

# LSESU Position Paper: Class and Seminar Sizes

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## 1. Introduction

- 1.1. It is the firm position of LSESU that small class sizes facilitate a better overall teaching and learning experience, promote a greater quality of discussion, and lead to students attaining higher grades.
- 1.2. We therefore support the maintenance of the current School policy of requiring undergraduate classes and graduate seminars to have a maximum limit of 15 students per group<sup>1</sup>.
- 1.3. While we acknowledge that there may be some instances where for pedagogic purposes, small class sizes may not be desirable, LSE already has in place a mechanism to grant exceptions to this policy through the USSC and GSSC.
- 1.4. We feel that the current system provides adequate checks and balances to ensure that courses are not arbitrarily granted exceptions to this policy, in order to provide a focus on the high quality of teaching and learning experiences provided through small class sizes. While at the same time, the policy grants the degree of flexibility required to accommodate for unseen surges in course demand, or for pedagogic reasons that a larger class size may lead to a better teaching and learning experience.

## 2. The case against larger class sizes

- 2.1. As stated above, we recognise that there are certainly times when it is pedagogically appropriate, or even beneficial, to have a larger class size. However, this should be the exception, and not the rule, as LSE should be striving to provide an intimate and meaningful teaching environment that promotes discussion and the exchange of ideas.

Here we shall set out five key reasons against larger class sizes; while this is not an exhaustive list, these are core reasons why we believe LSE should maintain an emphasis on small class sizes.

- 2.2. *Larger classes lead to an increased dependence on the lecture method of instruction.* McKeachie notes, “[Class] size and method are almost inextricably intertwined. Thus, the research on class size and that on lecture vs. discussion overlap. Large classes are most likely to use lecture methods and less likely to use discussion than small classes”<sup>2</sup>. When teaching theoretical subjects, discussion is vital to the absorption of information and the contesting of ideas. When a class is too large, whole-group discussion is stifled and the instructor often must fall back on lecturing rather than facilitating the exchange of ideas, in

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<sup>1</sup> LSE, ‘Seminar and class size limits policy’, available here:

<https://info.lse.ac.uk/staff/divisions/academic-registrars-division/Teaching-Quality-Assurance-and-Review-Office/Guidance-and-School-Principles/Seminar-and-class-size-limits>

<sup>2</sup> McKeachie, W. (1980). ‘Class size, large classes, and multiple sections’. *Academe*, 66, 24-27

order to maintain control of and provide focus to the class. While this may produce an outcome that serves the greatest number, it is to the detriment of providing free discussion and in-depth analysis.

- 2.3. *Larger classes reduce the amount of active student participation.* Wulff, Nyquist, and Abbott found that what students report to be most dissatisfying about large introductory courses is the lack of instructor-student interaction and the opportunities for questions and discussions<sup>3</sup>. Large class sizes, as they fall back on dependence on the lecture format as opposed to intimate group discussion, reduces the opportunities for students to actively contribute to the class and shape their own learning. Stones' survey of over 1,000 US universities students found that 60% of respondents reported the presence of a large number of people in class deterred them from asking questions, even if the teacher encouraged them to do so<sup>4</sup>. It could also be argued that larger class sizes contravene inclusive educational practices. For example, disabled students, particularly those with anxiety, could be disadvantaged by larger class sizes where they may feel intimidated to contribute than in a smaller and less overwhelming setting. Similarly, students whose first language is not English may benefit from a small group where it is more likely there will be direct face to face exchanges, and smaller classes may be a less intimidating setting to ask for something to be repeated.
- 2.4. *Larger classes lower the likelihood of frequent, substantive feedback from staff on student work.* Feedback, as evidenced by the National Student Survey results, is of vital importance to students at LSE, and this is of equal importance in both written and aural formats. Large classes decrease instructors' abilities to know the individual work of their students, and decreases the likelihood of being able to provide high quality feedback, both in class and in their assessments. In very large classes, it is highly likely that a majority of students will go through an entire term without a single interactive exchange with their course instructor; this is not even considering whether that exchange will be a substantive and meaningful one. A wide range of literature shows that meaningful student-staff interaction is generally associated with a range of positive outcomes, such as retention and attainment.
- 2.5. *Larger classes decrease students' display of critical thinking within classroom discourse.* Fischer and Grant found that class size significantly affected the level of cognitive skills used by students in the classroom<sup>5</sup>. In small classes (15 or fewer students), when students spoke in response to instructor-posed questions, the average level of thinking (using Bloom's Taxonomy) displayed by their discourse was that of **analysis**; in medium-size classes (16-45 students) student discourse was characterized by a lower level of thinking—**comprehension**; and in large classes (46 or more students), the discourse of students who participated in class most often reflected the lowest level of thinking—**factual recall**. This demonstrates how the

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<sup>3</sup> Wulff, D. H., Nyquist, J. D., and Abbott, R. D. (1987). 'Students' perceptions of large classes'. In M. Weimer (Ed.), *Teaching large classes well*. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, no. 32. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

<sup>4</sup> Stones, E. (1970). 'Students' attitudes toward the size of teaching groups'. *Educational Review*, 21(2), 98-108

<sup>5</sup> Fischer, C. G., & Grant, G. E. (1983). 'Intellectual levels in college classrooms'. In C. L. Ellner, & C. P. Barnes (Eds.), *Studies of college teaching: Experimental results*. Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath.

intimate nature of small classes leads to a greater level of insight and analysis in the discussion of course materials, which we believe sets the LSE educational experience apart.

- 2.6. *Larger classes lower learning gain and academic attainment.* Research conducted at the University of Maryland found that only 25% of respondents in large classes agreed with the statement, “The size of the class does not affect my ability to learn”<sup>6</sup>. This suggests that the size of the classes does impact on self-perceived learning gain.

Richard Light’s research on attainment in US higher education institutions also found a consistent correlation between the number of small classes taken by students and their overall grades<sup>7</sup>.

Similarly, Kokkelenberg, Dillon and Kristy’s quantitative analysis of class size and student grades in a public university found a negative relationship between class sizes and grades, even when accounting for variations in data subsets, models, included variables, and statistical methodology, which they describe as a “robust result” that suggests “class size influences the likelihood of getting good grades and that future studies of economies of scale in higher education need to consider the effect class size has on student outcomes”<sup>8</sup>.

While there are a number of factor that impact on learning gain and academic attainment, literature suggests that class size does have a significant impact on these outcomes. More research should be conducted in the LSE specific context to evaluate the impact of class sizes on these indicators.

### 3. Class sizes and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)

- 3.1. The new Teaching Excellence Framework brought in by the government is underpinned by several quality indicators that institutions must adhere to. One of the most significant pieces of research behind the theorising of the TEF is unarguably Graham Gibbs’ *Dimensions of quality* report for the HEA<sup>9</sup>.
- 3.2. Gibbs argues that smaller class sizes are a strong indicator of quality of an institution, and evidences it by stating that smaller class sizes yield greater academic achievement in universities. He writes:

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<sup>6</sup> Carbone, E., & Greenberg, J. (1998). ‘Teaching large classes: Unpacking the problem and responding creatively’. In M. Kaplan (Ed.), *To improve the academy*, vol. 17, Stillwater, OK: New Forums Press and The Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education.

<sup>7</sup> Light, R. J. (2001). *Making the most of college: Students speak their minds*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press

<sup>8</sup> Kokkelenberg, E.C., Dillon, M. and Kristy, S. M. (2008) ‘The effects of class size on student grades at a public university’, *Economics of Education Review*, Volume 27, Issue 2

<sup>9</sup> Gibbs, G. (2010) *Dimensions of Quality*, Higher Education Academy

*“Lindsay and Paton-Saltzberg (1987) found in an English polytechnic that “the probability of gaining an ‘A’ grade is less than half in a module enrolling 50-60 than it is in a module enrolling less than 20” (p218). All subsequent UK studies have reported sizable negative correlations between class size (as measured by the number of students registered on a course) and average student performance, in most but not all subjects, and in most but not all contexts (Gibbs et al., 1996; Fearnley, 1995). Large classes have negative effects not only on performance but also on the quality of student engagement: students are more likely to adopt a surface approach in a large class (Lucas et al., 1996) and so to only try to memorise rather than attempt to understand”.*

- 3.3. Gibbs also supports the arguments of section 2.3 of this report, in that at a micro-level, the quality of the interaction between students and instructor in large classes is reduced for all but a very vocal minority. Gibbs writes, “the contributions that students do make [in large classes] tend to concern clarification of facts rather than exploration of ideas”.
- 3.4. If LSE is to seriously engage with the metrics and theories underpinning the implementation of TEF, it would be wise to engage with research that suggests high quality institutions place an emphasis on small class sizes.

## **4. LSE student opinion on small class sizes**

- 4.1. In 2013, LSESU surveyed 2,765 current LSE students on proposals to Teaching Task Force 2, one of which included lifting the cap on class sizes. For context, nearly one in three LSE students took part in that survey, and the response rate was nearly four times larger than LSE’s response rate for the National Student Survey in 2012/2013. The class sizes proposal elicited a very passionate student response, with the overwhelming majority of students rejecting the premise of lifting the cap on class sizes, even if that meant they would be taught by a ‘high profile academic’. The results were also overwhelmingly similar for students from qualitative and quantitative subjects. No research or survey has been conducted of this scale at LSE either by the School or SU on the topic of student opinion of class sizes since, and as such should be taken as the authoritative research in the LSE context.
- 4.2. The vast majority of students clearly prefer small classes, with 89.1% of students considering the ideal class size to be 15 students or less. 39.9% of the respondents consider the ideal number to be 10-15 people per class/tutorial group, 38.9% of the respondents want even smaller groups of 5-10 people. Only 15 students (0.7%) responded that the ideal number of people to have in a class/seminar is 30+.

These views are shared by qualitative and quantitative students: 40.3% of students on quantitative subjects and 40.0% of students on qualitative would prefer class/tutorial groups with 10-15 participants. Undergraduates favour a smaller class size over postgraduates, with

45.5% of undergraduates stating that 5-10 students is the ideal class/tutorial size whereas 46.3% postgraduates indicate 10-15 students as the preferable group size. Consequently, a strong preference towards small class/tutorial groups with few participants is evident across all student demographics.

- 4.3. LSESU asked students about a proposed trade-off between class size and greater contact with permanent or 'high profile' faculty members. The overwhelming majority of students are explicitly against increasing the size of classes/seminars to either of the proposed sizes (30 or 60) even if they were to be taught by a senior academic or notable member of full-time staff. Specifically, 69.3% of the respondents stated they were against increasing the size of their tutorial group to 30 students even if they were to be taught by a senior academic or notable member of full time staff. Undergraduate students are only marginally more opposed to the suggestions (70.5% postgraduates compared to 66.9% of postgraduates). Again there is only a small difference between qualitative and quantitative students' views: 71.8% of qualitative students were opposed to increasing class sizes compared to 65% of the respondents from quantitative disciplines.
- 4.4. The suggestion of increasing the sizes of tutorial groups to 60 students was almost unanimously rejected by the student body, with 95.5% of the respondents saying they would not be willing for the size of the tutorial groups to increase even if they were to be taught by senior academics or notable members of full time staff.
- 4.5. The reluctance of students to increase class sizes even if notable members of staff were to teach them is connected to the fact that students relate the size of class/tutorial groups with the quality of teaching and debate. Specifically, when asked if they think the size of a group impacts the standard of teaching and debate in class, 92.4% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that the size does impact the standard of teaching and debate. 4.6% of the respondents felt neutral about the impact of group sizes on the standard of teaching or debate and only 3% of the respondents stated that they disagree or strongly disagree. These percentages are largely consistent throughout undergraduate and postgraduate programs as well as quantitative and qualitative programmes.
- 4.6. As stated above, this research is the most comprehensive that has been conducted on this topic at the LSE. Student opinion overwhelmingly shows a preference for and an appreciation of the value of teaching in small, intimate classes.

## 5. Conclusion

5.1. In an authoritative piece of research on the importance of small class sizes in universities, Cuseo argues that the “magic number” for a university class size would be fifteen or less<sup>10</sup>. He contends:

*“a class size of 15 or less may create a social-emotional climate or ‘psychological space’ in which students’ begin to perceive the learning environment as a ‘community’ rather than a ‘class’. The professor is more likely to know the names of individual students, and students are more likely to each other by name. Students have more eye contact with the instructor and other students, and the physical ecology of the room may be rearranged to further increase eye contact and reduce interpersonal distance.”*

5.2. In the Fischer and Grant research cited in 2.5, they found class size significantly affected the level of cognitive skills used by students in the classroom. In small classes—defined as 15 or fewer students—the average level of thinking displayed by students in response to instructor-posed questions was significantly higher than it was in larger-sized classes.

5.3. LSE currently has a policy of capping classes and seminars at fifteen, except in instances where an exception is granted. A wealth of academic literature from across the Higher Education sector suggests that this is the right policy to have in place, for teaching and learning, and for student attainment and satisfaction. LSE students also have a strong desire and preference for small classes, where they can explore and discuss complicated and important ideas in the optimal learning environment.

5.4. It is LSESU’s firm position that the current School policy of requiring undergraduate classes and graduate seminars to have a maximum limit of 15 students per group should be upheld.

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<sup>10</sup> Cuseo, J. (2007), ‘The Empirical Case against Large Class Size: Adverse Effects on the Teaching, Learning, and Retention of First-Year Students’. *Journal of Faculty Development*, v21 n1 p5-21

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