

Panel #2: Launch of the BSc in Global Humanitarian Studies

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Prof Peter Sammonds: An introduction to the BSc

The new BSc in Global Humanitarian Studies offered by the UCL Institute for Risk and Disaster Reduction (IRDR) is a multidisciplinary programme designed to educate and train future generations of humanitarian leaders in the theory and practice of effective humanitarian action. The programme affords students the opportunity to delve into the political, historical and developmental contexts of humanitarianism. It enables the understanding of humanitarian crisis response and its impacts, while recognising widening vulnerabilities and anticipating evolving threats.

The BSc will be based around four core themes:

1. Inequality, social justice and ethics
2. Humanitarian crisis response and logistics
3. Climate and hazard risks: impacts and adaptations
4. International development

In addition to the core modules, which make up 50% of the degree programme, students can select two out of the four optional pathways available. These include:

1. Digital science pathway
2. Management science pathway
3. Global public health pathway
4. Anthropology and social science pathway

Students can choose from this diverse yet integrated range of topics so as to specialise and tailor their degree to match their own interests, experiences and career aspirations.

The motivations for designing such a programme emanate from the increasing emphasis on the need to professionalise the sector expressed by humanitarian organisations and actors across the humanitarian space. The programme aims to produce well-informed graduates able to meet the heightening demand for a good working knowledge of the principles bound up in humanitarian work, qualitative and quantitative research methods, good communication and negotiating skills, critical and analytical capabilities as well as an understanding of issues surrounding security and ethics.

The BSc creation was based on extensive consultation with national and global bodies operating in the field, including consultancies, intergovernmental agencies, non-governmental organisations and the private sector, courtesy of the IRDR's wide network of cross sectoral practitioner partners.

Allen Abramson: The Anthropological connection

Anthropology and humanitarianism share a sense that the world is not an entity of separate parts but is highly interconnected. This is especially true in the post-disaster environment in which humanitarianism is most active, when our desire to increase connectivity is often felt.

The anthropology-humanitarian connection is particularly relevant in two areas:

1. The plain of transnationalism and cosmopolitanism. There is a tendency for cultures to homogenise when highly connected, creating one global tribe that overrides differences. UNICEF and MSF are good examples of this in the humanitarian actor space, as transnational organisations, but are they really of one culture? Ethnography can help to analyse more deeply the formations of homogenous communities, and to examine whether humanitarian organisations contain more variation than we initially think.
2. Despite globalisation, we still see high levels of diversification. Differences in the local, regional and national environments, as well as in communities and organisations still exist, and so when disaster strikes, humanitarians must shape interventions to reflect the context. Although one size never fits all, immersive methods of investigation can help us to understand to what degree models of disaster assistance can be replicated across many different contexts, and whether we can borrow from experiences in one place to support responses in others.

Ultimately, research methods are a partnership. All involved in projects must feel ownership so that the outcomes benefit the intended in the most suitable and appropriate ways possible.

Jessica Field: dominant issues within the contemporary humanitarian scene

Humanitarian action occurs at all levels and encompasses a huge range of diverse actors. The World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul, Turkey in 2016, marked a key moment in the humanitarian evolutionary timeline. It was the first to focus exclusively on humanitarian action and put forward the "Agenda for Humanity" that articulated a new, bold aspiration to seek reform in the sector and to improve effectiveness and efficiency moving forward. Despite receiving critique for not enforcing the commitments made strongly enough in the following years, the summit nevertheless emphasised a number of important issues that continue to dominate the humanitarian field today.

The key themes that emerged centred round public health, localisation, technology and innovation, and gender, race and discrimination.

Public health: how can actors better coordinate responses to public health crises such as the Ebola outbreak and the latest Coronavirus pandemic?

Localisation: the launch of the “Grand Bargain”, a unique agreement between some of the world’s largest donors and humanitarian organisations to commit to better funding distribution among local humanitarian groups to help improve the effectiveness and efficiency of humanitarian action. This is in recognition that local organisations are the primary first responders yet received less than 2% of global funding in 2016. While the proposed rise to 25% has not yet been achieved, change is occurring in light of the many political and bureaucratic obstacles slowing the process.

Technology and innovation: the advancements in technology have enhanced numerous humanitarian processes, from tracking displaced populations and collecting biometric data to improve distribution of resources, to enabling community feedback apps and improving assistance-based accountability. Despite the advantages however, concerns around ethics, equitable access, data protection, privacy and personal vs virtual interactions exist, and their long-term implications. The BSc in Global Humanitarian Studies enables students to explore these issues and develop solutions to such challenges.

Gender, race and discrimination: there is rightly an increased recognition of the need to address the colonial legacy of humanitarian assistance, to challenge the dominance of western aid approaches and to safeguard the sector from further protection failures around staff and recipients of assistance in the sector. It was acknowledged that there is a need for more diverse representation at top levels in organisations and agencies working in the aid and development sectors, and greater exploration of non-western humanitarianism through history.

Student questions:

How to prepare for starting the BSc in Global Humanitarian Studies?

- Look through the details of the degree on the IRDR website
- Think more broadly about humanitarianism – look online for news, articles etc.
- Staff are available to contact personally to discuss the programme
- Check on the IRDR website for increasingly more resources - humanitarian masterclasses and taster sessions will be available.

What type of student should take the course?

- Students interested in humanitarian action and wishing to pursue a career in this sector.
- Students from a wide array of academic backgrounds – the different pathways in programme aim to attract students from a diverse range of theoretical disciplines and practical experiences, so that all can benefit from multidisciplinary perspectives. The pathways enable students to tailor their degree based on individual interests and specialisms.

How does the programme promote employability?

- There are few comparable options for studying these subjects at undergraduate level, and so the unique nature will set our students apart
- It allows students to specialise very early on, again an unusual offering
- Students not gain academic knowledge but also vital practical skills such as risk analysis, data analysis, GIS mapping etc.
- A key strength lies in the programme's interdisciplinary nature, offering an extremely broad knowledge base
- Many employers value fieldwork skills, and the programme enables students to conduct field research.
- There are many options for students to hone their interests and to make key connections in the practitioner world through UCL's diverse professional networks.

How do students know which pathway to choose?

- During the introduction week, taster days in pathways will be available in order to get a feel for what each can offer
- Tutors will always be on hand to offer guidance
- It is possible to change pathways in the early stages if students wish to pursue another specialism.

Are women and children more vulnerable in disasters?

- There is a tendency to perpetuate the view that women and children are passive victims of disaster and need saving due to their enhanced vulnerability.
- Vulnerabilities are however, linked to identity, and this is applicable equally to men. It is important to contextualise responses and not rush to conclusions based on preconceived perceptions.

- The programme allows students to focus on who is marginalised in both society and disaster situations, and cuts through the automatic victimisation of certain groups to explore the deeper issues at play.

What are the most enjoyable elements of studying at the IRDR?

- Support and resources are always on hand – the library, online resources and lecturers can provide information and discuss student goals and ambitions.
- Life in London as an international student offers experiences beyond what you get from your home country. You can compare, contrast, learn from and take back home your experiences.

What other opportunities exist outside of the timetabled classes?

- Internships, work experience, employment and volunteering opportunities can all complement your studies, expand your network and provide good experiences for your CV.
- There are numerous clubs and societies at UCL.
- London culture and nightlife means that theatres, museums, pubs etc are all close at hand.
- There is always plenty of common room space to encourage student interaction and working together outside of classes.
- The IRDR is always creating and hosting new initiatives, for example the series of humanitarian masterclasses, the Institute's annual conferences, and regular seminars, forums and workshops.
- UCL central London location means affords access to the HQs of many humanitarian organisations, government departments and other universities.
- Numerous professional events, talks and collaborative opportunities take place year-round.
- Specialist IRDR projects that promote and enhance industry networks, e.g. [GRRIPP: Gender Responsive Resilience & Intersectionality in Policy and Practice](#)

Why is it unique?

- No other undergraduate programme exists with such breadth of interest, coverage and skills in humanitarian field that allows students to specialise so early into their studies.