STUDENTS' UNION UCL

Developing UCL's Community Research Initiative with key stakeholder groups: the voluntary & community sector

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Background

The community research initiative is a knowledge exchange opportunity for master's students, delivered by the Students' Union UCL and funded by the university's Office for Education and Student Experience, with additional funding during 2020-22 from the Office for Students/Research England (grant number:).

The primary aim of the 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 to develop student collaborative and relational skills and voluntary sector skills for university partnerships working.
» 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.

Our knowledge gap

Our colleagues in the Students' Union UCL are experts in building online systems to support student services, as well as student communications and marketing experts. Our knowledge gap is around the design of a knowledge exchange service to best meet the needs of the voluntary & community sector.

Beginning to fill the gap

During March and April 2021, Joanna spoke with contacts from ten external partners from across the voluntary & community sector and statutory bodies: nine voluntary & community sector organisations, one small, five medium-sized, and three large[1], and a local authority. One respondent has previously met with students to discuss research, two have attended a CRIS event during 2019-20, and all except one have met with Anne Laybourne in-person or digitally since December 2018. Participation in CRIS was instigated by one respondent while all others had been approached by Anne.

For this scoping work, conversations were video calls due to national Covid restrictions and lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. An interview schedule was devised but Joanna, a master's student with anthropology training, was guided by the participants and used the schedule as a prompt only. Joanna made detailed notes during each interview about points made which could easily translate into service reform. These are written up in the "key messages & actions" section. Other information from interviews has been written up in the "general responses" section. After each interview, Joanna structured interview notes and added reflective notes. All notes from all participants were reviewed together by Joanna for common themes and stand-out points, with emerging themes and possible action points discussed during team meetings.

This scoping 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 May-July 2021, in collaboration with our systems & IT colleagues. The updated community research initiative will be launched to the voluntary & community sector officially in late September 2021 at the start of the 2021-22 academic year.

General stakeholder responses to the Community Research Initiative

All interviewed stakeholders were positive about CRIS. Reasons for the varied between individuals. One respondent suggested they were interested in the support of younger people in their education as well as the benefits of research for their organisation. However, worries about working in this way included committing to a student and fixed dissertation in their fluid working environment with unstable timelines and unforeseen delays. A second respondent was positive about CRIS because of the opportunity it presented to have unheard people and their stories influence academic research. This individual also framed their wish to participate in CRIS from an epistemological perspective - academia is only one way of knowing. Three respondents saw CRIS as a way to build research into their service improvement and one thought of CRIS as a way to promote the work that they do. Finally, one respondent, very experienced and already connected to UCL, considered CRIS as a way to further their relationship while another saw CRIS as one way for the university to be fulfilling its civic responsibility, positioning local universities as central in post-Covid world.

Overall expectations

Only one respondent had not met with Anne or a student through CRIS at the time of interviewing. Expectations of the service included having an ongoing relationship with the service itself, transcending individual student projects from one year to the next. CRIS is expected to be a specialised brokering service, making appropriate connections in terms of subject matter as well as student skills. The role of CRIS is to be a conduit and a conversation starter and facilitator, to step back once a partnership or collaboration is formed and signed up. The expectations of what CRIS sets up for them is a two-way information and learning

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[1] NCVO definition based on income bands 2017/18.

opportunity, where they can influence research and see benefit coming back into the organisation. Furthermore, in the partnership forming phases, CRIS must help with the process of clarifying the role of the organisation, helping them articulate what they can offer. Finally, there is an expectation for events to be delivered by CRIS and networking among themselves is an important function these events must meet.

Key messages and actions for implementation

Communications

Newsletter: acts as a gentle, unobtrusive reminder that we exist. There was not a strong feeling for how regularly this should be produced (although monthly was suggested as the maximum frequency); it is seen as more important to produce a *relevant* newsletter, sharing content that is useful or information to be acted upon e.g., save the date for events or registration. Suggested content included ongoing research collaboration projects and information about other organisations that are involved as well as reminders to check their CRIS account.

Website: a centralised online service for this type of university research collaboration was warmly welcomed. Ideas for what their interface should look like included reflection section, feedback and observations, appointment booking function, information section with all documents/materials in one place, and quick Q&A function. Having all CRIS-related work on one place, and one system, was really appreciated. Regular check-ins "are we doing it right?" – propose set-up check in, one month in, and at the end at the least. They can book in others but these three would be standard, post-collaboration connection with a student.

Training needs: Understanding UCL and research terminology

UCL is huge and complex and at times hard to understand. In addition, CRIS is focused on research and there was some feedback for support with language and concepts and benefits to them. One individual expressed a need to be introduced to the benefit or importance of research, compared to monitoring or evaluation. One, who said they were always receptive to any training for development purposes, wanted to see training around different methods and procedures in research, how to collect information and, importantly, how to move beyond the 'tick box' exercise. Another partner expressed concern around possibility of working with different departments, and the need to understand how they work and what methodologies they use. Two others were interested in research methods and process, including analysis. Finally, project management skills were identified as a good developmental opportunity as well as research ethics. This was mentioned at the same time as data management and sharing and we have interpreted this identified gap as being around GDPR specifically, with an overarching introduction to the research ethics process that universities are bound to. This is about expectation management. Finally, all respondents mentioned training in the Initiative itself and this is now being framed as an on-boarding offer (see below).
We propose to develop glossary-style materials as well as an introduction to key terminology during the onboarding session (below) and a self-directed session on research, its importance, and uses (and shortfalls).

Onboarding to the service

From our conversations, there seems to be a need for a formal and structured on-boarding service. This has been lacking to date and to add context, four of the respondent stakeholders had been approached by Anne during the early part of 2020-21 with possible student connections but no partnerships has emerged. So the service until now has been ad hoc contact, offering a possible student. Feedback through these interviews indicates a need for more of a structure and understanding of what they can do within the service, expectation setting, articulating limitations e.g. not getting a student this year, outlining the responsibility of the organisation and what exactly they are committing to. In addition to this, some respondents raised the issue of accountability and research ownership, mainly around what happens after the collaboration project and the student moves on.

Events

Stakeholders suggested a blended promo event, where they can see students, UCL staff and other organisation who have completed a project together and hear about their experiences.

Giving feedback

As well as having the option to give reflections, observations, and complaints at any point during the year, stakeholders seemed to welcome feedback as a group activity rather than one-to-one interview meetings with CRIS. There was also an element of this achieving the need for network-building and learning from others like them for organisations. A benefit to CRIS of working this way is that is more efficient and is another way for us to provide the space for people to meet and share.

Summary of all planned action: May to September 2021

» Build and maintain the external partners MailChimp audience as part of the student staff admin role
- Make consent to mailing list part of the onboarding processes
- Agree a funky, fresh template, create a process for capturing content for new newsletters.
- Pilot a newsletter during summer for research consultancy opportunity and training sessions. Also new platform stuff e.g. Remo, Gather Town

» Consult with Systems about the Organisation's view on the platform. Include if possible:
- Q&A function (send a question which notifies an email account managed by the student staff in the first instance, raised to Anne if required, these are visible to others?)
- Email link to cris@ucl.ac.uk
- Feedback form option (for observations or complaints)
- Reflection log option
- 'Request a check in' Calendly booking link
- Access to their collaboration agreements
- Access to all materials needed for a project
- Book-in option for training/events

» Create a glossary of research terms, including what different methods can achieve in terms of output e.g. anthropological methods gather rich stories and would be good for storytelling campaigning

» Revisit and update the glossary we have about master's degrees and the year from a student's perspective, adding university terminology, structure, people

» Design a self-directed learning session on research

» Design an onboarding session to be delivered live during term 1 (CRIS upskilling phase)

» Design self-directed learning onboarding output

» Plan and deliver Celebration & Inspiration event (30th September, 12:00-14:00)
- Key notes speakers (Muki, Caroline, Jim)
- Film from the Provost
- Include registration in first pilot newsletter
- Identify and recruit students and organisations to present
- Ensure networking function to the event for organisations

- » Create group feedback focus group MS Bookings invite links throughout the year for organisations to book themselves into if they had engaged in a knowledge student meeting, co-developing a research project, during collaboration, or at CRIS completion
  - Organisations would be invited through the newsletter → query this