Developing UCL's Community Research Initiative with key stakeholder groups: non-collaborating students

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Background

The community research initiative is a **knowledge exchange opportunity for master's students**. We are in the Students' Union UCL and we're funded by the university's Office of the Vice Provost Education and Student Experience. We were delighted to receive knowledge exchange funding from the Office for Students & Research England to scale up the service during 2020-21 and explore the student impact of knowledge exchange in 2021-22. This project is called ISIKLE.

In this report we will refer to the community research initiative as CRIS.

Our primary aim at the community research initiative is to **enhance the student experience around their dissertation**. Knowledge exchange and collaborative practices are the key mechanisms we employ to achieve this outcome. We currently:
  » broker new relationships and networks and facilitate knowledge exchange between students and voluntary & community sector organisations.
  » provide workshops for students and voluntary sector organisations to develop skills in project management, active listening, storytelling, and participatory research methods.
  » support meaningful power-sharing and research co-creation within a group of diverse experts with different systems of knowledge and needs.

The service is therefore a knowledge exchange bridge *out* of the university into the local community, carrying academic and methodological expertise, and at the same time, is a bridge *into* the university for voluntary & community sector organisations, carrying experiential expertise and ideas for creating real social impact.

Our challenge

While there are many important stakeholder groups to consider, the two *participating* stakeholder groups at either end of the bridge are master's students and voluntary & community sector organisations. Our challenge is to create a service that is attractive, acceptable, and useable to both.

In spring 2021, we ran some interviews with voluntary & community organisations to better understand their needs and preferences around knowledge exchange as well as listen to what improvements they

thought we could make to our service. We have written up our findings and we're implementing the suggested changes in time for the new 2021-22 academic year.

Our knowledge gap

The second part to our knowledge gap is related to the second key stakeholder group, master's students. At the end of each year, we try to follow up with as many students as possible who have collaborated with a voluntary & community sector organisation during their dissertation. We do this to learn from them, encourage reflection on the *process* of research and not only findings or outcomes, and to evaluate our service so that we can improve year-on-year.

There are however many more students who do not get to the stage where they formalise a collaboration. It is really important for us to understand their motivations for signing up, experience with us, and also any barriers to that final collaboration. The central question is could we have done more or done anything different for these students. Ultimately, we want more students to be able to take up the opportunities offered by the community research initiative and to do this we need to know what obstacles are in the way and see if we can find a solution.

Continuing to fill the gap

Joanna identified 226 students who did not engage beyond sign-up or got to the stage of a knowledge exchange meeting but did not finalise a research collaboration. During July and August 2021, we emailed these students inviting them to make a time with Joanna to speak and also receive £15 Student's Union UCL Shop voucher. 15 students agreed to interview; 10 who had signed up to CRIS during 2020-21 but did not engage in any other way and five had at least one knowledge meeting arranged with the support of CRIS but did not reach a collaborative research agreement. The students' courses are presented in table 1.

Joanna's conversations with students were video calls due to national Covid restrictions and lasted between 10 and 30 minutes. Two interview schedules were devised - one for each type of student experience - but Joanna, a master's student with anthropology training, was guided by the students and used the schedules as a prompt only. The broad questions we asked students are presented in table 2.

Joanna made detailed notes during each interview about student experience and the role of CRIS for each of the students, which were reviewed together for common themes. These are written up in the "General responses" sections below. After each interview, Joanna structured interview notes and interpreted the interviews using an evaluation grid devised by Anne in conversation with other ISIKLE colleagues. We used the evaluation grid to help us translated what the students said into action points – these are under the heading "Key actions for implementation" below.

Table 1. Master's course title for student interviewees

Student interviewee group	Master's course title
Sign up stage only	MA Applied Linguistics

	MA Education
	MA Modern European Studies
	MA Social Justice and Education: Sociology of Education
	MSc Clinical Neuroscience
	MSc Eating Disorders and Clinical Disorders
	MSc Entrepreneurship
	MSc Global Health and Development
	MSc Health, Wellbeing and Sustainable Buildings
	MPA Innovation, Public Policy and Public Value
Knowledge exchange stage only	MA International Public Policy
	MA Policy Studies in Education
	MA Population Health
	MA Sociology of Childhood and Children's Rights
	MSc Public Policy

Table 2. Questions we asked each student

Student interviewee group	Interview questions
Sign up stage only	Why did you sign up to CRIS? What did you think you were signing up to? What were your expectations of CRIS? What did you think about our communications (emails, announcements etc)? What were some of the things that meant you didn't do anything more on CRIS? What would have made things different?
Knowledge exchange stage only	Please tell us a little bit about your experiences meeting with an organisation. What did you think about the knowledge exchange meeting(s)? What challenges were there for collaborating? What was it like with your supervisor about your interest in collaborating? What were your expectations going into the meetings? What were the competing factors for a collaboration for you? Are you disappointed that you have not collaborated on your dissertation? Have the meetings helped at all anyway, with your dissertation as it stands now? What could have been done differently to have secured a collaboration?

This feedback work was undertaken and written by Anne Laybourne, a postdoctoral researcher and CRIS manager, and Joanna Socha, CRIS administrator and current master's student with strong anthropological research skills.

This report sets out the key themes identified, together with a plan of action for related changes to be made to the service during August-September 2021, in collaboration with our systems & IT colleagues. The updated community research initiative will be launched to UCL students at the start of the 2021-22 academic year.

General responses by students who signed up only

Each of the 10 students from this category reacted positively to CRIS and cited numerous motivations for signing up. Many had multiple motivations including:

- The offer of **tailored dissertation support** during the development of their research project and their introduction to UCL and British academia. Five students included this motivation in their answer.
- **Adding value** to the master's year. Four students included this motivation in their answer.
- Joining a **supportive student community**. Two students included this in their answer.
- Access to a great **networking** opportunity. One student mentioned this in their answer.
- **Learning more** about the third sector and the "real world" was mentioned by two students and learning more about London by another.
- **Using knowledge** from their course in practice, especially combined with **making positive change**. One student mentioned this.

Many students mentioned that they only discovered CRIS through their own research and proactivity, and that their tutors or course mates were not aware of the service.

Ideas about the service

Only two students in this category had an accurate general idea of what the Community Research Initiative is and how it works. Interestingly, three thought that CRIS is a student network providing peer support and feedback on research ideas and dissertation writing for postgraduate students. Other ideas of what the service is included an opportunity to volunteer with UK organisations and a community organisation monitoring students' academic performance and wellbeing. Two students admitted they did not really know what they were signing up to.

Overall expectations

Most students expected the Community Research Initiative to be a communication channel between community organisations and students, and a mediator of relationships between the two. Insight into implementing dissertation research in practice as well as gaining advice from other students were also mentioned as expectations students had of CRIS.

Communication

Email communication from Community Research Initiative was met with highly positive feedback, with all participants except one (who did not recall getting any) praising emails as helpful, stimulating and non-intrusive. Many students highlighted the overwhelming amount of UCL emails sent to postgraduate students. One person indicated that it would be helpful if the emails from CRIS were shorter and more focused, especially given the volume of emails UCL students have to manage. Some students would prefer more emails throughout the year to help keep CRIS on their radar, as well as more guidance on how the initiative works and ways of engaging at any given point of the year.

Students found the invitations to workshops and meetings with Anne particularly helpful and most engaging out of all emails. Students from different time zones mentioned that although they found the events of interest, they could not join due to time zone difference and were not aware of recordings available on the CRIS website.

Obstacles to engagement

The main factor affecting the capacity of interviewed students to engage with CRIS further was the workload on their course and feeling overwhelmed. Therefore, many of students that had signed up chose other, non-collaborative dissertation projects, often suggested by the department or the supervisor, as they offered more certainty and fitted better with course timetables. Some respondents mentioned busy or under-informed supervisors as an obstacle to developing collaboration, as well as the lack of clarity on how to engage with the service themselves. For one student, very specific dissertation requirements on their course made further involvement with CRIS very difficult. Another student was forced to keep their engagement with UCL down to the essential minimum due to professional and family commitments.

General responses by knowledge exchange students but no collaboration

All five students from the category generally enjoyed what the Community Research Initiative offers, particularly praising the opportunity to create an engaged research project that can have importance beyond academia and how supportive Anne was in helping them navigate the relationship with a community partner. Three respondents spoke very enthusiastically about their knowledge exchange meetings, noting how effective and helpful they were in developing research ideas. One respondent did not like how unstructured and unclear their meeting was, while another one found the organisation representative rude and distracted, which hindered the quality of the meeting. Although generally happy with their current dissertation progress, all students expressed disappointment at not being able to use the opportunity for collaborative research through the Community Research Initiative.

Challenges for collaborating

Three general types of challenges around building a collaboration were cited by the interviewed students: (1) a lack of clarity on what they themselves wanted as well as coming to the stage of exploring organisations too late; (2) academic dimensions of a master's degree, particularly the strict course timetable, restrictive dissertation requirements, or lack of support from the supervisor; (3) differences between students and community partners, mostly due to difference of methodologies or research needs, lack of clarity and mismatch of time and availability. None of the students felt that any of these challenges were within the control of the Community Research Initiative.

Academic supervisor relationship

Three students described the involvement of their supervisor in the process as insignificant, with the academics' reactions ranging from cautious approval to lack of interest, and with no active participation in the process. Instead, supervisors emphasised the timely submission of proposal. Two remaining students did not yet have their supervisors assigned at the time of deciding on the final dissertation topic.

Competing factors

There were many competing factors around dissertation decision-making for these students. Degree workload and dissertation proposal deadlines were mentioned as primary reasons for choosing easier and more certain dissertation projects to mitigate the time pressure. One student expressed concern about good marks dependent on departmental requirements and decided to choose a "safer" option of a non-collaborative dissertation. Personal research interests and limited flexibility to change research topic or methodology based on partners' needs were also among competing factors in developing a collaboration.

Key actions for implementation

We have listed below the key themes from the student feedback, together with actions that we have identified to improve the service for 2021-22 academic year. We will monitor the achievement, or not, of these actions in 6 months and again at the end of the academic year.

Student understanding of the service
The students had different ideas of what CRIS is as a service, what it offers them, how they could participate, and what the knowledge exchange process could be.

Action(s):
1. During Welcome 2021, we have scheduled three online sessions, **CRIS Onboarding & Induction**. We are offering three options to maximise the number of people who can attend. In addition, we will pre-record the material and upload to the CRIS webpages to be disseminated to people unable to attend e.g. time zone issues and also to be useful throughout the year as students can sign up to CRIS at any time during terms 1&2.
2. To clarify the CRIS process, we have restructured the year in a skills focus, networking focus, and partnership/collaboration focus, mapping these onto the master's year. Sign up remains available throughout terms 1&2. Live provision of orientation and skills sessions will take place during term 1. Asynchronous versions of these sessions and workshops will be available for those who sign up in term 2. Networking opportunities will be launched during term 2, with students now skilled up. Term 3 will be taking these new networking and meetings forward into designing and agreeing a project. The summer is support of confirmed collaborative dissertations.
3. The restructuring of the year means we have been able to schedule everything ahead of time and create a CRIS timeline.

Communication
Students were generally supportive of CRIS communications and made suggestions for improvements that our emails need to cut though the noise – be shorter, more focused, and more frequent, act as a reminder.

Students told us that the sender of communications really matters and this dictates the priority they give it. Key senders to receive high priority are teaching staff or student leaders/representatives.

Action(s):

1. We will plan a communications strategy, with stable elements in the same way we have for the community organisations – mapped onto the events/time of the year. This should help us achieve shorter and more focused messaging which in turns should allow us to gently increase the frequency.
2. By mapping our communications onto the events/time of the year, we will be able to use our messaging as reminders for events, and keep CRIS on students' radars in amongst all the noise.
3. We will identify quieter periods of UCL comms, such as the long university holidays which are orientated towards the undergraduate experience. Winter and Spring breaks are ideal transition points too, where master's students are beginning to think about dissertations during the former and firming up ideas by the latter.
4. All messaging to include reminders of the opportunities coming up but also the recorded materials form the opportunities past.
5. Directly work with appropriate department or programme leads and staff with supervisor duties to raise awareness and increase understanding of the Community Research Initiative as well as encourage CRIS promote to students.
6. Look into promoting content through UCL's main social media channels.
7. Try to ensure our messaging is prioritised by master's students by working with sabbatical officers (Postgraduate, Equity, Education), part-time officers (Community Relations, Mature Students, Students with Caring Responsibilities, International), and colleagues in the Students' Union's Policy, Governance & Insights department who support the elected student leaders including all master's courses.

Timing of events

The time zone issues which have been highlighted here will continue through a blended year and uncertain future for provision. In particular, China is an important time zone to make CRIS accessible to given the high numbers of Chinese students at master's level.

Action(s):

1. Identify suitable cross over times of the day between GMT (London) and Beijing time. Aim to always offer one delivery to fall within this time where live provision has multiple options.
2. Promote heavily the asynchronous materials to make up for time differences where events cannot be scheduled appropriately.
3. Use the World map function within Padlet for each term, to get students to indicate where they will be living during that term. This was piloted during 2020-21.

Competing stresses: curricular vs co-curricular

There are competing priorities between curricular course requirements versus our co-curricular offer, a perceived 'risk' of a collaboration compared to a traditional dissertation, lack of support or promotion by teaching or supervision staff, and late allocation of supervisors or students not thinking about dissertations early enough for a collaboration.

Action(s):

1. Target teaching and supervision staff to ensure they are aware of CRIS. Work with them to identify ways CRIS can be supported within the course requirements.
2. Work with UCL Arena and their new project around personal tutors, often a precursor to supervisors which could help mitigate the problems with late supervisor allocation and encourage students to think earlier.
3. Provide light-touch events bringing staff together with community organisations to increase staff skills and experience in collaborative working.
4. Produce a film resource for a staff audience, outlining measureable/evidenced benefits to working in this way.
5. Run a staff stakeholder scoping exercise during 2021-22 to listen to staff concerns, understanding, and ideas for service reform.
6. Offer content from the Community Noticeboard to dissertation staff to include in dissertation project books or options.

Different ways of working coming together
Students struggled with very different approaches and perspectives during knowledge exchange meetings.

Action(s):

1. Make all skills sessions open to community organisations as well as students so that they can learn and practice in a mixed group. Build in plenty of space to enable knowledge exchange to occur organically.
2. Focus one of the skills sessions on participatory research methods, which is most likely to be the missing element in most master's courses.
3. Introduce a 'buddy' system for students to support each other through this process and discuss issues and solutions.
4. Offer a reflective process + follow up meeting for students to capture what was difficult or confusing.