

Research, Interrupted

COVID-19's impact on LSE PhD students employing in-person qualitative methods

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Research Team

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Acknowledgements

The Research Team would like to thank all the LSE PhD students who participated in this study for their time, candour, and trust, as well as Rita Astuti and the PhD Academy for their support.

Research, Interrupted

COVID-19 has had unprecedented consequences on academic research. Libraries are closed, field sites no longer accessible, productivity reduced, morale low, priorities rearranged, and entire research projects called into question. LSE PhD candidates employing qualitative in-person data gathering techniques are uniquely affected by these changes. As the LSE celebrates its 125th anniversary and reaffirms both its dedication to the social sciences and its commitment to shaping the post-COVID world, this PhD student-led report sheds light on the impact of the pandemic's onset on qualitative PhD students' work and wellbeing. Based on this data, we offer a range of recommendations and provide preliminary insights into what it means to be an LSE social scientist in times of unprecedented social disruption. As partial, localised lockdowns and distancing measures are expected to continue, grappling with these fundamental questions to help researchers cope with the crisis will only become more critical with time.

The pandemic has underscored the importance of robust social science research for combating the shared challenges of a globalized community; to quote one of our respondents, it has driven home “the importance of doing science and research from, for and in the real world” (Javier, 1st year, interviews and surveys). A commitment to such research is at the heart of LSE's identity – and so too should be a commitment to PhD researchers working in this tradition.

1. Methodology

In line with the baseline assumption that qualitative, in-person research is likely to be particularly impacted by COVID-19 and the resulting public health measures, our study limits itself to students using or planning to use primarily in-person qualitative methods for their PhD projects. Our sample of twenty-two doctoral researchers represents a small portion of the entire LSE PhD candidate body, but we aimed for saturation and collecting a range of student experiences rather than statistical representativeness. Therefore, our sample encompasses students with varying personal and residential status, from eleven different LSE departments, and at different stages of the PhD journey.¹ Finally, these researchers employ a broad range of qualitative research designs and methodologies from ethnography and focus groups to interviews and surveys.

Participants were primarily recruited via convenience and snowball sampling strategies, with the help of the PhD Academy and individual LSE departments who disseminated our call for participants. We also made use of personal and professional connections. As LSE PhD students employing qualitative in-person methods ourselves, we were able to build a rapport with our peers and sought to respect the limited personal and emotional availability of PhD interviewees during the current crisis. Given the potentially sensitive nature of the information shared, we refer to participants using pseudonyms and have altered identifiable details concerning their projects and personal circumstances. Markedly, several participants expressed that they appreciated the opportunity to share their experience and hear about how other PhD students were coping.

¹ Half of the respondents were in their first year at the time of their interview. This might be due to the structure of the researchers' personal networks, with three of the four team members being first-years at the project's onset. However, students who are still at the beginning of their PhD journey might also be more available or might have felt a greater need to communicate their concerns, since the LSE's central response to support PhD students, the funded extension scheme, was targeted at late-stage PhD students. The greater representation of first year students subsequently led us to launch a second round of data collection focused on third- and fourth-year students, to ensure our report reflects the needs of all PhD students. However, we did not register significant differences beyond some concerns regarding job market prospects and calls for further extensions between students in their earlier compared to those in the later years of their PhD.

The research team, made up of four European Institute PhD students, carried out semi-structured interviews between June and September 2020 with a second, targeted wave of data collection October 2020 to include third- and fourth-year students. Structured questions enabled us to gather contextual information regarding the PhD student (e.g. department, year of study, living conditions, etc.) while unstructured questions aimed to elicit a better understanding of PhD students' research plans prior to COVID-19, the pandemic's impact on students and their projects, and, respondents' planned strategies for managing pandemic-induced research uncertainties. Our interview touched on institutional issues relating to current LSE research guidance and measures of support for PhD students. Key quotes were collected, and the non-verbatim data was analysed thematically, which included an initial familiarisation with the data, the joint development of themes, and the in-depth analysis of the transcripts in light of these themes.²

To supplement the interviews, issue better recommendations, and encourage cross-departmental sharing of best practices, we contacted PhD student representatives in all PhD departments in October 2020 and asked them to share how their department or peers had supported them since the pandemic's onset. We received feedback from five departments.

2. The impact of COVID-19 on PhD researchers

The impact of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has been felt across all facets of university life. In this study, respondents report a host of challenges to their personal lives and their research capacity that hold important lessons for the LSE academic community.

2.1 Anxiety about the future

The pandemic has severely disrupted planned research activities amongst almost all our respondents. Since researchers relying on qualitative in-person methods depend on personal interactions with human subjects, national lockdowns, social distancing measures and School restrictions on face-to-face data gathering affect their research in particularly acute ways. Across the study's 22 participants, uncertainty resulting from the fact that research plans – especially those involving international travel – are at risk of being postponed indefinitely or forgone altogether results in significant anxiety.

For students at early stages of their research, this risk creates significant anxiety around both timetables (finishing research on time) and content (researching what was originally intended). Qualitative in-person researchers have attempted to engage in what Ólafur (1st year, ethnography) refers to as a form of “brinksmanship”, i.e. “trying to decide at what point [...] they shift and change their topic.” Yet, the uncertainty resulting from constantly evolving health and policy dynamics frequently vitiates attempts to make alternative arrangements. As Sadie (1st year, participant observation and interviews) put it, “Why plan if everything is gonna fall apart?”

For scholars at the later stages of their research, anxiety is most acute when it relates to the completion of already begun in-person research or, especially for those closest to graduation, their employment prospects. Respondents who have already invested significant time and efforts into their research projects before the pandemic are less able to abandon or significantly alter their research design to adapt to the crisis. However, as third or fourth years, they also have less time to ‘wait it out’ or re-start with a different approach. Whether researchers plan on continuing in academia or not, respondents

² Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101, DOI: 10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.

more advanced in their PhD journey also report concern over the impact of economic downturns on job markets across the world. Jeremy (4th year, ethnography and interviews), for instance had his job offer rescinded as a result of a COVID-induced hiring freeze in academia; faced with an unexpected period of joblessness after his graduation, he has been scrambling to find temporary teaching positions to sustain himself.

2.2 Poor working conditions, dwindling morale, and intellectual isolation

In addition to student anxieties directly relating to their research and/or career prospects, a tripartite combination of inadequate work conditions, personal challenges and care obligations, as well as a generalised sense of intellectual isolation has made PhD work particularly difficult, if not periodically impossible. Many respondents find “thinking about such a long-term project when [...] you find yourself in this survival, day-to-day mode” (Yusuf, 4th year, interviews and participant observation) uniquely challenging.

Conditions in small flat shares are often unsuited to working from home, with several respondents lacking space for basic office furniture, such as a desk or an adequate working chair. With London-based interviewees often dependent on PhD offices for otherwise unaffordable workspace, lack of campus access has contributed to frustrating workplace arrangements. Further, the rapid onset of COVID-19 lockdowns also left many researchers unable to access research materials they had left on campus; library resources have also become more difficult to access.

What is more, nearly half of respondents indicate that they currently provide care to someone other than themselves (e.g. children, elderly family members, etc.). Given that these responsibilities are likely to become more taxing during the pandemic, increased care obligations may further disrupt respondents’ research. Relatedly, some interviewees require a certain amount of health support themselves – either because they fall into a COVID-19 ‘risk group,’ or because they must, for instance, equip home working spaces with furniture appropriate for a long-standing back condition.

Finally, the isolation that results from being cut off from LSE campus and life presents further challenges. While feelings of lockdown-induced social isolation are pervasive across society, our data suggests that among research students this is compounded by a form of *intellectual* isolation that has deleterious consequences for research. Indeed, perhaps the most common response across the 22 participants is that the lack of academic community is negatively impacting their research, with COVID-19 having thrown the importance of informal academic contact into sharp relief. This loss is felt deeply since what many students cherish most about their PhDs is the academic environment and the possibility to work with others.³ Some departments have attempted to bring research students together via online mediums, and cohorts have also organised their own social gatherings and workgroups. However, there is widespread agreement that these measures are poor substitutes for organic conversations that generally occur on campus. Such diminished contact with colleagues also further contributes to anxiety over research during an already fraught period.

Taken together, some respondents report a negative feedback loop in which anxiety, lack of focus, and intellectual isolation feed off each other. These challenges may be more acute for some – for instance those with pre-existing mental health concerns⁴ or those who had a loved one fall ill or die. International

³ 18% and 13% respectively of PhD students surveyed by *Nature* enjoy “working with interesting and bright people” and the “university/academic environment” most about their life as a PhD student.

Woolston, C. (2019). PhDs: The tortuous truth. *Nature*, 575(7782), 403–406. <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-019-03459-7>

⁴ A potentially quite significant number, with PhD students already at much higher risk for mental health issues than the general population in pre-pandemic times.

students also face increased challenges while attempting to navigate an ever-shifting terrain of government travel restrictions and anxieties about being cut off either from LSE or from family for extended periods of time.

2.3 Sense of gratitude and relative fortune

With cohorts scattered around the world, intellectual and social contacts frayed, and a constant barrage of bad news, it is unsurprising that PhD students report a sense of loss of momentum and morale. However, not all responses are uniformly negative. Indeed, beyond personal efforts at maintaining peer contact, a vast majority of respondents express considerable gratitude to their supervisors for their generous availability, support, and empathy in light of COVID-19. Supervisors are perceived as an invaluable primary point of contact for PhD students, as being “on [their] side” (Theodesia, 3rd year, ethnography) by providing “outstanding” and “compassionate” pastoral support (Javier, 1st year, interviews and surveys) and, for some, advice on how to adapt their projects.

Nevertheless, while supervisors have encouraged them to remain in touch, PhD candidates are balancing their need for supervisory support with a concern that supervisors are facing increased academic, administrative and family responsibilities that may limit their availability. Furthermore, our interviewees report that supervisors are often equally in the dark about institutional developments at School level.

Finally, most respondents display a sense of gratitude for the relative certainties afforded by their status as research students. Many also perceive the PhD Academy to be supportive and willing to help, even if sometimes unable to do so. While there is a general sentiment that the pandemic has been highly destabilizing for researchers, PhD students (and especially those on funded studentships) report feeling lucky to have a modicum of financial stability. It should be noted, however, that such sentiments are not universal, with respondents who rely on external funding far less financially secure than their LSE-funded peers.

3. Conducting research under pandemic conditions: specific challenges for qualitative in-person researchers

In the following section, we outline some of the specific issues in-person qualitative PhD researchers face, their response strategies, and the new challenges these responses engender.

3.1 Field site and participant access: ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ barriers

For most researchers in our sample, the biggest challenge to conducting their PhD under pandemic conditions is access to field sites and participants. COVID-19 and the related policy responses have introduced new barriers, both ‘hard’ and ‘soft’, that have altered or prevented such access.

We understand ‘hard’ barriers as those that render in-person field and participant access impossible or highly infeasible. They are inflexible, impacting researchers largely regardless of their personal circumstances and project specificities. Lockdowns, travel restrictions, mandatory quarantine, and social distancing measures are among the ‘hard’ barriers that impact virtually all research students

Levecque, K., Anseel, F., De Beuckelaer, A., Van der Heyden, J., & Gisle, L. (2017). Work organization and mental health problems in PhD students. *Research Policy*, 46(4), 868–879. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2017.02.008>

Evans, T. M., Bira, L., Gastelum, J. B., Weiss, L. T., & Vanderford, N. L. (2018). Evidence for a mental health crisis in graduate education. *Nature Biotechnology*, 36(3), 282–284. <https://doi.org/10.1038/nbt.4089>

interviewed. Given the international nature of both the PhD student body and research projects, interviewees find themselves stuck in the UK or their home country, unable to return to LSE or their field site. Visa concerns exacerbate the subsequent uncertainty.

'Soft' barriers are more amorphous and context dependent. Some field sites have disappeared – for instance, organisations that cease to operate due to a lack of funding – while it has become inappropriate to conduct research in others – e.g. in vulnerable communities reeling from COVID-19's impact. For some projects, research assumptions have been made obsolete; in other cases, pandemic-induced political volatility complicates access. These barriers also include reduced ease and affordability of travel, overwhelmed gatekeepers, novel ethical challenges, participants now wary of outsiders, as well as researchers' individual health concerns. Unlike lockdowns and border closures, most 'soft' barriers will endure even as government and School guidelines change and many might outlast the peak of the crisis. However, they are also the barriers most crucial to consider as the School and individual students begin to negotiate a return to the field.

3.2 “Hope for the best, prepare for the worst”

Most PhD students hope to forge ahead with their research plans. However, faced with current uncertainties, many have attempted to 'COVID-proof' their theses by changing research designs, altering research timelines, and including COVID-themed aspects into their research questions. There is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to these adjustments, since individual researchers must heed a variety of divergent considerations – including the nature of the research topic, individual responsibilities and vulnerabilities, evolution of the pandemic in home and field site, impact of COVID-19 on potential respondents, government and LSE policy, and supervisory expectations. Due to the ongoing nature of the pandemic, the endpoint of these changes – and thus the final shape of respondents' PhD projects – remains unclear. Nonetheless, students' struggles in making these choices speak not only to the question *how* qualitative research is possible during pandemic times, but *what kind* of research and *with whom*.

In this respect, it is crucial to note that research methods are neither an independent nor secondary aspect of interviewees' projects: they entail epistemological choices that are indivisibly linked with their research questions, theories, analysis, and even discipline. As such, they are not always easily pandemic-proofed. Indeed, for several interviewees, shifting away from primarily in-person methods or shifting their field sites entails changes to the point where their PhD is “not recognisable anymore” because “everything, basically, is different” (Javier, 1st year, interviews and surveys). This “loss” (Adrian, 1st year, ethnography) has been challenging to navigate for a few respondents. Some, like Markus (3rd year, interviews and participant observation) are amending their research questions to fit a new research design. Others, like Ilanga (1st year, ethnography) have tried to mitigate the situation by changing field site rather than pivoting away from in-person data collection. Meanwhile, researchers who had already started data collection are considering turning their comparative project into a single-case study, leaving out the subsequent field site(s) they had planned to visit. Others take the opposite approach, converting their project into a comparative one by seeking to identify relevant fields online or in a more accessible location.

3.3 Challenges to online research

Most students were eager to explore the possibility of shifting at least parts of their in-person research online, perceiving such a shift to be the School's preferred crisis response. Months into the pandemic, however, their assessment of web-based research is strongly negative. To be sure, there have been some successes – a few students in our sample report that access to interview partners has improved after having been moved online, or that participants craving social interaction are eager to talk to

researchers on Zoom. Overall, however, PhD students feel that online methods fall short of allowing them to pursue their research, with three issues standing out: the inaccessibility of marginalised groups online, issues of trust preventing research with elite stakeholders, and the low quality of online data gathered.

Many of our respondents' research projects are concerned with understanding various dynamics of inequality. On the one hand, the deleterious impact of the pandemic on socially disadvantaged groups has made this research more urgent – an assessment reportedly shared by students' colleagues and advisors. On the other hand, marginalised populations are frequently inaccessible online. This applies to socio-economically underprivileged participants in the United Kingdom and other European countries, as well as to most research participants located in the global South. Since these participants “don't have Zoom, don't have smartphones” (Aria, 1st year, ethnography), the inability to get in touch with them online has been almost total. Occasionally, researchers have been able to access a small sliver of more advantaged participants for online interactions, representing, for instance, “20 per cent or less” of planned respondents (Ian, 3rd year, participant observation and interviews). For Sadie (1st year, participant observation and interviews), relying on online methods would thus make it impossible to transcend “a very middle-class perspective”, leading to research findings that would reproduce rather than challenge existing patterns of exclusion.

While interviews with experts or other high-level figures have been slightly less affected by pandemic conditions, many students nevertheless struggle to access these subjects. Matthew (4th year, interviews) describes that his interviewees' concerns about protection of sensitive information renders reliance on online methods inconceivable, since there is “no way” that respondents would agree to it. For Malcolm (3rd year, interviews and participant observation), who had succeeded in meeting with elite stakeholders prior to the pandemic, “it's much harder to gain access to online meetings because the gatekeepers are slightly more stringent” in admitting outsiders. Related to such issues of trust, many PhD researchers indicate that attempts to build a ‘snowballing’ system – in which interviewees introduce the researcher to further potential conversation partners – are stymied by online settings in which respondents are more reluctant to give away contact details. Finally, some PhD students report that respondents are simply much more likely to ignore them due to the impersonal nature of the online relationship.

Even where PhD researchers succeed in shifting some of their data gathering online, they still need to contend with the lower quality of data collected. Dirk (2nd year, interviews), who had already conducted half of his interviews prior to the COVID outbreak, notes that “you really see the difference in terms of quality and the problems that you have when collecting this kind of data online.” Online or phone interviews mean that interviewees' involuntary reactions to questions cannot be observed, that it is easier for them to dodge difficult questions, and that the interview's informal surroundings – off-the-record anecdotes, tours of professional spaces, etc. – fall away. Finally, Ava (1st year, interviews and focus groups) – who has set up focus groups on a video-conferencing app – notes that, due to the socially distanced nature of the online setting, participants are not engaging in discussions that run without her constant intervention – meaning that the distinctive advantage of a focus group approach may evaporate under online conditions. More practical challenges such as unreliable internet access and the use of translators also affect online data collection.

Beyond using online methods as direct replacements for face-to-face data gathering, several PhD researchers utilise them to supplement existing or planned in-person data. This includes the analysis of media and government outputs published online, or social media activities. However, respondents treat these as complements to rather than substitutes for in-person data.

3.4 Returning to the field

Acknowledging the shortcomings of online methods and the centrality of genuine in-person data gathering to their projects, many respondents express their plans to return to the field eventually, albeit not necessarily to the field site initially selected. This return requires the management of both the soft and hard barriers outlined above.

Across respondents, what is and feels safe is both context- and researcher-dependent. For instance, some field sites have indeed much lower (or higher) incidences of COVID-19 than the UK or enforce specific restrictions on face-to-face interactions. Meanwhile, international students and those with international field sites are concerned about getting ‘stuck’ in the field if they return, or not being able to travel home in case loved ones fall ill. For several respondents, this would also engender visa issues, both in the UK and in their field site abroad. As a result, a significant number of PhD students are shifting from international to local/home country field sites, introducing a noticeable British/continental European bias to field site selection.

Many PhD students are also concerned with the ethical as well as health and safety implications of in-person research. For instance, several respondents are contemplating the health risk they might pose to their participants, especially participants in communities with limited access to healthcare resources. Similarly, organizations and informants might currently be overwhelmed, and research participation would place undue demands on their time and emotional availability. Researchers with caring responsibilities face additional dilemmas: Chip (3rd year, focus groups) highlights that he might be willing to be “reckless” and continue conducting focus groups if he were living alone, but he cannot risk exposing his child and elderly relatives to COVID-19. PhD students who are more vulnerable themselves due to health conditions also have to grapple with difficult choices. For instance, Javier (1st year, interviews and surveys) indicates that he won’t be able to conduct in-person research until a treatment or vaccine has been found.

Beyond more fundamental and ethical considerations, several interviewees have begun thinking through the practical requirements of conducting research under pandemic conditions. For Ian (3rd year, participant observation and interviews), a return to his field in Western Africa appears feasible if he follows social distancing guidelines, uses face masks and hand sanitizer. Sadie (1st year, interviews and participant observation), meanwhile, highlights that she would only conduct in-person data gathering if she tests negative for COVID prior to entering the field – presupposing, of course, the availability and accessibility of testing, which is far from uniform. She also raises the question of how to handle and disinfect recording devices and to record interviews conducted while wearing facemasks. A few respondents, who had started data collection prior to the pandemic, implied that they had continued or re-started some of their research at times without full renewed ethics or health and safety clearance – often, it appears, because they were unaware that this was necessary or how to obtain it.

Until a return to the field is possible, many respondents keep busy in other ways, be it working on side projects, focusing on writing up existing data collection, penning blog posts or papers, or conducting desk research. Others have been attending to crucial, non-academic matters, such as care work. Nevertheless, for the majority of our respondents, making meaningful progress on their research requires some return to the field, necessitating clear guidance regarding how and when to do so.

4. The LSE response to COVID-19: student perceptions

COVID-19 is putting enormous strain on LSE’s PhD student support infrastructure. While some of the challenges outlined transcend the School’s immediate control, respondents identify key areas where

effective institutional support can alleviate burdens – and where ineffective support might erect new ones. Markedly, stark inequalities across departments, supervisors, and personal situations emerge. The ‘LSE offer’, understandably never completely the same for all PhD students, has become more uneven in the wake of COVID-19. However, regardless of respondents’ individual situations, dissatisfaction with the School’s crisis response centres around the lack of clear information – particularly concerning support schemes and the resumption of fieldwork. At the same time, however, nearly all respondents also express appreciation for the PhD Academy’s responsiveness and efforts, especially the funded extension scheme.

4.1 Information needs and information overload

Many respondents emphasize increasing communication fatigue resulting from unrelenting, albeit uneven flows of information from the LSE, individual departments, the PhD Academy, professors, supervisors, and fellow students. A paradoxical situation thus emerges, with students equally overwhelmed and underserved by the School’s communication: many feel inundated with emails but starved of meaningful information that matters for their immediate circumstances. Consequently, some PhD students opt for only skimming general official emails, with a few indicating they have stopped reading them altogether.

In tandem with an overload of general and COVID-related communication, students express a need for deeper, personalised opportunities to engage with other members of the LSE community. Many feel that, beyond personal efforts at maintaining contact, there is a dire lack of pandemic-adapted forums at LSE for general academic exchange and for the discussion of more specific needs (such as groups for students with childcare responsibilities). Notably, some departments have organised opportunities for social or methodological exchange – something respondents appreciate, even if some were initially overwhelmed by these offerings during the pandemic’s early months. We expect that as researchers are settling into this new, although ever-changing ‘normal’, the need for such opportunities of exchange will grow. This particularly impacts in-person qualitative researchers with few or no departmental peers who employ similar methods. The COVID Knowledge Bank on Moodle is a crucial first step in this direction and should be advertised widely by departments.

The ‘burden of outreach’, however, cannot rest on students’ shoulders alone. Respondents generally note a need for more targeted and personalised communication from LSE. Instead of assuming that “if you don’t respond you’re strong enough and it’s okay, you carry on”, PhD researchers might “occasionally (...) need someone to reach through that screen and grab you and say ‘no, we really want to talk to you, see how you are doing’” (Matthew, 4th year, interviews). While individual supervisors and peers might do this, the level of guidance needed and provided varies greatly between departments and even cohorts and types of students (part-time vs full-time, LSE-/ESRC-funded vs other funding schemes, in the UK vs in the field). As one student with pre-existing health concerns underlines: “I need help to adjust things at home (...) and I would have expected them [the LSE] actually to follow up and ask people how they are adjusting. They didn’t.” (Theodosia, 3rd year, ethnography).

4.2 Uncertainties surrounding existing support schemes

In line with these challenges of communication, PhD student awareness and understanding of LSE actions is often incomplete. When PhD students know of specific LSE policies, many are nevertheless uncertain about their own eligibility.

For instance, whilst respondents across all years are grateful for the LSE’s 6-month funded extension scheme, the fact that it is only accessible to students at the very end of their PhD journey means that only two students in our sample have applied for and been granted this extension. A number of

respondents in the first three years of their programmes express strong interest in applying in the future; yet some fear a policy reversal on the School's part that would undercut the scheme's availability to cohorts graduating in one- or two-years' time. It is worth noting that students expressed their desire not to abuse the School's extension offer, with many respondents speaking of applying for the extension as a strategy of 'last resort', and with one interviewee preferring to take an unpaid interruption he saw more honestly reflective of his personal circumstances. One student also underscored that some students might need more than the six months offered, especially those who are more advanced and have less time left to wait out the lifting of the 'hard barriers' and develop ways of navigating the 'soft' ones.

Beyond the possibility to apply for the flagship 6-month programme, students report local support mechanisms in their departments. However, knowledge and adoption of these often appears to be reserved for respondents 'in the know', leaving out exactly those students unable to attend zoom meetings or carefully monitor their email due to stress, health concerns, caring responsibilities, or continuing research activities. What is more, divergences between departmental financial and pastoral support lead to steep inequalities within the School on matters such as accessing office space, purchasing home office equipment, or benefiting from platforms of social and academic exchange.

4.3 Unmet support needs

In addition to the funded extension, respondents indicate that the current amount of financial support provided by the LSE will need to be recalibrated in the future to account for COVID-related expenses. Indeed, the closure of the LSE campus and the transition to remote working arrangements have added financial pressure on PhD students in the form of increased office expenditures (e.g. computers, external screens, printing equipment, etc.). With many students not planning to return to campus, these needs persist even as campus cautiously reopens. Some respondents equally foresee a potential increase in fieldwork costs to ensure the health and safety of researchers and participants (e.g. hand sanitizer, masks, insurance, as well as higher airfares).

Self- and externally- funded students are particularly vulnerable. Some self-funded students express concerns that their personal and/or family's financial capacity to fund their PhD and cover essential living costs may be increasingly under pressure; for example due to expenses related to care obligations for at-risk family members and children. Meanwhile, as it is the case for one respondent, some external funders do not grant extensions and their support is contingent on conducting and publishing about research that is currently infeasible. These self/externally-funded students, however, do not have access to the LSE's funded extension scheme.

In light of COVID-19's impact on mental health and wellbeing, several respondents also highlight the importance to make counselling easily and freely available, with Adrian (1st year, ethnography) arguing it "should be there on the table like the cookies in the PhD Academy. You shouldn't have to jump through hoops to get it."

4.4 Opaque support infrastructure

An additional factor influencing students' awareness and use of LSE policies is the opacity of the LSE institutional infrastructure. Even in cases where students report strong supervisory and departmental support, they voice confusion as to whom they should share questions and concerns with. Often, supervisors and even departments appear unsure of the resources available and the guidelines to be followed. Consequently, respondents may find themselves on a bureaucratic carousel, with an ill-defined and changing set of forms to fill in, multiple webpages to check, and countless people to contact.

4.5 Unclear fieldwork guidelines

Manoeuvring through LSE bureaucracy becomes especially crucial for students planning to resume in-person research or trying to get a re-formulated project approved. Given the unclear support infrastructure highlighted, several respondents note how they struggle to navigate ethics approval and locate the correct forms to prepare for a return to their field. While they are committed to institutional requirements, it is difficult to comply with guidelines one does not know about. Often, supervisors and even departments are equally unaware or unsure how to proceed on questions regarding health and safety precautions for those already in the field, travel approval for those hoping to return to it, and changing ethics review processes. Some students working with populations that are hard or impossible to reach digitally express particular frustration with what they perceive to be a ‘one-size-fits-all’ institutional push for shifting research online, without clear support for those wanting to continue in-person data collection – a push that is seen as “increasing the paperwork without facilitating the actual work” (Sadie, 1st year, participant observation and interviews).

5. Actionable insights

Like our respondents, we are aware that there cannot be an institutional fix for COVID-19 itself. Nevertheless, there are many ways the School can empower all PhD students to adapt to the current circumstances resourcefully, innovatively, and safely. Interviewed students are grateful to the LSE for its generous efforts, but they also call for additional and, as much as that is possible, *ex ante* relief to the current uncertainty.

Several actionable insights can be garnered from the data:

- **Targeted communication and proactive engagement:** More information is not necessarily better, if it is not targeted and easy to navigate (see 4.1 and 4.4). PhD students would like to see more personalized and clear communication from the School, with e.g. information relevant for students who have applied for fieldwork being distributed to them directly.
- **Accessible information:** With guidelines constantly being updated and many PhD students unsure about the offers of support available to them, they need a place where they can find reliable and concise information (see 4.4). Rather than having to sift through an overflowing mailbox, a webpage could serve as a ‘one-stop shop’ – reducing email information overload but increasing policy awareness and compliance. Such information sharing should also target PhD supervisors, given that they are often crucial sources of guidance (see 2.3).
- **Accessible pastoral and mental health support:** Respondents strongly suggest that LSE provide greater pastoral care and mental health support, concretely more free counseling services. As future lockdowns loom and social distancing continues, such measures – already important in pre-pandemic times – will become even more crucial (see 2.1, 2.2). Furthermore, departments should devise ways to proactively and individually reach out to PhD students, in order to reach those who might not be contacting School staff themselves (see 4.1).
- **Combating intellectual isolation:** Students who regularly attend online events and gatherings organised by peers or the School highlight their importance. Conversely, students who do not have access to such forums or find themselves unable to attend lament their absence (see 2.2). At the same time, institutional feedback indicates that when such events are offered, student attendance is often low. Based on our data, we suggest that student uptake of these events could be improved by holding them during term-time and in a manner that is inclusive of students situated in different

time zones. Socialising appears to be most missed at the level of departments and cohorts, underlining the need for informal and smaller virtual events rather than School-wide forums. These could, for example, take the form of a virtual lunch or happy hour after a departmental seminar that is already attended by most/all PhD students. Departments could also help to combat specifically *intellectual* isolation by facilitating virtual PhD spaces, utilising apps such as MS Teams or Trello where students can share resources, collaborate, and chat. Students also report the success of communal WhatsApp groups.

- **Careers support:** PhD students hope that the LSE will continue to provide timely insight into job market developments in light of COVID-19, as well as hands-on advice for PhD students entering or about to enter academic and non-academic job markets (see 2.1). This could also include offering graduating students visiting fellowships to maintain their LSE affiliation and ease their entry into the job market, as some departments have already done.
- **Reallocating existing funds:** COVID-19 has changed both what funds can be used and what they are needed for. Some departments, for example, have started to reallocate travel or conference support to finance home office expenditures. Money could also be shifted to pay for in-person health and safety measures (masks, hand-sanitizers, etc.; equipment that is currently only provided for those students returning to campus) or other ways to facilitate fieldwork – such as renting a car rather than relying on public transport, or hiring local proxies when travel is not feasible (see 4.3).
- **Equalising the LSE offer – inter-departmental exchange:** Each department has different needs, resources, and students, and has understandably responded differently to COVID-19 (see 4.1). However, the crisis should not exacerbate inter-departmental inequalities. Social events and academic guidance are needs of *all* students and should be available to all. Best practices ought to be shared across departmental boundaries – such as weekly lunch meetings, peer support groups, online research seminars where students can present papers they were meant to take to conferences, and small-scale financial support schemes (such as providing money for printing in print shops etc.). Strengthening inter-departmental linkages between students, e.g. through School-wide workshops, peer support groups or measures to bring together student representatives, has benefits beyond the propagation of COVID-related best practices: it encourages intellectual cross-fertilisation and collaboration in times when new methods are needed and new questions asked; it builds up community cohesion and enables collective claims-making.
- **Enabling a flexible return to fieldwork:** A number of our respondents called on the School – and in particular on the Research Ethics and Health & Safety commissions – to show flexibility in allowing researchers to restart face-to-face data gathering in COVID-safe ways (see 4.5). Many of the field sites researchers are interested in are reopening; especially those where marginalised or precarised populations are involved: social service provision for these communities “will need to happen anyways, and it will need to happen in person” (Theodosia, 3rd year ethnography). Researchers ought to be supported in their quest to accompany these activities in a responsible manner.
- **Specialised methods support:** Further efforts at hosting tailored PhD seminars or workshops providing hands-on practical advice are highly desired by students. For example, the PhD Academy could organize specific method surgeries and/or seminars for students planning to do research on vulnerable populations or with elites (see 3.3).

- **No PhD student left behind:** The pandemic and the policy measures seeking to curb it have affected some students more fundamentally than others. Therefore, initiatives that support all PhD researchers remain paramount, but more targeted support is equally important. This can entail advertising the LSESU Hardship fund to self- and externally-funded students, creating a network or organising events for researchers with caring responsibilities, or considering further extensions for those most impacted (see 2.1, 4.3). Detailed solutions likely require additional consultations beyond the scope of this project.
- **Leading the way in necessary disciplinary discussions.** The pandemic poses unique challenges to an entire generation of PhD students. A main takeaway from this report is that, creativity and flexibility notwithstanding, for many qualitative in-person researchers the blow from COVID-19 is too severe to be mitigated entirely. As a world-class social science research institution home to leading academics, LSE ought to initiate broader conversations at the level of the academic disciplines concerned: moving into the post-pandemic world, there is urgent need for a discussion about the kinds of theses COVID-hit PhD students can be expected to produce. This will be critical for ensuring that these cohorts are not unduly disadvantaged especially on the (academic) job market.⁵

⁵ Some of these conversations have already begun and would benefit from the involvement of LSE staff and expertise: Medical researchers, for instance, have argued for a recalibration of disciplinary conventions to valorise the kind of qualitative and sociologically-minded data gathering our respondents are conducting. Conversely, given the severe disruption brought by Covid-19, anthropologists have started to debate how disciplinary standards for qualitative research must be adapted to the pandemic context.

Bothwell, E. (2020, September 2). *Will Covid-19 change the scientific method long term?* Times Higher Education.

<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/will-covid-19-change-scientific-method-long-term>

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