

Understanding the Attainment Gap at LSE



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Introduction

In the academic year 2015/16, LSESU collated research and data from the School regarding the attainment gap. Two reports were produced, one identifying the problems with the attainment gap and another focussing on reasons provided by students for the gap.

The 2015/16 report entitled '**The Attainment Gap at LSE**' showed that the attainment gap exists between students of colour¹ and white students at LSE. The report showed that the gap existed even after accounting for a number of variables such as the types of school the students attended before arriving at LSE, or Socio-Economic Class. The gap persists regardless of these factors, alongside being present amongst international students. The conclusion of the previous report was that further research should be undertaken to establish which factors may have an adverse impact on students of colours' ability to achieve 'good' degrees, in comparison to their white peers.

According to the School's own data, the gap is worsening over time. A number of projects have been launched in order to tackle this issue, including the EDI Taskforce's project aimed at Departments within the School which have the highest number of non-native English speaking students. LSESU continues to support the work of the EDI Taskforce, while also believing the source of these issues cannot solely be reduced to students' first language or the language of their parents. The gap exists amongst international students and also, to a lesser extent, amongst students from South Asian backgrounds whose first language is not English. LSESU is not clear on the rationale for focussing on this particular group and one of the aims of this further exploration is to ascertain whether language is indeed a major factor which contributes to the gap.

In 2016/17 LSESU has decided to focus on the experiences of students of colour at LSE, and particularly those most affected by the gap. This report outlines the findings of this further exploration into the reasons for the gap, as well as providing some recommendations for cultural and operational shifts which the School and Students' Union could take in order to work towards reducing the gap.

¹ For the purposes of this report, people / students of colour will be used to refer to non-white students. The term was popularised by postcolonial theorists, such as Fanon, in order to express the common experiences shared by all non-white people. This affiliative understanding of the politics of race and ethnicity is central to the spirit in which this project has been undertaken.

This project is not intended to constitute a scientific or academic piece of research and should therefore not be read as such. Our aim is to begin a conversation around the attainment gap, by employing a phenomenological understanding of student experiences, and propose practical steps which can be taken by the School and the Students' Union in order to tackle it.

Literature review

During the initial stages of the project, a literature review of relevant theorists was undertaken, in order to conceptualise the themes this project wished to explore. The review also provided a theoretical framework for the drafting of research questions.

Education theorist Paulo Freire²'s work on the liberatory possibilities inherent in education had a significant impact on conceptualising how education institutions can interact with historically excluded groups. Freire's belief that *"the solution is not to 'integrate' [the oppressed] into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become beings for themselves"* is an important point, which recognises that it is the duty of education institutions not to assimilate historically excluded groups into their structures, but to substantively engage with those groups and integrate their experiences by transforming the structure itself. This idea highlighted the importance of responding to student feedback, particularly that of students of colour, as well as academic staff members of colour.

The work of philosopher Jennifer Saul³ also informed this project in understanding how psychological factors can produce differential outcomes for historically marginalised groups; in Saul's research looking specifically at the role of women in academia.

Saul deploys two psychological concepts, implicit bias and stereotype threat, to explain the marginalisation of women in academia. Implicit bias is the idea that even those who explicitly hold egalitarian views are still implicitly biased against underprivileged groups (such as people of colour, gay people etc.) as a result of the structures they belong to. An example Saul gives of this is the

² Paulo Freire (1968) *Pedagogy of the oppressed*

³ Jennifer Saul (2013) *Implicit Bias, Stereotype Threat, and Women in Philosophy*

differential rates by which men and women are published in academic journals if there is no anonymous application process in place.

Stereotype threat is the understanding that people who belong to an underprivileged group often underperform due to fear of confirming societal stereotypes or negative impressions associated with belonging to that group.

Saul's work is crucial in making sense of how micro-level interactions both produce and reproduce structural inequalities, and how on an operational level actions can be taken to protect against this.

Sara Ahmed⁴, a feminist theorist who has written extensively about diversity in Higher Education institutions, served as the final theoretical inspiration for this project. Ahmed's work as a diversity specialist in universities highlights the differences between diversity in policy and in practice. She writes, "*the difficulty of equality as a politics [is that often] policy becomes a substitute for action because there is an investment in both law and policy as 'performatives'*", recognising that many HE institutions believe they can accomplish the aims of their stated policies by naming their commitment to an equal outcome, rather than working to actualise it through structural change.

She further states, diversity solely understood in policy and procedural terms "*is derived from what is already valued... [and acts to] maintain rather than transform organisational values*". Ahmed's work is bold and at times shocking, and highlights the need for HE institutions to approach a commitment to diversity holistically, at every level, rather than leaving it to dedicated Equality and Diversity Teams. It also reinforced the belief of this project that the experiences of people of colour hold the key to understanding structural differential outcomes in attainment.

⁴ Sara Ahmed (2012) *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*

Methodology

This report focusses primarily on first-hand experiences of students at LSE. In order to fully understand these experiences, we have collated contrasting information from existing sources such as the NSS and other internal and external surveys. We have also conducted focus groups and interviews with students.

Focus Groups

The gap exists for both postgraduate and undergraduate students, as well as in the home/EU and international student community. LSESU has limited resources and therefore decided to focus on the groups of students most affected by the gap.

Ethnicity	Level	Domicile	% Achieving Good Degree
Other	PG	Non UK-D	90.90%
Mixed	UG	Non UK-D	89.80%
White	UG	Non UK-D	89.60%
White	UG	UK-D	88.40%
Mixed	UG	UK-D	86.40%
White	PG	UK-D	85.00%
Other	UG	UK-D	82.00%
Chinese	UG	Non UK-D	81.30%
White	PG	Non UK-D	81.30%
Mixed	PG	UK-D	81.10%
South Asian	UG	Non UK-D	80.10%
Other Asian	UG	Non UK-D	77.70%
South Asian	UG	UK-D	75.60%
Chinese	UG	UK-D	75.40%
Mixed	PG	Non UK-D	75.10%
Other Asian	UG	UK-D	72.10%
Chinese	PG	UK-D	72.00%
Other Asian	PG	UK-D	71.90%
South Asian	PG	UK-D	71.60%
Other	PG	UK-D	71.30%
Black	UG	Non UK-D	70.80%
South Asian	PG	Non UK-D	70.50%
Other	PG	Non UK-D	70.30%

Black	UG	UK-D	66.90%
Black	PG	Non UK-D	65.10%
Chinese	PG	Non UK-D	65.10%
Black	PG	UK-D	62.20%
Other Asian	PG	Non UK-D	60.10%

Any groups defining as simply 'other' or 'mixed' were excluded from the project as it was determined that it would be difficult to ascertain where the participants would define as 'other' or 'mixed' in the same way for these focus groups as they do in LSE data collection.

It was therefore determined that focus groups would take place for the top 5 performing groups and the bottom 5 performing groups, as follows:

Ethnicity	Level	Domicile	% Achieving Good Degree
White	UG	Non UK-D	89.60%
White	UG	UK-D	88.40%
White	PG	UK-D	85.00%
Chinese	UG	Non UK-D	81.30%
White	PG	Non UK-D	81.30%
Black	UG	UK-D	66.90%
Black	PG	Non UK-D	65.10%
Chinese	PG	Non UK-D	65.10%
Black	PG	UK-D	62.20%
Other Asian	PG	Non UK-D	60.10%

Two focus groups of 10 people were run for each group. The focus groups were led by Jasmina Bide (Education Officer), Busayo Twins (General Secretary) and Riham Mansour (Community and Welfare Officer). The focus groups took place in the Saw Swee Hock Building, in an informal setting. Participants were given a £10 Amazon voucher as a reward for their time, and refreshments were provided.

The participants were asked to complete a diversity monitoring form after volunteering to participate; the participants were then grouped by domicile, ethnicity and study level.

Participants were given a short introduction to the attainment gap and then informed of the actual gap at LSE. Participants were then asked to talk about which factors they felt would have the biggest impact on their ability to achieve a 'Good' degree whilst at LSE, either negative or positive.

Coding and Analysis

The focus groups were recorded and then transcribed. The analysis of the transcripts from the focus groups was undertaken using the qualitative data analysis software QDA Miner. QDA Miner allows researchers to group text into inference codes, with the aim of creating 'lower' and 'higher' levels of inferential coding, drawing out themes from across different cases. Influenced by grounded theory, this coding exercise underwent three stages:

- I. Open stage: the creation of 'text units', coded purely on the basis of the meaning which emerged from the text.
- II. Axial stage: establishing thematic and conceptual links between the values of data
- III. Selective stage: 'drawing together' broader themes which run throughout the entire study.

The themes drawn up in the final stage of the coding process act as the findings and themes for this report. The themes have been synthesised as much as possible, in order to produce as broad-ranging and relevant findings as possible. This was also carried out in order to ensure the responses of participants are anonymised as possible.

Findings

Mentorship, support and academic community

Mentoring and support emerged as a significant theme across the focus groups, and a critical way in which students felt their chances of attaining a 'good' degree was made possible.

Numerous participants felt that having a mentor at LSE was a major incentive for performing well, particularly for those students from backgrounds where having family members or siblings who have gone through the university experience is rare. Mentors were cited as something many participants felt that they would receive upon arriving at LSE, or gain through their experience, but this was not often the case. Participants who raised having a mentor cited a family member or family friend as their main point of contact for academic and career advice and development, while other participants cited a professor or teacher at LSE, however less frequently.

Several participants felt that it was the duty of LSE itself to provide a supportive environment where students can flourish, and where they will receive the connections to achieve. One participant cited an example of a teacher who encouraged informal chats as an example of being a positive mentor:

“So one thing that actually my class teacher now did, was that at the beginning of the term she invited everyone for a coffee morning, and she treated everyone. So she wants to make it a regular thing. But I think that’s up to the teacher though to do that. If it would be a mentoring thing, I would love that. For teachers to do that.”

Participants generally acknowledged the pressures placed on academic members of staff and the scarcity of their time, which impedes on them feeling able to develop more personalised relationships with their students. However, this was also seen as a major deficiency in terms of LSE’s offer of support. Some participants who felt that they did in fact have personalised relationships with their teachers cited it being in their ‘nature’ to be forward or as a result of their own confidence in pursuing these opportunities, whereas other participants said they would not feel confident approaching teachers or using their office hours to develop a mentor relationship without it being formally introduced or proposed to them.

Other participants contrasted the support present in the academic community at LSE with that of Oxbridge, where they felt Oxbridge students had more personalised academic relationships with their teachers. One participant cited how despite LSE having a similarly small academic community to Oxbridge, LSE's culture seems less supportive:

“If you compare it to, for example, Oxford or Cambridge, which have colleges - I feel like those institutions, even for a one-year Master's programme, the community is a lot more encouraged. And I think that it really helps with class discussions, or generally how confident you feel. How much you feel like you want to engage and stuff. So I think it would be in the interest of LSE to encourage identity or interaction more.”

There existed a general consensus in the focus groups that feeling a sense that staff members had the time and resources to invest in getting to know students as individuals, to tailor advice on career and academic progression to each student's own aspirations, was crucial for a successful LSE experience. This was most acutely felt by students of colour, particularly those whose domicile is the UK; they explained that in order to navigate elite institutions like LSE, it is vital to find role models. However, they described how it was often difficult to find role models with similar journeys to themselves amongst the staff at LSE, which indicates the role that staff recruitment has to play in providing both descriptive representation to people from certain backgrounds, as well as the more substantive sharing of experiences and knowledge that students of colour recognise as important to them and their success.

One participant described how currently it is not clear where students of colour could go for academic support around issues related to their background:

“There are those issues, like, who can you talk to when you want to talk about your own experiences which are important to you as a non-white person, for example.”

Participants also discussed the role that peer support has to play in the academic community at LSE. While some students were extremely positive about the role of peer support, others acknowledged that while it is helpful to some, larger cultural issues at LSE around mental health support and trying to be the 'model student' prevent some from accessing the support.

One participant described the situation as thus:

“I have spoken to peer supporters about it, there is a peer support scheme where students help other students. They love the people who get like, special training on mental issues, and how to help other people to overcome them and they are independent supporters. They are not your friends, so you can discuss some issues with them that you would not be able to discuss with other people. But, I discussed it with them and they were all saying that people just do not come to them because they feel ashamed to ask such mental support. LSE has like, means and has departments to help them, but students are just not using it because they feel ashamed of using them.”

This indicates that peer support is part of the solution to providing mentorship and support at LSE, direct intervention from the School itself is also necessary.

Rigidity of the curriculum

Participants discussed the influence of the curriculum, what is contained in the curriculum, and how that links to their attainment. Many participants felt that the curricula ethos at LSE was that dominant perspectives or ideologies exist within various subject disciplines, and that if these hegemonic perspectives are challenged then their attainment will be negatively affected. While these views were most commonly articulated by undergraduate participants, some postgraduate students, particularly students of colour, expressed similar sentiments.

To some participants, the existence of dominant schools of thought within disciplines comes from a Eurocentric, Western bias, which privileges certain kinds of knowledge over the experiences and research of academics of colour or those from the Global South. There exists a fear amongst some students that if they express views or articulate arguments which are outside of the bounds of the curriculum, then they will see their grades suffer.

This viewpoint is expressed as such by one participant:

“I was just going to say I am legitimately concerned because there’s only one perspective that is taught in Economic History - and I don’t know what the other departments are like once again - but I’m legitimately concerned that if I don’t reproduce those thoughts that I’m going to get a bad grade and I’m not going to be graded in the right way.”

For some, the dominance of some schools of thought within their discipline

means that they feel academically restricted. It also produces a degree of risk aversion in the subject matter students decide to focus on in their studies, ensuring that they have a deeper understanding of how to deploy other's arguments as opposed to developing their own. This is particularly exacerbated by the mode of examination which LSE deploys, where most degrees are 100% exam, which inhibits students from experimenting with different ideas due to fear of failure. While this approach may work to the benefit of some, particularly if those schools of thought resonate with them personally or with their lived experiences, others felt that this was not the most effective way to learn, and even actively excluded some.

Some participants went so far as to suggest that the composition of those who create the curriculum, the thinkers and theorists who are adopted on reading lists, determine the ideas which are most prevalent within the curriculum. One participant described this as follows:

"It's an institution where you're supposed to receive different ideas, challenge thoughts, and not all your authors are supposed to be like white British men from the 1600s, you know. That's basically it. There's not enough variety, but I don't think that's really the goal of LSE to diversify that stuff."

Another participant suggested that in departments such as International History, the Westernised focus of the curriculum impacts on the quality of the teaching, and the concept of 'value for money' the participant felt is integral to the university experience:

"If I'm going to be giving you money, then you should be returning something of quality. And if the quality is three classes, and all of them are taught from an Anglo-Saxon perspective, it's just like: global history? No way."

There was consensus amongst all the focus groups which discussed the curriculum that a commitment from the LSE to make it as diverse and inclusive as possible in order to ensure that the breadth of a topic is covered, and arguments and debates are as well-explored as possible. Currently there is a sentiment amongst students that LSE could be doing more to critically analyse the content of its curriculum, and encourage a less rigid and more dynamic approach to the disciplines which encompasses a plethora of voices and experiences.

Global university: barrier and benefit

The global nature of LSE, as an institution with a student population from all across the globe and an international teaching staff, offers as many opportunities as it does challenges.

Participants in the focus groups cited the global nature of LSE as one of the reasons they chose to study there; that it offers the opportunity to meet and debate with people from all walks of life, to meet future leaders from across the globe and develop a network of connections for their future careers. The international character of LSE's staff body was also cited as of significant appeal, as it would mean that students would be studying under experts in their chosen field at an international level.

However, participants also acknowledged that while one of LSE's key strengths is its international culture and presenting students with these opportunities to make connection, a significant detriment is that these opportunities are not always taken up or integrated into the experience of LSE students' day to day life.

Participants cited the fact that having a diverse and largely heterogeneous student population means that it is often easy for students, both home and international, to feel isolated and for a cohesive sense of community to seem difficult to achieve. While LSE's one campus and relatively small student population compared to other London universities in some way makes these challenges less stark, they do not entirely overcome them.

One participant, who described themselves as a Zimbabwean-born South African, articulated the situation as thus:

“One thing that I have realised about the LSE, in as much as it is multicultural, the friendships that we formulate are mainly based on ethnicity and the zone where we are coming from. You find out that people from America, they associate themselves alone, and most of us we are coming from Africa, we tend to isolate ourselves. I do not know the main reason as to why, but I expect more effort, especially from the students. I do not know whether the problem is from us coming from the south or the west or we just cannot mix at all. We do mix when it is time for study groups but then [we do not] in terms of events or social gatherings.”

This disparity between students coming together in study groups, and separating in their leisure time, is integral to understanding how LSE needs to build a cohesive academic community in which differences are celebrated and opportunities for building lasting connections can be established.

Another participant felt that students from different backgrounds did mix, but that LSE could do more to provide greater structured opportunities for students to build connections with each other:

“We always invite each other as black students and white students. Usually of their own thing. That is what I have noticed. Or even if you have attended some of the events organised by my classmates or friends. Sometimes it is difficult to gel. If there was a focus, we could maybe find a way to see each other and break down any barriers.”

This indicates that while the heterogeneous nature of the student population is not constricting all bonding and development of a student community, it remains a significant barrier faced by some students, especially those without the confidence or informal training in how to capitalise on connections and opportunities. This is something LSE should recognise as a goal for a well-developed academic community centred around students.

‘Othering’

Amongst some focus groups, the notion of ‘othering’ groups of students, particularly international students, was raised as a barrier faced by some which affected their time at LSE. This is often a difficult conversation to have, and those which emerged in the focus groups centred mostly on the experience of East Asian students, who may face barriers to academic participation based on their confidence with the proficiency of their English or cultural differences.

One participant sensitively raised this topic in explaining how the heterogeneous nature of LSE’s student population can create difficulties:

“For example with Chinese students, I feel like sometimes other people, people that speak very good English, make fun of them too. It makes me very upset, this kind of thing. Or they just kind of ignore them, it is like, “oh we don't speak the same language”. The way they speak, not just speak English, but how they think is different you know. Sometimes they

marginalise, that is why they, all Chinese... and I have a lot of Chinese friends because I lived in China before... they are always in groups, they do not mix much with others, because they just, I know that is not the case for everything, for all Chinese people here."

Another participant described how, as the only person of colour on their programme, they have been confronted by racism within class by peers and this has placed mental strain on them:

"In my specific programme, I am the only black girl in my programme and in one of my seminars, there is a white South African guy who expresses openly racist views. And then when he says these things then, at first I would be like actually, 'I do not really agree with that, you can't really say that'. But then at the risk of my own mental health and my sanity, I am not going to challenge that every single time. Then whenever he says things like that, I feel really weird, people do just turn and look at me to see my reaction to what he said and that is horrible for me because again, I cannot speak for Africa as a continent, Africa is not a single entity so I am not going to speak on behalf of Africa. But then I have to be in the same space as this guy who is openly racist and it is really frustrating. It is just ridiculous."

Focus group participants felt that understanding each other's differences and coming to LSE with an open mind to learn new ideas or ways of thinking was vital for success, but in practice this did not always happen. Participants observed that the country or culture a student comes from, or the class background of students, affected the ways in which they participate and behave in the classroom. Participants felt teachers therefore need to understand these dynamics, and should be provided with training and guidance in order to ensure all perspectives are taken into consideration and all learning styles are accommodated.

When referring specifically to the attainment gap, students of colour felt that white students and academics perceive of the issues differently, and give salience to differing factors. Some participants suggested that while these differences of opinion or perspective are understandable, more work needs to be done to understand how white students and academics conceive of the barriers faced by students of colour. In doing this, white students and academics will be drawn them into a conversation around historical exclusion faced by students of colour, and make them aware of how they can play a part in addressing the barriers faced by students of colour. There was a perception

amongst participants of colour that it is students of colour who are “making noise” about these issues, and that white students and academics need to do more in identifying their role in rectifying the differential attainment rates of students of colour.

Some participants of colour expressed the notion that while they did not feel actively ‘othered’, in the sense that either staff or peers went out of their way to make them feel out of place, the impact of being a minority on white-dominated courses presented challenges.

One participant described this feeling of being a minority, and of the role of people of colour supporting each other in this environment:

“On the first day of our course, our department has a drinks thing. Everyone comes down, they put on some free drinks and some nibbles, 150 people there, that is my entire department: three black people. And I was like ‘Okay, this is us’, and literally we went off in a corner and had a little conversation. ‘We are the black people in this department and we have only got each other’. And that was it. We made a black little WhatsApp group and we were the best of friends, so that was my support network. I spoke to them every day; we still talk now. A WhatsApp group still exists and yet they were kind of just there. They read all my essays, I read all theirs so on and so forth.”

Some participants of colour said this feeling of being a minority within an institution like LSE can be very daunting, and make otherwise confident people question their worth or sense of belonging. Participants felt that there should be no reason why some courses do not recruit a representative number of people of colour, and that this should be explored.

Impact of staff demographics

Participants in the focus groups discussed the role the profile and diversity of academic staff at LSE had on their education experience.

Participants overwhelmingly believed that the profile and demographics of academic staff members at LSE had an impact on the way in which students were taught, the design of the curriculum, and more broadly the sense of belonging some students felt. Some participants directly linked the demography of staff to the notion of mentorship and ‘role models’, seeing themselves reflected in the staff body.

Participants of colour reported feeling that in class discussions, they were more likely to be taken seriously, or their view reinforced, if the discussion was led by an academic from a background similar to theirs.

Some participants felt like the demographics of the staff impacted on the scope of what is taught at LSE, and that the more representative the staff body is of the wider world, the less niche some academic areas appear. One postgraduate participant described how having only one academic with a specialism in Africa in their department restricted the areas the student could explore:

“There is only one Africa specialist in the entire History department, and if she is ill or if you cannot come in then there is no one that I can speak to about. It's sort of restrictive, because then if you want to study something, if you want to write your dissertation on something to do with African history (like I'm doing homophobia for example) and she does not specialise in it - that is difficult obviously. So, my only issue would be that there is only one specialist in each area, if you get what I mean.”

More troublingly, a participant of colour described how the diversity of staff impacts on what is perceived as worthy of academic inquiry. One participant relayed a story where a student of colour had requested to write their dissertation on ideas around reparations for the slave trade, and were informed it was not an important topic:

“So, a friend of mine went to an academic and said ‘I want to do my dissertation about ideas of reparations’, and she said, ‘what reparations?’. He tried to explain it, and she was like ‘I feel like I'm very widely read and this is not an important topic in the world’. That was her response. And this is someone who I really like this person, but that is where their head is at.”

Other participants echoed this idea that due to the way the academic canon is constructed, and the research interests of the academics at LSE, the experiences and interests of students of colour can be dismissed.

Another participant described that the affiliative bond developed between students of colour and academics of colour is crucially important to their development, and relayed the experience of discussing colonialism in class as a minority student:

“I feel like you need more people of colour to have discussions like this. I feel like you can read a book and get an experience, but you also have your own personal experience in addition to the book, and I feel like that's more rich in a way.”

A participant of colour described how the paucity of black academics made them feel so angry that it has inspired them to want to pursue academia in order to make a difference:

“I'm definitely considering going into academia. I went to this talk at Kings College about African History, and there was only one black PhD student on the panel of about five white people. And I thought to myself, this is absolutely ridiculous. The point is I have not met a black African historian, in the United Kingdom, which I just think is shocking. I would consider going into academia because I think there absolutely need to be a top black African historian in the United Kingdom.”

Participants asserted that universities such as LSE should do more to be transparent in its recruitment practices and the routes it offers for progression to academics of colour, which would have a significant impact on students from both a curricular and development perspective. Another participant of colour, who is also from outside the UK, described how being taught mainly by white academics had made them question whether they belonged at LSE:

“In terms of feeling at home within LSE, I'm a bit concerned. Especially from my department, you would want to feel at home even when you are attending lectures. But in the whole department, we all have only one African profess, someone who was born in Africa, someone who understands Africa, someone who has written about Africa. It is totally different because if you were to ask someone from my department, their favourite course, they will tell you, it is African development, because it is taught by an African. So, I do not feel at home when we are talking about Africa sometimes, in as much as it is so informative and other aspects I would want to feel at home when we are discussing issues happening in my country.”

There was consensus amongst all focus groups that a diverse staff body has a positive impact on the teaching and learning experience for all students, as it ensures that the curriculum is as rooted in the real world as possible, and all students feel like they belong at LSE.

Provision for disabled students

The final theme to emerge from the focus groups was that of the intersection between disability and education experience.

The majority of focus groups raised the support for disabled students at LSE as having a significant impact on their academic performance. Participants cited the high levels of stress experienced on courses with 100% exams, to the highly competitive environment wearing down students' self-confidence.

One participant, who had to interrupt their studies due to disability, described how there is a feeling that disabled students are not factored into the fabric of LSE life:

"I had to interrupt for a year during my undergrad, so I was here for a whole extra year, incurred a ridiculous amount of debt because...just everything went wrong. And I thought they'd learnt from that. [Staff Member] was brilliant once she finally took over again and pulled it in for me. Came back for Masters and they got rid of her. So I came back partly on the reliance of her being there. All their policy choices just don't seem to pre-empt disabled students. Even their graduate course choice."

Participants of colour described how disability compounded a lot of barriers which they already face in their education experience at LSE.

The pressure of academic life on mental health, as well as the concurrent impact of being from a group historically excluded from education, added to the enormous strain students of colour at LSE place on themselves to do well. While some participants were not sure on the link between ethnicity and disability, they suggested that LSE should do more research to look into how the intersection of ethnicity and disability play out with regards to attainment.

Recommendations

The report above describes the major themes which emerged as feedback during the focus groups held around the attainment gap and educational experience at LSE. They are to serve as the start of a conversation around these issues, and are not to be taken as an exhaustive exploration of the area. However, as a result of the information which emerged from these focus groups, these are seven immediate recommendations LSE can take on board in order to begin addressing some of these issues, in collaboration with LSESU.

1. Introduce mandatory guidance or training for all teaching staff in how to facilitate class discussions inclusively.

Across the focus groups, the role that teaching staff have to play in leading on discussions sensitively and pluralistically emerged. Ensuring that teaching staff feel adequately supported in leading discussions based on the principles of understanding the differing experiences of students from different backgrounds, particularly those from backgrounds which have been historically excluded from education. Having this in place, in coordination with awareness around unconscious bias, would empower students of colour to feel included in seminars and classes.

2. Introduce formal “*students of colour mentoring schemes*”, by and for students of colour, as well as for academic staff of colour.

The role of peer support, and the vital need for mentorship, is another theme to emerge from the report. Putting in place formalised systems for students of colour to meet and support each other would have a positive impact. This should also take the form of staff-student mentoring, particularly for students of colour considering a career in academia. There is an awareness of the limited time and resources available to staff members of colour, which should be taken into account. Mentoring schemes for academic staff of colour, particularly graduate teaching assistants or early career academics, should be explored.

3. Research how white students, teaching staff and managers at LSE construct issues of attainment and race, to inform interventions to address racism.

The focus of much research has been on students of colour, and their perceptions of the attainment gap. However, little has been done to explore how white students, staff and professional staff conceive of notions of attainment and race. Further research should be commissioned focussing particularly on this issue.

4. Conduct further research into the experiences of East Asian students, to understand their conception of academic community and the drivers of their attainment.

The experiences of East Asian students emerged as particularly different compared to other students of colour. Due to the differences in cultural context, and the differential attainment rates, further research should be conducted to explore the nature of the student experience for East Asian students at LSE.

5. Define what is meant by an '*inclusive learning and teaching environment*' in the LSE context, drawing on best practice elsewhere. (e.g. Kingston University's Inclusive Curriculum Framework).

LSE must define what is meant by an inclusive learning and teaching environment. Student participants were not clear on what ways LSE acts to encourage diversity, in the curriculum and in teaching practices, and these concerns should be dispelled. By making very clear how LSE is taking active steps to provide an inclusive educational experience, the experience of students of colour will improve.

6. Increase transparency in staff recruitment and progression. Publish this data and explain recruitment and promotion procedures clearly.

The profile of academics of colour has a significant impact on the learning experiences of students, particularly students of colour. LSE should be transparent about its recruitment and progression procedures, and look to actively recruit more academics of colour.

7. Set a KPI target for the recruitment of students from underrepresented backgrounds to courses with large white-majorities.

Participants felt that the diversity of a cohort had a significantly positive impact on their learning, and is one of the reasons why they chose to attend LSE. There should be no course at LSE where people are underrepresented, and therefore the School should put in place measures to actively recruit students of colour to courses where they are underrepresented.

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