

How do international LGBTQ+ students experience the LSE environment?

Khushi Bajaj and Sanisha Shiny Sanadhanan¹

See this project presented by the researchers: <https://youtu.be/puRVXaooeSs?t=1>
If this project has informed your practice, let us know at lse.changemakers@lse.ac.uk

Background

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4 calls for states to "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all". According to the 2019 statement released by experts at the United Nations (UN) titled 'The inclusion of LGBT people in education settings; of paramount importance to "leaving no one behind"', LGBT students face both explicit and implicit violence in educational spaces. On the other hand, Cooper and Newsome's study on "International Students' Cultural and Social Experiences in a British University: "Such a hard life [it] is here"" (2016) has found that, "Individuals who encounter alien cultures for the first time in their early adulthood often experience a sense of dislocation which thrusts them into culture shock."

As a Higher Education Institute, the London School of Economics and Political Science has communicated sentiments that resonate with the UN's call in its LSE 2030 strategy where Priority 3 is 'Developing LSE for Everyone'. According to the official LSE website, around 70% of the student population at the school is from outside the UK. Despite this, the unique challenges of having an LGBTQIA+ identity that intersects with the sense of dislocation that the international student status can bring about remains unaddressed at the institute. This study bridges some gaps mentioned in a 2021-22 LSE Changemakers research '[The Experience of Gender Non-Conforming Students at LSE](#)' which stated, "The scope of this study could not incorporate an intersectional approach which is also necessary to promote inclusivity". The experiences and issues faced by international students due to cultural differences require particular attention. Bringing those issues to light can contribute significantly to the emotional and mental wellbeing of a considerable fraction of the student body and can help make the overall LSE experience more inclusive for its future students.

Methodology and Study Design

The methodology for this study comprised qualitative research methods to capture the depth and nuance of the subject matter more effectively.

Selecting the participants

The research was carried out with the help of **seven participants** - three undergraduate and four postgraduate international self-identified LGBTQIA+ LSE students. They were chosen through purposive sampling - in a way that ensured sufficient variability in terms of nationality, gender, sexual/romantic orientation, and race.

Focus groups

¹ Both the researchers contributed equally to this project

The first focus group study was conducted with six participants. The discussion explored themes surrounding interaction with peers, effectiveness, and accessibility of resources provided by LSE and other support facilities at the university, and the general environment at the LSE. The students were also asked to provide any recommendations or specific details on the kind of support they would like to receive in the future. Additionally, an “expert” focus group discussion was performed with three LSE students who were post-holders in relevant societies/groups to capture the broader picture via their insights.

Semi-structured interviews

The participants from the first focus group were invited to give semi-structured interviews. They were provided with a secure environment to freely talk about how cultural differences impacted their experience at the LSE, how LSE initiatives aided them during the adjustment period, and the key areas in which the services, support, or environment were lacking.

Owing to the sensitive nature of the topic, utmost transparency was maintained with the participants at all times concerning how the data will be collected and analysed, and the possible outcomes it may lead to. When signing up for the study, it was made clear that they have the option to withdraw from the process at any stage and all information supplied by them will be erased in that scenario. Their identities were kept **anonymous** throughout and no information they provided has been published without their consent.

Findings

The interviews and focus group discussions were coded, after which we identified six themes that emerged across the conversations:

- **Overdependence on free student labour:** For a majority of students, any feeling of inclusiveness on campus seems to be a result of the free labour of other students- specially the students who are a part of the LGBTQ+ society committee- instead of the result of initiatives and signalling undertaken by the administration, halls, and departments. Students also rely on informal peer mentoring in terms of navigating LSE, London, and even healthcare resources by other LGBTQ+ students instead of feeling like they have a formal support structure in the university that they can turn to. Students also felt that there was an over dependence on their contributions in the classroom when it came to highlighting intersectional readings and discussion points, instead of faculty members putting in the effort to assign readings from authors of different backgrounds and identities, so that diverse perspectives could be brought into the scope of the lecture and seminar.
- **Limited social interactions:** A lot of the students spoke about the isolation caused by there being few opportunities to interact with people with similar identities. Events and spaces within LSE and around London were described as being too focused on career development or alcohol, and as being dominated by white cis men. LSE Halls were also identified as spaces that can contribute to isolation because there is no way of knowing if it is safe to come out, and there is no way of knowing if other LGBTQ+ students live in the accommodation and connect with them. Students also recounted incidences of discrimination and queerphobia within the halls. Due to an absence of an overall feeling of safety, students only end up interacting with other LGBTQ+ students and staff members.
- **Impact of managerial decisions and administrative processes:** Almost all students spoke about how they felt like managerial decisions and administrative processes had a direct

impact on their mental health and feeling of safety. Students brought up the decision to disaffiliate from Stonewall and expressed their fear that this was a signal that the student body would be subjected to further discrimination- words like 'signal', 'precedent', and 'indication' were used. A lot of them felt like if there is a decision that impacts students, they should have a say in the matter, with words like 'apathy', 'transparency', and 'accountability' being used. They also spoke about a lack of support in navigating the administrative processes at the LSE, specifically in the context of gender-specific processes like name-changing.

- **Need for more physical spaces and visibility:** Students expressed the need for more physical spaces and visibility on campus and in halls. One of the main concerns was the fact gender-neutral toilets and disability toilets are the same, and therefore queer students end up not being able to use them out of concern that a disabled student might end up needing it. Students also expressed that a dedicated LGBTQ+ centre, study lounge, and bar on campus was something that felt missing and would make them feel safer. The same was also said about student halls, with queer-only flats or accommodations and an LGBTQ+ sub warden being seen as essentials that were missing. There were also expressions of the need for more pride flags and visible queer staff on campus. Students also felt like there was a severe lack of visibility of resources, and most were not aware of any support spaces or structures in LSE other than the LGBTQ+ society, the LGBTQ+ officer, and Spectrum.
- **Safe/Unsafe classroom environments:** The feeling of safety or lack thereof in the classroom seems very dependent on individual departments, with students feeling like a majority of the labour is falling to LGBTQ+ professors. Students also expressed that it was not just how professors behaved on campus but also their social media posts that impacted their sense of safety. It is important to note that international students cannot choose to not attend classes if the environment feels unsafe or uncomfortable because of their student visa guidelines.
- **Funding issues:** The LGBTQ+ society is funded primarily through memberships. On the one hand, this can prevent students from being able to sign up because of parental surveillance of funds, and on the other it restricts the functioning of the society. Students also mentioned the high cost of attending queer events in London, and spoke about the need for an aid fund that helps supports students who need to pay fees related to legal documentation, gender-affirming resources, housing, and other essentials- specially during the cost-of-living crisis.

Recommendations

1. Focus on sensitisation across the board

- LSE should provide inclusivity and allyship training for students
- Provide gender-sensitive, trans-inclusive, and trauma-informed training for staff and faculty

2. Make resources more visible and accessible

- Create a centralised space online where all resources for LGBTQ+ students (LSE and non-LSE) are listed

- Make resources visible and accessible to students before they come to London and promote them regularly through department and school-wide channel
- 3. Communicate with students in a transparent and accountable manner**
- LSE leadership should be more transparent about management decisions that affect the student body
- Invite and encourage inputs from student stakeholders - in the LSESU and otherwise - before making decisions like disaffiliation from Stonewall
- 4. Make the LSE physical and administrative infrastructure more inclusive**
- Create gender neutral toilets that are separate from accessible washrooms and create a dedicated LGBTQ+ space on campus that also has a support desk to help students access resources
- Take a more gender-sensitive approach towards LGBTQ+ specific administrative matters like name changes on documents
- 5. Provide more support to LGBTQ+ students in LSE Halls**
- Have a dedicated LGBTQ+ officer or sub warden in all halls and queer-only apartments and accommodations
- Have an LGBTQ+ group in halls so that students can socialise with each other, and have LGBTQ+ specific subsidised halls events
- 6. Shift the responsibility of inclusion from student labour to university sponsorship and organisation**
- Organise more university-wide social and academic LGBTQ+ events including an introductory event during welcome week
- Establish an opt-in program where students can get matched with LGBTQ+ staff mentors who they can approach for more guidance on navigating LSE and the UK as international LGBTQ+ students
- 7. Create a school-wide LGBTQ+ inclusion in classroom charter**
- Draft specific guidelines for making courses, readings, and the classroom structure more LGBTQ+ inclusive and focus on supporting faculty so that they can follow them
- Encourage faculty to bring more intersectional topics to lectures and seminars
- 8. Encourage the formation of more formal and informal LGBTQ+ groups on campus**
- Support students in forming intersectional student societies and study groups to provide more safe spaces for people who are also marginalised as a result of societal attitudes towards their culture, gender, race, caste, language, and more
- Provide funds to such student spaces so that they do not need to be dependent on membership fees to run
- 9. Provide support in terms of financial aid to economically marginalised LGBTQ+ students**
- Have a university-wide fund to support students who are dealing with housing issues, fees to change legal documents, the cost of living crisis, etc
- Have a dedicated page on the LSE website that talks about external means of financial aid for LGBTQ+ students like charities, schemes, etc.