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The Common Room – **The Change Makers are here**

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Speaker: Welcome to the Common Room, a series of podcasts by the LSE Higher Education Blog, where we aim to enable dialogue and share different perspectives in the changing HE landscape.

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Miriam: Hello, and welcome to the first in a series of podcasts from the LSE Higher Education Blog. I'm Miriam Rahali, and I'll be your host. Today we're going to talk about Change Makers. Change Makers is a new initiative between LSE and the LSE Student Union that gives students a chance to effect meaningful change through independent research.

The programme was piloted earlier in the year and Change Makers funded £50,000 worth of student-led research projects with only 24 project proposals selected for funding. Applicants were required to identify areas for further improvement at the school such as community life, inclusive education, assessment and feedback, building connections beyond LSE and ensuring the values of the school's ethics codes. In essence, the Change Maker's project is a community-building exercise that aims to fundamentally transform how we, as a community, view our relationship to one another, and in turn how we produce knowledge.

Today I'm joined by Erica Stanley, an undergraduate and student in the Department of Government, as well as two of the participants on the projects that I helped to mentor, Arya Gerard, a student, a Master's student, in the Law Department, and Brian Walker, a Master's student in the Department of Psychological and Behavioural Science. These three participants conducted original projects and will be providing, throughout the podcast, more insight into the purpose as well as the challenges and opportunities of undertaking this work.

I'm a current PhD candidate in the Department of Media and Communications but because I also completed my Master's degree here at the LSE, I've been on campus since 2013. I've seen many changes take place across the school, so I welcome the opportunity to be involved in this initiative, as a mentor to these Change Makers projects. Thank you all for being here with me today, in the hot summer vacation. I know that you have a lot of work on your dissertations but I think we will all benefit from hearing your ideas and insight from this experience.

So Arya, tell me why did you decide to get involved in the Change Makers Project?

Arya: I think for me it was just the opportunity to be able to interact with people outside of the Law Department because I think with law, you tend to always just mingle around the same people. It's quite interesting that LSE is actually a social science - mostly a social science space - university and I thought it would be interesting to venture out and look at how research is conducted in social sciences.

I really thought that Change Makers would be a good opportunity. Also, the Change Makers Project that I was working on with two of my other friends was related to volunteering, which is something that I'm really passionate about and I thought it'd be quite a nice opportunity to just look at volunteering and see how that could possibly - how research could be conducted in that area, I guess.

Miriam: Erica, what about you? Why did you decide to join Change Makers?

Erica: A friend of mine, and I had met a year ago and really bonded over our experiences as joint honours students. Even though we were from different departments, different disciplines, we realised that a lot of the experiences that we had had were very, very similar. We were really interested in developing our research skills in an area that we were really passionate about and wanted to find more about with how other students experience their joint honours.

Brian: Okay, so our Change Makers Project emerged from a casual discussion. My team members, Abby Hennessey and Lara Neervoort are my classmates and so we had a discussion in qualitative research methods, and Abby said, just pitched the idea of looking at how postgraduate students from low socio-economic backgrounds integrate into the LSE community.

We were really energised about the prospects of doing, of really gauging, the pulse of the student experience and all through part-time paid research, which was also geared towards making the LSE more than it is now. That type of social change was really what was the guiding philosophy behind me, myself, and my team and my colleagues, engaging in, pitching, and being selected for Change Makers.

Miriam: Okay, so all very different reasons for joining, but with the purpose of effecting change here at the LSE. Choosing to complete this project during term time is a significant undertaking. Erica, as an undergraduate student in your final year, I would imagine that you faced intense academic and personal pressure that could keep you from successfully participating in a school-wide research project. What were some of the factors that enabled you to join Change Makers, and did you encounter any barriers to conducting research?

Erica: It was a bit daunting at first. I did a similar research project last year. I couldn't really handle it with the work even though the workload was less severe. With this year, I think that because me and my partner both felt like we understood our work, it would be okay. When we actually got into the process, the fact that we had a mentor that would help us through the entire process, that we were able to set our own deadlines and the entire Change Makers team was so supportive about when we had to hand things in ... They would never ask, "Where is this thing?" It would be, "Do you want any help? How can we help you?" I thought that that made the process a lot more feasible and a lot more enjoyable as a third-year student.

Miriam: Brian and Arya you're both on rigorous one-year postgraduate top programmes. Many of the Master's students here at LSE have mentioned that time constraints make it difficult to engage in any extracurricular activities. Could you tell us what some of the factors were that enabled your participation and success, or if you faced any barriers or obstacles in conducting your research?

Brian: Arya, you can go first,

Arya: Yes, sure. Thanks, Brian. For me, I think it was really easy in the sense that I really wanted to do a project about volunteering. Having been in the UK for about five years, what really helped me integrate into the UK sort of society/community was, really, volunteering, and getting to meet people outside of school because I actually went to an international school and everyone was basically of the same nationality. I wasn't really able to experience anything beyond what I would actually normally experience back home.

It just felt like, "I'm in this foreign country and I'm not really doing anything new or different." Volunteering was really a way to get me out there and experience different people, learn a bit more about the UK culture as well. So, I have really benefited from volunteering and I wanted to be able to put that into a project. That was kind of my inspiration to continue with the Change Makers Project.

Miriam: Did you face any obstacles or barriers with your very rigorous one-year LLM?

Arya: Definitely, I think there's always the issue of time management and prioritizing, but I think with the support from everyone at the Teaching and Learning Centre and just having that mentor who is there to make sure that we were on track, it really sort of helped me to prioritise and get everything laid out and done, completed in time.

Miriam: Perfect. Thanks. Brian?

Brian: Okay, well, from the start, the application guidelines were clear. Well, our team had Miriam [chuckles] - that's you - as like best mentor ever! Solid support from start to finish.

Arya: I definitely agree.

[laughter]

Brian: Then my team, as I said, from a qualitative research methods course, we're always doing group assignments together, so we had a very good synergy. We're all in the same department. We knew what expectations at the departmental level were. In terms of Change Makers, because we knew, okay, how to allocate our time and to prioritise ... we knew our strengths and weaknesses, and so we made sure to leverage that throughout the execution of the project. We definitely enjoyed it.

Miriam: I think your last point about being able to be a part of a team is really important. Erica, in your team, did you feel like you had a good balance of autonomy and support while working on this project?

Erica: Yes, I thought that was one of the biggest advantages of the way that they set out this programme. When I was working throughout it, me and my partner felt like we were the only people on the project. We had a mentor to get advice from, we had

the team to help us with any contacting other people, but in the end, when we were working on it, we would sit in the living room together and do all work and talk about when we wanted to get things done, we will set our schedule together. It was, I think, a perfect balance of our own decisions and having to listen to other people. The only problem was that I guess is that because we're students and because we're lazy ... [laughter] we let our own lives and study of stuff get in the way. At the very end of the project because once you have your first results, you feel like you're done. We went to the Education Symposium. We felt very good about ourselves. Then we realised that we had a whole section of research that we originally wanted to do, that we never got around to, just because the term ended and for us, that's when LSE stuff ended as well.

Miriam: That time scheduling and commitment. I think one of the interesting parts of this research was the output didn't necessarily need to be an academic report. Arya, did you enjoy the flexibility in the output that you could generate? How do you feel with that result? Do you think the School benefited as a result of your study?

Arya: I think it's quite interesting that there wasn't sort of a prescribed forum of output that we really needed. There was that span of creativity that we were given, which I really appreciated. Although initially, we started out wanting to do a report, we ended up having to do a poster in the end due to time constraints which I thought was quite interesting because as a law student, you're never really made to produce anything besides a report. I quite enjoyed the process of learning how to actually build and structure an academic poster. I really enjoyed it, yes.

Miriam: Great! Brian, you did generate a report. Tell me, has that helped you in the process now as you're writing your dissertation for your Master's degree?

Brian: Well, we opted, as you said, to do a 23-page report. We decided to do that because we wanted to just gain more practice in terms of honing our research skills, building all the research design, looking at the ways in which the results conform or deviate from the literature. And so right now, we're nearly writing our dissertations and that practiced the skills that we've garnered over the past four months are playing out and we feel like we know what we're doing. Hopefully, we'll be able to get distinctions in the dissertation also. It worked out well.

Miriam: Great, and do you think that the school benefited as a result? Are there any recommendations you made, or anything that you would carry forward that you think the school will be using as a result of your study?

Erica: I personally found that to me, maybe the only downside from the project because as I mentioned, we didn't manage to do our final block of research, which was to contact head of departments, and to actually talk to them one-on-one and ask them to say what they were going to do based off of our research to improve the issues faced by joint-honour students. It was difficult to gauge afterwards what our impact on the school was, because as happy as you are to contribute a piece of research and even to talk about it at the Symposium, you never know how much of your ideas and your findings will be taken on board.

Brian: Well, that was very interesting. Well, we had a different experience. For example, at the Symposium in February, we gave a progress report at that symposium. Then after that, the head of admissions, Catherine Baldwin, she reached out to us via email. We told her that we'd have a discussion with her. She

discussed our recommendations after the project was written out and been made. We met with her. We discussed our recommendations, and so our project looked at how is it that - the reasons for which postgraduate students from low socioeconomic backgrounds integrate into LSE community. She read the reports.

Recommendations included, for example, hosting a welcome reception for all scholarship awardees because one of the findings was that LSE just hands cash out to students and says, "Hey, you're here. You should feel like you're here and that's an achievement." While there's no sense of community, these persons are marginalised by academics. They feel that everyone here at LSE are all from high socioeconomic backgrounds. The director was pretty receptive to our findings. I know that, well, she's given a commitment to implement some of our recommendations. It's incremental, baby steps, but we do feel that we've had some meaningful change. At least having some dialogue is a start.

Miriam: That's great to hear. It's interesting to see that cross-collaboration across the school. Arya, you also worked with Dave, from the Volunteer Centre. With your other colleagues on the project, you worked with an undergrad and Master's students. Could you tell me more about what it was like to work with different levels across the school? And if you found that process working together as a team enjoyable, or if there was anything that you might change if you had extra time going forward to complete this research.

Arya: Alright, sure. Yes, I think it was difficult because everyone had different schedules. Unlike Brian, where everyone's from the same course on your group and you know everyone; in my group, it was basically having different schedules. One of my teammates doesn't actually live in London, so she had to commute into university as well. That made it difficult to collaborate and actually find a time where we could all meet together, which was a struggle. But I think having that difficulty parallels with what actually happens in the real world outside.

It gave me a little bit more of an insight into what working life might actually be and working in groups. Like I said, as a law student, everything is just really ... you're made to do everything by yourself. It's very independent. There isn't much group work besides discussions and seminars. Really, I think Change Makers was a really good opportunity for me to get a little bit more of a taste of what it's like in the real world out there.

Yes, I wouldn't change my ... I wouldn't go back and change anything. I think I really enjoyed the experience, and just doing Change Makers, I think it's helped me a lot as well just in terms of confidence and just talking to people.

Miriam: I'm happy to hear that. And the pilot programme that we all participated in was successful and the project will continue next academic year. As we have learned, change can oftentimes be inspired but quite difficult to effect. In that regard, I guess my next question is, what tips or advice do you have to pass on to the future Change Makers?

Erica: I would give two pieces of advice. The first one would be, it can be difficult once you set out your plan to change it, but if your findings show a leaning towards one or another direction, it's best to go with that. Originally, we were going to look at whether there were differences in experiences in different departments and home and international students and all these different factors. But in the end, we realised

that the individual departments and how they handle the joint honours programmes was the key of our focus. We didn't have to do all these other research methods. That was really good.

The second piece of advice would just be if you're going to have - as you said - you had a really fulfilling encounter with someone that was doing the work that you were trying to target. I think that if I could give any - the most important piece of advice, it would just be to make those connections and organise those meetings as early on as possible because they are what you will take away the most from the experience.

Arya: One thing that I would say is not to be disheartened if things don't go the way you initially planned them to go. If you've already got the schedule and you don't really keep up with it, don't think that the entire project is going to fail and I can't really complete it. I was really lucky in the sense that my mentor, Miriam, helped us out and we're able to get something out in the end. [chuckles] It wasn't that bleak of an image.

I think it really gives you that tenacity to continue, and just enjoy the process, I think. It's really a fun experience because you're actually conducting research on something that you care about which is why you even want to get involved in the first place. It's not like I'm doing some math sums here and there, but just have fun and just try and enjoy the process and meet new people and just enjoy the ride.

Miriam: Thanks. Brian ...

Brian: It's likely as a Change Maker that you want ... when you start out, your scope is going to be pretty big and then you want to do everything, but just narrow down your focus, what you want to investigate, how feasible it is. Just make sure to look at always what you have and what you can actually within that time frame. Think about the best way to communicate your results. Who's your target audience? Who are the power players at the school who can drive and inform policy, the policy shifts that you want to see?

Also, engage the academics who are working and investigating on subject matters within the scope of that your project falls into. For example, we engaged our head of department who looks at happiness, and he speaks glowingly about his working-class roots. For example, Dr. Sam Friedman, they were expert interviewees, Sam Friedman who does work on class. These persons helped us to grow ourselves in the literature, and to make meaningful reports. Those are my top tips and just enjoy the process. Things won't work out the way you expect them to, but just ride the wave and make the most of it.

Miriam: Thanks for that and for bringing up Professor Dolan and Professor Friedman who were a part of the research process. Thinking about that and in terms of bringing the school together and creating a more inclusive student community, do you think going forward, Change Makers can be more inclusive? Or do you think anything can be done to ensure that a multiplicity of voices and more feedback from the students can be ensured? Or do you think that from this first one, we did a very good job as a Change Maker's team in doing research that brings forward the ideas and participation from the student body?

Arya: I think initially there was that social where people could go to if they were interested in starting a Change Maker project. Actually, one of the students that I

interviewed met her project-mate in that social. I think in that sense, there is that inclusion in the first Change Makers project, but I'm not too sure if there's anything else that we could do because it really depends on the students that are there and what the issues that they want to bring up. I think just getting the message about the Change Makers project out there like there's this project that you could do, or they can engage in. Yes, just promotional stuff, I guess.

Miriam: It's fully funded research and there are opportunities for students who want to be involved in school communities to participate in the societies and other clubs. But this was the first time this type of project has been launched. I'm just wondering if there was anything that may need to be changed, that may perhaps allow for a wider participation from future Change Makers.

Erica: I think what we saw with the round of Change Makers is that the people who are interested in doing these projects and doing further research are typically, and correct me if I'm wrong, people who are looking into ... We had a project about racism in the classroom. You've got low socioeconomic experiences at the LSE. You've got experiences from minorities. You can see that the people who are on-board with these topics are the ones that are pushing for inclusivity. I think that's a really good sign, but because of that, I'm not sure what more ... I think they should do more, but I can't figure out what they should be doing.

Miriam: Brian ...

Brian: Building on that point, I just feel that at a macro-level, the school needs to just show that it's responsive. After we've done all this, collected all these pieces of research, that the school is actually responding to the recommendations. Incoming students would be able to see that, the school has implemented these recommendations from this year's batch. Then students will feel that they actually have agency to drive the change that they need and so that there's not ... not just an echo chamber and we're building up research and not actually acting on it. That's probably the most important way to build inclusivity and build interest among a wide cross-section of students for the future.

Erica: I think that the fact that we are being paid as well, we're getting compensation for our work was a really good factor because it meant that any negative feeling that we could have towards LSE for making us do volunteer research to benefit whatever, whether they would respond to it, all these negative feelings we might've had were changed because it felt like they valued us and they were willing to compensate us for the work that we were eager and passionate to do. It was a really positive addition to the entire experience.

Miriam: That's interesting. It's great that the project was funded, but tell me a little bit more because I know that a lot of the analysis was rushed and a lot of groups would've prepared to have maybe a few extra months to complete the analysis and the research. Would any of you feel that the 60-hour funding was not enough or did you manage your time effectively and were you able to complete the research within the 60 hours?

Arya: In terms of the 60-hour limit, it might not be an accurate reflection of how much time actually goes into the project. I guess, for me, it was never really about the money when I thought about joining the Change Makers project, but I can definitely understand how it would be an incentive for some others to get involved in

the Change Makers project. If we're going to be involved in something and not getting paid for it, it's definitely a problem for some students.

Maybe not for most students at LSE because everyone's pretty well off, but I think it definitely helps with a couple of Sainsbury's shops here and there. I think if we're thinking about inclusivity and getting different students across different socioeconomic backgrounds involved in this project, then, yes, the funding with the Change Makers project really helps with that.

Miriam: Brian, I know that you, Abby, and Lara also worked beyond the 60 hours. That's a testament to your drive and determination to effect change. Can you tell me a little bit more about that process and what you were thinking in the final stages of writing up?

Brian: Alright. For us, the 60-hour cap was insufficient. It's three of us, so that was 20 hours for each of us. Definitely, we knew from midway that this definitely ... we were going to exceed it beyond the funding. We knew that. We knew why we're doing it, so that really helped us to pull through. For the future, I think the team should probably look about extending ... I don't know - 100 hours. I don't know what. I guess it depends on the scope of the project. That's definitely something that needs to be flagged up for the next year, but it is what it is.

Miriam: It's evident that you are all very passionate about effecting change in some way at the school. On a personal level, do you feel like participating in Change Makers has benefited you?

Arya: Yes, definitely. I think I've been able to communicate with people across departments. I've worked on my social skills, I've also worked on time management, juggling different responsibilities, and even just talking to people from the department outside of law and talking to staff as well. I think I've benefited in multiple ways. I can't really think of a reason why not to get engaged.

Erica: I found the process to be really cathartic because it was so important for me and my partner as joint honours students to put our feelings out there into the world and see if other people experienced them too and to understand that some things were particular to our disciplines, but some things were shared. It was really beneficial emotionally for me. And I really appreciated the time and opportunity to do that.

Brian: Personally, for me, it was really just so much of the sole improvements in my social interactions. So for example, in undergrad in Jamaica, I didn't do any sorts of extracurricular activities. I wasn't involved in university life. I went to my internship, went to school, got my grades, I'm out. While here, I felt that I needed to ... well, this project really allowed me to immerse myself in the student community, gauge the pulse, what's going on. That, for me, was also just really helped my holistic development and my LSE journey. This has been a really good part of the year, thus far.

Miriam: Great! And as a mentor to the Change Makers project, I must say that this has been one of the most personally rewarding experiences over my six years here at the LSE. I have not yet had the chance to interact with different levels of students, and I had first-hand been able to kind of witness the passion and enthusiasm that you have, for even only being here either on three or one-year programmes to do

something and change something at the LSE. I want to thank Brian, Arya, and Erica for joining me today and for allowing this conversation to continue.

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Speaker: Thank you for listening. Please read the accompanying commentary for more context and feel free to share or post comments and questions below by clicking leave a reply. We would also like to thank our partners who made this podcast possible. Click on their logos or names for more information.

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