

Department Senior Student Advisors Impact Report – Year 1

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With special thanks to all staff and student respondents, Lisa Corns and Pete
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Executive Summary

This report presents our findings from the initial evaluation of the Departmental Senior Student Advisors (DSSAs), investigating the impact and value of DSSAs as perceived by staff and students. The DSSAs are a new service, introduced in AY24/25, offering pastoral support and guidance to students through a centrally managed team of advisors, who are embedded into departments.

Drawing on a survey of department staff, students and the DSSA's engagement records, we find evidence of a substantial, positive impact of DSSAs on students and departmental colleagues alike, focused on support with (assessment) regulation and health and well-being.

Key Findings

While only a minority of surveyed students stated engaging with their DSSA – highlighting the potential for better student awareness and engagement – those that did engage reported near universally positive experiences. DSSA meetings matched expectations and provided helpful advice. Responding students also self-reported largely following the advice they were given, underscoring its relevance. Staff, in turn, described four key benefits to their departments: better support for students (matching students' assessment), reduced staff workload, improved processes for handling student support requests, and greater knowledge of available support and confidence in supporting students.

Staff survey respondents linked the DSSAs' impact to four interrelated mechanisms: DSSAs' ability to coordinate information and responses across their departments; by acting as points of contact or referral for department staff, or even more simply, as a presence that colleagues knew could help with pastoral matters; their ability to directly meet with students; and, lastly, their ability to proactively reach out to students, offering persistent, helpful and friendly communications.

Against this overall positive picture, a small number of comments nonetheless outlined a lack of impact, or even negative changes. Raised concerns include lower PSS familiarity with student cases and subsequent 'single points of failure', worse SSC relationships, as communications were redirected through DSSAs, and a possible loss of faculty/PSS confidence and sense of responsibility for student support.

This 'strongly-positive-with-some-negatives' pattern resurfaced when asking staff about possible changes to the service. While most respondents indicated that no changes were needed, a minority of respondents suggested more time in departments, more student outreach, stronger integration into departments, review and clarification of the remit of the DSSA strategy, and the need for resourcing and development of the entire support system at LSE.

Next Steps & Recommendations

The DSSA's service varies substantially across departments. Hence, many of the identified areas for improvement are best addressed on the department level. As already started by the DSSA leadership, we hence propose to share this report, alongside anonymised and aggregated department level feedback, with departments, to arrange review meetings between department and DSSA leadership where requested. In these meetings, ways to maximise student and staff engagement or tailor the type and forms of support, and 'embedding' into department processes can be discussed. Depending on the benefits of such meetings, maintaining them may be helpful to ensure that the service continues to develop in dialogue with departments.

Our findings further suggest two possible areas of work for the DSSA leadership team. First, to review and clarify who is, and who ought to, use the service. Such clarification – and its communication to staff and students – could improve the quantity and quality of engagement. Such work could also inform resource planning, for example, better accommodating differential UG and PG access patterns. Second, the team might seek to explore ways that good practices for working with DSSAs can be shared across departments. While the Community of Practice offers such opportunities for DSSAs and equivalent roles, no such forum currently exist for department staff. Creating this may aid the embedding of the service and strengthen consistency.

However, comments also highlight that the School generally must ensure sufficient resourcing and recognition of the wider 'eco system' of student support. The DSSAs depend on the work, time, and care of colleagues to refer students into the service, and in turn, rely on central services to provide effective support to students. As such, the DSSAs are no magic bullet, and the wider eco-system of support needs to work.

Finally, the available analysis paints an ambiguous picture of the hybrid operating model of the DSSAs. Most respondents did not remark on it. Among those that did, opinions appeared split. Some explicitly called for moving DSSA roles into departments to deepen departmental integration and oversight. Others highlighted that DSSAs' position "with one foot in the department and one foot in the SSC" had been important to build bridges between the departments and SSC. The DSSA leadership could work to make a stronger case for this operating model and share this case with departments. Future evaluation, for example, considering perspectives of SSC service leads or DSSAs themselves could further support this work.

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1 Introduction

The Departmental Senior Student Advisors (DSSAs) are a new initiative at LSE, designed to improve the support offered to students within their home department. Introduced in AY24/25, this report presents the findings of the initial impact evaluation, looking back at their first academic year of operation.

Background

There are now seven DSSAs working across 14 departments (Table 1), who joined LSE between May and November 2024 (ie in AY2024/25). The percentage allocation is based on department UG and PGT headcount, designed to ensure an equal workload for each DSSA and department.

DSSA	Department & Allocation
1	International History (50%)
	International Relations (50%)
2	Anthropology (40%)
	Sociology (60%)
3	Philosophy (50%)
	PBS (50%)
4	Geography (80%)
	Gender (20%)
5	International Development (50%)
	Media & Communications (50%)
6	Mathematics (60%)
	Health Policy (40%)
7	Statistics (90%)
	Methodology (10%)

Table 1: Department and time allocations of the 7 DSSAs

Earlier discussions with the DSSAs team suggested that this work intended to achieve three broad improvements in the School:

- **For students:** to improve and equalising the student experience between department, strengthening the sense that ‘LSE cares’
- **For academic and PS staff:** to improve their experience and sense of School support, by reducing demands of their time, relaying information about available School support, and assisting with complex cases
- **For the School:** to improve working relations between central School services and departments, by bridging and relaying relevant information about policies and services

To achieve these improvements, the DSSAs use a hybrid operating model. Managed centrally in the Academic Registrar's Division and spending some of their time there, the DSSAs spend most of their time in their departments, corresponding to their allocation. This also marks an important difference to similar student advice roles that already exist in six departments, who have dedicated PSS staff to support the pastoral care of students (s. annex 1 for overview).

Evaluation Questions

Given the novelty of the DSSAs at LSE – and the substantial School investment into the initiative – this evaluation sought to inform possible improvements to the service, while providing the School with an initial assessment of the worth and impact of the DSSAs. This translated into three specific evaluation questions¹:

- What did the DSSAs do in their first year?
- How do students perceive the quality and value of the DSSA's work?
- How do departmental staff – academic and PSS – view the quality and value of the DSSA's work?

In answering these questions, a recurrent theme is the role of inter-departmental consistency. Wherever possible, data was hence analysed to understand if there were important differences across departments.

Data

To answer these evaluation questions, the evaluation analysed three sources of data:

- Descriptive statistical analysis of the 'Engagement Trackers', Excel spreadsheets recording engagement by DSSA in all 14 departments and noting key details such as source, length and reasons for student interactions
- A survey of students in departments with DSSAs, open between 05.06 and 19.06.25. The survey collected 107 complete responses, representing 11 of the 13 targeted departments².
- A survey of staff in departments with DSSAs. Collected in two waves between 21.08 and 19.09.25, the survey collected 53 completed responses, representing all but one department with DSSAs.

Ethics

¹ In the scoping of this projects, three additional foci were discussed: i) a closer examination of the operating model, including comparative work in departments with fully embedded DSSA-like roles; ii) work with the DSSA's themselves to understand their view on strengths and weaknesses of the service; and iii) understanding the impact of the DSSAs on central services, given their focus on referral based support. While the current project could not investigate these foci fully in the available time, where relevant, these are suggested as further analysis below.

² The department of Statistics was excluded in the student survey to avoid overlap with work by the Inclusive Education Team.

Ethics approval for the student data collection was provided under the ethics procedure for institutional research, analysis and evaluation. Informed consent was collected from all respondents, including the condition of anonymity. All findings are presented in anonymised form.

2 Findings

2.1 What did the DSSAs do in their first year?

The DSSAs’ “Engagement Trackers” provide a detailed record of the activities and case load through the 24/25 academic year. As the DSSA team does not use a case management software, these trackers rely on manually kept Excel records. This may affect data quality, including slightly different ways in which colleagues are using the trackers to log their engagement. The below findings should hence be regarded with some level of caution, although the core findings have been validated with the Head of the DSSA service, and are triangulated with the staff and student surveys.

Scale of Support

Across all 14 departments, the DSSA trackers log contact with 1279 students, leading to engagement with and support for 950 students. This represents a substantial share of the relevant student populations in the 24/25 academic year³: around 24.5% of the combined UG and PGT students in their respective departments were contacted by a DSSA, and 18.2% of them interacted in some form with their DSSA.

This headline finding has three important qualifications. First, the distribution across the departments varies (s. figure 1). While 175 students engaged with their DSSA in the department of Statistics, only 7 did so in Methodology. It is likely that different department headcounts, different time allocations between departments, as well as variations in the support needs contribute to this variability.

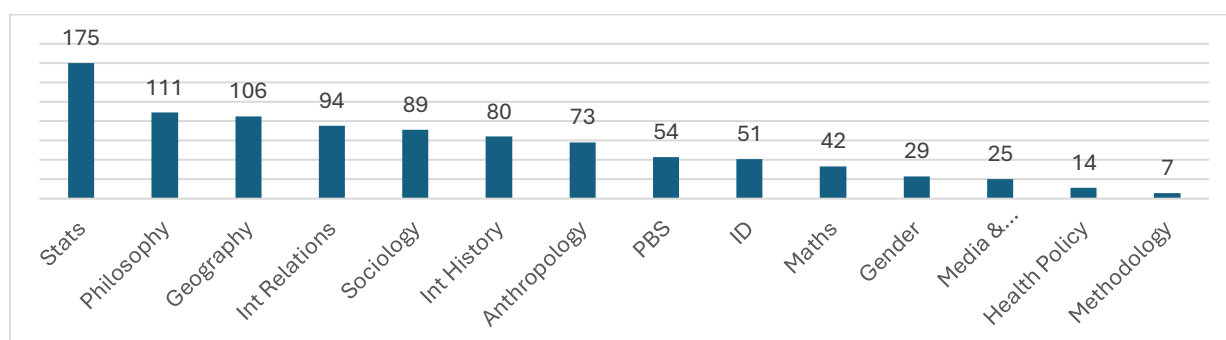


Figure 1: No. of unique students engaged with by department. Nb: an engagement is defined as contact with a student that has a status record which is not “never engaged”. Some students have multiple engagements recorded.

³ Department population figures retrieved from https://tableau.lse.ac.uk/#/views/Schoolpopulationsizeandshape_16820881157640/2_School-departments?iid=1&redirect=auth; UG and PGT students from the “Population Plan” only

The second qualification to our headline figure is that in all departments that have undergraduate students, these made up a larger share of the DSSA caseload than PG students (s. figure 2). This is particularly notable in PBS, where PGT students made up just 17% of the students contacted by the DSSA, despite comprising 58.5% of the department’s head count.

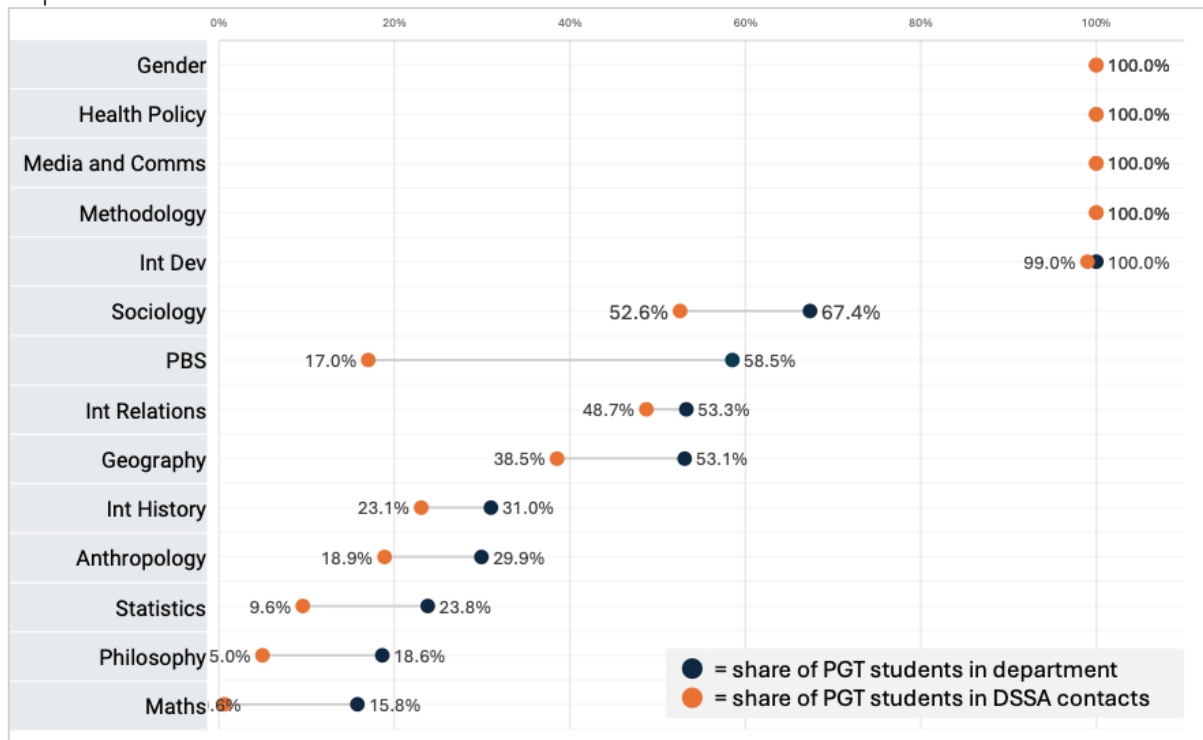


Figure 2: Share of PGT students by department, compared to share of PGT contacts of DSSAs by department.

Lastly, there is important variability in how students ended up accessing DSSA support in the first place. Overall, active outreach by the DSSAs’ via email was the most common way students entered the services, followed by students booking appointments, being referred by academic colleagues teaching them, and being referred into the service by departmental PSS colleagues. Once again, however, there is substantial departmental variation (fig 3). The rate of DSSA initiated contacts – a dominant mode of outreach in the department of Statistics and Gender – contrasts with departments such as Methodology, Health Policy and Media and Comms where the majority of engagements are initiated by students.

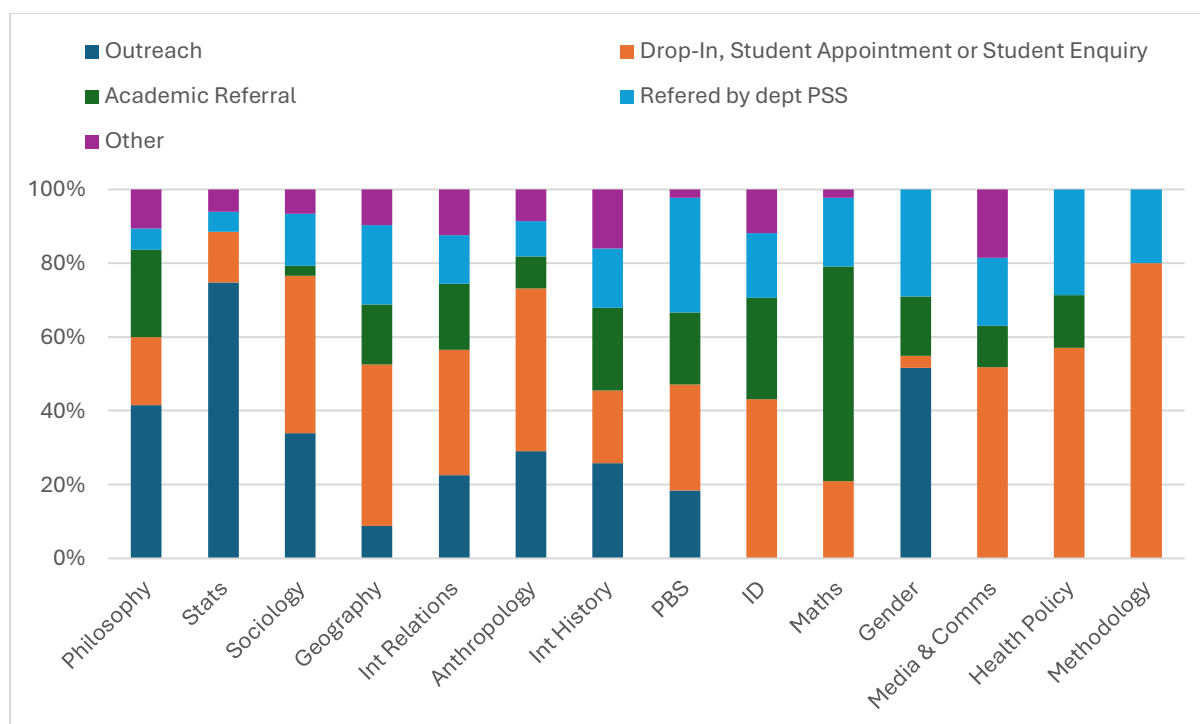


Figure 3: Share of the top 4 engagement reasons and 'other' by department. Note substantial variations in department sizes (cf fig 1). See appendix 1.1 for code explanation and 1.2 for full engagement by count.

Understanding Engagement

This variability of support across departments and UG/PG access raises the question whether engagement mirrors uneven need for support – or indicates an over-focus on some students. Similarly, the differences in referral sources might simply represent different departmental working models or represent lack of awareness by some students and colleagues in some departments. While the absence of baseline data describing the 'need' for support among students and departments makes an exact answer for this difficult, the qualitative findings from our staff and student surveys do add to this concern. Ultimately, they suggest that engagement is inequitable, with at least some students who could benefit from the DSSAs currently not accessing it, and at least some members of staff needing to be better informed about the service.

Staff Views

The first indication of this is from the staff survey. Here, we asked colleagues how well they felt staff and student had understood the DSSA role and were making use of it (fig 4). While few colleagues felt that awareness was poor, colleagues were roughly split on whether overall awareness was good, or not-quite-there-yet. Generally, respondents to the survey were also marginally more positive on students' awareness of the service than on staff's (though the low number of responses did not allow us to identify clear differences between departments).

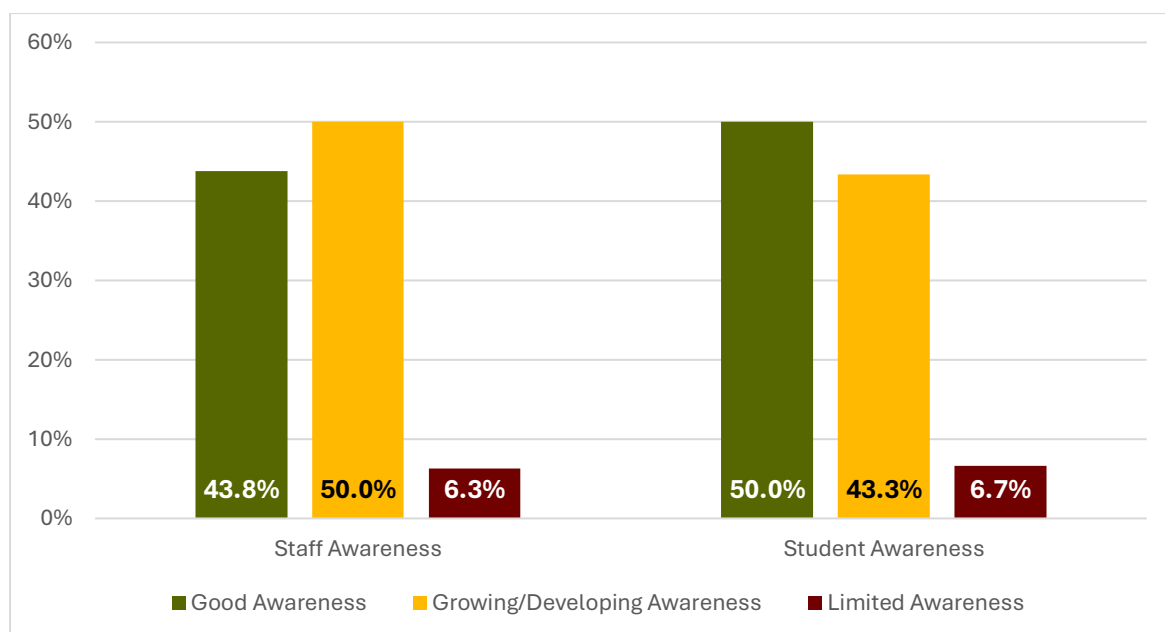


Figure 4: Share of responses indicating good, growing/developing and limited awareness of the DSSA service for staff and students respectively (n=53; 63 codes extract from free-text responses describing engagement levels)..

In the same response, a few colleagues also offered possible explanations for this level of awareness.

Among colleagues who identified good awareness, they identified three key enablers:

- **Departmental visibility:** multiple respondents linked good awareness of their DSSA to regular departmental communications and DSSAs joining welcome week events to advertise themselves and the support they offered
- **Shortcomings in existing support:** as one respondent suggested, the high uptake of the DSSA service was as it addressed an important gap in the departments, where academic mentors were struggling to offer pastoral support alongside their academic support
- **Personal rapport:** one respondent also noted that personal rapport with PSS staff and the DSSA had allowed them to understand the role and make use of it.

However, more commonly, colleagues offered explanations as to why the awareness and utilisation of the role was *not* as good as they were hoping for it to be. Analysing these responses, three themes stand out as key barriers to more effective engagement of the DSSA role:

- **Integrating DSSAs into existing structures:** Several colleagues remarked on the related challenges of understanding the remit of DSSAs and distinguishing it from existing support (such as academic mentors, PSS support, and central School services). Some respondents directly linked this challenge to the amount of time DSSAs spent in their department, highlighting both that low department times made it more difficult to become aware of the service, and

meant that some level of support had to be continued to be offered by PSS staff, blurring the distinctions between roles.

- **Accidents of joining:** several colleagues pointed out that their department's DSSA – or they themselves – had joined midway through the academic year, missing the 'start of term' communications that would have established the service. Department staff turnover further exacerbated this issue.
- **Inertia:** Lastly, a few respondents also pointed out that awareness, integration and understanding simply take time to 'evolve organically' – time which the DSSAs had not yet had in their department. As such, PSS colleagues had remained the 'instinctual' first place to look for support.

Thus, our staff survey data does support the claim that at least some colleagues do not yet know how to make use of the DSSA service, and as such, are unlikely to refer students with need for the service into it. This underscores the continuous need to make colleagues aware of the DSSAs, provide clear guidance what the service can and cannot provide, though some of this awareness is likely to build organically and over time.

Student Views

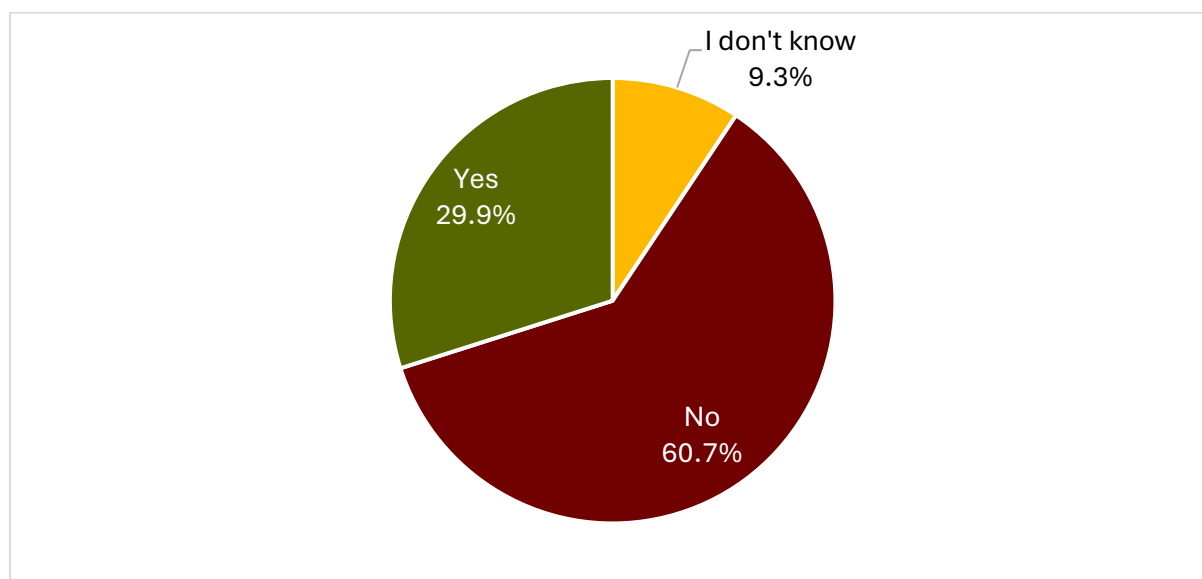


Figure 5: "Have you ever had any of the following engagements with your DSSA?" (n=107); "yes" includes contact via email, in person, both and 'other type of engagement'.

In our survey of students, only a minority (29.9%) recalled ever engaging with their department's DSSA (fig 5).⁴ Asking students who had not engaged with their DSSAs for possible reasons for this, three broad kinds of responses were given (fig 6). First, there were students who were unaware of the service – the most common individual reason. Second, there were students who considered that they did not consider DSSA

⁴: This figure is larger than those derived from the DSSA engagement trackers in section 2.1, which suggested that 18.2% of students in departments with DSSAs had engaged with them. This suggests a likely response bias in our survey towards students who *did* engage with their DSSAs.

support, including, because they did not think they needed support, or were already receiving sufficient support from personal connections, academic advisors, or School support services. Lastly, there were a small number of students who stated that they would have liked to access the DSSA but did not know how to do so, or felt uncomfortable discussing their concerns. While concerning, this last cluster was by far the smallest, with only 6 students indicating that they knew about the DSSAs, but not how to access them, and only a single student in our survey indicating that they had been uncomfortable at discussing their concerns. Due to the small numbers of respondents, no clear patterns across departments or level of study could be identified.

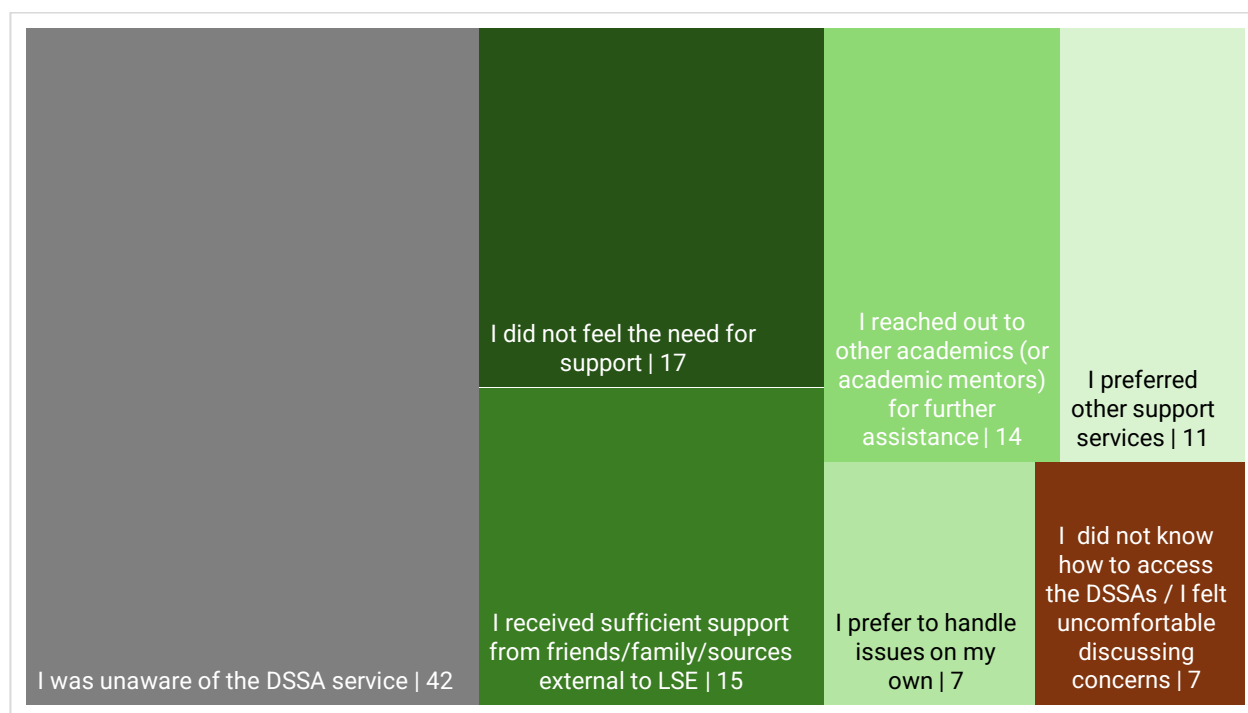


Figure 6: "Why did you not engage with your DSSA?" (n=63, multiple answers per respondent, total answers=113); colour indicate response cluster 'unaware' (grey), 'no DSSA support needed' (green), 'DSSA support needed' (red).

Overall, the available data hence suggests that there are likely at least some students that could benefit from support by the DSSAs, but currently do not know how to access it, or are unconformable doing so. There is also a likely, larger group that might be interested in advice from the DSSAs but are not familiar with the service.

The status of students who consider that they do already receive (sufficient) support from other parts of LSE are the least clearly evaluable: they pose what is ultimately a strategic and normative question about how students *should* be accessing LSE support. Part of the considerations are possible *qualitative* differences in the support that DSSAs offer, which individual students might not be able to comment on or even notice, lacking a clear comparison between accessing support themselves versus via a DSSA. We will return to this point in below, highlighting emerging evidence that working with DSSAs allows students, for example, to file extenuating circumstances with higher quality.

Offered Support

Once in the service, what support and advice to DSSAs provide? A first perspective on this is provided by the DSSA engagement trackers, which record both a primary and secondary engagement reason. According to these records, students engage most commonly with their DSSAs in relation to assessment regulation and administration, including questions about resits, deferrals, extensions, or extenuating circumstances. This is followed by student queries related to well-being, health, and disabilities.

The relation of primary to secondary reasons underscores that these two areas are often linked. While assessment is the most common primary reason, disability and health related queries are by far the most common *secondary* reason recorded – possibly suggesting that while students seek advice on assessment policies initially, health and well-being related questions emerge throughout the consultations. These findings are consistent with our student survey results, which found that School process and well-being and mental health related support were the most common reasons students engaged with the DSSA – followed by interest in an interest in navigating available support broadly.

As before, however, there is substantial variation in this across departments (fig 7). The department of Statistics stands out for its very large share of assessment policy related queries, comprising over 80% of the recorded reasons for contacts. In contrast, in the departments of PBS and Gender, the most common reason for student contacts is related to health and well-being.

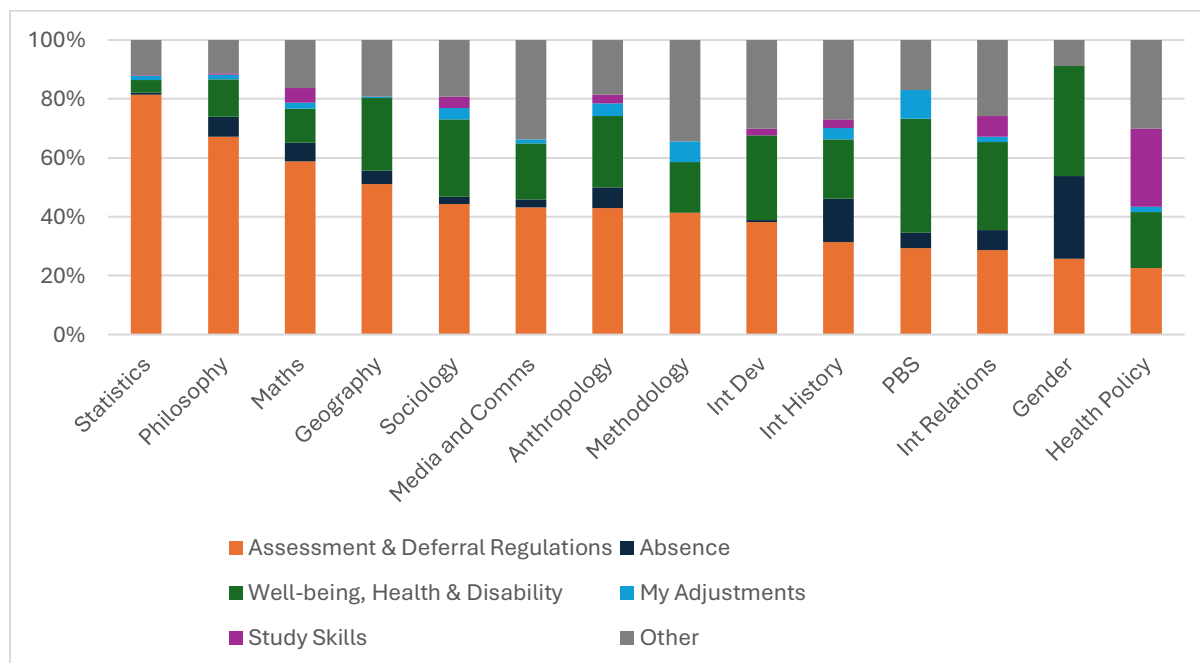


Figure 7: Share of Engagement reason, aggregating primary and secondary reason, by department reasons as share of all engagements (total of 4316 recorded engagement reasons, excluding blanks)

For each student contact, the engagement logs record up to five next steps, comprising up to three “actions” and two “advice” fields. Consistent with these

engagement reasons, the most common actions taken were student-wellbeing signposting and advice on procedures and progression (fig 8). Only ‘student outreach’ – including inviting students to an appointment or checking in with them via email – was a more common action. This result is likely influenced by the way ‘engagements’ are logged, which includes a substantial number of referrals by individuals or services, which DSSAs then follow-up on (cf fig 3). In these instances, reaching out to students is the first step for further advice. However, outreach is itself a vital component of the service. As we will return to in section 2.2 and 2.3, the capacity to reach out proactively is itself core to the perceived value of the service.

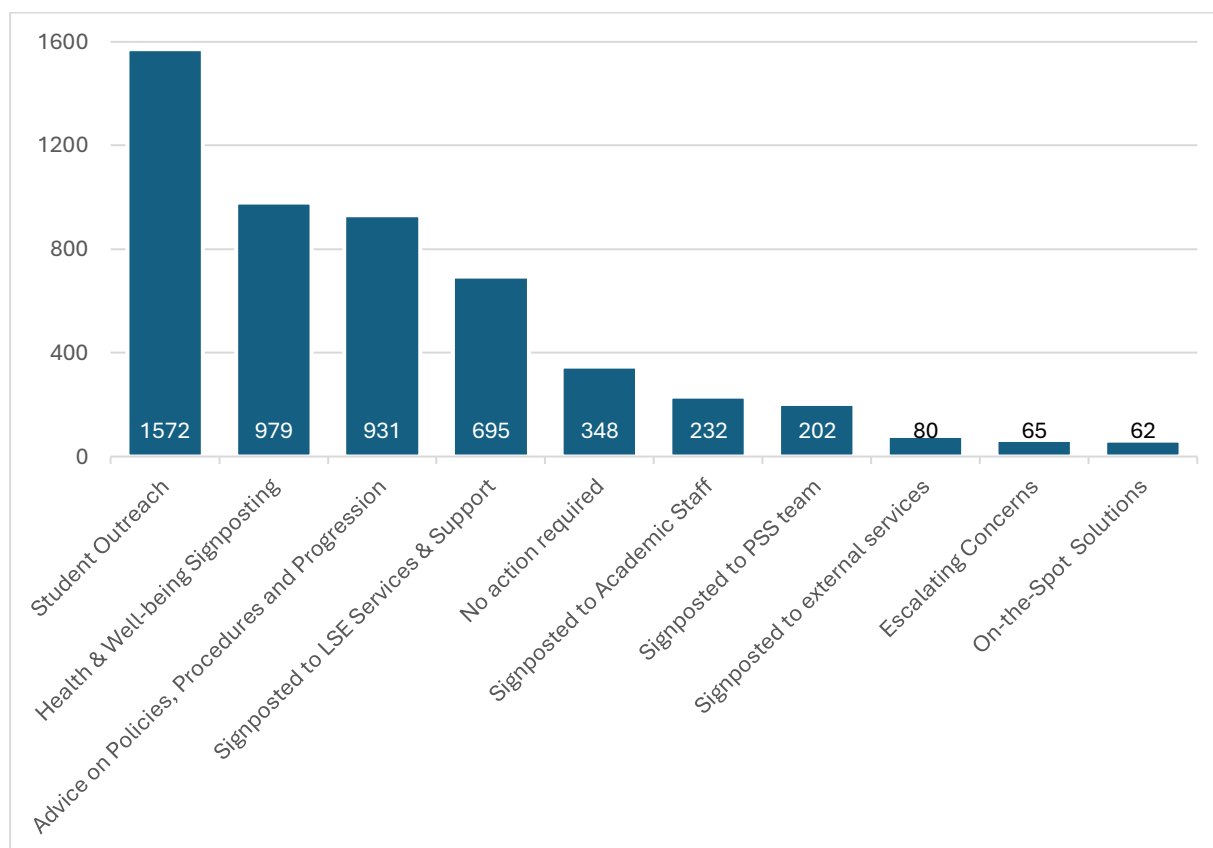


Figure 8: Count of actions and advice logged following student contacts. Each engagement has up to 5 actions/pieces of advice recorded.

This account of interactions between DSSAs and students is complemented by data on departmental engagement we collected in our survey of department staff. Asked to describe the kinds of support they and their students had received from their DSSA, colleagues described five key areas in which the DSSAs had supported them:

- Support and advice for students (57 mentions)
- Support and advice for members of staff (35 mentions)
- Proactive outreach to students (16 mentions)
- Information gathering and dissemination across departments and the School (11 mentions)
- “Departmental citizenship”, including contributions to committees, department meetings and policy discussions (7 mentions)

Taken together, these activities highlight the diverse role of DSSAs. Focusing on ‘on-the-spot’ solutions for policies and procedures, and signposting to health and well-being services for relevant student concerns, they also act as an important source of support for staff, with DSSAs proactively reaching out to students following staff referral and collecting and disseminating information to escalate concerns. At least in some departments, their specialist expertise is also beginning to contribute to departmental committees and policies.

2.2 How did students perceive the quality and value of the DSSA’s work?

In our student survey, we asked students that had engaged with their DSSA whether the DSSA’s support met their expectation, and whether it was helpful. While our response count (n=24 and n=27) limits the strength of our conclusion, our available data nonetheless indicates a strongly positive student experience: 83% of responding students said that the service met their expectation, and 89% of students considered that engaging with the DSSA was helpful. These figures are less positive than feedback the DSSA service has itself collected through regular feedback forms, though remain broadly comparable. Here, 98% of students who used the service would recommend it to a friend; 96% of respondents found the support useful⁵.

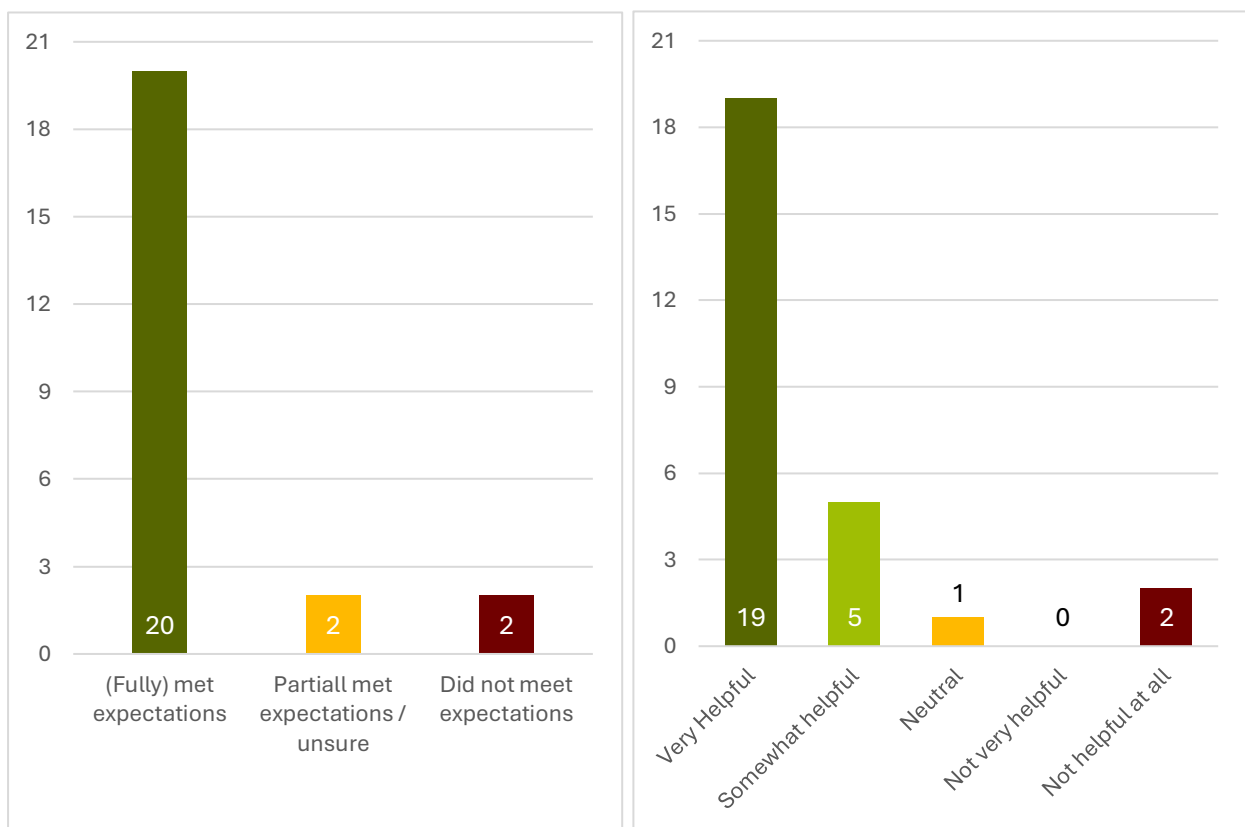


Figure 9: Count of responses from student survey. Left: Did engaging with your department’s DSSA meet your expectations? (n=24); right: “How helpful did you find the advice from your DSSA?” (n=27)

⁵: SCIW Board Papers, Departmental Senior Student Advisors (DSSA) Update, 31.03.2025

Asked to explain their Likert scale ratings of the DSSA’s helpfulness, twenty-two students detailed positive experiences, highlighting the **caring, understanding and supportive** advice of the DSSA, which they felt had **reassured** them about processes and better equipped them to navigate support. Some students explicitly contrasted this with “unhelpful and alienating” support they had received from other services at LSE. Students further emphasised the **clear and consistent communication** from the DSSA, including **quick responses** and **proactive follow-up** in the progress of cases. This was ultimately underpinned by the perception of the DSSAs as providing **high-quality advice**. As one student put it, their DSSA allowed them to take a shortcut to “confusing and long” LSE processes.

However, two students painted a more critical picture. One student detailed **difficulty reaching their DSSA** and being disappointed by being **signposted onwards** to central services, rather than receiving on the spot solutions. The second student felt that they received **unclear advice** which was not helpful to their situation, compounded by their DSSA seeming “very unprepared and unsure what to advise”.

Importantly, however, receiving irrelevant or unclear advice from the DSSAs appears to be a minority experience. Asked whether they had acted, or were planning on acting on their DSSA’s advice, 90% of responding students indicated that they had follow at least one of the recommended follow-up actions suggested (fig 10).

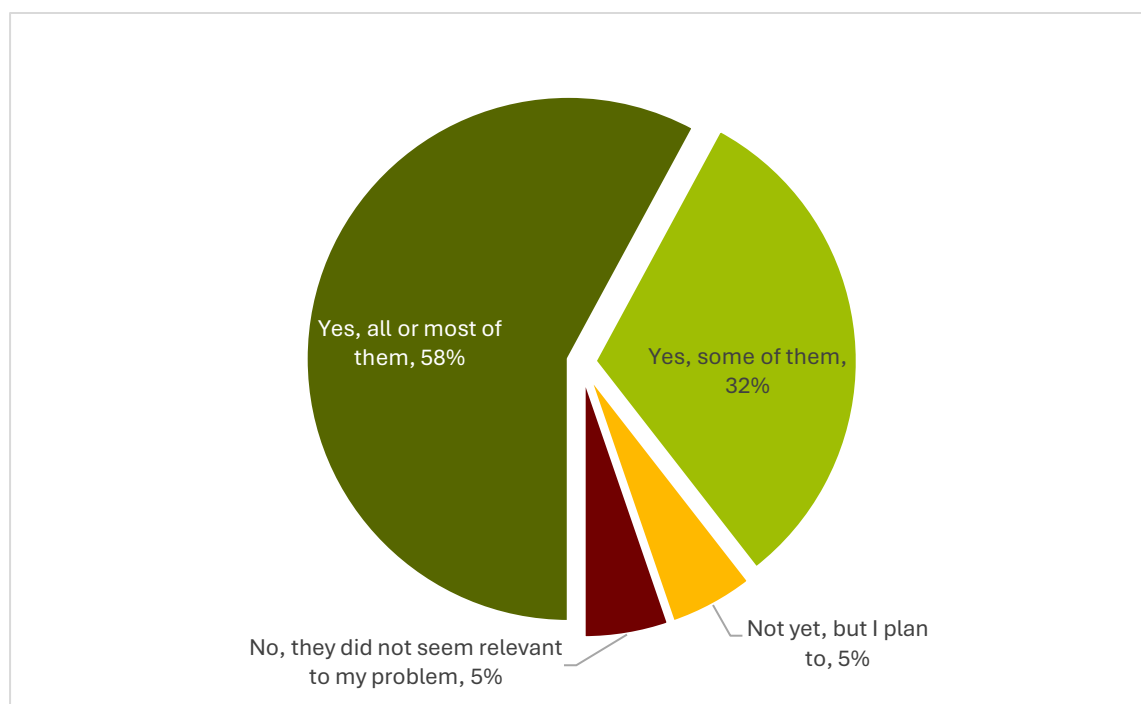


Figure 10: Share of answers to the question "Did you act on your DSSA's recommendations?" (n=19)

2.3 How did staff perceive the quality and value of the DSSA’s work?

In our staff survey, we asked departmental colleagues to describe what, if any, significant changes they had noticed since the DSSA had joined their department, and what, if anything, they considered the DSSA to have contributed to this change.

Conducting a thematic analysis of the results, we identified seven key changes DSSAs had made to their departments, based on four ‘mechanisms’ or capacities (fig 11).

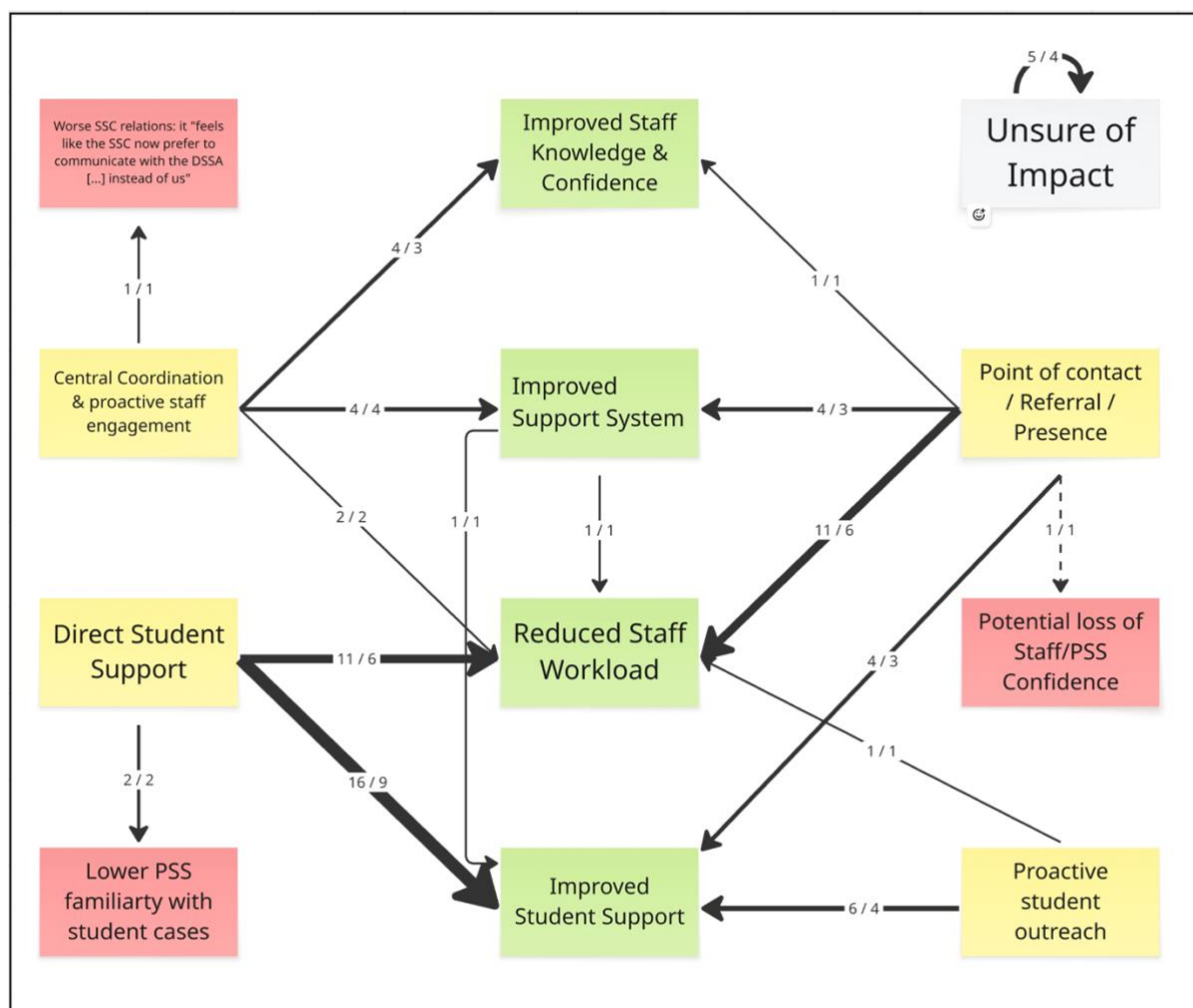


Figure 11: Relation of DSSA actions (yellow), positive outcomes (green) and negative impacts (red), extracted from staff survey (n=53, representing 13 departments). Arrows indicate the number of unique mentions (first digit) and number of unique departments in which the outcome was described (second digit). Eg "6/4" indicates that six individuals described the link, from 4 different departments.

Given our limited sample and uneven departmental response rates, the relative consistency, and strongly positive nature of collected responses is itself notable, especially when considering that the underlying data was collected through free text responses with minimal guidance on specific domains of change⁶.

Indeed, across our 53 responses, only 5 described not noticing any changes in their department. Two respondents explained that they had started their roles at the same time or after the introduction of the DSSA and hence were unable to comment. The remaining three – two academic staff and one department manager – considered that they had not noticed any changes to their day-to-day work but also cautioned that

⁶ Full question text: "What, if any, have been the most important change(s) you noticed since the DSSA joined your department? Were these changes positive or negative? For example: changes to the support offered, changes to information received / provided, changes to workload ..."

they did not consider themselves to be ideal witnesses to these changes given their work remit.

Positive changes

Among staff that did notice positive changes in their department and attributed them to the DSSA, we identify four broad themes.

First, and most commonly, staff described that they considered that their department had seen **improved student support** due to the DSSA, including:

- They considered that their department was now able to offer more support, offer “more promptly”, and more consistently, in turn enabling students to better navigate LSE’s support landscape or making better informed decision about their future studies
- Consistency was also linked to students no longer ‘going under the radar’, with DSSAs ensuring reliable and proactive follow-up on raised concerns or queries
- This was also linked to more targeted and earlier support, with DSSAs being able to reach out to students before issues arose or at least before they became worse
- Colleagues further considered that support offered through the DSSAs had made their departmental support more personalised and caring, given the DSSAs’ ability to build rapport with students and follow-up with them
- Lastly, 5 responses directly linked the joining of DSSAs to improved NSS scores their department had seen in 24/25

Second, and similarly commonly, colleagues noted **reduced workload** for staff across the department. Specifically, colleagues noted that:

- Their workload had reduced, with estimates ranging from “slightly” to “massively”. This range is possibly explained varying responsibilities of respondents. For example, Academic Mentors maintained much of their mentoring work, with their DSSA only assisting with specific cases; meanwhile, senior PSS roles might see virtually all student request redirected to their DSSA.
- Indeed, other respondents described a more nuanced change in working patterns, noting a reduction in particular of ‘complex cases’ that no longer required multi-stakeholder consultation and information gathering from them
- Colleagues further reported a reduction in time spent on SSC liaison, which now was taken on by the DSSA
- Lastly, colleagues reported an overall change to the departmental environment, which became more supportive and ‘improved moral’

Third, some respondents described an **improved system of student support** in their department. This concretely included:

- Clearer or “streamlined” processes, structures and responsibilities for handling student queries, deferrals and requests, ensuring more consistent information being provided by staff
- Other colleagues also noted systemic benefits of the DSSA role, outlining for example how student Extenuating Circumstance submissions had improved in quality

Lastly, and closely relatedly to the above, colleagues also described that they themselves or the colleagues around them had become **more knowledgeable and confident in supporting students**. This included:

- Better awareness of School processes and regulation in particular including EC, leaving colleagues to feel “better equipped to offer assistance” or make decisions about student support
- Colleagues also reported a sense of having a ‘safety net’ in their department, rather than support being reliant on single individuals

Negative Changes

A small number of responses also outlined negative changes. Notably, these changes were both much less common than concrete benefits, and framed much more cautiously, for example, as possible risks to keep an eye on.

First, two colleagues from two separate departments expressed concerns about **lower levels of staff familiarity with student cases**. In some ways the direct consequence of DSSAs taking on student cases, staff noted that they were less familiar with students facing difficulties, with much of the student case information sitting with the DSSA. Difficulty in accessing information held by the DSSA contributed to this. As one response noted, this also created a single point of failure; should a DSSA change roles, continuity of student support might be compromised.

Second, one respondent noted that they were worried about **department staff losing confidence and skills in supporting students** over time, as well as a declining sense of responsibility for pastoral care. Linked to the DSSA only being in the department some days, they stressed that that pastoral care ought to remain a shared responsibility across PSS and faculty, requiring continuous development and training to ensure awareness by all stakeholders.

Lastly, one respondent raised concerns about **worsened departmental relationships with the SSC**. Indeed, one of several comments negatively highlighting the information provided by the SSC throughout the survey, the comment expressed that they felt that the SSC now preferred to communicate with the DSSA rather than departmental staff directly for certain issues. While the DSSA was ultimately able to mitigate this lack of information and act as a communication channel, the response nonetheless stressed that the relationship to the SSC had weakened.

Contributing Factors and Enablers

Colleagues' responses also provided some insight into how the DSSAs contributed to these changes. Ultimately, four mechanisms of the DSSAs were highlighted:

- DSSA's ability to act as "as a point of coordination and responsibility", reaching out to staff, gathering information, and disseminating them across the department
- DSSA's simply "being present" in the department, and acting as points colleagues could reach out to in case of questions or refer students to when they did not know how to best advise them
- Their ability to directly take on student support, in particular, hosting 1:1 meetings, allowing them to build rapport with students and be a personable and caring face of the wider support system
- Closely related, DSSA's ability to proactively reach out to students, especially those known to be at higher risk of encountering issues, for example, owing to resits, deferrals, returning from interruption.

More broadly, comments indicated that the status of the DSSA in the department, and relationship to colleagues were key to their impact. Survey responses referenced that DSSA's impact was enabled by a trusting relationship between staff and DSSAs, building on DSSAs' perceived competence in supporting students and awareness of School regulations. This was closely related to their overall visibility: given the importance of referrals into the service, changes were greatest when students and staff were clearly aware of the role and remit of the DSSAs. Notably, one comment also suggested that the DSSAs might be able to build different relationships with students, as students might be more open about well-being needs with their DSSAs compared to academic faculty or mentors.

Areas of Improvement

In the final part of our survey of departments, we included three questions aimed at understanding priority areas for further development of the service⁷. For each question, the most common response theme was that no changes were necessary, with the role was already offering valuable support or had exceeded departments' expectations. Nonetheless, these responses outline an opportunity for further development of the service in at least five areas.

Time in departments

The most common suggestion for improvement was to expand the hours DSSAs were in departments. Colleagues explained the need for such an increased time with the large workload for DSSAs in their department and growing demand for support by

⁷ Q7: "Are there areas where you were hoping or expecting to see change due to the DSSA, but did not?"

Q8: "Is there anything the DSSA could do to better support you, your colleagues, students, or the department overall?"

Q9: "Is there anything **the School or DSSA leadership team** could do to better support you, your colleagues, students or the department overall?"

students; as one respondent also noted, this large demand also placed a substantial emotional burden on DSSAs.

Department integration

A second suggestion for improvement concerned the DSSAs integration into department processes, beyond simple 'time spent'. Responses related to departmental integration stressed three inter-related aspects: the need to continuously remind colleagues about the role to ensure staff awareness and enable signposting into the service, as well as to dispel misconceptions about them being, for example, student counsellors or the same as academic mentors; facilitating better information sharing between DSSAs and department staff, for example, by organising regular case meetings or sharing operational data on student uptake back with staff; and overall, facilitating a closer relationship between DSSAs and academic roles such as AMs, DHoDs and DTs. To this end, several responses also considered that making the role 'in-house' would improve departmental oversight and allow for better integration into the department.

Student Outreach

A third suggestion for improvement concerned more targeted outreach to students. As several respondents noted, they thought that the impact of their DSSA could be improved if they spent more time reaching out to students considered at risk, for example, reaching out to all UG students, scheduling 1:1s with all students with My Adjustment plans, or simply spent more time raising awareness of their work to students.

Remit and Strategy

The fourth cluster of suggestions concerned the strategic remit of DSSAs. In the simplest case, this was framed as a request for greater clarity about the services offered by the DSSAs, such that staff and students would have the clearest sense of when to make use of the service. However, several comments also advocated for a review of the remit. Negatively, when questioning the DSSAs participation in central School work such as enrolment or exam invigilation. Positively, two colleagues advocated that DSSA support should be made available to PhD students, given their distinct wellbeing support needs, which went currently unmet. Another comment advocated for a greater role in the DSSAs in training and upskilling department staff on areas such as anticipatory duty, available support and pastoral care more generally. Comments also stressed the need to make sufficient CPD available to DSSAs to ensure that "we invest in [DSSAs] growth", both to support the scheme and individuals within the team – with another suggestions arguing that training in counselling could enhance the DSSA service.

Creating Supportive Structures

Lastly, throughout responses to our survey, colleagues underscored the need for the right structures and resourcing to be in place for DSSAs succeed. Underpinning the request for time, possibly widened remit and stronger engagement with staff and

students is the need for sufficient resourcing by the School, both for the DSSAs and the services, which they signpost students towards, in particular the DMHS. Some comments further stressed that the DSSAs are “not a magic bullet” – that improving student support and addressing the most complex cases required structural and institutional interventions.

3 Conclusion

3.1 Limitations

The presented analysis attempts to outline the impact DSSAs had in their first year of operation. Before summarising the findings, we want to briefly consider key limitations of our approach.

Most notably, this involves limits arising from our sample size and possible response bias. Despite 53 staff, and 107 student responses representing 13 of the 14 departments now having DSSAs, the sample is insufficient to consistently break down findings onto individual departments, or the contributing role of individual characterise to experiences of support. Due to these constraints (and lack of time), we also did not conduct statistical analysis of the presented survey data. This means that there is likely to be some bias in whose views are reflected, with an uncertain direction of effect (at least anecdotally, it seems that individuals with strongly positive or strongly negative experiences may be overrepresented). However, given the range of views collected and in the case of staff, at least, more detailed free text data collection, we hope to offset this limitation somewhat.

A second limitation concerns our impact identification strategy, which centrally relied on observations and attributions by staff, and some extent, students. For example, rather than attempting to measure staff workload and either showing a decline over time and/or relative to departments without DSSAs, we relied on the changes staff themselves noted and linked to the presence of the DSSAs. While this approach has methodologically established and is made more robust by the quantity and triangulation of the collected data, there may be concerns about ‘agency bias’, leading respondents to attribute too much of an observed change to the intervention in question. Similarly, as highlighted throughout the text, not all respondents have reliable insight into ‘what support would have been like without the DSSAs’, limiting the insights of their feedback. As such, the presented findings should be considered as the first steps towards a more rigorous impact evaluation, identifying areas of *likely* impact that future work could investigate in greater detail.

Lastly, the present report excludes two important perspectives: those of the DSSAs themselves, and that of the central services that DSSAs are working alongside. While the self-evaluation work conducted by the DSSA leadership team remedies the former at least somewhat, we hope that future work can fill in this gap to paint a more complete picture of the DSSAs value and impact.

3.2 Key Findings

Nonetheless, we consider that the evaluation provides sufficiently strong evidence to derive four conclusions.

First, the DSSAs have made improvements to student support, staff experiences of working with students, and the wider departments they operate in. This sentiment appears to be shared by both staff and students, with respondents consistently and substantially valuing the work of the DSSAs. Student feedback, while limited in number, is strongly positive, with students valuing the caring and reassuring support provided by the DSSAs, closely linked to their ability to offer consistent and proactive communication – actively working towards making students feeling seen and supported. Staff feedback is similarly positive, highlighting the better support for students (agreeing with students’ perceptions), reduced workloads, improved processes for handling student support requests, and greater knowledge of available support and confidence in supporting students that DSSAs have facilitated.

Second, there is substantial heterogeneity in the details of responses and experiences. Across data sources, patterns of engagement with the services, student concerns, perceptions and quality and services offered by the DSSA appear to all vary to at least some degree. This appears to be linked to a range of factors including individual DSSAs, departmental contexts, departmental ways of working, student populations and the different staff perspectives represented in the survey. This heterogeneity matters for three reasons. Practically, it underscores that any recommendations raised should be viewed as a reflection of individual opinions, situated in departmental contexts, and should only be taken forward in that context, rather than being applied across all departments. Strategically and normatively, it raises the question of ‘equity in student experience’. While ensuring such equity is a stated aim of the DSSA service, operationalising this into practice across different disciplines, support needs and ways of working requires nuance and should build on departments’ own reflections. Finally, it presents an opportunity for learning: if structures can be built that allow departments and DSSAs to reflect on and share different experiences, it may provide valuable opportunities to disseminate innovation.

Third, and notwithstanding the strongly positive overall perceptions of the service, there are several areas where the DSSA service can further improve its impact. These include 1) clarifying the remit: which students ought to use the DSSA (in relation not least to other available support such as AMs, DTs, or accessing SWS directly) to receive what kind of support, and how to build the awareness and resourcing to deliver on this ambition; 2) a clearer communication of this remit to staff and students to strengthen engagement; and 3) continuing to integrate the DSSAs into their departmental contexts to ensure consistent and effective student support, as well as sufficient information for departments.

Fourth, however, and closely relatedly, across responses, there is also a clear sense that the DSSAs are no magic bullet, with attention and resources needing to be

invested in the wider LSE ecosystem of support. Several responses, from staff and students, explicitly contrasted the caring, proactive and helpful support from DSSAs with cold, difficult to navigate and unhelpful support received in other parts of the School. Similarly, some responses argued that the DSSAs had been successful precisely *because* existing support is regularly overwhelmed. As such, the aim articulated on the School level for DSSAs – to improve working relations between central services and departments – is only partially met. While the DSSAs appear effective at disseminating information with staff and students and at helping them navigate central support better, the actual ‘distance’ between departments and central services appears unchanged. As one comment put it: “We could use a better bridge between the wellbeing services and the department. [...] [Our DSSA] was very helpful in this regard this year, but I feel like there is scope for a much more thorough bridge to be built”.

Lastly, underlying this evaluation, is the question about the impact of the DSSAs operating model. Currently available data paints an ambiguous picture. Most respondents did not comment on the operating model at all or simply took it as given. Among those that did remark on it, however, opinions appear split. Some colleagues explicitly called for bringing the roles into departments, chiefly to more deeply integrate DSSAs into departmental operations. Other responses highlighted that DSSAs’ position “with one foot in the department and one foot in the SSC” has been important to facilitate the much-needed bridge building between departments and the School. The identified mechanisms DSSAs rely on for their impact (departmental coordination, departmental presence, direct student support, and capacity for proactive student outreach) are also not obviously linked to this hybrid operating model. Hence, further analysis – especially with a comparative focus on those departments that operating DSSA-like roles purely in department or work with central services to outline how the position of DSSAs in SSC has enabled more effective working relationships there – could produce valuable insights. Additionally, DSSA leadership could work to better articulate more clearly what the benefits of this hybrid operating model are intended to be, not least to identify practical steps to further develop them.

3.3 Recommendations

Based on these conclusions, we consider that the DSSA and School leadership may want to consider the following actions:

- I. For the DSSA leadership team and/or School to consider improved records keeping for the DSSAs – possibly via a CRM or case management software. This could improve data accuracy, and address raised departmental concerns about data sharing, awareness of DSSA workloads, and business continuity
- II. (*In progress*): For the DSSA leadership to share the findings of this report with departments, alongside a summary of gathered department feedback (where

relevant) and to set up meetings to address questions including engagement, services offered, and departmental integration.

- III. For DSSA leadership to review and discuss the remit of the service to enable clearer communication of what the service can – and cannot – provide, plan existing department allocations in light of different engagement patterns, and scope resource need for any additional demands.
- IV. For the whole School to consider the wider ‘ecosystem’ of support and improvements to it.
- V. For the DSSA leadership and/or School leadership to explicate and possibly strengthen the value proposition of the ‘hybrid’ operating model to make a stronger case to departments for the benefits of the current setup

Supporting the above suggestions, the Eden Evaluation Team is looking forward to continuing working with DSSA colleagues on the evaluation of this service. In this work, we will explore ways to complement existing work, and widen the range of perspectives considered. As such, work could include:

- Comparative work with departments with locally managed, DSSA equivalent roles, focusing on understanding the role of the DSSA’s hybrid operating model
- Work to reflect the voice, learnings and areas of improvement of DSSA colleagues themselves
- Work with other Central Services to understand the impact of DSSAs on their work (possibly strengthening the understanding and ‘case for’ the operating model)

4 Appendix

Appendix 1: Overview of DSSA and DSSA equivalent roles at LSE (provided by Inclusive Education Team, as of AY2024/25)

Department/Division	DSSA	Alternative role to DSSA
Department of Accounting	No	No
Department of Economic History	No	Departmental tutor
Department of Economics	No	Departmental tutor
Department of Finance	No	No
Department of Government	No	Departmental tutor
Department of Management	No	Departmental tutor
Department of Social Policy	No	Student Community and Wellbeing Manager
LSE Law School	No	Undergraduate Student Support and Advice Manager
School of Public Policy	No	No
Data Science Institute	No	No information
European Institute	No	No information
Firoz Lalji Institute for Africa	No	No information
International Inequalities Institute	No	No information
Marshall Institute	No	No information
Department of Anthropology	Yes	/
Department of Gender Studies	Yes	/
Department of Geography and Environment	Yes	/
Department of Health Policy	Yes	/
Department of International Development	Yes	/
Department of International History	Yes	/
Department of International Relations	Yes	/
Department of Mathematics	Yes	/
Department of Media and Communications	Yes	/
Department of Methodology	Yes	/
Department of Philosophy, Logic and Scientific Method	Yes	/
Department of Psychological and Behavioural Science	Yes	/
Department of Sociology	Yes	/
Department of Statistics	Yes	/

Appendix 2: Engagement Type Code Book

Analysis Code	Caseload Code(s)			
Outreach	Outreach - identified group	Other outreach		
Drop-In, Student Appointment or Student Enquiry	Attended drop in	Student booked appointment	Student enquiry (via email/other)	
Academic Referral	Referred by AM	Referred by Department Tutor	Referred by Programme Director	
Referred by dept PSS	Flagged by dept - no action needed	Referred by dept PSS		
Referred by Student Records, Student Reg, SAET or other SSC	Referred by other SSC	Referred by SAET	Referred by Student Records	Referred by Student Reg
Referred by SWS	Referred by SWS			
Request via Extension	Request via extension request			
Returning from Interruption	Returning from interruption			
Other	Other	Returning from LSE GO		

Appendix 3: Count of Successful student engagements by type and department – absolute counts and all engagement types, including contacts with multiple students

