Local authority UCL & LSHTM MSc dissertation collaboration – 2024/2025

Guidance document

INTRODUCTION

Following a successful pilot scheme, we are delighted to extend a scheme to coordinate Local authorities with UCL and LSHTM MScs, to collaborate on student dissertation projects.

Several local authorities have collaborated ad hoc on student dissertations before. The intention to provide a more coordinated and systematic approach to the offer and the supervision of projects from both sides and to provide some support to both LA collaborators and UCL students throughout the process.

You'll find in Section 4 the types of projects that students can do to fulfil their dissertation requirements. We've also given some examples of the kinds of projects that have been offered before in collaboration with local authority partners.

If you are interested to collaborate, please read the guidance below, then complete this form (https://forms.office.com/e/un6uEFN16X) or get in touch with us to explore further. We'd be happy to discuss project ideas or what's involved in more detail – contact us here: dahr.laphrn@ucl.ac.uk or book time with Aradhna.

BACKGROUND AND GUIDANCE

What do students have to produce in a dissertation?
Recommended structure: journal article (i.e. abstract, background, methods, results, discussion + references). For some MSc programmes, a lay summary of 500 words is required and is marked separately. Word limit: UCL- 7,500-8,000 words. Precise word count, recommended structure vary between different Masters programmes and dissertation types. LSHTM: up to 10,000 words. The style of the project is determined by the type of project they undertake

What form do the dissertations take?
Dissertations at UCL or LSHTM can take the form of research projects, typically a **literature review secondary analysis of quantitative or qualitative data,** or economic evaluations . They can also do more applied projects, such as a **health policy report** or an **evaluation of a public health initiative**.

What skills will students bring and what support will they need?

Students have had modules in introductory statistics, epidemiology, qual and quant research methods (including critical appraisal). This dissertation may be their first application of such skills outside of their course so it is likely they will need to understand the context of your topic. Students do vary widely in their prior experience however.

Roles and responsibilities In general we expect that partners will be external advisors or technical experts (depending on circumstances). Students are expected to work independently.

We have provided some broad guidance of how the respective roles of supervisors and LA collaborators might be divided.

Responsibilities	LA collaborators	University
Idea	propose the project	ensure project is an appropriate level of complexity and meets the requirements of a dissertation for their programme (in discussion with MSc programme/dissertation leads)
Data & Delivery	broker/ensure access to data and/or stakeholders needed for the project	provide guidance on methods
	Summarize the policy context for the student, discuss the policy implications of their findings	read/comment dissertation drafts

There may be some variations to this, e.g. where a LA collaborator has methods expertise. We have suggested the LA collaborator flag where they have areas of expertise where they would be happy to provide guidance to the student, and that the university supervisor and collaborator discuss their respective skills and experience at the outset of the collaboration. (See time commitments)

What kind of data do LAs need to provide or broker access to?
It depends on the project. The main constraint is that there is limited time for setting up **data sharing agreements** between organisations, so **we recommend these are drafted and shared as early as possible** (i.e. before a student has been assigned to the project). Some templates available on request.

Some possibilities:
- specify a literature review (systematic search and analysis/synthesis) of publicly available data, e.g. council policies, grey literature, or peer-reviewed literature on a topic of interest

- signpost to publicly available datasets e.g. census, English Housing Survey, particularly where you're seeking to contextualise your borough's characteristics.
- broker contact with experts in your council for a consultation e.g. to inform a needs assessment or evaluation.

Where it is feasible to set up data sharing agreements in time, you could also consider sharing
completely anonymised individual level data (i.e. where identifiers there is no possibility of re-identification), provided such sharing is in line with your data sharing agreements and the original intention of processing of such data.

<u>**Approximate**</u> **required time commitment for LA collaborator:**
We recommend LA collaborators protect **a maximum of** ~4 hours (online or in person) for the MSc, mostly spread over a 3-4 month period. We suggest focused, **short (c30min) meetings** to update on progress. We recommend this as a maximum for two reasons:

1. to be fair and consistent across all MSc projects. E.g. LSHTM specifies 6-10 hours for a supervisor. So if getting another 3-4 hours from an external advisor this would significantly increase time and potentially be unfair for those not getting this additional support
2. to keep the commitment manageable for partners

This might break down to input at pivotal points:

- selection process if required & initial meeting with UCL supervisor to discuss respective areas of expertise + preferred ways of working	- ~Nov/Dec[#]
- introductory meeting with student + UCL supervisor, to explain policy context & agree ways of working	- ~Jan/March[#]
- review student plan, in line with MSc formative feedback	- ~April-June[#]
- discuss student findings to support partner engagement, enable them to give formative feedback before submission, if appropriate	- ~late July/first half of August[#]
- to convene an opportunity for the student to present findings to staff after submission of the dissertation (NB see also section 3).	~ late August/mid September[#]

[#]Note: The timescales will vary depending on individual dissertation deadline dates.
Advice for 2024/25: If you find the time commitment is going over what you expect, contact the university supervisor, your own organisational research lead or dahr.laphrn@ucl.ac.uk .

APPROXIMATE TIMINGS

End of October 2024	Submission of project outlines [i]
Dec 2024 - Feb 2025 (depending on programme)	Students review list to indicate their preferences and discuss ideas with potential supervisors. NB a selection process might take place at this point (see Appendix 1)
Jan -March 2024	**UCL:** Students assigned a project following a selection process by academics in collaboration with LA, criteria TBC, where possible that aligned with their preferences. Students develop research questions/outline with academic supervisor. **LSHTM:** students receive a list of projects – they contact supervisors directly to arrange their project.
Early April *LSHTM only	Students submit final protocol to LSHTM ethics for review
June 2024*UCL only	Students present early plans for their project to course leads for formative feedback
Mid-June-end August 2024	Students work on their dissertation fulltime.
~ 1st week of September	Students submit dissertation

[i] if you would like to offer a project but do not have an idea or have an idea but are not sure how if it's suitable or you might frame it for a dissertation please do contact Aradhna who is happy to support you in working up an idea into a dissertation project proposal

ADDITIONAL DISSEMINATION OPPORTUNITIES

- **During the dissertation:** presenting to team meeting or similar on emerging findings for discussion to aid interpretation (where relevant)
- **After the dissertation submission:** LAPHRN presentation to public health researchers and LA staff
- **After the dissertation submission:** blog on project and what they learnt

EXAMPLE PROJECTS

Projects undertaken in the pilot scheme 2023/24

1. How is food insecurity related to school absenteeism? Systematic literature review (*Initially school absenteeism a council priority, but less so as the year went on. Review found a dearth of lit from the UK despite clear evidence it was a policy concern*)

2. What is the evidence of effectiveness of employment support policies/interventions for people with long term conditions or disabilities? Systematic literature view (*Student added specific RQs to address council evidence needs around what policies/interventions were tried/suitable for local implementation; wider interest identified from NHS /regional policy partners during the review*)

3. What are local authorities in London doing to improve energy efficiency in London's housing? Review of grey literature (*Topic remained a priority for council throughout the review: they suggested/proposed questions or focuses to address their evidence gaps. Raw data extraction tables requested by council, not just review findings*)

4. What is the impact of virtual ward ('hospital at home') models of care across different sociodemographic groups? ? Systematic literature view

5. How do extreme weather conditions, other than extreme heat and cold, affect rough sleepers' health and how can they be protected? Systematic literature view (+ report for policy org) T*rickier than expected because evidence gaps actually turned out to me smaller/more niche than initially expected (ie lots already known about effects of heat and cold).*

Earlier projects

6. Evaluation of an integrated care initiative to inform COVID vaccinations: secondary analysis of anonymised interview data (*What worked well/made it feasible*: original evaluation conducted in collaboration with UCL so data access only involved minor amendment to UCL ethics)

7. Evaluation of a measles catch up programme: interviews with key stakeholders + analysis of vaccine uptake data (*What worked worked well*: council signposted and introduced MSc student to key stakeholders enabling them to complete this part of the project. Student had sufficient time to obtain ethics permission for the interviews. *Challenges*: Anticipated quant uptake data was not available in the end due to change in IT systems. Qual however was sufficient for MSc project.)

8. Policy review of housing allocations policies in London councils (*What worked well*: used publicly available data *Challenges:* unusual project assignment so initially student found it hard to navigate how to do this, given others were using systematic reviews/meta-analyses of peer-reviewed papers)

Some titles of collaborative projects previously undertaken by LSHTM students

9. Addressing Food Insecurity in Lewisham: Barriers and Opportunities to Implementing Cash-First Approaches in Street Markets

10. Effectiveness and associated factors of peer support for substance use reduction and smoking cessation in adults with Serious Mental Illness: A systematic review

11. Health Policy Report: Encouraging plant-based diets in hospitals: the benefits and barriers to utilising choice architecture to promote healthy sustainable nutrition
12. Evidence of effectiveness of school-based interventions designed to improve mental health and school engagement to young people
13. Exploring the Role of Community Anchor Organizations in the Facilitation of Public Health Partnerships to Improve Community Health and Wellbeing in the Royal Borough of Kingston-Upon-Thames
14. Why has Needle Exchange use in Kingston not returned to pre-COVID levels?: Qualitative Exploration of Key Informant Perspectives
15. Mental Health and Social Isolation in Young Adults Engaging in Intensive Gaming/Social Media Use: A Secondary Analysis of the Emerging Adults Gambling Dataset
16. Exploring Oral Health Needs of Children in the Youth Justice System in London – understanding knowledge, behaviours and perceived needs: a qualitative study
17. How the digital marketing of energy drinks impacts children and young adults: a literature review using systematic methods
18. Learning from childhood immunisation strategies in UK urban areas to improve DtaP/IPV booster coverage in a London borough
19. Policy Context of Fuel Poverty in the UK
20. An exploration of the public health messaging and communication in response to the 2022 mpox outbreak in the UK. What lessons can be learned for the next health outbreak affecting queer communities?
21. The use of biological data in evaluating behavioural interventions targeting children & adolescents: a literature review

Appendix 1. Selection processes used in 2023/24

Islington

Islington's projects proved very popular with students which resulted in a lot of enquiries and a need for a selection process. The process entailed

1. One hour MS Teams meeting for any interested students to attend to address queries and set out organisational context (i.e. why the topics are priorities for the council)
2. One-page application (1 week deadline) to cover:
   a. why they want to do this project
   b. why they might want to collaborate with a local authority, and
   c. what relevant background experience/skills/knowledge they have
3. Response to all students to inform them of the council's decision

(NB – projects were advertised in December in 2023, which resulted in the selection process occurring over December and early January. To minimise work/admin for the council during holiday season, consider protecting an hour for the selection process in your diary and sharing the date of the meeting alongside the project advertisement.)

GLA selection process:

Greater London Authority have also used a selection process for several years which has worked well. This entails:

1. Request for CV and statement of interest from all interested students: if statement of interest demonstrates good understanding of the project, the GLA and motivation to do the project, then invited for interview
2. Interview: 30-min conversation to ascertain fit between supervisor and student

Tips for students on getting selected:

- Take the time to review the organisation's website and read any key documents referenced in the project idea.
- Do a focused literature search (perhaps starting with lit reviews) of what is known on the subject so far, so you can build on, rather than duplicate previous work
- Reference what you have read in your statement of interest /application to demonstrate you have thought how your work could add value.