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Impact Objectives

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Translational education and training for early career researchers

Colly Benari, Head of the Academic Careers Office at University College London (UCL), discusses the role and impact of the UCL Academic Careers Office at UCL.

Could you introduce yourself and how you came to take on the role Head of the Academic Careers Office (ACO) at UCL?

I consider myself a failed scientist, though I failed earlier than most! I studied biology as an undergraduate. During my degree, I held a research assistant job in a neurology lab working on basic research into visual system development. Although studying science was exciting and my principal investigator was a wonderful mentor, I hated working in the lab. My personality just didn’t suit the individual nature of the work and I am grateful that I found that out at an early stage. I figured out that there is a whole world of work supporting science and this has led to an exciting and fulfilling career in biomedical research funding charities and higher education. Now I am Head of the Academic Careers Office at UCL – a team working across the School of Life and Medical Sciences to support academic and clinical academic researchers in achieving success.

Could you give a brief explanation of the key objectives of the ACO within UCL and affiliated biomedical research councils and the background and origins of the Office?

The ACO develops and runs innovative programmes to support the career development of academics at all levels. The team has a great deal of experience of supporting academics to pursue research. We have managed multi-million-pound funding budgets and shaped the careers of thousands of scientists. We are passionate about giving researchers the tools – both practical and intangible qualities – that set them up for success. The ACO was started in 2011 by Professor Geraint Rees, Dean of Life Sciences, to support the implementation of the NIHR Integrated Academic Training Programme (IAT), which continues to provide funding for pre-doctoral and postdoctoral clinical academic training posts at UCL and UCLH. Corsant is a passionate supporter of clinical academic trainees and continues to advocate for their interests both within UCL and nationally. The flagship IAT programme is now the largest in the country.

We have since expanded our remit considerably to include a range of doctoral and postdoctoral funding programmes and a wide range of skills training and personal development programmes open to clinical and non-clinical academics. The ACO’s values underpin all of our work. We always put early career researchers first and aim to be helpful resource to them. We aim to work primarily in collaboration – with other UCL teams (such as the Translational Research Office (TRO)) and external organisations – because we know that sharing ideas leads to a better scientific ecosystem. It’s also worth noting that we don’t just go for the low-hanging fruit – we always try to do the right thing by committing to helping solve problems, even if they are difficult and messy.

Could you expand on some of the key opportunities available to early career researchers through the ACO?

Early career researchers can find a wealth of support in the ACO. We provide a range of funding opportunities for early career researchers, including funding schemes that fill gaps in the overall funding provision. One of our most popular funding schemes is the UCL Wellcome Clinical PhD Programme, which provides three years of funding for clinicians wishing to undertake research.

Our training programmes aim to build essential skills that will ensure that our researchers are the most sought after by funders as their careers develop. These programmes fill gaps and, where possible, are rolled out nationally to ensure that researchers outside UCL can benefit. We have training programmes in data science and computer programming for clinicians, workshops and events on translational research, training and development initiatives for translational research, a high-level summit promoting medical innovation, networking workshops for early career researchers and programmes of inspirational talks to encourage and enable the UCL community to pursue research.

Personal development – particularly wellbeing – is an area of interest for us. Our ADAPT programme is a portfolio of schemes that aims to build resilience in early career researchers at UCL. By making researchers more resilient, we enable them to take calculated risks in their research and career development, leading to bigger rewards.

What skills are becoming increasingly important and why are these skills critical to translational research?

An important part of the ACO’s role is to spot emerging areas of need and provide high quality training to fulfil those needs. Data science is a key skill area that will be essential for clinical academics in the near future. Our Clinician Coders scheme provides much-needed training in data science for clinicians and academic clinicians. The short courses enable healthcare professionals with no prior experience to start coding straight away and analyse real healthcare data. We will create a cadre of clinicians who understand digital technology, its applications and future potential, removing the gap between clinicians and data science experts.

Building bridges between communities of experts with a range of expertise and priorities is key to furthering translational research. This ethos, combined with efforts to upskill researchers in translational research more generally, will contribute to a culture shift at UCL, making researchers more comfortable in pursuing translational research.

Can you give an overview of any plans for new translational education training programmes to be developed by the ACO?

We are very excited to have launched ACCELERATE – a set of interlinked training and development initiatives aimed at upskilling the biomedical research community in translational research with a focus on technical training, skills development and encouraging innovative thinking. ACCELERATE is part of a wider portfolio of work to build translational research capacity at UCL. The initiative is supported by a Wellcome Trust Translational Partnership Award and the ACO is working closely with UCL’s TRO to deliver the objectives, namely: widening participation, removing barriers and amplifying potential in translational research. The programme aligns with the strategic priorities of the School of Life and Medical Sciences, the NIHR UCL Biomedical Research Centres and the School of the Built Environment, Engineering and Mathematical and Physical Sciences.

The Wellcome Trust Translational Partnership Award is an important example of the ACO and TRO working together but it is not the only example. The teams collaborate regularly on a range of efforts to build capacity in translational research through education and training initiatives, grants and sharing best practice.

ACO support for Translational Research

The Academic Careers Office (ACO) has developed and supports various training initiatives in an effort to accelerate the development of skills needed by researchers to translate an idea from the laboratory to the patient bedside in order to address unmet medical need. This includes our collaboration with Eurekii, an international institute that aims to build and foster a global community of translational medicine professionals, and through Ignite, our high-level medical innovation summit. In collaboration with UCL’s Translational Research Office (TRO), supported by a Wellcome Trust Translational Partnership Award, we have developed the ACCELERATE translational research training programme for early career researchers at UCL, which we hope to expand beyond UCL going forward. ACCELERATE has been designed in collaboration with the Therapeutic Innovation Networks (TINs) as a flexible, modularised programme that adapts to the needs of the research community.

Individuals are able to engage in initiatives based on their interests and needs with workshops on grant writing, pitching skills and networking as well as mentoring for early career translational researchers.

Could you tell us about the ACCELERATE training programme and what the main priorities are?

The main priorities are to build resilience in early career researchers at UCL, making researchers more comfortable in pursuing translational research. This ethos, combined with efforts to upskill researchers in translational research more generally, will contribute to a culture shift at UCL, making researchers more comfortable in pursuing translational research.

Are there any opportunities that the ACO will look to capitalise on in the future?

We are always looking for the next problem to solve or gap to fill. Currently, we are exploring ways to expand our existing programmes and extend our reach beyond UCL and outside the UK’s borders to position the ACO as an important voice in researcher development globally. Ignite, our high-level medical innovation summit, is ripe for rolling innovation summit, is ripe for rolling
out globally and has already been trialled in South Africa. Ignite brings together high-level scientists and professionals in medical innovation to debate, challenge and learn about medical innovation from other perspectives. This programme attracts professionals from a range of sectors who want to network with peers, regulators, economists, healthcare sector experts, politicians, patient advocates and everyone in between.

We are also exploring opportunities to scale up and potentially spin out our programmes to extend their reach internationally.

‘The course has given me confidence to pursue a career in academic medicine. It was great to have a safe space to talk completely openly and honestly about doubts and issues. I learnt many different tools: how to listen differently, negotiation and how to manage people’ - ADAPT scheme participant

What is unique about the ACO?

The ACO is unique because our work is underpinned by our commitment to conducting research into our own programmes. In the past we had a postdoctoral researcher embedded in our team who conducted qualitative and quantitative research into the career progression of clinical academic trainees, and we are currently a part of an Erasmus+-funded programme, which conducts research and support on clinical academic career progression.

We also aim to embed research into our support programmes as much as possible to further practice what we preach. Our ADAPT resilience building schemes are a great example of this. All participants in our schemes are evaluated using question sets that are validated by the psychology research community to measure resilience, self-efficacy and career satisfaction. We take these measures before the intervention, immediately after and six months after. We will publish our findings in order to spread best practice in the researcher development community.

We take our position in a research-intensive university seriously and aim to be active members of the community in all respects, thereby furthering researcher development practices internationally.

This is the third article in a series of three highlighting some of the translational infrastructure available to researchers at UCL, our BRCs and potential industry partners¹,²,³.

References

1. Translating novel science to patient benefit. Impact, Volume 2018, Number 10, December 2018, pp. 6-8(3)
2. The innovation game. Impact, Volume 2019, Number 7, August 2019, pp. 6-8(3)