

Background

Being the first in my family to attend university, campus life and the myriad of opportunities was uncharted territory for me and the learning curve was steep. Observing friends with similar family backgrounds to my own grapple with their careers and all the non-academic tenets of university life inspired this project. I have sought to investigate how first generation (FG) status impacts how this group makes use of the non-academic opportunities offered at the university and how they pursue career development. First generation spans all students whose parents have not completed higher education. This group is worthy of investigation not despite its size but rather because of it. Intersecting with many other identities, such as minority backgrounds and low income, greater awareness about the needs of FG students can help us create a more inclusive and welcoming university experience for many groups. To narrow down my project, I have chosen to focus on the Economics and Government departments. As they are two large departments, they not only lend large enough sample sizes, but offer different profiles, for example, in terms of International to Home students, which should yield additional robustness to my findings.

Literature review

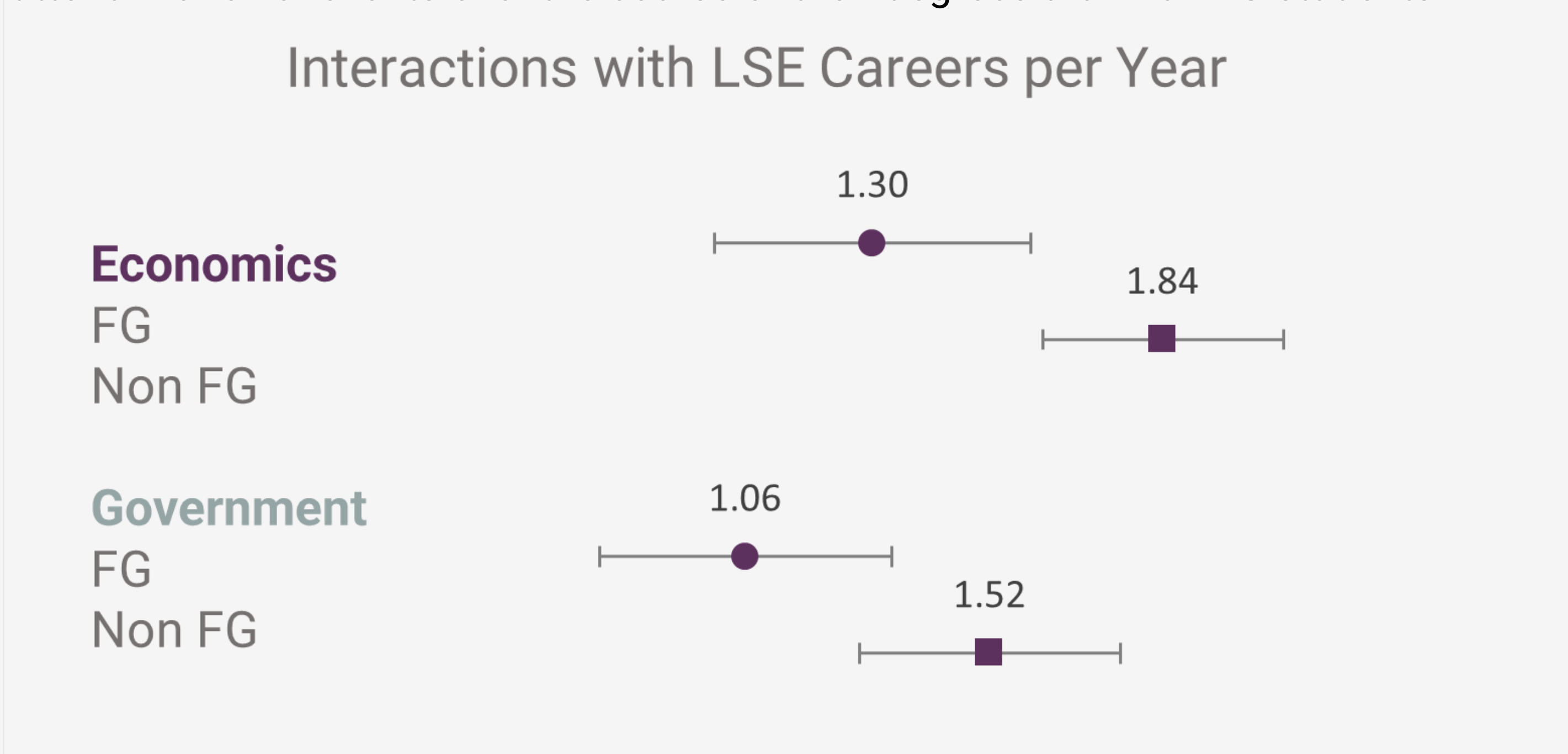
While the academic experience of FG students has been covered extensively, less research has been dedicated to their career development at university and how they navigate non-academic aspects of the university experience. While many FG students attend university with the goal of getting a good job, they are often more passive in researching opportunities than second generation students. Parents of FG students often encourage studying hard but may not be familiar and understand the other aspects of student life that also contribute to the value of the degree, such as networking with students and potential employers and gaining important non-academic skills which help students reach their career related goals (Roksa et al., 2018). Limited social networks of professionals with 'desirable' careers also make it harder to understand one's career options (Tate et al., 2015). They also exhibit low familiarity with career services offered by universities and tend to hold leading society positions, study abroad or do internships at lower rates (Pasero 2018; Stebleton & Jehangir, 2020). This often leads to an excessive reliance on online resources instead (Pasero, 2018). First generation students often perceive themselves as more independent and adaptable than their peers who can fall back on more parental support.

Methodology

To provide a first picture of FG students' career development, this research project has pursued three complementing strategies. Firstly, by conducting a survey among current undergraduates, secondly by conducting interviews and finally, by analysing participation statistics from the LSE Career Services. The survey was created through Qualtrics and covered three core areas. In the first part, respondents were asked about their background and previous experiences. In the second part, interviewees were asked about their habits surrounding career development, for example, who they tend to discuss career advice with, and how much they value these sources. Finally, they were asked about their attitudes and confidence in a range of different questions. A total of 176 responses were collected whereof 18 were first generation. For the interviews, I probed deeper into the findings from the survey. As well as asking them about their personal experiences, I asked respondents what they thought about some of the differences I found between first generation students and others. The interviews lasted 30-45 minutes. Out of 15 FG students who expressed interest in the survey, only 3 agreed to the interview and no further interviewees were sought due to time constraints. Finally, I retrieved data from LSE Careers on participation in their events. Spanning several cohorts, I analysed the participation by FG students relative to their peers.

Findings

The table below shows the participation data from LSE careers for the two selected departments with 95% confidence intervals. On average, FG students attend 1.5 fewer events over the course of their degrees than non-FG students.



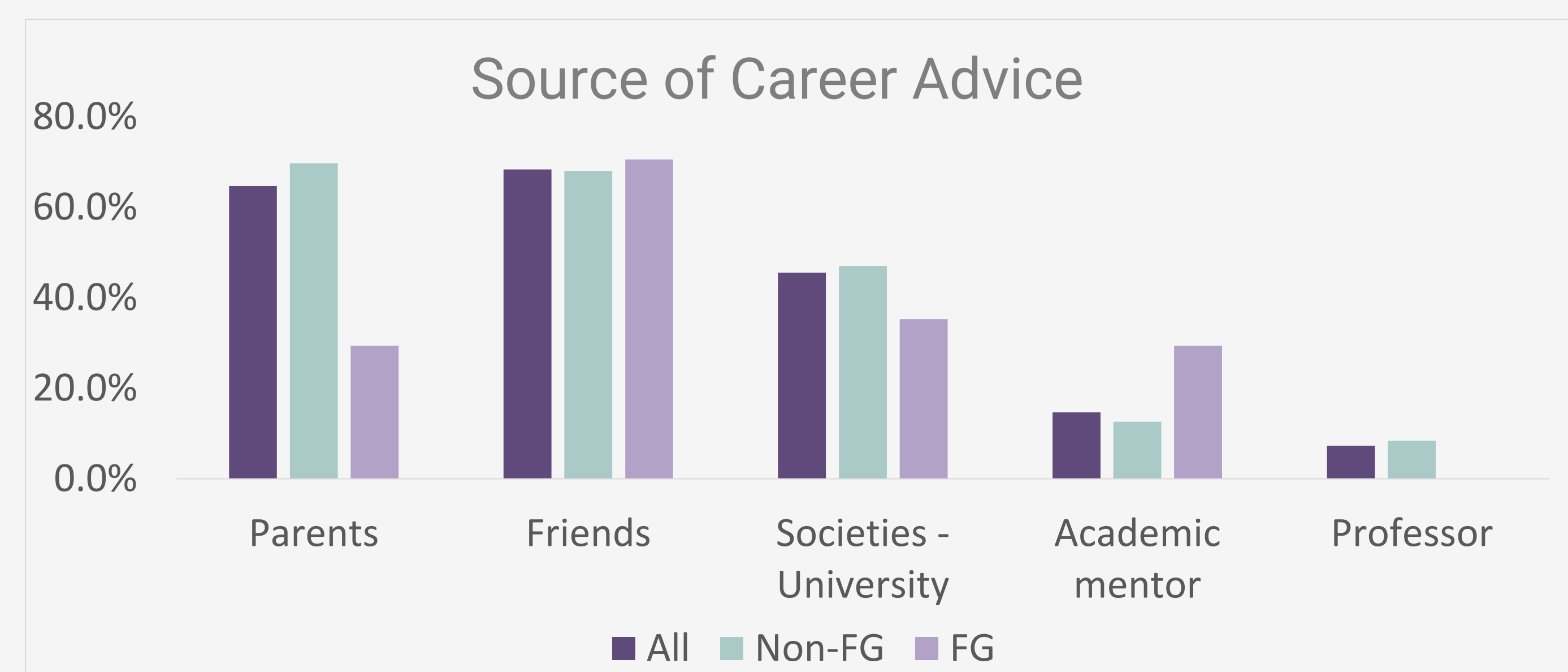
This low participation with LSE Careers is concerning, as the literature suggests that FG students are also less engaged in other type of career building activities, such as leadership positions in societies (Tate et al, 2015).

Findings (continued)

The lower participation rates may be explained partly by unfamiliarity with what is offered. Interviewees indicated that they found it difficult to navigate the myriad of activities offered. Several felt that there was insufficient information for first year students to help them understand the opportunities offered and how these are structured. This led to overwhelm for one interviewee:

“[Information] was very divided because there's many different departments. Maybe you get something from the school, from LSE events, from LSE careers or like even my department, all giving different information. They have different portals that you can look at. I didn't know what to do with it.”

When it came to getting advice and guidance, over 70% of non-FG students in my survey reported relying on parents, while less than 30% of FG students did. While both groups reported getting advice from friends at the same rate, first generation students tended to value their advice more highly than other students. The interviews also suggested that FG students also relied highly on online research about career options. For example, one interviewee explained friends' LinkedIn pages was a primary source of information to learn about different opportunities. Additionally, FG students often feel uncertain about how to approach career counselling. Two interviewees felt like the short meeting slots would not be worthwhile for telling their story and verbalise their concerns, despite wanting to talk about it. Interviewees had similar concerns about their academic mentors, feeling like meetings were often impersonal and irregular.



Recommendations

Help Navigating What's On Offer

- Better help is needed to navigate the wealth of talks, meetings and opportunities offered by the LSE Careers, departments and others.
- I recommend the creation of an **LSE-wide** infographic which provides students with an overview. It should show which types of events and opportunities that students can expect from where. The infographic should be marketed across campus at the start of each academic year

Reduce Barriers to Individualised Help

- FG students have less experience discussing their careers outside their social circle and are less used to discussing these concerns with 'professionals'
- I recommend creating a video of what a Careers Discussion could look like to reduce anxiety and help students understand and make the most out of such opportunities.
- Additionally, encouraging follow-up meetings with the same consultant might help students who find it difficult to retell their stories to engage more.

References

- Pasero, H. (2018, April). Challenges faced by first-generation university students. *Luminate*. <https://luminare.prospects.ac.uk/challenges-faced-by-first-generation-university-students>
- Roksa et al. (2020). Navigating the First Year of College: Siblings, Parents, and First-Generation Students' Experiences. *Sociological Forum*, 35(3), 565–586. <https://doi.org/10.1111/socf.12617>
- Stebleton, M. J., & Jehangir, R. R. (2020). A Call for Career Educators to Recommit to Serving First-Generation and Immigrant College Students: Introduction to Special Issue. *Journal of Career Development*, 47(1), 3–10. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0894845319884126>
- Tate, K. R., Caperton, W., Kaiser, D. Pruitt, N. T., White, H., & Hall, E. J. (2015). An Exploration of First-Generation College Students' Career Development Beliefs and Experiences. *Journal of Career Development*, 42(4), 294–310. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0894845314565025>