

# University College London: Cultural Consultation Service

The University College London Cultural Consultation Service offers advice and support for staff or students who are experiencing challenges that may have a cultural dimension. **Dr Caroline Selai** and **Dr Sushrut Jadhav**, co-directors of the service, give a personal insight into why the service was established and its impact.

The University College London Cultural Consultation Service (UCL CCS) for staff and students was launched on 1 November 2011 with support from the Office of the Vice-Provost (International), Professor Michael Worton. The service offers confidential consultations on individual issues, and also assists those who wish to enhance their existing cultural skills in teaching, learning and in the provision of healthcare. Help can range from basic consultation to facilitating more complex interventions.

## Why the CCS was established

The CCS was established following the two co-directors' numerous experiences as academic teachers, supervisors, mentors and team members, which have mirrored those documented in the large and growing literature on international students and the challenges they face (for example, Montgomery, 2010<sup>1</sup>). Figure 1 shows the percentage increase in UCL students classified as "overseas nationals" (those students who registered their domicile as outside the UK) from 2006/07 to 2012/13.

UCL, London's "global university", has a multicultural and diverse staff (see table 1). Encounters between people from different backgrounds – including age, gender, religion, language and country of origin – can give rise to interpersonal issues. The CCS adds to the type of support available for UCL staff members by facilitating informal resolution of issues arising, and enhances existing capacity.

UCL also has a growing number of international students. These students face a number of challenges when adapting to different cultures, academic practice, methods of study and pedagogic style. The academic aspects relate to both general methods of study in the UK and to UCL's strategy on global citizenship and internationalisation of the curriculum. Figure 2 shows the comparison of the growth in UCL home and overseas student numbers since 2003/04.

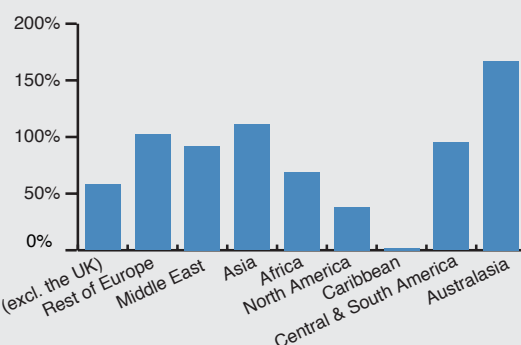
## A unique service

Although there are other clinical cultural consultation services embedded within healthcare (for example, McGill University in Canada<sup>2</sup>), at the time of the launch, this was the first such service operating within an institution of higher education. At the time of writing this article, it remains, to our knowledge, unique in

providing a service that offers consultations within a culturally safe space, builds institutional capacity and generates intercultural dialogues.

The CCS is relatively autonomous from existing governance mechanisms for staff and students. It provides specialised cultural expertise that may bear upon interpersonal or academic issues relating to learning and teaching, including pedagogic content. In doing so, it attempts to understand, resolve and enhance teaching and learning through a cultural rather than through an exclusive individual psychological lens. It is staffed

FIGURE 1: PERCENTAGE INCREASE IN STUDENTS DOMICILED OUTSIDE THE UK 2006/07 TO 2012/13



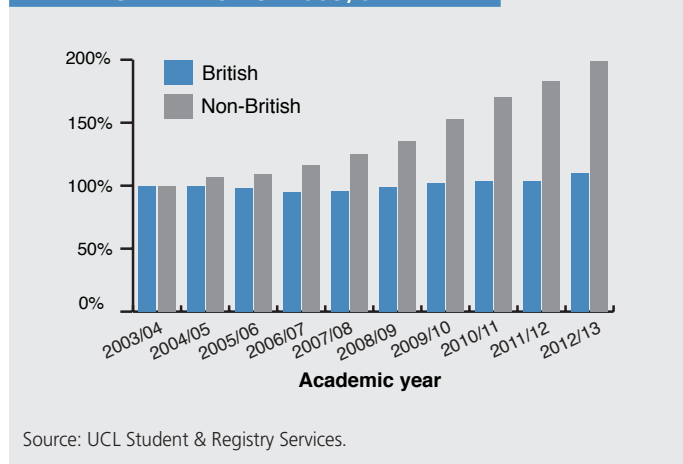
Source: UCL Registry and Academic Services web pages.

TABLE 1: PERCENTAGE OF UCL STAFF CLASSIFIED AS "NON-UK NATIONALS" (AS AT 30/09/12)

Academics	33%
Teachers & TAs	41%
Researchers	47%
NHS-related	24%
Admin/management support	18%
Manual and craft	34%
Technicians	22%

Source: HR information office, UCL, <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/hr/statistics/>.

**FIGURE 2: CHANGE IN STUDENT NUMBERS BY NATIONALITY SINCE 2003/04**



by officers who have specific skills in intercultural and interpersonal issues and conflict resolution. It primarily relies upon a narrative approach and seeks to reframe problems that often resonate with wider societal tensions, conflicts and inequalities.

### How it works

At present, the service is run by Dr Selai and Dr Jadhav [the authors] – full-time academic staff who run the service on a voluntary basis. Any student, or member of academic, administrative and support staff, can refer themselves to the service, or be referred by a tutor. Referrals can include requests for personal support, support for academic departments and consultations to external institutions, including academic and healthcare.

Referrals are usually offered a one-hour initial meeting, during which the person seeking advice will have the opportunity to discuss their situation in detail, in an informal and friendly atmosphere. From experience, any issue presented usually has a number of aspects. The possible interventions are therefore many and varied.

### Expert consultants

It is difficult for any cultural expert to have detailed knowledge of all cultures. Therefore, rather than claiming “cultural competency”, the service embraces a wider anthropologically derived notion of “cultural sensitivity”, which draws upon more generic notions of cultural awareness, cultural safety and intercultural communication. The CCS has a team of consultants from across UCL teaching and student community who have agreed to be available to provide culture-specific advice.

### Structure and governance

The CCS governance mechanism is through the Dean of Students Office, Students Psychological Services, and the office of the Vice-Provost (International). It also has links with the UCL Equalities team (who provide support for the website), the Race Equality Board, and with the human resources

department for mediation services and informal resolution of interpersonal conflicts.

### Activities in the first 18 months

The CCS received a total of 39 new consultations in the first year (see table 2). Activities in the first 18 months have included:

- advertising and embedding of the service;
- seminars – for example, a workshop entitled “Cultures of teaching and global wellbeing”<sup>3</sup>;
- training workshops – for example, workshops for all UCL new international students during Induction week;
- formal referrals to the service;
- consultations by individual colleagues and whole departments – for example, departmental tutors have sought advice on improving the experience for international students joining the department, and requested several individual consultations;
- research – for example, the CCS is currently leading on a major cross-faculty study, funded by the office of UCL Vice-Provost (Education). The research team is conducting focus groups and semi-structured interviews, to elicit views from UCL staff and students on their cultural experience of learning and teaching at UCL, in order to inform the future direction of the CCS;
- providing consultation to a London university experiencing similar challenges;
- healthcare – for example, advice on mentally unwell patients, requested by clinical colleagues at the Camden & Islington Foundation Trust;
- CCS international outreach consultations – for example, providing clinical opinions for staff members at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, India; and
- academic discussion forums – for example in “Grand Rounds”, institutional discussion events (see box 1).

### What has been the impact of the CCS?

The impact of the CCS has been considerable in a relatively short time. This has been demonstrated by individual, confidential feedback from users of the service, formal feedback after workshops, attendance at events and improvements in departmental culture and ethos when the CCS has provided interventions upon request. Also, some of the clinical cultural techniques used during consultations have also informed the cultural formulation interview aspect of DSM5 (the fifth edition

**TABLE 2: NEW CONSULTATIONS/REFERRALS IN THE FIRST YEAR**

Referrals (2011/12) with a cultural dimension although the initial presentation and help-seeking was for advice on interpersonal issues	25
Direct referrals to CCS website	7
Direct personal consultations: national and international	5
Organisational consultation (UCL)	1
Organisational consultation: external: (UoAL)	1
Total	39
Source: UCL CCS.	

**BOX 1: GRAND ROUND ON NEGOTIATING GENDER AND CASTE IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

The UCL Cultural Consultation Service hosted its first “Grand Round” on 27 June 2013, on the topic of “Negotiating gender and caste in higher education”, with guest speakers Professor Shubhada Maitra, Centre for Health & Mental Health, and Professor Avatthi Ramaiah, Centre for Study of Social Exclusion & Inclusive Policy, both from Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, India, and a discussion panel of UCL staff and PhD students. The event was attended by more than 100 delegates from both within and outside UCL.

The discussion was timely as the Government has now given a commitment to introduce caste discrimination legislation, as part of the definition of the protected characteristic of race (EOR 238).

The Grand Round discussion covered a wide and provocative set of issues, such as: Does our gender or caste – as teachers or students – matter? How are our experiences of teaching and learning shaped, enhanced and challenged by the interplay of our own characteristics such as gender or caste and by those of our teachers? And how are these influenced by the wider culture of an academic department or discipline, the culture of the university as a forum for learning and teaching, and the broader aspects of the host culture?

Professors Maitra and Ramaiah shared their personal experiences and a lively discussion ensued. The themes covered: sexuality and sexual orientation, whether teachers can comment on students’ personal relationships, inter-marriage, why many Dalits (formerly termed “untouchables”) convert to Buddhism and Christianity, and individual and collective psychological experiences of Dalits. The Grand Round concluded with a discussion of the subtle distinction between teaching (with power residing with the teacher) and facilitating learning (empowering the students), and between caste and caste-ism.

public-engagement activities, workshops, roadshows and featured articles.

The aim is to create a space of cultural safety that allows people to talk freely about discrimination, be it prompted by race, ethnicity, gender, religion or other characteristics. The intention is to allow voices to be heard through sharing of personal experiences. Dissemination of activities to the wider academic community also helps establish a closer link between higher education and society.

**Next steps**

Long-term goals include an emphasis on sensitising and empowering teachers and other staff. It is hoped to provide assistance to UCL researchers working overseas and on UCL campuses abroad, both in terms of cultural support and assisting them to incorporate critical cultural dimensions within their research paradigms.

Following completion of the main research project, the findings will be disseminated and guidelines developed to inform our educational policies that may benefit UCL students and staff.

The CCS will develop hubs in India in a manner that is configured to address local issues. It is hoped that initiatives will see hubs developed elsewhere.

**Conclusion**

The CCS is uniquely placed as separate from, but linked to, other sources of teaching, training, advice and support for staff and students at UCL. It works alongside colleagues to embrace diversity and promote equality of opportunity. Through interactive training workshops and other outreach work, the service is having an impact at local, national and international levels.

1. Montgomery, C (2010). *Understanding the International Student Experience*. Palgrave Macmillan. ISBN 9781403986191.
2. <http://www.mcgill.ca/culturalconsultation>.
3. [http://www2.wlv.ac.uk/celt/ESRC\\_Seminar/jadhav\\_esrc\\_seminar.pdf](http://www2.wlv.ac.uk/celt/ESRC_Seminar/jadhav_esrc_seminar.pdf).
4. American Psychiatric Association (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (Fifth ed.). Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Publishing. pp.5–25. ISBN 978-0-89042-555-8.

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Dr Selai and Dr Jadhav are co-directors of the University College London Cultural Consultation Service: <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/ccs>.

**FURTHER INFORMATION**

- More information on the CCS is available at: <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/ccs>.
- Information on specialist services available at: [http://www.ucl.ac.uk/ccs/specialist\\_services](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/ccs/specialist_services).
- Examples of issues arising for both staff and students, in the form of anonymised vignettes/case studies can be found at: <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/ccs>.

of the *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders*<sup>4</sup>). Recognising the impact and potential for further developments, it is proposed that the CCS should move from the International Office to UCL’s Education Office, and there have also been discussions on links with UCL’s Global Citizenship courses.

**Challenges**

One of the main challenges relates to referrals. These are often indirect rather than direct. People often do not spontaneously acknowledge that their difficulties may have a cultural dimension, and these cultural issues often emerge during the initial interview. There is a policy of encouraging informal referrals (for example, a chat over lunchtime with a departmental tutor) to prevent stigmatisation of students and bureaucratisation of the service.

Another challenge is a lack of resources. The service is currently provided on a voluntary basis by academic staff, in addition to their existing job duties.

The service is at an early stage and its existence is not widely known.

Also, problems of a cultural nature embody wider social tensions around social class, gender and race, and other aspects of inequality, and the CCS mirrors similar issues within the institution. Often there are no straightforward solutions. The issue is addressed through continuing intercultural dialogues,