Improving the course selection process at LSE

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Project Description

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 Changemakers 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. In the context of selecting courses, the main difference between masters and undergraduate students is flexibility. Masters students typically come to the LSE with a set plan for the courses they want to take; undergraduate goals are far more exploratory, which leads them to be more satisfied when things do not go to plan. For this reason, we elected to focus on dissatisfaction among masters students. We surveyed MSc students across six departments[1] to understand the breadth of the issues raised in our interviews. 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, and, clearly, there was no coordination regarding course selection processes between departments. 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 Moreover, the IT system for course selection is out of date and was obviously overwhelmed.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

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[1] Departments are: Economics, Economic History, Gender Studies, International Relation, Management, and Psychological and Behavioural Science.

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[2]. 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?[3]

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

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[2] We found that most students would prefer communication about course selection 1–2 months in advance of the first day of term
[3] Students found such videos extremely helpful in communicating what they should expect from a course

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, perhaps through the TQAROS survey. For transparency, departments should share this feedback with future students to enable the next batch of students to make informed course selection decisions.

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.

Appendix 1: Charts

Response Breakdown

The graph below shows the count for each department, with 95 total responses. We do not normalize for department size. Moreover, it is possible that the students who were least satisfied with course selection were the most likely to respond (and course selection satisfaction may be correlated with department).

Response Count by Department
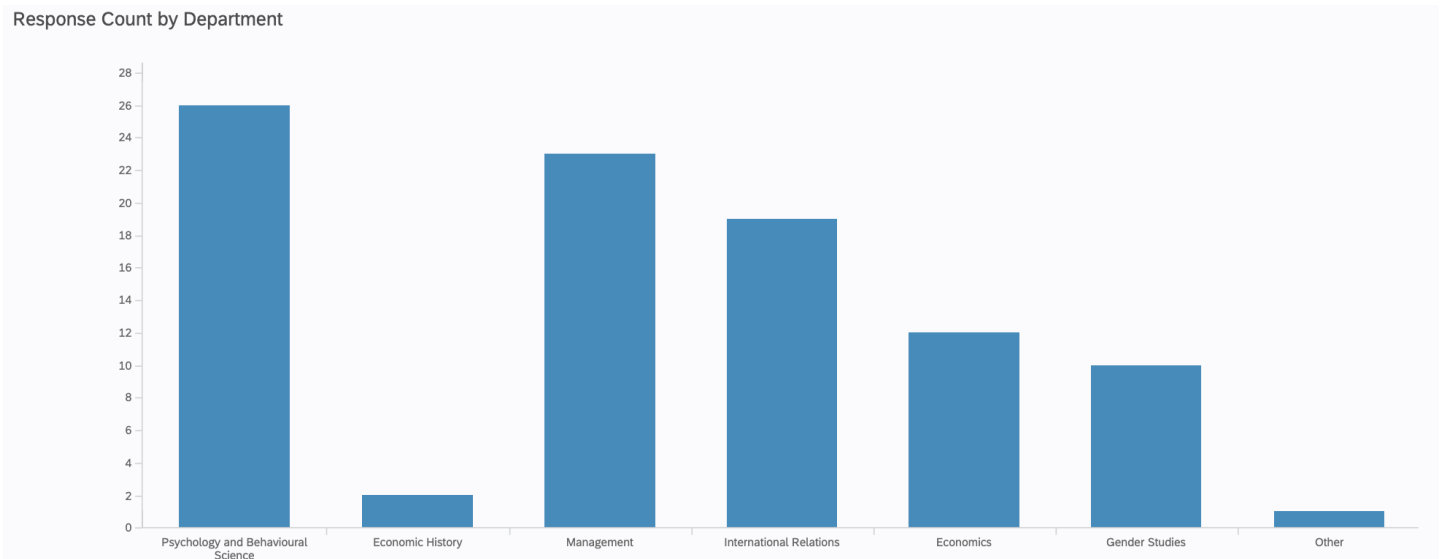
Impact on Perception of LSE

We asked students to rate how the process of course selection impacted their perception of LSE, with options being "significantly more positive" to "significantly more negative" on a Likert scale. Hence, a rating of "3" is neutral and anything less than 3 is a net negative perception.

We see that in the Economic History department and in the Economics department, the process of course selection improved student perception of LSE. Notable is that there were **zero students** who got waitlisted **or** rejected across these two departments.

Overall, how has the process of course selection impacted your perception of LSE?

1 - significantly more negative
3 - neutral
5 - significantly more positive

Impact on perception of LSE
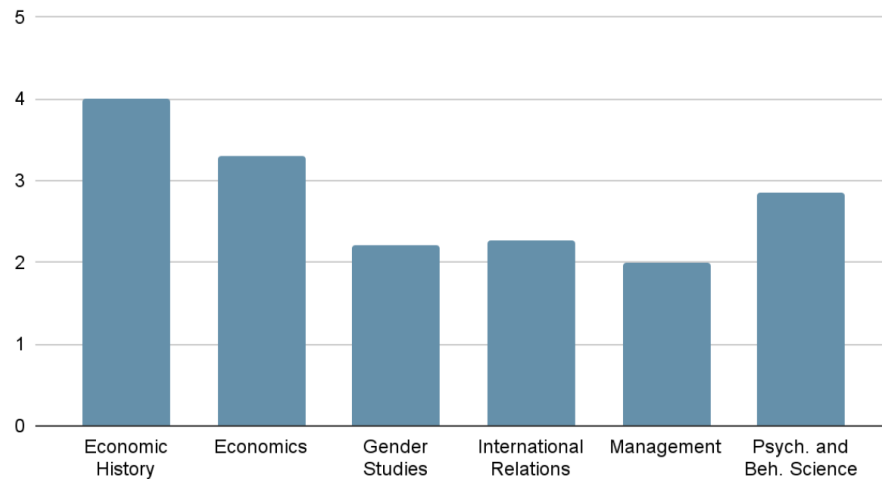
Appendix 2: Notable Verbatims

Expectations

"Because my MSc program is only one year long, I don't have the luxury of simply trying to get into a class in a subsequent year. It really impacted my opinion of the school, especially since students are paying a tremendous amount of money to attend (personally I am in the highest tuition bracket) and what you are paying for is access to courses and professors. If these two things are compromised it means the university has not lived up to what they are offering. " – MSc Student in Gender Studies

"I was very disappointed to find it so hard to get onto particular courses. If there is such interest in particular courses, more resource should be added to the teaching team so that students who wish to take them are able to do so." – MSc Student in Psychological and Behavioural Science

"During welcome week, the program director totally downplayed the struggle of getting into your chosen courses. With lower number of choices, competition for each course increased. A course called 'Conflict and Peacebuilding' had 120 applications for 40 seats. Even though I put

in a lot of effort in the 200 word statements, I was rejected from 2 out of 3 first choice courses. This is because these courses were more International Political Economy oriented, so they were reserved for IPE students instead of IR students (even though we are in the same department and these courses were listed in IR program regulations). So basically seats were being given on the basis of program instead of the statements. It was frustrating and stressful. Ultimately I got into 2 out of 3 first choice courses after writing an angry email to the department. It worked like a miracle." – MSc Student in International Relations

"...many students apply to a particular programme at LSE based upon its course offerings. It wasn't until after registration that we were notified about the process of applying to courses and that enrollment in certain courses could not be guaranteed. This creates a situation where a student might realize too late in the process that he or she did not get any of the courses which led him or her to apply to and accept admission to LSE over other programmes." – MSc Student in International Relations

"As a gender, peace and security student, I believe we were second or third on the list of those who could take conflict and peacebuilding, but none of us could not get in because we were not in the international affairs department. I think priority should be organized around relevance to degree program instead of the department." – MSc Student in Gender Studies

Timing

"Truly awful, should have taken place at least a month beforehand. Either LSE needs to increase capacity or have fewer students in each programme." – MSc Student in International Relations

"I think choosing courses during the first week is way too late. It just puts a lot of pressure on students." – MSc Student in International Relations

"Being able to register for courses earlier would be beneficial as it would allow more time to sort out your schedule. I was also confused by the registration process. Even when I had completed the registration for my courses I was uncertain if I may have missed something due to the scattered nature of the instructions regarding course registration on the website." – MSc Student in Psychological and Behavioural Science

"I think that course selection needs to take place earlier. It is so confusing and stressful to be in the first weeks of your masters and be unsure about what courses you are in that term, and

LSE courses are extremely demanding, so auditing a few courses while you wait to get into courses is really unattainable" - MSc Student in Psychological and Behavioural Science

Communication

"By the time of choosing the courses, I felt scammed. The whole process was ridiculously unclear, and the communication was a joke. I even considered dropping out the school. Maybe you could use some game theoretical models to allocate the courses? You could ask some quant to do it as his/her dissertation." - MSc Student in International Relations

"I had no idea it worked like this prior to arriving (at my UG university we were guaranteed placement on any course) - more guidance on what to put in our statements/what they are looking for -- one way it could be improved is e.g. guaranteeing everyone gets one first choice and then allocating second choices by merit. I was lucky to get all my first choices but I know some people who got none of theirs and it seemed really unfair that they weren't mediating between courses to ensure everyone got at least one course they were really happy with." - MSc Student in International Relations

"The most frustrating was the lack of communication and organization between departments regarding the course selection. Statements from department managers were conflicting, and, clearly, there was no coordination regarding course selection processes between departments. 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

"Feedback from previous students on the courses would be helpful. A detailed course outline should be available before having to choose the course" - MSc Student in Management

100 word statement

"100 word statement should be scrapped" - MSc Student in Psychological and Behavioural Science

"100 word statement should be compulsory." - MSc Student in Gender Studies

"I have some concerns about the 100 word statement, though I understand why it is there. I think that, particularly at the beginning of our time at LSE, people have different academic

backgrounds, familiarity with English, and writing styles that may be subject to bias from the course convenor. I am not sure how to get around this, because I think it's useful to have an idea about the motivations of the students in joining the course." – MSc Student in Psychological and Behavioural Science

"We've been given contradictory information about the 100-word statements. The majority of my peers did not understand what should we communicate in the statement. In fact, we've been told that we shouldn't worry about writing the statements and that it may not have a significant effect on our module entry." – MSc Student in Psychological and Behavioural Science

Courses not offered

"Courses that are not available for the academic year. Some of the initial courses I was interested in before applying to LSE I was later told are no longer available. This is frustrating as these courses were a primary factor in my decision to apply to LSE." – MSc Student in Psychological and Behavioural Science

"It is regrettable to see some courses that match your interest and are not offered that year. This year, it was like 6-7 courses like that on our programme. We all automatically linked that to Covid, and it deepened our understanding of being disadvantaged students during a pandemic." – MSc Student in Psychological and Behavioural Science

"I remember being very frustrated because some courses listed for the MSc online were not being offered and this had not been communicated before hand, and the fact that the department was overenrolled by 50% was not communicated until after Week 1...I felt really disappointed and undervalued." – MSc Student in Gender Studies

"In the beginning, it was very hard for me to understand which actions I had to do at LSE For You vs. Moodle. I believe LSE For You timetables should be connected with Moodle.
Also, I believe they could enhance the user experience to search for courses. Each course has different documents, it is not standard, especially when it comes to elective courses." – MSc Student in Management