Year one of UCL's Community Research Initiative for Students

The Community Research Initiative for Students, or CRIS as it is affectionately known, matches up UCL master's students with community organisations so they can collaborate on a piece of research. This research in turn can form part of your dissertation.

Anne Laybourne, the CRIS manager, is here to help throughout the process. She can help you connect with relevant voluntary community organisations that might be interested to meet for an early exploratory conversation. CRIS sets up and chairs meetings for you. You can meet with different organisations and these conversations can be useful just on their own. New knowledge can emerge, students often receive new things to read or consider, and you get a chance to elaborate on your ideas and listen to what other people think is important in your field. If there is a match between your ideas and an organisation's ideas, CRIS supports you and your supervisor to develop and run a collaborative project. There is also training for you throughout the year.

What is CRIS like for students? We aim to provide a great experience for you at whatever stage of CRIS you get to. Of course, all students hope they end up working with an organisation on their final dissertation project. In 2018-19, we supported 13 students to meet with different voluntary and community sector organisations, three of whom went on to do a project with an organisation. Three students agreed to share their experiences, summarised here.

All three students were social science and humanities students, two were international. Two of them carried out a collaborative project with an organisation, while the third student had a meeting with two different organisations but did not find a match for their dissertation in the end. The CRIS manager asked the three students the same set of open-ended questions, designed to let them tell their CRIS story in their own words. This was audio-recorded, with their permission. The manager listened to all the recordings and typed out what they said. The students' words were then categorised into a framework with four themes – discovery, academic studies, wellbeing, and employability.

Discovery

Two students spoke about their CRIS experiences in terms of it helping them discover something new about the world around them. One student realised that their CRIS experience had helped them see how an organisation operated and what the work really entailed. This was helpful as they wanted to work in a similar organisation so it was enlightening and helped them understand what it might mean to work somewhere like that. The second student enjoyed the way CRIS allowed them to broaden their master's experience beyond UCL campus, discovering organisations and people they didn't even know existed;

where **more** happens

"I think that it really got me off campus a bit in that I wasn't just, I didn't have degree tunnel vision. I thought outside the box a bit and was able to experience UCL in London rather than just experience UCL." [Student 003/18-19]

This student also welcomed the community that CRIS offered, noting that a postgraduate experience at university is very different from an undergraduate one, where you feel more immersed in the university. CRIS helped them feel part of the UCL community,

"Master's students don't really have anything for them, and just having that opportunity [of CRIS] was fantastic and just made me feel more part of UCL, more part of the community." [Student 003/18-19]

Academic studies

The CRIS experience for two of the students can be categorised under academic studies. The students described benefits including the contextualisation of their degree through working with an organisation external to the university. They saw what they were learning in the classroom played out in the organisation.

Both students felt they had increased their knowledge through having someone else involved in their project with a different experience to their supervisor, and were able to practice different methods and skills, like interviewing people and developing ideas through co-production;

"That's how you create ideas - through interactions with other people, they don't just come to you randomly while you're sitting in an office." [Student 002/1819]

It was also an important benefit to CRIS for these students that there was additional support from both the CRIS manager and the organisational partner that complimented their usual academic supervision. This student didn't think they would have pursued doing interviews if they hadn't had the additional support of the organisation;

"Someone to like check in with because you know a lot of your master's you just work with your supervisor and they're like 'yeah, go and do it' and I think it's much less likely I would have ended up doing fieldwork and interviews if I hadn't had that partnership." [Student 001/18-19]

Wellbeing

In terms of wellbeing during CRIS, all students thoroughly enjoyed the experience and would recommend it to others. Their wellbeing was enhanced by the training opportunities they received, and they got a lot of satisfaction in doing a project that attempted to have a use of meaning for wider society. All three students felt their confidence had improved;

"It was a challenging but transformative experience in that I was a student in the room, and I was meeting all these people who had proper jobs and were all experts in their field and that kind of thing. So that was kind of a challenge, just confidence-wise. But it also forced me to see myself on the same level as the person I was speaking to. So just because I'm a student doesn't mean I'm not an expert in something or know less that the other person. It just means that I work in different situations and that was confidence-building in that respect." [Student 003/198-19]

One student also acknowledged how intimidating a master's can be, even when you've experienced it before. This student's supervisor was unavailable for much of the year and they had additional support needs. The additional support including emotional support of CRIS was very helpful in their circumstances;

"Even with being an older student, you know what I mean, being almost 30 and having done a master's before, I still get sort of intimidated or overwhelmed or scared away from things so having someone to talk to and check in with who was sort of encouraging, beyond my supervisors, was super helpful." [Student 001/18-19]

Employability

All the students talked about their experiences in terms of their employability either about putting CRIS on their CV or the skills they feel they developed now make them more employable. This included communication skills, explaining an idea, working in a team, networking with others, and ability to negotiate;

"It was difficult to reconcile my goals and the goals or the organisation...it was difficult to find the balance point between these two so negotiation skills – I had to develop my negotiation skills which was difficult but kind of exciting." [Student 002/18-19]

Taking part in CRIS but not necessarily getting the anticipated outcome was a valuable experience for this student. They were unable to find a match with an organisation but getting to try something new, being in control of developing their own ideas for their dissertation was something they appreciated and believed would help in the future;

"I did gain the ability to throw myself into something and try it out and have all these meetings with these different organisations and then it not working out completely as I expected in, in itself, a valuable experience and has helped me gain some valuable skills. So I appreciate that in itself." [Student 003/18-19]

Final comments

Early indications therefore suggest that CRIS is adding something to the student experience at UCL during a master's degree; this includes enhancing personal skills, clarifying things for their future, but also discovering new community, whether that's London itself or the UCL community. During 2019-20, CRIS is working with 18 students and different voluntary and community sector organisations, supporting knowledge exchange meetings and building collaborations. Seven have set up a dissertation project. We'll report on their experiences at the end of the year.

Background information

CRIS is one of the student services provided by the UCL Volunteering Service in the UCL Students' Union. Funded by the Office for Vice Provost of Education and Student Affairs, CRIS has student experience right at its heart – specifically, master's students. It is the only UCL service or initiative exclusively offered to our master's community, across any of the master's programmes on offer here. And CRIS is linked directly to your dissertation project, the supervised independent research project you do as part of your degree.

But what is CRIS about? CRIS is about knowledge exchange and meaningful research but more than that; it is about research that has been developed collaboratively, through dialogue between a master's student, their supervisor from UCL, and people from outside of the university with expertise and knowledge of their own. At CRIS, we believe that better research can happen through collaboration that values input from others and that our research should have a societal impact. This is written into UCL policy.

The sector that we most want to benefit from collaboration with our students and colleagues is the voluntary and community sector. Often, voluntary and community organisations, especially small-to-medium sized ones, have incredible knowledge to share but little capacity to do so. We have a responsibility to our local community. This is also written into UCL policy.

You must develop an original idea for your dissertation project. Imagine, you and your supervisor are interested in housing policy in the context of homelessness. Wouldn't it be incredible to exchange ideas and perhaps develop a research project with someone from a homeless charity like Centrepoint, an organisation on the ground working directly with and influenced by housing policy? They are likely to have a unique perspective compared to you and your supervisor.

*Please note, all students agreed to take part in this service evaluation. To maintain good practice around confidentiality, we have anonymised their responses using a numerical code and the year they studied at UCL.