

PhDConnect! – a student-led cross departmental events calendar to help PhD students network and connect to UCL Services

Yasmin Garcia-Sterling¹, Leanne Taylor², Beatrice M Ossei-Gudom³, Yiyao Gong⁴, Alberto Fernandez Gonzalez⁵, Eleonora Piga⁶ & Anita Ng⁷

^{1,3,4,6,7} The Bartlett School of Sustainable Construction, University College London; ²The Bartlett School, UCL, Faculty of The Built Environment, ⁵ The Bartlett School of Architecture, University College,



1

Background

Student experience after the pandemic has had a disruptive interruption to existing PhD researcher traditions. The Global Young Academy (GYA) found that 75% of early career researchers (including PhD candidates) reported a negative impact on their research activities due to COVID-19 (Byrom, 2020). There hasn't yet been any initiatives to understand what PhD researchers went through and how to help them navigate the post-pandemic which has led to a risk of PhD drop-outs and a higher than usual rates of student attrition (HESA, 2022). Some noteworthy instances for PhD researcher needs now are inclusive access to facilities and services; mental health support, career, training and professional development, networking and affording place attachments for a sense of belonging.



Sense of Belonging



Networking and access to resources



Place - attachment needs

2

Methods

To develop PhDConnect! Which will involve having spaces across the Bartlett school to host cross- department initiatives. The purpose of providing a sense of belonging, alternative space solutions and accessibility to PhD networks.

We conducted a survey on utilising space solutions, inclusive communication and cross department collaboration with our targeted research groups across the 12 schools, institutes, and departments within The Bartlett, UCL's Faculty of the Built Environment, including department graduate tutors (DGT), PhD teaching and learning administrators and the Bartlett research students' representatives.

The PhDConnect! Team consists of researchers, students, the Doctoral Programme Lead and Faculty Graduate Tutor (FGT). We hosted a 2-hour panel followed by a networking launch event for PhDConnect! in-person, March 2023 and initiated communication awareness through a monthly newsletter, on UCL events website and through UCL GO app, followed by social media accounts on Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn.

References

Byrom N. The challenges of lockdown for early-career researchers. *Elife*. 2020 Jun 12;9:e59634. doi: 10.7554/eLife.59634. PMID: 32530421; PMCID: PMC7292644
Higher Education Statistics Agency. (2021). Non-Continuation Summary Statistics. Retrieved from <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/performance-indicators/non-continuation-summary>.
van Tienoven TP, Glorieux A, Minnen J, Te Braak P, Spruyt B. Graduate students locked down? PhD students' satisfaction with supervision during the first and second COVID-19 lockdown in Belgium. *PLoS One*. 2022 May 23;17(5):e0268923. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0268923. PMID: 35605012; PMCID: PMC9126403.

phdconnect@ucl.ac.uk

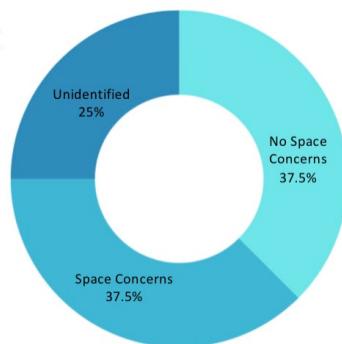
PhDConnect! will be a student-led events calendar bringing all PhD researchers on one central calendar so that services of UCL are able to communicate to all students more effectively. In turn, PhD researchers can be signposted to relevant information, academic spaces and social events across the year.

Study Question:

Post-pandemic, what is currently being facilitated for PhD researchers, from the information they have access to and supported collaborations to meet their needs?

3

Results

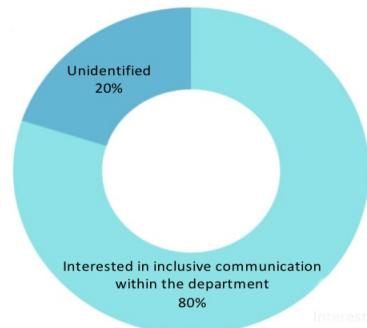
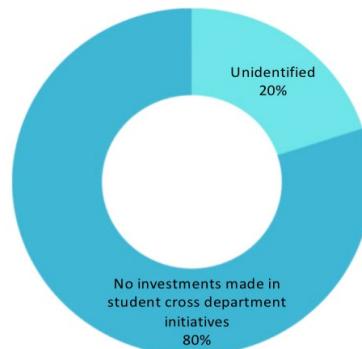


All responded departments represented by staff have identified in active attention to changing space constraints within their departments. 3/6 departments don't have space constraints and 2 disclose its due to their hot-desk solution.

While a library solution does not solve space constraints due to the requirements of a 'student base needed', the 3 departments with space concerns did not disclose having a hot-desk solution. We can consider Bartlett hot-desking to support time constraints concerning 1/6 departments.

Limitations of a hot-desk solution has reported decreasing sense of belonging, although PhDConnect! Hopes to be provided as a recommended regular social space solution.

All responded departments have not yet shown making a budget or funding cross-department initiatives. 2/6 departments have a budget and 2/6 departments have cross-department initiatives. These 2 issues were the most occurring student needs last academic SSCC meetings across the year and across the Bartlett School. PhDConnect! Hopes to be provided as a recommendation for accessing funding for cross-department initiatives to all Bartlett PhD students and student representatives.



All responded departments have shown an interest in inclusive and EDI focused communication within their department. PhDConnect! Is working with UCL accessibility team to ensure the way we communicate the events via the PhDConnect! Undergoes critical attention to diverse communication needs. 5/6 departments have EDI contacts and throughout the Term 2, PhDConnect! Will seek guidance by them. It is hoped PhDConnect! Will provide a recommended standard for EDI communication within the Bartlett school.

4

Discussion

From the questionnaire to the Bartlett participants across the school we were able to learn about what is currently being facilitated for PhD researchers, the information they have access to and collaborations that are supported.

When asked, "do you have space constraints within your department for PhD researchers?", 50% of the departments said, Yes and those that proposed a hot-desk solution remained with the barrier of a decreasing sense of belonging.

Also, when asked "what is the best way of receiving information about events?" All student preferred instant messaging visualisations, which are faster, shorter and more informal over longer written and structured formats. In order to meet digital accessibility and legislation (2018), 80% of the departments are interested in expanding the inclusive communication. While 1/3 of the departments have funding for researcher needs, no investments have been made for PhD research cross-department initiatives (beyond and across the departments) that all researchers can access.

5

Conclusion

PhDConnect! project is now launched, and key personnel appointed. PhDConnect! is a partnership between ChangeMakers and The Bartlett, UCL's Faculty of the Built Environment which brings together and promotes collaboration between people, space and services across the 12 schools, institutes, and departments. The future aims us to involve more schools of UCL by having more networking opportunities to bringing together the wider PhD research community.

6

Why PhDConnect!?

Taking these themes launched the PhDConnect! with 12 events which has targeted Arena fellowship applications, mental and wellbeing support, avenues for part time jobs to help with financial constraints of PhD researchers and an informative session for master's students who would want to transition to a PhD. Published on the PhDConnect newsletters, events and social media channels. We are now scheduling regular events with other UCL schools and student led groups on the PhDConnect! monthly calendar run through our email phdconnect@ucl.ac.uk and have had 153 signs ups to date.

