Improving the course selection process at LSE

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See this project presented by the researcher: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tKO6cpVP7Jc
If this project has informed your practice, let us know at lse.changemakers@lse.ac.uk

LSE students spend several weeks at the beginning of each term exploring, shortlisting, and registering for their courses. Courses are the heart of the LSE student experience, yet students experience significant difficulties in the process. In our Change Makers project, we set out to understand the pain points that LSE students experience in course selection and how we might improve the process.

Methodology

We started by interviewing five students (four MSc, one UG) in the Psychological and Behavioural Science department and found that the majority of issues in course selection lie with masters students. For this reason, we elected to focus on dissatisfaction among masters students. We surveyed MSc students across six departments to understand the breadth of the issues raised in our interviews. The departments were Economics, Economic History, Gender Studies, International Relation, Management, and Psychological and Behavioural Science. We gathered a total of 95 responses.

Findings and Recommendations

The issues that students have in the course selection process can be grouped into three themes: poor communication, high degree of uncertainty, and the lack of a robust feedback loop.

Poor Communication and Cognitive Overload

"The most frustrating was the lack of communication and organization between departments regarding the course selection. Statements from department managers were conflicting…For instance, the IR department communicated that no departments apply 'first come, first serve' schemes, which was the case for many outside options. Moreover, the IT system for course selection is out of date and was obviously overwhelmed. This has been the worst course selection process in my academic career." - MSc Student in International Relations

Much of the information students receive around course selection is either overwhelming, unclear, or outright contradictory. At the beginning of term, students are pummeled with information about selecting courses and have a very short time span to explore, review, and finalize their selections. Furthermore, the information is often unclear. Some critical information

is not available or very difficult to access; it is hidden in web pages or requires students to reach out directly to professors or academic advisors. Since so much of the information came through word of mouth, students reported receiving contradictory information about the course selection process.

We recommend making communication about course selection clearer. Moreover, departments should communicate with students about course selection earlier, promoting earlier exploration of courses. We found that most students would prefer communication about course selection 1-2 months in advance of the first day of term.

For **each course** that the department offers, students should be able to get the following information:
1. Is a 100 word statement required and what should it contain?
2. How is the waitlist prioritized? First-come-first-serve, or based on the 100 word statement and student interest?
3. Historically, is the course highly competitive to get into? What can students do to increase their chances of getting into it?
4. Is there a link to a video of the professor describing the course? (Students found such videos extremely helpful in communicating what they should expect from a course.)

Unclear Processes

Students report experiencing many "unknown unknowns" in the course selection process. Students typically assume that LSE does course selection the same way as their home university, only to find out too late that LSE's process is very different (with differences from department to department and even within a department!). It is extremely difficult to get information about course selection processes, particularly outside your home department. **Unclear processes make the task of course selection feels unfair, since success in course selection often comes down to luck.**

We recommend defining clear, consistent policies at the department level and clearly communicating these with students. However, departments should consider giving professors some wiggle room to adapt as deemed appropriate (assuming the alterations are clearly communicated). These policies should answer the following questions:
1. (all of the questions listed in the "Communication" section above)
2. What is the maximum turnaround time between signing up for a course and hearing back (whether the student was accepted/rejected/waitlisted)?
    a. This is really important for students, as they will likely be enrolled in several courses of interest, trying to stay up to speed with all of them until they have their schedule finalized
3. Where should students go when they need support for course selection?
4. How does the department manage expectations around course selection, especially getting into popular courses?

No Feedback Loop

Departments should instrument listening mechanisms to continuously have a pulse on the student experience with course selection. Instituting a system for continuous feedback enables LSE to verify that the resources invested into improving course selection are worthwhile. Although our recommendations are based on student feedback, they are based on limited data with many confounding variables due to COVID.

Currently, 50% of students surveyed reported being waitlisted, and 25% of students reported getting rejected, both of which were highly negative experiences. However, these figures vary greatly by department, meaning the student experience differs greatly among LSE students.

Waitlisting and rejection are so stressful because many MSc students chose to come to LSE in order to take a specific course. Many questioned their decision to come to LSE in the first place when they did not get into a desired course. Indeed, 40% of students had a more negative perception of LSE as a result of course selection, with perceptions being more negative for those who were waitlisted or rejected.

In the short term, departments should start tracking Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) around course selection, such as the rates at which students are waitlisted and rejected. This provides a common language for comparing student experiences across departments. Departments should also give students the opportunity to provide feedback on the process.

In the long-term, the university should redesign course selection such that students can rank their first, second and third choices. They should also design KPIs that incentivize departments to maximize the number of students that get into a first or second choice course. Finally, there should be an effort to set up and popularize [Rate my professor](#) for LSE professors.