

What does identity and belonging mean for LSE students

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Introduction

Surveys suggest that nearly half of university students in the UK are negatively impacted by mental health issues (HUMEN, 2022). A sense of belonging is regarded as a potential aid. It is crucial to understand how LSE students perceive their sense of belonging: what belonging means to them, what they feel connected to and how their relationships with various components of LSE influence their self-conceptualisation (Islam, 2014). This project aims to explore identity and belonging within LSE, acknowledging students' fluctuating feelings of belonging and how this affects their university experience. This will be illustrated through the landscapes of friendships, departments, societies and LSE culture in general.

Methodology

We invited 12 students from the Departments of Social Policy, Sociology, Psychology and Economics to participate in semi-structured interviews. These students were selected through convenience sampling, with interviews conducted remotely or in-person. The results were coded and analysed to inform the topics of a mixed-method survey distributed to the undergraduate cohort across all departments, resulting in 45 responses.

The responses cover students from 17 departments, with the most (12) coming from Economics, followed by Law School (7) and Social Policy (7). The majority of respondents were in their second year (33), while first and third year each accounted for 6 responses.

The survey results were then coded and analysed, with numerical data corroborating the qualitative data obtained. A codebook was initially developed by one researcher, with further analysis of each participant's entry by other researchers to minimise bias.

Results

At the outset, results suggested that a sense of belonging was imperative among respondents, with around 85% indicating its importance. Open-ended questions in the survey, along with results from the semi-structured interviews, identified several key components that constituted "belonging": friendships, societies, departments, the general LSE culture and the halls and services available to students.

Friendships and Connections

As Tajfel's (1978) social identity theory suggests, connections were key to forming students' identities. For our respondents, the main pathways for meeting new connections at LSE were societies, classes and halls of residence. Connections within classes and societies helped to alter the initial "isolating" impression before entering LSE, with one participant mentioning feeling "fortunate to find people I connect well with at LSE."

Conversely, these pathways also acted as barriers for some: a "lack of people at classes or lectures" leading to difficulty in forming close friendships. Other students mentioned pre-

formed "bubbles" and "cliques", defined by halls of residence, societies and nationality, which prevented potential connections. Another major barrier was time: differences in daily routines and work schedules prevented regular contact, leading to weakened connections. As one student put it: "there are not a lot of events or physical elements of the school that bring people together for a prolonged period of time."

Societies

With nearly 90% of respondents participating in clubs and societies at LSE and 75% attending at least once a week, these activities are instrumental to students' university experiences.

Students who were unable to participate mainly cited "time" as the biggest constraint.

Experiences within societies varied depending on the type of society. Career societies, a hallmark of LSE, were described by students as "intense but useful", and often praised for being well-run. On the other hand, experiences in social societies were more varied. The majority of students had positive experiences, describing these societies as "a major highlight of university life" and "the best thing about LSE." However, students mentioned encountering core groups within each society that were difficult to penetrate, with concerns about "favouritism" and "social exclusion". One student suggested it was challenging to get involved after the initial societies fair. Despite these criticisms, societies generally provided a positive pathway for students, "making it so much easier to make friends".

Departments

A student's department is their first introduction to LSE, significantly impacting their overall experience and identity. Nearly 70% of respondents reported at least a somewhat positive experience within their department, with 78% feeling supported. Many participants mentioned supportive staff and friends within departments, particularly noting a "close-knit" atmosphere in smaller departments. They felt comfortable arranging office hours and reaching out when support was needed. As one student summarized: "I know I can always ask for help". However, some students expressed a fear of asking for support, suggesting the need for more "outreach" programmes or improved departmental events.

For the 14 joint honours students surveyed, experiences with their second department varied considerably. Only about 35% reported feeling integrated through events and outreach, while 50% stated they received little to no engagement beyond occasional emails. One student noted that departmental communications were "non-existent". Around 15% mentioned challenges navigating the different cultures between departments, with one student sharing, "they don't include us that much." Just under half felt that their second department "could do more to include us". Enhancing inclusion efforts for this subset appears to be an area for improvement among many departments.

Culture

With just over half of the students surveyed being international students, experiences with transitioning to LSE have been mixed. Many students faced challenges adjusting to a new environment within LSE and London. Cultural differences within the city and an initial struggle with making friends were common. As one student remarked, the transition was "difficult especially in terms of social factors" with international students often sticking together while local students did the same, creating a barrier to forming friendships across cultural backgrounds. However, some appreciated the large community of people from their home background. The transition was

described as "overwhelming" by some students, who felt isolated in the city and experienced "multiple forms of pressure." On the positive side, LSE halls and societies, particularly cultural societies, were helpful. One student noted that LSE had "robust cultural communities," which eased the transition.

Regarding the culture at LSE itself, 38% of the students surveyed found their initial impressions changed. Many perceived a competitive environment heavily focused on career progression and internships, with one student describing it as "toxic", particularly in the finance and corporate sectors. This career-oriented focus sometimes overshadowed other aspects of social life. Despite this, students found support through the university's diversity, joining societies, and forming friendships with people who were not as "self-interested" or were "down to earth".

Halls and Residence

Living in LSE halls significantly contributed to a sense of belonging for over 35% of respondents. The community-building potential of residence life was highlighted positively in some responses. However, some students noted challenges: "it was difficult to find people who actually wanted to form friendships." Others mentioned it was "hard to meet people in halls after the first few weeks" and observed "cliquey environments... especially reluctant to socialise across different backgrounds." Commuter students often felt disconnected; one shared: "I do not necessarily feel as though I 'belong' at LSE. Maybe I have a disconnect because I commute, so I don't really get that feeling."

Support Services

Awareness of LSE's support offerings like LSE LIFE, the Wellbeing Service, and the Disability and Wellbeing Service (DWS) was relatively high, with only around 20% indicating unfamiliarity with these resources. Experiences utilising them were mixed. Some praised LSE LIFE as "very useful", while 1 in 3 critiqued accessibilities, noting "it's sometimes hard to get a slot." Similarly, while the Wellbeing Service was deemed "helpful and useful," many felt that it "takes too long to get an appointment". Specific services received polarised feedback: one student found LSE Counselling "not helpful" with "very generalised advice," while another found DWS "wonderful and very helpful...they seemed to really care." Among those aware of the services, around 50% had used them.

Conclusion and Discussion

Our findings highlight the importance of creating inclusive environments that meet the diverse needs of students. Both surveys and interviews indicated that human connections contribute significantly to students' sense of identity and belonging at LSE. The main pathways for forming connections include societies, departments, and accommodations, though experiences varied considerably.

Attending societies emerged as the most popular way to form connections at LSE. However, addressing social barriers within societies, such as cliquishness and favouritism, appears essential to foster inclusivity. Departmental support also plays a crucial role, suggesting the need for departments to build close-knit communities and enhance outreach programs. The varied experiences of joint honours and international students indicate a potential need for targeted support and integration efforts to ensure all students feel equally valued.

LSE's competitive culture, especially in career-focused sectors, might be seen as a double-

edged sword. While it promotes academic and professional success, it could also undermine social cohesion. It may be important to balance career-oriented initiatives with nurturing a supportive and collaborative social environment.

Living in LSE halls significantly influences students' sense of belonging, though experiences were inconsistent. Enhancing community-building activities and maintaining engagement beyond the initial weeks could potentially help alleviate feelings of isolation. For commuter students, creating opportunities for involvement and connection seems vital.

While support services like LSE LIFE and the Wellbeing Service are appreciated, improving their accessibility and responsiveness appears crucial. Addressing the logistical challenges students face in accessing these services could potentially increase their effectiveness.

Limitations and Future Research

Our findings are based solely on undergraduate students and the sample size was relatively small, with 45 survey responses and 12 interviews, which limits the generalisability of our results. Additionally, the use of convenience sampling may have introduced bias. Future research could benefit from a larger, more diverse sample including postgraduate students.

Longitudinal studies might also provide insights into how students' sense of belonging evolves over their academic journey at LSE.

Despite these limitations, we believe this study provides valuable insights into the undergraduate experience at LSE and suggests potential areas for improvement in fostering a stronger sense of belonging among students.

Bibliography

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