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Eden Centre for Education  
Enhancement

# LSE Navigate Research Report

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## Abstract

This research explored the transitional experiences of Contextual Offer Holders (COH) to the London School of Economics (LSE), including both transitions from school to university and subsequent progression through academic years. Using a participatory approach, we engaged students in reflective digital diaries, creative workshops, and appreciative inquiry-inspired dialogue to uncover key enablers and barriers shaping their experiences. This approach allowed us to co-create a deeper understanding of the challenges students encountered while generating practical, student-informed solutions with the potential to drive meaningful and lasting improvements for future cohorts.

Our findings highlight key challenges including academic pressure, career uncertainty, financial strain, limited social participation, and a lack of confidence to succeed, all of which shaped the emotional and personal dimensions of transition. The research also identifies factors that support students' success, including orientation programmes, peer support, financial aid, early (and diverse) career guidance, and structured personal development opportunities.

Based on these findings, we propose targeted interventions to address identified challenges, including tailored workshops for COH students to build professional and personal confidence, a space to craft and communicate their stories, career guidance beyond their degree specialisation, and resources to support students facing job rejections to devise a 'Plan B'.

The study produced five key outputs: (1) a panel discussion between senior leadership and students, (2) a Theory of Change outlining detailed activities and intended outcomes aimed at enhancing COH students' experience and outcomes, (3) an aggregated journey map that charts students transition to/from LSE, (4) a research report, and 5) evidence briefings categorised by each of the identified challenges.

## Executive Summary

### Introduction

Research has demonstrated that Contextual Offers (COs) increase access to higher education for students from diverse and historically excluded backgrounds. However, emerging evidence suggests that while contextual offer holders (COHs) successfully gain entry to 'elite' institutions such as LSE, they may face distinct challenges in their university experience and progression.

These challenges have raised concerns about equity in student outcomes, and the extent to which existing support structures adequately address the needs of COH students. In response, LSE made an Access and Participation Plan (APP) commitment to enhancing support for COH students, recognising the need for a more comprehensive, multi-level, and tailored approach.

However, existing analyses have not fully identified the underlying causes of the disparities in student experience. A key unresolved question is whether students who receive contextual offers would have faced similar challenges regardless, or if contextual admissions itself contribute to this. To enable evidence-based support, this research asks:

- 1 What challenges did students from backgrounds targeted by Contextual Offers experience during their transition into LSE?
- 2 What problems should the transition support programme focus on?
- 3 What can solutions look like?

### Methodology and Data

The project took a participatory and student-led approach, engaging students as active collaborators rather than passive subjects. Sixteen student ambassadors were recruited as paid contributors, participating in a structured six-week programme. Through reflective dialogue, creative methods, and collaborative problem-solving, they mapped their transition experiences, identified key enablers and barriers, and co-developed solutions to enhance support for future COH students. Adopting a multi-method approach, the research additionally draws on:

- **Digital Diaries:** Personal reflections from students, providing qualitative insights into their experiences, concerns, and suggestions.
- **Workshops:** Interactive sessions where students discussed key issues related to their academic, social, and personal transitions.
- **Photovoice:** A participatory method where students used photography to document and reflect on their day-to-day experiences, highlighting both challenges and sources of support.
- **Journey Maps:** A method in which students visualised their transition to LSE, identifying key turning points, institutional touchpoints, and areas where additional support could enhance their experience.

- **Theory of Change:** A structured framework mapping interventions to expected student outcomes, collaboratively refined with students to ensure their perspectives were authentically represented.

## Key Challenges

COH students reported encountering a range of obstacles during their transition to LSE, including:

- **Academic Adjustment:** Struggles with independent learning, self-directed study, and adapting to LSE's 'rigorous' academic environment<sup>1</sup>.
- **Community and Belonging:** Feelings of isolation, difficulty forming friendships, and challenges in integrating into social and academic spaces.
- **Career Uncertainty:** Lack of clarity around career pathways, difficulties in securing internships, and limited access to professional networks.
- **Financial Pressures:** Budgeting concerns, high living costs, and financial stress impacting overall well-being and access to opportunities.
- **Confidence and Personal Growth:** Imposter syndrome, self-doubt, and pressure to succeed affecting students' academic and personal development.

## Proposed Solutions

Building on student feedback and institutional insights, the research proposes a broad set of interventions designed to address these challenges and strengthen support for COH students. These include:

- **Enhanced Pre-arrival and Induction Support:** Expanding transition programs to ensure students feel prepared before arriving at LSE.
- **Strengthening Peer Support Networks:** Developing structured peer mentoring programs and student-led communities and networks.
- **Academic Skills Support:** Workshops and resources to help students navigate independent learning and academic expectations.
- **Financial Well-being Initiatives:** Expanding access to financial aid, budgeting support, and paid opportunities for students.
- **Career Readiness and Professional Development:** Personalised career coaching beyond students' disciplines, networking opportunities, and employer partnerships.
- **Building Resilience and Confidence:** Initiatives to tackle imposter syndrome, self-doubt, and rejections.
- **Clearer Signposting and Access to Support:** Ensuring students are aware of and able to access existing institutional support structures.

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<sup>1</sup> As articulated by participants.

## **Theory of Change and Student Validation**

A key element of this research was the development of a Theory of Change, mapping interventions to expected student outcomes. To ensure its relevance and accuracy, a validation workshop was held with students, where they reviewed, expanded, and refined the framework. This process reinforced student ownership of the findings, ensuring that their lived experiences, concerns, and aspirations were authentically represented before presenting the final framework.

## **Long-Term Impact**

By implementing these recommendations, the research envisions a long-term impact where:

- Students feel a strong sense of community, belonging, and support, leading to higher overall satisfaction with their university experience. They develop lasting friendships and networks that support their personal and professional growth.
- Students develop a strong sense of self-confidence and resilience to deal with challenging situations and people, enabling them to overcome future challenges. They maintain a healthy work-life balance and continue to grow personally and professionally.
- Students feel confident to share their stories to empower others with their successful transitions – personally, professionally, and academically.
- Financial support programmes increase access to higher education for students from diverse backgrounds, promoting equity and inclusion.
- Students feel confident about approaching a clear and desired career pathway. They secure meaningful employment in their chosen fields shortly after graduation.
- Students build strong professional networks and relationships, leading to ongoing career development and opportunities for advancement.
- Students develop resilience and adaptability, enabling them to handle future professional challenges (such as rejections) with confidence.

## **Project Outputs**

1. [Theory of Change](#)
2. [Aggregated Student Journey Map](#)
3. PhotoVoice gallery<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Please see the Appendix 2 for an example. Some submissions contain photos of students. If you would like to be granted access to the submissions, please contact [r.p.arora@lse.ac.uk](mailto:r.p.arora@lse.ac.uk).

## 2 Introduction & Background

This report brings together the insights, ideas, and reflections COH students at LSE, who were invited to explore their transition experiences in depth, to a) deepen institutional understanding of the challenges and opportunities they encounter as they enter and progress through university, and b) to inform the development of targeted, student-informed support.

Sixteen student ambassadors were recruited as paid contributors to the research and engaged in a structured six-week programme incorporating creative, reflective, and collaborative methods. Drawing on digital diaries, Photovoice submissions, journey maps, and iterative discussions in workshops, the research identifies key barriers and enablers affecting students' transitions.

The report outlines the methodology, summarises the main findings, and presents a set of student-generated recommendations. It also includes a discussion of wider institutional and sectoral literature, and reflects on the implications of this work for equity-focused support, and student voice.

### 2.1 Background

Widening access to higher education has been a longstanding priority within the UK sector, and contextual admissions policies are an increasingly common mechanism for addressing structural inequalities in access to selective universities<sup>3</sup>. Evidence indicates that contextual offers can play a meaningful role in enabling students from diverse educational and socioeconomic backgrounds to access highly competitive institutions such as LSE<sup>4</sup>. However, though access has improved, there is growing recognition that the experience of transition into university remains uneven for students admitted via contextual pathways.

Early analysis at LSE suggested that although COH students arrive with great potential, some report lower levels of student satisfaction and somewhat lower academic performance in their first year<sup>5</sup>. This raises important questions about how well LSE has supported these students beyond the point of admission. Hence, as part of its Access and Participation Plan (APP), LSE made a formal commitment to strengthen transition support for COH students. The central aim of this research is to inform the development of this transition support. To achieve this, we placed students at the heart of the enquiry, seeking to both surface their understandings of the barriers and enablers shaping student transitions, and to co-develop more effective, inclusive, and responsive support mechanisms informed by the voices and experiences of the students concerned.

While there is a growing body of literature on the experiences of students from backgrounds aligned with contextual admissions criteria, this remains an under-researched area – particularly in relation to their transitions and sense of belonging within highly selective institutions such as LSE. This research seeks to contribute to closing this gap by providing deeper insights into COH students' experiences and informing the development of more effective, evidence-based support.

<sup>3</sup> Schulte, J. & Benson-Egglington, J. (2025) Evaluating the impact of contextual offers in a highly selective institution: results from a mixed-methods contribution analysis. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 79 (1). ISSN 1468-2273

<sup>4</sup> Boliver, V., Gorard, S., & Siddiqui, N. (2019). Using contextual data to widen access to higher education. *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, 25(1), 7–13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603108.2019.1678076>

<sup>5</sup> Compared to students with standard offers and/or without the socioeconomic characteristics that lead to students being eligible for contextual offers.

## 2.2 Research Questions

In response to these gaps, this project was guided by a core commitment to better understand

“Using participatory methods that amplify the voices and experiences of recipients of interventions... is key to avoid essentializing... This can be done by reframing target groups and individuals as ‘subject matter experts’...”  
 (Ardizzone, 2023, p. 26)

the transitional experiences of students admitted via contextual offers and to inform the design of more effective, inclusive support systems. In doing so, it sought to centre student voice as both the subject and driver of inquiry. Three questions framed the study:

1. What challenges do students from backgrounds targeted by contextual offers experience during their transition into LSE?
2. What problems should the transition support programme focus on?
3. What can solutions look like?

The project also provided an opportunity to explore methodologies for student co-creation. Against the wider backdrop of dissatisfaction with existing student voice mechanisms and concerns about ‘over-surveying’ of students, the project explored how students could be engaged with institutional research and evaluation process in ways that takes students’ agency seriously, while also providing a structure that makes the translation of findings into institutional practice as easy as possible. This theme resulted in the following three ‘meta-research’ questions:

- How can we meaningfully engage students in co-creation processes at LSE in ways that foster sustained and authentic participation, beyond tokenistic involvement?
- What approaches best support depth of engagement in student co-creation, ensuring students feel both empowered and equipped to critically reflect and contribute?
- How can co-creation initiatives balance student ownership with the necessary structure and scaffolding required for productive dialogue and outcomes?

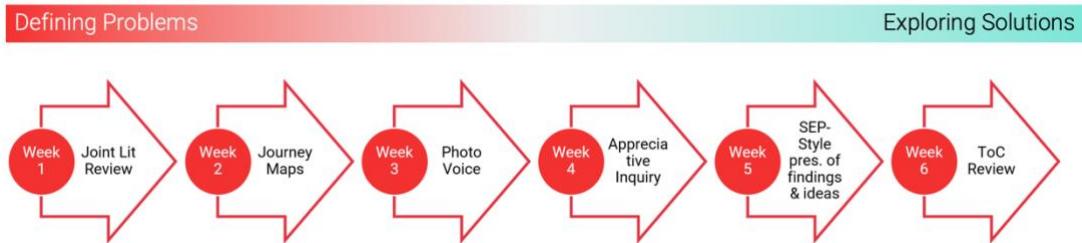
## 2.3 Research Methods

This research project sought to deepen institutional understanding of how students entering LSE with contextual admissions offers experience the transition into university, and to explore how support structures can be meaningfully strengthened in response. The design was inspired by the work of Dr Elizabeth Rahman at the University of Oxford, whose [Diversity of Student Experience](#) project offered valuable insights into the complexities of student transitions and belonging in elite higher education institutions. Her participatory and narrative-led approach helped shape the ethos of this project, particularly in its commitment to centring student voice, and creating a space for students to critically reflect on and inform institutional practice.

To address the research questions presented above, the project adopted a participatory and multi-method approach, designed to value student experience and reflection as a key source of knowledge. Sixteen COH students were recruited and paid as research ambassadors, participating in a structured six-week programme of inquiry. Through weekly workshops, homework ‘reflective exercises’, and creative methods, students were invited to explore their transition journeys, surface shared challenges, and collaboratively generate ideas for enhancing institutional support through. Concretely, this involved five qualitative methods:

- **Photovoice:** Students used photography and accompanying narratives to express and explore significant moments, challenges, or supports in their university transition.
- **Digital Diaries:** Weekly asynchronous prompts invited students to reflect on evolving themes in their experience, enabling insight into both the personal and systemic dimensions of transition.
- **Journey Mapping:** Students collectively examined the formal and informal touchpoints across their LSE journey, highlighting where institutional support was accessed, missed, or desired.
- **Collaborative Workshops:** Facilitated sessions created space for thematic analysis, peer dialogue, and iterative development of potential solutions.
- **Theory of Change Development:** Insights from all activities fed into a co-analysed ToC model, articulating shared priorities, intended outcomes, and practical interventions. A validation workshop was held with students to review, refine, and critique the draft ToC, ensuring that the final framework authentically reflected their lived realities.

The process also involved in a student-led panel presentation to senior institutional stakeholders, fostering direct engagement with student-generated insights and proposals.



### 3 Findings

#### 3.1 What challenges do students from backgrounds targeted by Contextual Offers experience during their transition into LSE?

Research on institutional barriers and gaps in support for students from backgrounds that align with COH criteria consistently highlights the structural inequalities that persist within higher education. Studies indicate that universities often operate on implicit norms and expectations that assume a level of academic, financial, and particular social capital that COH students may not have had the opportunity to develop prior to entry (Reay et al., 2009<sup>6</sup>; Burke, 2012<sup>7</sup>).

Academic transition support is frequently designed as a one-size-fits-all model, overlooking the specific learning trajectories of students from underrepresented or historically excluded backgrounds (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015<sup>8</sup>). For instance, a large proportion of COH students transition from state schools with lower university progression rates, where exposure to independent study or critical thinking skills may differ significantly from the expectations at 'elite' institutions like LSE. Generic academic transition support often assumes that all students enter with the same level of preparedness, failing to acknowledge that students from different schooling backgrounds may require more tailored approaches to succeed. Similarly, and as uncovered in this study, unspoken rules about how to engage in seminars, or network with faculty can disadvantage students who lack prior exposure to these practices and may not have a 'feel for the game' (McCormick, 2006<sup>9</sup>). LSE Changemaker reports have similarly shed light on more specific, internal challenges - such as the perception of LSE as "elitist", and students' resultant fears of being excluded socially or academically even pre- application (Srivastava et al, 2021<sup>10</sup>). Raso & Ward (2024<sup>11</sup>) further find that students report feeling "out of place, stupid and inadequate", and less supported by available resources and systems in their academic integration.

Consistent with this literature, our research uncovers that COH students often experience LSE as a deeply unequal and stratified space and frequently feel ill-prepared to navigate. This perception shapes how students understand their place within the institution. As one student described, LSE was "a place of great opportunity, but also one that makes me feel so small", capturing a broader tension between feelings of alienation and a powerful desire to belong.

Research has also shown that social integration is often left to student initiative rather than being institutionally facilitated, which can lead to a sense of exclusion or isolation for students who lack pre-existing networks (Thomas, 2012<sup>12</sup>). One Changemaker report mirrors this, as it

<sup>6</sup> Reay, D., Crozier, G., & Clayton, J. (2009). 'Strangers in paradise'? Working-class students in elite universities. *Sociology*, 43(6), 1103-1121. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038509345700>

<sup>7</sup> Burke, P.J. (2012). *The Right to Higher Education: Beyond widening participation* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203125571>

<sup>8</sup> Mountford-Zimdars, A., Sanders, J., Moore, J., Sabri, D., & Jones, S. (2015). Causes of differences in student outcomes. Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/23653/>

<sup>9</sup> McCormick, B. (2006). A Feel for the Game: Bourdieu, Source Study, and the Legend. *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 28, 257-261. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/sac.2006.0035>.

<sup>10</sup> Srivastava, I., Stuart-Delavaine, L., & Vanhersecke, Z. (2021). *Inclusivity? LSE's outreach program*. LSE Changemakers Report.

<sup>11</sup> Raso, M., & Ward, A. (2024). *"People don't understand you": An exploration of the academic and social integration of undergraduate LSE students from non-selective state schools*. LSE Changemakers Report.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas, L. (2012). Building student engagement and belonging in Higher Education at a time of change: A summary of findings and recommendations from the What Works? Student Retention & Success programme. Paul Hamlyn Foundation. <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/building-student-engagement-and-belonging-higher-education-time-change-summary>

highlights lower sense of integration into LSE for commuter students who are less likely to be able to take up social opportunities and access societies (Swift, 2020<sup>13</sup>). Financial concerns are another well-documented barrier, as funding and bursary schemes, while alleviating tuition costs, have often failed to account for hidden costs associated with extracurricular engagement, networking, career development opportunities, and the broader cost of living and studying in London (McKay & Devlin, 2014<sup>14</sup>). Similarly, career services tend to be structured around dominant professional pathways that privilege students with access to particular forms of social capital, overlooking the need for more tailored, industry-specific, or non-traditional career guidance for COH students (Bathmaker et al., 2013<sup>15</sup>).

The students in our project often encounter many of the same challenges. However, distinctive and underexplored dimensions emerged in the form of pre-arrival influences, particularly the messaging and expectations communicated to students by their sixth forms and colleges. A number of students reported being actively discouraged from applying to high-tariff institutions like LSE, with teachers/advisers suggesting such ambitions were unrealistic. Comments such as “that’s too ambitious for you” were cited as having a lasting impact on students’ confidence and sense of academic self-efficacy. For some, the cultural norms within their school/college<sup>16</sup> environments shaped their higher education choices, having initially steered them towards institutions perceived as more accessible or familiar, rather than elite universities. There is a dearth of literature that explores this challenge explicitly, however, Mazenod et al. (2019<sup>17</sup>) have found that institutional messaging in schools can subtly undermine student aspirations for university through attainment grouping practices.

Building on these pre-arrival influences, the following section outlines additional gaps in support that students experienced once at LSE.

### **3.1.1 Institutional Barriers and Gaps in Support in the LSE Context:**

Students often arrive with varied educational backgrounds, limited access to pre-university enrichment opportunities, and differential levels (and types) of social capital. Their unique needs may include tailored academic orientation, greater clarity around ‘unspoken’ institutional norms, support navigating professional pathways which are perceived as ‘elite’, and social integration platforms. Additionally, students from lower-income households may face constraints that shape how they access extracurricular life – such as the need to prioritise paid work, or the inability to participate in unpaid opportunities. The current system also often assumes a baseline of prior knowledge and confidence that not all students hold, placing the burden on COH students to self-navigate and adapt, rather than on the institution to provide tailored and responsive support.

These can be categorised under five key themes:

<sup>13</sup> Swift, S. (2020). What are the main challenges faced by commuters, and how can LSE help to support this growing group of students? LSE Changemakers Report.

<sup>14</sup> McKay, J., & Devlin, M. (2014). ‘Uni has a different language... to the real world’: Demystifying academic culture and discourse for students from low socio-economic backgrounds. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 33(5), 949-961. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2014.890570>

<sup>15</sup> Bathmaker, A. M., Ingram, N., & Waller, R. (2013). Higher education, social class and the mobilisation of capitals: Recognising and playing the game. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 34(5-6), 723-743. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2013.816041>

<sup>16</sup> Such findings point to the need for greater collaboration between LSE and schools/colleges, to ensure that students are supported and encouraged throughout the application and transition process.

<sup>17</sup> Mazenod, A., Hodgen, J., Francis, B., Taylor, B., & Tereshchenko, A. (2019). Students’ university aspirations and attainment grouping in secondary schools. *Higher Education*, 78(3), 511–527. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45199986>

### **Social and Community Integration**

- The fast-paced academic environment at LSE means that students who do not have the opportunity to establish a sense of belonging early on may find it increasingly difficult to integrate later in their journey, as academic pressures intensify and reduce the time and space available for building social connections.
- Students repeatedly mentioned experiencing limited informal, inclusive spaces designed to bring together students from different educational and socioeconomic backgrounds, resulting in missed opportunities for peer connections.
- While student-led initiatives exist, they are not always well signposted, or tailored towards COH students, leading to a reliance on self-navigation rather than structured institutional and programme-level support. Students reported facing challenges with building early peer relationships, accessing responsive or inclusive groups, or securing mentorship that addresses both social and academic needs.

### **Academic Transitions and Institutional Expectations**

- The university assumes a level of preparedness in academic writing, critical engagement, and independent study that students expressed does not account for the diversity of their prior educational experiences.
- While some transition support exists, it is not always sufficiently tailored to the specific needs of students from state-school or first-generation backgrounds. This lack of adaptation may manifest in several ways: limited recognition of prior learning gaps in academic content, difficulty in navigating or finding out about available resources, and the perceived inaccessibility of support systems designed to build confidence and academic skills.
- Students arrive at LSE with diverse educational backgrounds and varying levels of prior experience, yet the current institutional approach to teaching and learning practices were often perceived as insufficiently responsive to these differences. Many students felt that the curriculum and delivery approaches were not adequately tailored to recognise or address their specific starting points, creating additional barriers to effective engagement and academic confidence.

### **Financial Accessibility and the Cost of Studying**

- The financial realities of studying at LSE – particularly the cost of living in London – are a significant concern, yet information about financial support was often considered difficult to access or not well-publicised.
- While bursaries and hardship funds exist, greater transparency and proactive communication are needed to ensure students are aware of, and can access them.
- Students felt that the institution does not provide/advertise enough structured, equitable, and quality employment opportunities that could help them gain financial security and pursue career development, whilst balancing work and study.

### **Career Development and Professional Networks**

- LSE's career development resources do not always acknowledge or address the fact that COH students may have fewer professional networks and informal career guidance compared to their peers.

- COH students need tailored career guidance that reflects their unique needs, particularly in building confidence, navigating imposter syndrome, and navigating the competitive nature of certain industries.
- The culture of high achievement at LSE can make it difficult for students to process setbacks such as job or internship rejections, yet structured support for resilience and alternative, 'Plan B' career pathways is not widely available.

### Personal Growth Challenges

- Many COH students report experiencing imposter syndrome, particularly in competitive academic and social environments where prior educational experiences may not align with those of their peers. LSE has not yet embedded structured support to address these confidence-related barriers.
- The university experience requires students to develop self-advocacy skills, manage independent learning, and navigate a fast-paced environment – yet guidance on balancing these new expectations is not readily available.
- Some students described facing exclusionary attitudes from peers, including comments that questioned their legitimacy at LSE or pressures to conceal aspects of their educational background (such as completing fewer GCSEs) due to social pressure. This contributed to feelings of isolation, diminished confidence, and imposter syndrome.

### 3.1.2 Enablers and Strengths within the COH Student Experience

Despite these barriers, COH students demonstrated a strong capacity for self-advocacy, peer support, and leadership, leveraging LSE's existing strengths in enhancing student experiences:

- **Peer Networks and Mentorship:** Where peer mentoring schemes exist, students reported significant benefits in terms of guidance, and social integration. Expanding these schemes and ensuring COH students are actively connected to them early on would provide a more structured support system.
- **Widening Participation Outreach such as Pathways to Banking and Finance, Law, etc.:** These programmes encouraged and inspired students to study in London, and provided a sense of community with peers from similar backgrounds. They offered structured support and networking opportunities with several students recounting these networks persisting into their time at LSE as students. Simultaneously, opportunities to act as student ambassadors were also considered as important opportunities to reflect on their experiences at LSE and work with likeminded students.
- **Scholarships and Financial Support:** Financial support, such as bursaries and scholarships such as the LSE New Future Fund, and the SU Participation Fund, helped alleviate some of the financial burdens and allowed students to participate more fully in social activities, and enabled students to engage with the community.
- **Professional and Personal Development Programmes:** The Laidlaw Scholarship, for instance, helped students build networks and receive guidance from experienced professionals who offered support in career planning, skill development, and navigating the job market.

### **3.2 What problems should the transition support programme focus on?**

The findings indicate that LSE's current academic induction and transition support does not sufficiently account for the varied educational backgrounds of COH students. While academic expectations at LSE are 'rigorous', there is an assumption that students will quickly, and independently adapt to new styles of learning and assessment. However, students have highlighted that they would benefit from clearer academic scaffolding, including more explicit guidance on independent study, essay writing, and critical engagement with academic literature. Existing initiatives, such as those provided by LSE LIFE, are valued, but require effective marketing and communication, and greater integration into departmental practices to ensure their accessibility and relevance to COH students. Social integration also remains a key area where LSE's institutional culture needs to evolve. The research findings suggest that COH students often feel that LSE operates on an implicit model of self-sufficiency, where students are expected to navigate social spaces without structured opportunities for engagement. While there are informal and student-led initiatives aimed at fostering a sense of belonging, a more structured approach to social integration (particularly from the first year) would help ensure that COH students feel part of the wider university community.

Moreover, while LSE offers financial aid and bursaries, the findings suggest that financial concerns persist for COH students, particularly in relation to hidden costs such as extracurricular activities, networking opportunities, and travel for career events. Financial aid policies need to go beyond tuition support to consider the broader financial landscape that shapes student experience, including cost-of-living pressures and access to professional development opportunities. Even where these services exist, students may possess limited awareness and are thus not able to make use of them. This became particularly evident during the workshops, where representatives from relevant LSE divisions were invited to speak directly with students – often introducing funds and resources, such as the LSESU Participation Fund, that many students were not previously aware of.

The research also highlights that while LSE provides impactful careers services, it tends to focus on traditional career pathways that may not align with the experiences or aspirations of COH students. Many students reported feeling disconnected from career events and networking opportunities, with a lack of tailored support for those from non-traditional educational backgrounds. There is an opportunity for LSE to provide more inclusive career guidance, including industry-specific mentorship programmes and alternative career pathways that account for diverse interests and ambitions.

Equally, a recurring concern voiced by students in this study was the absence of a clear or supported 'Plan B' in relation to careers and post-graduation pathways. Whilst many felt immense pressure to secure competitive internships or graduate roles early on, few reported feeling equipped to deal with setbacks such as rejections or shifting aspirations. The institutional narrative around success was often perceived as narrowly defined, with limited visible support for students navigating alternative routes or periods of uncertainty. This lack of contingency planning contributed to heightened stress, self-doubt, and a sense of isolation when initial plans did not unfold as expected. Students expressed a need for more honest, transparent, and emotionally supportive guidance around career development, including tools to manage rejection, explore non-linear paths, and reframe 'failure' (i.e. not achieving a 2:1, or securing a job), as part of the learning journey.

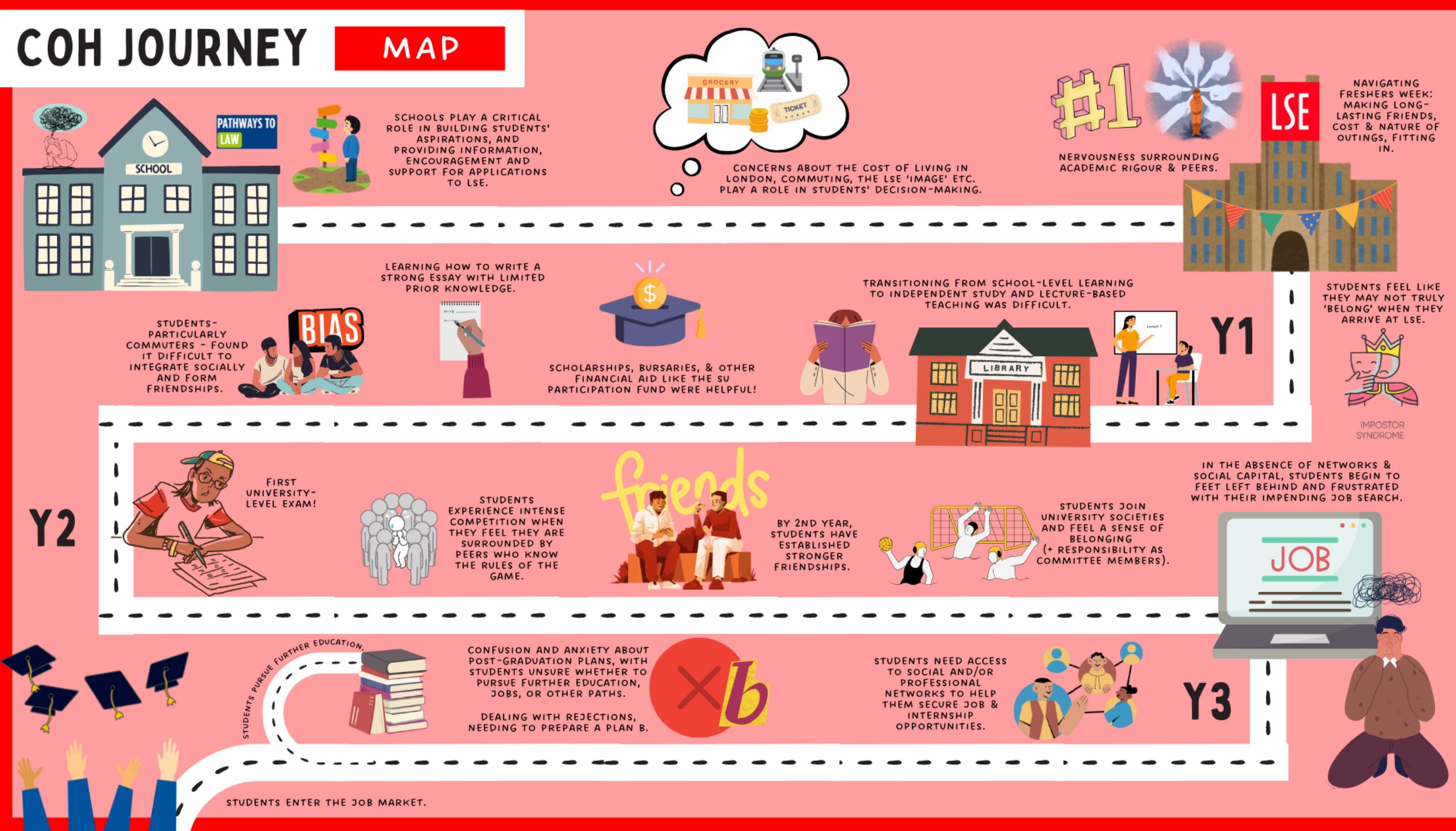
Building on this, findings further point to how narrow and sometimes conflicting definitions of success shape the experiences of COH students at LSE. Success is often socially through metrics such as achieving a first-class degree, or securing high-paying graduate jobs (often in law, consulting or finance). However, many students reflected on the pressures and unrealistic expectations attached to these narratives, and expressed uncertainty about what success should look like for them personally. Some students spoke about making strategic choices, such as deliberately aiming for a 2:1 while focusing on securing meaningful work experience, recognising the emotional and practical costs of relentlessly pursuing a first. Underpinning these reflections was a broader sense of an 'ideal LSE student' archetype – someone confident, and well-networked – a model that many COH students felt positioned against.

Table 1 presents these challenges as they arise during transitions into, during, and from LSE, which is then followed by an aggregated student journey map (Figure 1) that details key challenges, barriers, and enablers during the COH student journey.

*Table 1 Key challenges at different points of the students' journey*

Point in Student Journey	Key Challenges
Pre-Arrival	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Early Aspirations and Influences:</b> Goals to attend LSE varied; state schools often guided students towards familiar paths rather than high-tariff institutions.</li> <li><b>Barriers and Challenges:</b> Working during A Levels, missing open days, and the need for 'super-curriculars' impacted students' academic focus and confidence.</li> <li><b>Personal and Social Factors:</b> First-generation learners faced unique challenges, with decision-making influenced by distance from London, financial considerations, and discouragement from schools.</li> </ul>
Adjusting to LSE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Social Integration:</b> Accommodation was crucial for making friends, while commuter students struggled with socialising and adjusting to an international student body.</li> <li><b>Academic Transition:</b> The shift to independent study, new teaching styles, and intense competition, especially during exams, posed significant challenges.</li> <li><b>Financial Concerns:</b> Despite scholarships and financial support, the high cost of living in London and navigating fresher's week were major concerns.</li> <li><b>Personal Growth and Challenges:</b> Students faced imposter syndrome and balanced multiple commitments. Their lack of social and cultural capital (of the kind that is prized at LSE), and occasional stigma and hostility, impacted their academic and professional journey.</li> </ul>
Transitioning from LSE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Career Exploration:</b> During the transition from 2nd to 3rd year, students realised the importance of summer internships. Third-year students navigated the process of career applications and explored various post-graduation paths, but emphasised the need for comprehensive career guidance from the start.</li> <li><b>Personal Reflections:</b> Students reflected on their university experience, balancing academics, social life, and future career security. They recognised the importance of setting realistic expectations and relying on both internal and external support systems.</li> <li><b>The Jadedness of 3<sup>rd</sup> Years:</b> Many students felt let down by the lack of support, avenues to have their voice truly heard, and equitable opportunities from LSE. They often had to navigate their career paths and personal growth on their own, leading to feelings of uncertainty and discontented about their future.</li> </ul>

Figure 1 Aggregated student journey map



## 4 What can solutions look like?

The findings from this research point to five critical areas where LSE can enhance its support for COH students:

1. Community & Belonging
2. Academic Transitions
3. Personal Growth Challenges
4. Career Development

Informed by the reflections, insights, and solutions developed by students themselves, the following recommendations aim to foster a more inclusive, responsive, and empowering transitional experience, and the Appendix further details the intended outcomes and impact of the proposed activities.

### Pre-Arrival

Many students enter LSE having already faced discouragement from teachers or advisors in their sixth forms or colleges. Reay et al. (2009) find that these pre-arrival influences have the potential to impact their self-confidence and academic self-efficacy, and belonging and academic confidence are shaped long before academic performance is measured (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015<sup>18</sup>). Therefore, LSE can play a pivotal role in disrupting such narratives by explicitly affirming the capability and belonging of COH students from the outset – such as through inclusive messaging in offer-holder communications, induction events, and early engagement opportunities through Widening Participation. More specifically:

- LSE could take a proactive role in affirming to COH students that they belong and can thrive within the institution. Early messaging should emphasise the value of diverse pathways and actively counter external narratives that may have framed elite institutions as “out of reach.”
- Pre-arrival communications, welcome events, and early engagement strategies could integrate inclusive messaging, drawing attention to the success of previous COH students.

### Adjusting to LSE

- **Build a Visible and Sustained Network:** Students expressed a strong desire for community and connection both with COH peers, and their departmental communities. Establishing a sustained COH network (rather than a one-time induction) can provide continuity, mutual support, and a platform for collective voice. Such networks also signal institutional recognition of the unique experiences COH students bring, fostering a stronger sense of belonging (Gale & Parker, 2012<sup>19</sup>).
- **Proactively embedding academic skills support:** COH students identified challenges in adjusting to the academic demands and expectations of LSE, including confidence in academic writing and navigating the ‘hidden’ curriculum. Academic belonging workshops to help students develop confidence in their voice and capacity within seminars, office hours, and group work, and facilitating spaces for open dialogue between staff and students about assumptions around ‘independent learning’ and academic norms could

<sup>18</sup> Mountford-Zimdars, A., Sanders, J., Moore, J., Sabri, D., & Jones, S. (2015). Causes of differences in student outcomes.

<sup>19</sup> Gale, T., & Parker, S. (2012). Navigating change: a typology of student transition in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 39(5), 734–753. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2012.721351>

support students' transitions. Similarly, academic skills workshops (like referencing), discipline-specific writing support, and tailored guidance on independent study methods can help bridge the gap in expectations and prior learning experiences. In some instances, students expressed strong appreciation for skills modules embedded within the curriculum (e.g. IR102), noting that this integrated approach supports their development without adding an additional time burden or competing with their core academic responsibilities.

- **Financial Support and Accessibility:** Proactively and effectively sharing clear, accessible information on the plethora of financial aid, alongside introducing more flexible, equitable employment opportunities within LSE, would alleviate financial stress, and enable COH students to fully participate in university life.
- **Celebrate Contextual Offer Holders, Publicly and Internally:** Students want to be seen as individuals with their own stories. While they welcome tailored support, they also voiced discomfort with existing 'othering' narratives. There is a need to publicly value the presence and perspectives of COH students at LSE, which includes, among more:
  - **Launching a COH network (i.e. LSE Navigate)**, visible across campus, that affirms identity and encourages advocacy.
  - **Storytelling campaigns** where COH students share their insights and journeys, helping to normalise diverse pathways and humanise the 'contextual offer' label.
  - **Staff training** to better understand the assets and needs of students from equity-deserving backgrounds, framed around anti-deficit perspectives.

## Transitioning from LSE

### Make Career Planning and Setbacks a Supported, Ongoing Process

Students consistently expressed anxiety around securing internships and jobs. Support should recognise that not all students have the same access to professional networks, or the same capacity to manage uncertainty and failure. LSE can hence play a key role in:

- **Career Confidence and Professional Development:** Expanding career mentoring schemes that connect COH students with professionals within and beyond their fields of study, alongside networking and skill-building workshops, would ensure students feel supported and prepared for a range of professional journeys.
- **Developing an "LSE Plan B" toolkit:** Many students spoke about the emotional toll of career-related rejection, a challenge often compounded by limited access to informal guidance and professional networks. To address this, LSE could co-design a Plan B toolkit with students, framing it not as a fallback, but as a proactive, resilience-building strategy. The toolkit would include targeted resources, storytelling from alumni with non-linear career paths, emotional support, and skills-based workshops. By normalising uncertainty and offering alternative strategies for navigating early career setbacks, this initiative could help mitigate the disproportionate emotional challenges often experienced by COH students.
- **Building space for career ambiguity:** Offering drop-ins, and spotlighting stories from WP Student Ambassadors (and specifically, COH Alumni) that centre diverse career journeys.
- **Introducing peer-to-peer career mentoring:** To provide informal, relatable guidance throughout students' degrees.

## **Principles for Effective Transition Support**

In addition to targeted solutions, cross-cutting, the research also speaks to broader principles new and existing work should abide by to address the broader structural and cultural factors that shape how support is experienced by COH students, and are thus essential for ensuring the overall effectiveness, inclusivity, and reach of the programme.

### **1. Design Support that is Tailored to Diverse Starting Points and Needs**

- Ensure flexibility and adaptability in programme design, allowing students to engage with the types of support most relevant to their individual contexts – whether foundational academic skills, networking confidence, or alternative career pathways.

### **2. Strengthen Visibility and Navigability of Existing Support**

- Improve the coherence and accessibility of communications about available resources, ensuring students know what support exists, how to access it, and why it might be relevant to them.
- Consider centralising key information through a dedicated hub or platform, with proactive signposting throughout the student journey – from pre-arrival through to graduation.
- Facilitate opportunities for students to hear directly from alumni, peers, and staff about support mechanisms, sharing lived experiences and success stories to enhance relatability and engagement.
- Build on positive examples from this project, where inviting relevant LSE divisions into student-facing spaces helped surface knowledge gaps and improve awareness.

### **3. Foster Confidence and Enable Informed, Self-Defined Success**

- Actively challenge narrow institutional narratives of success that centre on high academic attainment or specific professional pathways.
- Support students to develop the skills and self-assurance to make informed decisions about their goals – whether academic, personal, or professional – and to define success on their own terms.
- Provide reflective spaces and resources that encourage students to explore what success means for them, including guidance on balancing academic aspirations with well-being, extracurricular engagement, and career development.
- Validate diverse forms of achievement and promote storytelling that highlights non-linear, authentic journeys – empowering students to feel ownership of their experiences and choices.

## 5 Conclusion

This report emphasises that effective transition support for COH students is not simply a matter of providing additional resources, but of cultivating an environment in which such support is accessible, meaningful, and embedded throughout the student experience – from pre-arrival and induction, through to graduation.

The findings contribute to the ongoing work of understanding and supporting the transitional experiences of students admitted through Contextual Offers at LSE. Firstly, it is crucial to note that while students occasionally referenced their Contextual Offers when discussing feelings of alienation, the vast majority of challenges and barriers they faced cannot be attributed to receiving an offer with one grade lower. The evidence strongly indicates that these differential experiences would persist regardless of offer type; reducing entry requirements by one grade is not what creates these disparities. Instead, the underlying factors that make students eligible for Contextual Offers in the first place (limited economic resources, first-generation status, lack of the type of cultural capital that is prized and privileged at LSE, and unfamiliarity with elite academic environments among many more), are what drive their distinct transitional experiences. In other words, COH students do not face particular challenges because they received a contextual offer; they face these challenges because of the same background factors that qualified them for contextual admission. This distinction is crucial, as it confirms that while Contextual Offers successfully identify students who may need additional support, the policy itself does not create their disadvantage - it merely recognises pre-existing structural inequalities that continue to shape students' university experiences.

The findings also highlight that support should not be contingent on students identifying themselves as requiring 'extra help,' but instead be built into the everyday practices, environments, and cultures of the institution. Equally, while participants frequently identified individualised support mechanisms as beneficial, this may also reflect their understanding of what is possible to change within existing institutional frameworks. When discussions explored these issues more deeply, students often expressed interest in more structural reforms too, suggesting that initial preferences for targeted support may also be shaped by the perceived boundaries of institutional change, rather than representing their full vision for transformation.

Ultimately, LSE Navigate should aim to foster a university environment where students from diverse educational and social backgrounds are not only able to succeed academically (and/or in their own terms), but also experience a genuine sense of belonging, security, and agency. Achieving this requires an intentional focus on dismantling systemic and cultural barriers, amplifying student voice in programme design and decision-making, and promoting narratives of capability, resilience, and contribution. In doing so, LSE can strengthen its commitment to equity and inclusion, ensuring that its approach to contextual admissions is not only about widening access, but also about creating the conditions in which all students are able to thrive.

## Methodological Reflections

Methodologically, our approach offers insights for future co-creation initiatives at LSE, and studies seeking to uncover the experiences of students from backgrounds targeted by Contextual Offers. Creating invited, affective spaces that enabled both personal reflection and peer dialogue was crucial to our multi-method design, and this enabled students to express their experiences in diverse, meaningful, and relevant ways. A particularly valuable element was

facilitating a panel between senior leaders on the project board and students themselves, creating a direct channel for students to share their visions for Navigate. Our role as neutral facilitators in these exchanges (rather than as intermediaries or interpreters) ensured that student voices reached decision-makers unfiltered and unmediated. This direct dialogue exemplified genuine co-creation, moving beyond consultation to create spaces where students could actively contribute to shaping institutional responses according to their needs.

Reflecting on the overall research process, two key learnings emerged: first, the vital importance of transparent agenda-setting and embedded feedback loops for building trust and enabling real-time adaptation; and second, while the variety of methods enhanced inclusivity and expression, the breadth of approaches meant each method could have benefited from deeper engagement. Future research might consider more focused methodological choices and extended timelines for relationship-building and collaborative sense-making, ensuring that the depth of engagement matches the complexity of students' experiences.

## Ethics

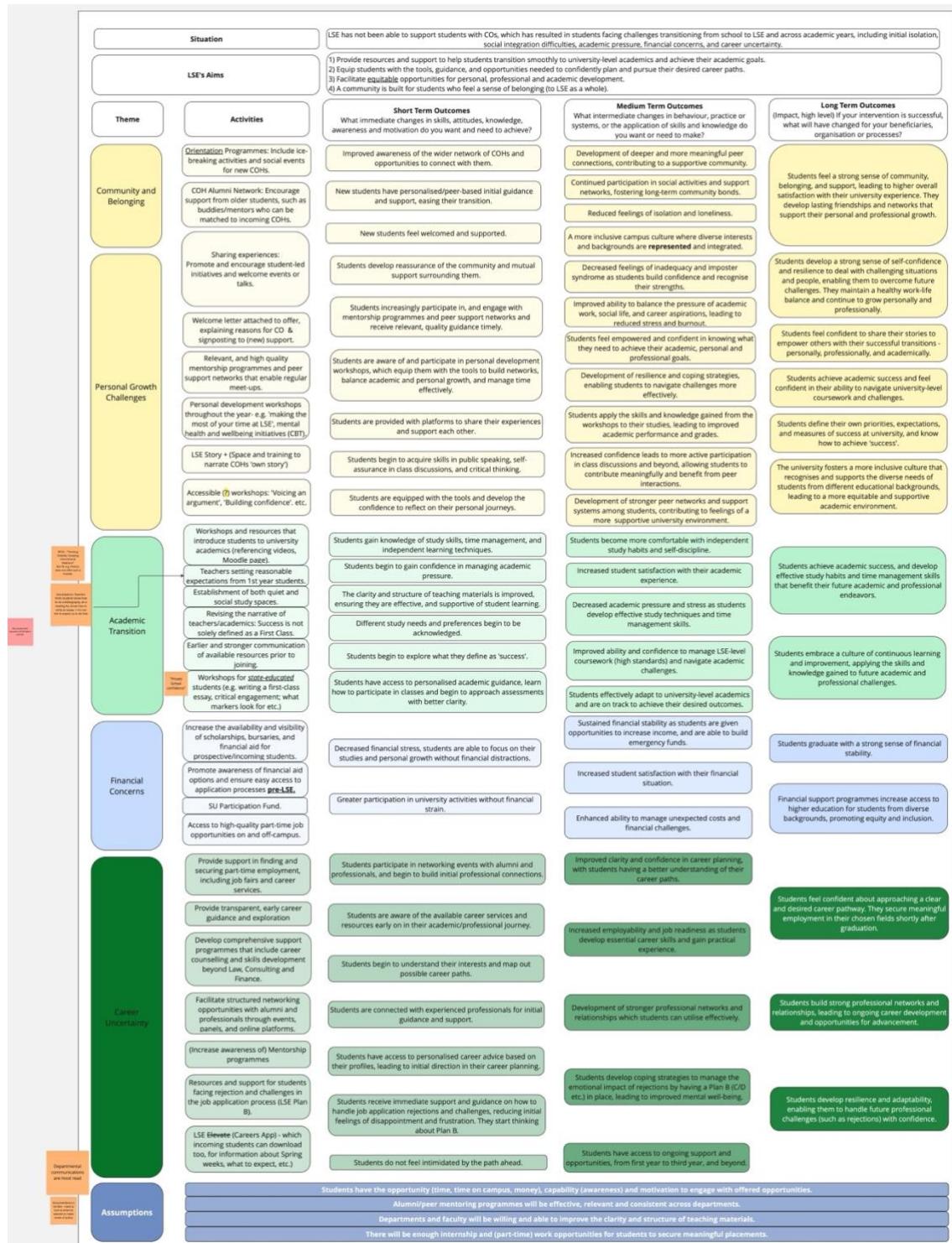
This project was conducted in line with the LSE Research Ethics Policy. Ethical approval was obtained through the appropriate internal processes. All student participants received clear information about the purpose of the study, the nature of their involvement, and the ways in which data would be used. Informed consent was obtained for all components of the project—including participation in workshops, Photovoice submissions, and public-facing outputs. Particular attention was paid to ensuring voluntary participation and the right to withdraw at any stage without penalty.

The participatory nature of the research meant that students were not just contributors, but co-creators of knowledge. As such, ethical considerations also included attending to power dynamics, protecting confidentiality, and ensuring participants had opportunities to shape how their narratives and creative work were represented.

In the case of visual materials (photographs), consent was sought for any potential publication, display, or dissemination beyond the workshop setting. The team took active steps to create an environment of safety and trust, and embedded regular opportunities for reflection, feedback, and participant support throughout the programme.

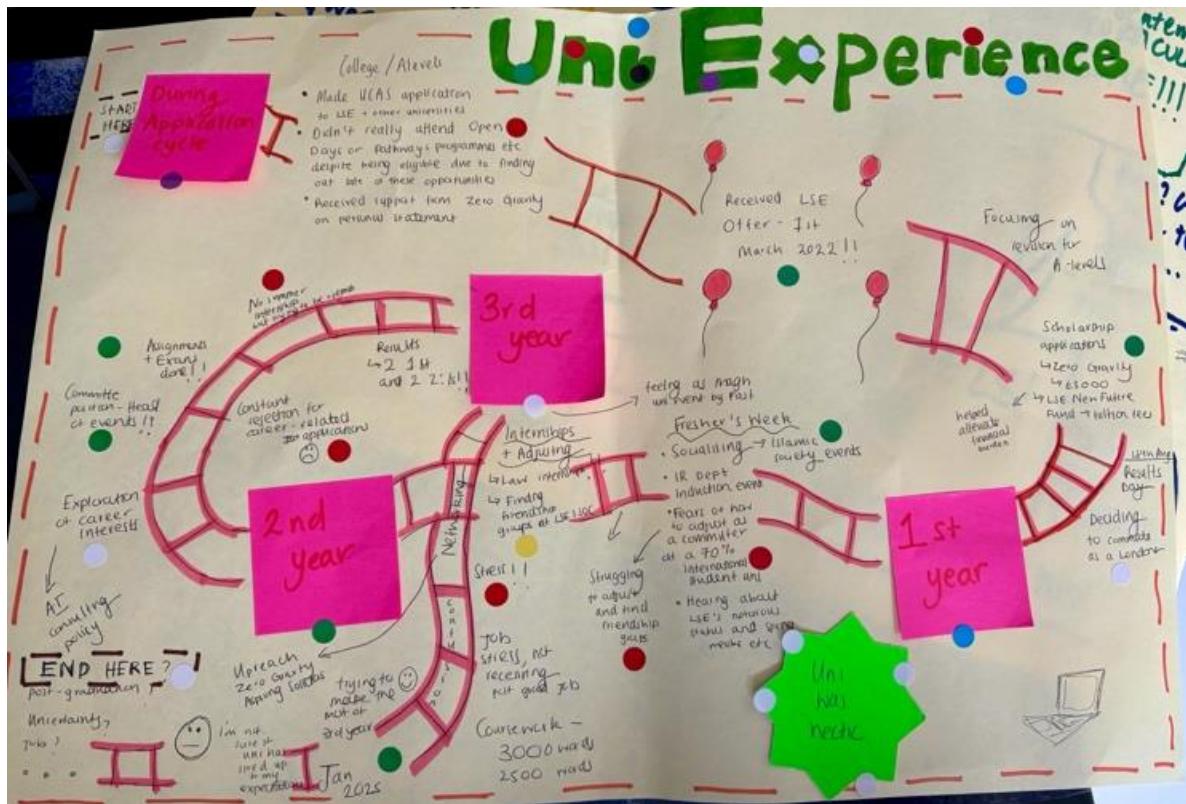
## Appendix 1

### Theory of Change



## Appendix 2

## *Journey Mapping Exercise*



*Example of Photovoice Submission*

**Take a photo of a moment, place, or experience that has stood out to you during your transition to LSE. What made it stand out to you?**



A Rolls Royce Spectre, casually parked outside the CKK; a car that I had only seen on TV. The recurrence of opulent cars, vanity number plates, diplomatic vehicles, exposes a fanatical world I previously could only imagine.

Simultaneously, the RR reminds me of the scarring trade I had to make to get to LSE. Sell my own 2004 car just to afford to live in London. A loss of autonomy in hopes for greater opportunity.

Representing wealth surrounding and within LSE, the RR inadvertently places me as an imposter, deepening my desire for more than home. A source of motivation.



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Photography: LSE