

# Missing taste of home from abroad: How bad is homesickness and how can LSE help?

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### Background

LSE welcomed thousands of students every year, and around 70% of LSE's students are from outside the UK. Students from non-western culture are likely to be susceptible to homesickness: their culture and support network are half a planet away. These students have to change their eating habits drastically in a short period of time in a context without the support from friends and family.

LSE has provided a lot of support for international students, including social events and bouchées; whether that is sufficient is another story.

Some people are more homesick than the others. This study will answer below research questions: **To what extent food is related to homesickness**, and **what can be done more to help international students to adapt more quickly?**

### Literature review

Previous research indicated freshmen who had high level of homesickness showed the worst overall adjustment to university (Nauta et al., 2019), and some linked homesickness with subsequent drop out (Thurber & Walton, 2012).

The reason of homesickness and its cure can be roughly divided into two categories: which is (lack of) social interaction and access to homey food. Lack of social support, low level of sense of belonging, and social anxiety are linked to homesickness (Watt & Badger, 2009). Scholars also associate food with the relief of distress, change emotional states (Locher et al., 2005) and describes memories with food are the sense of home (Abarca & Colby, 2016). Food is the reminder of home, which can ease homesickness if they are authentic, but could also provoke homesickness if they are not authentic.

Homesickness can be understood as one stage of culture shock (Oberg, 1960). This line of theory pointed out that newcomer enters the new environment with excitement and will experience a honeymoon stage. The excitement will eventually fade, and culture shock will kick in, in this stage the newcomer will be more hostile and aggressive to the host country. The newcomer will then either adjust and recover from the cultural shock; or remain hostile to the host country.

### Methodology

This study employed **semi-structured interviews** as the data collection method to explore the experiences, emotions, and coping mechanisms related to homesickness. Qualitative research provided an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon.

The target population were **first-year postgraduate students at LSE who moved to London in 2022**, with limited experience living abroad and are mostly Asian. This study assumed this specific group are the most vulnerable population to homesickness due to their lack of experience, and assumed students who were more senior had already battled homesickness.

**Purposive sampling was used to select 7 participants who self-identified as experiencing homesickness.**

Participants were interviewed about their previous and current experience to homesickness, eating habits, impact of authentic home food, opinions on food in LSE restaurants, experiences with home-taste food in the UK, and strategies for overcoming homesickness. These questions aimed to gather insights into participants' perspectives, behaviours, and emotional responses.

### Findings



Students did not have high expectation to food in LSE: "It is London, what are you expecting?"



Students had mixed opinions to LSE canteens. Some rather spend more for quality food in places nearby.



Go-to restaurants were often recommended by friends or bumped into, which usually takes months to find.



Students suffered from severe home-sickness did not have a honeymoon period.



Friends were crucial for students at the first few months; it acted as a painkiller from homesickness.

Most of the students did not have much expectation for the food in LSE in terms of tastes and authenticity. Male interviewees often expected the food to have a larger portion. Some of them actively avoided eating at the LSE as it is "expensive and not delicious", and thus "I would rather spend more to eat at restaurants nearby".

One interviewee said he has low expectation to food in LSE canteen, but the canteen served watery rice which is worse than expected. Students prefer to find restaurants themselves if they are craving from home taste, and are satisfied when those food are "90% as good".

"Exploring places nearby and finding restaurants I like takes time, problem is I do not have time at the first three months.... Getting back on my feet is a gradual process. I wish I find my go-to restaurants earlier. I would have been much happier."

Some students almost instantly feel homesick when they arrived London. Without the honeymoon period, and a good mood to explore the city, they are the most vulnerable. They survived the emotional downturn by making new friends and hang out with them.



### Recommendations



First few weeks of arrival is key. Departments and residential halls should release the timetable for orientation during summer time so that students could plan accordingly to meet new friends. Some students only know about the orientation after one week before the semester started, which clashed with the "give-it-a-go" sessions.



Residential halls should provide more customized recommendations to its residents in different cultures. One interviewee described this as "street smart": "I don't need information from Google, what I need is something that I cannot find on Yelp." Asking Alumni to provide their favorite restaurants could be helpful.



Asking Alumni to provide their go-to supermarkets could also help. Some specific ingredients, such as shrimp paste, Tapioca Flour, and ingredients for India milk tea, need time to find in London. This could give students the ease of mind as they will know where to go when they crave home taste.



Students tend to miss their family the most during festivals. There are a lot of festival celebrations at halls and on campus, but for many festival is for gatherings. Faith Centre had held events like World Cafe to provide Iftar Dinner. Extending this to other cultures and holding workshops to teach students to make traditional cuisine could ease homesickness.

### References

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