

AHRI Adopt a Plant postgraduate wellbeing project 2020/21

What was the project?

The AHRI Adopt-a-Plant project is a scheme rooted in supporting the wellbeing of Arts and Humanities postgraduate students through engagement in group activities based around plants and crafts. The project was initially developed in 2019 as an in-person group activity within the AHRI REACH Space, and successfully ran as such until the outbreak of Covid-19 in March 2020. With the College pausing all in-person activities, it was clear from autumn 2020 that, if ran again, the project would have to be reimagined to suit online delivery.

The positive feedback and comments from 2019 regarding increased mental wellbeing and the chance to meet new PhD researchers from across the Faculty resulted in the AHRI being keen to offer the scheme for a second year. Furthermore, the ongoing context of Covid-19 related lockdowns and restrictions into Spring 2021 gave the project an important reason to continue - to help prevent PGR isolation.

How was the project set up?

Lauren Cantillon was asked if she would be interested in coordinating the scheme for a second year. She was enthusiastic about the challenge to adapt the project to a digital format. With support from Mark Johnson (AHRI Engagement Coordinator), the project was adapted to a digital version as part of the AHRI's REACH-XR offer. An activity box would be sent to each participant, with activities being done on group Microsoft Teams calls. An interactive Padlet board would function as a way for the group to stay in touch in-between sessions, with participants encouraged to post relevant links and images of their plants and crafts for the others to see - a digital garden for the group to grow as a collective.

One of the biggest challenges was how to incorporate plants into the activity box. After initial research, having plants delivered to participants was not possible due to financial limitations. It was agreed that this year's project would instead take on a 'grow your own' approach, with participants receiving seed packets, soil, and pots, in addition to craft materials. The 'Activity Menu' sent to participants is attached to this report - it sets out the themes and materials required for each week's activity. Activities were chosen to be accessible to all participants, to be 'low-impact' in terms of materials required to be posted and have a sustainable focus (for instance repurposing household waste like plastic cartons and food cuttings). The materials were purchased by the AHRI team and posted to Lauren's home address, from where she assembled and posted all the individual boxes.

Drawing on a collective understanding of 'zoom fatigue' (as learnt through online teaching and participation in conferences over the course of the pandemic), it was decided that meetings would be held for one hour every fortnight. This mirrored the format of the in-person meetings the previous year, but with a shorter meeting time to try and prevent screen fatigue.

A 'call for planters' (project participants) was drafted across December 2020 and issued on Monday 18th January 2021. Interested individuals were given two and a half 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 questions that required a creative response:

- Your name and KCL A&H department
- The year of your PhD that you're in
- Tell us in a few sentences why you want to take part in the project
- What's your favourite plant? (it's fine if you don't have one)

To offset the demands of the creative questions (as per feedback the previous year), a tick-box question was included to try and remove barriers to applying:

Any other reasons? Please tick as many as you like, and feel free to add more:

- I love craft
- I love plants
- I want to meet new people
- I have never tried to grow anything but would love to have a go!
- I'm excited about receiving an activity box
- I wanted to take part last year but couldn't
- This sounds like a great way to carve out some self-care time
- Insert your own.....

This enabled applicants to share their personalities and interest in the project in a less time intensive manner, and was also extremely useful when deciding successful applicants as high engagement in this section suggested the applicant understood the aims and goals of the scheme.

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 newsletter
- KCL Faculty of Arts & Humanities Twitter @kingsartshums
- KCL Faculty of Arts & Humanities newsletter
- 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
- King's Sustainability

Who took part?

The call elicited eighteen responses - a 125% increase on the previous year's initial applications. Eleven participants were chosen, based on their applications and availability to take part in sessions over the course of the scheme. Including Lauren as project coordinator, represented departments were:

- Culture, Media & Creative Industries (4)
- Digital Humanities (1)
- History (4)
- Philosophy (2)
- Theology & Religious Studies (1)

Participants ranged from first year to third year PhD researchers, and an MPhil candidate from the Philosophy Department.

Meetings & Activities

Meetings were held on Wednesday afternoons for one hour (3-4pm) every two weeks, hosted through Microsoft Teams. The first meeting was designed as a group 'unboxing' of the activity box; an opportunity to meet the group and talk about why they joined the scheme.

Plant activities included planting seeds in pots, using household plastic waste to make new containers, and learning about how to regrow food cuttings. Several craft activities were repeated and improved from the previous year. Making clay seed bombs was incredibly popular with the first cohort and was similarly successful with the 2020/21 group. A macramé hanging basket kit with all materials and instructions was sourced from Hobbycraft and also proved a popular activity, with participants

commenting that the task was trickier than expected but the challenge also made it an enjoyable (and entertaining) activity.

One week a participant led the group in creative drawing exercises, and another week participants were able to sculpt their own object using air-dry clay (ambitions ranged from a water jug to incense burner holders to pen pots). A 'Bring Your Own Craft' week was also well received; crafts being done included mending clothes, balloon art, colouring books, knitting, collage, baking, and a mind-map.

The group hosted a guest speaker, gardener Steph Prior from [Brockwell Park Community Greenhouses](#). Steph gave a brilliant presentation regarding houseplants and propagation techniques, before answering the many questions the cohort had for her about their own houseplants. This was a fantastic session, with many participants noting it as one of their favourites in project feedback, e.g.: 'I loved the last session on propagation' and 'the session about propagation and overall taking care of plants was absolutely incredible'.

Attendance varied over the scheme. One participant only attended the first meeting, and two more stopped attending due to personal reasons approximately halfway through the project. Sometimes external factors such as childcare, supervisor meetings, training sessions and work commitments prevented participants from joining the session, however this was at a similar rate to the previous year.

The interactive Padlet board (or 'digital garden') was well taken up by participants as a way to share photographs of their crafts (completed and in progress) as well as photographs of the plants grown from seed in the early weeks of the project. Participants also shared links to inspiring YouTube videos and Instagram accounts related to the activities and were able to 'like' and comment on each other's posts. The Padlet offered a less formal space outside of emails for participants to keep in touch. One participant commented that 'it felt very harmonious for the group to be planting together and giving updates', suggesting that the Padlet enabled activities to be extended as progress photos could be uploaded over the course of the project.

Project aims 2020/21:

- Bring together PhD students from across the Faculty of Arts & Humanities
- Create a digital postgraduate wellbeing space – a space to be and a space to talk and share knowledge and experiences
- To learn new plant-related skills
- To learn new craft-related skills

What did the project achieve?

'I would absolutely love to take part in Adopt-A-Plant again. It has provided space for a break, connection with other research students, and the chance to do something with one's hands, which we all need more of in our increasingly screen-dominated lives.'

In July 2021 participants were asked for feedback about their experiences of taking part in the project. Responses were anonymous, and questions asked included:

1. What did you enjoy about the Adopt a Plant project?
2. What were your favourite activities and why?
3. How could the Adopt a Plant project be improved?

The feedback reflects how participants viewed the project as time-out from their busy schedules and a chance to relax while also doing something fun and creative. Participants felt like taking part in the scheme had a positive impact on their wellbeing: one participant noted 'during lockdown it was hugely beneficial for wellbeing' and another said the scheme enabled them to 'take time out for myself from my hectic schedule'. Participants also enjoyed the chance to meet new people from across the Faculty, with several noting that meeting new people was one of the things they most enjoyed about taking part in the project. For instance, one comment described the scheme as a 'great informal space to connect with other people in the faculty'.

These two strands echo key themes of last year's feedback. This suggests that the scheme adapted well to operating in a digital environment - despite being physically apart from one another, participants were still able to bond and looked forward to coming together as a group. Other aspects of the project that people enjoyed included the chance to grow plants and to try new activities.

Favourite activities included making seed bombs and macrame plant holders because (as one participant reflected) 'they were challenging and fun, and most important, they're things I'd never have tried on my own'. Another participant recounted how they enjoyed using recycled plastic tubs as plants, so much so that they 'have done it with several other plants since'. Participants enjoyed the chance to learn something new, with one stating that they enjoyed 'being able to learn with and from others in the group'. As previously stated, the majority of feedback highlighted the propagation session led by Steph Prior as being one of their favourites.

When asked how the project could be improved, responses were mixed. Some participants wanted sessions to be longer and more regular, whereas other participants thought the amount of time involved was 'just right'. One participant suggested having a group chat for participants as 'something to keep in touch better'. Last year's group did have a WhatsApp group chat, however this was seldom used and so replaced with a Padlet for this year. Both platforms could be potential options for the next cohort. Participants also said more external speakers 'would be fabulous', suggesting 'maybe keen gardeners from the KCL community as well as external experts'.

Participants were also asked to reflect on taking part in the project as a digital experience via the question:

'How was your experience of participating in a digital Adopt-a-Plant project, and how do you think your experience of the project would've been different if it had been held in person?'

Several comments noted that the digital format made it easier for them to attend, being 'low stress and easy', 'easier to attend in some ways', and one participant saying they would not have been able to attend in-person sessions as they live outside of London. Conversely, one participant noted they would have been more likely to attend the in-person sessions compared to the digital offer of this year.

Participants perceived the digital space as having prevented them from getting to know the other participants better (compared to an in-person format). The set-up of Microsoft Teams meant that it was challenging to facilitate group conversation in a natural manner while also trying to bring in the quieter members of the group. In an in-person setting different conversations may happen simultaneously without interrupting one another, yet in a digital space the platform constrains this. The breakout rooms feature of Microsoft Teams would have split the group, and it would have been difficult for people to move in between conversations, thus the group was together all the time.

Some participants imagined how the project could have operated in person, with comments such as 'it would be nice to go to some different locations for things like distributing the seed bombs if the sessions were in person' and 'we'd probably have gone for coffees and got to know each other better'. Participants seeing the potential to bond with their fellow participants suggests that creative projects like Adopt-a-Plant can be a way for postgraduates to connect with fellow researchers outside of their research work. During the final meeting it was discussed how participants could come together when College restrictions allow and, access depending, be given a tour of the AHRI REACH Space.

Several participants made positive comments about Lauren's role in leading the project, saying she did an 'incredible' job, that she was 'lovely and helpful, and tried making sure everyone felt included', and that they appreciated the work she put in in putting together the materials, organising sessions, and keeping the Padlet updated. One of Lauren's priorities in coordinating the meetings was to ensure that all voices were heard and that everyone felt empowered to speak, therefore it is encouraging to have feedback that this was realised.

Things to consider for the future

A downside of the digital format meant it was challenging to introduce new participants to the group as attendance dipped. Last year's in-person format meant that as people dropped off towards the end of Semester 1, the project could be opened up to new participants in Semester 2. Materials were also not a problem as they were provided on the day. However, this year's necessary activity box format meant any new participants would also have to be sent activity materials in order to take part. If the project runs again in the digital format, there should be consideration as to how new participants could be introduced and therefore budgeted for. Could regular participants nominate a friend for instance? This is how the project evolved the previous year, with people bringing friends to the in-person meetings in the REACH Space.

Airdry clay continued to be an extremely popular activity and material to work with. Participants enjoyed how tactile it was, and there was a conversation about how it reminded people of playing with playdough or slime. To build on that sense of play, participants could be provided with more airdry clay. This year each person received 3 packets, but at £1 a packet from Hobbycraft more could be allocated per person. Macrame also continued to be a popular activity. Participants enjoyed the challenge of working a different part of your brain (compared to PhD analysis) and much humour was shared during the session. However, as some participants began to pick it up quicker than others, there was some sadness that participants were not able to help each other as much as would have been the case in-person.

A surprise activity success was the 'Bring Your Own Craft' session, which was very well attended. Participants seemed to enjoy the chance to work on pre-existing creative projects/hobbies, and people brought a great range of skills to the session. One example of this was collage, which could be a good scheduled activity going forward (e.g.: in-person, collage a pot and varnish with PVC to waterproof).

From the perspective of the coordinator, leading the sessions digitally felt more pressured compared to in-person sessions. Lauren was also self-conscious of not falling into the tone of a seminar tutor, reflecting that a different tone is needed to organise a session of peers compared to teaching students. Participant feedback was positive about her efforts, but it was an extra part of the role that did not seem to be as much of an issue the previous year. She echoed other participants in their praise of the externally led session; from the coordinator's POV, another guest led (external or internal guest) session would alleviate some pressure of always being session lead.

Appendices

1. Activity Menu
2. Full participant feedback comments

REACH-XR Adopt-a-Plant 2021: Activity Menu

Week 1 (3rd March)

The Great Unboxing

Items: Your box, delivered from the AHRI to you!

Week 2 (17th March)

Let the planting begin!

Items: Seeds (nasturtium or lavender), pot, soil mix, good vibes

Week 3 (31st March)

Repurposing kitchen waste - planters & offcuts

Items: BYO plastic cartons (e.g., any food containers, milk bottles), BYO veggie cuttings (spring onions, coriander or lettuce would be good options!), herb seeds, soil mix, scissors

Week 4 (14th April)

Seed bombs!

Items: Airdry clay, wildflower seed/soil mix, optimism

Week 5 (28th April)

Making a macramé plant holder

Items: Macramé kit, creativity

Week 6 (12th May)

Still life drawing (or doodles!)

Items: Paper, coloured pencils, some items to draw, a sense of humour

Week 7 (26th May)

Make a mini plant pot

Items: Airdry clay, imagination

Week 8 (9th June)

Discussion/craft workshop [TBC]

Items: Enthusiasm

Week 9 (23rd June)

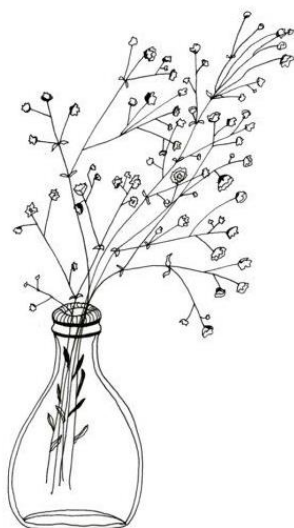
Bring Your Own Craft

Items: More enthusiasm!

Week 10 (7th July)

Finale!

Items: Your plants and creations



Adopt-a-Plant Participant Feedback 2020

ID	What did you enjoy about the Adopt a Plant project?	What were your favourite activities and why?	How could the Adopt a Plant project be improved?	How was your experience of participating in a digital Adopt-a-Plant project, and how do you think your experience of the project would've been different if it had been held in person?	Would you take part in the project again in the future?	Any other comments:
1	I loved being a part of this years adopt a plant scheme. It was a great chance to make new connections and take time out for myself from my hectic schedule. The chance to actively engage with practical and crafty workshops, in a social group setting, was super beneficial to my wellbeing.	I loved the last session on propogation. As an enthusiastic plant lover I was so heartened to learn more about how to tend to plants and grow more from cuttings. It really was an eye opener. I also really enjoyed the early sessions planting our seeds together. It felt very harmonious for the group to be planting together and giving updates.	I sometimes felt an hour was too little time to develop a rapport with members of the group I didnt already know but I know scheduling wise it made sense	I think that the digital element made it easier to attend in some ways as I could jut log on wherever I was but there is certain distance from members who are quieter	Yes	Lauren did an incredible job hosting and planning the boxes. I commend her on the hard work and perseverance!
2	Learning about plants, meeting new people, and having a relaxed hour to look forward to every fortnight.	Making the seed bombs and the macrame, because they were challenging and fun, and most important, they're things I'd never have tried on my own.	By having more of it -- running it for a few more weeks (the whole year, even?), or a longer session each time.	I think it would have been nicer to chat with each other in person and we'd probably have gone for coffees and got to know each other better. That said, it worked very well digitally, thanks to Lauren's excellent organisation and planning, and it has been a good substitute for in-person activities during the pandemic.	Yes	I would absolutely love to take part in Adopt-A-Plant again. It has provided space for a break, connection with other research students, and the chance to do something with one's hands, which we all need more of in our increasingly screen-dominated lives.
3	Everyone was very friendly and it was great to do something creative.	Making the macrame plant hangers was fun and produced something that looks great in the house! The presentation on propagation was also very interesting and useful. I also enjoyed using recycled plastic tubs as planters and have done it with several other plants since!	Maybe a group chat or something to keep in touch better?	Online meant it was low stress and easy to attend but in person would have made it easier to get to know other group members.	Yes	Thank you for organising it!
4	It was a great informal space to connect with other people in the faculty and learn some new skills. During lockdown it was hugely beneficial for wellbeing. .	I enjoyed all of the activities but particularly planting differnt seeds and learning about the different types of soils and ways to care for plants was really interesting. Particularly being able to learn with and from others in the group.	I'm not sure! The activities were great and the timing and level of participation required was just right.	In person the project would have been a nice opportunity to take a screen break however the sessions didn't feel like intense screen time as Teams could be on in the background. It would be nice to go to some different locations for things like distributing the seed bombs if the sessions were in person.	Yes	Really appreciate the time and effort taken by Lauren to put together the resources, organise the sessions and keep the padlet updated. It was a much needed community during the current pandemic restrictions!
5	Meeting new people at KCL, being 'inside' the academic world while at the same time doing things completely unrelated to academia.	The session about propagation and overall taking care of plants was absolutely incredible. The macrame session was lovely as well.	More guests speakers would be fabulous, maybe keen gardeners from the KCL community as well as external experts?	I wouldn't have been able to participate had it been in person, as I'm based in Hertfordshire. So I was glad it was online!	Yes	Lauren was lovely and helpful, and tried making sure everyone felt included.
6	Meeting new people; attempting to grow a plant (which is still growing and alive!); a good variety of activities.	The speaker (can't remember her name) on propagation - it was very interesting.	Could have more external talks (which I know would cost money, but it was certainly a good session).	I think as libraries opened it was more difficult to juggle the sessions with studying, but if it was in person I would have been more likely to come to all the sessions as it would have been on campus. But Lauren was great throughout and very enthusiastic!	Yes	It was a great experience overall - and I learnt a lot!