

MSc Food Policy CityChat session

An opportunity to ask our current Food Policy students about studying the course and PG life here at City, University of London



Thanks for joining us this evening for the MSc Food Policy CityChat. We have two of our Food Policy students with us this evening who is able to answer any questions that you may have about studying the course or PG life here at City, University of London.



Hi I've nearly finished the Food Policy MSc course, here at City and am ready for your questions today!



Hi - maybe you can give some general comments about your experience? And how many hours approx did you spend on course work?



Hi - It's been a fabulous experience, it's taught me a lot about food, but also how to analyse and research topics. Hours vary, depending on assignments and deadlines, however a guideline would be about 20 hours a week for part time and 40 hours for full time.



Hi - Following a meeting at one of the open evenings earlier in the year I have been reading bits and pieces ahead of the course starting - I was wondering if there's anything you'd recommend as particularly important? Or, put another way, is there anything you wish you had read or gotten familiar with before you started?



Hi - I think the most important thing is to develop the ability to understand what interests you and what doesn't, e.g. Agriculture or the food economy, culture or politics? There's no need to be absolute, but worth noting what piques your interest.



Can you tell us How are the classes organized ?



There's a single 3 hour lecture each week for part time and two for full time students. These run from late Sept to Dec, then again from late Jan to May. Dissertation work follows on in May.



I think I timed my post poorly 😊 Would you mind talking a bit about your housing experience? (are you in a postgrad dorm vs living off campus, neighborhoods, transportation, etc.



I live in London so am unsure how student accommodation is arranged



Would you mind talking a bit about your housing experience? (are you in a postgrad dorm vs living off campus, neighborhoods, transportation, etc.)



Hi - City offers great options for housing but there are private student accommodations as well. In terms of what City has to offer, the options are available on our webpage below. The University is located in Angel/Clerkenwell and there are a lot of student options in the local areas. <https://www.city.ac.uk/study/living-in-london/accommodation/postgraduate-halls>



Dear - thank you very much for your availability to answer our questions. I am from Switzerland and I have applied for the course to start in September. I have a background in Food Science Engineering and would like to know more about the structure of the Master's programme. I have read that many assignments were in the form of essay, briefing paper or research paper about subject of your choice, is that right? Is it challenging to find topics to write about? How many hours do you need to work on these papers? Where do you find information about the content of the paper you are writing it (Do you do literature research, or is it more field research, like interviewing actors of the food systems) Could you maybe describe on of your typical day, week? Hope my long message won't afraid you!



Hi - I'll answer this in a moment!



The full masters course comprises 8 written assignments between 1500-4000 words and a dissertation of 15,000 words. All of these are reasearch, briefing or analysis papers, looking at a topic, supply chain, culture, etc etc. depending on the module they are within.



Each assignment has a wide brief so that you can choose a specific subject that you enjoy. E.g. a brief could be to anlyse the supply chain of a product, therefore you could choose locally produce beef, or Ecuadorian chocolate, depending on your interests.



I have never found it hard to find things to write about, most people are battling with the word limits to get all their information into an essay! Information is usuall taken from the library, which is accessible online, or academic journals, or possibly from the internet, e.g. google scholar, also company reports, or news and media.



Field research could be undertaken only for the dissertation, not for the previous assignments due to timescales, ethics approval and resources. Most weeks I work on assignment or dissertation for a few hours and also catch up on other reading for the course or dissertation. There is required reading for each lecture which can take a few hours as well.



Thanks - I'm also interested to know what kinds of research tools are available - for instance, subscriptions to periodicals, access to quantitative databases, or similar?



Hi - there are loads of resources available, a huge amount of relevant journals are available online via the library through various databases or google scholar, lots periodicals as well. We also have access to the libraries at other University of London campuses, which gives a really broad literature resource.



Hey - I am from Italy. Could you recommend some books to read during the summer about our future subjects?



Food Policy by Tim Lang - he founded the course and this book is a great overview of the topics we study.



Hey - I'd also recommend Food by Jennifer Clapp - it's more focused on the political economy of food but I found it very helpful! The department also provided a summer reading list which will have lots of advice too. Food Wars is arguably the best place to start though!



Hi everyone, I am also starting in September. Could you tell me how much direction is given on assignments, and did you have an opportunity to examine examples to get a feel for what is expected? Thank you .



We receive feedback and guidance on assignments, however the teaching encourages the student to make decisions, so tutors won't say right or wrong, but will give guidelines point in directions to look, as well as providing sample essays from previous years.



And one more question, if most of the time you are working on your own, do you still have some contacts with other students? How is the students atmosphere?



Hey I'm also currently an MSc Food Policy student (full time). There is a lot of reading and working on assignments that may be on your own, but I often study physically at the university and study with other coursemates to talk through assignments, classwork and have lunch together! We've also organised some trips and dinner together and I've met some great people!



So, if I am understanding well, when you write about a subject, you are more compiling informations from diverse sources than properly collecting the information to write about. It's a bit more than being a journalist and not directly the detective?



It's about gathering information, critically analysing it and reaching a conclusion based on the evidence. Your analogy is right, it's about researching a topic and then having the ability to analyse what you find.



Thanks for being here to answer questions - at what point in the program did you select a dissertation topic/begin the research process? Did that happen fairly early on?



Hey we began looking at dissertation topics around Feb/March this year. As part of the dissertation, you undertake a pre-proposal where you outline your initial ideas. With this, the department then assign you a supervisor who can support and advise you. If you're a full time student, you have till the following September (around 6 months), or if you're part time it's till December (9 months) to complete the dissertation.



Thanks for your answer 😊 This is great to know, so you also exchange and collaborate with other students rather doing the work by your own !



No problem! All our assignments are done individually but there are lots of opportunities to discuss work with other students, either in class or outside of it. We created our own WhatsApp group where we often organise meetings to discuss upcoming assignments etc. It's a good way to share ideas and resources, as sometimes you find people are researching/studying topics that overlap!



Thanks for the info! I've actually reserved a room in the Pure City postgrad hall already. I know Pure City has partnerships with other universities as well, and I'm concerned that it will be really reminiscent of undergrad dorms. I'm considering living in a hostel as an alternative. I guess my interest is more in what the experience is like living off campus versus in a dorm.



Hey - I've not been in City halls, so am unsure. I know many people live off campus and a lot of the full time students will meet in the library on a regular basis when doing there assignments and research.



Thank you for your answer ! What are you planning on doing next year ? Do you want to work or keep studying ?



I'm actually looking at a PhD! I never thought I'd say that, however I've enjoyed the study so much that I have a keen interest in carrying on with research, alongside progressing my career as a food writer.



Thanks! I am a bit afraid about my written capacity on working on my own on diverse topics. Do the lectures provide enough theoretical tools to be able to analyse well the supply chain of a product?



Yes, the lectures provide all of the framework and foundations that you need to complete the assignments, we are also able to find frameworks elsewhere and use them, if we wish.



What was the makeup of other students, roughly? For instance, I'll be coming as part of a career change, moving away from a completely different policy area in which I've been working 7+ years. I imagine there's a pretty diverse set of people on the course?



The makeup of students is very diverse, as you predicted. We have people straight off undergrads to people who've not studied in 20+ years! Modules have both part time and full time students so it's quite diverse, which is a great way to learn!! worked in an artisan bakery for 4 years, then in food charities for 2 before starting the course and so share some experience with you in moving into quite a different field. There is obviously a lot of shared interest (FOOD!) which helps too 😊



Do you have access to additional research tools through the partnerships with Innovative Food Systems Teaching and Learning (IFSTAL)?



Hey - I'm not sure if there are additional research tools to be honest. Through City, University of London however there are most, if not all research tools you might need for assignments and dissertation. Is there something specific that you would be looking for?



IFSTAL doesn't provide additional research tools, however it does provide a fantastic opportunity to work with students from other disciplines and universities to develop a better understanding of food systems, not to mention meet more new people 😊. I believe IFSTAL is in the process of securing funding for future years, it would be worth checking their website to see if they have received it.



What did you enjoy the most during the MSc.? What are the key strengths that it has brought to you? And what do you consider to be a key skill to have to enrol to the MSc. ?



One of the best things about the course is the access to events, people and knowledge that are 'off the radar' normally. I've become engaged in public debates around food policy since doing this course. The other great part is how I have developed my critical analysis skills, the ability to look at a topic or evidence and develop well informed opinions about it.



Good questions!! I've enjoyed being in an academic environment after having finished my undergrad in 2011 and not studied since then! I've met people from different backgrounds with their own expertise which has really changed my approach to looking at how the food system works and how it can be improved. Re key strengths, my abilities to write clearly and think critically have greatly improved because of the assignments and ways we are taught to approach food systems and food policy. Regarding what you need for the course, some interest in wanting to understand the food system on a deeper layer is important. Food Policy is broad and complex, so having that curiosity is key to succeeding and enjoying the course!



Thanks! It's really helpful to know that living off campus is somewhat normal. And I really appreciate that! I will send you an email this afternoon (evening for you 😊)



Where are you living now? We have quite a few international students so I can forward your question to one of them 😊



Thanks for the answers! there is nothing in particular I'm looking for, I'm more just interested in how the relationship between City and IFSTAL works - if it's primarily lecturers, resources, career opportunities, funding, etc. Those answers helped provide context!



No problem!



You both touched on this a little, but could you provide some examples of career paths students are pursuing? I've heard of multiple students pursuing media-type careers or starting non-profits.



We have several current students who work at DEFRA (Dept for Environmental, food and rural affairs). Lots of people obviously go into the policy direction (either with government, local government or retailers), but as you said, lots of people also go into not for profits. I think one of the most valuable parts of the course has been realising that even if 'policy' isn't your 'thing', there are so many areas of the food system that you can become involved in and use your strengths to do something you really enjoy.



People seem to go in many different directions! Coming into the course, there have been chefs, food buyers, soil scientists, writers, biologists, charity workers, government workers... everything! The course would well prepare you to pursue working in any food-related career which has a focus on developing positive change.



Hello - thank you for providing these pieces of information. I would like to know about the career prospects. As part of the course is there an official body on campus that assists students connecting with employers or any career days organized by the university? Moreover, in MSc's site, it is stated that graduates can work in food businesses, except from NGOs etc, could you tell me some examples of food industries that alumni could work? And one more question, there is something I have to notice studying in this MSc course If I want to pursue a PhD in this field? Thank you very much for your help.



Hi - thanks for the question. On campus, the university generally provides a lot of support re career guidance and opportunities. The department itself forwards us opportunities for volunteer, part time and full time work. Regarding specific career days for the centre, I'm not sure if there is one but the course provides so many opportunities for networking and meeting people from industry that, if you are interested in a specific field, you can find people to talk to.



IFSTAL <https://www.ifstal.ac.uk/> provides great support in that respect, they send regular information about opportunities both in academia and career paths with NGO, charities governments and business.



Re industries other than NGOs, there are lots of food businesses who are actively 'improving' their purchasing policies, sustainability policies and so on and having a grounding in food policy can definitely prepare you for that. We have people who work for large restaurant groups, supermarkets, membership organisations and so. The skills learnt on the course are quite versatile. Regarding PhDs, I'm not sure if I understood your question correctly - did you mean do you have to do an MSc in Food Policy to do a PhD in Food Policy?



Last question: how are dissertations typically structured? Is it strictly a paper/essay format, or is there flexibility for the medium (i.e. a photography or video project, an article accompanied with a larger thesis paper, etc.)?



It's a 15,000 word assignment and don't think there is much flexibility on that! Does that answer your question? For my dissertation, I'm doing a media analysis (looking at how newspapers talk about meat substitute) but other people are doing interviews, focus groups, questionnaires etc. Let me know if that answers your question? Perhaps I've misunderstood it.



It has to be research based, that can be primary research (e.g. interviews, focus groups or observation), or secondary research, which is desk based, such as analysing press reporting on topics, policy analysis.



It's akin to writing a research paper for a journal but with a greater focus on literature review and illustrating that you've understood the key concepts of food policy. It is also meant to demonstrate your ability to do research itself



Thank you very much for your reply!! I mean if I have to do a specific preparation as I study in the MSc so that I can go to a doctoral degree, eg the dissertation.

