

Supporting PhD students to embed co-production into Mental Health Science research

Co-production training partner for PhD programme

About the programme

Our involvement with the Mental Health Science PhD students began in October 2020. The UCL-Wellcome Mental Health Science PhD programme recruited six students over five cohorts to take part in the programme, starting in 2020.

The first year for students consisted of them attending programme-specific seminars, Masters level modules that were of interest, and conducting rotation projects across three themes (mechanism, population and intervention). Each cohort also received training from us. The training was co-produced and co-delivered by staff members and members of our community with a variety of different lived experience.

The programme aimed to provide students with training in involving people with lived experience in research and covered topics such as:

- The core values underpinning co-production
- The importance of sharing power and responsibility
- How to put co-production principles into practice
- Understanding safety and safeguarding in co-production spaces
- Considerations for accessibility

We also provided a practical session on how students could incorporate lived experience into their PhD projects which was delivered while they were planning them. A key part of this was allowing for space and time for students to express any challenges or concerns with involvement or co-production, that they had, in anticipation of starting their PhD projects. Assistance was also provided with advertising opportunities to join the students thesis committees.

In the second year of the programme students used what they learnt in the first year to work on their PhD projects. All students had at least two lived experience advisors on their thesis committees and some also set up additional advisory groups (often with a larger panel of lived experience advisors). This depended on the student and supervisor's preferences and experiences of involvement as well as the PhD projects they pursued.



How our support for the Mental Health Sciences PhD evolved

"In 2020, during the depths of Covid, UCL had to quickly create a Mental Health Science PhD programme from scratch, having committed to the programme funder (Wellcome) that lived experience involvement would be a core component of the programme. Co-Production Collective has been instrumental in ensuring that lived experience involvement in students' PhD projects has been impactful.



They quickly created and delivered a bespoke training package for our PhD students, over the course of the first year, introducing vital topics such as power dynamics, accessibility, distinguishing co-creation from consultation, and how to implement co-production in action.

A particular challenge, which Nicc and her team rose to brilliantly, was how to implement lived experience involvement in primarily mechanistic (usually lab-based) projects, especially when students and their supervisors had little or often no background in any type of lived experience involvement in research.

Co-Production Collective have now trained 30 of our students, across 5 cohorts, with outstanding feedback, and supported all students in recruiting lived experience advisors for their thesis committees. They also helped us to identify an important gap in our training – specifically safeguarding – and worked with the programme to develop procedures in this area which have subsequently influenced safeguarding provision and policy at University College London. Co-Production Collective team have been a joy to work with, and we couldn't be happier that we partnered with them to deliver this central component of our PhD programme."

Professor Jon Roiser, Professor of Neuroscience and Mental Health at the UCL Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience



What happens next

Now that the funding for the Mental Health Sciences PhD has ended, we are taking time to better understand what students gained from being part of it and how this can help inform training for PhD students beyond this programme. Over coming months, we will be integrating the learning into our training offer.

In addition, a group of researchers made up of students on the programme, a lived experience advisor and lived experience researchers have secured funding from [UCL Centre for Equality Research in Brain Sciences](#) to understand the experiences of students as well as lived experience advisors on the training. From this, and with support from us, they aim to create some guidelines for PhD students on involving lived experience in their PhD studies.

“Lived experience involvement is really important in the field of mental health science. We know that involving people strengthens the quality of research and makes it more applicable to people affected.



The training provided by Co-Production Collective covered the basics of co-production and involvement as well as more complex issues that might come up in involving people, such as on projects exploring the mechanisms of mental health. We worked through some examples together and students were able to bring up any concerns they had with involvement, especially those who had no experience of involvement. The requirements set out by the programme set the ground for everyone to try involvement in some aspect. As someone with experience of mental ill health and having worked on involvement projects before, I found the Co-Production Collective team welcoming and supportive, and I was able to work on multiple projects with the team during my PhD.”

Humma Andleeb, former student on the UCL Wellcome PhD programme

Case study by Humma Andleeb

