

Transforming how LSE interprets & treats Neurodiversity: reforming the Student Academic Mentor scheme

Samuel Crutcher

If this project has informed your practice, let us know at lse.changemakers@lse.ac.uk

Abstract

The neurodiversity movement at LSE is nascent, yet promising. It requires greater institutionalising of support to cultivate neurodivergent communities from within the institution, as well as through the SU. Beneficial reforms would make the environment more inclusionary to neurodivergents (as opposed to piece-meal or specific policies in isolation), interpreting neurodiversity as a collectivised issue and treating it as a legitimate social movement. This report recommends adding neurodivergent-specific support to the existing *Student Academic Mentor* (SAM) scheme. Expanding SAM will thereby improve pastoral and academic support for neurodivergents, and will give neurodiversity greater clout & visibility as a policy issue. This report prescribes practical, specific advice that is feasible within LSE's current policy/political climate and constraints.

Background

Neurodivergents experience challenges within higher education institutions at greater rates than their neurotypical peers. Using 'autism' conditions as a proxy for wider neurodivergent traits, national statistics indicate that 2.4% of the UK student population is diagnosed with autism, yet, within the UK, less than 40% of these people complete their university education (Gurbuz, Hanley and Riby, 2018), meaning autistic students are more than 10 times more likely to drop out (60% vs 5.3% overall dropout rate). (Hazel, 2022) Within the 2020/21 academic year, LSE had 11,689 full-time students, (LSE, 2021), statistically dictating that at least 281 of them will have an autism diagnosis. The above average drop-out statistics suggest that only 112 of these people will finish their University education at LSE.

According to numerous studies, between 15 and 20 percent of the population is neurodivergent, with up to 10 percent of the population diagnosed with dyslexia, 5 percent having ADHD, and 1-2 percent having autism. (Montvelisky, 2021)

The policy context surrounding neurodiversity within LSE is nascent yet very promising. Neurodiversity as a policy issue has been supported predominantly outside of the LSE institution itself; promoting 'neurodiversity' as a policy issue has mainly come from within the SU. I recommend one policy from within the LSE institution to support cultivating this neurodivergent community.

Methods

I used purposive sampling to recruit interview participants. My interviews were used both for my dissertation project and also this changemakers project; my interview guide produced informative data for both distinct projects simultaneously, because of their similar research titles. (dissertation explores '*Informal Neurodivergent Epistemic Communities*'; this report explores '*Institutionalising Neurodiversity Supporting through expanding "SAM"*').

I used semi-structured interviews, using emancipatory interviewer techniques to empower interviewees to explore whatever details of their LSE experience they felt were salient. I collected consent forms for participants beforehand, giving all participants aliases of country names with no particular relevance to their identities (e.g. one participant is named Kenya but has no relationship to Kenya). I recruited participants through advertising via departmental newsletters, through approaching personal contacts (within my course, contacts developed from my broader SU activism, etc)

Analysis

1) Needs of neurodivergent students

My interviews began by exploring what needs are currently unmet for neurodivergent students. Unmet needs raised by participants were broad and extensive, ranging from pastoral to academic issues. Reoccurring obstacles reported by neurodivergent student within LSE pedagogy were characterised by the sense of feeling:

- Invisible
- Ignored
- Overlooked.

Classmates and educators often don't understand how neurodivergence affects neurodivergent students. Participants can't speak candidly to classmates and educators, of the ways neurodiversity presents itself for them. They feel they have to downplay the challenges neurodiversity poses for them, for fear of reinforcing potential stigma.

2) Changing how LSE interprets neurodiversity

Participants suggest that serious, long-lasting, meaningful improvements to reforming LSE pedagogy and resolving their multifaceted needs, would arise only from fundamental change to the LSE institution. This suggestion was articulated as follows:

→ Kenya: '*Institutions aren't built for neurodiversity*'; LSE education is '*not a fair playing field, [so effective changes to pedagogy] can't just be added or subtracted. It has to be bulldozed over and made somewhere else*'.

→ Botswana: meaningful change would require changing "*every individual, every component, every piece of paper, every assessment, every course convenor*".

More important than peace-meal reforms or small-scale amendments to how current policy is formulated and delivered, is an environment for neurodivergents on LSE campus that is

made more inclusionary. Policies must support a change in how LSE perceives & interprets neurodiversity as a policy issue, in two crucial ways:

- Improving visibility
- Interpreting neurodiversity differently

3) Improving visibility

Participants describe feeling invisible within LSE pedagogy. The degree of neurodivergence students experience is overlooked by LSE pedagogical structures and often ignored by policy-makers/providers. LSE pedagogy is structured in ways exclusionary to neurodivergent needs; individual officials even ignore the basic needs of neurodivergent students.

→ Japan couldn't get basic teaching accommodations because their advisor unilaterally decided against it. *"By his frame of reference, it would be weird"; "there's a limited amount of recommendations they make"*.

Neurodiversity is side-lined so long as it's not framed as a truly important policy issue, and students lack awareness. I propose finding steps to elevating neurodiversity to a forefront policy issue.

Participants suggest it is not sufficient that students' neurodivergence be given greater visibility as a policy issue only; it also must be interpreted differently. Meaningful culture change signifies neurodiversity being given greater visibility *and* being seen differently.

4) Neurodiversity: an individualised issue

Participants described how being overlooked or ignored arises because their neurodivergence is seen as a feature that can be interpreted as something specific to the individual and thus as something treatable in isolation of other neurodivergent students. Neurodivergence as a feature of individual students, is presently treated as being attributable to the inherent capabilities of individual students.

Participants describe the implications this has on their ability to self-advocate

→ Clarifying why they are not as able to self-advocate as they feel they should be, Norway states: *"I'm not confident about neurodivergent issues, because I see them as personal issues"*

5) Neurodiversity: a collectivised issue

This is contrasted against how neurodivergent students desire neurodiversity to be addressed as a *collectivised issue*.

Participants express challenges that often affect neurotypicals as much as neurodivergents.

Participants described neurodivergence as being a universally-shared phenomenon (affecting neurotypicals/neurodivergents equally):

→ Japan: [Neurodiversity] *"is kinda made up [...] we are all on the spectrum, no-one is the perfect brain."*

→ Spain: *'More people [should] realise that they are closer to neurodivergence than they thought'.*

Norway explains why/how this collectivisation of 'neurodivergence at LSE' is necessary, by comparing their varying ability to raise 'neurodiversity-related' issues with race-related issues (within the 'Race Matters initiative).

→ Norway: [The Race Matters initiative is] *"a broader topic of: decolonising is a social justice issue"*. In contrast, Norway describes being unable to self-advocate for their neurodivergence because *"I'm not able to link it to a social issue"*

By treating neurodiversity as an individualised phenomenon (responsibility for accommodation being given to neurodivergents themselves) LSE is undermining the ability of neurodivergents to self-advocate and make their voices heard.

6) Unique position of neurodivergent students

Neurodivergent students are better placed to support one another within LSE pedagogy than any neurotypicals for three reasons:

Distinctive potential for empathetic connections:

→ Spain: neurodivergents as possessing some kind of *"radar"*, that can uniquely detect other neurodivergents and their associated needs.

→ Cuba: *"Neurodiverse solidarity, connection there; neurodiverse community would definitely help me with that"*

Distinctive strength to create effective support:

This connection unifying neurodivergents makes neurodivergents more likely to create support for neurodivergents that is meaningfully effective.

Genuine desire of neurodivergents to support one another
Participants unanimously expressed gratitude for their opportunity to contribute to research that will lead to improvements for their fellow neurodivergent peers.

→ Japan: *"I'm so fine with talking about [my struggles] if I feel it will help other [neurodivergents] in similar positions"*.

Discussion

This report recommends one specific policy to address these needs that is practical/feasible *now*, building upon existing support and achievements. This policy

recommendation - the first step towards more inclusionary LSE environments- could precipitate wider culture change necessary for further meaningful improvements.

My findings support:

- Making neurodivergents feel less invisible, ignored, and overlooked
 - Improving visibility surrounding neurodiversity as a pedagogical/policy issue within LSE
 - Framing neurodiversity as a collectivised issue
 - Improving representation of neurodivergents within institutional processes
 - Institutionalising support ranging from academic to pastoral
 - Student-led support between neurodivergents

1) Contextualising policy recommendation

The LSESU *Neurodivergent Officer* position was only inaugurated in 2021, with the first two *LSE Neurodiversity Weeks* (held in February 2021 and March 2022) open to all LSE staff & students.

The current LSE policy context is favourable for my findings.

- The *LSESU Neurodivergent* role, only established in 2021, will be merged with the *disabled students* role and will become enumerated, hopefully ensuring future LSESU officers are committed to taking the neurodivergent movement seriously, (*so long as commitments to neurodiversity is codified into this merged role*).
- An *LSESU Neurodivergent Society* will hopefully be established soon.
- *LSE Life* is introducing neurodivergent-specific workshops where available.

2) Introducing the *neurodivergent pilot scheme* within/alongside SAM

Jenny Stowar suggests expanding the SAM structure to help the development of an LSE neurodivergent community. The proposed expansion to SAM scheme would improve visibility of, and give clout to, the importance of neurodiversity amongst the LSE student body. The peer-support dimension of SAM would be extended to also include neurodivergent students supporting recently matriculated neurodivergent students, thereby leveraging the unique potential neurodivergents have to understand & support one another.

→ Stowar suggests a “*neurodivergent-specific channel for seeking advice and guidance, with neurodivergent mentors facilitating neurodivergent mentees to explore where support is available within LSE and offering their own guidance*”

Greater peer-support institutionalisation for neurodivergents would emulate the strengths of the existing SAM scheme, helping neurodivergents to feel less invisible, ignored and overlooked within LSE pedagogy. Participants described how other neurodivergent students are often important providers of advice & knowledge to other neurodivergents; interview data confirms that greater peer-support between neurodivergents could help neurodivergents

experienced within LSE education to transfer useful knowledge to recently-matriculated neurodivergents.

Institutionalising greater official support for neurodivergents, alongside progress within the SU, would support general efforts towards cultivating an LSE neurodivergent community. These efforts would help frame neurodiversity as a collectivised issue, and an Institutionalised role for greater peer-support between neurodivergents would reinforce the notion that neurodivergents possess shared features that warrant community-level, collective support.

3) Practicalities

This expansion would represent a pilot scheme. Its results & efficacy would be assessed through focus groups and student feedback. It has recruitment processes separate to the existing SAM scheme. Methods for recruiting mentors within this expanded pilot scheme would include some channels presently used by SAM, but also some new channels (student news, support from the *Neurodivergent Officer* etc). Responsibility for developing this pilot scheme would be within SAM; Stowar will be investigating how similar schemes have worked at other universities.

This pilot scheme can be introduced from next Michaelmas Term. The first mentors can be recruited just before Michaelmas Term starts, when students begin checking emails again; mentees are then advertised to this scheme a few weeks' later. The scheme would start before Michaelmas Term reading week. If the 202/23 pilot is successful, it can be expanded and made ready right from the start of Michaelmas Term in 2023.

Institutionalising a neurodiversity-specific dimension into the LSE peer-support scheme represents a first step to transforming how neurodiversity is interpreted at LSE. Crucially, it:

- 1) Gives clout to neurodiversity as a policy issue.
- 2) Highlights the multidimensional needs facing neurodivergents (academic, pastoral, etc).
- 3) Notifies students as soon as they matriculate that neurodivergent support exists within the institution and amongst the student body.
- 4) Facilitates integration of disparate services/support available to neurodivergents; students become the sign-posters to alerting neurodivergents of support available.
- 5) Represents yet one further dimension of this nascent LSE neurodiversity movement.

Expanding the SAM scheme to introduce a neurodivergent-specific component will support the collectivisation and promotion of Neurodiversity as a policy issue at LSE. Stowar has already confirmed its viability, and in conjunction with the Eden Centre and the neurodivergent officer, this policy can be piloted as soon as early michaelmas term 2022.

References:

Gurbuz, E., Hanley, M. and Riby, D.M. (2018). University Students with Autism: The Social and Academic Experiences of University in the UK. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, [online] 49(2), pp.617–631. doi:10.1007/s10803-018-3741-4.

Hazel, W. (2022). *UK university drop-out rates at lowest on record but many students aren't graduating*. [online] I News. Available at: <https://inews.co.uk/news/uk-university-drop-out-rates-lowest-record-students-graduating-new-figures-1523529> [Accessed 29 Jun. 2022].

LSE (2021). *LSE at a glance*. [online] London School of Economics and Political Science. Available at: <https://www.lse.ac.uk/about-lse/lse-at-a-glance> [Accessed 29 Jun. 2022].

Montvelisky, J. (2021). Council Post: Neurodiversity As A Strengthening Point For Your Team And Our Society. Forbes. [online] 13 Aug. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbestechcouncil/2021/08/13/neurodiversity-as-a-strengthening-point-for-your-team-and-our-society/> [Accessed 29 Jun. 2022].