STUDENTS' UNION UCL | Volunteering Service

Community Research Initiative for Students

Annual Report *2018/19*

Prepared for the Office of the Vice Provost
for Student Experience & Affairs

Contents

Introduction

The Community Research Initiative for Students (CRIS) exists to enhance the experience of UCL's postgraduate (taught) students (PGT) by supporting them to undertake their dissertation in collaboration with a not-for-profit organisation ('community organisation'). CRIS is a cross-UCL service open to any PGT student.

The initiative is directly funded by the UCL Office of the Vice Provost (Education & Student Affairs), and managed by the Volunteering Service. The funding covers staff costs for one 0.5 FTE Community Research Manager.

CRIS formally started on 11 November 2018 when the Community Research Manager took up her post. The rest of 2018/19 focussed on developing the programme infrastructure, establishing links with UCL departments and relevant community organisations, and engaging with a trial cohort of PGT students.
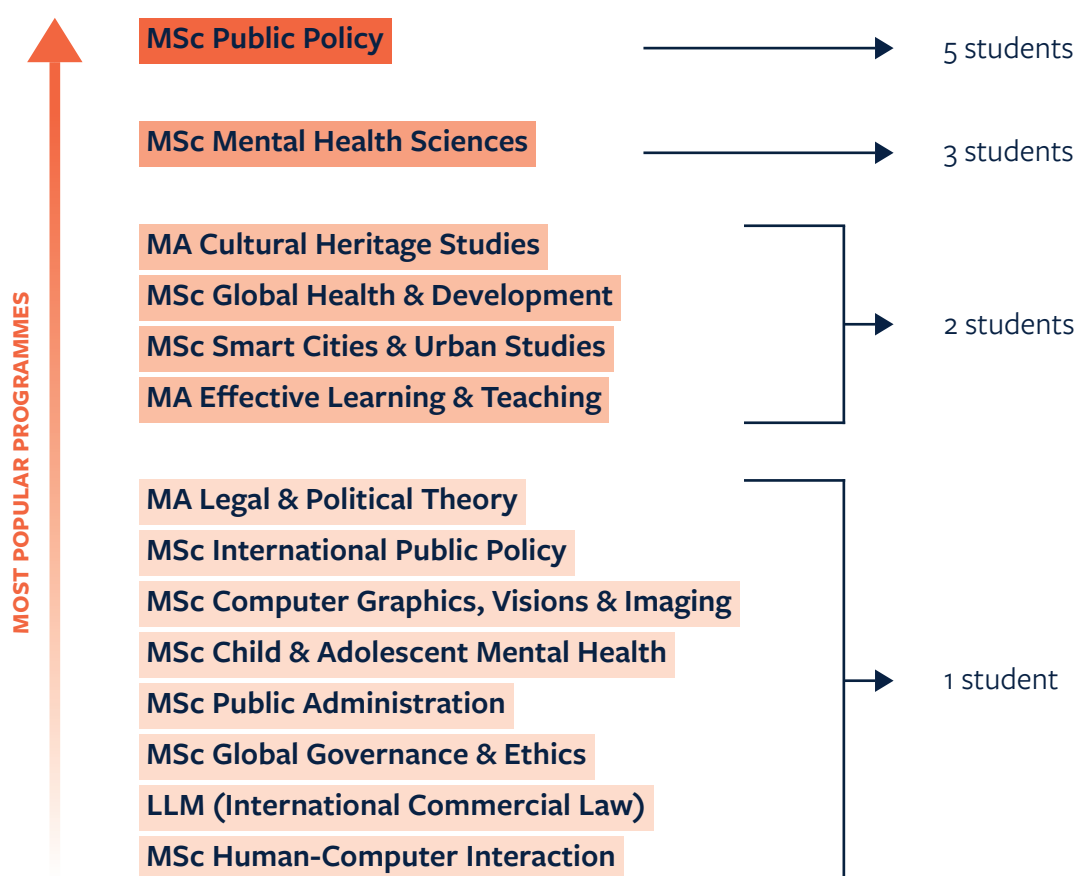
What does the service offer?

- A personal consultation for PGT students to help identify potential research interests.

- A matching service with potential community partners, drawing upon the Volunteering Service's existing networks within the charity sector.

- Management of initial approaches to organisations and introductory meetings.

- Student skills sessions, covering the principles of partnership working and project management.

- Support of student/supervisor/organisation partnerships to draw up co-designed research agreements.

- Monitoring of the research agreement milestones.

- For academic departments, CRIS also helps provide links with community organisations to co-design research projects for departments' "project books" of dissertation topics.

The 2018/19 trial cohort

The first student approached the initiative 11 December, 2018 and during 2018/19 session, 24 students in total engaged with the initiative from across 15 unique master's programmes (FIG 1); twenty-one full-time students and three part-time who will continue to work with CRIS during their second part-time year in 2019/20.

Below: UCL master's programmes studied by students approaching the service

MOST POPULAR PROGRAMMES

Programme	Students
MSc Public Policy	5 students
MSc Mental Health Sciences	3 students
MA Cultural Heritage Studies	2 students
MSc Global Health & Development	
MSc Smart Cities & Urban Studies	
MA Effective Learning & Teaching	
MA Legal & Political Theory	1 student
MSc International Public Policy	
MSc Computer Graphics, Visions & Imaging	
MSc Child & Adolescent Mental Health	
MSc Public Administration	
MSc Global Governance & Ethics	
LLM (International Commercial Law)	
MSc Human-Computer Interaction	

FIG 1: Master's courses and student numbers

The 2018/19 trial cohort

FIG 2: Type of student engagement in CRIS

Stage of engagement

Stage 1 - Advice and guidance via email	→	7 students
Stage 2 - Face-to-face consultations	→	4 students
Stage 3 - Engaged with Community Organisation	→	10 students
Stage 4 - Dissertation	→	3 students

70% of enquiries resulted in engagement beyond an email and an average of 3.2 hours each face time with the community research manager (FIG 2).

Since the beginning of CRIS, we have engaged with over 80 academic supervisors, teaching leads, tutors, and programme or module leads. All three Schools have engaged with the initiative, across 24 Faculties/Institutes/Centres. A total of 49 master's programmes engaged with the initiative in the first 6 months.

Impact on students

14% of full time students from the initial cohort went on to undertake fully collaborative dissertations with a community partner. If a student got to the stage of engaging with an organisation, 30% completed on collaborative dissertation. Our feedback from students who completed other stages was that their interaction with CRIS had still helped to enrich their experience of their dissertation.

One of the lowest scoring items on the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) around the dissertation is "I am happy with the support I received for planning my dissertation/major project". This is supported by feedback from students engaging with CRIS, many of whom expressed dissatisfaction with their dissertation arrangements. Throughout the year, we collected student testimony and several comments are related to this issue of being supported in the initial stages of the dissertation, such as planning and development of ideas:

> **"Thanks for all your work on this, it is turning what I assume would otherwise be dissertation dread into research excitement."**
> MSc Public Policy student, Stage 3

The 2018/19 trial cohort

The program has given me access to UCL's network, introduced me to wonderful partners, and is helping me learn how to collaborate with them well. It would not have been possible for me to do this without CRIS connecting the dots and supporting me every step of the way. I'm excited to have this opportunity to make the most of my year at UCL. This experience is already giving me valuable research and partnership skills that I look forward to bringing with me as I explore jobs in both research and non-profit programs. Thank you, CRIS!"
MSc Global Health & Development student, Stage 4

"I really would have liked to do a CRIS dissertation and wish that I'd known about it sooner so that I could have taken it into consideration when submitting my first research proposal! I also think it is a really good idea that should be taken forward by the university for future student cohorts...Finally, it was really useful to have another academic to discuss my dissertation ideas with so a big thank you for that!"
MSc International Public Policy student, Stage 3

"I knew I wanted to do research on behalf of a socially focused organisation for my master's dissertation, but before I came across CRIS I lacked the connections and inspiration. Straight after meeting with CRIS I felt energised to start my research. From the initial meeting they provided advice and connections based on my research interests and were very encouraging of my abilities as a researcher. I highly recommend the program."
MSc Public Policy student, Stage 3

"I think the benefits of the CRIS are help in the idea generation stage, help making a conceptual topic specific to a real world problem, potentially getting additional guidance and data for one's project, and of course, making a clearly defined positive impact on the world through the dissertation by partnering with a charity."
MSc Smart Cities & Urban Design student, Stage 3

The 2018/19 trial cohort

Student dissertations in partnership with a community partner

Three students formed a partnership between themselves and their supervisor and a community organisation partner. Each new partnership signed a Research Agreement, outlining key milestones, roles and responsibilities as well as risk assessments. Two students were enrolled on the MA Cultural Heritage Studies and the third was enrolled on the MSc Global Health & Development. Two have received extensions due to health and personal extenuating circumstances. Their amended deadlines are 7 Oct, 2019 and 31 Jan, 2020. Their dissertation titles are:

> **What community-level interventions could prevent youth violence in London?**

> **How do heritage institutions present medical history, specifically the histories of anaesthesia, surgery, and pain, and how do such presentations make use of affect/ emotion, objects, and/or other interpretative techniques?**

> **Communities and Historic House Museums. Introducing the living heritage mentality into a hybrid site. The case of the Wallace Collection, London**

Student skills development

In addition to the one-to-one consultation meetings, we co-designed two skills development sessions with PGT students. Piloted topics included principles of public engagement, research communication skills, reflexivity skills, project management skills, and skills for partnership working. Student feedback was positive from the six attendees (table 3), responding to the questions on a 5-point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

The 2019 PTES shows student feedback on skills development during their master's studies at around 75% satisfaction. CRIS has the potential to aid efforts to improve this score by providing specialist skills development sessions.

The 2018/19 trial cohort

Table 3: Student evaluation of community research skills development sessions

Statement	Student agreement (maximum score 5)
I liked working with peers from different courses	4.8
I would recommend these skills development sessions	4.4
Overall, I enjoyed these skills development sessions	4.3
I can easily see how I can utilise some of the learning	4.3
I learned something new	4.2
It would be better if community partners were also part of these sessions	4.2
I am confident this will help me during job hunting	4
I am confident this will help me with my dissertation	3.5
I wish this was online learning only	0

Support for academic departments

We identified the need to align the initiative with the practice of "project books". These are pre-developed lists of research questions that some departments use for their PGT students, generally where there is a large student cohort. Students are strongly encouraged to select a project from the project book instead of developing their own independent project. To this end, we developed and delivered a day-long matching event bringing together UCL academics with community organisations. The aim was to develop new relationships and partnerships and outline research ideas to offer to students to then develop further for their dissertation. This took place on 11 September, 2019, with 18 PGT supervisors and 18 community partners attending.

22 attendees provided an evaluation of the event. Supervisors came to the event with different expectations: four expected to generate projects ideas during the event while three supervisors expected to engage with and meet new people with future partnerships in mind. One expected to meet people with data needs. Community organisation representatives came with expectations that can be broadly categorised as initiating relationships with academics, getting help with specific projects, and generating new project ideas with an academic. UCL academics all had their expectations met at least somewhat, most would recommend the event to colleagues, and the majority were confident the research outline developed as part of the event would be carried out by a student (table 4).

The 2018/19 trial cohort

Table 4: Key findings from matching event evaluation

Key findings from evaluation	Community	UCL
Expectations met entirely	56%	83%
Expectations met somewhat	44%	17%
Would definitely recommend	72%	75%
Confident that research will follow	95%	75%

International engagement
The community research manager was awarded a place on the SciShops.EU Summer School (Cyprus, Limassol). SciShops.Eu project is an international consortium funded by Horizon 2020 to increase the science shops capacity across Europe as well as encourage knowledge transfer about best practice. UCL's community research initiative compared very favourably to other science shop models. Consequently, two science shops, Corvinus (Budapest) and Vetenskap & Allmänhet (Public & Science) (Stockholm), will visit UCL to learn about how we match students and organisations (online platform) and academics and organisation (matching events). The community research manager has also been invited to present at the SciShops.Eu end of project conference at the University of Brescia. She will be funded by SciShops.Eu to do this.

Overall community research initiative evaluation
Each student completing a collaborative dissertation will be invited to take part in an 'exit' interview. A mixed method approach will be taken, with a brief structured questionnaire together with open ended qualitative questions. These data will be collected as part of the service evaluation with full and informed consent from participants. We will collate an evaluation report in January 2020.

Moving forward

First look at 2019/20

The community research manager offered two introductory sessions as part of the Students' Union What's On programme of events plus a spill-over session due to demand. In total, during weeks 0 and 1 of term, 100 students have met with the community research manager or have emailed to enquire about the initiative. There is considerable growth in coverage of UCL course engagement, with 33 new course contacts from 2018/19 year. We will continue to support all students who engage with CRIS as described above. In addition, our plans for the year include:

- Launching the online brokerage for CRIS during the year.

- Designing and delivering a Collaborate Fair for current PGTs and community organisations.

- Drop in support 'surgeries' for groups of up to eight students.

- Continuing to build the engagement with new PGT programmes.

- A specific project on UCL East PGT programmes and building our community partners there.

- Second matching event between supervisors and organisations in September for 2020/21.