

## UCL Culture: Student Engagers

### Overview and Context

The UCL Student Engagers were a group of postgraduate research students developing innovative and experimental engagement strategies in UCL museums and collections. Their variety of academic interests did not always seem to have obvious links to the museum collections, but the themes of research can always be linked to objects or exhibitions.

The Student Engagers shared a common desire to bring research to new audiences, and to make what they do accessible to the wider public. Through conversations with museum visitors, they also encouraged visitors to think about the collections in novel and varied ways. These open-ended discussions also challenged the students to think about their research from different perspectives and challenge them to explore unexpected links.

#### Aims of project:

Student Engagers aimed to:

- Broaden public awareness of current research by sharing knowledge with museum audiences
- Make connections between their own areas of expertise and UCL collections.

Most of their time was spent in the UCL Museums interacting with visitors and writing blog posts. They were also involved in a number of activities outside of the UCL Museums, including:

- Materials & Objects events
- A lunchtime talk in UCL Art Museum for an exhibition of the works of Richard Cooper Jr.
- Engagers visited Primary schools to inspire children about science
- Museum of the Normal at Queen Mary, University of London: Engagers participated as hosts at an adult event during the Being Human festival

#### The Blog

“Writing blog posts has also been a highlight of Student Engager work. It’s been great for helping deepening my knowledge of the collections, and for practicing writing academically in a public-friendly way. It’s also really useful for my professional development to be able to demonstrate examples of my public research engagement online. I appreciate the re-institution of a regular schedule for the blog posts, as it’s been easier to commit to writing when there’s a deadline.”

According to the Twitter account, the pieces with the most retweets have been: [books bound in human skin](#), [a defence of Neanderthals](#), and [Egyptian beer & bread](#).

Notable moments include: a piece on [museum collections](#), which sparked online [discussion](#) amongst curators on how to prevent museums from feeling like mausoleums; and a piece on the [ethics of displaying skeletons](#) in museums – several members of the public voiced strong opinions on the subject.



### Facts and Figures

Programme ran from 2013 to 2019

**425** engagements in museums

Engagers deemed **95%** of engagements were positive; none were negative

Average length of engagements was **10-15** minutes. 6 were longer than 1 hour

**70%** of engagements included discussion of the student’s research  
25% discussed the collections

**50%** of visitors were age 16-35

**40%** of visitors were British  
Visitors came from **41** Nationalities

Almost **50%** of visitors were tourists.  
About 10% were UCL students, 10% Londoners, 8% local workers

Gender was evenly split

### Snapshots of engagements in the museums

"This visitor came to the Petrie with her husband because they saw a documentary on Petrie. They were in the neighbourhood to see the Brunei Gallery and thought they would pop in to see the Petrie. We discussed the Petrie's collection, my research, and the student engager project. The visitor gave me some great advice about other museums in London. She was absolutely fascinated by how well-preserved the organic materials are."

"This visitor is taking a night class at the Open University on Persia. He came to the Petrie to see if there was anything in the collection that had ties to ancient Persia. This was his second visit. We discussed my research, his university course, and displays at other museums. I recommended where he could get more information about the Engager Project since all the engagers work on different subjects. We also discussed the history of medicine in regards to the ancient world and in high density places like Hong Kong."

"The family came to visit the Grant after a visit to UCH. They have consistently come to the Grant for the past 5 years. The boy loves to find specific specimens. I spoke with the family about my research and use of the Pathology Collection specimens. The mum and dad asked me quite a few questions about my research and we had a really engaging discussion."

"This visitor was at the table where I had spoken with other visitors. I started up a conversation with him after I noticed he was drawing. We had a very long discussion about my research, the Student Engager group, research at UCL, museums in London and conservation work. This was a very free flowing engagement and really pleasant."

"I spoke with this group of students about my research for over 30 minutes. Two are doing Masters in Book History and one in International Relations at SOAS. Although they do not do anything with medicine, they were really interested in hearing about the different epidemic diseases and examining the photos of the Pathology Collection specimens. We also discussed global health and contemporary outbreaks. Then we discussed the Student Engager projects and how my research ties into the collections. They thought it was great to have researchers in the museums to speak with visitors about research. One of the visitors commented that sometimes museums can be solitary spaces so it is nice to have someone to chat with during a visit. Finally, I showed the group around to a few of my favourite pieces on display at the Petrie."

"We spoke about bones, mummies, ancient Egypt, the oldest Britons, footprints in the mud, mammoths on Jersey, Paleoclimate and routes out of Africa, the nature of human-Neanderthal interaction, the noble savage and changes to the landscape."

"I initially approached this visitor to tell her a bit of information about some objects she was looking at. However, we mainly spoke about my PhD research, her research with music therapy for autistic children, and living abroad."

"Mother and two kids - talked about bones, sports, dental enamel hypoplasia, Neanderthals; consciousness and the mind - both girls are synesthetic so we talked about the mind/body connection, Jeremy Bentham and bodily integrity."

### Feedback from Engagers

#### What worked well?

Quotes from Students Engagers:

- Interacting with people in the museums has given me more confidence as a researcher and has also shown me which bits of my research, and general aspects of human evolution, captivate visitors.
- I appreciated going to UCL Museums/UCL Culture staff events, it has also been a really valuable way for me to meet people and learn about what kind of work they're doing in this field.
- I learned a lot about running museums, curation, and the history of objects in the collection and I really value this experience.
- I've really appreciated the support of all the staff members in the museums throughout the year, both in answering my questions and giving me background behind current exhibits so that I can engage with greater context. They also respond promptly via email to questions regarding blog posts, which I appreciate. Their friendly attitudes are why I'm always so happy to engage in the museums and why I look forward to work there every week.

#### What could be done differently?

- Engaging in the museums when there is a tour, class or talk is a little challenging. When there are talks or tours happening, I think it might be helpful if, during the session, the museum staff introduce us if we're on duty that day, so that visitors and students know they can approach us.