

# Student Engagement with Discussion Forums

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If this project has informed your practice, please let us know at [lse.changemakers@lse.ac.uk](mailto:lse.changemakers@lse.ac.uk)

## Introduction and Background

In this project, we attempt to understand the drivers of student engagement patterns with discussion forums within Economics modules at the LSE. The objective is to deliver critical insights into student learning habits and how the forums can be structured to improve the learning experience of future LSE cohorts taking Economics modules.

In recent years, the Department of Economics has rotated across three forums to support student learning: the Moodle forum, Piazza, and Ed (introduced 23/24 academic year). Each forum has its relative advantages and disadvantages.

The report is structured as follows. We first analyse student engagement patterns with forums more generally to determine whether forums are effective in the first place, noting the features and characteristics that are relevant in driving engagement and effectiveness upward. This is in order to determine precisely how forums are effective in complementing the student learning process and what can be done to improve them. We then take a forum-specific approach and attempt to determine which forum is the most effective and why, in order to provide insights into how the Department can best support student learning with forums. Our conclusions are data-driven, using existing anonymised data from the Piazza discussion forum across 5 Economics modules in the 2020-21 academic year, as well as a survey we ran this year.

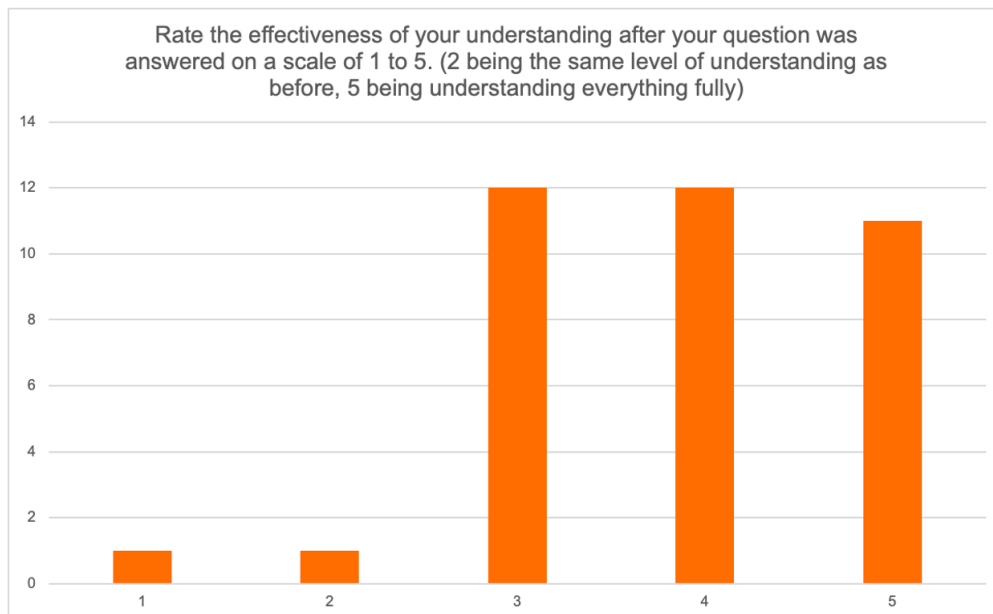
## Methodology

1. Dataset
  - Anonymized data on student and teacher usage of Piazza for the 2020/21 academic year across five Economics modules:
    - First Year Courses: EC100 (Economics A), EC102 (Economics B)
    - Second Year Courses: EC201 (Microeconomic Principles I), EC210 (Macroeconomic Principles), EC220 (Econometric Principles)
  - Metrics included: number of views, days online, contributions, and answers.
2. Survey
  - Conducted with 37 undergraduate Economics students.
  - Aimed to gather qualitative insights and fill gaps in data, particularly regarding the effectiveness and temporal usage of forums.

## Finding I – Forum Effectiveness

1. Effectiveness of Forums

- Forums are an effective learning resource. Students rated forum effectiveness with an average score of 3.8 on a five-point scale.
  - Majority of students use forums frequently, both during term time and the exam period, indicating their importance in the learning process.
  - Forums significantly enhance students' conceptual understanding and exam preparation.
2. Silent Learners
- A key observation corroborated by both data sources is that most engagement



with forums is 'silent': most students actually contribute (defined as posting or answering an existing question) very little on forums but use the existing posts as a learning resource and passively view the forum. This pattern suggests that while students find value in forums, barriers to active participation exist.

## Recommendations

1. Maintain Usage of Forums
  - Continue using forums as they significantly benefit student understanding and exam performance.
2. Promote Anonymity
  - Ensure all forums are anonymous to encourage more active contributions from students who may hesitate to post publicly.
3. Teacher Endorsement
  - Increase the frequency of teacher endorsements on student answers to boost confidence and encourage more peer-to-peer interactions.
4. Incentives for Participation
  - Introduce awards or recognition for the most active contributors to foster a more engaged community.

## Finding II – Forum Preference

Figure 1- Student responses to survey question on forum effectiveness

- **Ed discussion forum is the preferred platform** among students due to its user-friendly interface, effective filtering and search features, and functionalities like 'like' and 'watch' options.
- Piazza and Moodle are less favoured, with **Moodle being the least preferred** due to its cumbersome navigation and less clear anonymity features.

If you have experience with the three forums listed below, indicate your preference, if any.

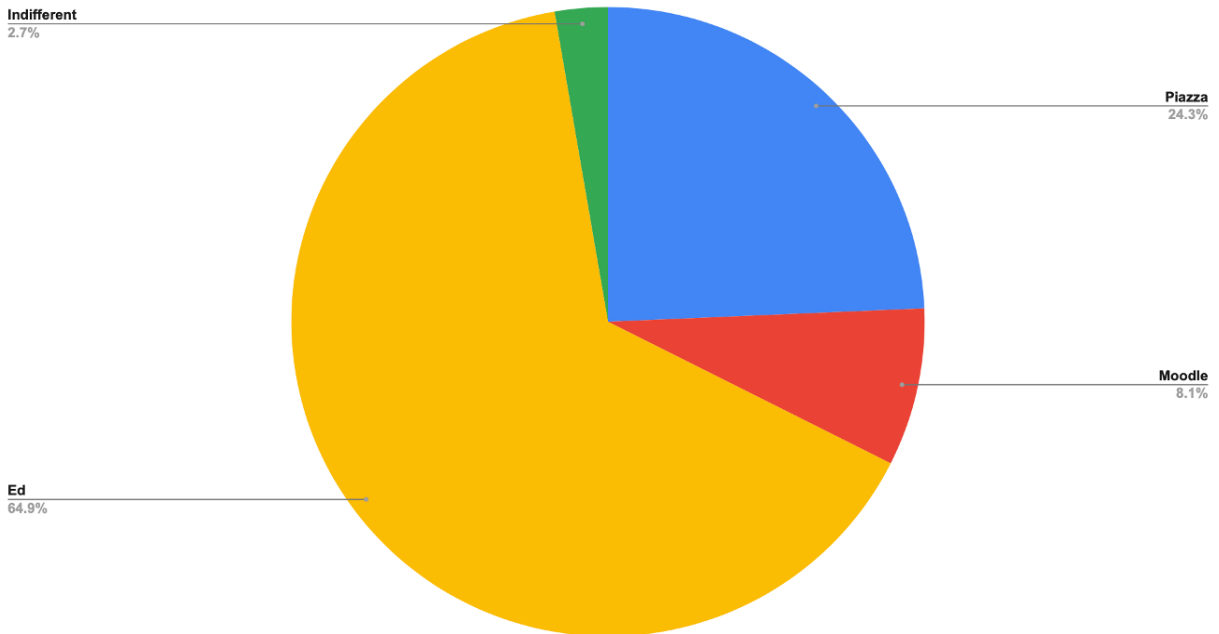


Figure 2 - Student preferences over discussion forums

### Further Recommendations

1. Standardize Forum Usage
  - Adopt Ed as the standard discussion forum across all Economics modules and possibly across the entire School to streamline student access and engagement.
2. Extend Forum Usage
  - Ensure all years of degree programs utilize discussion forums to maintain consistent support for student learning throughout their academic journey.

### Concluding Remarks

From our exploration of the existing data and supplementary evidence from the survey, it is evident that discussion forums play a pivotal role in enriching and supporting student learning within Economics modules, given the highly significant evidence that forums are regularly used by students and are found to be highly effective.

Having said that, there is evidence that discussion forums can be uniformly improved across all modules. Reducing the barriers to actively contributing to the forum will diminish the presence of "silent learners" and can only improve the understanding of future cohorts.

Anonymity of contributions and regular teacher endorsement of answers can reduce these barriers. Finally, the Ed forum demonstratively appears to be preferred by all students for its

helpful features and intuitive UI relative to the other forum options, which both suffer from teething issues (namely, Piazza sells student data and Moodle has a clunky UI and its anonymity option is very unclear). These insights form the backbone of our ensuing recommendations for the Department that are outlined above. These recommendations are simple to implement but can go a long way in enriching the learning experience of the student body at LSE for many years to come.