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Surveying the Econ/Dev Research Associate Landscape in India

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Introduction

▶ Research Associate or Research Assistant roles (RA) have become increasingly common and sought out. They are often considered gateways to Ph.D. or Master's programs.

▶ An RA typically provides full-time support to the lead researchers and manages major components of the research project

Why be an RA?

▶ First exposure to understanding what goes into the production of research

▶ A chance to work with mid-career or senior people in the field as well as other young, talented, early-career researchers

▶ An understanding of government partnerships, stakeholder management and the on-ground realities of the people whose lives you are hoping to improve

▶ A chance to develop skills, including but not limited to programming/statistical tools, management and writing

▶ Letters of recommendation, and support with applications

Motivation Behind the RA Survey

▶ Information on RA opportunities is typically passed only through informal networks

▶ The goal of the survey was to make information on these roles transparent and more widely available

▶ We ask respondents about their demographic and academic background, the application process they followed, tasks undertaken as a part of the role, day-to-day work environment and access to opportunities for personal development.

A Note on Survey Methodology

▶ We surveyed 156 current and former RAs working in the economics or development sectors in India

▶ The survey was conducted from January 24, 2021, to February 21, 2021, and was shared over e-mail, WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn using our personal accounts.

▶ Our respondents comprise of current or former RAs from 56 different academic and non-academic institutions in India

▶ Although the sample is non-representative, this provides the first overview to date of individuals in RA roles in the economics or development sectors in India.

Who is Getting RA Roles?

▶ 65% of our sample identifies as female

▶ Majority of the people in our sample are Indian citizens, who belong to the "General" caste category and identify as Hindus.

▶ 96.1% of our respondents come from families where parents have attained at least an undergraduate degree.
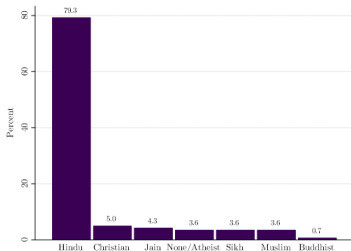
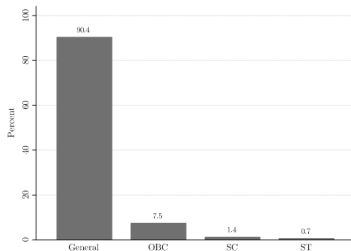## Who is Getting RA Roles? (Continued)

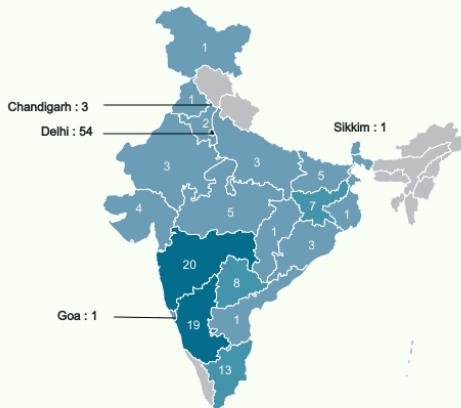Figure: Religion

Figure: Caste

▶ This data makes a strong case for taking active steps such as affirmative action to increase the representation of people from historically marginalized or oppressed backgrounds.

Where do RAs Work?

- ▶ 71% of our sample works at organization that would be classified as 'academic' - this is mostly universities and research labs

- ▶ Other types of organizations represented are NGOs, consulting firms, governments and think tanks

- ▶ Most RAs spend 1.5 − 2 years in their roles before moving on to doctoral studies or masters in fields such as public policy, international development and so on

- ▶ RAs in our sample live and work out of 20 states and union territories in India

Where do RAs Work? (Continued)

Academic Background

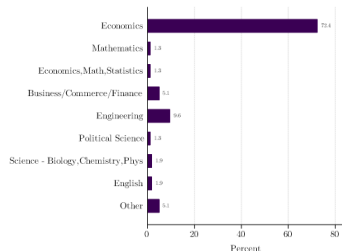▶ An undergraduate degree is a prerequisite, 78% also have a master's degree
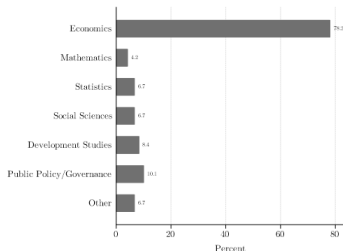

Figure: Undergraduate Major

Figure: Graduate Field of Study

Academic Background (Continued)

▶ Most respondents have *not* taken any additional courses on mathematics or monitoring & evaluation
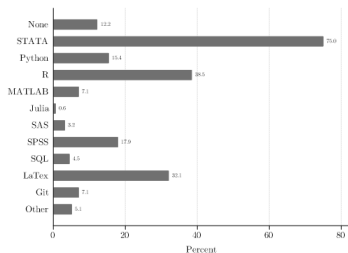 ▶ The most popular additional courses taken are for programming or statistical tools

Figure: Prior Experience with Statistical Tools

Figure: Prior Research Experience

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How do Applicants Find Out About Roles?

▶ The other main objective of this study was to make information about RA roles and how to get them more transparent and widely available.

▶ Most respondents find out about the role through job portals and organization websites (35.42 %), their personal networks (31.25 %), through their faculty members (20.83 %), or by sending out cold emails (20.83 %).

▶ This highlights the important role informal networks play in getting these jobs.

What Does the Application Entail?

▶ Applications to academic organizations require a considerable amount of material.

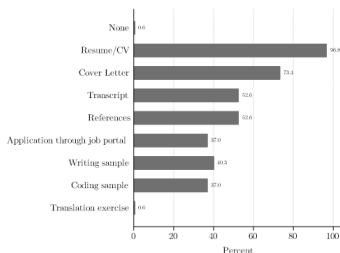▶ The average duration of the application process is one to two months.
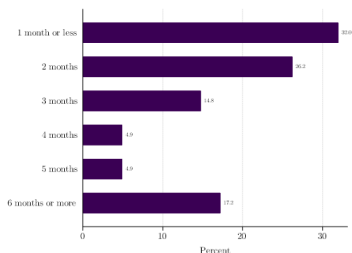

Figure: Materials Required

Figure: Duration of Application

Day to Day Life of an RA

▶ We also wanted to answer what being an RA entails. Through our survey, we asked respondents to report how much time they spend on a range of activities.

▶ We find that RAs spend their time on data cleaning (42% report spending more than 15 hours a week), data analysis (35.9% report spending more than 15 hours a week), and survey design and data quality monitoring (29.2% report spending more than 15 hours a week).

▶ A much smaller portion of time is allocated to administrative tasks, personal research agendas, and personal skill development (6 %, 11.97 %, and 15.61 % report spending more than 15 hours a week, respectively, on these tasks)

Benefits

▶ We asked about monetary benefits including health insurance.

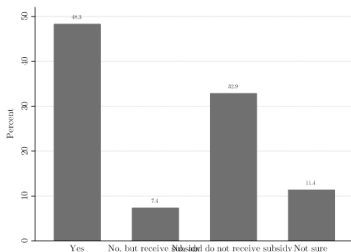▶ Most received opportunities for personal development, most commonly access to seminars and conferences.
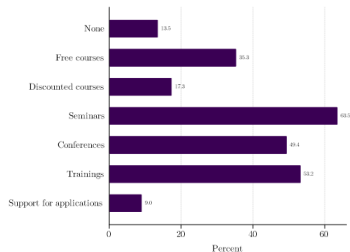

Figure: Health Benefits

Figure: Personal Development

Interaction with Principal Investigator

▶ We asked about frequency of interaction with the PI over email, over a call and about personal development.

▶ More than half the RAs in our sample exchange messages with PIs once in one to three days and speak to their PIs once in three to seven days.

▶ About 37 % report that they discuss their professional development and careers once in two to six months, while about 22% report doing this less than once in six months.

Interaction with Other Team Members

▶ Further, 41.6 % of the respondents are the sole RAs on their project.

▶ Of those that work in teams of two or more, interactions with other team members happen every one to three days.

LORs and Co-authorship

▶ As the pathway after working in an RA role is usually graduate school, we also asked about the number of letters of recommendation they expect to obtain from this role and whether they expect to be co-authors

LORs and Co-authorship (Continued)

▶ On average, RAs expect to get two letters of recommendation for their work.

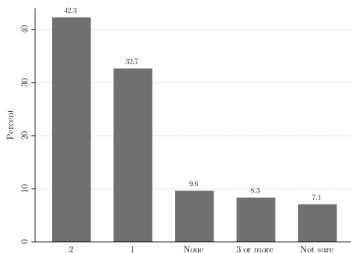▶ Only 37.18% expect to be co-authors on research output.
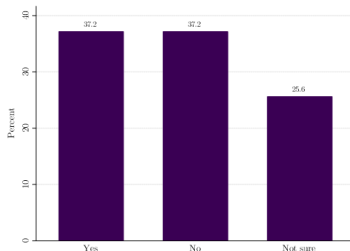

Figure: Letter of Recommendation

Figure: Co-authorship

Future Plans

▶ Lastly, RA roles seem to increase interest in pursuing a Ph.D.

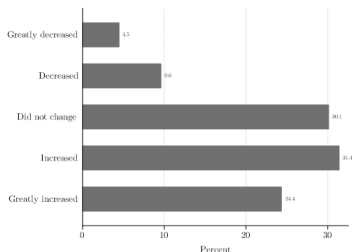▶ Moreover, nearly half the RAs in the sample state that they expect to go on to do a Ph.D.
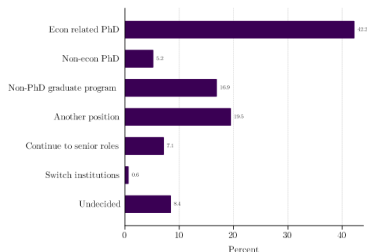

Figure: Ph.D. Interest

Figure: Future plans

Work Life Balance and Growth

▶ Most respondents agreed that work life balance was heavily tied to the stage of the project, the intensity of fieldwork and the support of supervisors such as Principal Investigators and more importantly closer supervisors such as Research Managers.

▶ Most mentioned how these roles have helped them understand their prospects and build skills that are valuable for graduate school.

▶ Personal and professional growth is mostly self-driven and dependent on the amount of free time that they can find after work.

Advice for Applicants

1. Apply widely and don't self censor!

2. Talk to previous RAs and ask potential supervisors lots of questions

3. Reputation isn't everything

4. Be a problem solver

5. Make your mental health a priority.

Conclusion and Discussion

▶ In conclusion, our survey shows the need to make hiring for RA roles more diverse along dimensions such as caste and religion and make information about these roles more accessible in order to fix the evidently leaky pipeline to an Econ career.

▶ While this survey is a small effort to reduce barriers to information, a larger push to reach those who may not have access to the personal or academic networks that most commonly provide access to these roles is required.

▶ Lastly, support during the course of the application process, especially to gain experience in statistical tools, programming languages and research seems crucial.

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Thank you!

▶ For our full survey results, link to our data appendix is here:
RA Survey Data Appendix

▶ To read our results, link to our Medium blog is here:
Insights from a Survey of Research Associates in Economics and Development in India

▶ For any questions or feedback contact us at
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Bryan. Young "Stars" in Economics: What They Do and Where
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