Peer Study Groups at LSE

Conchita Misquith

Research Assistant, Eden Centre

Jonathan Schulte

Evaluations Manager, Eden Centre

Executive Summary:

- This research project aimed to understand the role and impact of Peer Study Groups at LSE

- Surveying departments, we found broadly three types of peer study group setups and aims:
  - **Seminar groups**, set up in individual classes, to encourage students to complete group assignments and discuss learning materials
  - **Study groups**, set up on the cohort level, encouraging students to watch lectures together or share notes
  - **Transition groups**, set up on a departmental level to bring together students across programmes and engage them with the department

- Conducting focus groups with students, we found that while all three groups provided some benefits, common challenges around initial and sustained engagement or social connections were more easily navigated in setups that provided a clear structure, purpose or link to assessed parts of the course

- Our key recommendation is therefore for organisers to more clearly identify the pedagogical purpose of groups and make this clear to students as well – work that can be supported by central guidance and better sharing of good practices across departments
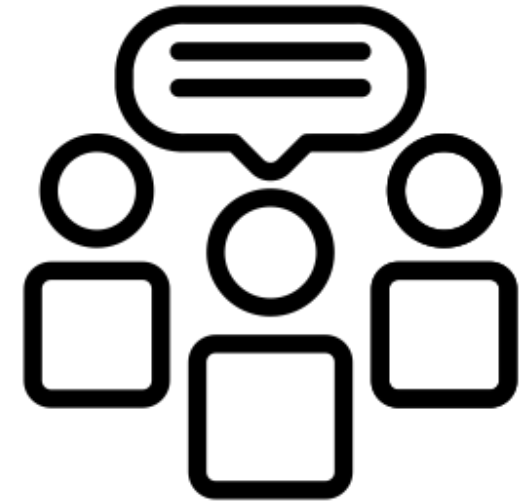
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Background & Methodology

What are Peer Study Groups?

Broadly defined, Peer Study Groups (PSGs) are small groups of **student peers**, **assigned by their departments** and with the expectations that **students meet,** collaborate, study, support or socialise **without formal supervision**.

Research Background:

PSG work is anchored in LSE 2030, which "identifies peer study groups as a means by which an institution can foster a strong sense of community and belonging". Guidance provided to departments further outlines that PSG work can:

1) Help students develop a sense of belonging, confidence, social connections

2) Ease the transition period for students joining LSE, and provide them with a secure support system

3) Supporting students in developing of a range of academic and social skills

4) Help students build more diversified social networks

References:
1. Initial Guidance for Peer Study Groups, December 2021

Evaluation Objectives:

1) Understand the impact of the PSG scheme for the academic year 2021-2022 across LSE's undergraduate and postgraduate programmes.
2) Identify good practices across LSE.
3) Improve the current LSE PSG programme and guidance.

Methodology (1/2)

➢ Phase 1: Departmental Surveys

i.   *Data Collection:* LSE wide Departmental Surveys were deployed over a span of two weeks to understand how departments envisioned and organised their Peer Study Group programme.

ii. *Data Analysis:* Post data collection, we analyses survey responses and developed 3 Peer Study Group typologies:

a)   Seminar Groups

b)   Study Groups

c)   Transition Support Groups

➢ Phase 2: Student Focus Groups

i.   *Data Collection:* We conducted focus groups with 14 students, including students from each of the identified peer study group typologies. We looked to explore their experiences with PSGs whilst identifying disconnects between departmental survey responses and actual student experiences of Peer Study Groups.

ii. *Data Analysis:* Thematic analysis was conducted on transcripts from the focus groups discussions
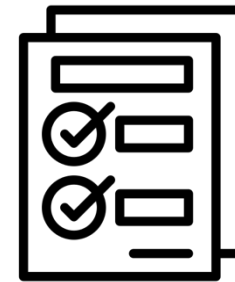
Limitations

➢Limitations:
1) Although the sampling frame consisted of 27 departments and 11,549 students on UG and PGT programmes at LSE, only 13 departments responded to our survey in Phase I; only 14 students participated in Phase 2
2) Not all departments implemented PSGs, or at least did not associate their work with the PSG label, given the ambiguity around the term
3) The effect of Covid was the prime motivation for PSG departmental support towards students this factor may limit generalisability of the study.

➢Mitigation:
1) We believe our results are robust due to homogeneity in responses received by students and departments; students' membership in multiple peer study groups further had a 'multiplier effect' on the effective sample
2) Although Covid may limit the holistic understanding of PSGs, it still gives us a chance to understand the process of PSG deployment and working across the school.

Phase 1 Findings

Departmental Survey

Surveys were designed and deployed across all 27 academic departments at LSE over a span of 14 days

Aimed at capturing departmental purpose, vision, and organisation of Peer Study Groups for the academic year.

13 departments responded to our survey of these, 7 departments stated running Peer Study Groups in 2021/22.

1.1: Departmental Survey Findings:

Although departments' survey responses revealed a shared 'core vision' for the purpose of peer learning, three distinct variations emerged. These variations emphasised a particular purpose, and were strongly associated with particular ways of assigning the group, the length of activities, and the type of tasks set:

Common Core of PSG work	Purpose / Typology	Learning Outcome Emphasised	Assignment	Timing	Expected Activities
• Facilitating social connections and community • Enable social learning • Develop social skills and teamwork	**Seminar Group**	• Academic skills • Engagement and peer support with coursework	• Course level	• Seminars + Throughout the academic term	• Completing group assignments, eg presentations, podcasts, research proposals, weekly work sheets, case studies/reports
	Study Group	• Build peer support network during Covid	• Cohort Level or Course level	• Throughout the academic year	• Sharing of notes / questions • Attending online Q&As together. • Watching pre-recorded lectures
	Transition Group	• Support students' transition into study at LSE.	• Cohort Level	• Welcome Week	• Making social media posts • Meeting academic mentors as a group • Social events on campus

,, " Survey Quotes highlight the contrasting views on the purposes of peer study groups

"Given that lectures are still online this year, students can take advantage of their peer group assignments to find others with whom they can watch pre-recorded lecture videos and attend synchronous online lectures or online Q&A sessions".

- Course Administrator, Department 1

"We are concerned with enhancing students' transferable skills, and teamwork is key. Debate and argumentation in groups produces better outcomes. We hope it contributes to students' sense of community and programme/ departmental cohesion (learning community)".

- Programme Director, Department 2

"The purpose is to practice students' hands-on abilities using the R software. We hope students will become more familiar with working with R and be able to use R to conduct some simple projects after the study group".

- Teaching Staff, Department 3

1.2: Other Findings:

1) In most of the survey responses received, class teachers were the sole administrators in organising PSGs.

2) Programme Support Staff often citied reasons for lack of guidance as to what is expected of them in incorporating PSGs and how must they navigate through it.

3) Some departments have higher budgets and can therefore hold more social activities for students, whilst the others with low budgets may not may able to do so.

"Lack of central support, in particular timetabling and consideration for PSS workload."
- Anonymous

"We are not aware of any concrete student guidance from, e.g., LSELife concerning how to work in groups; some variability in student engagement"
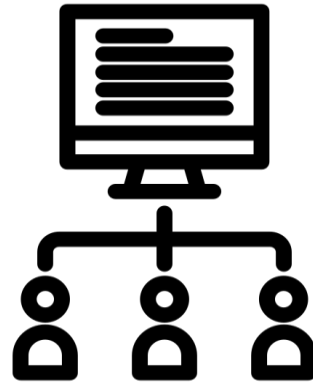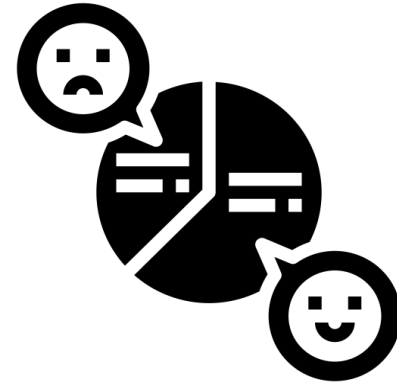- Anonymous

Phase 2 Findings

Student Focus Groups

Focus Groups discussions with students from 3 different departments, each reflecting a different peer study group typology. Total sample size: 14 students, across 3 departments (UG+PG)

Focus Group discussions were recorded on Zoom, informed consent was obtained from the participants with discussions lasting an hour

Transcripts were then generated, and thematic analysis was conducted to highlight key findings from each peer study group (ie seminar groups, study groups, transition groups).

Seminar Group Findings

Strengths	Limitations
1) With many tasks tied into assessments or teaching activities, most students felt strongly incentivised to collaborate and work as a team, learn with and from each other, and work towards a common goal.	1) Some students felt these groups were 'transactional' or 'business-oriented' as the goal was to accomplish weekly seminar class activity.
2) Students reported a strong benefit to academic work: they spilt up weekly readings and prepared discussions, caught up on missed information, and jointly prepared for summative assessments.	2) Students were much less likely to engage with work that was not tied into assessment.
3) Most students report good and consistent engagement with their seminar groups, with assigned groups coming together and working regularly – especially when meetings were in person, rather than via Zoom. However, in some cases students felt the intensity of activity was only high during the initial weeks and at the end of the term.	3) Some students struggled to keep up with the weekly pace of participating in PSGs, and felt they were falling behind in learning as compared to their peers. This was particularly true in intensive courses like economics or research-oriented programmes.

" Seminar Group Quotes

"One of the reasons why the seminar group worked was because **we had class participation marks which was like 10%** and **because the readings were so long, you can't do them on your own,** like it's really difficult for you to view them on your own so it kind of did matter. I guess if we met up".

- Student 1

"It **felt very business related** and just, you know, do the work. If they had more of a **human touch and try and put people together who have similar interests**, then they can talk about it and then study as friends rather than just people that you know might become dubious of each other".
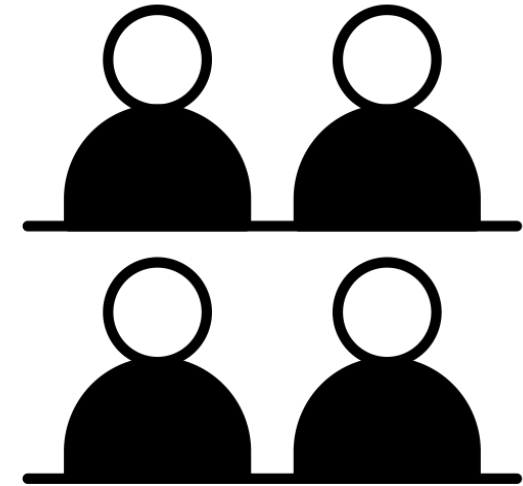
- Student 2

"For me, **the brief notes we made during our weekly [seminar group meeting], for example research tables that we created in our seminars every week were very useful for revision for my assessments.** We just had like very brief notes with different quotes that helped us in our assessments"
- Student 3

Finding 2.2: Study Groups

Study Group Findings

1) Students in study groups struggled to find their peers, establish contact or even study together – which was the main aim of this group.

2) Students' reported that reaching out and setting up a meetings especially in the busy phase of early term rarely happened, as they weren't clear on what benefits the group might have on them, especially as they did not believe the groups would contribute to their individual coursework.

3) In our focus group, students also emphasised on the competitive, individualistic student culture of LSE, which further hindered assigned Study Groups coming together, as students were worried about appearing to 'copy' others work.

Study Group Quotes:

"You know, particularly in the modules that I've taken this year, i**t's been a real source of resentment that you can still do extremely well without kind of contributing anything to the intellectual community** of the school or the class that you're in. Large part, perhaps **because there's not an incentive to participate**".

- Student 1

"What's confusing about study groups is that it's obviously very **ambiguous as to whether they're your friends or whether they're your study buddies".**

- Student 2

"I managed to track my peer group mate down who I sent an e-mail to and who didn't answer me and I said, oh, why didn't you answer and and he basically said, well, you know it's. **It's basically yet another meeting that I have to go to".**

- Student 3

Finding 2.3: Transition Groups

Transition Group Findings

1) Transition groups often succeeded in coming together, however, students couldn't sustain long-term relationships (both academically or socially) as activities did not extend past the Welcome Week.

2) This group suffered from a low recall value; both students & departments emphasised that since it happened during Welcome Week, staff and students couldn't remember much.

3) A lot of activities were fit-in during Welcome Week which left some students feeling extremely overwhelmed.

4) Students who arrived late at LSE were left out as planned activities were over.

WELCOME TO LSE

Transition Group Quotes

"**It kind of felt like i've been forced to be in a group with people like that I don't know and working on Welcome Week activities** like making Twitter or Instagram posts for the department and in the first week everyone feels like a stranger".

- Student 1

"**I arrived late because of my visa delays, and I couldn't meet my group and I don't I don't think they met each other as well,** so we just worked on a shared design like somebody designed it initially, and then we keep the feedback on our phone and we never met"

- Student 3

"Like I said […] I **can't quite remember very well, because [it was a] long time ago** and I don't think any of us had much time, from what I remember"

- Student 2

Findings 2.4: Common Challenges

Overview

Across our focus groups, students reported similar key issues for their peer study groups. However, depending on the context and set-up, some students found these more easily overcome:

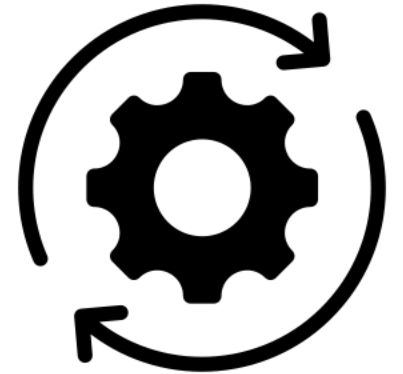|	**Organisation & Set-Up** How easy did students find it to overcome the initial 'hump' ie to reach out and set up initial meetings?	**Student Engagement** How easy did students find it to sustain engagement past an initial meeting and worked together as a team on the proposed activities?	**Social Connection** How easy did students find it to building and sustaining social connections outside the PSG?
Seminar groups	Easy (clear purpose and strong incentive through given tasks)	Easy (incentivised by weekly seminar prep, class participation marks incorporated in summative)	Somewhat easy (depending on the nature of students in the group, but made easier by common courses/interests)
Study groups	Difficult (students don't reach out to their peers and find it hard to sync-in given vague expectations and value)	Difficult (many students never met their peers as there are no stakes attached in the overall coursework)	Difficult (given lack of engagement)
Transition groups	Easy (given excitement of new environment, wanting to make connections)	Somewhat easily (though mainly for the initial welcome period)	Somewhat easy (given common introduction, though divergent interests made things more difficult)

Other general findings

1) Owing to the pandemic most students described mental closure of meeting on Zoom, and not in-person. This transpires into not developing social bonds with classmates and peers, highlighting both the potential value of PSGs but also the higher hurdle these groups had to overcome.

2) Some students we spoke to were unclear about the expectations of their peer study groups, in particular in the case of study groups, and highlighted how this made them less likely to engage with the project.

3) Students cited the 'highly competitive', 'transactional', 'business-oriented' and 'individualistic' nature of LSE generally, which some students felt made it hard to form social bonds with their peers.

4) Many students pointed out the importance of common interests and dedication to the PSG as important factors in encouraging good group relations. On this basis, they thought that PSGs should be opt-in/opt-out.

Recommendations

1.1 Recommendations: Process Improvements

1) Provide clear guidance on groups' purpose: Students often found themselves confused as to what they were expected to do and how they should use their PSGs. A workshop or webinar could help student understand what PSG are and what they may be expected to do.

2) Supporting groups early on: Students found it difficult to connect with their peer group mates especially during the start of the term, as most of them were left to connect via email and received no response. Holding ice-breaker sessions or making time early in the teaching schedule to allow students to meet and set up a first meeting would help ease this. Students in one of the groups found it particularly effective when professors took 5 mins during the start of the term to introduce peer group mates to each other in class. This made students develop a sense of obligation to connect and exchange numbers with their peer group members. More careful composition of groups can also be considered.
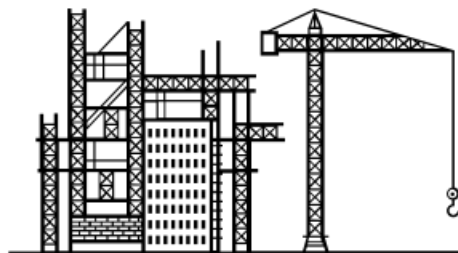
1.2 Recommendations: Improving Structures & Context

1) Improving on the LSE PSG Guidance: Departments often citied the lack of support of concrete guidance from Central Management to implement PSGs. Clearly defined goals and ways of achieving them should be incorporated in the central guidance document, highlighting the distinct types and purposes of peer study group schemes described above.

2) Facilitate staff exchanges and learning: Offering opportunities for staff involved in PSG programmes to exchange experiences and learn from each other could improve delivery for both staff and students (in addition to evolution projects such as this)

3) Reflecting on the what roles PSGs should play at LSE in a post-covid world: Departmental visions for this academic year was heavily covid-focused, highlighting the need to chart a new vision and guidelines for PSGs in a post-covid world. It calls for re-evaluating what we mean by PSGs and how they should function within the School post-pandemic

Further Resources:

- A study in study groups: to what extent are the Social Policy study groups practical? Nandita Mulay. LSE Change Makers 2022 23
- A Connected Curriculum for Higher Education. Dilly Fung. UCL Press, London. p.120ff

Thank You