

# Courses Outside Your Department

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## Background

Within the existing literature, there is no clear consensus on whether specialised learning is the best route forward for higher education. While many argue that specialisation is beneficial from an efficiency perspective, it appears as though students can gain from diversifying their academic experience at university by taking an outside course. For this reason, we hope our research project's focus on the motivations and experiences of students taking outside courses at LSE can contribute to this ongoing discussion by providing insight into the perspective of students on this matter. We hope our findings will contribute to enhancing the experience of students taking courses outside of their department.

## Literature review

Research often points to specialisation being the path forward for higher education in the UK. On one hand, universities are subject to pressure to become more specialised in regard to their research and teaching strengths (Glass et al., 2006). While specialisation may come with many efficiency gains for universities, it can also constrain students to a specific discipline and limit their opportunities to explore other areas of interest. The opportunity to study courses outside of their department at university is therefore crucial for students wanting to diversify their academic knowledge and experiences. In fact, diverse educational experiences have been found to be more beneficial for the future wealth creation of students with entrepreneurship education (Dutta et al., 2010), suggesting that an overly specialised education may prove disadvantageous for students in some settings.

“[Taking an outside course] is actually good for being a person not just for your studies... I don't think anything bad ever comes from expanding your horizons.”

## Methodology

The first part of this project analysed the data of third-year students within the Government Department taking outside courses, as all Government programmes offer the option of taking an outside course in the final year of study. We filtered our data to include only courses that were not required by programme regulation. For example, for a student enrolled on BSc Politics and Economics programme, an optional course would be one outside of the Government or Economics Departments. Moreover, after narrowing down the sample and removing missing observations, the sample was reduced to 600 observations.

The second part of this project consisted of seven semi-structured interviews with third-year students within the Government Department. Respondents were recruited by email. Interviews were conducted via zoom and responses were recorded via the live transcript feature. The respondents were asked about their motivations and experience of taking an outside course.

Possible limitations of our research method include that interview responses could suffer from social desirability bias, but we believe this may have been mitigated by the interviews being conducted by fellow students, rather than authority figures. Our sample only included students who chose to take outside options but gaining insights into the motivations of students who chose not to take outside options could have provided more richness to our study.

## Findings

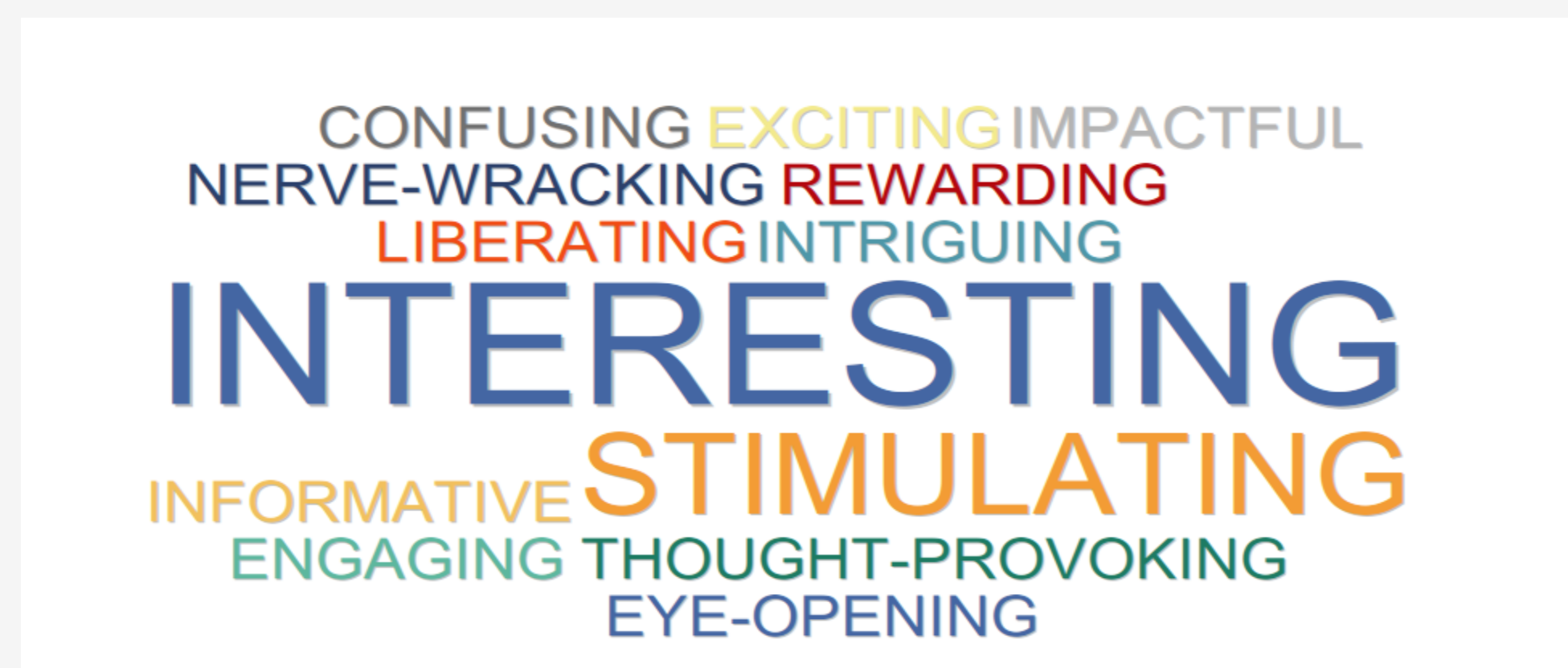
From 2018/19 to 2021/22 the grand total of students taking a non-compulsory outside option each year has increased, which may suggest an increased popularity of taking an outside option. We can safely rule out that this trend is not due to a change of programme regulations within the period of analysis but may be due to the variation within intake. Students on the BSc Politics and Economics programme constituted 53.3 percent of the total count of the students on optional courses, but this could be due to this programme having the largest intake.

Students were most likely to take an outside option in the department of Accounting, Geography and Environment, Management, Language Centre, and Statistics. Across the four years, outside courses from the Accounting Department remains the most popular option for students in our sample. The students seemed to concentrate their choice only on two courses within the Accounting Department. However, this is not surprising as most courses require completion of prerequisites and most students in our sample were on joint degrees without an opportunity to take an outside option until their third year of study. The choice of courses in the other most popular departments has been quite dispersed.

From conducting the semi-structured interviews, we found that the motivations of students taking outside courses included to help them in their future careers or further study, to lighten or vary their workload, to gain new skills, and to become a more holistic individual.

## Findings (continued)

Some students also decided to take an outside option because they felt constrained by the lack of Government Department courses available this year, although acknowledged that the limited options were due to Covid. Interviews with third-year Government Department students revealed very positive experiences of taking outside courses. All students agreed that they would recommend taking an outside option during their studies, with those taking a joint programme expressing regret that they were not able to take outside options in their first or second years, due to their programme structure. Each respondent was asked to describe their experience on their outside course in three words, and the responses to this question are displayed in the figure below.



Students were also asked to identify both positive and negative aspects of taking an outside course and their responses are summarised below.

Benefits	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Exploring new interests</li><li>• Becoming part of multiple new communities</li><li>• Getting out of your comfort zone</li><li>• Exposed to a variety of academic disciplines</li><li>• Becoming familiar with different forms of assessment</li><li>• Learning valuable life skills</li><li>• Complementing existing courses</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Difficulties with course selection and enrolment (for courses that require permission)</li><li>• Difficulties understanding 'jargon' used in specialised courses</li><li>• Initial adjustment to new forms of assessment</li></ul>

## Recommendations

### Encouraging teacher-student communication

- Interview responses consistently revealed that clear communication with class teachers was very important for a student's experience on an outside course.
- Students should be encouraged to reach out to their class teachers with any difficulties or concerns related to taking the outside course.
- The school should consider providing students with information on how methods of assessment and marking criteria may differ across departments.

### Improving student awareness

- Given that many students were motivated to choose an outside course for reasons related to careers and skills, alongside the personal development skills on the online course guides, LSE should consider including information about the careers in which these skills are valuable.
- In the long term, the school should consider developing a feature that allows students to filter courses based on skills and careers during course selection.
- More generally, students should be made aware of the benefits and potential challenges of taking an outside option via email or through the student newsletter to allow them to make an informed decision.

### Encouraging integration

- Our research found that students often feel confined to their department.
- LSE should encourage collaboration between different departments and promote an inter-disciplinary approach.
- Departments should consider holding events with other departments that aim to expose students to a variety of academic disciplines.
- These events could be similar to the existing Research Cafes within the Government Department but include faculty from multiple departments.
- This is in line with LSE's 2030 strategy of creating a sense of belonging and building a strong community within LSE.

## References

- Dutta, D.K., Li, J. & Merenda, M. (2011). Fostering entrepreneurship: impact of specialization and diversity in education. *Int Entrep Manag J* 7, 163–179. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11365-010-0151-2>
- Colin Glass, J., McCallion, G., McKillop, D., Rasaratnam, S., & Stringer, K. (2006). Implications of variant efficiency measures for policy evaluations in UK higher education. *Socio-Economic Planning Sciences*, 40(2), 119-142. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.seps.2004.10.004>