

## Students' experiences of off-campus learning

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See this project presented by the researcher: <https://youtu.be/ffi34WH8-RE>

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It has been argued that much of learning in a student's life takes places beyond the walls of a classroom. The manner and medium of imparting education have been a subject of debate over decades. While the traditional university education is skewed towards learning in carefully managed environments such as a classroom, I believe that the future of education must involve opportunities for learning that are off campus. This research idea was originally proposed by Mr. Mark Hoffman, Dean of General Course and Mobility and it was of interest to me as I felt that such experiences are an essential component of a well-rounded university experience.

### Research Question

The objective here was to study student experiences and perspectives on off-campus learning with the intention of developing a deeper understanding of how such experiences affect learning and the impact that they have on the motivation to learn, personal development, peer adjustment, community building as well as on the student-teacher rapport.

### Methodology

Qualitative data collection methods were adopted to undertake this research. Semi-structured interviews were conducted for the ten research participants. Out of the ten participants four of the students were postgraduate students at the LSE and the rest were undergraduate students. Out of the sample four participants recorded their experiences in a study abroad exchange program, others included a trip to Cumberland Lodge, a police visit, Legal London Walk, a visit to the museum and an internship program organised by LSE Careers.

### Literature Review

Several studies have outlined the benefits for students participating in the extracurricular activities such as regular attendance of school to higher educational attainment and better self-concept (Wilson and Nikki, 2009), greater student involvement (Griffiths et al.,2021), higher self-efficacy (Buckely and Lee,2018), greater self-esteem and lower rates of depression (Fredricks and Eccles,2006). Previous scholarly investigation has viewed off-campus experiences from the lens of extra-curricular activities. This research differentiates activities based on whether they were carried out physically on campus or off campus whether curricular or extracurricular in nature. While the focus of the bulk of previous research has been on studying the benefits of extracurricular activities on academic

performance (Buckley and Lee,2018) this research focuses on understanding how off campus activities impact the overall student experience.

## Findings

**Does the environment matter?** Findings reveal that off campus experiences hold certain advantages over on campus experiences. Six out of ten participants from the study spoke about the highly competitive environment at the LSE which classrooms reinforce, being off campus not only gave the students a chance to interact with each other but they also felt that the environment was less pressurising and less judgemental. *"In seminars people feel like they are being judged and hence are reluctant to speak up but under informal conditions, you feel as if everyone is in the same boat"- Participant 10*

**Impact on Learning:** Participants who had an off-campus experience related to their academics reported that the environment made learning more engaging in terms of interaction with the course materials with learning being more alive. For instance, a Law student who went on a Legal London Walk organised by the Department of Law reported the statement below. *"You take the students out of the class and show them what they are studying about, places where the cases that you read about are written grounding the theory that we learned in the classroom in the real world is very crucial. It's just taking an abstract concept and you know putting this into reality which is very helpful" - Participant 7.*

**Impact on Social Dynamics:** Off campus experiences played a major role in facilitating peer interaction. Two participants reported that trips to Cumberland Lodge allowed students to establish deeper and more meaningful connections with students in their departments and were reportedly particularly beneficial especially for programs with fewer number of students. In terms of the student- teacher interaction, participants expressed a desire to get to know their professors better. Such experiences allowed students to know their professors as individuals, learn from their experiences and reflect upon the path that they would like to take in the future. Participants reported that after such experiences they were more likely to initiate social interactions with their professors.

**Impact on Career selection:** Off campus experiences provided exposure to practical life situations and work environments enabling students to make informed career choices. Further off- campus experiences hold great potential in enabling participants to view themselves as members of the profession that they intend to pursue. Participants also reported off-campus experiences involving domain experts and professionals and could help students understand what the job entails and bust any myths or stereotypes that might be prevalent. *"The barrister's profession in the UK is traditionally quite exclusive and dependent on class. If you are a person of colour, a woman and LGBT personal or a foreigner you don't see yourself entering this profession. The gates of the inns of court look so daunting, just getting the students there might help them break that barrier psychologically"- Participant 7*

**Off Campus Experiences related to Exchange Programs:** Exchange programs yielded several benefits as reported by participants in terms of exposure to different academic systems and a greater choice of subjects. All four participants reported being more engaged

in academics in their exchange programs than at the LSE, while exploring different interests which had implications for their personal and professional growth. All four participants spoke about how much the experience helped them acquire new life skills and added a new dimension to their personality and each of them recommended that exchange programs must be expanded and encouraged by the school even for international students. *"The exchange experience changed my entire- resume and my personality- extroverted, independent, never lived alone before, procedural and admin things, finances, more like an adult."* - Participant 3

**Challenges related to Off-campus Experiences:** Participants spoke about the shorter than desired duration of the experience, a two-hour experience was less likely to yield life changing insights or significantly alter the social dynamics. Participants also spoke about challenges related to communication of the event as several students do not regularly read the newsletters and find their email inbox flooded. Others spoke about the lack of experts at the event and talked about how the event was not sequenced well and did not cover significant locations. All participants who attended exchange programs spoke about a lack of clarity on the exchange related processes such as documentation and visa related challenges along with a delay in the processing of communication responses and challenges related to the receipt of funding for their exchange programs.

**How to undertake off campus experiences?** If the objective of the off-campus experience is to serve as an ice breaker a short duration for the experience would be preferred, however if the objective is to encourage learning that would result in a change in a student's behaviour or personality, then an off-campus experience of a longer duration must be preferred. An exchange program is more likely to change a student's personality and behaviour than a few hours at the museum. Timing is essential when it comes to off campus experiences. If the objective is to enable the students to make deeper social bonds and connections, then these must be preferably carried out at the beginning of the term. A trip to Cumberland Lodge which enables students to spend a considerable amount of time with each other as well as the professors would help to enhance that class bonding and the community feeling that most students desire especially when they move to the LSE from another country. Such experiences must enable students to gain novel skills or perspectives while providing opportunities for interacting with professors, experts, and alumni. The off-campus events must be communicated and advertised well to encourage greater student turnout, new platforms such as social media must be supplemented along with regular modes of communication such as the email and the department newsletter.

## **Recommendations for Departments**

Departments have budgets for socials however the timing and the organisations utilisation of these budgets is less than optimal. While socials are desirable to begin with, departments must not restrict themselves to these and must seek to organise experiences of longer duration. Listed in the Appendix 1 is the order hierarchy of the impact they make on student experiences.

## Recommendations for Seminar Leaders

The LSE presents opportunities for seminar leaders to hold seminars outside the classrooms which can lead to greater engagement among students and even encourage them to speak up. Seminar leaders must therefore attempt to hold these at least once a term. These could be in the form of a site visit, a museum visit and educational walk or at the very least a discussion in a park. This can drive up student participation.

## Recommendations for the LSE

*"I just want to say that I wished that LSE was providing more outside classroom opportunities, as we've said. I see they didn't even have a proper exchange program for undergraduate students, and they only started introducing it this year. So, I know that things are going in the right direction. I wish they were much broader, and I was there when I was there". – Participant 6.*

LSE policies must encourage and support departments, course leaders and seminar leaders to undertake off campus experiences wherever possible. Support in terms of organisation and communication of the event needs to be streamlined. LSE currently has a GO LSE program meant to facilitate exchanges abroad and the off- campus experiences are organised by either individual departments or by separate bodies like LSE LIFE, LSE Careers in an ad-hoc manner. As per the participant's reports several administrative challenges exist while off- campus experiences which prevent cohort and community bonding. Given that off campus experiences feature in the LSE Futures Policy, a dedicated team for organising all off campus experiences "**LSE Off-Campus Events**" must be created. This body would be responsible for the ideation, planning and implementation of the event end-to-end, being involved in the initial outreach (to students and experts) ticketing, support, vetting industry experts and LSE alumni onboard. This body could be overarching and be responsible for the implementation of the GO LSE exchange program streamlining communication, documentation help and support.

## Conclusion

As the forces of accelerated digitisation and global pandemics disrupt industries including the educational industry, the future of learning seems to be forced out of classrooms. Universities must reimagine the role they can play in a student's life as educational as well as social institutions. According to the World Education Forum 2022, universities to cope up with this disruption must not only optimise technology but also leverage human interactions to their advantage and spend quality time facilitating professor-student interactions and off campus experiences serve as an excellent vehicle to attain this objective. As LSE seeks to expand its Futures Policy and global academic mobility program, prioritising off-campus experiences would not only provide a holistic and well-rounded educational experience for students but also enhance and future proof the LSE brand.

## Appendix 1

Off Campus Experiences by Increasing Amount of Impact	Examples
Program Based Socials	Outing in a restaurant nearby
Departmental Socials	Recreational outings
Departmentally organised Educational Tours	Walks in and around London
Museum visits	Course related or other
Meetings with Professionals	Shadowing Professionals, Discussions in Small Groups
Day Trips	Oxford and Cambridge
Overnight Retreats	Cumberland Lodge
Exchange Programs Abroad	Visit to countries learnt as a case study

## Quotes

*"I think there is a lot to be improved about social media of particular departments, though the events at the law school are advertised very well"- Participant 7*

*"It was certainly very nice to talk to professors and get a feel for how they are as people and get to know who I might want to work with as a supervisor or who might share the same research interests in mine some pointers on what we should think about if we're considering doing a PhD"- Participant 9*

*"Even though when I started LSE I was intrigued. I was also worried that I would no longer be interested in studying again. Now I'm still intrigued. I've also started enjoying learning again because of the lack of pressure. Whatever results I get, it doesn't feed back into my degree. And I've been getting better grades here than at LSE, which was ironic because like it doesn't count to my transcript." -Participant 5*