

How does asking about disability status at the application stage affect those with hidden disabilities?

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See this project presented by the researcher: <https://youtu.be/dqMMvfofM4k>
If this project has informed your practice, let us know at lse.changemakers@lse.ac.uk

Summary

The problem

The “2019 LSE access and participation plan” aims to increase representation from students with disabilities to a benchmark of 4.9%. We hypothesize that the university is already unknowingly meeting its goal, and that the main barrier is not recruitment, but rather student disclosure. Our aim was to understand how asking a mandatory disability status question on application impacts student disclosure at LSE.

The research

This project used nine years of admissions data and over 200 survey responses by students registered with the Disability and Wellbeing Service (DWS). Our research uncovers a meaningful proportion of applicants who believe that, rather than helping their chances of admission, disclosure could bring embarrassment and discrimination. Data shows as much as 46% of applicants conceal their true status on application. Thus, the current disability status question and its timing on application clearly causes some applicants distress and creates data inaccuracies that undermine LSE’s efforts to improve disability diversity and inclusion.

Recommendations

- **Collect better data on disclosure:** A student record should log both the date and value for every change in disability status while applying or enrolled at LSE.
- **Experiment with timing and messaging of the disclosure question:** Previous data has shown that tweaks to the question can have large effects on disclosure, and further testing could result in a more accurate reflection of our student population.

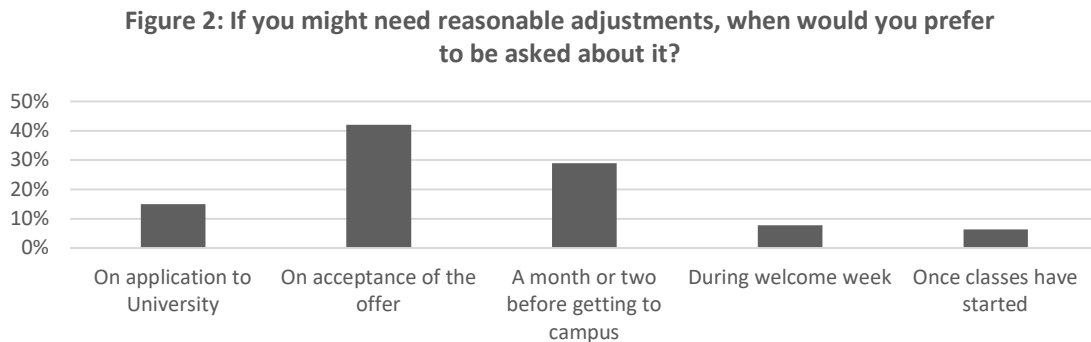
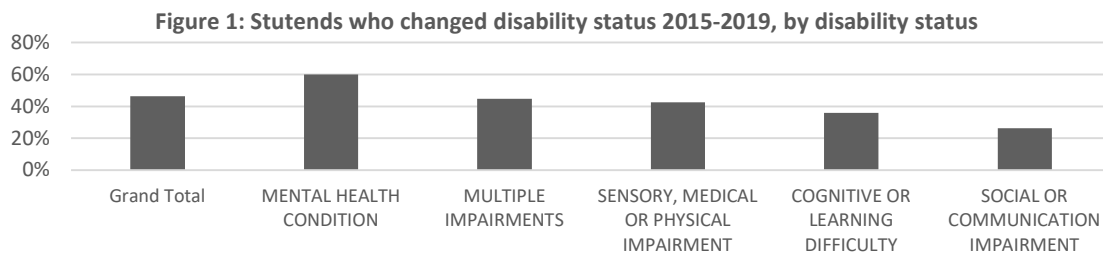
Background and methods

People with hidden disabilities often struggle with whether to disclose their disability (Valeras et al., 2010). They would like to avoid potential ‘discrimination’ and ‘stigma’ or they do not identify themselves as being ‘disabled’ (Jacklin, 2011, Riddell & Weedon, 2014). To understand this context at LSE, we analyzed student records of disclosure for 57,002 students over the past 9 years. Unfortunately, each record only contained disability status at application and every April, leaving us unable to pinpoint when and why students were

changing their disability status throughout the year. To supplement this, we conducted a survey of 208 students registered with DWS, in which we examined students' feelings and preferences around disclosure. Survey questions were brainstormed with Prof. Shreedhar of PBS & Prof. Sturgis of Methodology. They were reviewed with the Admissions and DWS teams. The survey was trialed with Fiona Holt, a DWS student.

Findings

Given how many students change their disability status between application and the end of their first year, there is strong evidence that students do not reveal their true disability status on the application. This is especially noticeable for those with mental health conditions, or multiple disabilities (Figure 1). Additionally, 85% of students prefer to be asked about their adjustment needs upon or after their offer is issued (Figure 2). One reason could be that 36% of students assume LSE "unofficially" takes disability status into account when making admissions decisions.



Rather than viewing disability disclosure as an advantage, many students feared it would be held against them. When asked why most students do not disclose their adjustment needs, one participant responded, "In case we are discriminated against and not given an offer because we are 'too much to handle'", echoing a common theme among participants. Other, less common, themes included being unaware that they would qualify, unsure of whether they would need adjustment until they were undertaking coursework, and seeing no reason to disclose the information and give up their privacy.

These same reasons may also prevent students from seeking the adjustments they need even while at LSE. Most survey respondents thought less than half of their peers who could benefit from adjustments actually disclosed their needs to LSE. The most common reasons for non-disclosure include fear of stigmatization and being perceived as weaker academically (Table 1).

Table 1: Reasons for never disclosing at LSE						
	Fear of Stigmatization	Avoid seeming weaker academically	Unaware they qualify	Avoid Hassle	Embarrassed to change after applied	Avoid Burdening others
Likely	82.11%	80.95%	78.42%	71.05%	65.26%	51.34%
Unlikely	9.47%	9.52%	12.63%	14.74%	18.42%	25.13%
Net Likely	72.63%	71.43%	65.79%	56.32%	46.84%	26.20%

Recommendations and further research

Based on these findings, we recommend some evidence-based next steps LSE can take. First, we recommend each student's record have a date and value stamp when the student's disability status changes. This could be used to answer questions including: How many students change their status from application to acceptance? How many students change their status during exam time? Do students who declare their disability earlier do better academically at LSE?

Secondly, our research uncovers a clear misalignment between LSE's desire to evaluate applicants' disability status to ensure diversity and inclusion and students' reticence to reveal disability status on application. To address this, we recommend experimenting with Post-Graduate question framing and timing, since undergraduate disability status question is usually asked on a common form outside LSE's control. Such experimentation can provide much needed insights at low financial cost and shed light on the most effective and inclusive policies to address some of the issues identified in this report. One example could be substituting "disability" language with "adjustment" language, as recommended by one survey respondent, a sentiment echoed by other responses in other questions. Another example could be framing the question as a diversity and inclusion initiative. A final example could be changing the timing of the question, potentially to after the application form (as some other universities do). Our research uncovered around an 25% increase in the disclosure rate on application in a single year (2014 and 2015). Unfortunately, there is no record of the changes made to the question that year. But it does seem to indicate that tweaks to the question could potentially have large impact.

Bibliography

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