



Job Description

Research Assistant: Northern Ireland Border Poll (Referendum) Project

Department: Political Science

Specific Unit: The Constitution Unit

Location: London – Bloomsbury

Grade: 6B

Salary: £30,922-£31,752 pro rata per annum including London allowance

Hours: 70% FTE

Duration of post: The post is funded for 12 months, in the first instance

Reports to:

Dr Alan Renwick

Context

University College London (UCL) is among the world's top universities. At the heart of London, it has a population of over 38,000 students, from more than 150 different countries, and offers degree programmes in a wide range of subjects. UCL's Department of Political Science is recognised for its excellence, ranked 2nd in the UK in the 2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF). It conducts teaching and research in all fields of politics, including British and comparative politics, international relations, political theory, human rights, public policy-making and administration.

[The Constitution Unit](#) is the Department's largest and longest-established research centre. Created in 1995, it conducts timely, rigorous, independent research into constitutional change and the reform of political institutions. Our publications include reports, books, and articles in both academic journals and mainstream media. We have always prioritised providing evidence to policymakers, and our research has significant real-world impact – both in the United Kingdom and around the world. The Unit is led by [Professor Meg Russell](#), a specialist on parliament, and the Deputy Director is [Dr Alan Renwick](#), an expert on electoral systems, referendums and deliberate democracy. Other areas of interest include the judiciary, monarchy, central government, political parties

and devolution. Major recent projects have included research into parliament's policy impact, the hosting of a citizens' assembly on Brexit in 2017, and the organisation of an independent commission reviewing the role of referendums in the UK.

In addition to producing research outputs the Unit organises regular events and has a popular blog and newsletter. Its senior staff are frequently consulted by policymakers and appear in national and international news media. The Unit also has a growing social media presence.

Main purpose of the job

The Constitution Unit has secured funding from the British Academy for a project called 'Deciding On Borders: Preparing For A Northern Ireland Border Poll'. A 'border poll' in this context is a referendum or set of referendums held north and south of the Irish border to decide the future constitutional status of Northern Ireland. The project will convene a group of twelve senior academics based in London, Belfast, and Dublin who, through research and meetings over the course of the year, will produce a report making recommendations on how any possible future 'border poll' should be prepared for, designed, and conducted. Questions to be considered include:

- Should a border poll (only) be held before negotiations have taken place on the form that Irish unification would take, or should such a vote

(also) be held once an agreement has been concluded?

- Would it be tenable to hold, as current legal provisions imply, a pre-negotiation poll in the North but not in the South and a post-negotiation poll in the South but not in the North? If not, what alternatives are feasible?
- How and where in the process should citizens be engaged in discussions about the options?
- How should the campaign be regulated?

We have already set out many of these questions in a preparatory report, published in March 2019, which is available [here](#).

The post-holder, based in London, will support this work by conducting research, preparing briefing papers, and working with others in drafting the report. Research tasks are likely to include mapping discourse around a border poll in Northern Ireland and reviewing relevant literatures (both comparative and specific to Northern Ireland, Ireland, and/or the United Kingdom). They may also include conducting and analysing interviews. The post-holder is expected to play a leading role in producing other outputs from the project, including academic articles and blogposts.

The post-holder will also have a role in organising the meetings and the wider programme of work for the project.

It is possible that additional funding relating to the project will be secured in the coming months to fund greater impact and engagement work. Should that happen, it may be possible to extend the post, should the post-holder wish, by up to six months and/or to increase the hours for some of the project up to 100% FTE.

Duties and responsibilities:

The Research Assistant will be expected to undertake duties as directed by Dr Renwick, including the following:

- Reviewing relevant literatures and preparing briefing papers on those literatures.
- Mapping and analysing aspects of existing practice around referendums and constitutional decision-making in Northern Ireland, Ireland, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere, and considering lessons that can be drawn from it.
- Mapping and analysing relevant public discourses, as reflected in the media, official publications, reports, and elsewhere.
- Identifying interviewees and planning, setting up and, where appropriate, participating in research interviews.

- Attending and taking minutes at meetings of the project team in London, Belfast, and Dublin.
- Collating research and papers from other project team members and working them up into draft chapters for the final report.
- Preparing drafts of other outputs, such as blogposts and scholarly articles.
- Building relationships with key individuals in the policy world who should be kept informed about the project.
- Planning and administering meetings of the project team.
- Coordinating communications within the project team.
- Leading the design and maintenance of the project's webpages and presence on social media.
- Liaising with the project team members and the UCL Press Office on advancing publicity for the project.
- Contributing more widely to the work of the Constitution Unit, for example through attending team meetings and assisting in the planning of events, future research projects, and the Unit's blog and newsletter.

Job descriptions cannot be exhaustive and so the post holder may be required to undertake other duties which are in line with the scope, spirit and purpose of the job as requested by the line manager.

As duties and responsibilities change and develop the job description may be reviewed and be subject to amendment in consultation with the post holder.

Person specification

Criteria	Essential or Desirable
Qualifications, experience and knowledge	
Either (1) a First-Class Bachelor's degree in Politics, Law, or a closely related field; or (2) a Distinction in a Master's degree in Politics, Law, or a closely related field; or (3) a 2.1 Bachelor's degree or Merit Master's degree in Politics, Law or a closely related field AND substantial professional experience of conducting research on politics, law or a closely related matter.	Essential
Clear and demonstrable knowledge of and interest in Northern Irish and/or Irish and/or British politics.	Essential
Clear and demonstrable knowledge of debates around the role or conduct of referendums in Northern Ireland, the UK, Ireland, or elsewhere.	Essential
Clear and demonstrable knowledge of and interest in Northern Irish and/or Irish politics specifically.	Desirable
Experience of conducting research on politics or a closely related matter.	Desirable
Experience of working in an academic research centre or think tank, government, or similar.	Desirable
Experience of writing briefings for policy-makers.	Desirable
Experience of working with websites and/or social media.	Desirable
Skills and abilities	
The ability to gather and systematically organise complex material from a range of sources.	Essential
Excellent written communication skills, including writing fluently and without errors for both specialist and non-specialist audiences.	Essential
Excellent organisational skills, including ability to deal with competing priorities, meet tight deadlines, manage a varied workload and work with limited supervision.	Essential
Excellent interpersonal skills, including ability to develop strong and constructive working relationships with the members of the project team, staff at UCL, and those operating in the policy world.	Essential
Sound judgement, and a well-developed ability to understand and balance political evidence.	Essential
Personal attributes	
An ability and willingness to demonstrate professional political neutrality, both in partisan terms and on key topics such as the question of Northern Ireland's constitutional future.	Essential

Apply

This process is not applicable to redeployees. Redeployees should follow the standard UCL redeployment process.

To apply for this position visit:

ucl.ac.uk/jobs

Please ensure that you do **all** of the following:

- Complete the required sections of the online form.
- Upload a CV, including details of your educational qualifications (with full details of grades) and your prior work experience.
- Upload a covering letter (maximum two pages) setting out clearly why you are interested in the position and how you meet the essential (and, where relevant, desirable) criteria.

Please do **not** upload other documents (e.g. samples of written work or degree certificates).

Any queries regarding the vacancy or the application process should be directed to Rachel Cronkshaw, at r.cronkshaw@ucl.ac.uk

Information about the Constitution Unit can be found at <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/>

Our department is working towards an Athena SWAN award. We are committed to advancing gender equality within our department.

This appointment is subject to UCL Terms and Conditions of Service for Research and Support Staff.

Please use these links to find out more about [UCL working life](#) including the benefits we offer and [UCL Terms and Conditions](#) related to this job.