

Inclusivity at LSE: Navigating LSE's academic space as a first-gen, low-income student

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Background

Being First-Generation, Low-Income (FGLI) are defined as those students who self-identify as the first generation in their families to attend college and come from a lower socio-economic background. FGLI students often face inherent challenges in their academic experiences, mainly due to disparities in access to opportunities, finances, and resources necessary to advance and excel in their education. There has been a growing stream of scholarship in recent years highlighting the barriers to success for FGLI students (See: Literature), and discussions and resources on this have been growing in higher-education institutions.

Though higher education has traditionally been thought of as an engine of opportunity, the struggles of FGLI students do not end when they are given the opportunity to advance in higher education. Hence, inclusivity at LSE should not stop at the recruitment of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Colleges need to improve accessibility and increase awareness of school resources, especially for those of lower socio-economic backgrounds, to ensure student success at LSE.

This research aims to 1) evaluate whether current LSE's support services help and better FGLI student experiences, 2) understand the struggles FGLI students face at LSE, and 3) FGLI students' awareness of school resources and support services available to them. This research will conclude with a set of recommendations on how the administration and the student union can build onto the existing resources they have to support and empower FGLI students and ways they can maintain awareness of school resources for FGLI students to access the benefits of higher education.

Methodology

In-depth interviews were conducted with six current students across undergraduate and postgraduate programmes during the 2020-21 academic year. All participants self-identify as first-generation, low-income, and have received some form of financial assistance from the LSESU or the Financial Support Office.

The interview started with participants sharing their experiences applying for financial assistance from these organizations. Then, participants were asked if they are aware and have accessed resources and support services that help improve accessibility, support student transition, and ensure student success. These resources include (but are not limited

to) the LSE's digital support fund, emergency funds, career services, office hours, mentorship programs, head start scheme, and counselling services. Depending on their responses, participants shared their experiences with these resources - what went well and what they wish could have been improved/offered to them. During the interview, participants also shared their feelings of belonging at LSE, how they perceive the institution and its community.

This research sought to collect quantitative data to analyze the outreach of LSE's financial programs. Specifically, the research hopes to gather aggregate data from the LSESU and the Financial Support Office on the number of students who have applied for financial support in the past year and the success rate (number of students successfully receiving some form of support from the respective offices). However, due to data protection considerations, the information provided by the offices have been somewhat limited. Nonetheless, they are included in the findings below.

Findings

Financial

The Financial Support Office did not provide statistics on relevant application numbers and the amount of financial support awarded to students. The LSESU reported seeing 128 enquiries relating to their financial support funds. Not every enquiry led to an application, and the office does not collate information on unsuccessful applications. However, of the 128 enquiries made, the office has made 83 awards. Some students receive more than one award, so the actual number of students who received financial support is actually lower. As more than 12,000 full-time students study at the LSE annually, the number of queries made is surprisingly low.

Almost all participants noted that they are aware that the support and hardship funds by the LSESU and the Financial Support Office exist. However, common reasons for not applying include a) lack of eligibility criteria, b) application procedures seem complicated and time-consuming, and c) not being aware that they were eligible to apply. Interviewees, though struggling financially, especially amid a pandemic, often thought that the funds were reserved for the "most needy" and often downplay their struggles. They also expressed concerns about whether they are taking the money away from someone who needs it more.

Among students interviewed and the information provided by the LSESU, there seems to be a low enquiry/application rate of the hardship and support funds provided by the LSE administration. This is well due to the lack of information, outreach, and eligibility criteria on such funds, as participants have mentioned.

All participants recruited have requested or received financial assistance from the LSESU and the Financial Support Office. When sharing their application process, interviewees have expressed nervousness handling the financial documents for their applications, confusion in the application process, difficulties understanding their bursary offer and managing their finances amid a pandemic. One participant had their accommodation bursary retracted when campus closed last year due to the pandemic, and the participant had to incur

additional rent payment off-campus as they could no longer live with their family. As the participant did part-time work at a pub before the pandemic hit, they did not have a source of income and did not know where to seek help.

Academic

Interviewees often felt disillusioned during their time at LSE. One interviewee described their education at LSE as simply an efficient “conveyor belt experience” for students to obtain a prestigious university degree but did not feel that the administration stopped to care and tend to the particular needs and struggles FGLI students face. More than half of the interviewees shared experiences of microaggressions they faced from faculty and classmates, namely toward their schooling background, lack of resources (family connections, finances, cultural capital and otherwise), and knowledge in navigating the higher education system. One interviewee described their experience with the faculty as “degrading” and would have appreciated some compassion from the faculty by recognizing the struggles they face as an FGLI student. One interviewee recalled their struggles navigating school resources and said: *“I don’t know where to go and how to ask for help. I didn’t know how or where to reach out for assistance because nobody taught me how to do that.”*

Social

Most interviewees had expressed feelings of isolation during their first year at LSE. Two interviewees felt the pressure to spend (i.e., To go to dinner and pubs) to expand their social circle and make friends. Often, they cannot sustain this lifestyle, and as a result, struggled to form connections with their peers during their first months at LSE. One interviewee expressed positive experiences with the headstart scheme and found community in related circles through LSE-sponsored meet-ups with free food. Another interviewee recalled meeting people from similar backgrounds through an LSE-sponsored scholars lunch but struggled to sustain connections with the people during the luncheon as it was only organized once a year.

When asked about what helped or would help them navigate the challenges they face at LSE, most interviewees have emphasized the importance of a support system with people who identify with and acknowledge their experiences. One interviewee recounted the helpfulness of their mentor, who checks in on their wellbeing and academic progress weekly. Two interviewees expressed appreciation for the community of FGLI friends they have found, namely through cultural societies and the Headstart scheme. Having a circle of friends from similar backgrounds allowed them to be comfortable in their own skin, as they no longer feel the burden of needing to explain themselves and their struggle.

Recommendations

1. **The administration needs to explicitly acknowledge the “first-generation, low-income” student identity** for an effective allocation of resources and for enabling an inclusive dialogue with FGLI students that empowers them to communicate and process their experiences. This could be done through 1) collating statistics on students who identify as first-gen, low-income at LSE, 2) acknowledge the term “first-

generation, low-income” through the university’s widening participation and headstart scheme, and 3) have initiatives catered specifically for first-generation, low-income students (detailed in recommendations below).

2. **Increase outreach for the university’s Headstart programme.** Most of the participants I interviewed did not know about the Headstart programme or how to join. The university should have this programme be advertised during the LSESU welcome fair and **increase the number of events** held under Headstart to increase opportunities for students from similar backgrounds to meet, connect, and form community.
3. **Improve accessibility and awareness of LSE’s financial resources**
 - a. Provide information about the eligibility of the hardship and support funds. These could include sample applications and specific circumstances under which students have received grants.
 - b. Collate information on where to find and apply for grants and scholarship and disseminate it during orientation and through departmental newsletters.
 - c. Include specific information, with examples, on how the school will take special circumstances (such as COVID) into account when (re)considering student bursaries and support funds.
4. **Create a financial literacy program/event** to introduce first-generation, low-income students on taxes, on-campus jobs, managing their finances, and understanding their scholarship/bursary offers. This type of event could be sponsored by the LSESU and run by current students/alumni.
5. **Increase LSE/LSESU-sponsored events** to eliminate the burden on FGLI students to spend in order to meet and form connections with other current students.
6. **Train faculty members and mentors to be aware** of the vast array of resources offered to students, so they are better positioned to mentor and refer students to resources, staff and opportunities at LSE.
7. **Create an FGLI mentorship/support scheme** and provide reasonable funding for mentors to organize get-togethers with their mentees. The mentors should be trained in identifying appropriate services and support at the LSE for students. Mentors could also serve as organizers for the financial literacy program, as mentioned in point 4.
8. **The administration should encourage on-campus employers to prioritize hiring first-generation, low-income students.** This is standard practice across US institutions, and LSE can take the lead in implementing such an initiative in the UK. FGLI students can be identified as those who receive a bursary or any form of financial support at the LSE.

Literature

Jack, A. A. (2020). *Privileged poor: How elite colleges are failing disadvantaged students*. Harvard University Press.

Tough, P. (2019). *The Years That Matter Most: How College Makes or Breaks Us*. Mariner Books.