

## UCL Strategy 2022-27

### Consultation Response Phase 2 (Paper 5)

March 2022

#### Introduction

This document serves as a response to the discussion paper *Education priorities and programmes*, which was published by UCL in February 2022. This response has been put together through extensive consultation with elected officers and network of student representatives, including lively discussions of the papers in our Policy Zones<sup>1</sup>. We also canvassed feedback from our vast network of Academic Reps to help shape our response.

#### Project One – ‘Engage’ with the UCL community to design and deliver a UCL Teaching and Assessment Framework for the Future.

We agree that the assertion that a truly “cross-disciplinary education offer” has been underutilised at UCL, and that more can be done to equip students with the knowledge and skills that such opportunities provide. Students highlighted the importance of understanding different perspectives within teaching, with one stating that the mission of higher education should be to “provide people with different ways of thinking of the world and mechanisms for debate”. With this in mind, we believe that a new Teaching and Assessment Framework provides the opportunity to make the curriculum more inclusive and less Eurocentric, with a more global perspective to taught content. The Union has long campaigned not only for diversity in reading lists, but for taught content to celebrate the achievements of a diverse range of scientists, economists, philosophers and so on, as well as ensuring the institution reflects diversity in its staff. This would further embed ideas such as the Inclusive Curriculum Health Check, which we believe currently does not go far enough as it is heavily reliant on extensive buy-in from departments that it is embedded and sustained, which in many departments has not taken place.<sup>2</sup>

On the issue of assessment, we believe that the paper could go further with a stronger focus on this area of the Teaching and Assessment Framework, as this is covered in less detail than ideas around synergies between education and research, and cross-disciplinary education. The pandemic has provided us an opportunity to critically evaluate what assessment is needed, the form in which it takes place, and what assessment types are effective for the diverse range of needs and learning styles of our students. In addition, the 2022-27 UCL Strategy gives the institution the chance to reassess all forms of assessment and build a new assessment structure from the bottom up, with considerations around student wellbeing and assessment load at the core

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<sup>1</sup> <https://studentsunionucl.org/make-change#zones>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/teaching-learning/education-strategy/1-personalising-student-support/bame-awarding-gap-project/ucl-inclusive>

of any new assessment structure. New forms of assessment, such as more peer-to-peer assessed work, will help build connections between students as well as broadening the range of knowledge and skills tested in assessment, and it is imperative that UCL evaluates the form and structure of assessments at the heart of any new Teaching and Assessment Framework.

## Project Two – Empower staff and students by designing an Empowering Programme Architecture framework to ensure UCL education is futures-focussed, unbounded and sustainable

We agree with the general principle laid out in the paper that choice within modules can sometimes be illusory, with one student agreeing that “if you do give people the choice they should get that choice or it is not a choice at all”. In addition, many students highlighted the perception that the application of module choice was not always fair between courses, with a rep from a smaller course stating that “nobody is accepted onto these electives due to our course not been seen as an equal to some of the other perhaps more ‘well respected’ degrees such as law or medicine”. There are also issues with cohort sizes to consider. This can be especially true at Masters level, where many postgraduate taught degrees are extremely similar, often only differing by one or two modules. This often leads to extremely small cohort sizes, reducing the amount of support that can be offered as well as opportunities for peer-to-peer learning or groupwork, and it may be beneficial to consider whether consolidating such courses may help improve the student experience, providing a greater sense of belonging and strengthen future ‘Programme Architectures’.

However, students did remain positive about the general idea of having a wide breadth of options when choosing modules, endorsing the general principle that “choice is good”. One student suggested that “the range of modules offered at UCL is good for some programmes” but that actually some degrees are “lacking in choice”. Where there are issues with capacity and the ability to offer choice, such as “a level of administrative and organisational complexity that is unsustainable” that the paper highlights, students appreciate transparency and honesty with regards to what is feasible, with one describing how this allows students to “understand what they can do and to narrow their focus”.

Where possible, UCL should take a departmental and student-facing approach to creating this ‘Programme Architecture’ framework. For example, departments should be proactive in making sure inter-departmental modules are offered to students where appropriate, particularly where this would enhance their learning and benefit their skills. The institution would also benefit from continuing to engage with the student representation structures to implement these projects as they have done with feedback to this paper, and it has been highlighted by student reps that UCL could also use engagement with the Academic Reps Network to “understand what each department values in regards to the choice of modules available”.

## Project Three – ‘Connect’ existing staff development, student skills development and careers to create a new sector-leading Institute for Higher Education Development and Support

We believe that many of the existing UCL activities and functions mentioned related to careers and skills development can sometimes suffer from a lack of awareness in the student population, and believe that consolidating this into a single coherent institute may help in this regard, reducing the fragmentation of student skills support that is mentioned in the paper and making the services on offer clearer for students. However, it is crucial that any new institute recognises a global skills and career market, as currently relationships with employers can often be predominantly based in the UK, whereas many international students want support in starting a career in their home country or elsewhere in the world. This would be consistent with the global nature of the alumni network and UCL’s Vision and Mission, and we hope this will be matched by the taught content at the university.

When asked what should be prioritised as part of a new institute, students predominantly favoured a focus on skills development and enhanced careers and employability support in their feedback. The proposal for more employability to be embedded into the curriculum was echoed by some students, with suggestion that it would be useful to “integrate internships and career-related opportunities and skill-building into modules and courses, not just as an addition through UCL Careers”. When considering how this is implemented, it is important to note that students made it clear that they wanted this to take place in an inclusive manner, with some suggesting that careers support should be “more inclusive to all fields of study, and not science geared”, and another suggesting that this include more “minority-focussed work”.

## Project Four – Modernise the structure of the Academic Teaching Year to improve the student experience and create space for our distinctive UCL unbounded approach to education.

We believe that one of the significant challenges within the current term structure is that some students are assessed on modules they have completed in term 1 in the summer exam period, and therefore the idea proposed in the 2 Semester+ model that “all assessment is completed in the term in which teaching takes place” is appealing. Indeed, when surveyed as to their preference of academic year structure a majority of students (58%) preferred the 2 Semester+ model, and one student commented that it is “good to do exams straight after you study, especially with term 1 modules”. Another student commented that the 2 Semester+ model is “friendlier to international students”, and a structure such as this which is more in line with the international education sector would help international student transition, particularly with the often challenging transition to a new culture and education system for international students. On this note, it will also be important to consider the compatibility with international mobility for students with exchanges and semester abroad programmes when considering any changes in structure.

However, some students did highlight that in-term assessments may be difficult to manage alongside other commitments that exist outside of exam periods, suggesting that there are “lots of things going on in term 1 and 2”. With this in mind it may be necessary to consider this balance with any adjustment to the academic

teaching year, such as through the introduction of a winter exam period, which would also have the benefit of reducing the bunching of assessments and therefore alleviating student stress. Receiving feedback on term 1 assessments before assessments on term 2 modules would also help students improve their skills and knowledge during the academic year, helping improve their readiness for future assessment and work on any areas of improvement throughout the remainder of the academic year. On top of this, the introduction of an extra assessment point would help students progress more quickly throughout their course, as well as benefitting students who require extenuating circumstances in giving them opportunities to catch up, alleviating the pressure or requirement to further delay their studies that exists within the current structure.

With any changes to the structure of the academic teaching year, it is also important to consider the potential impact of reducing the number of teaching weeks in a module. For example, the suggestion of a 4 term model as inspired by the University of Twente may make it difficult for students to grasp the content at hand and develop their knowledge, with one student pointing out that “teaching experience shouldn’t be compromised” in any changes. Within any new teaching year structure, it is crucial that students don’t feel short-changed with regards to the volume and quality of teaching received, with learning placed at the forefront and not sacrificed for changes in assessment or the introduction of projects related to UCL’s ‘grand challenges’.

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