

Executive summary: Falling between the cracks? Stimulating social interaction between PhD students

Jacob van de Beeten

See this project presented by the researcher: <https://youtu.be/Xelb32NleXo>

Read the [full report](#).

If this project has informed your practice, let us know at lse.changemakers@lse.ac.uk

Introduction

- Doing a PhD can be an isolating and lonely experience. Almost half of the LSE PhD students who participated in a recently conducted survey reported mental health problems and loneliness/isolation as significant challenges in their research.
- For this reason, this changemakers project aims to initiate a conversation about how to improve social interaction between PhD students at the LSE.
- I interviewed 10 PhD students about their experience to explore the following research questions:
 - Where and when do PhD students at LSE meet each other?
 - What can be done to make PhD students meet each other more?

Where do PhD students meet each other?

- PhD students primarily meet each other when working at their department. Proper working space is a prerequisite for social interaction.
- Departments organise few events as part of the PhD programme during which PhD students meet each other (and/or academic staff). Due to the pandemic, many of the academic events such as research seminars are still organised online.
- It is not easy to meet PhD students from other departments. There are no obvious venues where one can bump into peers, except for the activities organised by interdisciplinary research institutes. The PhD Academy space has the potential to be such a place, but in its current form is not seen as appealing.

How do PhD students organise themselves?

- PhD students struggle to self-organise within and across departments, due to lack of time and financial constraints. It is hard to find individuals who take the lead in organising social activities and to bring PhD students together. This is exemplified in the struggle to find volunteers to fulfill representative roles.
- There is not always a clear expectation that PhD representatives organise social activities. Whilst most departments have a social budget, the amount and rules are often left unspecified.
- The PhD Academy does not see organizing social activities for PhD students as part of its core business, but neither does the Student Union (SU). Moreover, PhD students do not feel connected to the SU and do not find their way to the Student Union Fund.

Recommendations

- **Departments need to create better conditions for PhD students to interact.**
 - Create physical spaces where PhD students want to be.
 - Generate more social interaction between PhD students and academic staff.
 - Enable PhD students to organise social activities:
 - The role of PhD representative should be remunerated;
 - Create clear budgets for social activities.
- **The PhD Academy should create better information and communication channels:**
 - Create a WhatsApp group for incoming PhD students during welcome week.
 - Make a webpage on the PhD Academy website dedicated to PhD student initiatives.
- **A PhD-run social committee should be established to organise PhD social activities.**
 - The committee should be embedded in the PhD Academy;
 - The positions should be remunerated;
 - The committee should be able to access resources from the SU and part of the SU budget should be earmarked for PhD students.