

Undergraduate Research Assistantship (UGRA) Programme Evaluation Report

1. Executive summary

The Undergraduate Research Assistantship (UGRA) programme transforms the student journey of many who have taken part. As a well-paid opportunity, the programme gives LSE undergraduate students the chance to work in meaningful collaboration with faculty supervisors and as part of a community of research assistants connected by the Phelan US Centre. The experiences of and skills learned by student participants have helped them in their post-LSE careers, including internships and work placements.

Faculty who took part in the programme celebrated their students' contributions to their research, finding them to be generative, with research assistants offering new perspectives and outlooks on their projects. Through their collaborations with students, faculty have been able to produce a variety of outputs that have often extended beyond the programme.

2. Introduction

Now in its ninth year, the Undergraduate Research Assistantship programme is a well-regarded flagship initiative delivered by the LSE Phelan US Centre.

Since 2017, the programme has been one of the most competitive student schemes at LSE with often over 200 applications every year. It has given more than 70 undergraduate students the chance to work with 38 of the Centre's faculty affiliates and assist them across 64 research projects on important social science issues. Each undergraduate works closely with a member of LSE faculty to support their research for up to 100 hours between November and June of the academic year.

A unique feature of this programme at LSE is that it is open to all undergraduate students – applicants are not limited to one department or institute. As a result, the programme is interdisciplinary and collaborative with faculty working with students from across LSE's disciplines. The programme provides real value to students, providing remuneration and key workplace skills, and to faculty participants with often transformative research assistance. Student and faculty engagement with the programme demonstrate that it benefits the wider LSE and its community.

3. Aim and background of the review

This evaluation of the Phelan US Centre's Undergraduate Research Assistantship programme stems from the recommendation in the Centre's 2024 research centre review that the Centre does more to show the real-world impact of the programme. The LSE's Eden Centre provided funding which enabled the recruitment of a student research assistant to independently conduct the research which informs this evaluation.

The evaluation looked at the impact of the UGRA programme for student and faculty participants. It also aimed to identify areas of success and improvement, to inform the future structure of the programme. A close focus for the evaluation was on students' academic, career and personal development, and on the programme's impact on faculty supervisors' research.

4. Impact on students

Direct impacts

The programme had a direct and positive impact on those students who took part, both in terms of the remuneration provided and as part of their time at LSE.

Remuneration: Student participants valued the fact that the UGRA opportunity is remunerated and was beneficial for their financial wellbeing. This was very positive in the context of the lack of other similar opportunities at LSE for undergraduates:

- *“Especially it was well paid, and it was fairly paid - that also really contributed to my experience with the program because sometimes you take on research work that is not paid and you do it for the experience but it takes away a lot of the time that you might have to actually just spend on paid work instead.”*
- *“I was a student who didn't have a huge amount of income [during COVID]. I got a regular pay check as well, which at a time of financial struggle was really important to me”*

LSE experience: Those who took part highlighted the importance of the UGRA programme in enhancing their time at LSE and as a transformative part of their student journey:

- *“The programme has been one of the most defining experiences of my university time so far.”*
- *“There are many valuable things that my degree has offered me but I feel that this programme, by fostering exchange between academics and students, faculty and assistants, is one of the intellectual and academic highlights of my time at the LSE.”*

Personal development: In terms of communication skills, students learned to communicate academic findings to people outside the field of expertise. Many made use of opportunities encouraged by the Phelan US Centre, such as by presenting at the 2024 British Conference of Undergraduate Research (BCUR) and the Knowledge Beyond Boundaries LSE Interdisciplinary Research Conference in 2025.

- *“[The project] it gives you another avenue for things to work [at student research conferences] ...and I think it helped also that you got your supervisor support to look at it. If you're submitting a pitch, how can you make it relevant? And then to what directions can you take it?”*

Impact on career development

Workplace skills: The programme has had real-world impacts on participants, equipping them with important skills needed to be successful in the modern workplace. Participants reported that the programme fostered a diverse range of transferrable skills, which varied depending on the specific character of each project.

- *“I did a summer internship in software engineering. I'd have to communicate like the design of those pieces of software or the design of the models to people who didn't have the same technical background... having the chance to develop that skill during the UGRA program really helped me.”*

Those who took part highlighted that they gained greater self confidence in leading part of a project and more confidence in communication and problem-solving. Working and coordinating with supervisors while balancing coursework also improved students' productivity, organisation and time management skills. These improved skills have proved useful in participants later careers.

- *“I ended up using a [timeline] software...a very intricate tagging and organization system. I have taken away these organizational skills from this project.”*

Future careers: Taking part in the programme enhanced participants profile for job applications post-LSE with many participants finding that having the programme on their CV demonstrating both their interest in and ability to conduct independent research, which has helped them in their interviews and applications. The programme also informed participants' career choices with former participants going on to work for high-profile organisations including NGOs and international organisations, such as the Office of the UN General Secretary, and for news outlets like the BBC and Bloomberg.

- *“I am immensely grateful for the opportunity to work on this internship. This opportunity has been a highlight of my year, a year so devoid of*

highlights. I have benefited greatly from this scheme – both in terms of enjoyment, and character development allowing me to receive an offer from my dream job.”

- *“It was a direct reason I got an internship externally to LSE in the summer of my third year. I later worked for [a research trust]. A big part of why I got that role was because of that research assistantship that I had.”*

Impact on academic development

Participants reported that the UGRA programme had deepened and/or diversified their research skills. Many reported that the skills developed supported their subsequent academic work, particularly in final-year coursework and dissertation projects.

5. Impact on faculty

Transformative for faculty research

Faculty members said that they found their collaborations with UGRAs to be generative, with research assistants helping to sustain the momentum of their research and offering new perspectives and outlooks on their projects. Students' work supported faculty members to produce a variety of research outputs, including edited book chapters, journal papers, blogposts and long-term book projects that extended beyond the duration of the UGRA Programme. At other times, research results were presented in academic conferences and talks, in which some UGRAs were able to participate.

- *“I often find that the conversations that I have with my research assistants will spark new and interesting ideas. Their insights are really valuable. It might maybe lead to some project down the road that interaction is something that is a really great opportunity.”*
- *“[The RA] greatly helped my work... He's now a co-author and we're putting together a paper that combines his and my research on that topic. I'm still working with that person.”*

Benefits across the project lifecycle

Students contributed to the groundwork and conceptual design of the research and faculty members noted that UGRA contributions often sparked new ideas and inspired new approaches. Additionally, students helped to sustain the research momentum in the context of supervisors' schedules.

- *“Research assistants are immensely valuable, not only in giving you kind of the time and scope to collect new data or look at new resources, but I also think that as an intellectual exercise, being able to explain your work to a research assistant and develop methods that are replicable. It's really helpful for designing your studies.”*

6. Recommendations and progress made

Feedback from student and faculty participants in the UGRA programme has guided recommendations which the Centre has addressed and is delivering on through a number of programme improvements:

UGRA Student Handbook. In response to suggestions that the Centre could play a more active role in articulating the expectations around the programme, we have created a UGRA Student Handbook which will be provided to every UGRA at the beginning of the programme. The handbook welcomes student participants to the programme, details how the programme is administered, provides a programme timeline, and outlines expectations around communication, time management, respect and engagement.

Guidance on further training and resources: Participants suggested that more guidance on training and resources at LSE on research methodologies tools would be helpful. The Centre will now be signposting resources and contacts such as those provided by LSE LIFE or the LSE Library to UGRA participants both in the UGRA Student Handbook, and during in-person events such as the initial faculty/student meet and greet session and the programme's halfway event.

Leverage student experience: With participants highlighting the benefits of taking part in student research conferences, we will be using their positive stories of participating to encourage greater engagement with these opportunities in future years.

Following up on research outputs: Students involved with the programme were interested to know more about the results and outputs that came from their collaborations with LSE faculty. Going forward, the Centre will be following up with participants to clearly communicate how their contributions have led to research related outputs like book chapters, blogs and journal articles.

US Centre Community: After completing the programme, UGRA participants are added to our Community as part of a dedicated LinkedIn group and are sent regular newsletters. Through this group, previous UGRAs stay connected to the Centre and other alumni from US Centre programmes, and keep the Centre updated on their jobs and career progress.

7. Conclusion

For many of the students who take part, the UGRA programme is a challenging but rewarding programme and a highlight of their time at LSE. One of the US Centre's aims is to support and shape the student journey and experience at LSE, and the UGRA programme makes a valuable contribution to this goal.