

Transforming how LSE interprets & treats Neurodiversity: reforming the Student Academic Mentor scheme

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Background

Neurodivergents experience challenges within higher education institutions at greater rates than their neurotypical peers. According to numerous studies, between 15 and 20 percent of the population is Neurodivergent. (Montvelisky, 2021). Using 'autism' conditions as a proxy for wider neurodivergent traits, national statistics indicate that 2.4% of the UK student population is diagnosed with autism, yet, within the UK, less than 40% of these people complete their university education (Gurbuz, Hanley and Riby, 2018), meaning autistic students are more than 10 times more likely to drop out (60% vs 5.3% overall dropout rate). (Hazel, 2022) Within the 2020/21 academic year, LSE had 11,689 full-time students, (LSE, 2021), statistically dictating that at least 281 of them will have an autism diagnosis. The above average drop-out statistics suggest that only 112 of these people will finish their University education at LSE.

Methods

I used purposive sampling to recruit interview participants. I used semi-structured interviews, using emancipatory interviewer techniques to empower interviewees to explore whatever details of their LSE experience they felt were salient. I gave all participants aliases of country names with no particular relevance to their identities (e.g. one participant is named Kenya but has no relationship to Kenya).

Analysis

1) Needs of neurodivergent students

My interviews began by exploring what needs are currently unmet for neurodivergent students. Unmet needs raised by participants were broad and extensive, ranging from pastoral to academic issues. Reoccurring obstacles reported by neurodivergent student within LSE pedagogy were characterised by the sense of feeling:

- Invisible
- Ignored
- Overlooked.

Classmates and educators often don't understand how neurodivergence affects neurodivergent students. Participants can't speak candidly to classmates and educators, of the ways neurodiversity presents itself for them. They feel they have to downplay the challenges neurodiversity poses for them, for fear of reinforcing potential stigma.

2) Changing how LSE interprets neurodiversity

Participants suggest that serious, long-lasting, meaningful improvements to reforming LSE pedagogy and resolving their multifaceted needs, would arise only from fundamental change to the LSE institution. This suggestion was articulated as follows:

→ Kenya: *'Institutions aren't built for neurodiversity'; LSE education is 'not a fair playing field, [so effective changes to pedagogy] can't just be added or subtracted. It has to be bulldozed over and made somewhere else'.*

More important than peace-meal reforms or small-scale amendments to how current policy is formulated and delivered, is an environment for neurodivergents on LSE campus that is made more inclusionary. Policies must support a change in how LSE perceives & interprets neurodiversity as a policy issue, in two crucial ways:

- Improving visibility
- Interpreting neurodiversity differently

3) Improving visibility

The degree of neurodivergence students experience is overlooked by LSE pedagogical structures and often ignored by policy-makers/providers. LSE pedagogy is structured in ways exclusionary to neurodivergent needs; individual officials even ignore the basic needs of neurodivergent students.

→ Japan couldn't get basic teaching accommodations because their advisor unilaterally decided against it. *"By his frame of reference, it would be weird"; "there's a limited amount of recommendations they make" .*

Participants suggest it is not sufficient that students' neurodivergence be given greater visibility as a policy issue only; it also must be interpreted differently. Meaningful culture change signifies neurodiversity being given greater visibility *and* being seen differently.

4) Neurodiversity: an individualised issue

Participants described how being overlooked or ignored arises because their neurodivergence is seen as a feature that can be interpreted as something specific to the individual and thus as something treatable in isolation of other neurodivergent students.

Participants describe the implications this has on their ability to self-advocate

→ Clarifying why they are not as able to self-advocate as they feel they should be, Norway states: *"I'm not confident about neurodivergent issues, because I see them as personal issues"*

5) Neurodiversity: a collectivised issue

This is contrasted against how neurodivergent students desire neurodiversity to be addressed as a *collective issue*.

Participants express challenges that often affect neurotypicals as much as neurodivergents. Participants described neurodivergence as being a universally-shared phenomenon (affecting neurotypicals/neurodivergents equally):

→ Japan: [Neurodiversity] *"is kinda made up [...] we are all on the spectrum, no-one is the perfect brain.*

→ Spain: *'More people [should] realise that they are closer to neurodivergence than they thought'.*

Norway explains why/how this collectivisation of 'neurodivergence at LSE' is necessary, by comparing their varying ability to raise 'neurodiversity-related' issues with race-related issues (within the 'Race Matters initiative).

→ Norway: [The Race Matters initiative is] "*a broader topic of: decolonising is a social justice issue*". In contrast, Norway describes being unable to self-advocate for their neurodivergence because "*I'm not able to link it to a social issue*"

6) Unique position of neurodivergent students

Neurodivergent students are better placed to support one another within LSE pedagogy than any neurotypicals for three reasons:

Distinctive potential for empathetic connections:

→ Spain: neurodivergents as possessing some kind of "*radar*", that can uniquely detect other neurodivergents and their associated needs.

→ Cuba: "*Neurodiverse solidarity, connection there; neurodiverse community would definitely help me with that*"

Distinctive strength to create effective support:

This connection unifying neurodivergents makes neurodivergents more likely to create support for neurodivergents that is meaningfully effective.

Genuine desire of neurodivergents to support one another

Participants unanimously expressed gratitude for their opportunity to contribute to research that will lead to improvements for their fellow neurodivergent peers.

→ Japan: "*I'm so fine with talking about [my struggles] if I feel it will help other [neurodivergents] in similar positions*".

Recommendations

This report recommends one specific policy to address these needs that is practical/feasible now, building upon existing support and achievements.

My findings support:

- Making neurodivergents feel less invisible, ignored, and overlooked
 - Framing neurodiversity as a collectivised issue
 - Improving representation of neurodivergents within institutional processes
 - Student-led support between neurodivergents

1) Contextualising policy recommendation

The LSESU *Neurodivergent Officer* position was only inaugurated in 2021, with the first two *LSE Neurodiversity Weeks* (held in February 2021 and March 2022) open to all LSE staff & students.

The current LSE policy context is opportunity for my findings.

- The *LSESU Neurodivergent* role, only established in 2021, will be merged with the *disabled students* role and will become remunerated
- An *LSESU Neurodivergent Society* will hopefully be established soon.
- *LSE Life* is introducing neurodivergent-specific workshops where available.

2) Introducing the *neurodivergent pilot scheme* within/alongside SAM

Introducing neurodiversity-specific mentorship within the SAM scheme would improve visibility of, and give clout to, the importance of neurodiversity amongst the LSE student body. The peer-support dimension of SAM would be extended to also include neurodivergent students supporting recently matriculated neurodivergent students, thereby leveraging the unique potential neurodivergents have to understand & support one another.

Greater peer-support institutionalisation for neurodivergents would emulate the strengths of the existing SAM scheme, helping neurodivergents to feel less invisible, ignored and overlooked within LSE pedagogy.

Institutionalising greater official support for NDs, alongside progress within the SU, would support general efforts towards cultivating an LSE neurodivergent community. These efforts would help frame neurodiversity as a collectivised issue, and an Institutionalised role for greater peer-support between neurodivergents would reinforce the notion that neurodivergents possess shared features warranting community-level, collective support.

3) Practicalities

This expansion would represent a pilot scheme. Its results & efficacy would be assessed through focus groups and student feedback. It has recruitment processes separate to the existing SAM scheme. Methods for recruiting mentors within this expanded pilot scheme would include some channels presently used by SAM, but also some new channels (student news, support from the *Neurodivergent Officer* etc).

Institutionalising a neurodiversity-specific dimension into the LSE peer-support scheme represents a first step to transforming how neurodiversity is interpreted at LSE. Crucially, it:

- 1) Gives clout to neurodiversity as a policy issue.
- 2) Notifies students as soon as they matriculate that neurodivergent support exists within the institution and amongst the student body.
- 3) Facilitates integration of disparate services/support available to neurodivergents; students become the sign-posters to alerting neurodivergents of support available.
- 4) Represents yet one further dimension of this nascent LSE neurodiversity movement.

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