

Exploring disabled Students' experience of the Student Union's Sports and Societies.

What can we do better? How can we help?

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Background

In 2019/20 students 17.3% of home university students identified as disabled; a percentage which has increased by 46% since 2014/15 (House of Commons, 2021). With the number of students with specific needs growing, scholarship thus far – including previous LSE Change Maker's research – has primarily focused on the academic experience of undergraduate and postgraduate courses. Problematically, there has been little investigation regarding student's social experience of university – in particular, on sports and societies. The London School of Economics and Political Science Students' Union (LSESU) promotes social inclusivity and mobility, and they frequently receive questions regarding the accessibility and inclusivity of various sports, societies, and events. Therefore, this study aims to understand disabled students' experience when joining societies and sports. This is to:

1. reduce unconscious ableism
2. increase the number of disabled students joining societies/sports.

This will, in turn, improve overall student satisfaction and engagement with the LSESU.

Literature review

To date, research surrounding the university experience of disabled students primarily concentrates on barriers in learning and teaching with the social aspect of university having garnered little attention. Acknowledging and listening to the voices of disabled students – in all aspects of university life – is integral in establishing an egalitarian and inclusive higher education experience (Vickerman and Blundell 2009). Previous LSE Change Makers' Projects have highlighted the academic aspects of the LSE experience with a focus on LSE inclusion plans and the university's application process (Beck and Nenzen 2019; Swanke 2020). However, the social experience of disabled LSE students has yet to be addressed; LSE's Inclusive Education Action Plan focuses on inclusive pedagogy and academia rather than addressing ableism that occurs outside the classroom. Queen Mary's Student Union have recently released a Sport's Strategy Plan which outlines their objectives and approach to making their sports more inclusive of disabled and marginalised students (Queen Mary Students' Union, 2019). Further, University of Nottingham's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategic Plans includes initiatives to alleviate the disparities of disabled students joining sports and societies which enables them to become more involved in the student experience.

Methodology

We conducted online semi-structured interviews to collect data for our study. Interviews were used because they allow for the isolation and analysis of individual experience, with interaction and emphasis on the participant's own words and experiences. Our inclusive criteria for the interviews were:

1. the participant must be a current LSE student; and
2. must self-identify as disabled.

Under the discretion of the participant, we included neurodiversity within our umbrella term of 'disability'. We must also acknowledge that the participants were not asked to disclose their disability at any point during the sampling and interview process.

We used convenience sampling, then a snowballing approach, to find appropriate participants who fit within the criteria. An LSE group chat was used to find initial participants and they were then asked if they could refer us to other students who fulfilled our participation criteria. We were able to conduct seven online interviews, averaging at 35 minutes (approx.) per interview. Our questions became more narrow as the interview progressed, beginning with the interviewee's overall experience at LSE and then honing in on their interaction and participation with LSESU's sports and societies. Our final question asked: "how can the LSESU's sports and societies be more accessible and equitable for the disabled LSE student?"

Each interview was recorded and then later transcribed for analysis. To understand our data, an informal thematic analysis was used for the study. This enabled us to collectivise the individual's experiences in order to be able to understand and identify the overarching issues that arise with being a disabled student involved in the LSESU's sports and societies.

Findings

Social Impact

A common theme that arose from the interviews was the sports and society's social dependency on alcohol. From private events to campus wide traditions, e.g., carol, the students we spoke to expressed frustration of being excluded as a result of not drinking.

With one student saying:

"In terms of socialising in like societies and stuff, it often feels that I have to push myself to stay at the same pace with everyone."

However, it became evident that alcohol is only one contributing factor to the feelings of "too much" and the sensory overload that disabled students experience when trying to join societies and be a part of their university community. A recurring theme that appeared was students feeling as though sports and societies created and upheld environments that were not "for them."

COVID-19 also contributed to the ways in which disabled students feel socially included and excluded. We found that the impact of COVID-19 was dependent on the student's level of

study. Disabled postgraduate students found the move to online events to be helpful in terms of networking and feeling socially overwhelmed because they did not have to commute, worry about masks or having to talk to everyone at once. However, we found that disabled undergraduate students felt the opposite – online events made it even harder to form friendships and gain new experiences. One student noted:

“LSE is very hyper-neurotypical, people are so busy with their work and stuff that it is difficult to engage on a social level and formal level because they assume everyone is able bodied.”

Accessibility and Inclusion

Many participants expressed personal issues and experiences of inaccessibility when speaking about whether LSE sports and societies are accommodating to disabled students. One of the main experiences expressed was that LSESU sports are geared towards able-bodied students.

The strong competitiveness of sports meant that many participants felt discouraged to enrol in the fear of not being made welcome because they wished to simply ‘try out’ and/or play recreationally. Moreover, some students revealed that they felt as though they could not be part of a sports team because it required too strong of a commitment – an ethos that is encouraged and perpetuated by the exec members. They expressed that if the expected commitment to sports clubs were more flexible then they would be more inclined to join a team. Being a disabled student means that juggling academics, and various other personal and professional endeavours alongside a society or sport can be exceptionally difficult and there seemed to be limited accessibility within sports and a lack of accommodation for disabled students. A student stated:

“I haven’t seen any advertisements saying that sports are accommodating to disabled students, I didn’t see any emphasis on disabled bodies, just able-bodied ones.”

Students spoke about their experiences of not feeling included in their societies particularly during group activities and big events. They felt as though the environment did not cater to their needs and focused primarily on able bodied individuals which led to them feeling invisible at these events. However, they also spoke to feelings of hypervisibility whereby they felt as though they were being difficult when asking for assistance and dismissed when there were no accommodations made after they spoke up. A student stated:

“I felt like it was a very neurophobic and hostile environment.”

Successful Accommodations

When asked about their own personal experience with LSESU sports and societies many students spoke of positive experiences with a particular sport or society. They mentioned experiences of feeling “accommodated” to and seen within their society which many are still currently members. Their experiences were focused on societies that did not feel to be “CV based” and friendly environments where they could meet new and like-minded people. An accommodation, that was mentioned by participants, was the idea of feeling comfortable to speak to the executive members. Perhaps, this would be about their personal circumstances, the accessibility of an upcoming event or simply being unable to attend – regardless of the reason, these participants appreciated the open and inclusive nature of these executive teams. As one student noted:

"I felt comfortable enough to speak to someone about my needs without feeling any sense of judgement or worry."

Conterminous with this was the positive experiences that students had with societies and sports that did not require a "strong commitment" but instead allowed students to be selective with their attendance depending on the week. Sports and societies that demonstrated flexibility greatly helped accommodate their disabilities, particularly during periods of stress or anxiety. Flexible commitment schedules also allow disabled students to continue feeling as though they are part of their club without feeling worried about "missing out" on important information or events. Students felt a greater sense of community when being part of societies that accommodated their needs and made them feel valued and included. In turn, students felt more confident to increase their own involvement and social participation and, in some cases, eventually becoming a member of the executive committee of the society or sports club.

Recommendations

Sports:

- LSESU sports should offer a recreational sport option and activities that do not need weekly commitment at the beginning of the term
- Provide training to its members on making sports accessible and inclusive
- Implement social events that are not centered around alcohol
- Encouraging disabled students to apply for sports and society (through advertisements and hosting events)

Societies:

- Continue hosting online events despite the movement towards in person events
- Online events should be recorded with closed captions
- In person events should ensure that slides / presentations are clear with accessible fonts and sizing
- Better organisation from the Student Union (ensuring that students have time to process and commit to an event well in advance)

Both Sports and Societies:

- The role of 'Student Inclusion Officer' alongside president, treasury etc. should be made mandatory for all sports and societies
- Making accessibility part of the application form for events/games
- Mandatory accessibility training for executive teams taught by the LSESU's Student Neurodivergent Officer and Student Disability Officer
- Increase the flexibility of event schedules and weekly commitments

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