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

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Research Question

LSE recognises that there are direct links between under-representation in higher education and broader issues of equity, social inclusion, and mobility. The School has been working to address these for over two decades, primarily through the work of the LSE Widening Participation (WP) team. The WP team work with London non-selective state school, college and sixth form students to raise their aspirations and instil confidence to enable them to progress to higher education. Their work spans from on-campus activities ranging from half-day sessions for students in Years 6, to week-long summer schools for those in Years 11-13.

These programmes involve the support of 114 student ambassadors, 85 mentors and 53 tutors, many of whom have previously been involved in WP initiatives during school themselves. WP, during the 2019/20 academic year, 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.[1]

The HeadStart initiative, which has been co-created with LSE students who have previously taken part in pre-entry WP programmes, is designed to aid students' transition to university and support retention. In the previous couple of years, the scheme has included specific offer holders' events, skill-building sessions, pre-Welcome Week inductions and priority consideration for Student Ambassador roles. However, attendance at these events has been very low and thus the WP team are looking to strengthen the programme and reassess these students' needs.

My research is investigating:

'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?'

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[1] 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

This research aims to, firstly, understand the experiences of students from underrepresented backgrounds during their transition to LSE, and then outline how LSE and WP can mitigate the obstacles faced by students.

Background

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. Working with the WP team, as a student ambassador over the last three years, has been a positive and influential part of my LSE journey. Being involved across WP's SPRINT scheme and CHOICE summer school, I have also had the privilege of seeing, first-handily, the important work WP does to encourage pupils to see their own potential, aim high and apply to leading universities.

All participants of this study attended state-funded schools and colleges across London and identified with having come from 'underrepresented' backgrounds, as outlined by the WP team. This criterion is based on national and regional measures about which demographics are underrepresented at the School and includes:

- Care-experienced students
- those who grew up in a postcode area of low progression to higher education (as defined by POLAR4 quintile 1 or 2) or in an area of deprivation (as defined by IMD 2019 quintiles 1 or 2).
- Ethnic minorities under-represented at LSE (eg Black African/Caribbean and Pakistani)
- Disabled young people
- Those who were eligible for free school meals
- Young carers
- Estranged from their family
- Forced migrants, refugees or asylum seekers
- From a Gypsy Roma or Traveller community.[2]

More broadly, this study fits into the work into social mobility and the experience of socially mobile students in UK universities.[3] Increasing social mobility has been the 'principal goal' of the British Government's social policy. [4] 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.

[2] LSE Widening Participation. (2019). Annual Report.
[3] 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
[4] 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.

To address my research question, I investigated the experiences of students from underrepresented backgrounds in their transition to university. I interviewed 7 domestic undergraduate students from a variety of departments. 4 of the students were involved in the HeadStart scheme, and 3 had not been involved in any pre-entry WP programme. Participants were recruited through the WP email list and via the Social Mobility LSESU society. The interviews were semi-structured and conducted over Zoom. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data.[5]

Literature Review

The central narrative that came across from all the interviews conducted was feelings of not belonging and 'imposters syndrome' as defined as:

'an internal experience of intellectual phoniness […] and is usually accompanied by a fear that one day some significant person (a colleague, boss, parent, or partner) will catch them out and realize that they are a fraud'.[6]

This research also aligns with Diane Reay's findings that 'the UK educational system is elitist at its core' and the experience of higher education is stratified by social class background.[7]

A key theme that transpired across all interviews was an unease and discomfort with a changing and conflicting identity that these students faced when beginning their LSE journey and joining an unfamiliar and elite institution. Most participants gave many examples of a 'divided habitus/ habitus clivé' as Bourdieu has described.[8]

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 *'grabble 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:

[5] Attride-Stirling, J. (2001). Thematic networks: An analytic tool for qualitative research. Qualitative Research, 1(3), 385-405.

[6] 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.

[7] 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.

[8] Bourdieu, P. (2004). The peasant and his body. p. 127.

'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'*. For instance, one student noted:

'I felt like I stuck out, I felt I had to change my Northern accent and speak differently to try to "fit in".

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 and found their conversations difficult to engage in'*. It was recognised that *'privately educated students very quickly form cliques and this is not the same for state educated'*. Of participants who had experienced HeadStart, only one had made a long-lasting friendship with a peer.

An obstacle encountered by all participants was a feeling of discomfort in new social environments of societies and formal networking events. 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.[9] This also echoes Bourdieu's claim that when individuals encounter an unfamiliar field, their habitus is transformed and often results in 'a habitus divided against itself'.[10] Three participants noted how this feeling of inadequacy and exposure to the privilege of their peers motivated them to improve themselves; this is akin

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[9] Friedman, S. (2012). "Cultural omnivores or culturally homeless? Exploring the shifting cultural identities of the upwardly mobile". *Poetics*, 40(5), pp. 467-489.
[10] Bourdieu, P. (1990). "Structures, habitus, practices". *The Logic of Practice.* Cambridge: Polity. pp. 52-65.

to Reay's work on the 'constant fashioning and re-fashioning of the self' whilst still retaining key valued aspects of a working-class self, that many socially mobile students encounter. [11]

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'*.

The increase in renting costs from 32-week hall contracts to 12 months private accommodation was also a source of anxiety for all those living away from their family home. 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'*. All participants noted they had good money management skills and were able to budget well. Two participants noted they felt *'guilt'* for having such a high bursary and *'feeling bad'* as they *'never expected to be one of the poorest at university'*.

Academic

All interviewees experienced difficulty in the transition from 'the regurgitation style of learning' in school to critical thinking at university:

'Having to read Plato and being expected to have your own original, unique stance was overwhelming as questioning authority did not come as easily to me as others'.

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',

'I didn't know what I could contribute',

'Classes were intimidating, and I was too afraid to contribute',

'In class, it took me longer to find my feet and a lot more refinement was needed for me than for the majority of my peers'.

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

One student encouraged a teacher eye-rolling at him after he answered a class question which made him feel *'embarrassed and stupid'*.

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'.

All interviewees did not feel comfortable reaching out to peers for academic support for fear of embarrassment and humiliation: *'I don't feel there is that collaborative environment at LSE to help overcome these obstacles'*.

There was also a concern for the lack of a representative teaching body, one interview 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'*.

Three participants found as they initially struggled to communicate verbally in academic conversations when they did well in written work, they would question if the marking was correct and doubt their ability despite having positive feedback.

Overall

All participants spoke of feelings of imposter syndrome and not belonging at LSE due to their previous educational background. They all also were aware of their social positioning during interactions in classrooms, societies and during informal socialising. 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 socially, academically and financially.[12]

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[12] Reay, D., Crozier, G., & Clayton, J. (2009). "'Strangers in Paradise'; Aries, E. and M. Seider. 2005. ''The Interactive Relationship between Class Identity and the College Experience: The Case of Lower Income Students.'' Qualitative Sociology 28(4):419-43; 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; Forsyth, A. & Furlong, A. (2003) Access to higher education and disadvantaged young people. British Educational Research Journal. 29. pp. 205-225; Lehmann, W., (2013),

One participant questioned: 'how much responsibility does LSE take for pre-university inequalities in educational experiences?'. As these findings have outlined, there is an opportunity for LSE to take the lead in ensuring the university is a space not only accessible but inclusive of students from backgrounds typically underrepresented in higher education. This 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

These recommendations have been created by analysing the participants' responses about how to improve WP's HeadStart to mitigate the obstacles encountered during students' transitionary period to LSE:

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 for students from underrepresented backgrounds.
> use student mentors to support first-year undergraduates from underrepresented groups.
> 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 in order to fit in, but instead should be about

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'Habitus transformation and hidden injuries: successful working-class university students', Sociology of Education, 87 (1): 1–15.

fostering and celebrating the diversity of the LSE student population and their educational backgrounds to ensure everyone feels part of this community.

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