

# Community and Belonging in LSE's Built Environment

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## Introduction

### 1. Summary of the project

The London School of Economics (LSE) is renowned for its beautiful campus in the heart of London. Composed of over thirty buildings, at the corner of Kingsway and Aldwych Street, LSE's campus is characterized by the stature of its buildings and its high population density. LSE provides a wide range of physical resources allowing students to meet their peers and faculty, to attend classes and seminars, to study, and to relax. Despite such ideal conditions, discussions among our peers indicate that postgraduate students consider the physical environment, such as the building layout and amenities, of LSE campus a hindrance rather than an enabling factor facilitating social interaction. Thus, we wonder whether postgraduate students have sufficient knowledge and access to information about the physical resources provided for them on LSE's campus.

In this research project, we ask the following questions: how well are postgraduate students informed about physical resources on campus, and how is this information accessed: accidentally and intentionally, via technology and via social means? For the purposes of this research, we define *physical resources* as the LSE buildings themselves and resources such as water fountains, lifts, bathrooms, microwaves, bike storage, and cafeterias. *Built environment/physical environment* refers to man-made structures, features, and facilities viewed collectively as an environment in which people work. This research question is inspired by our own experience as incoming postgraduate students and by our own disciplinary background in architecture, geography, and data management. Even in our second term we still struggle to locate buildings, to know their purposes, and to access their resources. This experience is supported by feedback received from fellow postgraduate students in our roles as Student Representatives.

### 2. Originality of the research project

We are convinced that interrelations and interactions between the LSE's built environment and its diverse postgraduate student body needs to be better understood. With this research project we, firstly, aim to provide the foundations for this understanding by gaining valuable insights into how postgraduate students build knowledge on how to access physical resources provided by LSE. Secondly, we aim to provide suggestions on how to improve accessibility of information about physical resources at LSE through technology and social means. In this respect, we consider the following hypotheses:

- 1) *LSE's physical environment shapes social interactions among postgraduate students.*

- 2) *Low levels of knowledge and weak communication about access to resources on campus impoverish social interactions.*

*Our assumptions are based on feedback received from our fellow postgraduate students and our personal observations and experiences at LSE:*

- Postgraduate students only come to campus for classes and studies (appointments, library) and less for social interaction, e.g., meeting up for lunch, coffee, or just casually hanging out
- Minimum time spent on campus
- Difficulty meeting people on campus

The use of physical resources impacts both students and LSE as an institution. For students, knowledge about physical resources influences their desire to be on campus and their interactions with others. Networking opportunities and interaction with fellow students and faculty have a direct impact on academic and professional outcomes. This plays an influential role in the ability of students to take advantage of their time as students and impacts their overall experience at LSE. Likewise, LSE benefits from students investing in physical resources as it creates an equal, diverse, and inclusive environment and generates positive reputational impacts.

## **Methodology**

### *The research processes*

In this research project, we have conducted a two-step approach to collect data on the experience of postgraduate students with the physical environment on LSE campus. First, we gathered *quantitative information*, about the level of knowledge of postgraduate students about resources provided on campus. We focused on resources such as bathrooms, microwaves, water fountains that impact desire to be on campus and facilitate interaction between students. The data have been collected in a survey distributed via online platforms (email, Whatsapp) to our respective programmes and other programmes in the Department of Management and the Department of Geography.

Second, we initially planned to conduct several *semi-structured walking interviews*. During *semi-structured walking interviews*, a participant and researcher walk together while the researcher interviews the participant. This technique was meant to confront participants' narratives with their accurate physical knowledge of the different resources within a building. However, participants had a limited time to answer our questions as they were often going to class thus, we had to modify the initially planned methodology. Instead, we conducted semi-structured interviews and we asked them to describe from memory where the resources they know exist in the building were located. Then we confronted their mental map with the actual map of the building to assess their knowledge of the building. This type of interview helped us to combine semi-structured questions about the use of physical resources with the mapping of the participant's orientation and navigation in the physical environment. These qualitative insights helped us to make better-informed suggestions on how to inform students of physical resources at LSE. We conducted 15-minutes interviews in the Central Building. The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods allowed us

to reflect on the sense of belonging of postgraduate students at LSE, fostered by the built environment.

### *Sample construction*

We sent the survey to approximately 245 students within the Department of Geography and the Department of Management. We thought that it would be easier to access people from our respective departments. Therefore, we sent the survey to our respective programmes via online platforms and to other programmes via the 'Student Representatives' channel'. Only students from four different programmes answered the survey. 35 postgraduate students filled out the survey (14 per cent), but we expected more students to participate. The low number of respondents highlights the low involvement of students in the improvement of campus life. This can be explained by the short duration of a Master's degree (one year) and the fact that the majority of Master's students just arrived at LSE (only one respondent completed their undergraduate degree at LSE). The results of this study, in this respect, are limited in view of the small number of participants and only represent the point of view of two departments.

## **Data Analysis**

Overall, **most of the students felt that they can satisfy their basic needs on campus** (86 per cent). Students come to campus on average three to four times a week. The reasons why students come to the LSE shed light on the use and types of activities they do on campus. Postgraduate students mainly come to LSE for academic purposes (lectures, seminars, academic meetings). However, only 66 per cent of them come to study and 60 per cent come to meet their peers for academic purposes. Also, only **29 per cent come on campus to socialise outside of academic interactions** (e.g. societies, pubs, lunch break). The fact that few students come to LSE to socialise is not due to a lack of will – **69% of them want to go to LSE more often for these reasons** – nor it is due to the distance of their accommodation from the campus – the vast majority live within 30 minutes of LSE. The data collected from our peers suggest that students spend little time or less time at LSE studying and meeting their peers as **the campus is not well-suited to these uses**.

- 69% of them do not know where the microwaves are and only 3% use them (few people have lunch on campus)
- 26% of them do not know where the water fountains are
- 34% of them do not know where the study rooms are
- 69% of them do not know where the bike lockups are
- In general, postgraduate students are aware of where the cafeterias are (66%) and where the sitting areas are (94%)

### *How people access this information?*

There is a **lack of information about existing resources on campus**. Only one person learnt about these facilities on campus during Week 1 of Michaelmas term, 20 per cent during the first month of Michaelmas term, and the vast majority later during the term (31 per cent) or even during Lent term (31 per cent). 12 per cent still do not know where these facilities are on campus. Over half of the participants found out about these facilities by trial and error, 20

per cent by word of mouth and very few were informed by the LSE Student Hub application or other digital platforms.

Eventually, postgraduate students mainly come to campus for lectures/seminars out of 'obligation', however, **they do not meet on campus for socialising** due to a) a poor knowledge of campus resources, especially common rooms b) a lack of sharing rooms.

- *Case Study: Central Building (CBG)*

We conducted semi-structured interviews in the CBG building as we have a good knowledge of it. Due to a lack of time, we did not address the rest of the buildings. In this building, we have interviewed six postgraduate students studying in five different Master's programmes. The majority come twice a week to the CBG building, only for lectures and seminars (83%) and to study (33%). They have **little knowledge about what type of facilities they can find in this building and where they are located**. Most of them found out about these facilities for the first time by trial and error (67%) and one person on the LSE website. When asked to describe where the equipment they knew of was located, some had a good knowledge of the building (2 persons), some were not exactly sure where this was located (3 persons) and one person was unable to tell us about its location in the building or thought she knew it, but when we compared their answer with the real map of the building, the answer was wrong. Based on these semi-structured interviews, we suggest that **postgraduate students do not come to the CBG building to socialise, have lunch or meet their peers due to their little knowledge about the physical environment**.

## Conclusion

This research project has demonstrated that postgraduate students mainly come to LSE campus for classes and studies and less for social interaction due to the difficulty of access to amenities and to the reading of the building layout but also, the lack of knowledge about them. This research project supports our hypothesis that (a) LSE's physical environment shapes social interactions among postgraduate students and (b) low levels of knowledge and weak communication about access to resources on campus impoverish social interactions.

This reduces the time spent by students on campus: for instance, people do not know where the microwaves are, therefore rarely eat on campus. In this respect, the built environment is a hindrance rather than an enabling factor facilitating social interaction. This also impacts sociability on campus: people would come more often if they can satisfy their basic needs and meet more easily and comfortably their peers.

Based on the data collected from participants and our analysis, we make the following suggestions to improve life on LSE campus:

- **Students have to be better informed about the types of amenities and their location on LSE campus** as soon as they arrive at the beginning of the Michaelmas Term
  - Improve the content and design of LSE Student Hub application

- There is currently no information about physical resources on campus beyond building locations. There is an opportunity to add information about physical resources within the LSE Student Hub application map.
- Improve buildings' signage on campus
- **Develop spaces where students can meet to socialise outside of classes**
  - Common rooms: postgraduate students would like to have more space to meet outside of classrooms
  - Lunchrooms: students who bring their lunch boxes to school would like to have more microwaves available and specific places to eat all together.

We suggest that these improvements would greatly contribute to improving the life on LSE campus and encourage students to spend more time there to **contribute to the overall experience of studying at LSE.**