

Involving international postgraduate students in university initiatives – a qualitative investigation into ‘UCL ChangeMakers’

Anastasia Vikhanova, Vanessa Wedi
University College London

Introduction

‘UCL ChangeMakers’ at University College London (UCL) is a collaborative and innovative programme which seeks to support and encourage students and staff working in partnerships with each other on educational enhancement projects¹ at UCL. Students taking part in the initiative are similarly called ‘UCL ChangeMakers’, as they are making a change to the learning environment of their peers and of themselves. To avoid confusion, we are using the term ‘UCL ChangeMakers initiative’ when referring to a programme itself, ‘UCL ChangeMakers’ when referring to those students who applied to participate, and ‘UCL ChangeMakers team’ when referring to staff members running the initiative and providing support to students and staff members who apply with their projects. In brief, students can either apply with their own idea or join a project proposed by the members of staff in UCL. One example of a project developed in 2017 is a simple video tutorial that was created in collaboration between staff and UCL ChangeMakers to help first-year undergraduate students in the UCL department of Mechanical Engineering learn computer-aided design (CAD) software. In another instance, PhD students as UCL ChangeMakers in the Institute of Education (IOE) created, with support from staff, a peer-support group for first-year PhD students to facilitate their transition to a new step in their education.

Since its inception, the UCL ChangeMakers initiative has expanded exponentially in terms of its participants and the number of projects it runs. In the 2016/2017 academic year, it supported fifty-two projects, of which twenty-nine were student-initiated and twenty-three were staff-initiated. However, there has been a significant decrease in the number of both home and overseas masters and PhD students who have applied to the programme in the past year. If this trend continues, this reduction in participants could become a significant obstacle for the progression of the UCL ChangeMakers initiative as a whole. Its current aim is to expand the programme substantially in the coming years and create equal opportunities for both undergraduates and postgraduates to be part of the journey of UCL ChangeMakers and improve their learning experience at UCL. Postgraduate students are a valuable part of the university community and can bring many innovative ideas into the initiative, helping to bring about improvements in learning outcomes, especially when considering their previous university experience (Lindsay, Breen and Jenkins, 2002). Furthermore, postgraduate involvement with university life has also been found to help their transition from a different institution, particularly for those students with a degree from a different country (Menzies and Baron, 2014). However, postgraduates, especially on taught programmes, are recognised as a ‘hard-to-reach’ group of students at UCL (Marie *et al.*, 2017).

¹ Examples of UCL ChangeMakers projects can be found at:
<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/changemakers/case-studies>.

This paper aims to investigate:

1. ways in which the UCL ChangeMakers initiative could be made more relevant and appealing to postgraduate students;
2. what promotion methods would be the most effective in reaching postgraduate students;
3. what the general perception of UCL ChangeMakers is, among the international postgraduate population;
4. how to increase awareness of the UCL ChangeMakers programme to UCL international postgraduate students.

An attempt to secure answers these questions involved conducting two focus groups comprising current UCL international postgraduates who are UCL ChangeMakers and UCL international students from the general postgraduate student population.

Method

Participants

Thirteen participants (four male and nine female) took part in focus groups. The demographics were not recorded to ensure open discussion, as their personal information might have identified them to the UCL ChangeMakers team (especially for those who were currently completing their projects). The first focus group was conducted with four current postgraduate UCL ChangeMakers (two masters students and two PhD students). The second focus group consisted of three current UCL ChangeMakers and six general population postgraduates (all masters students). All the participants in focus groups were international students. This was not initially planned for, as the invitation was sent out to everyone and international students were not particularly selected. Participants were recruited through an email invitation. Participation was incentivised by a twenty-pound Amazon gift voucher.

Data collection and Procedure

The study received ethical approval from the UCL Research Ethics Committee (project ID Number 4507/001). All participants gave their written consent to participate in the investigation. The study used a semi-structured plan for the focus-group interviews (see Supplement Materials A). Two leads conducted the focus groups, aiming for consistency in the procedure. Meetings were audio-recorded, transcribed, anonymised and entered into NVivo data analysis software (Richards, 1999). The length of the focus groups was ninety minutes on average.

Data analysis

The data was carefully examined and a thematic analysis was carried out (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Initially, as a familiarisation process, the researchers read the transcripts many times, and four broad areas deductively emerged from the interviews and were established as themes corresponding to the aims of the study. The coding scheme and the content of each code (see Supplement Materials B) were subsequently defined – two researchers coded all interviews to ensure agreement and eliminate bias. Any disagreement was resolved by means of the involvement of a third reviewer.

Results

As the investigation was conducted in the form of focus groups, rather than separate interviews, frequencies (numbers in brackets) are expressed in terms of the number of mentions of the specific code. Frequencies were chosen over any other type of quantitative data, as in many instances one suggestion was voiced by one student and then picked up and elaborated on by others. The nature of focus-group interviews will make the analysis ambiguous, as only the first student who mentioned an item would have been recorded. In this case, frequencies reflect the amount of elaboration and suggestions an idea received rather than the specific number of students who mentioned it. Furthermore, the analysis was conducted in line with the guidelines for a focus-group data analysis (Rabiee, 2004) to eliminate potential subjectivity in the data collection and analysis. Two focus-group facilitators kept observational notes and both of them were involved in data transcription and analysis, ensuring codes' frequencies were recorded appropriately. From these scripts, four themes emerged: UCL ChangeMakers Experience, UCL ChangeMakers – Image in the General Population, UCL ChangeMakers Promotion and Limitations and Improvements. Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4 represent the network charts of the relationships between individual codes.

Theme 1. UCL ChangeMakers Experience

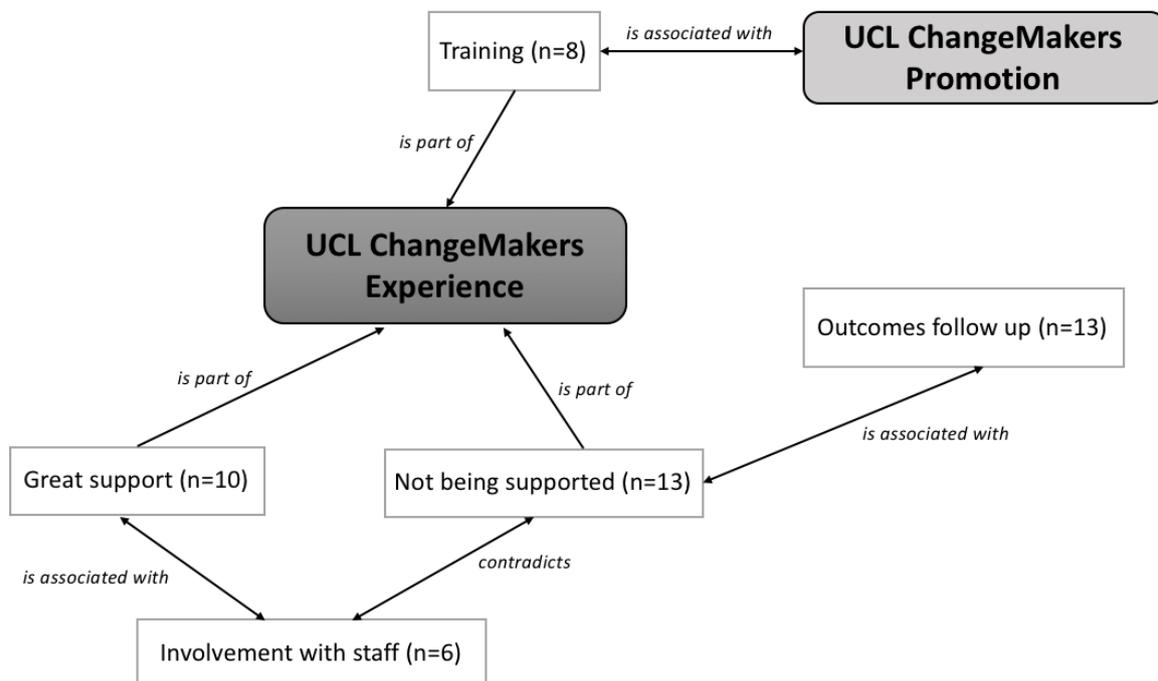


Figure 1. Network chart depicting codes from the 'UCL ChangeMakers Experience' theme

The present research did not focus specifically on the experiences of current postgraduate students in UCL ChangeMakers programmes and no specific questions were asked about it. Instead, some students raised a few concerns that were relevant to the aims of the investigation. There was an approximately equal number of mentions about 'great support' (n=10) and 'not being supported' (n=13), in reference mainly to staff members, but

occasionally also to the UCL ChangeMakers team. Students from different projects had very different experiences. For example, there were comments along these lines:

“I met with X [UCL ChangeMakers manager] once [...] And that was actually more valuable, because she knew about the project, so we could have a one-on-one discussion about it and I could get the specific support that I needed.” (P1)

whereas students from other projects complained like this:

“The way we were receiving support, even from UCL ChangeMakers themselves and from the staff, to me does not indicate that they are serious about the results of the project.” (P4)

The benefits of ‘training’ (n=8) provided as part of UCL ChangeMakers student support were mentioned quite often, that students linked directly with UCL ChangeMakers promotion. They generally agreed that the training provided them with skills they could use in the future, which students thought was important to highlight to potential initiative applicants.

Theme 2. UCL ChangeMakers – Image in the General Population

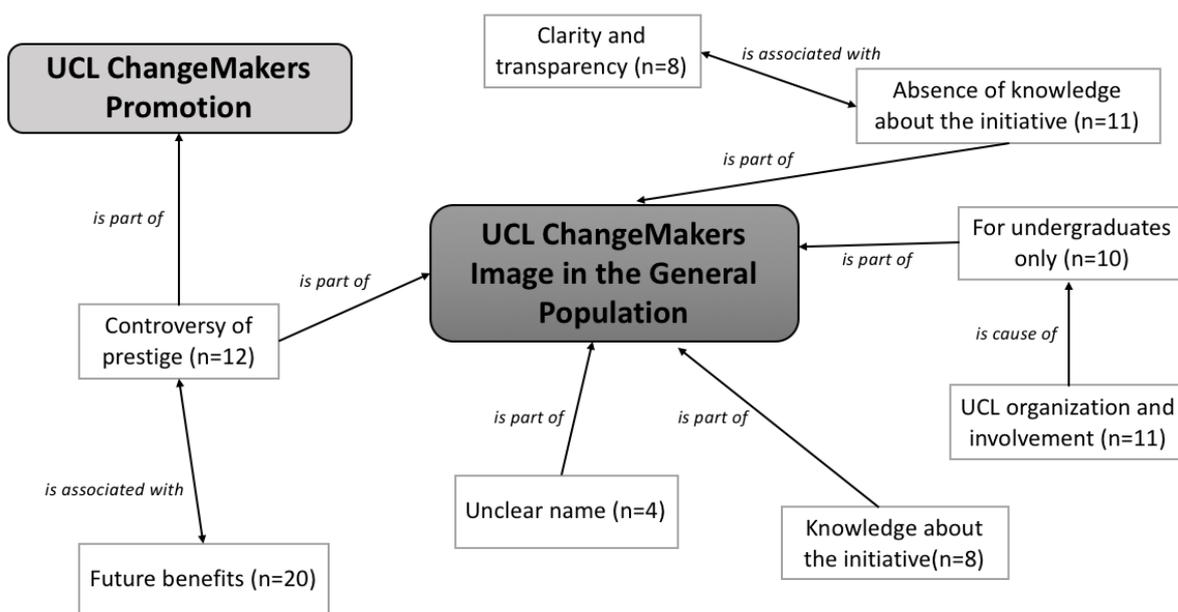


Figure 2. Network chart depicting codes from the ‘UCL ChangeMakers – Image in the General Population’ theme

The current theme comprises opinions – about the image of the UCL ChangeMakers initiative – of postgraduate students not currently involved in the programme. Overall, students did have a basic understanding of what the UCL ChangeMakers programme was and a few mentions were made about the initial ‘knowledge about the initiative’ (n=8) before the focus group; however, more frequently, students confessed to ‘absence of knowledge about the initiative’ (n=11):

“Even when I signed up for the focus group, I wasn’t sure what UCL ChangeMakers was apart from funded project between students and teachers and that was it” (P2)

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A few times, participants suggested that the initiative had an ‘unclear name’ (n=4), as they first thought it was about something different – the name of the initiative sounded misleading to them:

“Yeah, because it sounds a little, like Change Makers... changing what, the environment?” (P2)

Ten times, students also mentioned that they felt the programme was open ‘for undergraduates only’:

“When I look at emails I really pay attention that it’s not for undergrads. So, if it was for undergrads I didn’t go” (P9)

Finally, ‘controversy of prestige’ (n=12) was discussed a lot in relation to how the UCL ChangeMakers initiative is promoted. Students mentioned that it is important to portray the UCL ChangeMakers programme in such a way that applicants understand that it is honourable to be accepted. Others, however, debated that prestige might make students think that the initiative would require too much time or resources:

“But it might also deter some people from even applying if they think: oh well if it’s really competitive the chances of me getting accepted are slim so I might not even try” (P13)

Theme 3. UCL ChangeMakers Promotion

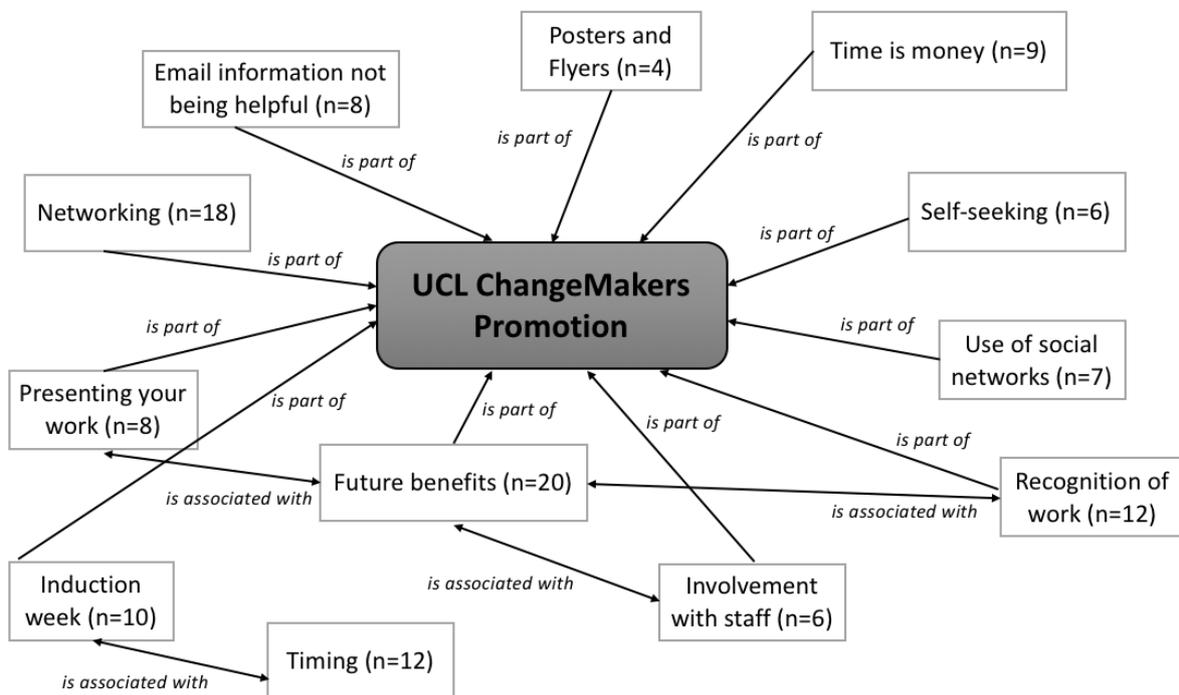


Figure 3. Network chart depicting codes from the ‘UCL ChangeMakers Promotion’ theme

The biggest theme described ways suggested by postgraduate students for how to achieve successful promotion of the UCL ChangeMakers initiative. We might assume that these suggestions are specifically relevant to the postgraduate population, as the communication

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of UCL undergraduate students with the University as a whole may well be different. In addition, postgraduate students have fewer opportunities to apply, as most of them stay in the University for only one year – and that aspect was brought up by students quite often.

Based on students' feedback, one of the most popular suggestions was the introduction of 'networking' (n=18) events to promote the UCL ChangeMakers initiative. It was frequently mentioned that UCL does not provide any platform for postgraduate students to connect with each other. However, aside from the general need for networking among students, it was also suggested that having this opportunity could attract more people to form inter-disciplinary teams:

"If you could give us networking opportunities or informal opportunities to visit other spaces on campus and talk about other people's work. Like not just UCL ChangeMakers, but other people's projects would be very interesting to me" (P6)

There was discussion about 'time is money' (n=9), as funding was something that attracted students to participate. Nevertheless, there were some disagreements about interest in the economic side of participation – many argued that 'recognition of work' (n=12), having an opportunity for 'presenting your work' (n=8) and other 'future benefits' (n=20), such as developing new skills or being able to put this experience on a CV, were much more important. For example:

"I applied for this program, because I am applying for a Ph.D. and in this program there are some research methods that I would find really valuable in my behavior study" (P10)

In relation to the 'future benefits' code, there was mention of 'involvement with staff' (n=6): students would much appreciate this, as it could open doors for them to partner further with staff. Interestingly, six times, participants mentioned that the UCL ChangeMakers initiative does not need further promotion, as the UCL student community is regarded as comprising 'self-seeking' (n=6) educationalists who, when interested, would find the information themselves:

"UCL relies on the individual determination to self-start and self-seeking rather than there are people out there proposing these as possibilities for people to do something" (P8)

In terms of more practical aspects of promotion, students complained about the 'email information not being helpful' (n=8). Instead, it was suggested that 'posters and flyers' (n=4) are a better way of attracting students' interest. Others also suggested that the current generation of students prefers communicating via 'use of social networks' (n=7):

"Can we establish like a forum, something like WChat, or Facebook, or WhatsApp. And people can join that and discuss their ideas, and maybe if we do have a forum like every-every group can post their updates on it. So that we can learn from different projects and use other people's experiences." (P3)

Furthermore, it was often highlighted that targeting the postgraduate population would be more successful if it started during the 'induction week' (n=10). This idea was directly linked with the timing of UCL ChangeMakers projects that are discussed in the next theme.

Theme 4. Limitations and Improvements

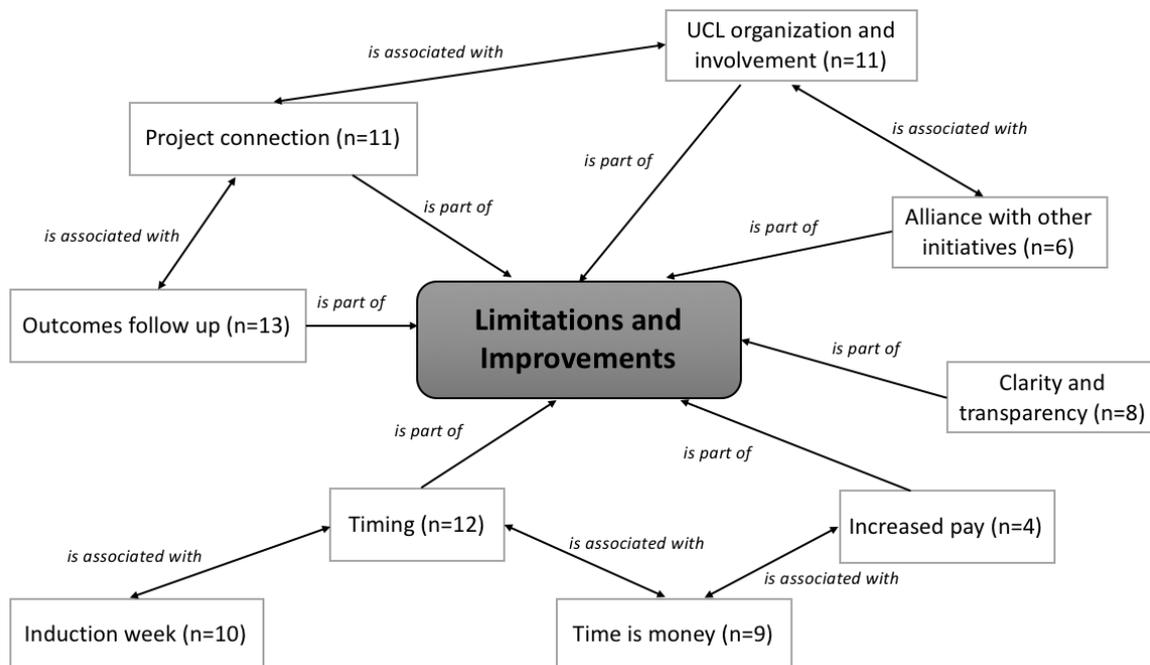


Figure 4. Network chart depicting codes from 'Limitations and Improvements' theme

This theme represented additional suggestions that did not fit completely into the category of the UCL ChangeMakers initiative promotion. Participants, however, emphasised that it is important to work on these things to attract more students (both undergraduate and postgraduate) to the initiative. For example, current UCL ChangeMakers mentioned the need for 'increased pay' (n=4), both for lead and supporting students, to make it equal. Another essential that was mentioned was the 'project connection' (n=11), something highly intertwined with 'networking' from the previous theme:

"[...] there was no person there saying like 'oh actually your idea for a project, someone else from chemistry was talking about a similar thing'. How am I supposed to know there's a student from the chemistry department that's also interested in [this project]?" (P4)

Similarly, 'outcomes follow-up' (n=13) was frequently mentioned, as the necessity for student satisfaction is directly linked with 'recognition of work' and students want to know what happened with previous projects:

"If I could come back and get an update on what the outcome of the project and how that outcome was imbedded in UCL, I would pay attention." (P3)

Finally, in terms of networking and connection, postgraduates mentioned the importance of 'alliance with other initiatives' (n=6), especially Student Academic Representatives in the UCL Student Union. It was also argued that a collaboration of two initiatives would produce more positive outcomes and increase promotion and training attendance.

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As mentioned earlier, the 'timing' (n=12) of the UCL ChangeMakers programme was found to be problematic, as postgraduate students felt that the deadlines for them to apply with their own projects are difficult to achieve. Suggestions were made:

"That's another problem that you set the deadline in November, but at that time students don't have an idea. We're here in a new country. So, if you could set the deadline in December or something..." (P4)

Something else that discouraged postgraduate students to apply was the lack of 'clarity and transparency' (n=8) about the resources the UCL ChangeMakers team provides for projects. Lastly, low 'UCL organisation and involvement' (n=11) was mentioned, as the general desire of postgraduate students is to feel a part of UCL. They thought the UCL ChangeMakers initiative would be a good way of achieving that:

"There's not really a campus culture here and I think like you said UCL ChangeMakers could really help." (P5)

Discussion

The Australian Council of Educational Research (ACER) defines student engagement as: *"students' involvement with activities and conditions likely to generate high quality learning"* (Coates, 2008). Postgraduate student input – with a particular focus on research-based education – is vital to the enhancement of teaching and learning practices at UCL. The aims of this study were to investigate factors that might explain: why there has been a significant decline in the number of postgraduate students participating in UCL ChangeMakers projects; how to make the initiative more appealing; how to reach out to a wider student population. We synthesised our findings into four major themes corresponding to the aims of the investigation: 1) the UCL ChangeMakers Experience; 2) UCL ChangeMakers Image in the General Population; 3) UCL ChangeMakers Promotion; 4) Limitations and Improvements.

The first theme, 'UCL ChangeMakers Experience', contained concerns and suggestions raised by current postgraduate UCL ChangeMakers. Many participants said that there was a lack of support and of interest from staff members. In an extensive literature review, Kuh and colleagues placed teaching and teachers at the heart of student engagement and participation (2006). Staff members have incredibly busy work schedules and often do not have the time, resources or knowledge about the UCL ChangeMakers initiative to support adequately, and participate fully in the running of, such projects. This is particularly demotivating for prospective postgraduate students who would like to start a project, as they receive no guidance or direction as to how to proceed – and this is mentally taxing and time-consuming. As a result, postgrads do not manage to apply and/or complete the project within a year in the University. Having partnership with staff is important for students, especially those at the postgraduate level. Based on our findings, many students considered this student/staff partnership within the UCL ChangeMakers programme as a preparation for their future studies or careers in academia. Students' personal initiative, as revealed by the results of focus groups, was not taken very seriously – thus demonstrating imbalance in the partnership component.

However, students who were asked to join a project by a staff member reported having a very different experience. They found staff members to be highly motivated and enthusiastic

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about the project and UCL ChangeMakers as a whole. Bryson and Hand (2007) concluded that students are more likely to engage if they are supported by teachers who establish inviting learning environments, demand high standards, challenge the students and make themselves freely available to discuss academic progress. The success or failure of the student/staff partnership is truly dependent on whether an open and collaborative environment has been established, within the department itself, to allow for the sharing of ideas and mutual constructive criticism. Students cannot feel truly involved until staff members are similarly involved.

'UCL ChangeMakers Image in the General Population' informed the current investigation about some issues concerning knowledge about the initiative. There was a consensus amongst the participants that awareness of the UCL ChangeMakers programme is poor. Most participants reported rarely reading the newsletters, even though previous research has shown that newsletters are effective in influencing young adults' knowledge and attitudes (Sanderson, 2000). A few students were aware of the UCL ChangeMakers programme, but at a very basic level. Those who were aware of the initiative thought it was another opportunity for undergraduate students and thus did not consider applying. Undergraduate/postgraduate combined involvement has been shown to create some tension and limit research experience (Dolan and Johnson, 2010), further highlighting the need for more available opportunities that are specifically for postgraduate students in universities.

Regarding the ways in which UCL ChangeMakers promotes itself to postgraduate students, participants stated that they would much rather receive information from clear, concise posters or banners around campus. Furthermore, 'social media', identified as one of the most effective means of promoting the initiative, has recently become one of the most popular ways of reaching out to a wider public (Saravanakumar and SuganthaLakshmi, 2012). Participants also said that the best time to promote the UCL ChangeMakers programme to postgraduate students would be at the very beginning of the academic year, as this is when they have the most available free time to participate in such initiatives. From a more applied perspective, students said that all the possible benefits of participation should be made clear. The team should focus on promoting: CV benefits; possibilities for publication and presenting the results of students' work; students' involvement with staff members that could become beneficial during the course of their studies. With emphasis upon the long-term benefits of joining UCL ChangeMakers, as opposed to short-term outcomes, students become more aware of themselves and their potential to effect change in a world that is open, fluid and contested (Barnette and Coate, 2005). However, this does not necessarily imply that they would not be interested in improving learning experience for the benefit of future students.

Focus group participants continuously stressed the importance of having the UCL ChangeMakers team host social networking events, specifically catering to the needs of postgraduate students. Social and cultural capital is won with a sense of belonging, with active relationships with others, and with knowing how things work in an institution (Case, 2007; Gavala and Flett, 2005; Krause, 2005). According to participants, many postgraduate students experience a sense of social exclusion – they do not feel like part of the university, but instead are mere bystanders. All the participants expressed a need for more social-networking events, where students from different departments can come together and share knowledge and ideas, thus encouraging greater social cohesion and connectivity. Students,

particularly international postgraduates, want the full UCL experience, which includes social activities, societies and initiatives such as UCL ChangeMakers. This has implications not only for UCL ChangeMakers per se, but for any programme or any university wishing to improve postgraduate satisfaction and experience during a shorter-term masters course.

Limitations and challenges

The findings from the small sample group of UCL international students cannot, of course, be generalised to the entire postgraduate student population at UCL. It should be noted that the students of the general UCL postgraduate population were on the Chevening scholarship, which could potentially result in selection bias, as they are essentially exceptionally motivated individuals. Since the focus group discussions were conducted with UCL international masters students, the study did not examine the experiences of UK or EU students. However, it is interesting to note that the majority of students participating in the UCL ChangeMakers initiative are indeed from overseas. This could perhaps be investigated further, as this fact leads to the assumption that international students may bring more interesting ideas into university learning enhancement.

Recommendations and updated recent findings

Recommendations were made in the original report, for consideration by the UCL ChangeMakers team: advertisement of the programme should mainly focus on reaching out to a postgraduate population through social media, so as to ensure that the target audience – in this particular case masters students – feel that the UCL ChangeMakers team is relevant and approachable and that contacting its members for more information would be effortless; UCL ChangeMakers participants should be encouraged to post regular updates on their progress throughout their UCL ChangeMakers journey, as to do so would depict clearly to the audience what it takes to run a project, what the journey entails at each point from start to finish and why the project matters (this would also assist with project awareness as well as increase institution recognition, as more people would see it and be a part of the entire experience). The key recommendation is to include networking events as part of the induction. By giving students opportunities to network and visit other spaces on campus, it will be possible to create an environment in which students feel cared for and heard and which, in turn, compels students to want to play a more active role in improving their department and the UCL institution as a whole.

The current research was completed in July 2017 and, owing to the timeframe of the investigation, the authors could not run a social event as recommended to the UCL ChangeMakers team. More recently, a team of students (including one of the authors of the current paper) finished an unpublished report that investigated the effects of a networking event on promotion of UCL ChangeMakers and on student satisfaction (Vikhanova, Dumitru, Amador and Tantawi, 2018). Around thirty postgraduate students who attended the social event reported that it was very helpful to both find out more about the UCL ChangeMakers initiative and make new friends. Most of the students said they would like to attend similar events and would recommend it to their friends. Moreover, two of the attendees applied to the initiative with their own projects and were accepted. The evaluation of the event shows that it should be continued in the future as a successful way of engaging students – both in the general sense and with the initiative in particular.

Summary

To summarise, the current study aimed to investigate ways of involving more UCL international postgraduate students in the UCL ChangeMakers initiative, as they are expected – as people with prior experience in other universities – to have a range of new ideas. Through focus groups, many suggestions were raised by students, including the need for: more staff support; greater emphasis on long-term personal benefits; greater use of social networks as a promotion tool. UCL international postgraduates also thought that more networking opportunities would lead not only to improvement in UCL ChangeMakers project outcomes and greater influence on the UCL learning environment, but also to a higher overall UCL international student satisfaction. UCL ChangeMakers or similar student initiatives can be used to promote the sense of partnership between students and members of staff. For that to be achieved, staff should be more involved with student initiatives to allow for students to feel truly involved in shaping their own education process. Furthermore, the continuation of the current project revealed that networking events can indeed fulfil the goals of this investigation. Future examination of UCL ChangeMakers can focus on other areas of improvement as discussed by this paper.

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Supplementary materials A

Interview structure

Current UCL ChangeMakers

1. Tell us a little bit about your projects;
2. Can you tell us one thing you particularly enjoyed about CM and one thing you disliked about your experience?
3. How did you find out about the UCL ChangeMakers programme?
4. How do you think UCL CM could be promoted more to PGT? How could it be improved?
5. In what ways is UCL CM relevant to a one-year masters student? How could it be made more relevant?
6. How did you apply? Please elaborate and state if you joined a staff-initiated project or started and applied yourself?
7. How do you feel about the application deadlines from the perspective of PGT students?
8. What personal outcomes did you experience from participating in UCL CM?
9. How would you describe your communication with staff members involved in the project?
10. Tell me about the support you received from university/staff members in your project.
11. In your opinion, what are good and relevant incentives for PGT students to join ULC CM?
12. What would your suggestions be to improve the image of CM?
13. What do you think would be the best way to promote CM among the master student population?
14. Any other comments you would like to cover?

General UCL PGT population

1. How did you come to hear about UCL CM?
2. What is your general perception of UCL CM? What would you say, in your own words, UCL CM is about?
3. In what ways is UCL CM relevant to a one-year masters student? How could it be made more relevant?
4. What is your opinion of the use of emails, the Moodle page and flyers to market UCL CM to PGT students?
5. How do you think UCL CM could be promoted more to PGT students? How could it be improved?
6. There are two deadlines to apply for UCL CM, one in June and one in November. What are your opinions about the deadlines from the perspective of PGT students?
7. In your opinion, what are good and relevant incentives for PGT students to join ULC CM?
8. What would your suggestions be to improve the image of CM?

9. Any other comments you would like to cover?

Supplementary materials B

Table 1. Codes and their descriptions used for the analysis of focus groups

Codes	Description
UCL ChangeMakers Experience theme	
Not being supported	Lack of support that includes both staff and the UCL ChangeMakers team
Great support	Mention of the support that includes both staff and the UCL ChangeMakers team
Training	Provided training/Moodle materials found to be valuable and useful or would be appreciated
UCL ChangeMakers Image in the General Population theme	
Knowledge about the initiative	Student knew about UCL ChangeMakers and had an understanding of what it is about
Absence of knowledge about the initiative	Student did not know about UCL ChangeMakers and had no or little understanding of it
For undergraduates only	The feeling that UCL ChangeMakers was not relevant to PGT students
Controversy of prestige	The feeling that the initiative takes too much time and is too difficult to get into, leading to discouragement
Unclear name	Ambiguity of the name of the initiative
UCL ChangeMakers Promotion theme	
Time is money	Money offered by the initiative can attract people
Networking	The opportunity to socialise with other students can attract people
Induction week	Introducing UCL ChangeMakers during the orientation week can be helpful
Future benefits	The experience can be used for the CV, in current or further studies or career
Involvement with staff	The emphasis on close work with staff members can attract people

Case Studies

Posters and Flyers	Posters and flyers attract more attention
Recognition of work	Acknowledging previous successes will attract more people
Use of social networks	Advertising and engaging with potential student through social networks
Presenting your work	The opportunity to publish or present your work at poster sessions/conferences
Self-seeking	No need to promote UCL ChangeMakers, as those who are interested will find it themselves
Email information's not being helpful	Irrelevance of emails and student unwillingness to read them
Limitations and Improvements theme	
Increased pay	Fair payment for all team members / raise to make the work-pay ratio fairer
Project connection	The need of communication between project for progress and other updates
Low UCL organisation and involvement	The idea of UCL being decentralised and the need for more developed postgraduate community
Alliance with other initiatives	The need for better communication between UCL ChangeMakers and other initiatives such as Student Academic representatives (StARs)
Timing	The need for a change in the UCL ChangeMakers deadline for PGT students
Clarity and transparency	The need for the UCL ChangeMakers team to inform students about all the available resources and opportunities
Outcomes follow-up	The concern that the results of UCL ChangeMakers projects are not taken any further and are forgotten by the end of the year