

Understanding Office Hours at LSE: who, how and why?

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This report summarises findings and recommendations arising from a study into Office Hour (OH) usage at LSE. It is guided by the following research questions: 1. Is there a differential uptake of OH across different demographic groups at LSE? 2. What are the main barriers students face in OH usage? 3. According to students, what makes a good OH?

Background and Literature

OHS are a “time-honoured academic ritual” [1]. They exist at most universities to allow students a chance to “address questions, solve problems, or discuss matters relevant to their studies face-to-face with their teacher” [2, p. 180]. Several researchers note the importance of OHS as an educational tool, especially as it relates to the benefits of student-faculty interaction [3, 2, 4]. Guerrero and Rod (2013) note that OH usage is positively correlated with academic performance [5]. It follows that underuse of OHS, or bad experiences with them, could affect students' educational attainment and experience at the university. Some studies have suggested that there are differences in student-faculty interaction across gender, race, social class and first-generation status [6]. If this is the case, these disparities in OH uptake may be in part contributing to attainment gaps which have long been stark at UK universities.

A mixed-methods design

Quantitative strand

- We used a newly available dataset of Student Hub OH bookings. The dataset contains 90000 unique OH bookings over a three-year period, made by over 16000 individual LSE students. Each anonymised booking had information on demographic profiles. This allowed us to track patterns and trends in OH bookings over time. (See Appendix)
- For the purposes of consistency, we only used bookings from the academic year 2019/20 for our analysis. We constructed our dependent variable ‘counts’ which shows, for each individual student, how many bookings they made in that year, and fit an OLS model (all independent variables are binaries):

$$counts_i = \alpha + \beta BME_i + \beta Female_i + \beta HUK_i + \beta HCI_i + \beta HEU_i + \varepsilon_i$$

Qualitative strand

- We conducted a thematic qualitative analysis of 23 semi-structured interviews with students who both use and do not use OH (see Appendix).

- For the qualitative analysis, we transcribed and coded main themes arising from the interviews following a data-led coding strategy (see Appendix).

Findings

Based on the OLS model, we found that BME students book 2.5 more OH per year than their white counterparts. Female students book 3 more OH than their male counterparts. Overseas students also book more OH than their home fee status counterparts, with UK students booking the fewest (between 4-5 fewer than overseas students), followed by EU students who book on average 2 fewer OH than overseas students. Findings were statistically significant at the 5% level.

This finding does not fit well with priors on unequal access to educational opportunities, particularly OHs [6]. An important qualification to these results is that they only include bookings made on Student Hub. Therefore, it could instead be the case that BME, female and overseas students simply rely more on this formal process of booking OHs and interacting with faculty, while their white, male and home counterparts may be using more informal methods to arrange these meetings, such as emailing or talking after class.

The following sections summarise four key topics that arose from our interviews.

Reasons for Going to Office Hours

- The first and most popular one was to seek academic help, which included three main areas: wishing to clarify content from lectures or seminars, seeking clarification on feedback received, and needing to ensure that a plan for a summative was “on the right track”.
- Secondly, to address career concerns. This includes seeking mentorship on future career decisions, and to a lesser extent networking with academics (specifically, for securing references).
- Finally, some of our interviewees mentioned going to OHs to simply learn more about an academic and their work. In a sense, to satisfy some sort of academic curiosity.

Characteristics of a Good Office Hour

- A substantial majority of our interviewees noted that clarity and straightforwardness was greatly appreciated. For instance, an interviewee noted a good OH as “when they actually answer my questions and don't skirt around it.”, and another as “(when) they actually listen to you and that they engage with your question and that they give as concrete as advice as possible”
- A second attribute brought up by interviewees was an academic's relational style. That is, students realise and value when academics are genuinely open, interested, and engaged with the students' academic (and sometimes personal) life.

Time

Time came up as a main barrier for both access to and enjoyment of OHs. Almost all interviewees mentioned time, mainly in two ways.

- OHs are too short to be useful, for both students that want to get academic help, and students seeking some form of relationship with academics. Students reported feeling rushed (“it's just not enough time to have courage”) or were sceptical that the shorter OHs (mainly 10 to 20 minutes) were useful. (e.g., “I don't think an office hour would help too much, like 10 minutes, I don't think would make a big difference”; “You just need to rush through the questions, and you don't even get proper answers”)

- This finding is substantiated by quantitative analysis conducted drawing from the same dataset, we found evidence that the longer the office hour, the less likely it is to be cancelled. Findings were statistically significant at the 5% level (See Appendix).
- Secondly, students feel pressured by the notion of “taking up” academics’ time. An interviewee mentioned feeling “rude taking up their time”, and another noted that “they’re really busy and they have (...) all the students looking for them for answers and they don’t have a lot of time”

Online v. In person

- Our interviewees displayed a broad range of heterogeneous views on the comparison between online and in person OHs.
- For some, in person OHs were preferred for reasons such as ease of relationship-building, the value of body language, and a feeling that going into the office itself was a meaningful event. (e.g., “they just feel more meaningful”; “a bit more exciting or a bit more fruitful”; “situational niceness”)
- Some preferred online, especially due to convenience (e.g., “convenient”; “More comfortable”), but also for some relational aspects (e.g., “less intimidating; “less formal”)
- Most interviewees expressed a wish to keep online OHs as an option when LSE returns to in person provision, mostly for convenience reasons, such as not having to travel to campus (especially if they lived far away) in order to go to a 10-minute meeting.

Recommendations

Resourcing

- The Eden Centre should develop resources for academics on how to conduct successful office hours, what to expect, and how to promote them (See https://crlt.umich.edu/sites/default/files/instructor_resources/learning_and_teaching_during_office_hours.pdf).
- LSE should keep online OHs as an option when it goes back to in person teaching (as a pilot).
- Students may want longer OHs at times. Departments could accommodate this by providing options to choose between different OH lengths.

Messaging

- Departments should make efforts to increase the exposure of OH during the initial weeks of incoming students. OHs are not a universally understood concept, and it thus follows that they should be advertised and “marketed” as valuable tools for students’ educational experience.
 - Specifically, students should receive extensive guidance on what OHs are for and how to make the most of them [7, 8, p. 183]
- Lecture and class leaders should continuously remind students of OHs throughout the term, encouraging students to attend.
- In order to reduce the presumption of being a burden, lecture and class leaders could notify students of current take up in OHs (especially when low) and encourage students to reach out regardless of the content of their queries.

Evaluating

- Given the importance of OHs for academic provision, and how important they are for students, LSE should develop a system for students to provide anonymous feedback

on OHs. This could be arranged through modifying TQARO Surveys, or having departments include feedback points throughout the academic year. This should be a resource for academics to develop their skills in student-faculty interaction.

- Change Makers should continue to encourage research on OHs, specifically to investigate potential disparities in OH usage across different demographics.

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