

## Executive Summary

### Student experiences in 2020/21 - Insights from answers to open-ended questions across three surveys

#### Aims and motives

The report analyses responses to open-ended survey questions in three programme-level surveys administered between February and July 2021. We probed 8598 written comments in which 5202 students from all taught programmes described the positive and negative sides of their experiences in their own words.

#### Areas covered in the report

Based on this analysis, the report examines the social and academic experiences of students in six key areas. We present these below. There are areas where students are very much in agreement with each other, and others where student views are divergent or even incompatible. In any case, we believe that the right interventions in these areas could improve student experiences in manifold ways.

#### 1. The pandemic

Unsurprisingly, students had a lot to say about how the School handled the pandemic. When they articulated an overarching evaluation, their statements fell within one of two camps. Those who said that the pandemic was handled well often pointed to the smooth transition to online teaching and praised the efforts LSE made to keep campus open and safe through an extensive testing scheme. Those who claimed the opposite described the many shifts that policy took over the year, and argued that the effects of such were challenging to handle.

Students wrote specifically about online learning, online assessments, and mental health during the pandemic. They described how remote learning limited their ability to learn from others or required concentration levels which were hard to summon in the home environment. Students also noted that teachers were sometimes not trained or equipped to teach well online.

Likewise, assessments delivered during the pandemic featured among the most frequent sources of frustration and discontent in student accounts. Strikingly, an overwhelming majority of students complained about the School not implementing a *no-detriment* policy. Only a handful mentioned the *no-disadvantage* policy (2020) or *assessment support package* (2021) that were put in place. Many pointed to technical difficulties or took issue with the time allocated to complete online 'exams'. Additionally, students shared the feeling that assessments were either too hard given the circumstances, or harder than in previous years and past exam papers.

Finally, students wrote about how their mental health deteriorated during the pandemic. Yet, there was no overall agreement regarding the quality and availability of mental health services at the School. Where some students found accessible and efficient support, others criticised the limited number of therapy sessions, and mentioned efforts that missed the target in terms of ensuring good mental health.

## **2. Social climate and social life**

Disappointment with School climate and social life was an overwhelming theme in student comments. Students complained again and again about the lack of community among them and offered a range of insights about what explains this problem. Identified causes involved characteristics of student culture (competition and social comparison), features of curricular organisation (high workload and lack of events), and characteristics of the campus environment (lack of social spaces). While these frustrations were widespread among students, working-class students, disabled students and other disadvantaged groups reported additional barriers to social participation.

## **3. Affect towards the School**

Many answers revealed a lack of trust towards the institution. By and large, students were not confident that key School stakeholders are willing to or capable of protecting their interests. This generalised sense of distrust took on soft and hard forms. We write about *soft distrust* to characterise accounts wherein students simply reported a feeling of not being heard, perhaps despite the best intentions of key School stakeholders. For instance, the elision of student voices was regularly attributed to the failures of existing communication channels between students and the School. We write about *hard distrust* to characterize those narratives wherein students claim that the School knowingly ignores student voices. Among students who held this view, the School became an institution which claims to care about student satisfaction and yet truly prioritises economic profit and reputational gains.

## **4. Teaching and learning**

Teaching and learning experiences were generally a source of great satisfaction among students. The report specifically covers two themes that run through such student accounts.

First, student answers reveal the teaching practices and qualities they value and those they dislike. Teachers are praised when they provide support and are approachable, have deep knowledge and expertise, manifest passion and enthusiasm, and boost interactions in class. In contrast, teachers are criticized when they prove unresponsive to student requests, when they leave little room for debates and disagreements, when they rely excessively on slides or problem sets, or when they seem to show little concern for their teaching role.

Second, student accounts reveal how their academic journey contributed to their personal development. Positive learning outcomes involve having developed a broad knowledge of contemporary issues, revising their ways of thinking, being challenged to achieve their best potential, and gaining confidence in their ability to succeed. On the other hand, there is much disagreement and variation regarding negative experiences of learning. For instance, while most students found their course adequately challenging, some claim that it was either too difficult or too easy, or either too academic or too practical.

## **5. Assessment, grades and feedback**

Students who wrote about assessment, grades and/or feedback were often motivated by frustration. Two main themes emerge from their accounts. First, students took issue with the place of final written examinations in the system of evaluations. They forcefully argued that written examinations are neither intellectually stimulating nor reliable measures of learning. Those who hold these views also argue that the tight scheduling of written examinations caused stress and anxiety. By and large, students called for the introduction of continuous assessment and the diversification of assessment activities. Second, students shared a great sense of confusion regarding what determines grades.

Significant numbers of respondents assert that grading practices and faculty expectations are consistently inconsistent, which impedes progress and cumulative learning. This sense of confusion is directly connected to grievances regarding the timeliness, quantity, frequency, and clarity of feedback.

## **6. Considerations for the LSE 2030 agenda**

Student accounts contain many insights relevant for the equity and inclusion objectives inscribed in the 2030 strategy. First, international students, students of colour, working-class students, and disabled students reported a series of specific academic challenges. Second, students debated inclusion and diversity in relation to the demographic makeup and background of both students and staff. While many praised how diverse the student body is, others thought it could be more diverse. Yet others argue that despite diversity, student networks are still separated along national and racial lines. Inclusion and diversity are also debated in relation to the curriculum as some students expressed concern over the Eurocentric nature of the curriculum and called for change in this regard. Last but not least, students concerned with diversity and inclusion often critique the way LSE treats maintenance and security staff.

### **Where do we go from here ?**

Based on these findings, we close this report with three broad series of recommendations. First, we suggest that communication between the School and the students could be improved. Second, we recommend that future internal surveys integrate new modules and questions based on student concerns identified in this report. Lastly, we suggest that students themselves occasionally make actionable recommendations which relevance should be further examined and tested by the School.