

How do students living in London for the first time engage with the city? What role does LSE play in shaping this engagement?

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See this project presented by the researchers: <https://youtu.be/EY0q4aOgrP4>
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Background

We are both part-time students, who have lived in London all our lives. Interacting with course colleagues, we observed dissonances between how those arriving in London understood the city, versus how we understood it. Different imagined Londons were overlaid on the same cityscape. We were interested to explore the extent to which students living in London for the first time felt that they had integrated the city, or whether they felt there were certain aspects, cultural or geographical, which remained inaccessible. In researching the offer LSE makes to its incoming students, we found the assertion that “The character of LSE is inseparable from its location [...] LSE is stimulating, cosmopolitan and very much part of the ‘real world’.” This suggested a commitment, on the part of the university, that it would connect students with the ‘real world’ of London outside the academic sphere. We set out to investigate to what extent this commitment has been fulfilled.

Literature Review

Little has been said in academic circles about the role of universities in shaping their students’ perceptions of the places they inhabit. The research which exists focuses largely on student experiences of culture shock (Coomer et al., 2016). Zhou et al.’s ‘Theoretical models of culture shock’ (2008) covers the theoretical basis of this well. Lazzeroni and Piccaluga (2015), meanwhile, usefully explore the role of universities in shaping urban space.

An article we found particularly useful is ‘Negotiating Their Way In: The Middle Classes, Gentrification and the Deployment of Capital in a Globalising Metropolis’, by Tim Butler and Garry Robson (2003). In it, Butler and Robson employ a framework of ‘cognitive mapping’, which casts people’s experience of their geographic local area as mediated through a conception of that area which often exists prior to their living there. In the case of Brixton, Butler and Robson find that incoming middle classes live in a ‘Brixton of the mind’, which makes it possible for them “to include themselves in a model of urban living which is ‘vibrant’, heterogeneous, informally segregated and paradoxical but ‘real’”. (p. 1804) We felt that this notion – that people can live in a ‘Brixton of the mind’ *even while living in Brixton* – could be usefully applied to London more widely.

Methodology

Our research was guided by the model for 'sequential interviewing' outlined by Mario Small (in 'How many cases do I need?: On science and the logic of case selection in field-based research', 2009). Small warns against adopting wholesale the logics of quantitative methods into qualitative studies, where they may be inappropriate. He recommends that in-depth interview-based studies be 'conceived as not small-sample studies but multiple-case studies', proceeding 'sequentially, such that each case provides an increasingly accurate understanding of the question at hand.' (p.24-25). We began by interviewing three students from the Holborn campus (closest to LSE, and thus offering the least geographic diversity to those arriving in London for the first time). After conducting the first interviews, we felt that High Holborn students' experience of London seemed not to be significantly shaped by financial barriers. Interested to see how this might differ for those for whom money was a more pressing concern, we added the criterion that our next accommodation block should also be the cheapest offered by LSE – which is why we carried out our second round of interviews at Butler's Wharf.

Findings

Across all six of our participants, none felt that LSE had played a large role in the shaping of their experiences of London. There was also some criticism of the information provided by LSE on London, some of which was considered irrelevant, out-of-date or difficult to find. This was confirmed when we looked at the information provided on the LSE website.

When asked why they had chosen to study in London and at LSE, participants focused on two factors. Their decision had overwhelmingly been shaped by the expected benefits of studying at a school of the calibre and with the reputation of LSE. Following far behind was their expectation of London as an internationally-renowned city with a cosmopolitan character and offering a high quality of life. Of the six respondents we interviewed, none had had a negative experience of London, and their expectations of the city had been matched to a large extent.

All participants expressed that it had taken them some time to adjust to life in the city. One spoke directly of the "culture shock" of having moved from a large city in China. Almost all participants expressed frustration at the cost of living in the city. The expensiveness of public transport and a dearth of places to eat inexpensively were cited as curtailing social activity. The complaint was especially obvious at Butler's Wharf – suggesting (predictably) that personal finances are a limiting factor for enjoyment of London. Finally, London's bustling nature was frequently focussed on, a quality characterised as "invigorating" at the positive end of the scale, and "overwhelming" at the other. Whilst participants were happy with their experience of London, then, its characterisation across the board as a cacophonous, and at times hostile, space suggests that more can be done to support students in navigating the city.

Two factors were crucial in the shaping of our participants' experiences of London. By far the biggest shaper of student experiences were the *social connections* they had made in their halls of residence. Though a couple were interested in exploring London individually, visiting new areas of London was most often a social activity. Second, the *geographic location* of halls of residence were a clear factor in the patterning of areas most visited. Those living in Holborn tended to cite Soho, Covent Garden and Notting Hill as areas which they had been to on several occasions. For those at the Butler's Wharf site, social activities were focussed on East London, particularly Shoreditch. Taken together,

identification of these two factors suggests that engagement with London as a city is done primarily as a social activity within established social groups. LSE may want to bear this in mind when helping students to connect with London, as we suggest in the recommendations section.

There were two notable dissonances between how participants talked about London in general, on the one hand, and how they described their specific experiences with specific places on the other. Firstly, there was a tendency to talk about the many things to do in London, as part of its appeal: in London, you 'never run out of things to do', as one interviewee said. But when pressed, participants struggled to name many specific 'things to do'. Participants described not having been to places (e.g. the National Gallery) almost apologetically, and shared the perception that they were not doing or seeing much in comparison to everything they *could* be seeing or doing. The feeling of potential, rather than much real activity, seemed to be characteristic of how participants experienced London. Second, participants often cited distance as the reason for not going to places in other parts of the city: 'I think I've probably spent much more time not going places and doing things because it would just be harder to get there.' The participant quoted lives 50 minutes away from LSE, yet framed the campus and her accommodation as both being part of a perceived city centre, inside which everything is close by and outside of which everything is distant. We would argue that, in many cases, perceptions of distance were skewed by lack of familiarity.

Recommendations

Our recommendations all fall under the general theme of giving agency. In view of the widespread aversion to organised tours that we found, equipping people with the means to explore - giving them the information and infrastructure - is central to empowering students to engage with the city.

Example 1: Map of London There is an interactive map of London on LSE's website (<https://tinyurl.com/bdh22bsu>) meant as a guide for new students. It aims to highlight 'key London attractions and sights, and different areas of the city.' But its scope is very limited. Aside from a few outlying parks and stadiums, it includes nothing north of Kings Cross or south of Elephant and Castle; nothing west of Hyde Park, or east of Brick Lane. This is a huge oversight, in a city where so many of the core attractions - arts venues, eateries, pubs, places where 20-something Londoners who aren't studying might tend to spend time - are to be found in the residential periphery. *So our first recommendation would be to provide a much better map.* This would give people the means to explore for themselves, cutting against the nonchalance and resistance towards guided tours. It would also be useful to give more general guides to areas (e.g. Dalston as a centre for nightlife, Greenwich for its maritime past, and Brixton as a centre for London's Caribbean community and a busy music scene). Guides, existing and new, should also be sensitive to cost. Many participants, particularly at Butler's Wharf, reported that their interaction with London had been shaped by financial barriers. This is not reflected or catered for in LSE's existing recommendations. It's worth noting that there is a comprehensive and well-thought-through guide to 'London Areas' on the LSE website. But it is hidden away, and its suggestions are not incorporated on the main map.

Example 2: Arts Venues LSE's oversight of both cost and further-out areas are well illustrated in the example case of theatre. Under the 'Student Life' section of LSE's website, theatre is touted as one of London's key attractions. But the site only talks about theatres in the West End, on LSE's doorstep and where tickets are most expensive. One participant thought that a £25 student ticket she'd got for a West End show was an incredibly good price to see theatre in London. While commercial venues are concentrated in central London, there are subsidised theatres all over the city which offer tickets starting at £5 or £10 for young people (e.g. the National Theatre, Young Vic, the Barbican). This applies equally to cinemas, opera houses and galleries. *A list of the venues in London which offer cheap tickets for young people - 'where you can see theatre / opera / dance / comedy for £10 or under'* - would be a great starting point.

Example 3: Social infrastructure Despite the resistance to guided tours, it's important to recognise the social dimension of how participants had been exploring London. The interviewee who seemed to be the most well-versed in navigating the wider city had done much of his exploration alongside his flatmates, who fortunately shared his curiosity. Bringing together people who share a desire to explore is something LSE could do more to facilitate. One straightforward way of doing this would be to *centralise department suggestions, as well as department events, into one calendar that students could pick from*. Some existing student groups, e.g. the Urban Explorers, are already in place, and could be circulated to all students.

Example 4: Cycling *Our final suggestion is simply to encourage cycling*. Many participants got around mainly by walking, often due to the perceived high cost of public transport. While there are great benefits to this in terms of getting to know a city, it obviously limits how far you can travel. Cycling is an excellent alternative. One participant talked about how, growing up on cul-de-sacs, she never actually learned how to ride a bike on real roads with real cars. Cycle safety instruction, explanations of how to use TfL bikes, and subsidised annual bike hire schemes could all be helpful offerings.