

Inequality in elite places:

The Experience of Routine Workers at the LSE

Authors

Bashir Ali, Nadim Choudhury, Laura Ehrich, Jinchong Ho, Haowei Li, Reyss Wheeler

Keywords

Inequality, LSE, Elite, Routine occupation, Hierarchy

Abstract

This paper explores the experiences of non-academic support staff at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). Elite universities can be understood as a microcosm of inequality, where immense ‘prestige’ and stigmatised workers co-exist. The LSE is an interesting institution to study in this respect, as it exudes immense privilege, yet maintains a strong verbal commitment to equality and has in the past been held to account for falling short of this commitment. The work of front-line, manual labour staff is often rendered invisible, thus at a world-renowned institution like the LSE, they can become the face of the inequality that exists. Surveys and on-campus ethnographic observations of LSE’s cleaning, catering, security and other support staff were used to inform in-depth interviews. Our findings suggest that staff are generally satisfied in their working environment and with their pay. The majority do not express feelings of inequality - but there may be issues about work hierarchies and inclusion. Some suggestions for how the LSE can further improve the experience of its lowest-paid staff will be put forward.

Introduction

While objective measures of social inequality can be defined and measured on a variety of geographic scales and societal compositions, subjective inequality may be perceived most starkly in small settings where extreme wealth and prestige co-exist with stigmatisation and backgrounds of poverty. When these two groups do not merely coexist, but enter into relationships where one serves the other, this may constitute a microcosm of inequality in which constant awareness of the privilege of others might exacerbate one's own perception of being unprivileged. One such microcosm is a prestigious university that employs service workers in partly unskilled, partly dirty, partly stigmatised work - according to the National Statistics Socioeconomic classification, these roles are classed as "routine occupations", and afforded a rank of 7 out of 8 possible social class rankings (ONS, 2011).

The London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) is one such university. It enjoys a global reputation for producing excellent research and alumni with the highest graduate salaries in the UK (Telegraph, 2013). As a social science institution, much of its research output is concerned with issues of inequality, and much more can be expected following the launch of the school's International Inequalities Institute in 2015. How do these concerns translate into everyday relations amongst LSE workers and students? The LSE employs 300 cleaning staff, 107 catering staff, 60 security staff and 30 maintenance staff. In its Ethics Code, the School expresses a commitment to "treat all people with dignity and respect and ensure that no person will be treated less favourably because of her/his role at the School" (LSE, 2014). The aim of this study is to investigate whether the School lives up to this commitment by asking routine workers at the LSE about their perception of equality in the workplace. As such, this study serves as a case study of subjective inequality among routine workers in prestigious places. It is exploratory in nature - due to the focus on the experience of routine staff, it would not be appropriate for the researches to have entered the field with a set hypothesis. Instead, a mixed method approach was used to give voice to the workers themselves.

Literature Review

It may be assumed that serving the wealthy at prestigious institutions is dissatisfactory - based on a belief that social inequality is felt more strongly amongst those who have a particular 'class consciousness', a consciousness either awakened or strengthened by the realization of such stark wealth discrepancies. This belief is substantiated by a wealth of literature documenting domestic cleaners and carers, as well as London based research on low-paid service workers.

The sentiment of subservience is central to many such studies: Sotelo's (2001) work on Immigrant cleaners who work in the 'Shadow of Affluence', shows through interviews that many are patently aware of the fact that they work for wealthy families, and this invariably exacerbates sentiments of inequality. Her work also highlights that this awareness exists for their wealthy counterpart as well. For instance, "some employers try to snip off price tags on new clothing and home furnishings" (Sotelo, 2001; x), so as to hide any explicit forms of wealth from domestic workers, but the workers are often aware of this practice. It is this social dynamic that we wish to understand in the wider context of a 'prestigious' LSE and those who work in the routine occupations here.

Wills (2008) remarks on the disparity of wealth between contract cleaners in Canary Wharf and those that work there as professionals, and the divide here is heightened by the fact that "the super-rich and the working poor are in the same buildings" (Wills, 2008; 305). The case for cleaners is important because they are "emblematic of 'bottom end' service work in countries like Britain" (Wills, 2008; 310) and this inequality is even more pronounced in London. However, in assuming that a particular consciousness of class, as Marx would have it, should necessitate a particular dissatisfaction amongst the low-paid routine workers, we homogenise their experience and assume that the class structure is still a primary identifier. Still, Wills asserts that "cleaners recognize the injustice of their pay and conditions of work" (Wills; 2008; 316) but does in fact argue against an 'essentialisation' of class politics. By considering the many intersections of identity, across faith, ethnicity and gender, she maintains that

one can and should campaign politically, but not with an anachronistic understanding of 'working class'. For this reason, we did not focus our research around the concept of class, but rather about the type of work and its subservient nature.

A study in this regard is a synthesis of ideas, where inequality of opportunity, class, privilege and power all intersect and become even more poignant at the LSE. Previous studies, especially those more quantitative in their approach, have sought to distinguish more strictly between these ideas.

One wide-ranging quantitative study in London has found that of the factors that office and contract cleaners suggest they most dislike, low pay and employer's practises/policies are the most significant, with 40% and 27% respectively reporting that it is the most disliked factor. This was research conducted by Citizens UK (formerly London Citizens) in 2005 in conjunction with Queen Mary titled 'Making the City Work: Low Paid Employment in London'. Our case study of the LSE will show that when routine workers are paid well so that 'low pay' as a negative factor for worker experience becomes invalid, 'employer's policies' may still remain a significant source of dissatisfaction, leading to a perception of inequality at the workplace.

Methodology

As outlined above, the research team found it inappropriate to enter the field with a narrow hypothesis that would be based on some essentializing assumption about the routine workers having a 'class consciousness' for their position in society. Thus, in order to assure the workers' dignity, we did not assume the presence of a perception of inequality. The concept that we sought to measure was thus not 'inequality', but 'experience', which enabled a more holistic analysis of the workers situation and whether or not inequality forms part of that.

Some indicators which operationalised 'experience' include interaction with students and academic staff and friendliness in the workplace, but more important was giving the workers a chance to voice their own accounts and give their own priorities. Our exploratory study relied on a synthesis of three methods:

An exploratory survey was decided on as the best method in order to quickly establish trends amongst the group and inform a more in-depth exploration later on. The survey included open questions on experience to allow the participants the opportunity to include individual feelings.

We simultaneously observed workers around the LSE campus whilst they were completing their daily tasks. The observations set out to investigate intra-team interactions as well as interactions with service users and staff (greetings, smiles etc.).

We used the preliminary findings from the surveys (around 20 gathered at this time) and our field notes from our observations to identify trends and issues that were still unexplained, for example the perception of LSE as a prestigious school, management hierarchies and venues for improvement. These issues were addressed in follow-up interviews. Our original aim was to conduct formal semi-structured interviews but due to the hours and places of the participants' work we often conducted unstructured and informal on-the-spot interviews. Overall we interviewed 11 members of staff, lasting between 10 and 20 minutes.

Ethical considerations

All of our interviews were informal and ad hoc, usually in the work environment, during the working time. This meant that it was difficult to obtain written consent in all cases. While giving us oral consent, many workers were unwilling to sign the form as that made them identifiable; even when we assured anonymity. We had similar issues explaining the withdrawal process. It would have been better practice to leave the respondent with a form explaining both consent and withdrawal in this study in order for them to reflect on the process.

It is also important to consider how our research may have created feelings of inequality amongst the staff through the problematising of the issue itself. Lastly, the people we were interviewing whilst on duty and in public areas often shared with us their personal experience, and we are unable to control who heard their stories. Although we tried to avoid questions that were very sensitive, we have no way of ensuring that our participants are not affected by their contribution to our study.

Data

There are a total of 497 routine worker staff at the LSE, of which we surveyed 77 (15.5%).

Survey Results

1. 95% of respondents were satisfied with their job (3.83-4.21 out of 5)
2. In average security (4.09) and maintenance (4.4) had higher job satisfaction compared to cleaners(3.92) and caterers (3.96)
3. Interaction with academic staff increased the job satisfaction of the respondents. With frequent academic interaction the job satisfaction increases by 0.4 points out of 5
4. Interaction with students doesn't really affect the job satisfaction of the respondents at all
5. Frequent smiling at the staffs (both academics and students) increases the job satisfaction by .7 points out of 5.
6. Staffs under 40 years are 0.3 points more satisfied compared to the staffs aged 40 and more.
7. Particularly young females are more satisfied with their job. They are 0.5 points more satisfied than the other groups
8. The people who have lived in UK for less than 10 years are .35 points more satisfied with their job compared to people who have lived in the UK for more than 10 years.
9. People with Zero hour contracts are less .27 points less satisfied compared to the people with full time contracts.

```
Mean estimation      Number of obs   =      77
```

	Mean	Std. Err.	[95% Conf. Interval]	
satisfaction	4.025974	.0942177	3.838323	4.213625

```
. reg satisfaction immigrants residents
```

Source	SS	df	MS	Number of obs	=	77
Model	2.20995671	2	1.10497835	F(2, 74)	=	1.64
Residual	49.7380952	74	.672136422	Prob > F	=	0.2002
				R-squared	=	0.0425
				Adj R-squared	=	0.0167
Total	51.9480519	76	.683526999	Root MSE	=	.81984

satisfaction	Coef.	Std. Err.	t	P> t	[95% Conf. Interval]	
immigrants	.3452381	.2366672	1.46	0.149	-.1263316	.8168078
residents	-.0119048	.2366672	-0.05	0.960	-.4834745	.4596649
_cons	3.904762	.1789036	21.83	0.000	3.548289	4.261235

```
. reg satisfaction cleaner maintenance security
```

Source	SS	df	MS	Number of obs	=	77
Model	1.46400636	3	.488002121	F(3, 73)	=	0.71
Residual	50.4840456	73	.691562268	Prob > F	=	0.5517
				R-squared	=	0.0282
				Adj R-squared	=	-0.0118
Total	51.9480519	76	.683526999	Root MSE	=	.8316

satisfaction	Coef.	Std. Err.	t	P> t	[95% Conf. Interval]	
cleaner	-.037037	.2263335	-0.16	0.870	-.488119	.4140449
maintenance	.3447293	.2807321	1.23	0.223	-.2147689	.9042276
security	.137037	.3078468	0.45	0.658	-.4765007	.7505748
_cons	3.962963	.1600419	24.76	0.000	3.644	4.281926

. reg satisfaction academicinteraction

Source	SS	df	MS	Number of obs	=	74
Model	.660943809	1	.660943809	F(1, 72)	=	0.97
Residual	49.2850021	72	.684513919	Prob > F	=	0.3291
				R-squared	=	0.0132
				Adj R-squared	=	-0.0005
Total	49.9459459	73	.68419104	Root MSE	=	.82735

satisfaction	Coef.	Std. Err.	t	P> t	[95% Conf. Interval]	
academicinteraction	.0834639	.0849391	0.98	0.329	-.0858591	.2527868
_cons	3.856716	.1982185	19.46	0.000	3.461574	4.251857

. reg satisfaction smiledat

Source	SS	df	MS	Number of obs	=	77
Model	1.60791055	1	1.60791055	F(1, 75)	=	2.40
Residual	50.3401414	75	.671201885	Prob > F	=	0.1259
				R-squared	=	0.0310
				Adj R-squared	=	0.0180
Total	51.9480519	76	.683526999	Root MSE	=	.81927

satisfaction	Coef.	Std. Err.	t	P> t	[95% Conf. Interval]	
smiledat	.1559309	.100746	1.55	0.126	-.0447654	.3566272
_cons	3.582482	.3013644	11.89	0.000	2.982134	4.182831

. reg satisfaction old

Source	SS	df	MS	Number of obs	=	77
Model	1.97062377	1	1.97062377	F(1, 75)	=	2.96
Residual	49.9774282	75	.666365709	Prob > F	=	0.0896
				R-squared	=	0.0379
				Adj R-squared	=	0.0251
Total	51.9480519	76	.683526999	Root MSE	=	.81631

satisfaction	Coef.	Std. Err.	t	P> t	[95% Conf. Interval]	
old	-.3221614	.1873389	-1.72	0.090	-.6953597	.0510368
_cons	4.205882	.1399964	30.04	0.000	3.926995	4.484769

```
. reg satisfaction zerohour
```

Source	SS	df	MS	Number of obs	=	77
Model	1.20167514	1	1.20167514	F(1, 75)	=	1.78
Residual	50.7463768	75	.676618357	Prob > F	=	0.1867
				R-squared	=	0.0231
				Adj R-squared	=	0.0101
Total	51.9480519	76	.683526999	Root MSE	=	.82257

satisfaction	Coef.	Std. Err.	t	P> t	[95% Conf. Interval]	
zerohour	-.2729469	.2048125	-1.33	0.187	-.6809543	.1350606
_cons	4.217391	.1715173	24.59	0.000	3.875711	4.559071

```
. reg satisfaction gender y_gen
```

Source	SS	df	MS	Number of obs	=	77
Model	1.29924242	2	.649621212	F(2, 74)	=	0.95
Residual	50.6488095	74	.684443372	Prob > F	=	0.3917
				R-squared	=	0.0250
				Adj R-squared	=	-0.0013
Total	51.9480519	76	.683526999	Root MSE	=	.82731

satisfaction	Coef.	Std. Err.	t	P> t	[95% Conf. Interval]	
gender	-.1845238	.2631713	-0.70	0.485	-.7089041	.3398565
y_gen	.5	.3648098	1.37	0.175	-.2268995	1.226899
_cons	4.017857	.1105541	36.34	0.000	3.797573	4.238141

In the data collection process, we encountered staff who had limited working usage of English (which our survey was written in) and may therefore have misinterpreted the questions, or refused to fill out a survey, leading to underrepresentation of this group in our sample. Some surveys were done under time constraints and we mitigated this by leaving survey forms with managers or asking our respondents to leave completed surveys with third parties, for us to pick up later. However, this may have introduced bias in our respondents' answers. Overall, our survey sample showed to have been too small to control for all variables in all cases. There were some trends that we picked up but were unable to provide a proper analysis due to insufficient data. There were many variables that we did not include in the survey, but that could have provided valuable insight, such as years of education. Although we collected data on ethnicity, the results had insufficient detail and we were unable to use it. Conducting a pilot study could have sieved out the missing bits and enabled us to modify our survey. Furthermore, we would have liked to use the interviews to investigate issues brought up in the surveys, but were unable to due to interdisciplinary constraints.

Findings

An analysis of our data showed that factors which influence satisfaction include employment status, gender, age, academic interaction and income. We also noticed that workers on a full-time contract (maintenance and security) are significantly more satisfied. Cleaners and caterers are mostly on zero-hour contracts which we discovered (through interviews) is unsatisfactory to them because the nature of these contracts do not guarantee job security in the event of long term illness. This is more of an issue for older workers, with people under 40 being more satisfied than people over 40, which is in line with the findings of Hallahan et al., who have identified a negative relationship between age and risk tolerance. Their research revealed that gender, income, and wealth are significantly associated with financial risk tolerance. A detailed investigation of the relationship between risk tolerance and age as well as marital status was also performed. Their results suggest that a negative relationship between age and risk tolerance exists, in particular a significant nonlinear structure.

What was interesting about our results was although the overall satisfaction averages of all occupation groups were 3.90/5 and above, we noticed in our open ended question that many of the occupations expressed grievances not covered in the rest of our survey questions, we grouped these responses into three categories: employment status, hierarchy and the nature of their jobs. Some of these comments include statements like *'excessive bureaucracy, even on minor issues'* and *'I think the issue with zero-hour contract is not fair for certain staff that have been there for long time and kind of discourage certain to stay longer or even have intentions staying'*. The response showed that our respondents perceived inequalities in their jobs. In the follow-up interviews, this pattern was repeated: staff tended to be happy overall in particular on wages and the job package the LSE provides. However, when asked whether if the LSE lives up to their commitment of equality, more often than not the answer was no.

This dichotomy then poses the following question: Why did our respondents express overall satisfaction when there were major issues that they were aware of and were dissatisfied with?

Common reasons given in interviews were in relation to management structures and preferential treatment. Although staff felt this treatment was discriminatory some were

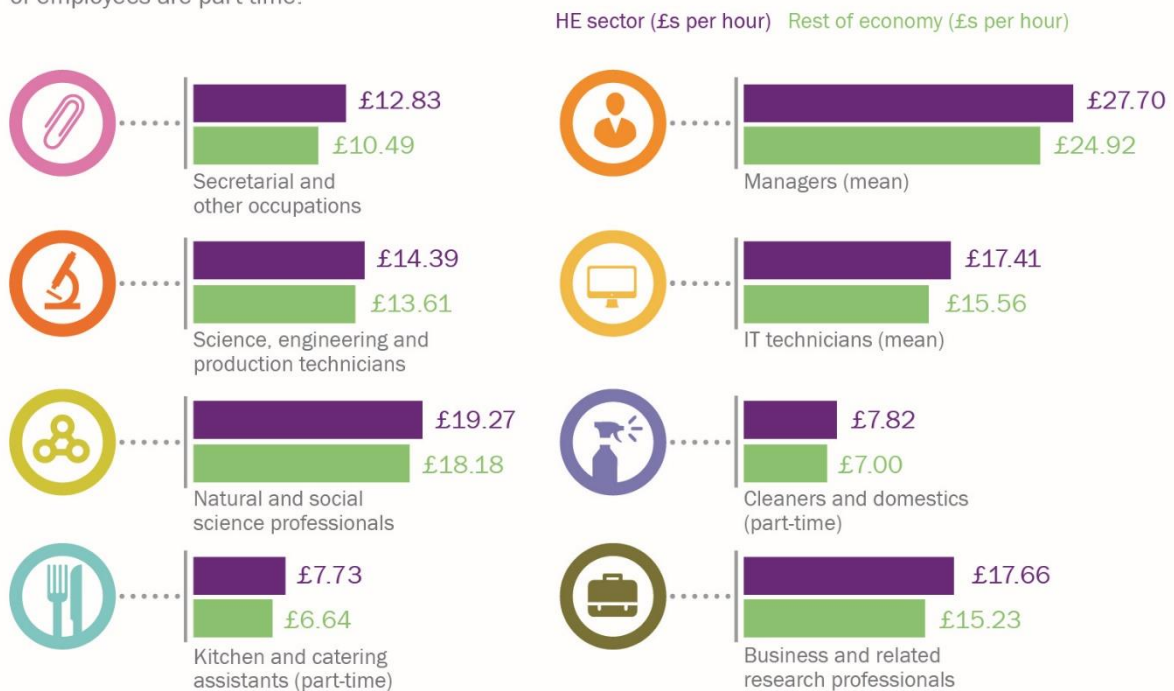
not sure why they felt unequal and suggested it may be because of their background but many said they did not feel excluded on the basis of gender or race but rather that a particular group was being favoured and rewarded more compared to the rest of the population. Such feelings were most prevalent in security, who brought up feelings of underappreciation and unequal chances at applying for internal jobs within LSE. Similarly, maintenance feel that a lack of access to training means they may not be able to move up or on to better jobs.

The dissatisfaction over issues like zero contracts and hierarchy is also where our interviews found evidence of perceived inequality. Our interviews revealed an emphasis on managerial decisions and complaints not being heard or acted upon which seemed to influence levels of inclusion. We found that many staff have nowhere they can express their grievances, other than their direct line manager of which all categories unanimously felt may jeopardise job security. One of the caterers we spoke to mentioned the difference between the employment statuses of the caterers and the people they entered into negotiations with. Caterers were on zero-hour contracts while their superiors were on full time employment with the perks that came with it. One staff member summed it up by saying “you have to weigh it up, is it that important to you that you’ll rock the boat?”.

Existing literature have previously shown that the negative utility from such grievances could be offset by an increase in wages. Richard Easterlin (1971) found that at in the US, higher income is positively correlated with self-reported happiness. However, over time, as median American incomes had grown, median self-reported happiness had not increased. Easterlin and others (notably LSE’s Richard Layard) have suggested that once basic needs are met, happiness determined more by relative than absolute income. Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers dispute Easterlin’s analysis, suggesting that as incomes grow over time, happiness grows, albeit at decreasing rate (relationship between income and happiness is increasing yet concave).

Hourly earnings of occupations in HE compared to the wider economy

Median hourly earnings for full-time employees in HE and the wider economy, by occupation, 2015. Mean figures used where median figures are less reliable. Part-time figures used when the majority of employees are part-time.



Sources: ONS

HE pay comparisons - May 2016 edition. (n.d.). Retrieved June 9, 2016, <http://www.ucea.ac.uk/en/news/communications-materials/infographics.cfm>

Our data found that for both catering and cleaning, LSE pays higher than the average of other higher education institutions, given in the Infographic above. This could, in line with the theory, explain why staff expressed overall satisfaction despite a number of grievances.

As LSE runs a campaign on inclusion (under the twitter hashtag #partofLSE), we interviewed the staff if they felt part of LSE, and received a variety of responses; those that felt part of LSE perceived LSE as a reputable place and expressed the pride they get from working here. Those that had worked at the LSE for over 5 years and did not feel part of LSE usually mentioned observing changes over the years had led them to feel less a part of LSE: competitiveness, contract changes and managerial structure were all causes of this perceived exclusion from the LSE community. It is important to note here that many staff were not so concerned with feeling a part of the wider LSE

community that includes students and academics but were more concerned with the camaraderie with their division. An emphasis on managerial decisions and complaints not being heard or acted upon is what seemed to influence levels of inclusion. We found that many staff have nowhere they can express their grievances, other than their direct line manager of which security, maintenance and cleaners felt may jeopardise job security.

Recommendations to the LSE

From our findings we believe that there is perceived and often real lack of social mobility for particular routine occupation staff groups at the LSE. We feel that it is important for the LSE to run a transparent and clear process for bonuses, promotions and internal job applications. We suggest that LSE employed staff are given appraisals on a six monthly basis, as members of staff are unsure about what they are not doing well enough to receive bonuses and internal promotions. We also suggest that the LSE allow all internal applicants the chance of an interview and provide them with feedback if they do not get the job to help address negative feelings arising from failed attempts at promotion as well as to allow the opportunity for staff to develop themselves based on feedback given.

An independent avenue of complaint by staff should be introduced, that sits outside the division, to avoid discrimination that is feared by many staff were they to file a complaint through their manager.

Finally, the LSE should ensure that all subcontractors must have the same commitment to equality that LSE states it has. This will help create a more unanimous and positive experience of equality at the LSE.

Conclusion

We sought to investigate the relationship between working in a routine occupation, and the extent to which satisfaction levels, and particular 'feelings' of inequality, existed because of the LSE being perceived as an 'elite' place. Whilst social theory was instrumental in formulating the basis of our research, we have made it a priority to highlight and give voice to those in routine occupations without necessarily imposing our thinking. Taking recourse in more revisionist theoretical discourse (anti-essentialism) has aided the direction of our research, and we feel it should continue to aid the direction of research in this field. This will allow others to identify real avenues for change that would perhaps go some way in reducing the inequality felt between workers and reduce the overbearing sense of hierarchy that exists. Poverty and inequality are interrelated, and we deliberately emphasised the nuances of hierarchical social inequality over the more common analysis of wealth or income disparity.

Our findings suggest that routine workers, on the whole, are satisfied with their work and feel that LSE and their work conditions are relatively better than other places where they may have previously worked. Dissatisfaction and sentiments of inequality were more apparent when our interviewees informed us of managerial practices, employer policies and hierarchy. We feel that previous studies that have documented the effect of 'neoliberalisation' across the Higher Education Sector in the UK have recorded similar ideas, but particularly about academics and faculty, who feel these changes more acutely, and often resist quite vocally. In highlighting the views of workers in a different kind of occupation in this establishment, one that perhaps cannot resist, or is not necessarily aware of the wider economic changes taking place, then we feel we include their voice in the wider debate of increasing inequality on the one hand, but also the 'corporatization' of the university model on the other.

Bibliography

Easterlin (1974). *Does Economic Growth Improve the Human Lot? Some Empirical Evidence*. In Paul A. David and Melvin W. Reder, (eds.), *Nations and Households in Economic Growth: Essays in Honor of Moses Abramovitz*, New York: Academic Press, Inc.

Evans, Y. (2005). *Making the city work*. London: Queen Mary University of London.

Foundation, I. (2016). [ARCHIVED CONTENT] UK Government Web Archive – *The National Archives*. *Webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk*. Retrieved 9 June 2016, from <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20160105160709/http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/classifications/current-standard-classifications/soc2010/soc2010-volume-3-ns-sec--rebased-on-soc2010--user-manual/index.html>

Hondagneu-Sotelo, P. (2001). *Doméstica*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

LSE Catering - Catering Services - Services and divisions - Staff and students - Home. (2016). *Lse.ac.uk*. Retrieved 9 June 2016, from <http://www.lse.ac.uk/intranet/LSEServices/cateringServices/Home.aspx>

LSE The Ethics Code. (2014) (1st ed.). London.

Maintenance - Who's who - Estates Division People and Organisation - Estates Division - Services and divisions - Staff and students - Home. (2016). *Lse.ac.uk*. Retrieved 9 June 2016, from <http://www.lse.ac.uk/intranet/LSEServices/estatesDivision/estatesDivisionOrganisation/whosWho/Maintenance.aspx>

Paton, G. (2013). Students paid £10,000 more after leaving top universities. *The Telegraph*. Retrieved from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/10340183/Students-paid-10000-more-after-leaving-top-universities.html>

Security - Who's who - Estates Division People and Organisation - Estates Division - Services and divisions - Staff and students - Home. (2016). *Lse.ac.uk*. Retrieved 9 June 2016, from <http://www.lse.ac.uk/intranet/LSEServices/estatesDivision/estatesDivisionOrganisation/whosWho/SecurityAndPorters.aspx>

WILLS, J. (2008). Making Class Politics Possible: Organizing Contract Cleaners in London. *International Journal Of Urban And Regional Research*, 32(2), 305-323. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2427.2008.00783.x>