

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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1.0 Background

No prior Changemakers project has researched the student experience as it relates to activism and so this project seeks to provide novel findings on the student activist experience at LSE. This research project uses the term "agents of change" as a means to understand how activist students engage with and are engaged by the LSE and LSESU. The term is taken from the LSE 2030 Strategy which outlines the central aims and commitments of the LSE over the next 10 years (LSE, 2019). There are two specific priorities: 1.2 "Students as Agents of Change" and 3.5 "Enable and Sustain Change" which assure that the LSE will enable students and staff "to innovate and drive meaningful change within the school" (ibid). Although activism is not explicitly mentioned in either priority, in understanding how activist students experience being "agents of change", this research helps to inform decisions on how the LSE enables students to be "agents of change" through the lens of activism. To summarise, the main three objectives of this research project are listed below:

- 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 LSE and LSESU can support and sustain activist campaigns.

Justice for Cleaners
The Decolonise Collective
Climate Emergency Collective
Make LSE Queer Again
Hands Off Campaign
Freedom of Mind
Coalition for Educational
Autonomy
LSE Rent Strike

2.0 Methodology

This project comprised of 6 focus groups with 16 participants in total from a range of activist groups, collectives and campaigns (see above). All focus groups were held on Zoom and lasted from 30- 90 minutes. Participants were collected through the snowball method and were selected on the basis that they held an influential position within an activist group for at least one year. Furthermore, all participants have been involved in an SU-supported campaign and or put forward an SU motion. This means that their group has been recognised formally within the SU structure and received enough votes from the student body to put forward a motion that demands a change in LSE policy¹. Given the nature of their activist work, all participants are anonymous and all identifiable information has been removed. This being said, it is worth highlighting that there is a greater proportion of female and undergraduate participants. This is because activism at LSE is overwhelmingly female and undergraduate led.

The methodology was heavily influenced by feminist participatory methodologies (Harding, 1991; Collins 1998) as they prioritise the voices of marginalised people and encourage a greater sense of community by delineating the traditional interviewer/interviewee dynamic. These are two important considerations given that activists are often marginalised and are less responsive to hierarchical group dynamics (ibid). The focus group format was chosen because it is useful when analysing activist group experiences (Atkinson, 2017). This is because the group-setting creates more comfortability amongst participants through a communal sharing environment (ibid, p66). The focus group, however, can lead to response convergence (Bloor et al., 2001) and so measures were taken to mitigate this. For instance, by giving main questions to participants in advance and asking participants to answer questions before sharing. Moreover, following a more holistic approach in focus groups, participants were encouraged to expand on their own experiences and pursue discussions that related to their own experiences (Thomas, 2019). A thematic analysis has been used to draw key findings and recommendations.

3.0 Data Analysis

Data analysis is separated into four different themes: Findings on how participants related to the term “agents of change” as well as findings on participants’ experiences at the LSE, with the LSE and with the LSESU. Experiences at the LSE will detail more general findings on student activism whilst the latter two categories will present specific findings on the experiences of student activists interacting with LSE/SU staff and structures.

¹ For information on the LSESU campaigning process please consult the recommended reading list on page 8.

3.1 Agents of Change

- All participants did not relate to the term “agents of change” with regards to their activist work. Although some did feel like the term related to their academic studies. Most participants found the term “empty” of substantive meaning.
- Moreover, most participants did not relate to the term “activist” either. With many participants expressing a distrust of the term, associating it with performative activism. However, many participants did not share this association when using activism as a verb or noun. It was specifically the use of the term “activist” to self-identify which made participants weary.
- Female participants also expressed more self-criticism over identifying with the term “activist”.

“No. Not in the context of our activism, no. I mean, yes of course, maybe in the sense of I get a Masters and I get an education, that I can, after that, maybe do a job that changes something. In the context of activism, no.”

3.2 Experiences at the LSE

- Participants explained that they engage in activism because of an investment in improving the LSE and particularly 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; however, it was normally through activist led panel discussions and meet-ups.
- 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).
- Below are lists of responses to a question asking participants to summarise their experiences of doing activism at the LSE into three words. The most common words were “humbling” and “community”. With a common pattern of one positive, one negative and one social-related word.

“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.**”

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

3.3 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.
- For instance, in an SU Town Hall meeting with senior LSE staff, members of the Climate Emergency Collective were called “tree huggers” and labelled as extremists for their demands by a senior member of staff. Participants felt that not only was this term completely inappropriate for anyone to use, with the term having a racist history towards Indigenous people, but also was used as a means to silence their voices.

“I heard that from people in meetings, they don't treat the student activists seriously. They put them as the loud socialists as soon as you're an activist, or from an activist group, you're not taken seriously by LSE management”.

“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.”

- 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.
- For instance, one participant from the Decolonise Collective explained that during the Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020, members of the collective drafted a letter to send to the LSE directorate. They spent a long period of time drafting and having multiple parties proof-read this letter only for them to never receive any response. It was this participant's opinion that this letter influenced the later release of an official LSE statement of support for the BLM protests, although the Decolonise Collective never received any acknowledgment of this influence.

“ 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.”

“It does feel that the work that we put in is just completely neglected until the university has to act and put themselves in a good light.”

3.4 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.
- Participants from the LSE Rent Strike campaign were deeply frustrated by the lack of consistency in support from the SU when it was most needed. For instance, when the participants needed the SU to publicize information about the campaign and upcoming rent strike via mass email. The email was sent out late and so the entirety of its intended effect in promoting the rent strike was lost.
- 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. These positions varied from student SU officer roles to students on advisory panels and boards within the SU. Participants explained that these roles are often exploitative because they rely on students' free labour, often lead to overwork when participants have to do academic work and paid work to stay afloat. This should be further researched on its own for many of these participants it felt like the first time they had been able to voice their experiences in these positions.

"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."

"First, I'm not paid, and it's very messed up because when you're not paid, you can just disappear and never show up, that's going to be fine. If you care about your community, you're going to show up and you do a lot of work that's not paid, it's not recognized as work. **Most of the things that I do, I never count on the support from SU or the sabbatical officers, I did on my own, and can be quite exploiting.**"

4.0 Findings

There are many findings one can draw from this data. In 3.1, the complete lack of engagement with the term “agents of change” does imply that LSE students do not feel as though the LSE is encouraging them to be “agents of change” outside of academic work. Although, the lack of engagement with the term “activist” posits that students that engage in activism are hesitant to identify with most labels. In 3.2, the social aspect of activism at LSE was overwhelmingly apparent in the accounts of participants. This highlights the ways in which activism at LSE is an important part of the student experience for many students and should be valued as such by the LSE in the same way that academic work and SU societies are. Below are the findings and recommendations for the latter two categories of analysis.

4.1 Recommendations for the LSE

As prior stated, activist students do not expect the LSE itself to automatically meet their demands, however, the means and kinds of communication activist students have with LSE management staff can be improved. The lack of recognition for activist students’ concerns is a central issue that should be addressed. Especially when an activist group is recognised as an SU campaign, because these campaigning groups must represent the interests of a large number of students in order to be SU campaigns. There are many ways LSE staff can do this:

- **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 which celebrates the rich history of LSE activists’ accomplishments would make a clear statement that the LSE recognises the work of its activist students. Notably, this was partly done in the LSE library with the Gay Liberation Front archive.²

² Please see Recommended Readings list for an example of this.

- **Keep LSE management and staff updated on SU campaigns.** Increased engagement with activist students' work would be deeply beneficial for understanding activists' perspective. Given SU campaigns represent the interests of LSE students, this would also help LSE staff to keep up with the student experience.

4.2 Recommendations for the LSESU

The LSESU is responsible for representing the interests and queries of activist students and so there are more substantive measures that the LSESU can put in place to improve the current system. Below is a list of key recommendations:

- **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 student officer and BAME student officer. Currently these positions are unpaid and lead to students being exploited for free labour.
- **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. This would also lessen the stresses of the activists in these positions as they would have a greater ability to focus on their activism.
- **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. Student repeatedly felt deeply confused by the SU structure and so this would improve the efficiency of SU campaigns.
- **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

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Bloor, Michael., Frankland, Jane., Thomas, Michelle. & Robson, Kate. (2001). Focus Groups in Social Research: Preparation and conduct. SAGE Publications, pp. 37-57.

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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>

Thomas, Kate. (2019). Rethinking student Belonging in Higher Education: From Bourdieu to Borderlands. London: Routledge, pp. 1- 42.

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>