

# Activism at the LSE: How do student activists experience being "agents of change" at the LSE? In what ways does the LSE enable student-led activism?

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If this project has informed your practice, let us know at [lse.changemakers@lse.ac.uk](mailto:lse.changemakers@lse.ac.uk)

## Introduction

This project seeks to provide novel findings on the student activist experience at the LSE, using the term "agents of change" (LSE, 2019) as a means to understand how activist students engage with and are engaged by the LSE and LSESU. The main objectives of this research are:

- To enlarge the body of research around student-led activism at LSE, as this is an aspect of the student experience that is deeply under-researched.
- To understand what enabling students to be "agents of change" means at LSE through the lens of activism.
- To improve the ways in which the LSESU can support and sustain activist campaigns as well as build on any pre-existing research they have done on supporting activism.

## Methodology

This project comprised of **6 focus groups** with **16 participants** in total from a range of activist groups (listed below) all of which have been involved in an SU-supported campaign<sup>1</sup>. The methodology was heavily influenced by feminist participatory methodologies (Harding, 1991; Collins 1998) and the focus group format was chosen because it is useful when analysing activist experiences and group dynamics (Atkinson, 2017).

**Justice for Cleaners**  
**The Decolonise Collective**  
**Climate Emergency Collection**  
**Make LSE Queer Again**

**Hands Off Campaign**  
**Freedom of Mind**  
**Coalition for Educational Autonomy**  
**LSE Rent Strike**

## Findings: Agents of Change

- All participants did not relate to the term "agents of change" with regards to their activist work. Most participants did not relate to the term "activist" either.
- Female participants also expressed more self-criticism over identifying with the term.

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<sup>1</sup> Please find resources on what qualifies as an SU-supported campaign, as well as more information on the LSESU campaigning processes, in the recommended readings on page 4 and in the full report.

## Findings: Experiences at the LSE

- Participants explained that they engage in activism because of an investment in improving the LSE and improving the welfare of students and staff.
- Most participants became involved in activism through in-person events at the start of the academic year. Participants did not become involved through SU events fair; it was normally through activist panel discussions and meetings.
- Activist work helped participants engage more with their academic work. For many, the experiences, expertise and connections gained through their activist work provided them with topics of research.
- Many participants expressed that the community and social aspect of activism at LSE was a very enriching experience. Many found that activism provided them with access to social networks and communities that they could not find in any other society or setting (academic or otherwise).

“I think that has been possibly the most positive part of activism at LSE for me, is the willingness of other groups who are totally unrelated to your cause wanting to get behind it and promote it... it gives me such a good feeling because you know that people care. **When you work with people, it always reaffirms what you're doing, even if it just means that someone else cares about your activism.**”

“ I think LSE could do better in the way it engages with activists by not vilifying them and actually engaging with them as their most passionate stakeholders in this organization because we're the ones who actually want to see things be better.”

## Findings: Experiences with the LSE

- Participants explained that experiences with LSE management and staff were often negative, especially in how their ideas were received.
- All participants stated that non-recognition, misrepresentation and gaslighting from the LSE management and staff were central issues. Many participants cited times when staff had framed them as extreme or demanding too much as a means to delegitimise their voices and activist work.
- Many participants explained that, although they felt personal achievements in their activism, often times the lack of recognition from the LSE undermined an objective sense of achievement.
- Below are lists of responses to a question which asked participants to summarise their experiences of doing activism at the LSE into three words:

“I haven't ever felt like LSE was interested in listening on a constructive level, it was always: **"We're a little too loud", and they push back.**”

Empowering, alienating, perspective  
Challenging, rewarding, humbling  
Learning, community, slow  
Community, fear, validation  
Collective, hopeful, slow  
Necessary, disheartening, humbling  
Community, trust  
Eye-opening, frustrating, hopeful

Unusual, bureaucratic, engaging  
Tedious, inspiring, humbling  
Humbling, frustrating, invigorating  
New, community, humbling  
Bureaucratic, high-potential, disorganized  
Vexing, alienating  
Challenging, lonely, exploitative  
Unsatisfying, Bureaucratic, slow

## Findings: Experiences with the LSESU

- Participants see the SU as a formal channel to have dialogue with LSE management. This is where activist students expect to have their voices heard and represented.
- All participants agreed that the SU does have some good systems for supporting campaigns: such as the campaigns officer and the provisions that come from being an SU campaign.
- Most participants however expressed that they had felt confused by the SU structure, for example not knowing who to contact or having their requests and emails ignored.
- All participants felt frustrated by the high levels of bureaucracy that created unnecessary issues for students simply trying to access campaign resources, book a room or publicise their campaign through SU official channels.
- All participants agreed that the SU should be a better intermediary between activist students and LSE senior figures/management.
- Participants who engaged in formal roles in the SU had negative experiences. Participants explained that these roles are often exploitative because they depend on students' free labour and often lead to overwork.

"Having that kind of support, trusting us to do our own thing, providing support where necessary, and providing a bit of direction would all be things I'd want to see. ...Being able to meet with the SU Campaigns Officer every two months at least showed that somebody cared... I think that auxiliary role that the SU play is helpful, but it could certainly be strengthened."

## Recommendations for the LSE

- **Create a bi-annual meeting between SU campaign activists and members of senior management.** A major issue is the lack of face-to-face dialogue with LSE staff and so having a meeting for student activists to voice their queries, demands and aims directly would help improve understanding and dialogue.
- **Create an allotment of time in Town Hall meetings solely for SU campaigns** to voice their concerns with the LSE Directorate and senior staff.
- **Improve the ways senior members of staff communicate with activist students.** For example, the use of terms that frame activist students as extremists (e.g. "tree hugger") are not helpful for improving understanding and dialogue.
- **Acknowledge activist students work and attempts to create dialogue.** This can be as simple as not ignoring correspondence from activist students and referring to an activist group by their actual group name rather than an individual member's name. This can also be more substantive, in acknowledging the influence of activist students on changes and improvements at LSE.

- **Create an archive of activism at the LSE.** In relation to the above point, the creation of an archive of LSE activists' work would make a clear statement that the LSE recognises and celebrates the history and influence of activists at the LSE.<sup>2</sup>

## Recommendations for the LSESU

- **More research on how the SU functions for students** and the experiences of staff and students in relation to campaigning.
- **More research on the experiences of sabbatical officers and students in formalised SU positions.** Particularly research on the experiences of female, Queer and BAME students in formalised positions in the SU as these students presented worrying reports on their experiences.
- **Pay part time SU student officers,** like the LGBT and BAME student officers.
- **Create paid campaign officer roles for students involved in activism.** Having students in part-time campaign officer roles would create better communication between activists and the SU.
- **Reduce the level of bureaucracy for campaigns** or allow for SU staff to more clearly direct activist students when starting an SU campaign.
- **Improve the level of transparency for students in SU campaigns.** Specifically, around the structure of the SU, who holds what positions and how to contact them.
- **Give more authority to democratically elected (sabbatical) officers.** For example, allow them to mass email students and or make a post on the SU Instagram page.

## References

- Atkinson, J. (2017). Journey into Social Activism: Qualitative Approaches. Fordham University Press, pp.65-98.
- Collins, P. H. (1998). Black Feminist Thought. New York: Routledge, pp.1-23
- Harding, S. (1991). Whose Science, Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives. New York: Cornell Press, pp. 1-8
- LSE. (2019). LSE 2030 Strategy. Retrieved from <https://www.lse.ac.uk/2030/assets/pdf/LSE-2030full-text-as-approved-by-Council-5-Feb.pdf>

## Recommended Readings

- LSE Students Union, LSE Campaigns Toolkit 2009:  
<https://www.lsesu.com/pageassets/yourunion/campaigning/guidetocampaigning/FINAL-LSE-toolkit.pdf>
- LSE Students Union, Campaigns Hub:  
<https://www.lsesu.com/campaigning/campaigns-network/>
- LSE Library Archives, LGBT Collections:  
<https://www.lse.ac.uk/library/collection-highlights/lgbt-collections>

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<sup>2</sup> Please see Recommended Readings for an example of this done by the LSE Library.