



Freedom of Information (FoI) legislation advice for UCL Medical Students

The Freedom of Information Act (2000) created a general right of access to all types of recorded information held by public authorities. To assist UCL medical students in using this legislation effectively UCL Medical School has put together this advice document which should be read in conjunction with the UCL FoI website <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/foi/>

UCL medical students seeking information about UCL Medical School, other Medical Schools, or any other public authority, for research or other purposes, are advised to first consider the following six questions. Students are strongly recommended to also seek advice from the Medical School Student Support Team who have experience of the best ways in which to obtain information and may be able to help you to access this without using FoI legislation. In addition, if the information is being sought for research undertaken as part of a programme of study at UCL, medical students are expected to seek advice from their research supervisor before making a FoI request.

- 1. Do I need to make a request, or is the information already available?** The websites or the UCL intranet may already contain the information, or it may be available from a previous FoI request - see: <https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/body/ucl>. A thorough search may also reveal other relevant information to help you refine your request.
- 2. Do I need to make a request, or can I request the data informally?** At the very least an informal conversation with a relevant staff member may help you refine your request. At best you may get the information you need without having to make a request.
- 3. What information am I asking for and how am I asking for it?** Poorly worded requests may lead to them being misunderstood or refused. Requests should be short, to the point, specific, and polite. It's tempting to ask for everything but the kitchen sink, but this is not the best approach. Other requests can always be made later if required. If you're requesting information for use in research, ensure the request will provide information that will enable you to answer your research questions. See <https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/> for examples of requests and how organisations deal with them.
- 4. How will I use the information I get responsibly?** If you are asking for information for research, ensure you or other research team members have sufficient time and expertise to process, analyse, and write up what is provided, bearing in mind information may not be formatted for research. Ensure your research has research ethics approval or confirmation that it is exempt. If you are asking for teaching materials or other content, remember the copyright will normally still belong to the author or the organisation. If you're reporting on the information disclosed, try to provide context.
- 5. How many requests do I need to make?** Care should be taken before making the same request to multiple organisations as the more organisations are sent a request, the more public money will be spent answering it. Try to ensure requests are sent only to relevant organisations.
- 6. Will my request be accepted?** There are 23 exemptions from the right of access that mean organisations do not have to provide you with information requested (see <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/foi>) and sometimes organisations don't hold the information you request. One exemption deals with the resources required by the public authority to answer your request; if a public authority can demonstrate that it will take one member of staff more than 18 hours to locate or extract the information relevant to your request it may be refused on costs grounds. This is known as the 'appropriate limit'.

More information on Freedom of Information can be found here:

UCL guidance on good practice when making FOI requests: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/research/foi/foi-universities/academics-guide-to-foi.pdf>

UCL Freedom of Information webpages: <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/foi>

Please contact the UCLMS Divisional Tutor, Dr W Coppola, with any questions relating to this guidance:
w.coppola@ucl.ac.uk

Yours sincerely

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