Student experiences in 2020/21

Insights from answers to open-ended questions across three surveys

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October 2021

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 What is it like to be a student at LSE?

What is it like to be a student at LSE? This report describes in great detail how students feel about and narrate their educational experiences. This look into their perspectives is more relevant now than ever as university students have been deeply affected by the pandemic.

1.2 Data sources

This report analyses student responses to three open-questions (table 1) across three programme-level surveys administered in 2021. These are: the Undergraduate Survey (n=1381), the National Student Survey (n=1161), and the Taught Postgraduate Survey (n=2660). Taken together, these three surveys contain 8598 open comments written by 5202 students. From these written accounts, we can learn about the stories, perceptions and experiences that lie behind the statistics derived from the same surveys.

NOTIONS	SURVEY ITEMS
Positive experiences	Looking back on the experience, are there any particularly positive aspects you would like to highlight?
Negative experiences	Looking back on the experience, are there any particularly negative aspects you would like to highlight?
Areas of improvements	What single aspect of LSE would you most want to improve, in order to enhance the experience of future students?

Table 1 Themes and wording of open-ended questions

1.3 Focus areas

In this report, we present findings on 6 thematic areas. While students address all sides of their experiences in the comments, we focus on the themes that appeared more frequently, elicited stronger emotions, or are identified as important in the LSE 2030 agenda.

1.4 Data presentation

One primary objective of the report is to render student stories, experiences, and truths. We therefore quote their words when these illustrate key patterns. Unless specified otherwise, quotation marks always signal original material retrieved from the database. These quotes can involve strong language and

disparaging views. While we chose to make these negative accounts visible in the report, readers should keep in mind that these are student views, not our own.

1.5 Tensions in the data

We advise readers to pay attention to the tensions that appear in the data. First, disagreements *between* student accounts are common. While some views are fairly widespread, others are debated, sometimes in virulent terms. For instance, students hold diverging views regarding what diversity and inclusion mean and why it matters. Second, there are dissonances *within* individual accounts. For example, students can (and often do) hold together gratitude towards their teachers, disappointment with their social life, and distrust towards unidentified School stakeholders. Simply put, their feelings may not be unequivocally negative or positive. Keeping this in mind is important to interpret the findings reported here.

1.6 Outline

Chapter 2 explores how the pandemic affected the student experience. **Chapter 3** moves to the analysis of the area of school climate, personal relations, feelings of inclusion and comfort around peers. **Chapter 4** addresses the affect expressed towards the School. Here, we unpack how students describe the quality of the bond between the School and its students. **Chapter 5** surveys how students experience teaching and learning at the School. **Chapter 6** focuses on what students write about assessment activities, grading practices and feedback procedures. **Chapter 7** brings together student comments that relate to key themes and objectives of the LSE 2030 agenda. **Chapter 8** closes the report with recommendations of what we think are valuable projects and avenues for further investigation based on the report's findings. Appendixes involve highlights of the report and further details on the research process.

1.7 Authors and contributors

This report is written for the Teaching Quality Assurance and Review Office (TQARO). The data analysis has been managed and conducted by Frida Timan and Benjamin Brundu-Gonzalez. Sahar Asif (Graduate Intern in the Academic Registrar's Division and Planning Division) has also contributed to data analysis in NVivo. The report is written by Frida Timan and Benjamin Brundu-Gonzalez, with contributions from Sahar Asif and Christopher Llewelyn where indicated. The report has benefitted from regular discussions among the authors, and from feedback from Thomas Hewlett in TQARO and Ellen Austin in the Planning Division.

2 ADJUSTING TO THE PANDEMIC: “It has not exactly been a “fun” year”

A prominent theme in student responses was the experience of the pandemic. This does perhaps not come as a surprise, as the pandemic has impacted everything from how students learn, their social lives, to their actual physical location during their studies. In this section, we draw out and summarize the main themes, experiences and opinions in the data. We do so through outlining students’ narratives of how LSE handled the pandemic generally. We then move on to describe the particulars of learning remotely, paying particular attention to online teaching and learning, hybrid teaching and learning, and being assessed online. We further analyse narratives regarding the LSE campus and students’ mental health during the pandemic. We close with describing the calls made for reduced fees in light of the pandemic, their motivations and rationales.

2.1 Experience of how LSE did “generally”

> “I think the university responded to the pandemic situation very well, and the transition to online learning and assessment was smooth.”

> “While I appreciate that the coronavirus pandemic has been highly disruptive; LSE's handling has been abysmal both in absolute terms and in relation to other universities.”

> “I think corona is a huge negative on education as a whole, it's not the uni's fault just the situation.”

Whether the School handled the pandemic well is debated in the data. Many are confident that LSE did the best it could to navigate an uncertain time, while others find that the School’s response was insufficient or lacking in quality. The one thing that stands out in positive comments is that the move to online teaching in Lent term 2021 worked well. The communication surrounding this shift, and the general infrastructure to support it (Moodle, Zoom accounts, etc.) appear to have been in place for students from the start, which made the transition straightforward. The statements that express that LSE handled the pandemic poorly often point out the many changes LSE’s COVID-19 policy went through over the year, and a lack of consistent information. There is also significant disappointment with online assessment, and some online teaching.

2.2 Online teaching and learning

> “...online teaching was not as efficient as in person teaching which definitely affected the quality of education.”

> “I don't see why a virtual learning experience could compare to a physical one.”

> “Everything being on Zoom was difficult, but I understand the necessity for it.”

> “Some teachers went above and beyond to make the experience more engaging despite the weirdness of the situation.”

Unsurprisingly, many students point to the limitations of remote learning, even when they also praise the efforts administrators and teachers made to facilitate the transition. In response to survey questions about their negative experiences at LSE, and what could be improved, many students simply referenced online teaching and a move back to in-person teaching. Zoom classes and online lectures (both live and recorded) are seen as more challenging than their in-person counterparts. Some of the reasons for this include the difficulty of maintaining focus while studying online, remotely and/or solitarily, and the presumed lack of knowledge among lecturers and teachers on how to teach and engage students in an online environment. Further, students have experienced lecturers “checking out” and using their pre-recorded lectures from last year. This has frustrated some students, making them feel like their teachers did not care about them.

It is indisputable that online learning is seen as a lower-quality substitute for in-person learning, but there are aspects of it that students appreciate. This includes being allowed to work at one's own pace, and having lectures recorded, so for example key terms can be revisited during the course, and in preparation for the exams. A handful of students further express that online learning has worked better than in-person alternatives, often because the bar to participation is lower as there is a chat function and other online tools. More generally, students say that they understand why LSE had to conduct hybrid sessions and eventually move education completely online. Students further acknowledge that the lecturers and teachers “went above and beyond” to make the online experience as good as possible.

2.3 Barriers to collaborative learning

> “I easily lost motivation to study most of the time because I felt left out (not being able to study on campus with my peers). It was difficult sometimes reaching out to my peers to ask them questions concerning the courses we were taking because there was minimum contact (only email addresses), even with which people were unresponsive.”

> “Furthermore, during LT Zoom completely removed the possibility of causal exchange of ideas with our teachers, instead placing it in strict and inflexible office hour format. This format cannot replicate the in person environment, as it is quite unlikely that someone books office hours if they do not already have a topic of conversation in mind. In a classroom environment, these conversations happen organically.”

Across the board, both undergraduate and postgraduate students feel that online learning has inhibited both connection and collaboration with peers and professors. For students, what has been lost is the opportunity to learn from informal discussions about the course, the readings, and the assignments.

Moreover, students also say they felt isolated and lonely due to online learning. Some postgraduate students even explain that they do not know anyone in their programme. Overall, students contend that they have had to navigate their education on their own to a larger extent than under normal circumstances.

Furthermore, postgraduates also worry that this lack of in-person meetings will be detrimental to their career development. Postgraduates mention this far more often than undergraduates. Students who make these statements argue that they find it hard to ask academics for recommendations as they did not get a chance to connect with them fully, and often doubt lecturers would even know who they are. The lack of opportunities to network with peers on the programme and students across the School is also prominent among postgraduate students, and a source of stress as it causes concerns about future employment and education opportunities.

2.4 Hybrid teaching and learning

> "I would have to say the ability to have in person seminars during Michaelmas term was probably the most positive aspect of the program in these COVID times."

> "I think the hybrid classes sounded like a good idea in theory but the execution was not great primarily due to technical difficulties. Most professors either found ways around it or were unable to find solutions resulting in students on zoom unable to experience the class proper."

> "... failed hybrid sessions did little to help those online. If anything they missed out on a whole term of learning and were not considered at all."

In this section, we draw on the student narratives that describe being in classes that were conducted simultaneously in-person and on Zoom. Here, there is a clear distinction between the perspectives of students who joined these sessions in person and those who joined them online. The main benefit of the hybrid model is identified as providing the opportunity to be on campus during the pandemic, which gave some students the opportunity to connect, build social networks and learn collaboratively, which they were grateful for when their studies went completely remote in Lent term 2021.

On the flip side, several statements from students joining these sessions remotely portray another image of hybrid classes. These students sometimes felt overlooked and forgotten about in the hybrid setting. For them, technical challenges (often having to do with microphones and sound), or teachers' inability to convene a conversation between those online and those in the room inhibited their ability to participate in, and sometimes even hear, what was going on in classes. As such, hybrid sessions have been a mixed bag for students in practice. Overall, however, the School's effort to ensure in-person teaching where possible is, celebrated by students.

2.5 Pandemic assessments

Students make many spirited comments about assessment during the pandemic. In this sub-section, we explore prominent experiences of such.

2.5.1 Lack of no-detriment policy

> "It feels as though our input is shot down at every hurdle especially when it comes to exams. LSE has refused to introduce a no detriment policy in light of COVID which has added to the overall stress of the situation and shows its utter disregard for the students of the school."

Students are very disappointed that LSE did not implement a *no-detriment* policy. Undergraduate students especially are prone to mention this as a major issue. They claim that this is particularly troubling as they believe other universities in the Russell Group adopted no-detriment policies. Students often express that LSE was the only UK university, or only university within the Russell Group, that did not adopt a no-detriment policy. Students argue that this has generated mental health difficulties such as stress and anxiety, an unfair disadvantage compared to graduates from other universities, and a sensation that the university does not care about them.

2.5.2 The School's no-disadvantage policy

*This sub-section was written in collaboration with Christopher Llewellyn.

While students often complain about the lack of *no-detriment* policy, there is only a handful of mentions of the *no-disadvantage* policy (2020) and/or the *assessment support package* (2021). One student expresses appreciation for such, and writes:

> "I truly felt like they catered to the needs of students by adopting flexible regulations like 7-day examinations, extensions, and generously implementing the 'no disadvantage' policy to ensure no students felt too overwhelmed by assessments compounded with the pandemic."

LSE's no-disadvantage policy differed from no-detriment policies used in other higher education institutions. Where no-detriment policies ensured that students could not achieve below their previously attained grades, the no-disadvantage policy ensured that cohorts as a group could not achieve lower grades than in past years. As such, the no-detriment policy is centred around the individual, while the no-disadvantage policy centres around the achievements of the cohort when considering grades. The no-disadvantage policy did however also include individualised adjustments for extensions, self-certified deferrals, Exceptional Circumstances and revised borderline regulations for classification.

Still, many students do not reference LSE's no-disadvantage policy. This suggests that students were either unaware of this effort or that this effort was seen as insufficient (especially when compared to no-detriment policies), but there is no way for us to make such inferences from the data available. What is

clear is that if students found the policy that LSE implemented insufficient compared to a no-detriment policy, they do not articulate that in their comments. Rather, they simply state that the absence of no-detriment policy is problematic, or even proof that the School disregards students.

Other steps taken to adapt the assessment system during the pandemic involved: (1) redesigned assessments, (2) increased signposting of pastoral services, (3) newly relaxed mitigating policies, such as relaxed evidential requirements when requesting an extension. The impact and experience of these measures are also debated in the data. Some students find that asking for extensions had ramifications (such as on when one would graduate) that made them unappealing. One student writes:

> "The ability to apply for an extension if you have COVID-19. I was told I wouldn't be able to get an extension in January yet, a classmate had COVID AS WELL, and they were offered the option to take the exam in the summer. All I needed was a small extension and I was advised by staff that I was eligible and that I would only be allowed to take the test next year and not graduate by December."

Simultaneously, some students describe that they appreciated the new, more lenient processes around acquiring extensions:

> "Placable management board for Extension Request - highly appreciated fact that the tough situation with a pandemic is taken into consideration."

2.5.3 Exam format

> "I feel that the 24hr-window approach to examinations is too lenient and should be restricted despite the time zone differences."

> "Also, ensure that all exams are at minimum, 24 hours, due to time zone concerns."

> "Additionally, the 24-hour exam format takes a substantial toll on student health. Although the exams are theoretically only a few hours, people want to take the fully 24 hours and you become exhausted from 3 or 4 in a row."

Timed exams are debated among students in the data. In particular, the 24-hour exams that were instated in some departments have resulted in different experiences for different students. Many students have appreciated the approach and praised the fact that it accommodated students in different time zones and those with, for example, family duties.

Others have, however, found that such exams increased stress for several reasons. These include (1) not knowing whether your classmates will use the full 24 hours rather than the few hours that instructors said the exam should take, (2) the possibility of doing better if more time than instructed is spent on the task, and (3) not sleeping for a long period of time, especially if students had several 24-hour exams

back-to-back. As such, 24-hour exams both enabled fair assessment when seeing the situations of international students studying remotely, but also had some unintended negative consequences.

2.5.4 Level of difficulty

> "One of the exam was also unjustifiably more difficult than what was presented in past papers, while I understand that this is to compensate for the online nature of the exam, I still thought that when compared to exams from the other courses that I took, this particular exam is still unfair given the difficult circumstances we are currently in. The teacher stated that they did not try to make the exam more difficult in previous years which I and other student I've talked to all disagreed with."

> "Exams are far too difficult for those who are struggling in the pandemic than those who are not. This is pretty self-explanatory when the university is the only one of the Russel Group not to have put in a safety net in place."

Another prevalent theme regarding pandemic assessment is the experienced increased difficulty of the exams during the pandemic as the format changed to open book, or a longer time was allocated for writing. Several students express that the practice exam questions were much easier than the actual exam questions, and thereby feel that they were not given a fair chance to prepare for and do well. Relatedly yet different, several students express that the assessments were too hard given the pandemic, and that it was unsympathetic of the university to run such difficult assessments during a national health crisis and lockdown. This seems to be especially articulated in relation to the first onset of the pandemic, in the spring of 2020.

Despite the above grievances, it is worth noting that mark distributions from both 2020 and 2021 show an increase in the proportion of 'good' degrees at both undergraduate (First and 2:1) and taught masters (Distinction and Merit) level. Whether or not some assessments were more difficult compared to previous years cannot be easily determined, but if we consider the final degree classifications awarded, students do not appear to have been unduly disadvantaged by the assessment regime during the pandemic.

2.5.5 Guidance and communication

> "The workload was also not communicated so you could have all these assignments, expectations and meetings suddenly announced without time to adjust. This was especially hard during COVID."

Perhaps unsurprisingly given the circumstances, students often complain about a lack of guidance, clear information and sense of planning surrounding the online assessments. They express that instructions were announced or modified at the last minute, that there was a lack of support for IT problems that arose during timed online assessments, and that this, ultimately, made it hard to perform well.

2.5.6 Distrust

> "The university as a whole does not care about us. They do not make decisions taking our opinions into account, and ignore us wherever they possibly can. I do not feel a part of the university: I feel overlooked, ignored and that all they care about is our fees. Nothing the university has done as positively benefitted me. They take the easiest route possible always, no matter the effect on us and refuse to backtrack or reconsider. I feel they have taken away what should have been an incredible 3 years from me. Specific points are many but here a few. The completely outrageous lack of any kind of no-detriment policy to help us with our exams in 2020..."

Among undergraduate students, and especially those in their third year completing the NSS, the experienced lack of empathy regarding assessments during the pandemic is seen as proof that the School does not care about them. In other words, pandemic assessments accentuated feelings of distrust (a theme we develop in a subsequent section) among LSE students.

2.6 The open and safe campus

> "I am immensely thankful to LSE about how they have handled the pandemic - keeping campus open and providing face-to-face teaching up until the third lockdown, and even in the third lockdown (now) are keeping campus facilities open subject to testing twice a week."

> "Access to the Library and CBG during the darkest days of Covid really saved my academic year."

Despite the challenges of the pandemic, students are at large very appreciative of the efforts LSE made to ensure an open and safe campus during the pandemic. In particular, the fact that campus was open during Michaelmas term of 2020, and again towards the end of Lent term 2021 is praised by many students. Students argue that this was fundamental to their mental health and academic success during this academic year. Likewise, the appreciation for LSE's testing service is highly present in the data. Students claim that this service is running smoothly and provides a sense of safety to campus interactions.

2.7 Mental health and wellbeing

> "Mental health issues are a very real concern especially during pandemic. LSE team of mental health specialists is not enough."

> "I received much support from friendly, patient and kind-hearted staff, including academic staff and school counsellors."

> "Poor mental health programmes."

Many students report that their mental health deteriorated through the pandemic. The reasons described include being isolated at home, dealing with uncertainty, having loved ones falling ill or passing away from COVID-19, personally struggling with COVID-19, or living through increased social tensions, for example in halls. It has not been an easy time for many students to navigate, and it is therefore of high importance to understand how LSE support available reached and was experienced by the students that needed it at this time.

The availability and quality of mental health and well-being services at LSE are debated in the data. Students that communicate appreciation for mental health and well-being services argue that these are easily accessible, and that relevant staff are kind and supportive. Further, the ability to defer exams due to a mental health diagnosis has also been appreciated by students.

Nevertheless, students also point to several flaws in the provision of mental health and wellbeing support. One such identified flaw is the limited number of therapy sessions students have access to. Six sessions are seen as too few to counter any mental health struggle. Another shortcoming is the lack of pastoral support and recognition of the struggles that students have had during the pandemic.

Further, some students feel that the mental health support available cannot replace policy changes that could have decreased stress during the pandemic. A student writes:

> "We don't want a wellness week to do yoga, we don't need an article on mindfulness, and we don't want to talk to LSE Life about our struggles. We need practical things that reduce anxiety and stress; we need a grade net which was given by most universities that actually care about their students; we would like there to be discussions at the very least of lowering the criteria for a 1st which our academic counterparts in renowned universities such as UCL received."

In this statement and others like it, students say that the mental health and wellbeing support available is missing the target and treats the symptoms rather than the root causes of, for example, stress and anxiety.

2.8 Calls for fee reductions

> "It is absolutely ridiculous that we are still being charged full school fees for an entire academic year online."

Finally, a great number of students call for the fees to be reduced because of the pandemic. When students make this claim, they generally invoke four arguments. First, delivering courses online reduces costs. Second, online classes are by definition of lower value and quality. Third, the quality of remote learning at LSE was particularly low. Fourth, students could not benefit from campus facilities.

3 THE SOCIAL CLIMATE: “an epidemic of loneliness”?

While this theme is not extensively covered in the NSS, survey participants have a lot to say about the quantity and quality of their interactions with other students at the School. In what follows, we explore this through three major themes. We start with one of the central findings of this research, namely what students call the “lack of community” or “community feel” at the School. Again and again, students bring up their frustration with the social side of their university experience. Second, we draw on student narratives to explain this generalised feeling of lack of community and belonging. How do students themselves make sense of their disappointing social experiences? Finally, we turn to students belonging to disadvantaged groups to show challenges that limit their opportunity for social integration, belonging, and community building at the School.

3.1 The “lack of community”

All surveys involve two close-ended questions measuring whether students feel part of a *learning communit*y. These statistics reveal low scores across all years of study (table 2). In addition, NSS data from 2017, 2018 and 2019 indicate that these low scores antedated the pandemic.

Table 2 Satisfaction with learning community (% Agree)

	NSS21	UG21	PGT21
I feel part of a community of staff and students.	46	36	50
I have had the right opportunities to work with other students as part of my programme.	60	48	59

Given this, it is perhaps not surprising that one of the most mentioned challenges of being an LSE student is the lack of community, belonging, or social interaction among students, or just that “making friends on campus is very difficult”, as one student phrased it:

> “There wasn't much a community within the LSE”
>
> “I think a lot of people at LSE are lonely.”
>
> “No sense of belonging, there is an epidemic of loneliness at LSE generally.”

This sentiment is particularly strong among undergraduate students. This lack of community is understood as a long-standing issue that has been brought to the School’s attention many times but is yet to be resolved. Students argue that this lack of cohesion has deteriorated their mental health as it left them without a much needed support network to face the challenges of a demanding education.

Overall, many students express disappointment regarding the social side of their student life. While they had hoped to broaden their social circles and to feel part of a community, this has not been realised at the LSE.

3.2 The sources of the problem

What explains this ”lack of community”? Students often grapple with this question and offer five tentative responses in their narratives.

3.2.1 The “competitive culture”

A central characteristic of the social interactions among students is what is described as “toxic” competitiveness. This should not be confused with academic challenge, which many students openly value. Rather, several students describe a social environment in which students compete over, among other things: (a) teacher’s attention in class time, (b) internships and jobs, (c) being the smartest, most well-informed and knowledgeable. In these statements, success at LSE is measured in excellence as compared to your peers, rather than to your own goals and past performance.

> “The environment gets extremely toxic due to the competitiveness.”

> “Provide a better community feel to LSE. Often it feels like the academic rigour of the university and its competitive environment is prioritised over the wellbeing of the students, preventing some from reaching their full potential.”

> “The culture at LSE (high pressure, competitive and focus on internships) sometimes undermines ability to create lasting relationships with peers.”

Students point to several negative consequences of this atmosphere. Firstly, it creates class interactions in which students feel inhibited to ask for clarifications, as they feel ashamed for needing such. This drastically impacts the learning environment of many students, who may already be struggling with their education. One student writes:

> “classes and seminars can be so competitive that you are more worried about saying something just to get a mark or the teachers attention rather than actually learning and absorbing what is being said. This has caused great anxiety in me; I had a really bad imposter syndrome coming to LSE. Everyone just seemed really smart without really trying, whereas I had to put in so much effort just to get a decent grade.”

Secondly, students express that this competitiveness creates a climate in which they compete instead of helping each other out. This hinders opportunities for collaborative learning between peers. Thirdly, students call our attention to how this competitiveness has stood in the way of forming personal

relationships between peers. One student describes: "*it is this idea that in order to be successful or the 'best* [discipline redacted for anonymization] *student', you need to drag other people down.*"

3.2.2 The "corporate" and "career-oriented" environment

Students often describe a disproportionate pressure to secure internships and improve their career prospects. Whether this originates in students themselves or in curricular features is hard to deduce from the data. In any case, this "corporate" or "career-focused" environment reinforces competition and comparison between students. This has repercussions on both academic and social sides of student life as students channel much time and energy into career goals and compete for internships and job offers:

> "The obsession LSE students have with their careers is hard to conceal and directly or indirectly manifests itself in many of their social interactions on campus. It's hard to relax when you're on campus and detach yourself from the career pressure that the LSE student body creates."

> "Community feel and personal relationships with peers is lacking. People seem to only want to come here for a job rather than a lifelong experience and LSE doesn't help increase engagement."

Likewise, the School and various departments are reported to focus their event-organizing efforts on career fairs and networking opportunities. While appreciated, the lack of balance between these types of events and what is described as a more "holistic" university experience creates a large amount of stress and pressure in students. This emphasis on careers is further seen as diverting attention from other possible gains from a university education such as building long-lasting relationships and shifting one's perspective on the world. As one student puts it:

> "The university lacks almost any feel of community but rather one big ladder in which you're a rung for people to step on top of. It prides itself on its competitive spirit and is renowned for its employer reputation; however, this is its greatest downfall and it [redacted] the soul of it".

3.2.3 The lack of social events

> "Have more social events to get to know peers better, particularly from other courses."

Students state that there is currently a lack of events at the School, and that that the School administration should put on more events that are (a) purely social (b) interactive and (c) bring together students from different programmes, departments or years of study. In other words, such events are seen as capable of solving issues of isolation, loneliness, and lack of community that students experience at the School.

> "The only other time in which I got to meet new people was at the Treasure Hunt, which I really liked. I would suggest LSE to organise more events of this type, and not necessarily only for first years!"

3.2.4 The lack of social spaces on campus

Students also point to physical obstacles limiting their ability to meet other students and form social bonds.

> "The social aspect of the university has been weaker than other universities. I feel there need to be more social spaces on campus, cheap coffee, bars, and places to get good food at cost, so students are inclined to hang around campus rather than disperse to other parts of London."

> "LSE lacked a hub for students - unfortunately, it can feel like moving between an open plan offices."

> "It's depressing that the library basement is the hub of student social life on campus."

Several students argue that there is a lack of physical campus space to congregate in and that this may be one of the root causes for the lack of social belonging at the School. Some statements further identify exactly what spaces they would appreciate. These include (but are not limited to) (a) space to rest and relax between classes on campus, as campus seats often are full, (b) "cheap" bars, cafés, and food places on campus (where "cheap" is the central characteristic), (c) a place that is purely for social interaction, such as an LSE common room, and (d) sports and music facilities. Students thereby try to come up with solutions to the issue of the "epidemic of loneliness" that they observe at the School.

3.2.5 The "impossibly intense" workload

In my cases, students write about their struggle to find a balance between developing a rewarding social life and keeping up with an "overwhelming", "very high", "heavy", "huge", "inhumane", "unreasonably demanding" or "impossibly intense" workload:

> "If I want to engage in a hobby, I should be able to do so without being anxious that I am not doing enough work (when I was working all day)"

> "Very high workload that infringes on ability to engage in student life."

Some students explain that after "chasing endless reading lists" or addressing deadlines "piling up on each other", they find themselves with "little time of enjoy life outside of work". Some reach the conclusion that the only way to address this double bind is to make a choice between being academically or socially successful:

> "the frequency of essays alongside the workload of readings pretty much necessitates a choice between falling behind on work or having a social life"

3.3 Inequality and social integration

> "Try to actually make it a friendly, nice environment rather than a breeding ground for the global rich community and their elitism."

Previous sections identified general mechanisms behind the experience of lacking community, social interaction and belonging at the School. However, this general sketch only tells part of the story. Even a cursory exploration of student accounts reveals the weight of background and identity characteristics on belonging and social interaction. This section therefore concentrates on the social experiences of students who fall into a numerical or symbolic minority group at the School. These statements are limited in number but illustrate important aspects of school life. We bring them to the fore here to illustrate areas in which the School can work to increase its social inclusivity.

3.3.1 Socioeconomic class

Students who define themselves as working-class often elaborate on how their background is negatively impacting their sense of belonging and their social interactions with other students. Three main marginalisation mechanisms emerge from their accounts. First, they express that they do not have much in common with their privileged peers. One student forcefully describes this cultural gulf:

> "The LSE is elitist. As a working class student, it has been nigh on impossible for me to integrate within the school community due to the skewed perspective of staff and students alike. Fresher's activities included a champagne reception. Class discussions are held in what I have deduced must be a secret language they teach at private schools."

Second, their narratives describe specific interactions or incidents during which students or members of staff expressed or manifested class prejudice: *"A member of staff was classist and referred to LSE as a place where 'rich kids unite' and this is a good thing."* Third, financial barriers limit their opportunity for social interaction Reported examples of economic costs to social activities involve society membership fees, the high cost of food and drinks on campus, and lack of affordable housing. Moreover, students that work part-time to pay for their education state that they may have gotten through their studies but missed the ability to socialize due to their financial situation. Because of this, these students generally call for enhanced financial support schemes.

3.3.2 Race and ethnicity

> "[...] makes racist and sexist comments that sound 'politically correct' but are deep down still racist and sexist. Stop this. Please. It's not funny and they are not jokes."

There are also statements contending that students experience interpersonal racism during their time at LSE. Some students of colour state that teachers see and interact with them as stereotypes of their respective nations of origin or skin colour, and that peers and other students "are racist".

3.3.3 Disability

> "All of the social aspects of uni have been lacking for me at LSE. There isn't much on offer for disabled students as accessibility is not a priority for most societies."

Statements by disabled students often state that that having a disability decreases one's opportunity to part take in the social life at the School for three major reasons. Firstly, students note that societies do not always ensure accessibility, which makes participation in specific events physically impossible. Secondly, students claim that their peers have sometimes been insensitive. Lastly and relatedly, there is a shortage of experienced staff to turn to in order to address these issues.

4 AFFECT TOWARDS THE SCHOOL: “They don’t care about you”

This section looks into the quality of the relationship between the school and the students as students themselves describe it. We found that for many students, the School is either unwilling or unable to protect and promote their interests. This lack of trust takes many forms, and is more common among undergraduate than postgraduate students. Below, we describe a continuum of distrust with two salient poles. *Soft distrust* characterises accounts wherein students simply report the feeling of not being heard, without making strong suppositions regarding the cause of this. *Hard distrust* encompasses negative moral evaluations and inferences wherein the School administration or relevant stakeholders are dishonest, misleading and care more about prestige and money than about “student satisfaction”.

4.1 Soft distrust

Distrust begins with the feeling that major School stakeholders *do not listen to students*. The sense that student voices and concerns are not heard appears again and again in student accounts:

> “LSE is making me feel tiny and insignificant, and my mental health is doing very poorly because of it. It is not up to the students to force themselves to feel heard and accepted by LSE, it is up to LSE to make its students feel heard and accepted.”

> “The team responsible for ensuring student satisfaction are completely out of touch with how students are feeling.”

> “Consistent evasion of student concerns.”

Consistent with this sense of being unheard, some testimonies point to practical barriers to efficient communication between students and the School. These obstacles, however, are not necessarily connected to features of School organisations. For example, some students articulate an acerb critique of the Students’ Union. While the SU is an independent body, they find that they cannot count on it to forward their concerns because key Students’ Union members work for their own benefit rather on behalf of the student body.

> “The Student's Union is not representative of anything close to popular opinion in LSE, and it seems to be surviving through a small clique of incumbents encouraging their younger friends of a similar political persuasion to run for posts when the time comes.”

Other avenues for dialogue between the School are equally insufficient or deficient. For example, some students stress that they cannot rely on student representatives because while they usually relay student concerns, their impact is restricted.

> “Listen to student representatives and take their feedback; those who represented were often ignored, or their insight did not impact departmental and school policies.”

The above accounts stress how failing communications channels play into the feeling of not being heard. Many students, however, reach more pessimistic conclusions and point to more fundamental problems. “Overall, I have a strong impression that LSE is a student unfriendly institution”, one student says. While the phrasing stands out, this quote captures a feeling that many students share.

4.2 Hard distrust

For many students, School stakeholders *do not listen* to students because they *do not care* about students. This feeling is often articulated in unequivocal and categorical ways

> “The university as an institution comes across as caring very little for the student community. One can easily feel like they have no association to a university community.”

> “I would want the higher-ups to demonstrate that they actually care about their students.”

> “LSE is so clearly an institution in which little care or regard is given to students' well-being.”

> “LSE needs to show that they actually care about the students,”

The experience of not being heard, listened to, or cared about is often connected to negative inferences about the true goals and priorities of the institution. Specifically, students often claim that the pursuit of economic profits and reputational gains is what truly guide School policy, despite statements to the contrary:

> “The administration could demonstrate actual care for students and staff above profits and reputation. This has been the most disappointing aspect of my experience at the LSE.”

> “They give the impression that they are only interested in money and brand as opposed to the university and its students.”

> “I often feel that students are taken for granted, that LSE's first priorities are financial”

In this kind of account, students further argue that the School operates like a “corporation” or a “business” that is run with a “commercial mindset” and that exploits students as nameless ”clients” or “profit units” instead of treating them as “people” and members of a “community”:

> “I feel zero ties to LSE and the entire process has felt pathetically transactional: school fees for a degree.”

> “I do not feel a part of the university: I feel overlooked, ignored and that all they care about is our fees.”

> “LSE clearly not caring for students, seeing us as a cash cows”

For some students, the feeling of being financially exploited even takes a more extreme form. These contend that their education is “not worth the money it costs”, say that they “lost money”, question how fees are used, or even claim they were swindled.

> “Has the LSE really put the £9250 to use this last year?”
>
> “For me the experience I had does not satisfy the costs. […]I therefore feel a level of resentment.”
>
> “It feels like the school does not respect us as their students. Not much communication is being made and I don't know where my money went into."

For many students, along with the logic of economic profit comes the logic of prestige. In many instances, however, the exact ways in which the search of reputational gains harms students remains vague and unspecified:

> “I sometimes get the impression that LSE is so focused on their reputation as an 'elite institution' […] It is possible to be an elite educational institution *and* to care for your students and to make processes that reflect that care!”
>
> “I feel like the prestige of the school is privileged compared to the students' well-being.”
>
> “The school puts itself before its students in virtually every circumstance […]. The value of 'the LSE degree' is prioritised over the well-being of the students”

Many students interpret the School’s focus on their career prospects and achievements as a sign of this quest for prestige. To be clear, students appreciate what their credentials contribute to their labour market value. Still, students express disappointment with being seen as future graduates boosting School statistics rather than learners:

> “The utilitarian approach to higher education, which sacrifices the essence of academic teaching”
>
> “It feels like a training ground for future investment bankers, not a university trying to impart knowledge so that its graduates will do some good to the world.”

Last but not least, the ultimate form of distrust appears when students describe key School stakeholders as insincere or manipulative. In these student accounts, any rhetoric about student wellness and development is described as ”performative” talk, “lies”, “false promises”, or “lip service”.

> “Don't lie about teaching, housing, Covid and in general... Students are not stupid.”
>
> “LSE do not (and will not) listen to us and our concerns, they swathe us in buzzwords of integrity/sensitivity/and do nothing in practice.”
>
> “Does not look like LSE actually cares about its students but only pretends to do so”

In the same vein, students suspect that existing initiatives regarding mental health or inclusion reflect reputational purposes rather than genuine intentions:

> “Most of the 'help' they give towards mental health, and towards poorer students is tokenistic at best, and represents no real substantive effort to improve students' wellbeing.”

5 TEACHING AND LEARNING: “I learned a huge amount”

Available statistics suggest that teaching is an area where the School excels: 82% of NSS respondents and 89.6% of PGT21 respondents reported that they were satisfied or very satisfied with the teaching on their course. While these statistics are very positive, they leave one key question unanswered: what exactly do students appreciate about their academic experiences at LSE? Answering this question is important to identify and promote good practices. In what follows, we first survey what students say about teaching to identify practices and skills that students deem essential to good teaching. We then survey what students themselves describe as the key gains and positive changes resulting from their training at the School.

5.1 Teachers and teaching

> “Teaching, on the whole, is of an incredible standard; both in terms of the knowledge of the professors and how much they care about the students.”

> “The most positive thing about my programme is that every day I'm excited to learn because I know that my professors will show me something valuable.”

In the survey, comments about teachers and teaching are often very positive, sometimes nuanced, and rarely unequivocally negative. Students usually express gratitude and admiration for their teachers, often in very strong terms. Less often, they point to failing teachers or poor teaching practices. In what follows, we take a close look at these comments to better understand what makes teaching good or bad in the eyes of students.

5.1.1 What makes for appreciated teaching?

Being an expert

> “Excellent staff with great knowledge of their subject and keen to educate the next generation.”

> “The teaching and the teachers have been very good, I've benefited from the fact they are experts in the field.”

Valued teachers are knowledgeable. The breadth and depth of their knowledge is both detectable in the lectures, course design, and their answers to student questions. Relatedly yet different, students also find that teachers at the School are “experts in their respective fields”, or “world-class” researchers. Those students feel like they are learning from the ‘best of the best’. Some students appreciate that researchers invite their own research into the classroom, as it, as one student expressed it “brings the course to life”.

Proving approachable and caring

> "The teachers are extremely kind and caring, and are amazing as individuals but also as educators. They clearly care about their students and go above and beyond to reach out to them to make sure they are doing well."

Students appreciate teachers that are "approachable", "caring", and "supportive". Teachers who are described in these words make students feel welcome to ask questions, to request their help and to reach out to them via email. Further, they reach out to students to make sure they are getting on well in the course, provide advice on aspects of academic life beyond the course (such as future studies), and are attentive to students' wellbeing. Last but not least, they also provide deep and supportive feedback on students' assignments.

Showing passion and enthusiasm

> "The professors teaching each course were very passionate and this encouraged me to do better and helped me stay focused and do better."

Appreciated teachers are passionate and enthusiastic about the content they teach, which motivates students. Students rarely specify what passion and enthusiasm mean in context, but these qualities are highly valued. Enthusiasm and passion do, nevertheless, appear to be related to another central characteristic of praised teachers: that they make the content interesting. An undergraduate student writes: "I have felt that all of my lecturers and class teachers really love their subject and teaching it, and it makes learning even the slightly more mundane subject matter enjoyable".

Giving clear explanations

> "[redacted] is the clearest, most talented professor I have ever had on any subject, period. they made difficult things seem simple, fielded questions effortlessly, provided intuitions that no textbook ever does, and made […] I did not even do particularly well in the course, but I have rarely enjoyed learning as much as I enjoyed learning from [them]"

Teachers are also praised for being patient with students, and able to deliver complex ideas in a digestible manner. Clear explanations are particularly appreciated in relation to exams and assessments. These teachers are said to make the link clear between course material and the upcoming assessments on the course.

Boosting peer-to-peer interaction

> "I always felt welcomed and invited to share my thoughts in seminar and in lecture, as the instructors did a fantastic job of creating a balanced atmosphere."

> “I really enjoyed the [class discussions]. A great opportunity for everyone to bounce ideas off one another and put the course content into action"

Students value teachers who encourage discussion, interaction, and other forms of exchange during classes and lectures. However, what teachers should do to foster these interactions is not clear, as some students like teachers who call on them to speak up when others clearly dislike teachers who “cold-call” them.

Encouraging students to outdo themselves

> “my teachers are really great at encouraging you to go beyond the syllabus.”
>
> “great teachers pushing us to produce challenging and stimulating work."

Finally, students value teachers who are motivational and encourage them to produce their best work. Students praise those teacher who have encouraged them to “go beyond the syllabus” and to “think”. The positive challenge (i.e., a challenge combined with the belief that one can persevere) is central to this characteristic of the praised teacher.

5.1.2 What makes for disliked teaching?

> “Some teachers don't respond to, or take extremely long times to respond to emails, making it difficult to complete summative assessments.”
>
> “Some of scholars were very rude, passive aggressive and simply unpleasant. This part was very disappointing.”

While positive comments prevail, students also mobilize the survey to criticise some teachers and teaching practices. What students dislike about teachers and teaching is often the inverted of what they appreciate: disliked teachers are not approachable, they do not explain things clearly, and are dismissive rather than encouraging and supportive of students. But we also find additional characteristics that students dislike.

Using lifeless teaching techniques

> “I have had a few lecturers who spent much of the lectures reading off the slides which I found made it really hard to engage.”
>
> “I feel the teaching in most of the courses so far has been textbook style, I would prefer if the material was more up to date with current events and did not focus as much on textbooks."

Centrally, disliked teachers don’t teach in a manner that facilitates learning. Characteristics of such poor teaching delivery include, but are not limited to, simply reading off slides, relying excessively on textbooks, filling class time with student presentations, or only covering solutions to problem sets without

deeper engagement. Some students argue that this is a result of teachers not having received actual pedagogical training.

Covering too much too quickly

Students also dislike teachers who “go through questions too quickly”, who are “a bit too fast when explaining concepts”, and whose classes and lectures feel “rushed” or “like a race to finish”. Students are quick to link these problems to original flaws in course design, *i.e.* incorporating “too much material for the time [the module] was meant to run”. Paradoxical though it may seem, this is a source of frustration both for less advanced students who feel “overburdened” by the quantity of information, and for more advanced students who feel that key topics are “glossed over” instead of being explored “in depth”:

> “It feels like an express degree. Most of my courses were about interesting and demanding but it all goes so fast that there is hardly any chance to go into in-depth discussions.”

Being inaccessible or unapproachable

> “The lecturer would never respond to emails and I understand as a supervisor they are not reachable which has given students anxiety. This is not to say they aren't a lovely and engaging person. However not satisfied by their teaching or lack of availability.”

> “Multiple staff members not replying to multiple emails. Directly caused me to not want to ask for help and potentially damaged grades. Completely disheartened by this”

Unsurprisingly, students also frown upon teachers who feel “unapproachable”, unavailable or unresponsive. This involves teachers who dodge emails, miss office hours, or whose behaviour dissuades students from seeking their support. Often, awkward class interactions (e.g. being “cold-called”) feed into the feeling that a teacher is unapproachable. One student writes: “I asked a question once and I got a response which started with a 'dig' at me for not understanding, and the assumption made in the dig was incorrect. As a result I don't feel comfortable to ask questions”.

Sometimes, however, barriers to access result from programme-level regulations or organisational constraints rather than from the teachers themselves. Students can find it frustrating when they can’t turn to teacher s with questions regarding the exams after Lent term. Lack of interaction with teachers outside of term time is also a large source of disappointment for MSc students working on their dissertations during the summer months.

Treating teaching as a side activity

> “Students are more than able to feel and understand when professors are not interested in teaching.”

Also, students dislike teachers who seem to treat teaching like a “side activity” to research or other academic duties. This makes students feel “distanced” and not prioritized by their teachers. One student writes: “Some of the professors seemed to be very distant with much more interest in their research than helping students”. As such, this is related to another characteristic of the disliked teacher: that they don’t seem to care about education at large, the course, or their students. In student narratives, these teachers don’t update the material, don’t speak enthusiastically in lectures, and don’t encourage student participation or reflection.

Shutting down pluralism

> “More variety of perspectives during discussions (even if they’re a bit left field) without the preference of tutors towards one particular way of thinking.”

Last but not least, another frequent source of discontent is the way some teachers (fail to) handle pluralism, contradiction and disagreement. Students complain about teachers who leave little room for intellectual divergences, trace a clear line between “right and wrong answers”, and do not let them explore literatures, models or theories that steer away from the course perspective:

> “Also, I did not feel like I refined my personal skills but rather learned what the professor wants to read/hear and applied this to receive good grades.”

In the same vein, students complain about those instructors who refuse to integrate student feedback, even when a great number of students agree on areas of improvement. Here, students describe that instructors either ignore or reject suggestions and critiques, especially those regarding the excessive workload or the scope of assigned readings.

5.2 Learning and personal growth

> “Academic engagement is exactly what I wanted in a university experience. I was challenged to grow and attribute who I am today to LSE.”

In addition to their comments on teachers and teaching practices, students write a great deal about what their classes have contributed (or not) to their personal developments. Below we review the salient features of these comments.

5.2.1 Positive learning outcomes

Learning “a lot" of “intellectually stimulating” things

> “Classes were fantastic. I learned so much and the teaching quality was phenomenal.”

> “I really enjoyed the content of the course.”

Time and time again, students simply state, often with much enthusiasm and gratitude, that they learn "a lot" from attending LSE and that they have "loved" or "enjoyed" their studies. In these empathically positive accounts, students stress that the topics they learn are "interesting" and intellectually stimulating. Most don't specify what this intellectual stimulation consists of and write statements similar to that of this student: "The course is very intellectually stimulating" and this student: "My course was very interesting, and I really enjoyed many of the topics presented".

Changing perspectives

> "The critical mind that embedded in all courses really helps to shape my worldview."
>
> "Each course that I took challenged me but also opened up new ways of thinking and seeing the world. I think I will be a better equipped to understand the world's problems and help shape society for the better as a result."

Other students are more specific in their statements, and describe that their learning has shifted their perspectives or world view. Students express a lot of gratitude and appreciation for this outcome of their education. One student describes: "I was taught a whole new way of thinking. I have had my outlook expanded thanks to my lecturers". Another student states: "Certain modules have also been genuinely transformative".

Being challenged

> "Very intellectually stimulating and has always provided a good challenge."
>
> "Academically rigorous, and has definitely pushed me intellectually."

A characteristic of appreciated learning at LSE is also that it provided a positive challenge which led to increased learning and a positive self-understanding. One student writes:

> "The intellectual stimulation received on the course has been outstanding in places. I have been pushed to achieve my best work, and have observed tangible progress across three years".

This idea of a positive challenge relates to those praised teachers that encourage students to do their best work, as the following statement makes clear: "I enjoyed the classes and my teachers really pushed me to produce my best work". In other words, the challenging nature of learning at LSE can be positive, when it leads to progress, and is supported by a praised teacher.

5.2.2 Missed learning opportunities

While those students who laud their learning experiences tend to share similar views, there is more variation among those who describe what was unsatisfactory in their learning experiences. Below we review these debates.

When the course is "too academic" or "too practical"

> "Felt like course material wasn't really applicable to the real world. Too theoretical."

Students disagree over whether courses are too theoretical or too practical. Some students find that analytical depth is lacking on their course. Sometimes, this is seen as the result of the breadth of the courses (this view is particularly prominent among postgraduate students), or of prioritizing practical applications. Other students, however, would appreciate more applied skills, such as programming languages (e.g., phyton or R) and Excel. It is therefore hard to conclude what changes students desire as a group.

When the course is "too easy" or "too difficult"

Some students disagree about whether the courses are too hard or too easy. Postgraduates state that courses are too easy more often than undergraduates do, and vice versa. A postgraduate student writes:

> "Personally, I found my final undergraduate year far more challenging and interesting. I think that this program will not be sufficiently challenging if it continues to accept candidates with no background whatsoever in either the methods or the theory".

Having said that, this is not to suggest that undergraduate programmes should be made 'easier' and postgraduate programmes 'harder' as both views are present in both groups.

When the workload impedes learning

> "Too much work. Students are always chasing after endless reading lists."

> "LSE rewards work at the cost of everything else. Very often, the workload was far too much and the mental health support is a joke leading to a very negative situation."

A number of students claim that the high workload has stalled rather than fostered their personal growth. One student writes:

> "The LSE has not allowed me to explore myself and understand the things I enjoy (other than academia). There is simply not enough time to do so on top of the constant work and stress (for example, my department did not offer a reading week)".

As such, staying on top of the workload is seen as preventing further learning rather than constituting learning itself. It is worth noting that students holding these views differ in striking ways from those who stress that learning at the School has been "challenging but rewarding". What explain such divergent perceptions of the workload is an interesting question for future internal research.

6 STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON ASSESSMENT: “Exams aren’t everything”

How do students perceive the system of academic evaluation at LSE? Perhaps unsurprisingly, comments on grades, essays and examinations are usually motivated by frustration. Among hundreds of respondents who chose to discuss their assessment experiences, only a handful make unambiguously positive comments. Below we focus on how students perceive assessment formats, grading practices and feedback procedures.

6.1 Assessment formats

In what follows we describe how students perceive assessment activities. Most frustrations are related to written examinations. Postgraduate students express this to a lesser degree as they more often write essays.

6.1.1 The weight of final exams

First, students often find that exams take too much room in the assessment regime. Even when students do not articulate a proper critique of the exam format (further elaborated below), they tend to request a more diverse portfolio of assessment activities.

> “Importance of exams to grades. Grading should incorporate more essays/projects/course work”

> “Add different methods of assessment i.e. not have 100% of the mark determined by the summer exam.”

6.1.2 The reliability of final exams

Second and relatedly, students challenge the relevance, the reliability and the validity of exams for assessing knowledge, skill or even effort. The main argument students make here is that exams evaluate “memorising and regurgitating” rather than research skills, creative thinking, and critical engagement with the course material. Relatedly, they stress that preparing for final exams reduces learning to a sequence of dull, tedious, and repetitive tasks:

> “revision is just rewatching videos you previously watched and took notes of. Very poor indeed”

> “it's a bit of a shame that exams are assessing how one learns a past paper by heart rather than how one understands a topic.”

Overall, students view written examinations as obstacles to advanced learning, content mastery and intellectual growth:

> “It sometimes felt like an A level education, we taught to prepare for the exam rather than learning as an intellectual pursuit. I wish I could have learnt more; I feel like I have so many unanswered thoughts and questions that I haven't been able to articulate due to a lack of framework to do so.”

Last but not least, students often claim that exams are not reliable and valid measures of effort, because work provided on the exam day may not reflect the work ethics students deployed (or not) throughout the year:

> “Continuous assessment does not count at all, which is unfair towards those who do the work consistently and timely.”

Consistent with this series of critiques, undergraduate students tend to note what alternative assessment formats would have contributed to their learning. In particular, students compare the limitations of written examinations with the strengths of essays. In the main, essays are praised because they require additional research, critical thinking skills, and invite a more personal appropriation of the course topics:

> “Introducing coursework (in the form of essays) would encourage students to think for themselves and evaluate the economic theories that they learn, rather than just accepting different models in order to do well in the exams.”

> “I also appreciated deeply the freedom provided to students in terms of their essay topics as I had the opportunity to dig deeper into the concepts and theories that attracted me.”

On top of being more intellectually rewarding, students argue, essays are also more useful for memorization in the long run.

> “Simply taking the time to memorise will not help to fully appreciate or even remember the materials after certain times whereas courseworks, through careful individual research, planning, writing out with sources will help to remember the materials more effectively.”

6.1.3 The scheduling of final exams

The tight scheduling of summative assessments is another major source of discontent among students. Bluntly put, they often describe an infernal cycle wherein very short periods packed with summative assessments alternate with periods of dead calm. Students suggest that this arrangement is detrimental to their learning experience and their mental health. Many talk about the “pressure” or “the stress” resulting from the accumulation of deadlines:

> “The assessments are arranged within a very specifically limited time (e.g. the submission for all of the essays are concentrated within one month), so the working pressure is extremely high. It might challenge the ability of time management and work under pressure for students, but it also brings negative effects on student's mental health”

> "My mental health really took a toll when it came to multiple deadlines being set on the same day."

While this is true for all assessment formats, including essays, frustration with scheduling reaches a peak when students write about the adequately named *exam season*. Participants often used worrying language to describe student experiences with, and psychological state during, the exam season period:

> "The last year and past two months of exams were traumatic for me"

> "Students have exam stress and I even saw students crying during this period"

Even when the tone is less alarming, an overwhelming majority argues that summative assessments should be distributed more evenly across the year:

> "Summative assignments better distributed throughout the year so not all deadlines are at once."

> "Timing of deadlines (all seem to fall on the same dates rather than be spread out)."

A final point related to exam schedule appears in student accounts. Students often find that exam dates should be released earlier. Students looking for internships, planning for holidays or international students tell us about the practical challenges that arise from late exam dates:

> "Exam time tables should be released much earlier in order to allow students to plan accordingly"

> "Informing the exam schedule and dates well in advance. The exam schedule is always announced so last minute, for example summer exams schedule released end March... which makes it difficult for international students to plan."

6.1.4 The feedback on final exams

Students usually cannot access their exam scripts nor receive individual feedback on their exam performance. This policy is not well received and generates a vast number of negative comments, especially among undergraduate students. Students talk about finding themselves alone with a number, without further details or explanations. This is particularly frustrating, one student notes, considering the weight of exams in assessment:

> "There is no feedback on exams at all. It is 100% of the grade and we see a grade without any feedback."

In many instances, students explain that this policy thwarts their efforts to learn from their mistakes. Numerical grades, they argue, reveal little or no information regarding their errors, omissions or misunderstanding. On the other hand, they often assume that exam scripts may contain helpful annotations to understand the logic behind their grade, and therefore the strengths and weaknesses of their work. This idea appears again and again in the data:

> "at least the graded papers should be made available to students after they have been assessed"

> “impossible to even see the exam papers marked, so cannot learn from mistakes.”

> “If we don't receive our final exams back, how are we supposed to learn from our mistakes.”

The consequences of this policy can stretch beyond the domains of learning and academic performance. Sifting survey responses, we find instances where students spent much time and energy seeking feedback after a disappointing exam grade. These stubborn quests for feedback, however, are generally unsuccessful. As suggested in the two responses below, the psychological cost of these unsuccessful tribulations is even higher when grades are lower than expected:

> “After disappointing first year exams, I sought feedback but didn't really have access to any. I tried reaching out to my academic advisor, because I felt really demolished, and still didn't really get any support. I was basically told that my grades were my grades and I was on my own.”

> “Academic support and feedback when it comes to exams, leaves much to be desired. I have a traumatic memory of getting an overall 2:2 for my first year and yet, the procedures at LSE made it so difficult to get any teacher give feedback on where I went wrong and how I could improve. [..] I felt absolutely lost and broken, and it went on to tear down my confidence in second and third year. I was only able to learn how to improve through reaching out to my friends. I would not wish this experience on anyone and hope LSE implements better feedback mechanisms for struggling students in future exams.”

6.2 Grades and grading

In the following, we review student responses to grades and grading practices. What do my teachers expect? How do I get a high mark? These are important questions for students.

6.2.1 The transparency of grading

Survey responses reveal a broadly shared feeling of confusion about assessment criteria and faculty expectations:

> “the constant feeling of being in the dark over how we will be assessed often leaves me anxious”

> “LSE always seems to champion its motto of understanding the causes of things. However, for undergraduate students, the more applicable motto would be to understand how to pass exams”

More generally, students report receiving grades that were unexpectedly higher or lower than they had anticipated and describe a lingering doubt regarding what makes the difference between good work and very good work.

> “every first-class grade feels like a fluke.”

> “Far more clarity and consistency on what constitutes a first class essay for each department.”

With these unexplained variations comes the feeling that grading is *consistently inconsistent*. Put differently, students believe that sheer luck plays a significant role in determining grades. Accordingly, grades and grading decisions can neither be anticipated nor be understood *a posteriori* because they are inherently random. The following accounts illustrate this perspective:

> "for one course I received a grade 17 points lower than that of a classmate while we had exactly the same results."

> "The criteria for what the professors expected the students to write were also not laid out clearly, which often made one feel that, even though they had produced a fine piece of work, they were still playing the roulette"

Of course, not all confused students reach the conclusion that grade distribution boils down to luck. In many instances, students merely state that even after two or three years, marking criteria remains "vague", "ambiguous" and "unclear".

6.2.2 The consistency of grading

How can we make sense of the confusion around faculty expectations and assessment criteria? Students accounts can help us answer these questions.

A major source of confusion is the fact that teachers hold different views regarding what constitutes good work. While students appreciate that some variation among teachers is inevitable, they find these differences excessive. Accordingly, student accounts are populated with statements pointing to the "subjective" character of grading:

> "Subjectivity in grading one teacher says one thing another says not so depends on teachers appreciation of style of writing."

> "In my course, the deemed quality of an essay is extremely subjective. Different teachers have different preferences. This is complicated to deal with, especially when four different teachers for each respective module have different expectations regarding how an essay should be written."

When students elaborate on the subjective character of evaluations, they first note that differences between teachers relate to formal expectations and definitions of good writing:

> "more cohesions about the essay writing styles preferred by the professors (e.g. one professor said that in the conclusion we should never add new information, another professor said that in the conclusion we shouldn't repeat ourselves, and that was contradictory and therefore confusing)"

> "One professor, for example, expected one thing to be included in the introduction while another was completely fine with its absence"

Sometimes, however, students refer to deeper divergences regarding the kind of material or the level of detail they should deploy:

> “The marking criteria are still not clear to me. For example, the quotation of EU treaties is appreciated by one marker as primary source, while criticised by another for being too technical.”

> “LSE IR courses have varied a lot in the Professors' understanding of IR and use of different methodologies in essay-writing and in their understanding of 'evidence'. This was reflected in a diverging and often confusing marking of essays and exams between different courses, which has been frustrating in terms of grading criteria.”

This is especially frustrating for postgraduate students in the context of their dissertation. A number of them report receiving conflicting instructions and feedback regarding central features of their research dissertation project. Given the weight of the research dissertation in their training and their final degree classification, we understand their frustrations. For instance, one student describes how they received conflicting advice on the amount of empirical material required in a high-quality dissertation:

“Another example, [redacted] telling me I could conduct 5-6 interviews for my dissertation, and a development professor telling me this was 'glorified journalism.' These depts need to sync on guidelines moving forward because the disconnect is apparent to many students and has thrown dissertations off course.” In a different vein, students also report baffling differences in how teachers use the grade scales:

> “There is evidently inconsistency in marking across the department. I have received higher grades in some courses than others, despite the feedback being less positive”

In any case, the feeling that unanticipated rules and expectations may lurk behind each new faculty member appears to generate anxiety:

> “there was no uniform approach and no uniform criteria and that proved stressful and confusing for students.”

Further, for some students, systematic variations among teachers render feedback moot and prevents progress:

> “the result was that I was adapting my writing to individual professors rather than trying to do what I had learnt to do best in writing my essays”

> “Speaking of grading, there is no transparency. I could be writing in exactly the same style and get a ten-mark difference from various teachers giving feedback. Because of this, it is difficult to measure progress, and every first-class grade feels like a fluke.”

Because of all this, both undergraduate and postgraduate students make suggestions for how to improve grading. First, many suggest that a system of checks and balances should limit the discretion of individual graders:

> "The marking system is very unfair! There must exist bias between the two markers. They did not do cross-check! You have to control the markers!"

"Streamline grading and blind-double-grade every summative essay and exam so that single 'renegade' profs cannot distort results". Second, teachers should collaborate and work towards standardising their expectations and their grading practices:

> "There should be greater consensus amongst the department on how to mark an essay and what is expected."

Third, if instructors are not willing or able to standardise their expectations, they should make their expectations explicit:

> "At the very least, each teacher should effectively communicate with the students at the beginning of the academic year what he or she expect from us in an essay."

6.3 Feedback procedures

The question of feedback appears, either explicitly or implicitly, in many student accounts. We already mentioned frustration surrounding the sheer lack of feedback following summative exams. More generally, we can assume that the general confusion surrounding what determines grades is related to feedback. This section explores in detail feedback stories and grievances. These fall into four broad categories.

6.3.1 Timeliness

First, by far the most common reported complain concerns the timing of feedback. Survey responses abound with anecdotes on untimely feedback, sometimes presented as near horror stories:

> "There was one essay, which I received no feedback for after 2 months, even though I sent an e-mail to the teacher."

> "The pace of feedback in the programme was mostly terrible, with feedback typically taking several months to be returned, even for small assignments worth 10% of a module"

In many instances, students simply write that late feedback is "annoying", "frustrating" or "irritating" in and of itself. Yet another range of comments points to the impact of delayed feedback on learning and progress:

> "I had one instance where I received my worst grade on any paper I wrote two days before a final exam, and could not discuss it with anyone. It fosters a culture of anxiety."

> "The feedback for the assignments comes too late to learn from. 10 weeks after submission, I hardly recall what I have written. I know timely feedback is very challenging for the department as a whole but it would add a lot of value in my opinion."

6.3.2 Quantity

Second, students take issue with the amount of feedback they receive. Many describe feedback as "minimal", "short", "limited", "superficial", "insufficient" or "lacking details". These adjectives are repeated *ad nauseam* throughout feedback stories. Although what they mean in context is sometimes ambiguous, students seem to take issue with the length of written or verbal feedback.

> "Assignment feedbacks are better be more detailed and specific instead of 3 sentences' feedbacks for 1500 - 3000 words of essay."

> "Only received two 10 min feedback sessions for extended essay- if this is supposed to take up to 1/8th of my course time to complete then that is woefully inadequate to learn the most from the experience"

This idea is articulated even more forcefully by postgraduate students. Often, they stress the gap between the length of their dissertation on the one hand, and the excessive concision of feedback of the other: "*Opportunity to get proper input on dissertation topic formulation and detailed feedback on the completed dissertation itself. Three sentences is not feedback*!"

6.3.3 Quality

Third, another range of accounts take issue with the quality and content of feedback. Here feedback is described as "poor", "unhelpful, "useless", "opaque", "confusing" "not constructive", or "not clear". Feedback is deemed unclear when it cannot explain how a grade was assigned or how to get a high grade:

> "The feedback is opaque and confusing. show exactly how marks are given / taken away. it […] should be easier to see exactly what has gone wrong and hasn't."

> "Asking students to achieve 'Exemplary skill' but not being able to define that other than 'We just know when we read them' is a complete mockery of the system and the academic rigour that is expected of students."

Still, students tell us little about the actual feedback practices that they have in mind when they formulate these critiques. Likewise, positive feedback stories express gratitude without pointing to specific pedagogical strategies:

> "Brilliant feedback from academics."

> "We do not write as many essays as compared to our chums at Oxbridge, but we do receive very detailed feedback on these (formative) essays"

6.3.4 Frequency

Fourth, students often wish they were given more opportunities to receive feedback. More frequent reviews of their strength and weaknesses would both reassure them and help them orient their efforts:

> "Feedback on problem sets should be regular rather than a select few every term. This would make it easier to know how to improve."

> "More opportunities to hand in work and receive feedback. In some modules I only receive feedback 3 times a term."

It is worth noting that complains about the low frequency of feedback resonate with frustration regarding the weight of exams and the advantages of continuous assessment. Often, students explain that more regular feedback opportunities would alleviate the anxiety related to final exams:

> "Part of the issue is that the formative/summative system means there are very few opportunities to practice your writing before major assessments."

> "I feel I did do not as well in my assessments as I hoped to and was completely surprised and disappointed with my grades. If there had been perhaps more opportunities to write, share work and receive feedback more frequently I would have been able to know my strengths and weaknesses better."

7 INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY: CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE LSE 2030 AGENDA

This section concentrates on those student comments that relate to the LSE 2030 objectives. One of the central characteristics of this agenda is the commitment to being and becoming an institution that is global and international in both expertise, content, and focus. Further, the strategy stipulates that the LSE community is and should continue to be diverse and inclusive. Student accounts tell us about what they experience as flaws in this regard. In this section, these statements are investigated to identify possible barriers to LSE reaching its 2030 objectives.

7.1 Barriers to inclusion for disadvantaged groups

7.1.1 International students

> "I think for one-year master's students who come from different countries would benefit from an introduction course on how the marking system works, what is expected in essays and exams, etc."

> "I wish there was more help provided to non-UK students who are not used to the quotation system or the anglo-saxon academic way of writing an essay for example, as I found out it takes quite a lot of time throughout the year to figure out what is expected from us."

International students often report on the specific academic and social challenges they faced upon arriving at LSE. In the surveys, they convey that they lacked the support that was needed to transition from one educational setting to another. Some examples of what is missing include information on what is expected from an academic essay at LSE, support when adjusting into a new culture and lifestyle, and more thorough consideration for the long-distance travel that is (in many cases) needed to partake in the education.

Among postgraduate students, international students also discuss a lack of basic orientation in relation to career counselling, in which basic information on the expected timeline for job searching in the UK was often left undisclosed, and left students that wished to settle in the UK after graduation in the dark.

To overcome such challenges, one student suggests that some key information could be provided in tutorials and videos, to help orient international students to the academic context of the UK generally and LSE specifically.

7.1.2 BAME students

> "Approach to non-English/non-White students, as many of my colleagues (including myself) experienced different treatment compared to our English/White colleagues. It was especially visible regarding

> dissertation advice on the topics challenging Westerncentric narratives. It was very unpleasant and unexpected, bearing in mind that we paid a lot of money to study at LSE."

Students of colour identify some central academic challenges as compared to their white peers. These include, but are not limited to, facing racism in lectures, consultancies, and in peer-to-peer interactions. Further, the attainment gap between white students and students of colour causes frustration and is deemed unfair.

7.1.3 Working-class students

> "Provide state school students with advice on Spring Weeks and Summer Internships and the support is not there."

Students who are working-class or first-generation students also identify barriers to making the most of their education. A reoccurring theme here is that students from state schools feel like they miss the knowledge or skills that students from private schools have, and benefit from at LSE. Such knowledge includes a distinct language use (which one student called a "secret language" of private schools) and how to secure work opportunities. A number of students request more guidance from the School for students who lack private connections with relevant experience to consult on navigating course choice, job opportunities and the like.

7.1.4 Disabled students

> "Lacking disability support (I tried multiple avenues multiple times for different supports to no avail - I feel unsupported), inappropriate counsellors, no clear method of reporting inappropriate behaviour of peers"

> "All of the social aspects of uni have been lacking for me at LSE. There isn't much on offer for disabled students as accessibility is not a priority for most societies."

Disabled students step forward in the survey and contend that their needs have not been tended to in their education at LSE. Most often, dissatisfaction comes from the School's assessment policy, which chronically ill or disabled students find unfair and exclusionary. The accessibility of School activities and student organised efforts such as societies are also brought up here and are seen as severely impeding the possibility to participate in the School's community.

7.1.5 Precarious workers

> "I was also disturbed by reports of the poor treatment of Blacks staff in security and cleaning positions. This impacts the feeling of 'community' on campus."

> "Treat cleaners with respect and provide hazard pay. It would definitely make me feel more of a part of a community who care about each other."

In the data, some mentions are made of the political endorsements that LSE makes outside of the classroom. These include, centrally, that LSE fails to ensure inclusivity through not paying the cleaning staff fair wages and providing good working conditions. As the students quoted above express, this issue is seen as connected to racial inequality, and as a lack of care that affects students, and not only the cleaners themselves.

7.2 Debates around diversity on campus

7.2.1 Diversity in the student body

> "Students that I have come across with during my undergraduate learning are very diverse and I learned a lot of things through the conversation with them."

> "Perhaps it would be interesting to see more people from diverse social classes, rather than an extremely privileged and elite group of people."

Students value diversity. The students that praise the School's diversity make several claims as to how this has supported their education. They argue that a diverse cohort or student body lends itself well to discussions in which many different perspectives are shared. In response to the question about what has been positive about their education, one student responded: *"*Diverse backgrounds leading to interesting points of views being discussed." Similarly, another student argued: "I feel like I'm getting a good education and I'm able to learn a lot, especially from the rich cultural diversity at LSE". When looked at in closer detail, the data conveys a sense that students learn from the mere being of a diverse student body. What is learned is often not specified, but it is without a doubt appreciated by students. Postgraduates mention this to a bit of a larger extent than undergraduate students, which is perhaps no surprise as the postgraduate student profile is more international.

However, others express that the School is not diverse enough, or not diverse in enough ways. Several students do not identify in which way, or what kind of diversity they are referring to in their statements, while some specify that they are talking about diversity in terms of racial or ethnic background, national identity or socio-economic class.

On the theme of diversity, some students also mention that while the student body is diverse, little or no interaction occurs between different "cliques" (as one student called it). Some of the identities that form different "cliques" are, according to students, for example class, educational background (whether one attended a private or state school), nationality, region, or origin. One student writes:

> "Unlike at other universities, LSE has specifically lacked attempts to integrate the disparate ethnic, cultural, and academic backgrounds of its entire student body. This has been complained about from before I arrived at LSE to the time I graduate, and will doubtlessly continue long after I leave. This is a great shame, as a change in this highly negative experience would make LSE one of the most sought

> after experiences in the world given the rich human capital that flows through its lecture theatres and classrooms."

As such, students express that this "clique-centric atmosphere" (as one student phrased it) leads to missed opportunities to make friends, and the learning that can happen when one encounters someone with a different experience and background.

7.2.2 Diversity in the curriculum

> "Reading lists for many courses […], focus on the work of white, old, male authors. Despite raising concerns about unsuitable authors on the [redacted] course, this was ignored by the teaching staff."

> "These [redacted] classes taught more prejudice than progress, which is simply not the point in a development degree."

Some students portray the curriculum at LSE as Eurocentric. The support provided for this view is manifold. Centrally, it is contended that reading lists overwhelmingly featured white, male authors from Europe and the English-speaking world. Many students find that this focus is unsuitable for a social science degree and call for change. This is coupled with an experienced lack of courses on race and ethnicity, which students interpret as a great failure on behalf of the School.

Other students have had similar experiences, but phrase them differently. They argue that geographical areas (especially "Asia" and "Africa") are missing from the curriculum. As these geographical areas are never located within the so-called Global North, these statements are important to consider. These students complain because it does not properly prepare them for working in their home countries and regions, or because it's not the global education they expected.

7.2.3 Diversity among faculty members

> "Inclusiveness for minorities in teaching staff and course content written by minorities telling their own narrative. Less Eurocentric articles and more global south authors"

> "As mentioned previously, the lack of black African teachers, especially when it came to courses focusing on African issues and race was a bit disappointing."

> "The vast majority of the teaching staff have been white despite LSE being a university that prides itself on diversity."

Among students who write about diversity issues, the lack of staff of colour, and especially black staff often comes up. Students motivate these calls for a larger number of BAME faculty by saying that these professors possess expertise on parts of the world beyond of the so-called global north, and could thereby diversify and decolonise the curriculum. In another vein, students call for more BAME faculty because it is the fair way to distribute faculty positions at LSE.

8 WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

While making clearly defined policy recommendations is beyond the scope of this report, below we put forth three broad areas for consideration.

8.1 Improving school communications

While some problems raised in student accounts have deeper causes, others may at least in part related to communication shortcomings. For example, students express sternly that the School did not adopt a no-detriment policy, and therefore failed to support them during the pandemic. However, the school did instate a no-disadvantage policy and a student support package. Since only a handful of students mention this, it is worth asking if they were even aware of this, and if so, what motivated the large grievance for the lack of a no-detriment policy specifically. LSE could learn from such a query.

8.2 Refining internal assessment

Perhaps our main contribution here is to make visible problems and concerns that are not otherwise captured by the NSS or internal surveys. These involve, chiefly, inequality on campus, distrust towards the institution, and frustrations with social life. Future internal surveys should be designed to assess the prevalence of these patterns and how they relate to student characteristics.

We specifically recommend three additions to existing survey modules. First, surveys should involve some measure of students' socioeconomic status. Working-class students do voice specific concerns in their comments; a statistical mapping of their experiences is therefore needed to elaborate a comprehensive diversity and inclusion policy. Second, a distrust scale should be introduced to evaluate more precisely how confident students are that the School is willing or able to what is best for them. Third, the areas of social participation and sense of inclusion deserve close attention. For each of the three themes, many survey scales have been tested and validated in education research and beyond.

More generally, future surveys should explore both attitudes (how students feel) and behaviours (what students do). For example, given what they tell us about their struggle to manage the workload and how this impedes on their social life, detailed information on the time-use patterns of LSE students could be extremely valuable.

8.3 Assessing student recommendations

* This section has been written in collaboration with Sahar Asif, Graduate Intern and LSE alumna.

While students are neither qualified teachers nor administrators, many specific ideas emerge from their lived experiences and deserve consideration. At the very least, some of these suggestions could be reviewed and experimented with in some departments.

For example, students make three series of straightforward recommendations to improve assessment activities at the School. First, many students suggest that expanding the portfolio of assessment activities would broaden their skillset and enhance their learning. Second, students almost unanimously claim that distributing summative assessments more evenly throughout the year would alleviate assessment anxiety. Finally, many students imagine how a standalone introduction to study skills could help them understand otherwise obscure academic expectations. They envision a course walking them through all sides of academic work, from revision strategies, research, essay writing, designing presentation slides, navigating plagiarism, to reading academic texts. While such efforts exist at the School (for example, via LSE Life and the “Prepare to learn at LSE” module) students usually do not report using them in the surveys. Understanding why and adjusting practices accordingly could greatly benefit students in reaching their academic goals, could help close inequality gaps and could increase student wellbeing.

APPENDIX A – REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

The Pandemic: "It has not exactly been a 'fun' year"

- Online and hybrid teaching solutions as implemented during 2020/21 are seen as lower-quality substitute to in-person teaching and learning by students.
- Many students found LSE's assessment policy during COVID-19 disappointing, unreasonably harsh and difficult to navigate and find proper information about.
- Careful consideration of student comments reveals unintended consequences of LSE's COVID-19 strategy, such as stress caused by 24-hour and open book exams.
- Great student satisfaction with LSE's efforts to keep the campus open and provide in-person teaching where possible.
- Increases in mental health difficulties such as stress and anxiety, and mixed experiences of LSE's efforts to mitigate such.
- Calls for fee reductions appear again and again in the data.

Social climate and social life: an "epidemic of loneliness"?

- Students broadly share the feeling that the School lacks a "community feel". This may well be the most largely shared feeling among students in our entire dataset.
- Students explain this lack of community and poor sense of belonging by referencing several causes. These involve: 1) competitiveness, 2) a corporate and career-focused student body and environment, 3) a lack of interactive events, 4) a lack of social space on campus, and 5) the highly demanding workload.
- Students belonging to minority groups face additional obstacles to social integration. These include financial barriers, limited accessibility of societies and events, interactions identified as classist, racist, sexist, homophobic.

Affect towards the School: "they don't care about you"

- Many students believe key School stakeholders are either not willing or able to do what is best for them. These students feel unheard and/or disregarded.
- This lack of confidence varies in form and intensity. What we call *hard distrust* encompasses the belief that the School's management is manipulative and/or insincere. What we call *soft distrust* encompasses the belief that the School's management simply does not listen to students' requests and experiences, or that the proper channels for interaction are missing.

Teaching and Learning: "I learned a huge amount"

- Comments on teaching and learning are overwhelmingly positive.
- Students appreciate when teachers are knowledgeable, approachable, caring, passionate and enthusiastic, give clear explanations, boosting class discussions and support and motivate students to achieve their best work.
- Students dislike when teachers utilise lifeless teaching techniques (e.g., reading slides out loud), neglect their teaching role, are unapproachable and inaccessible, and shut down debates or pluralism.
- Many students feel like they have learned a lot, had their world views expanded, have been positively challenged and grown as a result of their education at the LSE.
- Some students find that the curriculum has been either too academic or too practical, too hard or too easy, or that the workload has been so heavy it has impeded learning.

Student perspectives on assessments: "exams aren't everything"

- Students who write about assessment, grades and feedback were generally motivated by frustrations.
- Students take issue with the weight of a small number of exams on their final grades, with the reliability of exams as tools to stimulate and/or assess learning, and describe the scheduling of examinations as an undue source of stress. Accordingly, students often call for more variety in assessment activities.
- Students find that academic expectations and grading practices are opaque and vary too much from one teacher to the next.
- Students who write about grades and assessment generally find feedback untimely, limited, unclear, or scarce.

Inclusion and Diversity: Considerations for the LSE2030 Agenda

- Students who are working-class, of colour, or disabled describe failing support services or unwelcoming experiences with peers and staff that negatively impacted their academic experience.
- Students concerned with inclusion express concern regarding the working conditions, pay and general treatment reserved for the cleaning staff on campus.
- Whether the student body is diverse enough is debated in the data. Students mostly stress how diversity has broadened their horizons and enhanced their learning. Yet many argue that the student body could and should be more diverse or find that student networks are fragmented along ethnic and racial lines.

- Some students find that the curriculum has not been decolonized, as many of the geographical areas focused on lie in the Global North, readings tend to be written by white and male scholars, and course on key topics such as race are missing from certain programmes.
- Students concerned with diversity also note the underrepresentation of black academic staff. They view this both as an injustice and as an impediment to what is taught at the LSE.

APPENDIX B – METHODS

The Data

The three surveys. Our report analyses 8598 open text comments retrieved from in three surveys. These are: the National Student Survey (n=1161), LSE undergraduate internal survey (n = 1381) and LSE taught postgraduate internal survey (n=2660). LSE undergraduate internal survey covered both year 1 (n=747), Year 2 (n=614) and Year 3 students (n=20). The undergraduate survey and the NSS were administered in February-April 2021. and the taught postgraduate survey was administered in June-July 2021. Participation rates for all surveys oscillate between 35 and 40%. All surveys were administered online and feature the same open-ended questions enabling students to make suggestions and comments regarding their experiences (table 1). Merged together into a single database, these written accounts cover a large population (n = 5202).

The open text comments. With these open-ended questions, students were afforded the opportunity to choose the topics and the language of their answers. But what did they do with this opportunity? What do their written answers look like? Below we describe in greater detail the ways students engaged with open-ended questions and what this means for what we can learn from their responses. We find seven recurring characteristics worth mentioning to contextualise findings:

1. Levels of engagement with the open-ended questions were high, especially among postgraduate students (table 3). In each survey, a majority of participants responded to at least one open question.
2. Answers are often short or very short. In fact, the overwhelming majority of comments counts less than 200 words. See table 4 below for further details.
3. Many survey responses are unintelligible, either because they only contain symbols, because of their brevity (a handful or words) or because of errors in syntax, spelling or grammar.
4. Many survey responses are unclear because of vague words and phrases that could mean many different things. For instance, many students report that their classes were “intellectually stimulating”. Beyond conveying a general sense of enthusiasm, however, these words tell us little about student learning.
5. Students often describe specific staff members, modules or situated incidents. In a handful of cases, students even name staff members to call for sanctions or promotion. How comments of this kind should be interpreted (i.e. whether they indicate a larger pattern) is often unclear.

6. It seems reasonable to assume that the scope and wording of close-ended questions influence how students answer open-end questions. Very often, those words and phrases that students used again and again in their writing are borrowed from the surveys themselves (e.g., “intellectually stimulating”, “intellectually challenging”, “community”).
7. Finally, student accounts report both lived experiences and interpretations, inferences or speculations about the scope, origins and consequences of things. Whether these inferences are accurate is both not relevant for our purposes in this report and beyond the scope of what the data can tell us.

The research

Objectives. Our primary objective was to document student experiences as students themselves describe them. Because we aimed to assess the quality of student experiences, we focused on the identification of good practices, sources of concerns and grievances, and general areas of improvement.

Approach. Single comments were often coded against multiple themes and we chose an inductive approach to coding and categorising data. Simply put, this means that all themes were created, refined and revised as we progressed through student accounts. Compared to an approach wherein codes are designed *a priori*, an inductive strategy allows for capturing themes that were not anticipated by the researchers.

Procedures. We adopted several working practices to ensure the validity and reliability of findings. First, our approach involved two coding cycles. In plain terms, this means that we visited each student accounts several times to ensure all major patterns, themes and nuances were captured in the coding scheme. Second, all research operations were subject to collective review and validation. In particular**,** individual coding work was reviewed by other team members to ensure intercoder reliability.

Table 3 Number of responses and response rates for each item

	NSS21	UG21	PGT21
Positive experiences	535/1161 46%	674/1381 49%	1456/2660 55%
Negative experiences	551/1161 47.5%	694/1381 50%	1525/2660 57%
Main area of improvement	692/1161 60%	855/1381 62%	1616/2660 61%
At least one item	922/1161 79.5%	962/1381 70%	2635/2660 99%

Table 4 Length of answers to open-ended questions (measured in number of words)

UG21	NEGATIVE	POSITIVE	IMPROVEMENT
Min	1	1	1
Q1	50	37.5	39
Median	110	78	89.5
Q3	235	139.5	186
Max	1632	808	1512
NSS21	NEGATIVE	POSITIVE	IMPROVEMENT
Min	1	1	1
Q1	65.75	44	33
Median	135	93	81
Q3	330	174.5	182
Max	3993	2210	3240
PGT21	NEGATIVE	POSITIVE	IMPROVEMENT
Min	1	1	1
Q1	71	49	58
Median	155	92	130
Q3	329	166.5	270.75
Max	3922	1398	2250