dureOi\\_rE](https://youtu.be/50dureOi_rE)

A longer report is also available: <https://info.lse.ac.uk/current-students/part-of-lse/change-makers/research-gallery/undergraduate-transition>

If this project has informed your practice, let us know at [lse.changemakers@lse.ac.uk](mailto:lse.changemakers@lse.ac.uk)

### Background

We are from notably divergent backgrounds and upbringings: Nancy from rural Dorset in the UK, Natalia from Madrid city centre, Spain. Yet we connected strongly over our mutually overwhelming and difficult experience of the first term. We both reflected that, whilst the LSE provides much support for specific problems, we still felt distinctly lost and without personal guidance on how to navigate or cope with the intensity of LSE, on all fronts. Our project aimed to explore this and test an initiative which could remedy this deficiency at a university-wide level. We sensed more was needed than piece-meal, department or halls dependent solutions. Critically, we noted that neither of us had been reliably linked with a 2nd year student on our course, a source of support which we believed would have dramatically alleviated our mutual feelings of being both overwhelmed and confused in Michaelmas Term. We set out to map what support existed, which support was accessed and whether this was impactful. Chiefly, we aimed to pilot an undergraduate family system to empirically test and discover whether this format could 'give back' what we felt we hadn't been given.

### Literature review

1. Identified existing literature that explored the challenges of the university transition and confirmed the universality of the problem: **Briggs et al 2012; Gourlay 2009; Christie 2008; Gibson et al 2017; Hirst et al 2004.**
2. Using LSE as a case, reviewed surveys revealing the deficiencies in the School's student wellbeing and community: **NSS Results** (in which LSE has consistently been ranked as one of the lowest universities in the UK); **Beaver Loneliness Survey 2018** (110 respondents, 87% reported some degree of loneliness).
3. Examined the **Mental Health and Wellbeing at LSE: Student Consultation Report (2019, LSESU)**: this concluded that academic culture and lack of community are "extremely detrimental to students' health and wellbeing, leading to profound levels of stress, isolation and unhappiness". Highlighted key issues of academic competitiveness; "hesitance to use the resources"; lack of community among students - "A bigger sense of community would actually help you know that you're not the only one experiencing what you're going through".

4. To qualify our initial family system proposal, we reviewed literature on the utility and benefits of 'peer mentoring' ( *Gibson et al 2017*; *Glaser et al 2006*; *Hall 2000*; *Clark et al 2013* ), followed by a summary of existent undergraduate family systems at **Durham, Oxford and Cambridge** : 'Timetabled into freshers' schedules'; 'offer guidance and answer any questions'; '[which had a] huge impact on a fresher's experience'; '[offered an] approachable point of contact'.

## Methodology

### (1) Survey of first year undergraduates about Michaelmas term support and experience.

- Designed survey in Google forms; disseminated by email via halls wardens for maximum reach; analysed data.
- Surveyed questions focused on three key areas: pastoral support systems; impact of this support; links to older students.

Reflecting upon our literature review and survey findings, we reasoned that strengthening the LSE's **student-to-student pastoral systems** would be the best avenue for improving student wellbeing during transition. We concluded a **student 'family' system** would be the most effective format, and hence decided to test this with an LSE **pilot study** .

### (2) Pilot study of an undergraduate family system with real first year students.

- Recruited two 1st year participant 'children'; us acting as 'parents'. Cross-matched degree programme and halls.
- Set up contact from week 1; met weekly for 20min/1hr 'family' lunch over 5 weeks on campus in the same place.
- Invited them to update us on their overall experience: academic, extra-curricular, social, personal, emotional, mental.
- Provided an open space to ask questions seeking guidance, reassurance or advice about anything at all.
- Shared anecdotes about our own struggles and directed them to other university services where appropriate.
- Aimed to make them feel warm, welcomed and cared for, looking out for them and checking up on them.
- Recorded and transcribed lunches; summarised our own personal reflections; sought feedback in week 4 and 11.



Our **Pilot study** ran successfully for 5 weeks, concluding with a family meal in week 11.

Using the transcripts and personal anthropological reflections, we codified key themes with full supporting evidence.

1. **Reliance and support:** 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. They were able to reach out for extra support outside lunch over messenger. This was facilitated by the familiarity and consistency of the weekly lunch, which they explicitly praised. We were able to provide support on voluminous queries about studying, time management, emotional stamina, mental health and social life.



2. **Sense of belonging:** The set up fostered a genuine sense of a 'family unit' and belonging in the group. It worked to really establish an emotional 'home base' for them. Our shared stories and conversations became increasingly more personal and fluid. As weeks went on, we spoke less and they spoke more. We would stop to chat on campus. At our final family meal, the family spirit showed in laughter, origami and personal stories - they candidly expressed how grateful they were to have met us and been supported through Michaelmas Term.
3. **Parental purpose:** We both equally reflected on a compelling sense of purpose and utility in supporting this plainly unmet need of overall consistent support and reassurance. Sessions often lasted 1 hr instead of 20 minutes because of the sheer amount of questions and worries which came up each week. We saw huge parallels with our own current and past struggles with workload, mental health and social settling. It was fulfilling to be able to support these universal challenges and reassure the children that they were not alone!

## Conclusion

Our survey indicated that **70%** of students would have liked or benefited from connection to an older peer — **98%** of those with a connection found this relationship to be beneficial. Our pilot echoed this finding, as both children reported that "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** ."

## Recommendations

- An **undergraduate family system** administered at university-wide level, independent of academic department, halls or nationality.
- A family of '4', comprised of 2 first-year 'children' who are paired with 2 second-year 'parents' prior to Michaelmas term; each parent-child pair matched by department, plus aim to match minimum 1 other characteristic in the family (halls, nationality, perhaps personality type).
- Families meet once a week for lunch together, preferably at a fixed time and day each week, **compulsory** (e.g. timetabled) until week 5.
- Second year mums / 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.
- This should be promoted via a '**Raise your children well**' rhetoric.
- Parents should endeavour to support the children with all aspects of university life: academic, social, wellbeing and emotional.
- Parents should collaborate with children to create a format which works best for them. They are strongly encouraged to arrange 1 fun outing outside of lunch in Michaelmas term.
- Our ambition is for this system to be implemented **university-wide**, however we envisage a trial or '**pilot year**', where a larger sample of families run through MT to further work out details, test an implementation campaign and resolve problems to facilitate full implementation.