Neuroscience Careers Network – Researcher-led and UCL supported

Case study

Purpose:
The UCL Neuroscience Careers Network (NCN) was established in 2010 to promote the professional development of UCL neuroscientists. The NCN is organised by a committee made up of representatives from a variety of departments within the UCL Neuroscience Domain and includes researchers at various stages of their careers, including PhD students, post-doctoral researchers, and PIs. This ensures that events are relevant to all neuroscience researchers across UCL. There are around 10 committee members each leading or supporting 2-3 events per year. The Committee meets ~6 times per year and is supported strategically by the UCL Research Staff Consultative Group, administratively and financially by the UCL Neuroscience Domain, and reports to the Neuroscience Domain Steering Committee.

The network organises workshops and seminars on different aspects of career development, which are always popular and form the basis of the early career support provided by many of the neuroscience institutes and divisions across UCL. The NCN provides opportunities for neuroscientists to meet their peers - to share ideas and experiences, and initiate collaborations - and also provides a platform for careers advice and the dissemination of information regarding jobs, training and funding opportunities for researchers. The NCN is open to researchers at all career levels but particularly to those at an early career stage.

Range and extent of activity:
The NCN Committee organises around 9 events throughout the year, with a break over the summer period. These comprise seminars related to both academic and non-academic careers aimed at different career stages, as well as two small group practical workshops (on grant writing and on interview skills; max 10 participants), which are highly popular and are run twice a year. In deciding on the programme of events, the Committee aims to identify areas of need for research staff and is open to suggestions for new events from the neuroscience community. Typical events include seminars on: alternative careers; getting published; grant writing; grant/fellowship interviews; lab building/management; different academic paths; clinical academic careers; public engagement; and work/life balance – but have also included seminars on setting up a company and on promotion. Typically, a variety of speakers with a neuroscience background are identified for each event, and some events are followed by a drinks reception to enable researchers to network and meet the speakers.

Increasingly, the NCN Committee is involved in policy relating to research careers. For instance, the NCN contributes to the UCL Research Staff Consultative Group, which meets several times a year and is responsible for governance and strategic matters relating to research staff development. The group comprises UCL staff in roles relating to researcher development, including Organisational Development, the Graduate School, the Careers Service, and other faculty representatives. The NCN represents the early career neuroscience community by providing input into these meetings. In addition, the NCN encourages early career researchers to engage with important surveys that feed into policy, such as the Careers in Research Online Survey (CROS) and the Principal Investigators and Research Leaders Survey (PIRLS), and has provided feedback on various policy documents. For instance, we have provided detailed feedback on the results from the CROS survey in order to inform UCL strategy relating to early career researcher development, and have attended meetings with
representatives from HR and with Chairs from other Early Career Networks at which CROS results and ECR support were discussed further. Our suggestions, which represent the voice of early career researchers from PhD to junior PI level and from a range of departments across UCL, have helped shape the new HR in Research Excellence Award Action Plan. The Action Plan details meaningful actions which will improve support for early career researchers at UCL. We will continue to provide input into this individually and through the newly set-up ECN Chairs Meetings that will be occurring regularly for review and feedback. We have also engaged other early career research groups (e.g. the Biosciences postdoc group and the Biosciences Divisional Postdoctoral Committee) in this consultation in order to further broaden the input into this important policy.

The NCN Committee also contributes to other events, such as the annual UCL Neuroscience Symposium organised by the Neuroscience Domain, and the 1-day UCL Early Careers Event to be held in 2018. It also helps promote excellence by administering the annual poster prize at the UCL Neuroscience Symposium.

In addition to event planning, the NCN maintains a website containing useful resources including funding opportunities and other career resources. This is visited regularly, having received 247 hits within September alone. The NCN also has a mailing list consisting of ~650 early career neuroscientists, to which a newsletter is sent on a monthly/fortnightly basis containing useful information and resources, such as internal and external events and opportunities that may be of interest to early career researchers. Events organised by the NCN are also advertised in the fortnightly Neuroscience Domain mailing list, which has a following of >2000 neuroscientists across UCL.

The model we have developed has been used by the other Research Domains, who have also established early career networks. The Committee liaises with these and other early career networks to share best practice, discuss issues around duplication of events at UCL, and to increase collaboration between networks. For instance, the NCN Committee provided input into a writing retreat organised by the Environment Domain Early-career Network; we gave a talk to other networks about how the NCN Committee is organised and how we run events; and we helped raise the profile of some networks by adding them to the Research Staff Hub, which is a one-stop shop containing information relevant to research staff across UCL.

**Future plans:**

The NCN is further developing its website to increase the support available to UCL researchers. This will include a careers blog in the form of interviews with UCL academics as well as with neuroscientists that have left academia, in order to provide case studies of different career paths. This is also in line with the objectives of the Research Staff Consultative Group where we report on the findings.

In addition, the NCN is initiating a public engagement event (the UCL Neuroscience Open Day) that would enable early careers researchers to gain valuable public engagement experience as well as showcase their work to the public, and which would also raise the profile of UCL Neuroscience.