

Student experiences of the mental health services at LSE

Tamsin Saunders, Krishnan Puri-Sudhir, Zahra Boudalaoui-Buresi, Rohan Bhattaram

See this project presented by one of the researchers: <https://youtu.be/Rt5zhisy58jg>

If this project has informed your practice, let us know at lse.changemakers@lse.ac.uk

Background

At university, the student population is exposed to a number of specific stresses such as financial strain, academic pressure and homesickness, which can lead to conditions such as anxiety disorder or depression. In May 2019, the LSE Students' Union published a report on mental health and wellbeing. It highlighted the negative effects of academic culture and lack of community on LSE students' wellbeing and concluded that students do not feel supported by their university. It thus confirms the need for further improvement of mental health services. At the LSE, the Disability and Wellbeing Service is in charge of supporting students' mental health on campus. It offers two main services: Inclusion plans and counselling appointments with Mental Health Advisors.

Our LSE Change Makers project used surveys and qualitative interviews to investigate student experiences of inclusion plans and counselling, with the aim of answering three main research questions:

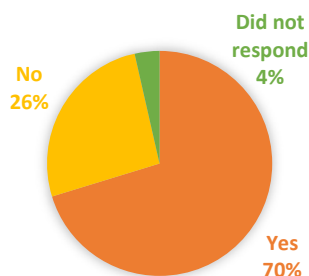
1. What factors influence students' disclosure of mental health issues and their ability to seek help within LSE?
2. What have students' experiences of the current mental health services at the university been?
3. Are there certain groups that are less likely to seek help for mental health issues and why?

Survey results

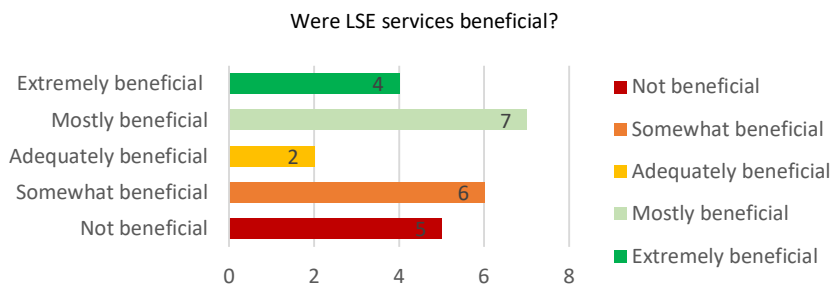
Our survey was answered by 84 students from a range of departments. The respondent sample is fairly representative of the LSE student population. Of the sample most were postgraduates (76%), 60% were female, 36% had international fee status and 48% had EU or UK fee status, average age was 25, and 67% identified as straight, 11% bisexual, 3% gay, 1% unlisted. 63% had no disability status, 12% had a mental disability, 3% had a physical disability, 6% preferred not to disclose.

Overall, the survey indicated good awareness of the mental health services on campus (70% of respondents said yes) and high usage of the services (a third of respondents had used the services). **Strikingly, there was an even distribution across respondents who did and did not find the services beneficial.** Our qualitative interviews helped us investigate the positive and negative aspects of student experiences of the LSE services.

ARE YOU AWARE OF MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES PROVIDED ON CAMPUS?



Interview Findings



We interviewed 3 volunteers to investigate students' experiences with the counselling service and inclusion plans. We interviewed 2 postgraduates and 1 undergraduate who represented a range of ethnic backgrounds, departments and were international and home students. All volunteers for the interview were female. Volunteers are referred to as Candidate 1, 2 or 3 to maintain anonymity. All the volunteers had previous experience accessing mental health services at their previous university or school and had prioritised accessing LSE's services soon after commencing their studies.

Inclusion plans (IP)

Reaching out to LSE for an IP:

- Candidate 1 discovered IPs through the LSE website and **found the process "straightforward" but there was a lot of administrative work and proof required which may have delayed the process.**

Experience using an IP:

- Candidate 1 stated that the **IP was a useful tool and that confidentiality was maintained in communications to her department.** However, she also stated that her **department occasionally ignored provisions included in her IP.** During online teaching **due to the COVID-19 pandemic, she had a much worse experience with her IP** as many provisions that were needed during these times were not provided even though her IP accounted for them.
- Candidate 2 found the service allowed her to set up her plan according to her specific needs. However, she found there were some implementation issues.
"Not all my teachers took it seriously, or maybe they didn't have the time or were too busy"

There were some instances where the Disability Service **lacked discretion with sharing her inclusion with new teachers, which made her feel awkward and uncomfortable.**

Counselling

Reaching out to LSE about counselling:

- Candidate 1 found out about the service through their "drop in" sessions. When she tried to book appointments there was a **long waiting list and delayed administrative replies.** She had to "follow up a lot" to secure an appointment as emails and communications were not replied to.
- Candidate 2 had a positive experience reaching out to LSE. When asked about why some students reach out while others do not, she said **she didn't think there was an**

information deficit and it was very easy to access information. For her, she found that **encouragement from her parents and the realisation that there are services tailored to students in a similar situation helped her reach out.**

Experience with LSE counselling:

- Candidate 3 had a **good experience since the counsellor was helpful in her guidance, supportive and made a connection with her.** Yet, **the limited number of appointments stopped her from continuing using the services.** As a proponent of mental health care in the US, she admitted she was more likely to be aware of and access services than others.
- Candidate 1 expressed several frustrations with the service. The **most significant frustration was with the guaranteed provision of only up to 6 counselling sessions per student.** She also stated that she herself is a person who usually takes some time to trust and open up to others and consequently a majority of her 6 sessions were spent with her just trying to open up to the counsellor. She stated that **the counselling sessions were more useful for students seeking help for school-related stress but would not recommend the services for more "personal" issues.** Sessions were only held every two weeks, which she felt was **too infrequent** to discuss her issues. Regarding additional mental health resources provided at the end of her sessions, she noted that there was **too much information given to her at once** which was overwhelming and tough to narrow down to her specific needs. She also stated that since she is from a minority ethnic background, **it was hard for counsellors at the service to relate to culture-specific problems.** However, she did mention that **while it is hard, the counsellors she met with still did a good job in trying to provide support.**

Conclusion & Recommendations

Our survey and interviews highlight the following findings:

- Generally, there is good access to information and awareness of the mental health services at LSE.
- Students who find it easier to seek help at LSE have prior experience accessing help elsewhere and have had encouragement from friends or family to do so. However, the culture at LSE can make it more difficult for students who haven't reached out before to initiate asking for help.
- IPs and counselling could be improved by:
 1. Finding a way to accommodate students' needs in more than 6 counselling sessions. Drop in sessions should be longer and more readily available as many students might need help for short-term but immediate issues.
 2. Reflecting on the location of the counselling centre on campus. Currently, it is hidden and the distinction between disability and counselling is confusing. Greater anonymity during the counselling process would be appreciated.
 3. Changing the culture of asking for help, perhaps through awareness campaigns about mental health as it is not something that is discussed by students on campus.
 4. Advice and information given by the counselling service should be more tailored to the student seeking help in terms of cultural sensitivity.