

# Embedding professional skills in undergraduate study:

a placement year with  
Archaeology South-East,  
UCL Institute of Archaeology

Louise Rayner MClfA (6621), Post-Excavation & Research Services ASE; Sakshi Surana, Student member (11090); Victoria Igary, Student member (11732) and Alex Allen, Student member (11024), UCL Institute of Archaeology BA Archaeology undergraduates

Back in 2016, colleagues working within the UCL Institute of Archaeology (IoA) and Archaeology South-East (ASE) recognised the potential for students to more fully engage with the professional archaeological and heritage sector as a part of their degree. A major influence for this was our work with the Historic Environment Trailblazer group developing a range of apprenticeships in archaeology. Several reports and surveys identified the widening gap between increasing opportunities in development-led archaeology and the shortage of skilled staff to deliver the work (eg Archaeological Market Survey 2016). The time was right for a better collaboration between our academic and professional contract staff to develop a new degree that welcomed students into the professional work team with enhanced skills training.

We launched our new four-year BA Archaeology with a Placement Year in September 2018. So far, ASE have hosted four cohorts through this degree. The students spend twelve months on a paid placement that provides them with at least six months' fieldwork as well as the opportunity to get training and real-life experience of other archaeological skills and specialisms. This degree is one of several offered at UCL that carries ClfA and University Archaeology UK accreditation.

After two years of undergraduate study and summer field schools, students apply to work for ASE. Successful applicants join us at the beginning of September in their third year. By this stage some students already have clear ideas about their archaeological interests – while others are open to any opportunities. Our placement coordinator supports each student and builds a programme with elements tailored to their particular aspirations. This is captured in an Individual Training Record, which maps skills and activities to the National Occupational Standards and tracks their progress.

Below, current and past students reflect on their placement year.

## Sakshi Surana:

'I began my placement with an expectation to gain some work experience, learn some new skills and to witness a different side of archaeology. Now coming towards the end of the year, I have gained all that and a lot more.

This year has enabled me to work with different teams in different specialisms and aspects of development-led archaeology. The back-and-forth structure, switching between the field and the office, allowed me to combine all of the separate skills from different tasks into a cohesive whole, enabling me to understand the work I undertake

“ *My professional development through this experience has also been conducive to personal development and teaching me real-life skills that extend beyond archaeology.* ”



Sakshi Surana on site with ASE geoaarchaeologist Letty Ingrey and assistant archaeologist Elisabet Pila. Credit: Archaeology South-East, UCL

holistically. Being able to work with archaeologists at various stages in their careers has allowed me to better understand the profession and its place within the socio-economic landscape.

I've had opportunities to attend external conferences and workshops, such as the annual ClfA conference, which enabled me to network and get more involved in the sector; soon after, I joined the ClfA Early Careers Special Interest Group committee. The sessions made me think about the social value/public benefit of the work archaeologists do; a thought which has stayed with me and made me want to be more proactive in my work.

From an academic perspective, this year has tied up the separate strands of my studies and enriched my academic work. In many ways, it has aided my studies by filling gaps in the course material and enabling me to articulate and apply my learning in various contexts by accounting for diverse perspectives. It has also made me realise that development-led and academic archaeology are not as disjointed as it seems, how beneficial they can be in terms of professional development and how they complement each other. My professional development through this experience has also been conducive to personal development and teaching me real-life skills that extend beyond archaeology.'

**Victoria Igary:**

'I've had the chance to obtain excavation skills in a commercial setting: the fast-paced momentum, how to complete paperwork and how to spot the nuances of a feature in all weather conditions. This was all under the supervision and expertise of experienced archaeologists, allowing me to ask many questions to ensure my work was of a high quality.

Whilst six months working in the field has made me realise that perhaps fieldwork is not my cup of tea,

I think it was very important to experience it, in order to see the whole process of development-led archaeology, from site to archive deposition. I've also obtained my CSCS card and used the health and safety protocols on construction sites, which will be useful when I come to find a job. I've had the chance to work with all sorts of experts, which has opened my eyes to all the possible career paths and specialisms. I discovered a love of archaeological illustration! I enjoyed it so much that I have chosen this as a module in my final year – hopefully I can do them proud!'

*Victoria Igary excavating on a multi period site in East Sussex.  
Credit: Archaeology South-East, UCL*



**“ I've had the chance to work with all sorts of experts, which has opened my eyes to all the possible career paths and specialisms. ”**





“ Due to the amount of fieldwork and post-excitation work undertaken during the placement I gained a significant number of skills, which really helped me with employability. ”

*Alex Allen excavating a pit containing briquetage during his placement year. Credit: Archaeology South-East, UCL*

Alex Allen has now graduated and we are thrilled the he has returned to ASE as part of the fieldwork team:

‘I’m extremely glad I chose the placement degree pathway. It provided me with a range of different experiences in the worlds of academic and development-led archaeology and helped me to connect with a wide array of archaeologists who are knowledgeable, enthusiastic, and keen to teach others about their specialisms.

Due to the amount of fieldwork and post-excitation work undertaken during the placement I gained a significant number of skills, which really helped me with employability. I was able to rejoin ASE as soon as my degree had finished, where my experience meant I hit the ground running. The placement really helped with my decision to work in archaeology long-term and I am eager to see what the future holds in store.’

For ASE staff, the placement year offers diversity in our busy schedules and an opportunity to engage with students and academic colleagues on a regular basis. We are able to teach, train and work alongside early-career archaeologists, who are often experiencing archaeology in a professional setting for the first time. Just as we share our experiences and knowledge, we also value their fresh perspectives. Everyone at ASE feels the benefits of this time together and we look forward to welcoming our new cohort in the autumn.

More information about the degree: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/archaeology/study/undergraduate/degrees/ba-archaeology-placement-year>

**Louise Rayner**

Louise is Head of Post-Excavation & Research Services at ASE. She has over 25 years’ experience in development-led and university-based archaeology. Recent CIFA Finds SIG chair, she is particularly interested in capacity building and training within the areas of post-excitation and specialist research, as well as initiatives looking to improve standards and guidance across the sector.



**Sakshi Surana, Victoria Igary and Alex Allen**

Sakshi, Victoria and Alex are all current or recent UCL IoA undergraduates on the BA Archaeology with a Placement Year. You can read more about them and their time with ASE in various blog posts or listen to our podcast with Alex: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/archaeology-south-east/placement-blogs>