

# Community and Belonging: The Experience of Postgraduate Students in the Department of Sociology

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*See this project presented by the researcher: <https://youtu.be/VstrP5c40iY>  
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## Background

My initial research question was proposed by a member of staff, asking how activity to foster community at department level impacted student wellbeing. The Welfare Survey (2016) highlighted an urgent need for LSE to make student mental health and wellbeing a strategic priority. This was underscored again by the LSE SU Student Consultation (2019), finding that especially the perceived lack of community at the University was extremely detrimental to students' wellbeing and learning. Having been a postgraduate student in the Department of Sociology this year myself, I thus decided to pursue this project as an opportunity to assess LSE's progress in tackling these structural problems so far.

## Literature review

Students' sense of belonging has a crucial impact on both their education experience and academic motivation (Freeman et al 2007). This sense of belonging is a "deeply personal and contextually mediated experience" that evolves in response to the degree to which an individual feels "secure, accepted, included, valued and respected by a defined group" (Levett-Jones and Lathlean 2008). As such, "who can achieve belonging and where is always tied to issues of power and inequalities" (Thomas 2019).

Whilst I initially set out to focus on activity at department level, the research reviewed alerted me to the importance of adopting a more holistic framework. As emphasised by Thomas (2012), a sense of community fundamentally rests on the way a University, as well as its constituent parts, functions and relates to people. A culture of belonging can only be achieved if it permeates the institution as a whole: "Effective interventions start pre-entry [...]. They develop peer networks and friendships, create links with academic members of staff, provide key information, shape realistic expectations, improve academic skills, develop students' confidence [and] demonstrate future relevance" (Thomas 2012).

## Methodology

I conducted ten semi-structured interviews with students on seven different MSc programmes within the Department of Sociology. Eight participants were recruited via Department newsletters and emails and two through participant referrals (Small 2009). Conversations lasted between one to two hours. In view of the holistic approach promoted by Thomas (2012) and others, I encouraged interviewees to expand on anything they considered relevant to their

experience. All interviews were conducted and recorded on Zoom due to the COVID-19 social distancing measures. I used thematic analysis to analyse the data (Coffey and Atkinson 1996).

## Data analysis

In line with previous research at LSE, all participants' relation to the institution was at least ambivalent. A lack of community and belonging was reported as particularly detrimental in this regard. As one participant said:

*"I think this year that's all we've had to kind of talk about. Every conversation with everybody is mostly about how we're alienated or how we missed out, or how we're just so lost." (P1)*

As already suggested by the broader literature, it was soon confirmed that a narrow focus on departmental activity was not sufficient to represent students' experiences. In fact, department events were considered as comparatively unimportant by participants, with only two having attended more than one event since Welcome Week. Instead, at least six areas could be identified as vital to whether students did or did not develop a sense of belonging.

- **Welcome Week**

For three reasons, the majority of participants perceived Welcome Week as an obstacle to feeling part of the LSE community: **1)** Welcome Week was described as "sparse", with students not feeling "particularly brought into the department" (P3); **2)** Participants felt "thrown into the deep end" (P7), lacking orientation and feeling overwhelmed by information; **3)** Course selection was experienced as "confusing" and "frustrating" (P1). Participants described it as "very unwelcoming to get rejected from courses [they] wanted to take because [their] statement was not good enough" (P3).

- **Learning Experience**

Many participants could not develop a sense of belonging as a result of their classroom and learning experience: **1)** Five participants reported difficulties participating in class, feeling insecure or uncomfortable due to the group dynamics in the classroom; **2)** Some students felt like they were behind on the learning curve. This was particularly the case for those who did not have a background in Sociology and for international students not familiar with the British higher education system; **3)** Three participants felt alienated by the course content, finding that it was Eurocentric and not dealing appropriately with issues like sexuality or disability: "It's like the department is claiming a certain tick box of diversity without actually addressing it" (P7).

- **Relation to Professors**

Academic staff played a crucial role in students sense of belonging. There was a consensus that, especially in these times, a lot of community-building "depends on the teacher and how much they are willing to do for their students" (P5). Unfortunately, whilst individual professors were proactive and organised extracurricular activities like walks or film nights, this was not the case for the majority. Relations to teachers were often described as "formal and uptight" (P2), with students wishing for more personal interactions and opportunities to get to know staff. Furthermore, seven students reported complaints and/or minimal contact to their academic mentor: "I literally haven't heard from

[him] since September. That's probably my biggest complaint. I'm not being mentored or advised" (P10).

- **Communication**

Three factors made communication another obstacle to feeling part of the University: **1)** Many students felt "out of the loop" and didn't know how to access information. The LSE Website was described as "very confusing". This was a concern especially for those who studied fully remotely: "This year is not an excuse that we don't know how to access things. I didn't know about so many opportunities and I don't know what else I've missed" (P1); **2)** Communication felt sparse: "More emails would have been nice, like just a sense we are here, we're a department, we're here for you, we have these things going on" (P9); **3)** Communication felt impersonal: "I didn't feel like anyone wanted me in particular to participate" (P3). More information and opportunities targeted specifically towards postgraduate students would have been appreciated.

- **LSE (Support) Systems**

Broader administrative and structural problems not only alienated, but also excluded several students from the LSE community: **1)** Two students could not access mental health support, with one of them having to wait for the approval of their inclusion plan for several months. This also meant that they did not have the mental capacity to engage in other community-building activities; **2)** Three students reported slow and inefficient support for their visas, leaving one of them unable to access any in-person classes throughout Michaelmas term despite being in London; **3)** Particularly international students felt that LSE didn't discuss fee reductions from an honest standpoint and experienced this as a lack of empathy for their situation.

- **Peer Networks**

Peer networks and friendships naturally played a crucial role in building community. However, it was felt that, especially in this academic year, more institutional support would have been necessary to facilitate these: **1)** There were barriers to joining student-organised events, such as concerns about compliance with Covid-19 restrictions or intruding pre-established friendship groups; **2)** Social events organised by the department were not perceived as attractive. There was a wish for events to be more regular and more diverse. Participants would have been particularly interested in more programme-specific and less structured events: "We need some kind of institutional support, but we also need them to get out of the way. It needs to feel organic" (P2).

## Findings

My findings reiterate the need for LSE to make community and wellbeing strategic priorities. In that, the experience of my participants matches the broader literature, which highlights the need for a holistic, institution-wide approach towards fostering a sense of belonging. As one of my interviewees put it:

*"Building community is really about the small things that come together to create that feeling as opposed to here's this event where we all come together. It's more like an ethos: You can't just*

*throw money at community building and that will resolve it. It's the little things that complement each other."* (P2)

In view of the lack of community experienced by my participants, it does not seem like LSE's current approach is successful in achieving this.

## **Recommendations**

*"If LSE is exploring keeping some of its teaching online it also needs to seriously think about the community building aspect. It's on part of the institution at this point to create opportunities and also try to understand what draws people to certain activities and what doesn't."* (P2)

- ◆ **Conduct more research on students' needs and interests.**

Events at department level and beyond were often not perceived as particularly attractive by students. It would be crucial for the institution to work more closely with students and conduct further research to establish what students want and need in the years to come. For example, my findings indicated a demand for less structured events as well as more activities targeted specifically towards postgraduate students. For more recommendations from my research, please see: [School Events – Students' Needs and Interests](#).

- ◆ **Ensure the consistent implementation of existing recommendations.**

Previous research at and beyond LSE has already resulted in many recommendations such as the "LSE recommendations for staff: Building community and supporting our students (2020/21)". Unfortunately, it seems like their implementation of these is still largely left to the goodwill of individual professors, which means that even minimum standards such as responding to students' emails are often not met. A more rigorous system to ensure consistency in students' experiences would be necessary.

- ◆ **Nurture convivial relationships.**

My findings underscore the importance of understanding community as an "ethos" or a "feeling" (P2). The way students and staff interact with each other inside and beyond the classroom plays a crucial role in this. A stronger sense of belonging can be fostered through making these relationships feel more personal and meaningful. More recommendations on how to achieve this can be found here: [How to Nurture a Culture of Belonging](#).

- ◆ **Implement administrative changes.**

Several administrative changes would be necessary to ensure all students can feel part of the LSE community. For example, LSE may want to rethink its course selection procedures, classroom participation policies, general communication as well as mental health support systems. These provide the necessary foundation for any sense of belonging.

## **References**

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