Why are so few disabled students studying at LSE?

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In 2018/19, 7.5% of LSE students had disclosed a disability. This figure is below the 2018/19 13.9% average in UK higher education generally[1]. Even at comparable universities (LSE's Higher Education 1 Statistics Agency (HESA) benchmarking group) an average of 8.7% of students were known to have a disability in 2018/19[2]. This project aimed to understand *why* LSE has below average disabled student attendance, and *how* representation can be improved. Our research highlights three key areas for improvement:

- **Data:** the LSE needs to research disabled students' situation more, and disseminate the data it already has more effectively.
- **Administration:** the LSE needs to remove financial and institutional barriers to disability support.
- **Involvement:** the LSE should involve more disabled students in disability policy decisions.

Research methods

Our research analysed LSE's HESA data submissions since 2011/12, provided by the LSE Graduate Admissions Team. Further, we sent a survey to Disability and Wellbeing Service (DWS) users, collecting 208 responses, to understand the experience of disabled students at LSE.

Background: the student life cycle

In 2015/6, only 2.8% of LSE's UK postgraduate applicants declared a disability[3]. However, those that declared a disability were more likely to receive offers (37%, versus 26% of non-declaring applicants) and were much more likely to take up offers (80%, versus 53% of non-declaring offer holders). At the undergraduate level, continuation rates amongst disabled students were lower than for non-disabled students (3.1% for disabled students versus 2.6% for non-disabled students, beginning with 2016/17 entry)[4]. This suggests that a combination of three factors causes the below average rate of disabled students at LSE: fewer disabled students applying; fewer disabled students disclosing their disability; and insufficient support for students enrolled at LSE. The following measures aim to address these problems.

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[1] HESA: Who's studying in HE?, 2018/19. Source: https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he.

[2] This includes the universities of Bristol, Cambridge, Oxford and Warwick, Imperial College London, and University College London. Source: LSE Graduate Admissions Team data submission.

[3] This was the only data point available to us; however, we assume this data to be representative of all students. Source: EDI Division, accessed from: https://info.lse.ac.uk/Staff/Divisions/Equity-Diversity-and-Inclusion/Assets/Documents/Equality-data/Students-2017/2017 Student-admissions-PG.pdf on 12.06.2020.

[4] See section 1 for details. Source: calculated from LSE Graduate Admissions Team data submission.

Recommendations

1) Improve data

Researching the lack of applications from disabled students, our survey determined what is *unlikely* to be relevant: the perceived quality of disability support at LSE. Only 9% of students surveyed said that this information influenced their decision to join LSE. 75% of disabled students were not even aware of LSE's disability support before applying. Thus, to understand why disabled students did not apply initially, further research is needed. Individuals creating applications but not submitting them, or individuals seeking information about LSE online, should be surveyed to understand what role different disabilities play in decision making.

Even data that *is* collected by LSE can be better utilised, if it were to be disseminated more effectively. Our finding that disabled undergraduates have a lower continuation rate than non-disabled students, for example, is in tension with the LSE's own assessment, which finds that there "is no significant difference in outcomes for disabled students"[5]. This highlights the need for transparency. We *assume* that LSE's calculations are more statistically sophisticated than ours and rely on higher-quality data; however, unable to access the model, we cannot validate this assumption. At any rate, together with our qualitative results, we believe that disabled students face an undue burden at LSE. This makes the LSE's calculations even more relevant.

Thus, we suggest that LSE make its data more accessible and more easily analysable. This will allow students to examine LSE's performance, suggest improvements, and form trust. As part of this, LSE should prepare data in an attractive way that supports intra-university comparisons. The UCAS interactive data explorer[6] is an excellent example of this, and currently does more to contextualise LSE's demographic information and invite curiosity than LSE itself.

2) Improve administration

In our survey, 46% of comments mentioned problems with receiving DWS support. Problems included: lack of flexibility in accepting medical evidence, the cost and effort of acquiring evidence, poor email response rates, and generally poor or inconsistent attitudes from staff. Several comments featured COVID-19; for example, changes from in-person to online exams were mentioned as an *improvement,* as disabled students did not otherwise receive the necessary adjustments. We thus advise the DWS conduct an analysis of their internal processes regarding the adjustment application processes. The pandemic highlights the inequitable impact of traditional examinations, and presents an opportunity for reflection before returning to standard exam formats.

Comments also referenced non-DWS entities: historical buildings like St Clements are inaccessible during busy periods; the LSE website is overwhelming for those with sensory processing conditions; individual academic departments fail to provide adjustments, or criticise students for requiring them – not just disadvantaging the students in question, but also potentially inhibiting others from disclosing their disability. This indicates poor

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[5] LSE Access and Participation Plan 2019/20, p.5.
[6] Source: https://www.ucas.com/corporate/data-and-analysis/ucas-undergraduate-releases/equality-he-reports

integration of the DWS into the wider LSE ecosystem, in particular academic departments. Support, both practical and social, should be consistent across campus, both in regards to accessibility, adjustments, and staff attitudes, and be considerate of the wide range of needs grouped under the label "disabled". Thus, we recommend that training should be provided to *all* staff across campus about their responsibilities regarding disabled students, to alleviate the barriers students have come up against both *inside* and *outside* of the DWS. This might also encourage more students to disclose their disabilities.

3) Involve disabled students

In our survey, respondents were asked to name institutions with a "better environment for disabled students", than LSE[7]. Many of the institutions named are distinguished by a stronger student voice; similarly, "ensuring disabled students are involved in discussions about policies/projects relevant to them" was rated highly effective or effective by 78% of respondents, the highest value of any suggested improvement. A student council, made up of students the DWS supports, would be well equipped to understand the diverse needs of disabled students. We advise a council of this sort be created with the aim of giving disabled students the opportunity to have their voices heard. This would also allow DWS to become better integrated with the LSE – an issue described above.

Relatedly, our survey prompted terminological worries. Some respondents did not identify as "disabled", citing mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, and addiction as separate to disability. Others criticised the stigma attached to the term. We encourage the LSE to open discussions with students about this; an objective that fits well with establishing a disabled student council.

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[7] The universities named by respondents are: the universities of Birmingham, Oxford, Kent, Sussex, Durham, Birkbeck, Cambridge, St. Andrew's, Birmingham and Melbourne; Birmingham City University, City University of London, De Montfort University, King's College London, University College London, Trinity College Dublin, The Cranfield School, HEC Paris, Miami University, and Yale