What first-class researchers need to know: a seminar and circle of critical friends (2015/16)

Summary

What makes a research paper outstanding? What are the hall marks of excellent research and excellent researchers? How can strategic considerations inform decisions about publication venues? How can I harness social media to communicate my research to new audiences? What resources can be leveraged via UCL’s open access office? What do I need to know about REF 2020? What about bibliometrics? What is impact, how do I measure the impact of my research and at what point in the research cycle should impact be considered? How can I plan and implement an impact strategy? These are the main questions that will be explored (and, no doubt, debated!) via a new staff activity beginning in October 2016.

This activity aims to:

(i) Consolidate, share and extend even further the research expertise that already exists in the department

(ii) provide staff with important information e.g. planning for REF2020 and UCL’s open access arrangements

(iii) foster an ongoing (i.e. 2 meetings per term) opportunity for staff to share and reflect on their existing research practices and future research plans

(iv) experiment with approaches such as ‘writing groups’ and other strategies that may make our lives easier!

Proposed structure

The first 4 meetings will address the questions set out in the ‘Summary’ above. All research active staff are asked to please attend these meetings. Those who wish to continue and who are able to make the requisite time commitment will be invited to join a circle of ‘critical friends’. Following an initial meeting circles will meet as they wish over term 3 and the summer. A final meeting will take place at the end of the summer to report on what has been achieved and to decide about 2016/17.
Proposed content

Meeting 1 (October 14) (JN)

Focusing on the example of a journal article, the first part of the session will take a ‘nuts and bolts’ approach to discussing the hallmarks of excellent research. Every effort will be made to avoid normative judgements and statements about so-called “excellence” and “best practices”. Rather, we will explore whether factors can be identified that hold true, regardless of discipline or writing style.

To ground this exercise we will ask staff to send, in advance of the session, lists of questions they are commonly asked by journals when peer reviewing as well as an example of what they consider to be an excellent article.

To close we will briefly discuss the practical hallmarks and strategies of productive yet ethical researchers, for example, the importance of being a “reflective practitioner”. Participants will be given a bibliography of useful resources.

Meeting 2 (November 25) (AF)

This session will explore the question of research impact. Drawing upon the considerable acquired expertise in the group we will seek to define impact and its measurement or evaluation in concrete terms. Although practically the focus for such activity will be driven by the measurement of impact for research councils and REF frameworks past and future, the session will seek to broaden and deepen our understanding of how and why our research makes (and has in the past made) an impact notwithstanding the demands of the REF, etc. With this better understanding and recognition of what impact is, the session will then proceed on to a discussion of how to build impact (creation and evaluation) into your research practice from the start and conclude by looking at what might be developed by way of individual and collaborative impact case studies within the department. Participants will be given a bibliography of useful resources.

Meeting 3 (January 20) (JN and ES)

This session will focus especially on REF2020. It will include short talks from a REF panellist (to give general guidance on evaluation) and (on the facts that we need to know e.g. open access arrangements) from Adam Cresswell, UCL
Research Assessment Support Manager. Ideally we will have an outside representative who can discuss everything we know about REF2020 for the first part of the session, so we can discuss issues like “What, according to the REF, constitutes excellent research?”

After reflecting on the outcomes of REF2014 we will work in a group to reflect on the strategies we might take both individually and as a department to ensure a better outcome in REF2020. Participants will be given a bibliography of useful resources.

**Meeting 4 (March 16) (JN)**

This session will explore how researchers can build a successful online presence in order to reach new audiences and consolidate their research profiles further. As well as looking at the merits of various online platforms (e.g. what is the difference between academia.edu and Researchgate) we will have a talk from UCL’s repository staff and Open Access office. Participants will be given a bibliography of useful resources.

**Meeting 5: Critical friend assembly (Beginning term 3) (JN)**

General working rules for all will be collaboratively drafted at the initial Critical Friend Assembly. Each staff member should already have selected one research output (new or in progress) that they will work on over terms 3 & 4.

Critical friend groups will then be formed and each will decide on the objectives that they want to achieve over the next months (e.g. write 500 words per day / get feedback on drafts / discuss the logical development of their paper’s argument) and identify how each can support the other in order to help them achieve those objectives. Then they will decide how the objectives of their group can be evaluated. In order to reduce the ‘reading burden’ it is hoped that each group will have more than 2 members and that the reading of drafts can be alternated between members. Critical friends will then be left to get on with it as they see best!

**Ongoing critical friend meetings**

**Meeting 6: Critical friend assembly (end of summer) (JN)**

The critical friend assembly will be reconvened at the end of the summer. Each group will outline their aims, evaluate whether they met them and communicate one new thing that they learned or found helpful from the process. Those who are happy to send their research outputs to the wider
group can do so and a larger, group feedback session can be integrated. Plans for the new academic year will also be made.