

# **Facilitating Peer Group Formation: Can LSE adapt the Assigned Peer Groups (APG) system to better support Social Policy MSc students to form strong peer networks?**

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## **Introduction**

A strong community network at university is positively correlated with academic performance and mental wellbeing for students. Friendship is cited as one of the most important reasons why students thinking about withdrawing from university decide to stay in higher education (Edinburgh University Task Group, 2020). Stadtfield et al. (2018) similarly find that university students who remain isolated are more likely to drop out of university than students more strongly integrated into a support network. Furthermore, students who remained isolated throughout university perform worse in exams than their peers with stronger social networks (Stadtfield, 2018). Students are also more likely to form study groups – which are found to improve academic performance (Sawyer and Berson, 2004) – with their friends, meaning that students with weak friendship networks are less likely to engage in this beneficial practice (Schmidt, 2020).

Other studies have found that workers routinely exposed to extreme levels of strain are likely to report experiencing less stress if they report a strong sense of social identification (Haslam et al., 2005). In an academic context, Li et al. (2022) find that student reports of academic stressors are significantly negatively correlated with social support (Li et al. 2022). While stressful situations exacerbate the negative emotional effects of perfectionism, increased social support and social connectedness seem to ameliorate them. Because of this, Milicev et al. (2021) recommend exploring interventions aimed at developing social networks and increasing social support in the postgraduate environment to improve mental health outcomes for students.

A 2021 LSE Changemaker report (Reiter, 2021) examining postgraduate student community in the Sociology Department recommended more institutional support to mitigate the two key blockers to students' ability to form strong community networks: concerns about intruding on pre-established friendship groups and low interest in social events organised by the department. Further barriers are also often apparent for students who are mature or part-time, and who commute or have family commitments as they are less likely to engage in social networks than their peers (Thomas, 2012).

This research explores how LSE can better support MSc Social Policy students to form strong peer networks, including through adapting the existing Assigned Peer Group (APG) system.

## **Methodology**

Data collection was two-phase: an online survey followed by focus groups. The survey received 23 complete responses (a complete response rate of 11%), with responses from all MSc Social Policy programmes apart from the Fudan (double degree) stream. In the second

phase, survey respondents<sup>1</sup> who expressed interest in participating in a focus group were contacted via email. Four responses were received. One research interview was held, and one focus group comprising three participants. Each of the four participants belonged to a different Social Policy programme.

Student types	Focus groups: % participants	Surveys: % respondents
Mature students (over 29)	25	13
Commuting students (zone 3 and beyond)	50	22
English as first language	25	52
Full-time students	100	96
Student gender	25 - male; 75 - female	39 – male; 61 - female

### APG engagement

APGs met on average, 1.8 times, with three respondents never meeting with their APG, and two respondents meeting with their APG 4 times.

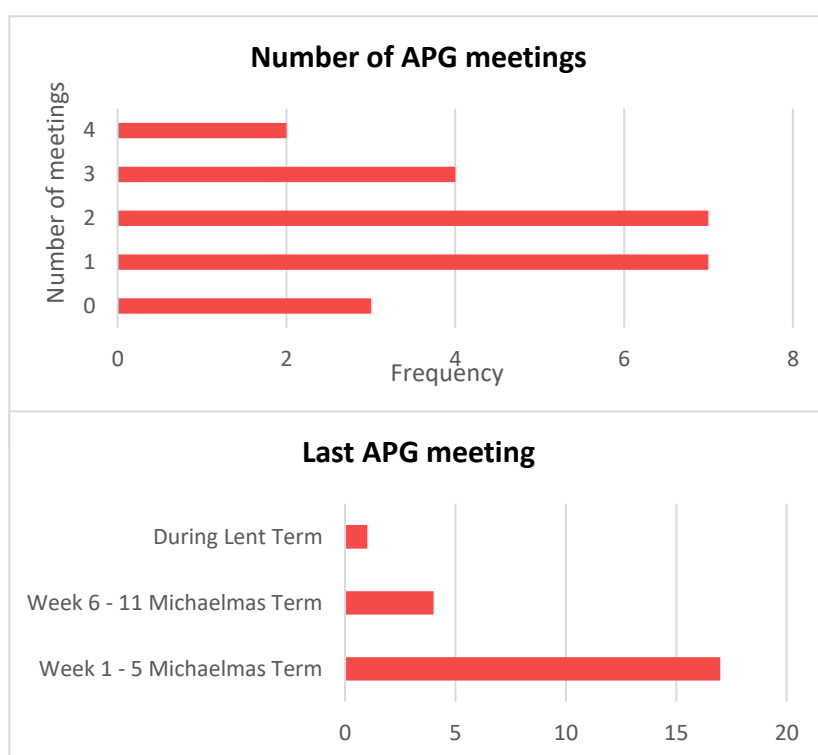
The majority of respondents had their last meeting in the first half of Michaelmas Term, with only one respondent meeting beyond the end of Michaelmas Term.

When asked to select reasons why their APG stopped meeting, the most common response (61%) was that the meetings were not useful. 10 students (43%) responded that their own classmates or friends were already performing the same function, and an equal number explained that it was too complicated to schedule meetings. Only two respondents (9%) cited not getting on with their APG members as a reason for why the group stopped meeting.

Low APG engagement can be explained by two factors. The primary factor of APGs not having a strong enough purpose or usefulness, and the secondary factor of the difficulty in scheduling meetings.

### Scheduling meetings

Scheduling was seen to be especially difficult for international students and commuting students. For international students, a significant number arrived in London late due to difficulties with immigration processes or finding housing, and those that were in London for



<sup>1</sup> Throughout the analysis, survey respondents are identified as “respondents”, and focus group or research interview participants are identified as “participants”.

the start of term were often not settled and spent a good deal of time and energy finalising immigration processes and securing housing.

*"I remember that one of the [meetings] I couldn't attend because I was looking for homes in the UK. I didn't have a place to stay. I was literally staying on my friend's couch and the last thing I was worried about was doing something for my peer group. I was really, really stressed at that time."*

Commuting students made decisions everyday as to what events justified spending the time and money to travel to campus. As one commuting participant explained:

*"I didn't want to just commute...for like a 20 minute [peer group] meeting and then just go home".*

APG meetings were not always considered sufficiently useful to warrant their prioritisation in students' schedules.

### **Motivating meetings**

All participants felt that there was no way to improve APGs as a social network or source of friendship, as these deeper connections could only arise organically. Several participants emphasised the difference in APG members' life stages and the unclear purpose of APGs as obstacles to a closer connection or more frequent meetings within the group.

Students may not have found APGs useful for academic support because members were often in different seminars for their stream-compulsory course, and often took different optional courses. Consequently, in the case of the former students were more likely to seek academic support from their seminar group. In the case of the latter, students did not feel that their APG would be able to offer any relevant academic support.

Furthermore, one student explained how requesting academic support is difficult without a prior social foundation:

*"Maybe [the APG] could have been emphasised more [as a source of] dissertation-related help. But on the other hand, that's impossible if there's not enough social foundation...I don't feel comfortable going to somebody where we've spoken twice and being like 'do you want to read my dissertation?' I feel like that would be too much of a burden for them."*

Rather than appeal to APG members for academic support, students were more likely to seek support from seminar classmates with whom they had most in common academically or, for more "burdensome" tasks such as proof-reading assignments, from peers with whom they had already formed a substantial social connection.

### **The value of APGs**

43% of respondents answered "yes" to the question of whether they met any of their friends at LSE through their APG, and 50% agreed that being assigned to a peer group improved their social and/or personal wellbeing. Students seemed to find the APG induction session helpful at the start of term to lift the pressure of making initial introductions in a large cohort of over 200 students. The ice-breaking exercises within pre-assigned groups supported students to develop a first circle of contacts:

*"I think it was useful just because...it helps you get to know more people in the programme quicker."*

The "meet the researcher" exercise, to be completed in the first week of term, was also sometimes seen as helpful for students to understand their academic mentor's research

interests and areas of specialisation, as well as for facilitating the initial sharing of contact details. One participant explained that they still use their APG WhatsApp group in a “utilitarian” way, such as to check deadlines.

However, some students were sceptical of the value of the “meet the researcher” exercise, with one participant feeling students were used to make free social media content for LSE. This frustration may have been exacerbated by students feeling time poor and stressed at the start of term.

*“The [meet the researcher] social media project was kind of bizarre. [It] felt a little elementary, as grad students doing a project like that and kind of made the social media page for social policy look bad and messy. A different project might be advantageous, maybe even a group presentation, actually something with stakes.”*

While elements of the exercise were praised by some, several respondents and participants felt the output of the exercise should be adapted and its value for students made more explicit.

## Recommendations

- Retain the APG system for its value in facilitating initial connections between students.
- Emphasise the APG as a professional network.
  - In the APG induction session, include an activity which involves discussion of research interests and academic/professional background alongside typical “ice-breaker” activities.
- Adjust the output of the “meet the researcher” exercise.
  - For example, ask APGs to present some slides to the MSc Social Policy cohort on their academic mentor. Presentations could be a precursor to the Welcome Week “Buzz Event”, an opportunity for students to network with many Social Policy Department professors.
- Use focused events to create more opportunities for students to make connections and “recognise faces”.
  - Events should have an academic/professional focus, with space for networking and discussion.
- Where possible, make programme-specific events available to all MSc Social Policy students with an interest in the field, such as the Research Stream Lunch which was open to all MSc Social Policy students with an interest in research.
- To encourage commuting students’ attendance at events, schedule some events during the daytime, where possible linking to existing on-campus scheduling such as a compulsory lecture or seminar for programme-specific events.
- Ask course professors to circulate among their students notices of any events relevant to their course.
  - Academic and professional interests of the MSc Social Policy cohort are very diverse, even within programmes, so students are more likely to attend events with a specific focus which is relevant to them.
- Encourage a university culture which fosters creative and critical discussion outside the classroom.