

An investigation into the experiences of LSE students of faith

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Background

For many students at the LSE, faith plays a significant role in their university experience. With 46.4% of 2021/22 students with a declared religious identity according to LSE's data library, it is particularly important that any LSE policy takes into account the perspectives of students of faith. In particular, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism represent LSE's largest faith groups

As a Muslim student, my faith has been significant in how I have navigated life at LSE. I wanted to investigate if this was also the case for other students from various religious backgrounds. As a result, my project aimed to uncover the experiences of students of faith and examine any trends on both an aggregate and micro-level.

Literature review

The relationship between a student's faith and their sense of belonging plays a major role in their university experience. This is because a student's sense of belonging is inextricably connected to their environment. Students that join faith societies or groups that reflect their social identities are able to develop strong connections to those around them (Calbrese & Poe, 1990). This is because in-group peer support and strong social networks inside student groups have been shown to improve self-esteem, well-being, and academic accomplishment, according to Archer et al (2003). As a result, religious groups at universities help to foster a sense of community, support and inclusion. Verily, research by LSE's faith centre (2018) found that it is 'immensely important that students feel they can bring their self to the campus, lectures and classroom, and students overall reported they feel accepted and accommodated for on the LSE campus'.

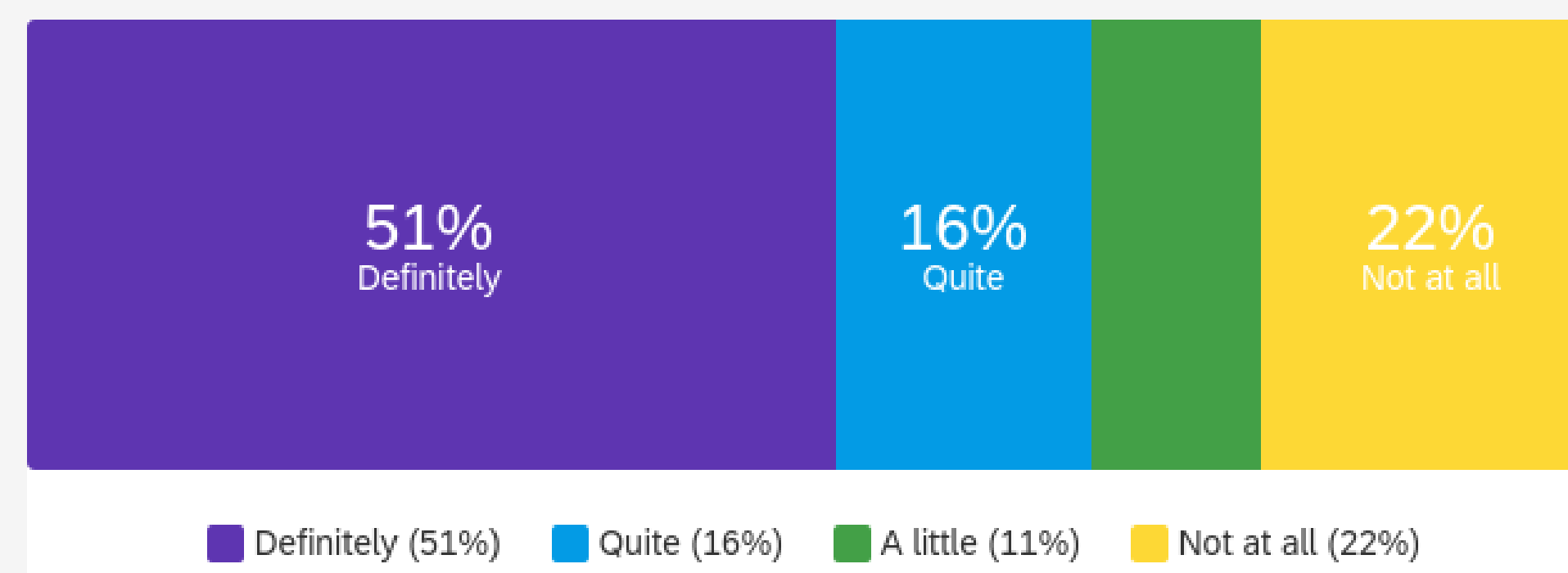
Inclusion means that all students have the right to be truly included, to actively participate with other students, to be valued as members of the school community and to have access to a system that delivers quality education and experiences (Ainscow, 2000). This includes empowering all members of our community to develop an approach that is committed to identifying and dismantling actual and potential sources of exclusion (Slee, 2003).

Methodology

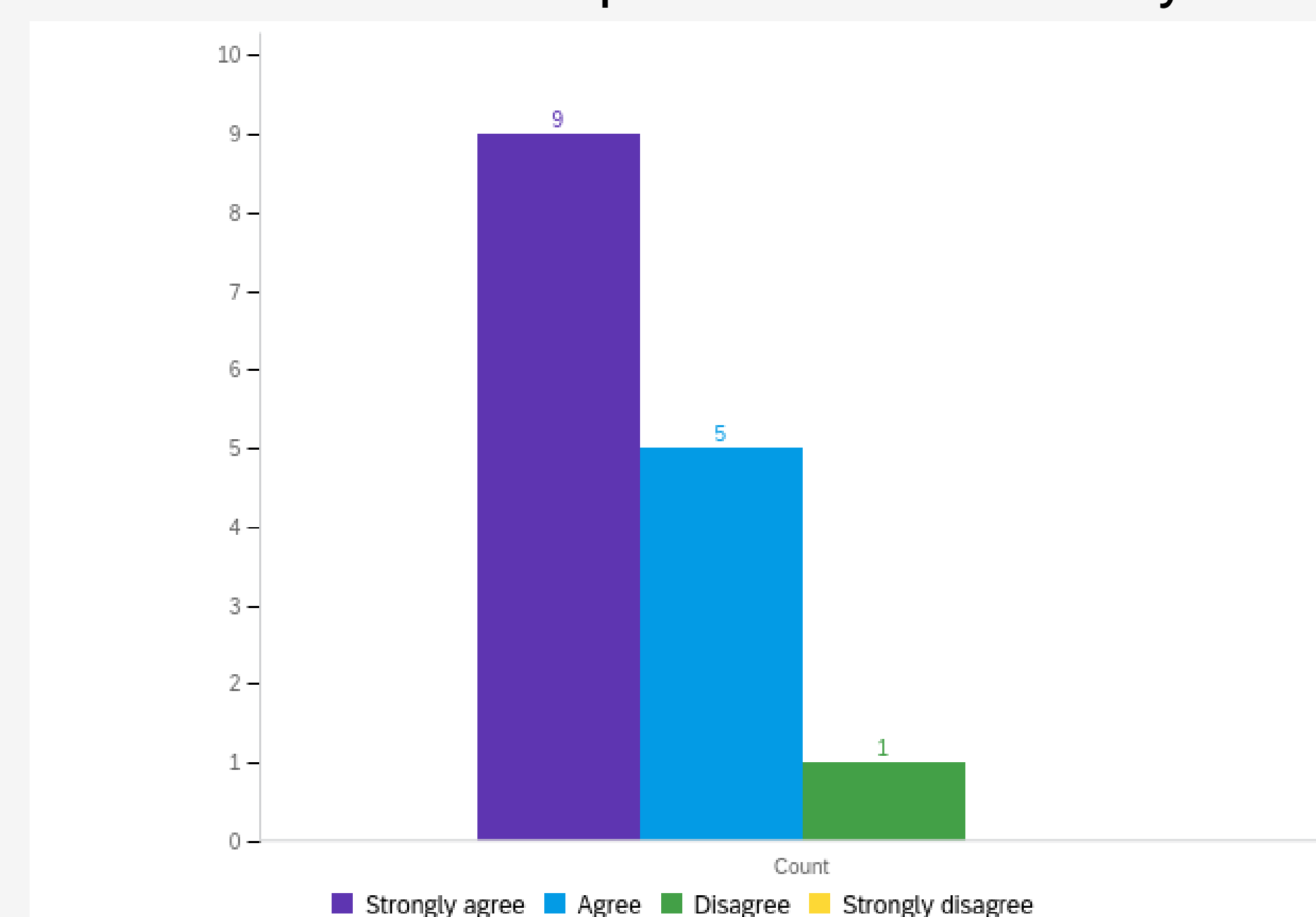
Firstly, I conducted a questionnaire on Qualtrics covering five major themes: Interactions with students, LSE staff, LSESU and societies, within academic settings and LSE accommodation. I surveyed 44 postgraduate and undergraduate students from across LSE through a mixture of Likert scale questions, multiple-choice questions and free-type format questions. Participants were asked a series of demographic questions and to what extent their faith affected these specific areas. Moreover, students were asked to suggest any possible ways LSE could better support students of faith. Following the questionnaire, I had in depth interviews with five students to further build upon their respective perspectives and develop a better understanding of their points of view.

Findings

Students were asked how important their faith was to them and 88% of those with a declared faith answered it was important to them.



Students were then asked to what extent faith societies have improved their experiences at LSE. The overwhelming majority of those who are either currently a member or have previously been a member of a faith society stated that LSE faith societies have improved their university life.



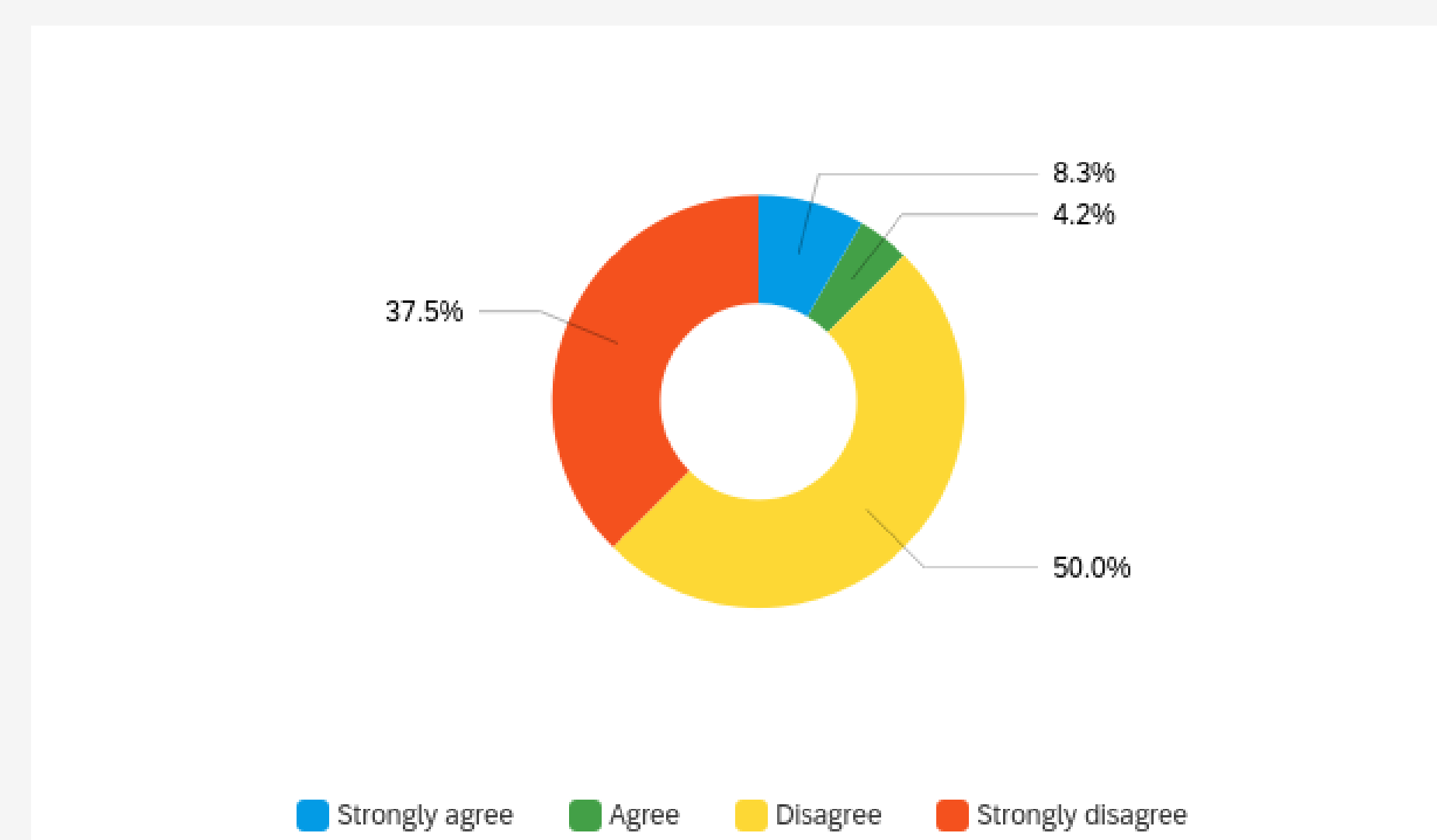
Findings (continued)

Interview data manifested how LSE's faith societies have managed to create a sense of 'community' especially during times of religious observance.

One participant expanded upon this by saying: 'It's nice to have a group where you have these shared beliefs and it creates this closeness immediately, especially when you're starting out in first year.'

Moreover, 100% of participants that have used LSE's faith facilities rated them either good or excellent. However, the majority of students seem to find out about LSE's faith-related facilities after joining the university. LSE's fresher's fair, word of mouth and social media represent the three main avenues through which students learn about these.

Moreover, when participants were asked if they are aware of who to go to if their faith has been spoken about insensitively by a member of staff or another student, 87.5% stated they did not know through which mechanism they could report such an incidence.



References

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- Slee, R. (2003, 15 May). "Progressing the partnership," in Meeting of Executive Directors, Schools and Curriculum, Learning and Strategy B

Recommendations

LSE should aim to foster inclusivity on both a department and university level.

Department level

- Ensuring departments are aware of **faith-related celebrations, obligations and activities** and actively try to accommodate students of faith during these periods of religious observances through:
 - Establishing **non-drinking department events** throughout the year.
 - Providing **online classes during faith-related holidays**.

University level

- Clarifying** and highlighting how students can **report faith-related issues**, what these issues may entail and why faith-related discrimination is not tolerated.
- Increasing the number of faith-related facilities** in a greater number of buildings such as a prayer room in library.

"It's annoying always having to go to the student union to connect with your faith and pray"

"Currently, the people that are attending mass on-campus are quite frustrated that they were never told that on-campus mass existed before."

- Organising greater discussions of faith** and support groups.