A guide to working with UCL media relations for department/faculty comms staff

This document specifically concerns media relations work and is intended as a brief overview for staff working in communications roles around UCL. We know staff working in these roles often have a wide remit (which may include media relations) and hope it helps answer some common questions.

Broader advice about linking in with UCL Communications & Marketing to promote news on the central channels is available here: http://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/staff-services.

FAQs

A member of staff in my department/faculty wants to promote something to the media - what should I advise them to do?
Find out a bit more and try to get a sense of whether it’s something that might potentially be of interest to national/international media. If you think it might be or you’re not sure, we would advise they contact the relevant person in the media relations team. We can assess the story and give an honest view about whether a press release is the right approach.

Will you send out a press release I or someone in my area has written?
We won’t send out a press release we haven’t been involved in writing. Releases distributed centrally need to conform to a certain style so we really need to be involved from the outset. The key people involved will be integral to the drafting process and have full copy approval.

We risk our reputation if we send out poor quality or unclear releases, or overuse valuable media contacts. Good notice is also vital because as far as possible we try to plan for news that is coming up in the weeks and months ahead, including an ongoing planned schedule of press releases. Planning well also lessens the risks of UCL stories clashing or competing with others on the day.

Can I write and distribute press releases directly myself?
There’s no central policy to prevent this, and in an organisation as large and complex as UCL we appreciate there are some occasions where this might be appropriate. However, we’d advise considering this carefully.

Distributing material that is rushed, not well-targeted/timely or going to out-of-date contacts risks reflecting badly on your department and UCL as a whole. If you or predecessors in your role have done this, it’s worth looking back to check if it resulted in coverage. If there was little or no pick-up, question the approach. If you are sending out a release, please make it clear that it’s from your area rather than central UCL and don’t brand/title it in a way that implies this.

The term ‘press release’ can be used quite broadly, and you might be asked to produce one by people without a sound understanding of what’s involved (e.g. that it will be sent to major global news outlets and be a strong enough story that there’s a good chance of them covering it). If you need support in explaining why it might not be a good idea, or to recommend another approach, we are happy to help.
Can you provide me with a list of key media/journalists in my area?
We have lists for all major subject areas, and we can work with you to make sure the list in your area is as good as it can be when we promote your stories to the media.

However, we’re not willing to hand over lists/contact details without being clear how they’re going to be used. We recognise you or staff in your area might have built up your own personal contacts with media and we have no wish to interfere with those relationships. Similarly, our contacts have agreed to be contacted by UCL centrally, and not for their information to be given out beyond that.

Academics in my area are keen to provide comment on relevant issues to journalists - how can they do this?
We have a central database of UCL experts we use when we get calls for comment, and that media can search directly, so please do encourage people to sign up to this. The best contact in our team is s.pipa@ucl.ac.uk

Is media training available at UCL?
No central training is available currently at UCL, but we are happy to talk to academics individually about what they might expect when being interviewed and suggest questions that might come up. More formal media training is provided by many of the research councils and we can provide a list. We’re also always happy to come and present to groups about working with the media.

A journalist has contacted me/an academic in my area - what should I do?
If it’s something straightforward, we’re happy for you to deal with this. If you have any concerns, it is potentially controversial, or you are unclear about anything, we’re happy to advise. In cases where it is a negative story, we can work with you and relevant colleagues in your area to draft a statement and handle any interest.

We’ve had some great coverage we’d like to highlight to people around UCL, how can we do this?
There are a number of ways we can promote your media coverage across UCL’s central channels e.g. social media, e-newsletters and websites. Get in touch with ruth.howells@ucl.ac.uk for more information.

Do I need to supervise filming/journalists visiting my department? Do I need to let you or anyone else know if filming is taking place?
If it’s something straightforward, like an interview with an academic in their office, you probably don’t need to supervise. If it’s in a lab or teaching area, there may be considerations (such as if students are happy to be filmed) that might benefit from closer supervision. It is good practice to let security know for information when a crew are going to be on campus and where, by emailing security@ucl.ac.uk

Parking can sometimes be arranged via the central service desk (efdservices@ucl.ac.uk or 020 7679 0000) depending on where filming is taking place. Do also let your contact in the media relations team know, so we can look out for coverage and promote this.