UNCOVER Presentation at HEIR Conference (September 2021)

Overall Script for Conference Presentation

Introduction: Rima

Hello everyone. I am Rima Nundy, a member of the UNCOVER group. This student-led presentation draws on the experience of creating a collaborative, inter-disciplinary academic community - UNCOVER - the Usher Network for COVID-19 Evidence Reviews) which is a research network run by University of Edinburgh staff, students and alumni across disciplines, producing up-to-date evidence on Covid-19 and its consequences.

We explore the benefits of an inclusive approach in terms of problem-solving, quality of work, and opportunities for both student and staff development.

We discuss the context in which UNCOVER was created: to provide rapid, reliable evidence reviews for policy-makers and decision-makers responding to the pandemic. We also explore how this has provided an opportunity to bridge the gap between academia and practice, and offered greater scope for student leadership and growth. We have achieved this through peer-mentorship, internships and project opportunities, and students rapidly stepping into roles with increasing responsibility.

We also explore the 'growing pains' or challenges arising from this innovative new way of working: the instability and rapid change; the challenges of flattening the hierarchy; and the need to manage boundaries as people stepped up into new roles and we felt our way towards productive and sustainable ways of working.

UNCOVER students and graduate volunteers will share our experiences of participating in UNCOVER, and ways in which we have co-produced its working model. We will discuss the role of the Student Forum and other channels for free exchange of opinions; how student involvement led to the creation of an UNCOVER conference and an inclusive model for publications; and the growing emphasis on transferable skills - using workshops and practical opportunities to support student experience, academic development and employability.

Durga - would you like to take us through your experiences of being a long-term member of the UNCOVER group?

Experiences of being in UNCOVER (Long-term member): Durga

Yes. Sure, Rima.

I would like to start by sharing my reasons behind joining UNCOVER last year in the early days of the pandemic. I will, then, go on to say why I have chosen to continue to remain a part of UNCOVER until now.

I joined UNCOVER as a student volunteer in March 2020. I was studying on the MPH on-campus programme at the University of Edinburgh when I joined. I, primarily, got involved because I felt this would be a platform to learn and practise research skills.

I was learning or had just learnt several research skills on different courses that I took up on the MPH programme. But did not have any real-world research experience until I joined UNCOVER. UNCOVER, therefore, I can say, happened to me at a perfect time as it enabled the novice or unexperienced researcher in me to apply my newly learnt skills and knowledge to a real-world problem in real-time.

Having said that, the group always sought and continues to strive to produce good quality research work and very often with extremely tight deadlines. Achieving these goals can sometimes become very challenging with less experienced members on board. However, all the review teams since the beginning have had a perfect blend of highly experienced, moderately experienced, and less experienced team members. This format of UNCOVER ensures that the less experienced members can receive guidance and support from the more experienced members and the research output is of acceptable standards. My colleagues will shed light on these challenges and the strategies we are adopting to overcome them in a short while.

And then participation in UNCOVER reviews gave me (and I think most of my colleagues who were involved with this group in the early days of the pandemic would agree) to this that UNCOVER gave us a routine, a sense of purpose, dissertation projects and meaningful jobs in those extremely stressful times. I was left alone in Edinburgh as lockdown kicked in, with my family away in India, and the normal routine gone. It was a very satisfying experience for me to be able to meaningfully contribute to something that had affected everybody personally.

In my case, I have been able to play a variety of roles throughout my journey with UNCOVER since I joined until now. I started as a student volunteer and a mentee, then as an intern and now working as a mentor and review co-ordinator. And this is one of my motivations behind continuing to be a part of UNCOVER. In addition to research skills, this has given me a chance to garner a variety of other skills including soft skills and apply them. Taking up different responsibilities for different projects has helped me to continuously discover the talents I have, absorb, and gather fresh skills and apply them. For example, I am currently co-ordinating a couple of review teams. This role requires me to set achievable objectives and timelines for team members, arrange and facilitate team meetings, note, and report review progress to senior UNCOVER members and external partners in addition to the researcher roles.

My participation in UNCOVER has also allowed me to closely discuss my personal research interests with Professors within this group who have extensive academic experience and seek their guidance and advice for future career steps. As a result, I also got an opportunity to work these Professors in projects outside of UNCOVER on public health projects with topics of my interest.

Overall, this has been a satisfying and fulfilling experience for me and I would like to contribute to UNCOVER for as long as I can. This was not just beneficial academically or professionally, but personally also- as the UNCOVER community has given me some wonderful friends and teachers

Bohee you have been a relatively recent addition to the UNCOVER community. Would you like to share with us what led you to join this group?

Experiences of being in UNCOVER (Newer member): Bohee

Of course, Thank you, Durga.

As a PhD student researching respiratory diseases, COVID-19 was one of the interesting research areas for me. I joined this group as a student volunteer in May 2021 to satisfy my desire to do COVID-19 relevant research. Since I've joined this group, working with them has been beyond my expectations.

Firstly, I learnt how to work with others, enabling me to pool ideas and see problems from different perspectives. In a group situation, we completed tasks that could not be accomplished by an individual, combining a variety of skills and expertise to tackle more complex and larger-scale problems. I had several courses requiring team projects in the university but working within UNCOVER was quite different from these previous experiences. As this team project does not require grades or scores, we can focus purely on generating high quality results for our projects.

In addition, all members in this group are organically and horizontally connected with each other, bound by each project. From raising research ideas and devising methodologies to presenting the results as a paper, I was able to communicate with the others whenever I encountered any issues, big or small, throughout the whole process. By doing this, as Durga mentioned, you can solidify skills that you learnt from the university by practising with a real-life project and strengthening your weak skills. In my case, I've practised various research skills and developed my teamwork skills via several COVID-19 projects.

Being involved in the process of publications as a student is also priceless as this opportunity is not common but also it requires expert comprehensive help and guidance. I witnessed that experts were always there for student researchers whenever they need some help or research advice. Another example is, through UNCOVER, I was able to participate in external projects. I had several opportunities of getting involved in projects with external research institutes. These experiences improved my skills of communicating with stakeholders and team members, and facilitating a team project while fulfilling stakeholders' needs. Still, there are lots of skills that I should uptake as a PhD student, but I am sure these experiences will help me to prepare as a researcher before going out into the practice. In conclusion, I found that UNCOVER can be a model that bridges academia and practice work for students.

However, like other research groups, UNCOVER has some challenges. Would you please share these challenges with us, Kayla?

Challenges: Kayla

Whilst UNCOVER has provided a wealth of positive benefits to staff and students alike; it has not been without its growing pains over the last year and a half. At its creation, UNCOVER pooled its volunteers from the university's MPH programs and the USHER institutes numerous public health professionals. Although volunteers were excited to engage in this work to address the mounting pressures of the pandemic, this also meant balancing the often heavy workload of UNCOVER activities in conjunction with our other commitments. This may have included completing dissertations, teaching, grading, and balancing the time required for our personal lives. Often, there was little to no idea as to what extent the workload would be, nor the most efficient number of volunteers to place onto a team, as the pandemic was evolving in real-time. There is simply no way to pre-emptively know as to if a review will illicit 300 searches or 6,000 to work through. Unfortunately, as the pandemic is still ongoing, this is an issue that still appears pending on the review at hand. Furthermore, communication issues based upon being a worldwide group have occasionally influenced how volunteers participate in reviews. Members, such as myself, have been known to be up at all hours of the night to engage in discussions in real-time or to meet strict deadlines.

The challenges mentioned earlier and the students' desire to tackle the pandemic in a head-on position have created a tight rope-like situation in which UNCOVER has had to balance to avoid unintentionally exploiting the student's time. As UNCOVER is a newer model in the scheme of British Higher Education, this leads to difficulties in finding spaces for it to fit within grant funding bodies requirements. Many former and current students have become highly proficient in the skills required to take on reviews which potentially leads to them no longer gaining a direct skill which could be applicable in furthering their careers beyond their time in UNCOVER.

Thus, the lack of consistent funding resources to provide our student/alumni volunteers with monetary compensation which reflects the workload completed or the volunteer's expertise leads to a greater concern for our student/alumni volunteers welfare.

Although I have described several challenges, UNCOVER is a highly adaptable group that draws upon the voices of students and staff alike. Prerna, could you please explain the various ways in which UNCOVER has begun to tackle some of the challenges it has faced?

Addressing Challenges: Prerna

Addressing the challenges of UNCOVER

The UNCOVER review teams of staff and students , via the creation of this dynamic and iterative learning experience, where they transparently explored the emerging data on COVID-19 together, created a defining model of research.

Of course it has been a challenge in the amount of data being discovered, but the team of students have grown over the year. Accommodation of student schedules based on their studies, jobs and lives in different time zones has been considered essential while planning meetings. Taking meeting notes, recording essential discussions and educational sessions, providing regular updates have been efficiently handled by the management and students.

 Also, despite the extremely short timelines of the reviews in the beginning of last year, UNCOVER management made it a priority to emphasize that students should not be pressurized or burdened by the work. Participation has been completely voluntary. Concessions have been made for the students to step back from certain projects or re-join later as per changing life-situations and educational priorities- for example-upcoming exams, dissertations or in my case, moving to an entirely different continent.

The environment of UNCOVER has been extremely inclusive, providing many opportunities for involving the students-old and new in varied research projects based upon their skill sets. The staff has made it their priority to provide training in the form of workshops, one on one coaching, internships, where the students were given a free-hand to explore, ask questions, suggest development of their own research skills and real-world applications by making use of the university resources and staff guidance at every step of the way. They have been enthusiastically receptive and took time to teach and share with students, for example on subjects of grant proposal writings, offering career guidance's etc. They have been supportive in offering individual encouragement and counselling to the Edinburgh students in this research journey as well.

As we have moved out of the first phase of the pandemic and are now getting to grips with its longer-term consequences, the focus of UNCOVER's work has also changed. Rapid evidence reviews with 48-hour turnaround times are no longer the norm, and UNCOVER is producing reviews with the latest

evidence, and using new approaches, including living systematic reviews and umbrella reviews, to strengthen and balance its work.

UNCOVER management has also been striving to find the right balance between student enthusiasm and over-utilization by obtaining funding for their research projects and providing remuneration and publishing opportunities to the students for their contributions, as experienced students are stepping up into leadership roles as mentors and co-supervisors helping to coordinate reviews, contributing to write-ups, and mentor newer members of the team.

The PTAS (Principal Teaching Award Scheme), University of Edinburgh was received by UNCOVER this year which has been fundamentally utilized in two important ways-first, to help collate the numerous resources created by UNCOVER, improving the flow of knowledge, thereby serving as a source of trouble shooting reference for working on systematic reviews by student volunteers.

Secondly, a group of our students are conducting a qualitative examination of the experiences of students behind their motivations to join UNCOVER, what have they learnt, advantages/benefits gained by working in UNCOVER or challenges or negative experiences faced while researching thus far will help in streamlining the process even further. This project along with the UNCOVER students Forum (which focuses on weekly meetings with the student volunteers regarding their working issues) will be utilized to create an initial student/staff Charter which would serve as a baseline set of expectations for those willing to join and work for UNCOVER, thereby helping in address many of the weak points faced.

Personally I believe, the commitment and spirited potential of student/staff teams of UNCOVER have helped in making this a successful research alliance with everyone working to making it better everyday.

Rima, would you agree? And also proceed with the concluding remarks.

Conclusion: Rima

Thank you all for sharing your experiences. This has been our attempt at providing a brief insight into our innovative collaborative model. Despite the challenges, its success is now evident in the self- sustained working model it has turned out to be – producing key evidence on a variety of Covid-19 related topics and largely meeting most of the goals defined at the outset. For those of you who are interested in knowing more about us and our work, pl feel free to join us at the UNCOVER conference the link to which is provided on the slide. Thank you for joining us today.

We now welcome questions from the audience.