

# The LSE Peer Support Scheme: student perceptions and desires

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## Background

Student mental health is a cornerstone of healthy university communities, associated with better learning outcomes and social engagement (Universities UK, 2020). The London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) understands that the university environment impacts student wellbeing, and the university's Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Framework commits the LSE to provide evidence-based measures to improve student wellbeing (LSE, 2020).

The LSE Peer Support Scheme aims to support student mental health through trained student volunteers who provide empathetic listening to others. The scheme has been running for over 10 years and may be a cost-effective complement to other services in the LSE support ecosystem. Previous research has investigated other aspects of this ecosystem, with little focus on the Peer Support Scheme. Indicative evidence shows that many who had used the scheme found it helpful (LSESU, 2016). Nevertheless, only 48% of students knew about the scheme and only 14% had approached it (LSESU, 2016).

The literature suggests several barriers that may explain underutilisation, such as stigma or a preference for other sources of help (Clement et al., 2015; Dopmeijer et al., 2020). It is unknown, however, what specific barriers LSE students face, and this research therefore set out to address the following objectives:

- explore LSE students' perceptions of the LSE Peer Support Scheme, including strengths and barriers; and
- explore what LSE students want from the LSE Peer Support Scheme.

## Methodology

We conducted in-depth, online video interviews, which lasted 30–45 minutes. A convenience sample of six LSE students was recruited on campus, using WhatsApp groups, and via personal networks. Our sample comprised four females and two males, of which four were undergraduates and two postgraduates. One participant had used the Peer Support Scheme. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and coded in NVivo.

## Results

Analysis revealed three main themes: (1) low awareness and usage of the LSE Peer Support Scheme, (2) welcoming perceptions of the scheme, and (3) several key barriers to scheme usage.

## **1. Awareness and usage of the Peer Support Scheme were low**

Most participants had heard of the Peer Support Scheme, but some were unclear of its purpose. Only one participant had used it, after having read about it in a newsletter. Those who had heard of the scheme learned of it primarily via newsletters, stalls during freshers' week, or the LSE website. One participant had lived in a hall of residence and did not recall learning about the scheme during his tenancy.

## **2. Participants valued the Peer Support Scheme**

All participants welcomed the scheme, identifying two unique advantages. First, it was considered less formal than other LSE wellbeing services. Second, participants welcomed the possibility of having shared experiences with a peer supporter. They approved of the diversity and perceived warmth of current peer supporters.

## **3. Several key barriers exist to help seeking via peer support**

We grouped barriers according to the ISM (Individual, Social, Material) framework, a multi-disciplinary tool for effective intervention design (Darnton & Horne, 2013).

### Individual barriers

- 3.1 Some participants sought a listening ear and others advice; this could lead to dissatisfaction with the Peer Support Scheme.
- 3.2 Some students do not believe peer support can help with complex problems, instead preferring the scheme for academic or interpersonal concerns.
- 3.3 Reaching out to a peer supporter and verbalising concerns can take time and effort.
- 3.4. Participants self-regulated in a variety of ways, believing they should deal with their own problems or that problems were not severe enough. Some were also disappointed by previous help-seeking.

### Social barriers

- 3.5 Some students may seek anonymity when accessing help, while others prefer to build rapport before opening up to a source of support.
- 3.7 Participants confided in friends and family, only turning to other sources of support when problems become more serious, or traditional sources of support were unavailable.
- 3.8 Stigma of help-seeking may prevent reaching out to a peer supporter and contribute to a 'soldier-on' mentality.

### Material barriers

- 3.9 Academic workloads may delay help-seeking, as the next deadline is always around the corner.

## Recommendations

### Navigating the LSE support ecosystem

- **Provide a contact template.** The purpose of the template would be to reduce time and cognitive load when contacting the Peer Support Scheme for the first time.
- **Update the LSE student support map.** Several participants were unclear what peer support entailed, how it differed from other services, and for what problems they could approach the scheme. We suggest incorporating case studies into the existing map and making the map 'flatter', hence requiring fewer clicks to reach a suggestion.

### Peer Support Scheme delivery

- **Consider providing anonymous support.** Certain sub-groups are unlikely to seek help unless it is anonymised.
- **Help build rapport.** A variety of variables predict rapport, e.g. amount of exposure. The LSE, for example, could create three-minute videos in which peer supporters introduce themselves.
- **Empower experienced peer supporters to work on scheme enhancement, either through sponsored roles or recognized volunteering.**  
Recognising the wealth of ideas suggested by our respondents, the scheme would benefit from creating dedicated leadership positions for students, e.g. Head of Marketing, that are filled from within the scheme.

### Marketing

- **Develop a perennial marketing strategy.** The Peer Support Scheme is likely to require effort and creativity to sustain awareness. The scheme may wish to consider the following:
  1. collaborate with the Beaver, Pulse Radio, LSE Life, or (vulnerable) societies, e.g. Intersectional Feminist Society;
  2. encourage peer supporters to pro-actively approach students in relaxed environments, e.g. library;
  3. allocate a dedicated peer supporter to academic departments; or
  4. time marketing activity to increase impact during stressful periods through collaboration with the Students' Union happiness tracker.
- **Enhance the friends and family referral route**  
Students will often reach out to their immediate network for wellbeing support that these contacts are ill-equipped to provide. Awareness of the Peer Support Scheme as a referral option could increase the scheme's uptake.

## Conclusion and future research

A full report is available [here](#). Participants welcomed the LSE Peer Support Scheme, and future research should explore similar schemes at other universities as well as the experience of and perceived efficacy of the current LSE scheme for service users.

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