

## **AHRI Adopt a Plant postgraduate wellbeing project 2019/2020**

### What was the project?

In May 2019 Professor Anna Reading put Lauren Cantillon (a PhD supervisee of hers) in touch with Dr Ed Stevens (AHRI Research Institute Manager) to discuss collaborating on a project related to plants, student wellbeing and the newly acquired AHRI REACH Space.

Lauren and Ed met on 17<sup>th</sup> May 2019 to discuss this further. It was established that the main purpose of the project would be to facilitate a space for KCL Arts & Humanities postgraduate researchers to socialise and provide informal support to one another – in short, the focus would be on boosting and supporting postgraduate student wellbeing in a calm space on the Strand Campus. At this stage the team (Ed and Lauren) assessed the REACH Space so as to identify plants that would suit the environment. The space available also meant that the project would be looking to cater to an upper limit of twenty students from across the faculty.

The team met again on Friday 5<sup>th</sup> July 2019. In preparation for this meeting Lauren put together a draft list of plants from Patch Plants (chosen for ease of delivery and because Patch provide easy-to-follow care directions) and a short-list of wooden trugs for the space. This was compared with the budget (£1,000) and again with the REACH Space, which was at the time being redecorated.

Ed ordered the plants and other equipment (trug, pots, soil, clipping sheers, watering can, water misters) in mid-July 2019 to ensure that the plants would arrive on time for the project to start. New AHRI staff member Mark Johnson also supported the project pre-launch. The launch date for the REACH Space being set as 9<sup>th</sup> October dictated when the 'call for planters' needed to be issued by – the intention was to have a session prior to the launch so that the plants would be in situ.

A 'call for planters' (project participants) was drafted in early August and issued Tuesday 27<sup>th</sup> August. Interested individuals were given four weeks to apply. Questions were asked that aimed to monitor a level of diversity in the PhD experience – participants were sought from a range of Faculty departments and at different stages of their PhD journey, with the intent that more experienced researchers could offer guidance for those just starting out. Applicants were also asked two questions that required a more involved creative response:

- Your name and KCL A&H department
- The year of your PhD that you're in
- What excites you about this opportunity?
- If you were a plant, what would you be and why?

In later feedback from participants several people mentioned that they had friends who had been interested in taking part in the project but that they were put off by the questions in the 'call for planters' application – in particular the question 'If you were a plant, what would you be and why?' was cited as requiring too much thinking effort.

The call was promoted through the following people/channels, in addition to organic social media shares and personal contacts:

- KCL AHRI Twitter @KingsAHRI
- KCL AHRI September newsletter
- KCL Faculty of Arts & Humanities Twitter @kingsartshums
- Other KCL AHRI Centres (Twitter and Centre newsletters)
- Centre for Doctoral Studies Twitter @KCLDocStudies
- Research Administrators in the KCL Faculty of Arts & Humanities (Humanities; Arts; Languages and Literature)
- KCLSU and VP Postgraduate Students

For the first meeting the group introduced one another, talked about their intentions for joining the group, and organised the plants in the REACH Space to best suit the temperament of each plant.

These locations were regularly re-visited and altered at future sessions (and in between) if the plant looked like it was not flourishing in that area.

Meetings were held approximately every fortnight, with occasional date swaps as related to other events already booked into the REACH Space, in addition to the timing of Reading Week. Having the group meeting once a fortnight was considered regular enough so that participants could bond, but not too often so that participants found it difficult to integrate into their schedule. Participants were encouraged to come on a regular basis, again to help establish a bond between the original group. This had a mixed rate of success. Some participants only came to the first one or two sessions, but for most of Semester 1 a core group of 5-6 participants attended every meeting, sometimes bringing along a friend.

In Semester 2 going into spring, the group experimented with propagating plant cuttings in order to grow the collection – these experiments were ultimately unsuccessful due to having no access to the REACH Space as a direct result of the Covid-19 global pandemic (Strand Campus buildings shut).

Sessions also included a craft activity, as well as plant care. These activities included:

- Making clay seed bombs
- Making macramé hanging baskets
- Decorating plant pots (using sharpie pens and washi tape)

These activities were well-taken up by participants, with many returning members requesting to continue working on their pot design doodles rather than engage with messier craft like the seed-bombs (although this was also popular on a reoccurring basis).

The group had planned to visit the [Edible Utopia tour](#) at Somerset House, as well as venture outside to plant their seed bombs around the KCL Strand Campus and the surrounding Strand area, however the outbreak of Covid-19 prevented this from happening – at least in the 2019/2020 year.

#### Who took part?

The call elicited eight responses (not including Lauren as part of the organising team). We also received an email from a student about to finish their PhD who said they would have 'signed up in a heartbeat' had they not been about to submit their thesis. Represented departments were:

- Culture, Media & Creative Industries (2)
- French
- English
- Digital Humanities
- History
- Philosophy (MPhil)
- Spanish, Portuguese & Latin American Studies
- English (2)

Participants also ranged from first year to third year PhD researchers, in addition to one visiting scholar from China, and an MPhil candidate from the Philosophy Department.

In Semester 2 (January 2020) the make-up of the group changed. Several original members were preparing for submission, and one also took up part-time work that often directly clashed with the Wednesday meeting time. So as to attract new participants, original participants were re-encouraged to bring along interested friends with no need to fill out any type of application form, and the project was also re-promoted via the AHRI social media accounts. This resulted in six new participants joining the fortnightly Wednesday meetings on a regular basis. After taking on feedback from the original members, it was also established that attendance would be welcomed on a more casual drop-in basis moving forward.

### Project aims:

- Bring together PhD students from across the Faculty
- Create a postgraduate wellbeing space – a space to be and a space to talk and share knowledge and experiences
- To learn new plant-related skills
- Bring some green nature into the infrastructure and concrete jungle of KCL Strand Campus
- To highlight the REACH space to KCL graduate students and encourage them to use it

### What did the project achieve?

#### *Connections around KCL*

In Semester 2 plans were made to hold crossover events between the Adopt A Plant group and the Exchange Space in Bush House. Prior to Covid-19 lockdown and the closure of Campus buildings we were going to arrange for cuttings from the plants in the AHRI Reach Space to be planted in the Exchange Space to cement the connection between the projects. Recently we have begun to experiment with 'digital twinning' between the projects, sharing photographs of the AHRI plants in their temporary home to encourage discussion and support for student wellbeing across social media platforms connected to the Exchange Space.

Another project Adopt A Plant is looking to twin with in the upcoming year is the Guy's Community Garden – again we would seek to share cuttings to establish a connection between the two groups/KCL sites. This connection would have the added bonus of promoting cross-Faculty relationships between researchers in the Faculty of Arts & Humanities and those in the Faculty of Life Sciences & Medicine based at Guy's Camps.

#### *Participant feedback*

In May 2020, after the project was suspended due to the global outbreak of Covid-19, participants were asked for feedback about their experiences of taking part in the project. Questions asked were:

1. How could the project be improved?
  - *Including some time or space outdoors would make the project even better, which I think had been planned for the future already.*
  - *I enjoy the plant project very much. Looking after the plants teaches me to respect life and ordinary things. And it also reminds me of my physical existence as individual life. The time spent with the plant and friends at AHRI revitalize me from the frustration I got in my research project. Pity that I should leave the UK in September, how I hope I could have a chance to spend more time with friends and plants at the AHRI centre.*
2. What did you enjoy about taking part in the project?
  - *The project was a really great initiative for well being. I found that it offered a space within the University to step back from my research and take a breather. The process of slowing down and thinking about something else for a couple of hours enabled me to go back to my work refreshed. It was also a really nice opportunity to spend time and connect with peers from the department which again is very beneficial for well-being when much of the time is spent working alone. I also enjoyed learning about how to take care of plants!*
  - *I didn't personally adopt a plant, but participated in the activities around it, i.e. designing a plant pod and building seed bombs. I enjoyed the community, relaxation and 'safe space' feeling, away from a stressful, hectic, everyday life.*
3. Would you take part in the project again in the future?

- *Yes I would very much like to take part in the project again. It helped me to feel connected to the college, to my peers and was great for well being.*
- *Yes, we need more well-being spaces on campus!*

The feedback from participants highlight the significant positive impact that the Adopt A Plant project has had on participants. Multiple responses directly cite the term 'wellbeing' and how taking part in the project boosted their personal feelings of wellbeing. Two key themes emerge overall: the opportunity to take time away from research, and to connect with other research students in a non-research setting:

- Stepping back from research: 'The time spent with the plant and friends at AHRI revitalize me from the frustration I got in my research project'; 'The process of slowing down and thinking about something else for a couple of hours enabled me to go back to my work refreshed; 'I enjoyed the community, relaxation and 'save space' feeling, away from a stressful, hectic, everyday life'.
- Connecting with other students: 'a really nice opportunity to spend time and connect with peers from the department'; 'It helped me to feel connected [...] to my peers'; 'I hope I could have a chance to spend more time with friends and plants at the AHRI centre'.

One response also noted that the project helped them feel 'connected to the college'. This would suggest that, for this group of students, the investment in the project by the college is recognised and appreciated as an investment in them. When read in conjunction with the feedback that 'we need more wellbeing spaces on campus', this makes a compelling case for reinvestment in the project for the future – enabling more graduate researchers to access the project.

#### Impact of Covid-19

The project was curtailed early due to Covid-19 – earlier sections of this report detail the impact on planned group activities. Lauren and several members of AHRI staff were able to rescue the majority of plants that were able to be moved and transported home. The plants are flourishing and will be able to return back to the REACH Space when the Strand Campus is able to be accessed. With access to Campus continuing to be curtailed into Semester 1 2020/2021, creativity is needed to run the project in a digital space – this has also been a challenge to think about with members of AHRI staff (Ed and Mark) on furlough.

#### Reflections for future leaders

- Think about creative ways to build a community outside the meetings – we tried a WhatsApp group with the idea that people could post in there when they'd watered their plants or were in the space and wanted company but members didn't 'buy in'. Feedback from members at the time suggested they wanted more messages and conversation starters etc from Lauren (as project lead) but this was unrealistic with budgeting and scope of the role. For 2020/21 we will experiment with other social media platforms to find something more suitable.
- Don't overload people – we started with a schedule of members taking responsibility for their personally assigned plants, however some members did not maintain this commitment. Another attempt at an individual plant calendar tick-off when watered paper-based system also did not work. So as to standardise watering (and ensure neither over- nor under-watering) in semester 2 we officially moved to a system where the project lead was responsible for plant watering, with the exception the plants of two individuals who had maintained their watering/care commitments.
- Encourage members to help set-up and tidy down – this seemed to stimulate member 'buy in' in terms of what sessions could be used for and people feeling that they had a say in the session schedule/structure.
- Snacks – get good ones! Remember dietary requirements and soft drinks e.g. apple/orange juice. Mini-bites, tunnocks tea cakes etc but also grapes are popular (satsumas not so much).

- Repeatedly emphasise that people are welcome to bring friends along – this is how we grew in semester 2, but also meant that if people had visiting friends or family (one member brought her sister along!) they feel welcome.
- Chat to participants about their own crafting and hobbies to inspire future session activities – pre-pandemic we had plans to do something around knitting as several people said they were working on projects for instance.
- Check out what's going on at Somerset House – again, pre-pandemic the group would have made a visit to a mushroom exhibition, which came up in feedback that this was something being looked forward to.
- Simple activities can be just as rewarding as more complicated ones – when given the option to make seedbombs or continue pot decorating several members chose to keep decorating their pots. All this required was Sharpies and pots to draw on, so not very expensive.
- Be mindful of *where* in a room you are placing a plant – think about the conditions it will/not be exposed to, but also try not to be disheartened if and when things die. The back room of the REACH Space is essentially like a greenhouse; maybe future funds could be used to purchase a cheap humidifier and Propagator boxes which have helped grow the collection in lockdown.

### Images

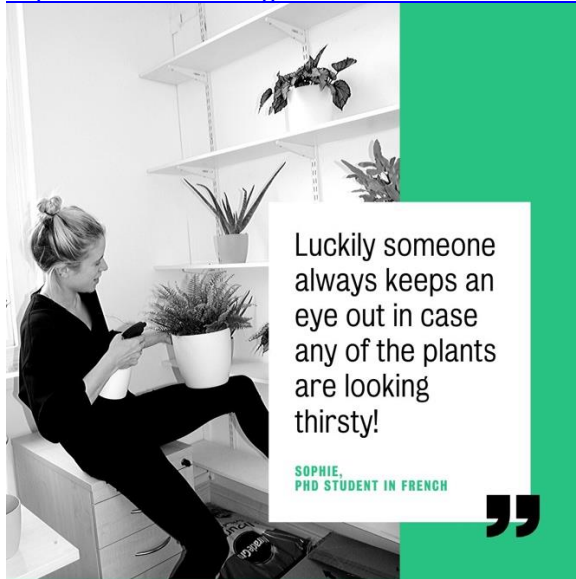
<https://twitter.com/KingsAHRI/status/1194552734172749825>



<https://twitter.com/KingsAHRI/status/1197130469738979328>



<https://twitter.com/KingsAHRI/status/1200396490251759616>



Seedbombs for guerrilla gardening:

[https://twitter.com/lc\\_explores/status/119719180411728641](https://twitter.com/lc_explores/status/119719180411728641)



Plants in the REACH Space February 2020 – the line of eight black pots is the group effort at propagating: <https://twitter.com/KingsAHRI/status/1232647131720290304>



Plants blooming in covid-19 'foster care'  
[https://twitter.com/lc\\_explores/status/1246070192192380929](https://twitter.com/lc_explores/status/1246070192192380929)