# Student satisfaction at LSE: patterns in undergraduate programme surveys

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## Background

Final year students in UK universities are encouraged to share feedback on their programme via the National Student Survey (NSS), run annually by Ipsos MORI and promoted by individual institutions. As well as giving institutions a tool to measure student satisfaction with 8 distinct elements of their programme (gauged via 27 standard questions), the survey is used by regulators to assess provider ‘quality’ and provide information for potential students.

Like many institutions, LSE runs a mirror of the NSS with non-final-year students, to evaluate student satisfaction as they progress through their programme. Unlike NSS data, which is only made available to institutions at aggregate levels, we can see individual student responses to the year 1 and year 2 programme surveys. This means we can explore patterns and relationships within the data that will inform our understanding of how to improve our students’ experience.

This study uses data from the year 1 and year 2 undergraduate programme surveys in 2018-19 to answer two key questions:

* Do a student’s background characteristics affect their satisfaction with various elements of their programme?
* Which questions have the biggest impact on overall satisfaction, and which questions are closely related to each other such that improvement on one will likely to lead to improvement on the other?

Answering these questions means we can:

* Recognise and investigate differences in satisfaction amongst groups of students.
* Prioritise our efforts to improve satisfaction on areas where change is likely to have a big knock-on effect on other areas.

## Do student characteristics affect satisfaction levels?

NSS data is supplied with single ‘splits’ that show differences in satisfaction based on a limited number of demographic characteristics. This work brings in further characteristics that we think might be relevant to LSE – for example, whether English is a student’s native language. It also uses statistical models to control for the impact of different characteristics on the overall satisfaction rating.

The student characteristics are provided in Appendix A. Note that response rates are broadly comparable within each sub-group, except for disabled students (who are less likely to respond than their non-disabled peers) and Black students (who are less likely to respond than other ethnic groupings). These response rates might affect findings in these specific areas of analysis.

**Non-native English speakers may experience less satisfying engagements with staff on their programme**

Being a non-native English speaker had a significant and negative effect on individual questions in several groupings. These students were less likely than native English-speakers to agree that:

* I have received helpful comments on my work (Assessment and feedback)
* I have received sufficient advice and guidance in relation to my programme (Academic support)
* Good advice was available when I needed to make study choices on my programme (Academic support)
* Staff value students’ views and opinions about the programme (Student voice)

These questions all relate to communication between staff and students. A more qualitative investigation could identify some of the specific barriers to effective communication between non-native English speakers and teaching staff – this could also form the basis for interventions designed to address such challenges.

**Differences based on ethnicity are complex, and need further investigation**

At the headline level of overall satisfaction, Asian students and those who preferred not to disclose their ethnic background were less likely to be satisfied than their white peers. Underlying this, patterns are more complex.

* Asian students are less likely to be satisfied with their teaching experience and with assessment and feedback, compared to white students.
* Students from a mixed or other ethnic background are less likely to agree that they feel part of a learning community compared to white students – the only significant difference for any ethnic group under this category.
* Students who preferred not disclose their ethnic background experienced pockets of dissatisfaction across a number of different areas but – unlike the differences highlighted for students from Asian and mixed/other backgrounds – these differences do not seem to have coalesced around a particular area.

The standardised ethnicity categories developed by HESA may not be the most useful way of classifying LSE’s student population, and future iterations of this work could consider an alternative classification approach – the aggregations may mask differences between sub-groups within an ethnic category.

It is also important to note that Black students are a small group overall at LSE, and their response rate to the surveys is noticeably lower than other ethnic groups. The non-significance of their generally lower satisfaction rates may well be due to sample size, and should not be taken as meaning that the differences are not important.

**Programme structure and organisation may not be meeting the needs of disabled students**

Students with a declared disability seem to experience some dissatisfaction with certain elements of how LSE programmes are taught and organised. Compared to their non-disabled peers:

* They are less likely to be satisfied with learning opportunities, specifically the chance to explore ideas in depth and to bring together ideas from different topics.
* They are less likely to agree that the programme is well-organised and that changes in the programme or teaching have been communicated effectively – although this is only significant at the higher 10% level.
* They are less likely to agree that they have had the appropriate opportunities to provide feedback on their programme.

Students with a declared disability are a relatively small group at LSE, and numbers mean it is difficult to distinguish between different disability types. Qualitative work could identify the specific issues that underpin these differences, and develop new ways to address them.

**Non-UK students are more satisfied than home students in several areas, especially around academic support**

Student with a Home EU or Overseas fee status are more likely to agree with every indicator of satisfaction with the academic support they have received on their programme. They are also more likely to agree that staff value students’ views and opinions about the programme.

**Students who achieve highly tend to be more satisfied with their learning experience**

Students with a higher average pass mark for their year of study are more likely to agree with key indicators around satisfaction with both teaching and academic support. Their overall satisfaction is also likely to be higher. But they are not more likely to be satisfied with other measures that might seem to have a relationship with high performance, such as assessment and feedback.

This raises an important question about causality. Does higher satisfaction lead to better performance, or vice versa? Further analysis, quantitative and qualitative, could help deepen our understanding of this relationship.

## What are the relationships between different questions in the survey?

The second part of the analysis looked at relationships between pairs and groups of questions in the survey, grouping questions based on their dependence on each other.

Perhaps unsurprisingly the biggest correlations were between questions in the same overall ‘group’ – for example, the four questions in the teaching group are clearly correlated. Hierarchical clustering allows us to explore further the relationships between different groups of questions.

At a granular level, the model shows a cluster of questions relating to teaching and to learning opportunities – but this cluster also includes question 15, ‘The programme is well organised and is running smoothly’, and question 27 which is the overall satisfaction measure. This suggests that student satisfaction with teaching, learning and programme organisation have the strongest relationship with overall programme satisfaction – improvements in these areas may be expected to drive improvement in overall satisfaction scores. Other question groups remain, for the most part, distinct – although the model finds an association between questions on learning community and on student voice.

A less granular model shows relationships between the different groups of questions. The same close association between teaching, learning opportunities, organisation and overall satisfaction remains. Student voice, learning community, organisation and management and academic support are also clustered together, while both assessment and feedback, and learning resources, remain unlinked with other groupings.

## Are these relationships likely to extend to the NSS?

As discussed above, NSS data is only available at aggregated levels – this limits the relevance of correlation analysis. To see whether the results of the student-level programme surveys could be generalised to third year NSS responses, we performed the correlation analysis separately on data for first year and second year students. In general, the correlations were sufficiently similar for us to conclude that the underlying relationships will extend into third year (NSS) as well.

# Appendix A

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| Covariate | Value | Count |
| Sex | Male | 920 |
| Female | 881 |
| Maturity | Young (<22 on entry) | 1730 |
| Mature (22+ on entry) | 71 |
| OECD | OECD country | 1133 |
| Non-OECD country | 668 |
| Bursary holder | No bursary | 1481 |
| Bursary | 320 |
| English language status | Native | 1205 |
| Non-native | 596 |
| Fee status | Home UK | 801 |
| Home EU | 282 |
| Overseas | 718 |
| Ethnicity 5-way | Asian | 928 |
| Black | 48 |
| Missing/PNTS | 60 |
| Other including Mixed | 127 |
| White | 638 |
| Disability | No disability | 1634 |
| Disability | 167 |
| Year of study | Year 1 | 991 |
| Year 2 | 810 |

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