"People don't understand you:" An Exploration of the Academic and Social Integration of Undergraduate LSE Students from Non-selective State Schools

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Introduction and Literature Review

This report explores the academic and social integration of undergraduate students at the LSE, who were educated at non-selective state schools. We aim to understand how integration impacts the experiences of non-selective state school students.

We broke educational background into the following categories: non-selective state, selective state and independent schools in the UK and overseas. Our report focuses on the overarching similarities between the non-selective state schools both in the UK and overseas, versus other types of educational background.

We refer to social integration as how included and involved students perceive themselves to be, with co-curricular experiences alongside the quality of students' relationships with themselves, their peers and staff (Nevill and Rhodes, 2004). We refer to academic integration as a student's academic performance, self-perceptions, academic progress, and the belief that staff are committed to supporting them (ibid). This report focuses on students' perceptions of their integration.

Integration is essential for students to have a positive experience at university; feeling excluded from the university's academic and social communities can lead to a negative spiral effect where students disengage leading to lower attainment, poor wellbeing and graduate prospects, and high drop-out rates (Blake et al., 2018). In the UK, students who did not attend independent or selective state schools are more likely to drop out of university and are less likely to achieve a 2:1 or above (Crawford, 2014).

There is a plethora of research within higher education (HE) and at the LSE (2019) regarding widening participation at universities. These efforts are essential as the students most likely to enrol at the LSE are from high-income backgrounds or areas with high educational progression (LSE, 2019). There is a research gap regarding the student experience with integration, with national surveys comparing universities rather than the individual experiences of students within each university (Makinson, 2017). It is not enough for students from non-traditional groups to gain access, rather they must stay, progress and be successful in their degree (Nevill and Rhodes, 2004).

Method and Participants

Research Question: What are the differences in perceived integration at LSE between non-selective state school students and students from other educational backgrounds?

H0: There is no significant difference between non-selective state-educated students' perceptions of integration into LSE and other students' perceptions.

H1: Students from non-selective state educational backgrounds feel less integrated than students from other educational backgrounds.

Quantitative Method

For the quantitative portion of the research, a survey was used to numerically ascertain respondents' perceived integration, both academically and socially, and their perception of LSE in terms of the support provided. There were 192 undergraduate respondents to the survey, and a copy of the survey questions can be found in Appendix 3 in the full report.

Qualitative Method

For the qualitative method, six participants were chosen as representatives of the different educational backgrounds at LSE (3 non-selectively state educated, 2 privately educated, and 1 educated at a selective state school), and were asked questions relating to their current experiences in a semi-structured interview. The interview questions can be found in Appendix 4 in the full report. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed using thematic analysis. The code sheet can be found in Appendix 5 in the full report.

Results
Quantitative Results
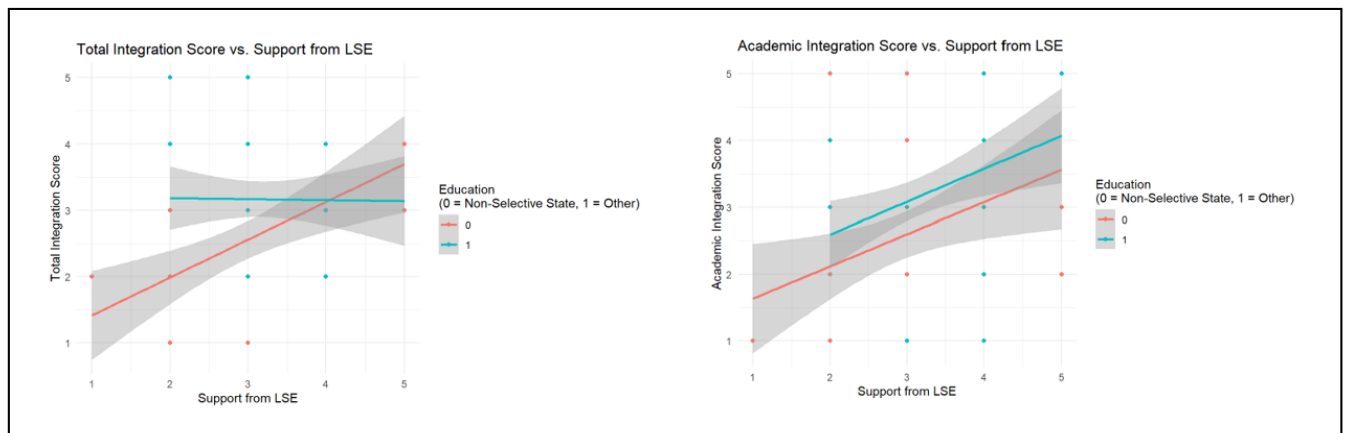
Figure 1: Line graphs showing mean total and academic integration scores alongside support from LSE for non-selective state school students and students from other educational backgrounds.

From the descriptive statistics (Appendix 1 in the full report), we find that students from non-selective state schools feel on average less integrated, less supported, less equal, and more like imposters than students from other educational backgrounds. In addition, non-selective state

school students felt that their wellbeing was 3x more negatively affected by their integration (or lack thereof) than their peers.

Welch's two sample t-test was performed to ascertain whether the mean differences between total integration were significant and found that they were (t = - 3.22, p = .0019, 95% CI [- 1.08, - .254]).

Figure 1 (below) shows that support from LSE increases total integration for non-selective state school students. In terms of academic integration, support from LSE increased this too for both groups, although the non-selective state school group started and ended less academically integrated than their peers. The graphs also show that only students from non-selective state schools had a score of 1 for support from LSE (i.e., "I do not feel supported at all by LSE"). Although integration increases as support does, a reverse causality test showed that support from LSE is not a good predictor of integration - in other words, the cause of students feeling less or more integrated is unlikely to be the amount of support they receive from LSE.

Appendix 2 (in the full report) shows that for each unit increase in *total* integration, there is a .15 decrease in the chances of being educated in a non-selective state school. The linear model has good fit, and all results are significant, as p < .05.

Qualitative Results

The qualitative analysis produced 8 themes surrounding academic integration, 6 themes surrounding social integration, and 1 theme exploring the intersection of the two. The qualitative results supported the quantitative findings.

Students from non-selective state schools report feeling that they do not feel integrated into the academic community, whereas their peers from other educational backgrounds reported more academic integration. Students cited poor support and resources alongside a misunderstanding of their experiences and background by both staff and peers, notably feeling like "some people get higher grades just because of what they had [in their education prior to studying at the LSE]". Students from non-selective state schools discussed high levels of imposter syndrome, feeling out of place, stupid and inadequate; students from other educational backgrounds were more self-assured.

Similarly, students from non-selective state schools found social integration more difficult, due to a lack of support and understanding, noting a cultural divide due to the financial resources available. While we do not presume that students who attended non-selective state schools to be from lower-income backgrounds, our qualitative results do highlight, at least a perceived, class difference, as social integration at the LSE is "money-centric".

> *ridiculously expensive… balls… black tie… mini-Euro trips*

Students from other educational backgrounds reported high levels of social integration, widely participating in co-curricular activities alongside having strong relationships. Both groups acknowledged the significance of their social integration on their well-being, but students from non-selective state schools reported more negative experiences.

While students reported a lack of support from LSE regardless of their background, students from non-selective state backgrounds reported this to a greater extent. Students from non-selective state schools felt there were many problems with the academic mentor system, with one participant saying they received "no support in [their] first 2 years".

Conclusion

In conclusion, students from non-selective state schools on average feel less integrated and supported, both by LSE staff and the school as an institution and have lower wellbeing. The quantitative analysis revealed that differences in integration between non-selective state school students and other students are significant. The qualitative analysis supports this evidence.

Although no significant differences were found between non-selective state school students from the UK vs. Overseas, potential discrepancies cannot be ruled out due to the small number of overseas state-educated students (within the LSE and therefore within our sample).

In terms of limitations, the data on outcomes for LSE alumni is not filtered by past academic background. Future research should consider students' educational experiences pre and post university to enrich the research on educational disparities.

There should be more support for students from those backgrounds that are already part of the LSE community - the support should not stop as soon as they receive their offers.

Recommendations

1. **Reform The Academic Mentor System:**
   It is the responsibility of the academic mentor to know a student's background and to regularly support them
2. **Distribute specific funding to socially empower disadvantaged students**
   Socialising in London is expensive; funding allows students to focus on building relationships rather than worrying about cost
3. **Deliver affordable, varied and regular social events**
   The LSE and LSESU should provide more events which focus on affordability, variety and frequency to ensure **every** student has access to social activities
4. **Provide Department specific educational skills sessions**
   Departments should provide timetabled skills sessions specific to their degree courses to ensure that all their students have the skills to academically thrive and integrate

> *There needs to be acknowledgement that some students need more support than others.*

References

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