

How well do General Course students utilize the LSE resources and get involved with the student community?

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Background

The General Course is over a century old study abroad program organized by LSE. Every year, hundreds of students like us come to London from different parts of the world, to call LSE home for a year. We as a team wanted to analyze how general course students adapted to the entire process of adjusting to a unique academic structure and navigating their way through a new campus's social landscape. Our research focused on how GC students utilized the LSE resources and how they interacted with the preexisting student community. Although LSE offers a lot of support in various forms, we had observed that GC students are somewhat detached and disconnected from the rest of the university's community.

As GC students ourselves, we observed that most of our fellow peers prefer to mingle amongst themselves, are less likely to participate in the LSE events, and are less enthusiastic about joining different societies. Moreover, we came across fellow students who weren't fully aware of the beneficial resources LSE provides, such as LSE Life, Student Wellbeing Services and the Student Counselling Services. We tried to propose useful solutions to improve the General Course student experience for the future.

The first step of our research examined whether there was an information gap about LSE resources within the entire GC population. Then we used data obtained from our surveys to understand GC students' opinion about the efficiency of LSE communication. We also wanted to quantify GC students' involvement with the community on campus through checking their participation levels in clubs and societies. We wanted to then apply a similar process to inspect the utilization of LSE resources, by approaching LSE Life, Student Wellbeing Services and LSE Careers. Finally, we wanted to understand the GC students' attitude and behaviour by conducting several focus groups and interviews. By evaluating their motivations, reasons and problems we were able to understand the factors inhibiting the assimilation and involvement of GC students within the LSE community.

Methodology

Our research focused on a healthy combination of qualitative and quantitative data to enable our investigation and help us make concrete claims. We first used surveys and quantitative secondary data available about the statistics of general course students to understand the overall demographics and psychographics of our population. We obtained our secondary data from the General Course Dean and our primary data was mainly collected through surveys and

interviews. We also initially wanted to approach different social clubs and organizations on campus and obtain data about the number of general course students regularly participating in events and activities. We aimed to do the same thing with LSE Life, Student Wellbeing Services and LSE Careers. However, due to COVID – 19, we weren't able to gather that data from these organizations. Moreover, we couldn't hold multiple focus groups, due to the pandemic so we switched to interviews to get information about the behaviour of GC students. So our research mainly focuses on quantitative data obtained from the Dean and surveys and the qualitative data obtained from interviews.

Data analysis and Findings

Based on the data obtained by our surveys and through the dean's office we found that the students displayed strong participation in the events solely targeted for the GC students. Almost 54% of the sample we surveyed attended 4 or more GC events. Our data, however, shows that participation for social activities was higher than academic or career-related events like GC Edge. 55% of the sample we surveyed claimed that they didn't attend GC Edge. The main reason they sighted was that they thought the event wouldn't really be applicable for the field or profession they are interested in. A few students also stated that the details about the program were a bit vague and they didn't really know what to expect from the event. In contrast, 67% of the general course population in the past year participated in GC social events.

When it comes to utilizing the academic resources at LSE, we found that 94% of the sample were aware of the tutoring session and workshops offered by LSE life and 80% of the sample have attended at least one of these sessions and out of that 60% found it useful. So the people who actually attended these workshops were greatly benefited. Our secondary data also showed us that the main resource centre that GC students utilized efficiently was LSE careers. In the last year, almost 100 GC students had 169 one on one meetings with a Careers Adviser.

Another important aspect we looked at was the participation of GC students in clubs and societies. That is how we quantified the "assimilation" of GS students with the LSE student community. We found that almost 90% of the sample we surveyed, enrolled in different clubs and organizations. The participation was equally distributed among different categories of clubs like Athletic association, Academic/ Career oriented clubs, Cultural/Religious organizations, Charity/Volunteer activities and Special Interest/Arts clubs. However, amongst the sample we focused on and from the interviews we conducted, we could conclude that students didn't really actively participate in these organizations even though they enrolled in them. A few reasons that came out during the interviews was the lack of incentive that exists probably due to the limited leadership opportunities available to GC students. Other students also noted that because GC students had to worry about weekly assignments they couldn't really regularly attend the organization's events and participate in them effectively.

Recommendations

We recommend that LSESU offer discounts to GC students. Since GC students are not allowed to take board positions in clubs, discounted rates would be an incentive to increase involvement.

We also think holding GC support group sessions would be beneficial. This could act as a safe space for students to meet and connect with other GC students and talk about their problems with adjusting to a new curriculum and atmosphere. They can even form study groups through these sessions and join clubs and organizations together so they feel more comfortable.

We recommend that GC students should not receive a class grade for 100 level courses. The purpose of a class grade is to give GC students a chance to adapt to LSE's academic structure, but 100 level courses are already designed to integrate new students into university. The class grade for 100 level courses ends up as an extra burden on GC students, as there are more formative assignments compared to 200 and 300 levels.