

LSE Widening Participation's HeadStart Scheme: supporting students from underrepresented backgrounds in their transition from school to university

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*See this project presented by the researcher: <https://youtu.be/BQogYEHYm7E>
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Research Question & Background

LSE has been working to address the direct links between under-representation in higher education and broader issues of equity and social inclusion for over two decades, primarily through the work of the Widening Participation (WP) team. WP work with London non-selective state school students to raise their confidence and enable their progression to higher education. During the 2019/20 academic year, WP engaged with 2540 participants from 360 different schools. Of these students, 68% were the first generation in their family to access higher education, and 32% had been eligible for free school meals.ⁱ The HeadStart initiative is designed to aid students' transition to university. In previous years, the scheme has included specific offer holders' events, skill-building sessions, and pre-Welcome Week. However, attendance at these events has been very low and thus the WP team are looking to reassess the programme.

My research investigates:

- How can the LSE Widening Participation team's HeadStart scheme best support students from underrepresented backgrounds during their transition to university?
- What, if any, additional support is needed from LSE, more broadly?

Because of my own experience of dealing with imposter syndrome since starting LSE, I wanted to understand how LSE can be made a more inclusive space for socially mobile students. I have also had the privilege of seeing, first-handily, the important work WP does to encourage pupils to aim high and apply to leading universities.ⁱⁱ Increasing social mobility has been the 'principal goal' of the British Government's social policy.ⁱⁱⁱ Yet, within policy perspectives that present mobility as an unambiguously progressive force is the striking absence of scholarly considerations of the impact of mobility on individuals themselves. This research gives a voice to the students to share their experience and contribute directly to LSE policy change.

Methodology & Literature Review

All participants of this study attended state-funded schools and colleges across London and identified with having come from 'underrepresented' backgrounds, as based on national and regional measures.^{iv} I interviewed 7 domestic undergraduates. 4 of the students were

involved in the HeadStart scheme, and 3 had not been involved in any pre-entry WP programme. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data.^v

A key theme that transpired across all interviews was an unease with a changing and conflicting identity that these students faced when beginning their LSE journey. Most participants gave many examples of a 'divided habitus/ habitus clivé'.^{vi} The central narrative that came across from all the interviews was feelings of not belonging and 'imposters syndrome'.^{vii} This research also aligns with Diane Reay's findings that the experience of higher education, in the UK, is stratified by social class background.^{viii}

Data Analysis & Findings

Social

All interviewees' narratives centred around a clear felt divide between UK state-educated students and those who are privately educated. Their university experiences had all been shaped by having to *'grapple with inequalities in opportunity that exist'* and a *'frustration with the types of privileged lives fellow students have lived'*. This fed into feelings of inferiority and a lack of belonging. Each participant laid out how imposter syndrome was a defining feature of their LSE journey. As one participant outlined explicitly: *'You're having to battle with your peers' sense of entitlement whilst at the same time trying to convince yourself, on a pretty regular basis, that you belong in this place [LSE], and you have earned your place and are equally entitled to this education'*.

Whilst talking about this internal conflict, another participant outlined that: *'you're trying to reconcile this with people who get things easier, don't have to question their identity as they wear it easier and don't have to question their positionality at all within this university'*.

Three participants noted instances where they had felt like *'the odd one out'* after observing interactions between professors and other students. One interviewee had overheard a professor tell another student that as they were a *'son of an ambassador'* they *'would fit right in'* to LSE. Over half of the interviewees gave multiple examples of microaggressions they faced from peers and staff. This was often directed towards how they spoke, their lack of 'cultural capital' or their schooling background. Three students had been asked *'what school they went to?'* within the first week of starting LSE. Another, by a peer in class, was told she was less worthy of her place on the course *'because she got in on a contextual offer'*. All interviews spoke of how such interactions led them to question their identity. In turn, they often attempted to change their mannerisms to *'blend in more'*.

Over half of the participants also noted that they thought it was *'only them'* that deal with this social discomfort and feeling of exclusion. Others found comfort and bonds with *'people from similar backgrounds'*. Whilst one found they *'gravitated towards state-educated peers'*, five participants noted they *'very often were the only state-educated student in a group or class'*. It was recognised that *'privately educated students very quickly form cliques'*. In aligning with Sam Friedman's work, many participants felt 'culturally homeless' which led to feelings of isolation and created mental battles which fed into imposter syndrome.^{ix} Three participants noted how this feeling of inadequacy and exposure to the privilege of their peers

motivated them to improve themselves; this is akin to Reay's work on the 'constant fashioning and re-fashioning of the self'.^x

Financial

All interviewees found the LSE bursary support to be very good. It enabled two students to not have to work and therefore get involved in university life. With regards to accommodation, those privately renting all encountered obstacles. Two went through a stressful situation after not being able to provide a guarantor for rented accommodation which meant they lost out on living with friends. One of these students said they felt as though they were *'being penalised for something that wasn't my fault'*. Half of the participants had a paid role as student ambassadors which they found useful financially and socially, as it led to them meeting *'like-minded people'*.

Academic

All interviewees had trouble in the transition from 'the regurgitation style of learning' in school to critical thinking at university. Within the classroom set-up, all also felt inadequate academically: *'Other people are more attuned to know how to participate, they obviously had experience in debating clubs at school', 'I felt like an underdog', 'it took me longer to find my feet and a lot more refinement was needed for me than for the majority of my peers'*.

Not having done niche subjects at school, such as Philosophy, led to students feeling as though their peers *'already knew everything'* and that they were *'steps behind'*. A cultural capital gap was felt in the classroom setting, with one participant being questioned *'you've never been to Paris?'* by a staff member. Not knowing how to write university-style essays or read academic texts was common for all participants. For example, as one noted: *'When the readings are long and difficult, and you don't know how to digest it, it all feeds into this internal narrative of "oh I don't belong to this place" or that other people are more suited to LSE than me and that I'll never contribute anything useful'*.

There was also a concern for the lack of a representative teaching body, one interviewee felt *'there was no one like me, teaching me'*, another expressed: *'I only had 2 POC teachers and the curriculum [first-year law] is white centric'* and *'with the lack of minority teaching staff I couldn't see any of myself in academia'*.

Overall

All participants spoke of feelings of imposter syndrome and not belonging at LSE due to their previous educational backgrounds. Collectively, these led the participants to all, at one point, question their belonging to the LSE community. The findings match previous scholarship that outlines obstacles encountered by socially mobile students.^{xi} LSE must tackle the feelings of inadequacy and 'imposter syndrome' which hold the brightest of students back from fully feeling part of the LSE community.

Recommendations

In order to mitigate the obstacles encountered during students' transitional period, LSE should:

- strengthen their non-bias staff training to more explicitly be aware of the disparities in the educational experience of students before university.
- continue to work towards ensuring professors and teaching staff are from diverse backgrounds

LSE WP should:

- continue to employ student ambassadors from underrepresented backgrounds during their first year of university
- create 'family-style networks between Student Ambassadors, pre-entry programme participants, tutors and mentors to establish a support network and mentoring for students from underrepresented backgrounds.
- make the HeadStart scheme more frequent and provide check-ins with student mentors to first-year students.
- provide academic skills sessions such as debating classes for HS students.

The relevance of these suggestions is that equality in education is a crucial prerequisite to equality in wider society. Widening participation cannot mean teaching young people how to behave differently and realign their identity to fit in, but instead should be about fostering and celebrating the diversity of the LSE student population and their educational backgrounds.

ⁱ LSE Widening Participation. (2019). Annual Report. Accessed via <https://www.lse.ac.uk/study-at-lse/Undergraduate/widening-participation/Assets/PDF/Widening-Participation-Annual-Report-2019.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Raey, D. (2017). 'Working-class children get less of everything in education - including respect'. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/nov/21/english-class-system-shaped-in-schools>

ⁱⁱⁱ Cabinet Office, (2011) 'Opening doors, breaking barriers: a strategy for social mobility', p. 5.

Friedman, S. (2016). Habitus clivé and the emotional imprint of social mobility. *The Sociological Review*, 64 (1). pp. 129-147.

^{iv} LSE Widening Participation. (2019). Annual Report.

^v Attridge-Stirling, J. (2001). Thematic networks: An analytic tool for qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, 1(3), 385-405.

^{vi} Bourdieu, P. (2004). The peasant and his body. p. 127.

^{vii} Clance, P. R., & Imes, S. A. (1978). The imposter phenomenon in high achieving women: Dynamics and therapeutic intervention. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice*, 15(3), 241–247.

^{viii} Reay, D. (2020). British education: still selecting and rejecting in order to rear an elite. LSE Blog. Accessed via <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/british-education-still-selecting-and-rejecting-in-order-to-rear-an-elite/>; Reay, D. (2017). *Miseducation: Inequality, Education and the Working Classes*.

^{ix} Friedman, S. (2012). "Cultural omnivores or culturally homeless? Exploring the shifting cultural identities of the upwardly mobile". *Poetics*, 40(5), pp. 467-489.

^x Reay, D., Crozier, G., & Clayton, J. (2009). "'Strangers in Paradise'? Working-class Students in Elite Universities." *Sociology*. 43(6).

^{xi} Reay, D., Crozier, G., & Clayton, J. (2009). "'Strangers in Paradise'; Brown, P. (2013) 'Education, opportunity and the prospects for social mobility', *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 34/5-6: 678-700; Cooke, R., et al. (2010). How Social Class Differences Affect Students' Experience of University. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*. 28(4):407-421; Lehmann, W., (2013), 'Habitus transformation and hidden injuries: successful working-class university students', *Sociology of Education*, 87 (1): 1–15.