

A background photograph of a diverse group of young people, likely students, walking outdoors. They are smiling and looking in various directions. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent purple and blue gradient at the bottom.

Priorities

for Wellbeing

Report 2024

Introduction

The past year has been defined for many by the national cost-of-living crisis. Inflation reached a peak of 11.1% in October 2022, its highest level since 1981, and energy bills, food prices and rents in London have increased by up to 60%, 18% and 19% respectively. This has had dramatic impacts on student wellbeing, from their housing conditions to their ability to engage in sports and co-curricular activities. Worryingly, the past year has seen sharp increases in student mental health problems as a result of the cost-of-living crisis, with 81% of students nationally now reporting they have been directly impacted by mental health difficulties and 80% of UCL students having cut down time spent socialising.

This report draws on extensive desk-based research, alongside five focus groups with UCL students, quantitative and qualitative data from a national survey on the cost-of-living crisis, and semi-structured interviews with elected student leaders. The topics covered are split into the three broad categories of financial, mental and social, and physical wellbeing. The report makes clear that while students have been severely impacted across the board, marginalised groups of students have been particularly impacted in different areas. This analysis is drawn out through equity subsections which explore the experiences of particular marginalised groups in more detail.

As sabbatical officers we look forward to closely working with key stakeholders and decision-makers across UCL and the sector more broadly to ensure student wellbeing is not only a priority but a foundation towards enabling our students to make the best out of their time and experience at UCL, with support at arms reach, mitigating the impact of the current climate.



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Executive Summary

Every year the Priorities for Wellbeing Report highlights key areas impacting student wellbeing and develops recommendations for UCL to take action to address the issues identified. This years report has a strong focus on the cost-of-living crisis, which has seen inflation rise to a 40 year high and increased numbers of students pushed into poverty. The report analyses how the crisis has impacted student wellbeing in a broad range of different areas, divided between the categories of financial, mental and social, and physical wellbeing.

The financial wellbeing section covers financial support, housing and employment. The section highlights how existing financial support measures are inadequate to meet students' basic living costs, with the government's maintenance loan falling to its lowest level in real terms in seven years. In contrast, rents in London have risen sharply, pushing many students into deepening levels of financial precarity.

The mental and social wellbeing section analyses how the cost-of-living crisis has impacted student mental wellbeing and sense of community, demonstrating how the need for students to undertake more part-time work, as well as increased transport costs, has curtailed the ability of many to participate in activities crucial to bolstering belonging. Within this section there is also a focus on the experiences of trans students at UCL and Black students' experiences of accessing wellbeing support.

The final section highlights the importance of physical wellbeing and the importance of improving and expanding sporting facilities for UCL students.

In response to key issues identified, Students' Union UCL have made 5 commitments to better support student wellbeing, such as by starting an informational campaign on private housing, working to expand initiatives to provide free and low-cost events on campus, and further enhancing support for student staff at the Union. A full list of Students' Union UCL commitments, and recommendations for UCL, are available at the end of the report.

Key recommendations from this report are:

Financial Wellbeing

UCL should continue to review postgraduate research stipend levels in line with inflation.

UCL should explore options to increase undergraduate bursary levels in line with inflation on an annual basis.

UCL should commit to a much lower increase in rents over the next few years. Ideally, UCL should implement a rent freeze across all its accommodation for the 2024-2025 academic year and ensure that there is strong and meaningful consultation with students and engagement with the Students' Union in the rent setting process. As a minimum rents in some accommodation should be frozen to respond to the tough financial pressures facing students.

Mental and Social Wellbeing

UCL should invest in a significant expansion of the Union's gym at the Bloomsbury campus as part of a new Students' Union building and in expanding smaller sports facilities across campus.

UCL should rejoin the Stonewall equality scheme. For the duration of time that UCL are not part of a membership scheme UCL should uphold its promise to implement and expand upon the commitments in the LGBTQ+ action plan.

UCL should continue their work aimed at improving the diversity of their counsellors, and aim to employ more Black counsellors to ensure that students who request a Black counsellor do not face increased waiting times.

Physical Wellbeing

UCL should invest in greatly expanding the Union's gym at the Bloomsbury campus and expanding smaller sports facilities across campus.

UCL should invest in developing multi-sports facilities at the Lee Valley Hockey and Tennis Centre at the Olympic Park.

Recommendations for UCL and Students' Union Commitments

Recommendations for UCL:

1. UCL should work with the Students' Union to develop sustainable funding to support the Students' Union's hardship funds, including continuing to ringfence deductions from any future industrial action for Students Union hardship support.
2. UCL should continue to review postgraduate research stipend levels in line with inflation.
3. UCL should explore options to increase undergraduate bursary levels in line with inflation on an annual basis.
4. UCL should work with UUK and the Russell Group, to lobby the Government to increase financial support to students, including increasing the maintenance loan.
5. UCL should consider whether it can develop more roles for part-time student staff across its workforce, including in its professional services teams. UCL should consider enabling the SU to run more campus services to enable it to create more flexible and fairly paid student jobs on the campus.
6. UCL should liaise with the University of London housing service to ensure that the Private Housing Guide is updated more promptly and reflects current rental trends.
7. UCL should commit to a much lower increase in rents over the next few years. Ideally, UCL should implement a rent freeze across all its accommodation for the 2024-2025 academic year and ensure that there is strong and meaningful consultation with students and engagement with the Students' Union in the rent setting process. As a minimum rents in some accommodation should be frozen to respond to the tough financial pressures facing students.
8. UCL should raise awareness about the financial assistance fund and how to access it through a communications campaign
9. UCL should work in partnership with the Students' Union to develop a process for reviewing the guarantor rent threshold on an annual basis, ensuring it is reflective of the current rental market.
10. UCL should continue to invest in the staff team who process guarantor applications, ensuring that the team have capacity to process applications more quickly.
11. UCL should review the eligibility requirements for the contract length of the rent guarantor scheme. The scheme is currently capped at 12 months, but flexibility should be built in by allowing, on a case-by-case basis, for 18 month agreements to be considered if a student is unable to source a 12 month contract.

12. UCL should ensure that the Active Bystander Programme continues to be a core part of new students induction.
13. As part of the new Student Life Strategy, UCL should commit to deliver a new Students' Union building as a hub of student life and activities.
14. Support the Students' Union by working with other London Universities to lobby Transport for London and the Mayor of London to consider higher discounts for student transport.
15. UCL should work with the Students' Union to find a permanent funding source for the Gender Expression Fund, as current funding is only due to last to 2025.
16. UCL should rejoin the Stonewall equality scheme. For the duration of time that UCL are not part of a membership scheme UCL should uphold its promise to implement and expand upon the commitments in the LGBTQ+ action plan.
17. UCL should continue their work aimed at improving the diversity of their counsellors, and aim to employ more Black counsellors to ensure that students who request a Black counsellor do not face increased waiting times.
18. UCL should consider implementing cultural competency training for all UCL staff, to increase student confidence in approaching staff.
19. UCL should invest in a significant expansion of the Union's gym at the Bloomsbury campus as part of a new Students' Union building and in expanding smaller sports facilities across campus.
20. UCL should invest in developing multi-sports facilities at the Lee Valley Hockey and Tennis Centre at the Olympic Park.

Students' Union UCL Commitments:

1. The Union is aiming to introduce individual transferable skills plans for student staff and reviewing options to utilise different employment relationships dependent on the type of work.
2. Students' Union UCL should build on its existing work in supporting students by starting an informational campaign on private renting during the 2023-2024 academic year.
3. To work to expand initiatives to provide free and low cost events on campus for students as part of the Student Life Strategy.
4. To continue its to work to influence the Mayor of London to deliver further discounts on travel for students.
5. To empower the Student Networks by continuing to improve and review structures around student welfare, community and belonging, to ensure they are more effective and prominent to all students.

Financial Wellbeing

In March 2023 the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Students published their report on the impact of the cost of living crisis on students.¹ The report states that “most students are facing significant financial pressures, with some groups particularly hard hit” and that “the increasing cost of food, transport, accommodation and living expenses means this academic year has pushed many students to tipping point”. The report also highlighted how the value of maintenance loans has been consistently falling in real-terms, citing evidence that in 2020 the average loan already fell short of monthly living expenses by £223, which has now increased to a £439 monthly shortfall in 2022/23. The report states that ‘the real value of maintenance loans is now at the lowest level it has been for seven years’.

The Russell Group Students’ Unions (RGSU) recently published a report on the cost-of-living crisis, highlighting the ways in which students are struggling financially and the inability of existing financial support to bridge the gap between students income and the rising cost of living across the sector.²

- Over two thousand UCL students took part in the RGSU cost of living survey. Of those students:
- 97% were concerned about the current cost of living crisis
- 96% had seen their cost of living increase in the last 12 months
- 51% of students felt confident that they have enough money to cover their basic cost of living
- 36% stated that ‘I would be able to cover the cost of an emergency’
- 21% said that they regularly go without food or necessities because they cannot afford them

This is an incredibly worrying picture and shows that many of our students are living with very significant financial challenges to pay basic living costs. This clearly has the potential to have a substantial impact on their wellbeing, academic achievement and ability to enjoy their time at UCL.



Financial Support

Universities across the country have responded to the cost-of-living crisis with a range of support packages, including increasing hardship support funds, providing targeted support and in some cases providing one-off grants to all students. At UCL, the university has increased the financial support offered to students. The total amount of money available in the Financial Assistance Fund has been increased, with a 34% increase in the average grant value compared to last year,³ and stipend funding to doctoral researchers has been uplifted in line with inflation to the new UKRI minimum rate of £19,668. This is a welcome move and has undoubtedly helped a large number of students.

UCL and the Students' Union have worked in partnership to increase levels of funding available to directly support students, which has had a demonstrable impact in easing the financial pressures students face. In 2013 the Students' Unions Sarah Douglas Hardship Fund was established to help students experiencing financial difficulty and with no alternative support available. Over the past year UCL have allocated an additional £640,000 saved from strike deductions to the fund. As a result, the Union has been able to:

- Distribute more than £220,000 to students in need.
- Give out over £150,000 via the hardship fund.
- Award 166 emergency grants to students, totalling £24,900.
- Support 131 students to participate in extra-curricular activities, totalling £24,338.
- Support 63 students with £5,680 worth of graduation costs.

This funding administered by the Students' Union has had a positive impact for students facing financial hardship. One student who received a grant said "it is... a big mental relief, knowing that I can keep focusing on work rather than running around to try and find some shifts".⁴ Another stated that "The Sarah Douglas Hardship fund helped me (and my family) through an incredibly difficult time", getting a grant which "helped to take off a lot of financial pressure, allowing me to continue studying, and giving me some time to get back on my feet".⁵

It should be noted, however, that allocating deductions from industrial action to hardship funding administered by the Students' Union was a one-off decision and no commitment to continuing this in the future has yet been made. This puts the sustainability of Students' Union funds such as the Sarah Douglas Hardship fund in question. The Union have begun exploring fundraising opportunities to seek to diversify sources of income. However, a longer term solution to ensuring the sustainability of these funds is needed to ensure that they can continue to support students in future years.

It also remains the case that a minority of students access hardship funding and that more is needed to support students at a time of acute financial hardship. At UCL, 51% of students were not aware of the financial assistance available from the university or Students' Union, and only 7% reported accessing these funds.⁶ As well as issues with awareness of existing funds, students commonly reported barriers to accessing these funds when they were aware of them such as being hesitant to apply due to perceptions that the application processes were time-consuming and sometimes invasive. Furthermore, research by the Office for Students has found that

¹ [APPG-Students-Report-Cost-of-Living-Inquiry-220323.pdf \(nationbuilder.com\)](#)

² [Cost+of+Living+Report+-+March+2023.pdf \(squarespace.com\)](#)

³ <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/alumni/news/2022/nov/our-students-and-cost-living-message-students-union-ucl-alumni-community>

⁴ <https://studentsunionucl.org/articles/what-its-like-getting-financial-support>

⁵ <https://studentsunionucl.org/articles/what-its-like-getting-financial-support>

⁶ RGSU Cost of Living Survey Unpublished Data

some students don't apply for hardship funding given the perceived stigma associated with asking for financial help.⁷ However, it is pertinent that awareness levels of financial assistance funds were higher for groups of students who traditionally may face increased levels of hardship. Awareness was higher for disabled, mature, first-generation, care-experienced or estranged students, and those from low-income backgrounds, which is positive given that these are groups of students more likely to need to access these funds whilst at university.

Outside of universities, research⁸ has found that during times of intensified economic hardship it can be more effective in alleviating poverty to increase existing financial support methods (e.g. government benefits) than to give one-off payments. Therefore, considering increasing the rates of existing financial support such as stipends and undergraduate bursaries may be beneficial, and would potentially reach a larger pool of students who may not apply for hardship funds due to lack of awareness, stigma associated with asking for help, or concerns around the application process.

UCL increased the cash bursary for UK domiciled undergraduate students across all household income levels by £500 between 2020/21 and 2021/22. The Students' Union welcomed this move and the benefits it brought to students. The rate for 2022/23, however, has remained at this level. Increasing the bursaries in line with inflation would make a significant impact in supporting students from lower income backgrounds and minimising financial hardship. Furthermore, continuing to review and increase the level of research stipends would be a welcome source of support for postgraduate students.

Recommendations for UCL:

UCL to work with the Students' Union to develop sustainable funding to support the Students' Union's hardship funds, including continuing to ringfence deductions from any future industrial action for Students Union hardship support.

UCL to continue to review postgraduate research stipend levels in line with inflation.

UCL to explore options to increase undergraduate bursary levels in line with inflation on an annual basis.

UCL to work with UUK and the Russell Group, to lobby the Government to increase financial support to students, including increasing the maintenance loan.

Employment and Employability

Over the past academic year many students have increased the number of hours they are working in order to be able to afford rising bills and living expenses. Research by the Sutton Trust found that 49% of undergraduate students nationally have missed classes this academic year to undertake paid work, with 23% reporting missing a deadline or asking for an extension in order to work. Of students in their second year or above, 31% reported an increase in their hours of paid work compared to the previous year.⁹

Of the 2,247 UCL students who responded to the RGSU survey, 29% indicated that they worked alongside their studies. On average, full-time students worked 15 hours per week while part time students worked 32 hours.

⁸ <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/poverty-chapter>

⁹ [New polling on the impact of the cost of living crisis on students - Sutton Trust](#)

Postgraduate students were particularly likely to be working high numbers of hours, with Postgraduate Taught (PGT) students working an average of 21 hours and Postgraduate Research (PGR) students 26 hours.

The increase in hours worked further demonstrates the financial hardship that large numbers of students have been pushed into and the inadequacy of existing financial support. Responses from UCL students to the RGSU survey demonstrate the significant impact working is having on students wellbeing and academic studies. One student commented that 'working has also increased stress because I fear falling behind' while another stated that 'my mental health and studies have been severely affected due to having to work too much and the pressure this adds'. It is crucial that UCL and the Students' Union work together to lobby national policymakers to ensure more financial support is made available to students, and therefore reduce the amount of hours students need to work.

The graduate labour market continues to be highly competitive, with an average of 62 applicants per graduate hire.¹⁰ With rising numbers of students taking on additional paid employment to help fund their studies it is important that universities and Students' Unions work to ensure that students are working in safe and beneficial environments. Ideally, students should be able to undertake employment that is flexible around their studies and helps them gain new skills to complement their university education.

The part time jobs many students are working includes being employed directly by UCL or the Students' Union, as well as working in many other local businesses and other organisations across London. UCL employs a large number of students, mainly through the internal recruitment agency Unitemps. The Students' Union employ a smaller number of staff. As a registered London living wage employer, the salaries students receive at the Students' Union are higher than most other local employers.

Given the need for more and more students to work alongside their studies, we recommend that UCL considers whether it can develop more roles for part-time student staff across its workforce, including in its professional services teams. It could also consider prioritising part-time student staff employment when expanding commercial services in future.

The Union has gathered a range of data and feedback from its student staff on their experiences of employment from focus groups and a staff engagement survey run by Agenda Consulting on behalf of the Union. Both the survey and focus group demonstrate that students largely feel positive about working for the Union, with 93% agreeing that 'I would recommend this organisation as a good place to work' and widespread agreement in the focus group that the Union cares about the wellbeing of its staff.

Through the survey and focus group student staff have also highlighted some key areas where the Union could improve as an employer, particularly regarding the security of student contracts and opportunities for training and development. The Union are committed to working to address these areas. For example, the Union is aiming to introduce individual transferable skills plans for student staff and reviewing options to utilise different employment relationships dependent on the type of work.

As well as providing opportunities for students to develop skills through employment, UCL Careers Service also provides training, events and support for students aimed to increase their employability. Over the past two years UCL have prioritised supporting students' employability prospects through the UCL Pillars of Employability framework, which seeks to embed employability in the curriculum to ensure students are building the skills they will need.

¹⁰ [Careers Annual report 2021-22.pdf \(ucl.ac.uk\)](#)

A key goal of the Student Life Strategy is to prepare students for graduate employment through ‘a strong partnership between the Students’ Union and UCL Careers’. In 2021-22 1548 students attended the Autumn Careers Fairs and 488 students participated in Employer and Alumni-led Skills events. It will be important to continue monitoring the impact these initiatives have as further graduate outcomes surveys are published.

However, it is again clear that employability is an area where the cost-of-living crisis has had a major impact. Just 42% of UCL students responding to the RGSU report felt confident about finding work after graduation. As well as concerns around being able to find work after graduation given the competitiveness of the graduate job market, students were also concerned about whether they would be able to secure employment with a high enough salary to support themselves, particularly given our position in London. Recent analysis by the Resolution Foundation found that the average UK worker is £11,000 worse off after 15 years of “almost completely unprecedented” wage stagnation¹¹. Student respondents to the Cost of Living survey pointed to this as a source of worry, highlighting that “the cost of living in London has increased, however, the salaries are still the same”.

We recommend that UCL considers whether it can develop more roles for part-time student staff across its workforce, including in its professional services teams. They should also consider prioritising employment opportunities for part-time student staff when expanding commercial outlets in the future.

Students’ Union UCL Commitment:

The Union is aiming to introduce individual transferable skills plans for student staff and reviewing options to utilise different employment relationships dependent on the type of work.

Recommendation for UCL:

UCL to consider whether it can develop more roles for part-time student staff across its workforce, including in its professional services teams. UCL should consider enabling the SU to run more campus services to enable it to create more flexible and fairly paid student jobs on the campus.

Housing

Research shows that students housing conditions are a crucial determinant of their wider sense of wellbeing and belonging. A Wonkhe belonging and inclusion survey found that 66% of students cited their living circumstances as playing a significant role in how settled they feel at university, more than any other factor¹³. This section considers the challenges students face both in the private rented sector and in renting at UCL managed accommodation, drawing on focus groups as well as interviews with student officers, and a wider review of relevant sector research.

¹¹ [UK workers £11,000 worse off after years of wage stagnation – thinktank | UK cost of living crisis | The Guardian](#)

¹² [About us | UCL Accommodation - UCL – University College London](#)

¹³ <https://wonkhe.com/wp-content/wonkhe-uploads/2022/02/Belonging-and-inclusion-survey-Wonkhe-Pearson-Feb-22.pdf>

Two key areas were identified through this research as being particularly challenging for students: finding accommodation and rental costs. The specific challenges facing international students are also considered in the equity subsection.

- **Finding Accommodation**

UCL students clearly value UCL student halls over alternative forms of accommodation. In UCLs 2023 Accommodation Exit Survey 47% of students said that, if given the option, they would choose to live in halls again for next year, an increase from 41% in 2022. The key reasons students cited were convenience, the sense of community, and value for money in comparison to the private rental market. There is, however, a critical shortage of UCL owned accommodation. UCL allocates approximately 7,500 beds across 26 halls in London,¹² which when fully allocated covers just 14.7% of UCLs total student population. A key means by which UCL can support students in finding accommodation is to expand its housing supply.

The London rental market is widely recognised to be in crisis, with the Mayor of London Sadiq Khan calling housing “the biggest crisis facing our city”¹⁴ as rental costs rise rapidly and record high levels of demand are sustained. August 2022 saw the highest level of demand ever recorded for rental properties in London, and in September 29 applicants registered for every new property let on the market¹⁵. A report by Zoopla found that the availability of homes for rent per renter in London is worse than any other part of the UK.¹⁶ The picture is unlikely to change in the near future, with the CEO of HomeLet stating that “the lack of available properties means the market is likely to continue to be very competitive”.¹⁷

This academic year, 30% of all Students’ Union Advice Service cases concerned housing, and the service has also seen a 19% increase in students looking at the ‘finding accommodation’ webpage over the past year. Students in our focus group stressed the difficulties they faced in finding adequate accommodation. One commented that “the biggest challenge we faced was how competitive it [the London rental market] was”, pointing to the “risks of being outbid by other people because there’s so many other people in London that also want the same room as you”. This corresponds with a wide range of reports that tenants across London are being forced into bidding wars to secure properties or being pressured to pay vast sums up front given the fierce competition for rooms.¹⁸

Support is available to UCL students navigating the private rental market, both through the University of London Housing Services and the Students’ Union Advice Service. UCL is a member of University of London Housing Services, which provides an important service to all University of London students in supporting students to find accommodation and navigate the private rental market. The support includes a register of independent halls of residence, a housing platform which is regularly updated and a list of registered letting agents.

The Students’ Union’s Advice Service offers support to students on housing issues by signposting to a wide range of resources and information, including information on finding accommodation. Between September and December 2022 almost half of the team’s cases related directly to looking for accommodation. Whilst there is a range of support available for students at UCL in regard to housing, there was limited

¹⁴ <https://www.londonworld.com/news/sadiq-khan-the-biggest-crisis-facing-londoners-is-housing-london-mayor-claims-4203304>

¹⁵ [Average London rents soar to £553 per week record high as renters face ‘crisis’ | ITV News London](#)

¹⁶ [Rental market report: what’s happening to rents? - Zoopla](#)

¹⁷ [Bidding wars: inside the super-charged fight for rental properties | Renting property | The Guardian](#)

¹⁸ [Bidding wars, cash up-front and ‘auditions’ – inside Britain’s broken renting market | Renting property | The Guardian](#)

awareness of the support on offer in our focus groups. One student commented that “there was not enough information on the UCL website, and it could really benefit students and make them feel adequately supported if more information could be published” regarding housing advice. Another student who had accessed the University of London Housing Services website stated that “the portal was outdated and not user-friendly”. The Private Housing Guide published annually had not been updated for 2023-2024 as of June 2023. Given that the housing market has changed dramatically over the past year this presented problems for students who were starting to look for accommodation for the upcoming academic year.

Students’ Union UCL Commitment:

Students’ Union UCL will build on its existing work in supporting students by starting an informational campaign on private renting during the 2023-2024 academic year.

Recommendation for UCL:

UCL should liaise with the University of London housing service to ensure that their Private Housing Guide is updated more promptly and reflects current rental trends.

● **Rental Costs**

Private rental prices across London have increased by an estimated 17% in the past year, with the average monthly rental bill now standing at £2,200.¹⁹ Average asking prices in London stand even higher at £2,500 according to the property website Rightmove²⁰. Energy bills, meanwhile, have increased nationally by an average of £276/year.

The National Student Accommodation survey found that the proportion of student tenants struggling with rent was up to 63% compared to 53% in 2022, with 72% saying their health is affected by rental costs and 10% of students in rent arrears, owing an average of £409.²¹ An NUS survey found that 64% of students disagree that their student loan or bursary covers the cost of their energy bills,²² and RGSU analysis found that the average student is likely to fall below the UK poverty line after average housing costs are taken into account.²³

Qualitative responses from UCL students to the RGSU report provide further insight into the impact rising rents are having on student wellbeing. One student said that rising rents and bills mean that they collectively take up 75% of their monthly spending, meaning they and their friends “can’t afford to heat our flats, [and] it got to the point in winter where I became very ill, and the conditions made it worse”. Another was forced to leave their flat due to an “extortionate increase in rent” of £200 per month, meaning they have had to move to a flat in worse condition in a cheaper area which “has had a detrimental impact on my general wellbeing and quality of life”. A third said that they “live in extremely poor quality housing with people who are noisy and aggressive but I cannot afford to move” and that “rent is my biggest expense and cause of my poor mental health / wellbeing”.

¹⁹ [Average monthly rent outside London now more than £1,000, says agency | Renting property | The Guardian](#)

²⁰ [Average monthly rents hit £2,500 in London and £1,190 for rest of UK | Renting property | The Guardian](#)

²¹ [National Student Accommodation Survey 2022 – Results - Save the Student](#)

²² [PowerPoint Presentation \(nationbuilder.com\)](#)

²³ [Cost of Living Report March 2023.pdf \(squarespace.com\)](#)

Rents have also increased steeply at UCL owned accommodation. Average rents have been increasing over the past six years, with a median increase of 26% from 2017/18 to 2023/24. Rents between 2022/23 to 2023/24 have increased by 11% across nearly all rooms and accommodation buildings. This includes increases in the cheapest accommodation available where rents had previously been frozen. Single rooms in Max Rayne House, the cheapest UCL accommodation available, had decreased from £135.59 per week to £130.97 between 2017-18 and 2022-23. They have now increased by 11%, up to £145.39 per week, for 2023/24. This compares to an increase of just 2.8% in the undergraduate student loan.

Across our democratic structures at the Students' Union, we have seen widespread support for action to address housing costs, including the implementation of a rent freeze. For the past 18 months the Mayor of London Sadiq Khan has called for a two-year rent freeze, similar to the policies introduced in Scotland, Berlin and Paris. In February 2023 a policy proposal was unanimously passed at the Welfare and Community Zone calling for the Students' Union to support the mayor's call for a London wide rent freeze and calling for UCL to implement a rent freeze across all UCL accommodation. This also featured prominently in officer manifestos for the 2023 leadership race, and in both our housing focus groups we found unanimous support for the proposal.

The Students' Union's understanding is that while rent levels continue to increase, UCL makes a surplus from accommodation and so the rent increases are not only about meeting rising costs in providing accommodation. UCL should commit to greatly reducing rent increases and ideally a rent freeze across all its accommodation for the 2024-2025 academic year. It should also ensure that there is strong student representation and consultation in the rent setting process through engagement with the Students' Union. Longer term it should consider the financial model for its accommodation and whether it is appropriate for a surplus to be derived from providing an essential accommodation service for students, which is a core part of their university experience.

● **Spotlight On: International Students**

International students face a particularly difficult set of challenges in accessing affordable housing. Landlords normally require a UK based guarantor which many international students are not able to provide. Where international students are not able to provide a guarantor, they are often asked to pay 6 months rent in advance, and our Advice Service have heard from students of cases of landlords requiring as much as one year's rent upfront.

UCL provides a rent guarantor scheme which supports eligible full-time UCL students to rent privately, by UCL acting as the guarantor for students who would otherwise be unable to secure a UK-based rent guarantor. As well as international students, the scheme is particularly important for estranged and care experienced students who are less likely to be able to provide a UK based guarantor. Unite Foundation Students have called on universities to offer a free guarantor service for care experienced and estranged students, as it is not currently common across the sector.²⁴ The fact that UCL provides such a scheme, in contrast with many other universities, is commendable. The scheme increases students' chances of finding affordable and suitable accommodation, saving money, and improving their quality of life. By continuing to provide this valuable scheme to students, UCL can have a big impact in helping to tackle inequalities that exist in accessing housing.

Feedback from a range of student officers and staff members at Students' Union UCL highlighted several

²⁴ <https://www.change.org/p/universities-provide-a-free-rent-guarantor-for-all-estranged-care-experienced-students-beourguarantor?redirect=false>

areas where the scheme could be improved to increase its impact in supporting students. The first concerns the rental price at which the guarantor scheme is capped. Having been set initially at £1000 per calendar month it has recently increased to £1300. There were a range of opinions expressed on the cap level, with some student officers welcoming the recent increase and others arguing that it remains too low given that it is lower than average London private rental prices.

UCL could address concerns regarding the cap and ensure transparency regarding how the cap levels are set. One suggestion would be for the cap to be benchmarked against a private rental index. The cap could be reviewed on an annual basis in partnership with student representatives, ensuring it is modified in relation to the rapidly changing rental market.

Another key issue is that students have reported waiting times of several weeks to hear back when applying for the guarantor scheme. This delay can diminish the impact of the scheme for some students, as they are often asked by landlords to submit their documents, references, and guarantor details within a very short time period. One student in our housing focus group, for example, reported that a landlord gave them one week to return all documents and confirm their guarantor, but they didn't hear back from the guarantor scheme for two weeks, meaning they were unable to secure the accommodation. By better resourcing the staff team processing applications for the scheme, and therefore giving the team the capacity to process applications more quickly, UCL can increase the effectiveness of the scheme.

A third key issue identified is that many students are reporting that landlords are increasingly only offering 18 or 24 month tenancies. This means many students who would benefit greatly from accessing UCL's guarantor scheme may miss out due to the eligibility requirement for the contract length to be a maximum of 12 months. Reviewing this requirement would be a positive step in ensuring students are able to access and benefit from the scheme.

Recommendations for UCL:

UCL should commit to a much lower increase in rents over the next few years. Ideally, UCL should implement a rent freeze across all its accommodation for the 2024-2025 academic year and ensure that there is strong and meaningful consultation with students and engagement with the Students' Union in the rent setting process. As a minimum rents in some accommodation should be frozen to respond to the tough financial pressures facing students.

UCL to raise awareness about the financial assistance fund and how to access it through a communications campaign

UCL to work in partnership with the Students' Union to develop a process for reviewing the guarantor rent threshold on an annual basis, ensuring it is reflective of the current rental market.

UCL to continue to invest in the staff team who process guarantor applications, ensuring that the team have capacity to process applications more efficiently.

UCL should review the eligibility requirements for the contract length of the rent guarantor scheme. The scheme is currently capped at 12 months, but flexibility should be built in by allowing, on a case-by-case basis, for 18 month agreements to be considered if a student is unable to source a 12 month contract.



Mental and Social Wellbeing

Community and Belonging

Students' sense of community and belonging has a crucial impact on their wider happiness and wellbeing. Research has found that when students feel a sense of belonging, this is positively associated with academic success and motivation, and higher self-belief in their chances of success in their course²⁵. Further research has found that whilst 75% of students who felt like they belong at their university reported feeling happy, just 19% of those who said they do not belong felt happy.²⁶ The cost-of-living crisis has meant that students have faced a particularly difficult set of challenges over the past year in building a sense of community and belonging. To help tackle this in the long term, the development of the Student Life Strategy has presented a clear vision for greatly improving students' extra/co-curricular and social experience at UCL. Successfully delivering on this strategy, and the infrastructural upgrades necessary to facilitate it, will be a big step towards addressing some of the challenges students face in building communities and sense of belonging at UCL.

One area of great importance to students' belonging is the welcome they receive when arriving at UCL. Previous versions of this report focused on the pandemic which had a wide range of detrimental impacts on students' ability to build a sense of belonging and foster student communities, including in disrupting the welcome that students received. Reflecting students' return to campus, the 2022 edition of this report showed substantial improvements in regard to student satisfaction about the welcome they received compared to the previous year. The headline figures from the most recent New to UCL Survey demonstrate that student satisfaction has largely stabilised when it comes to students' welcome period at UCL and continues to be higher than during the COVID-19 pandemic.

88% of students agreed that they feel welcome and part of the wider UCL community, down slightly from 90% in the previous year but still significantly higher than during the pandemic (79%, 2020). Positively, the percentage agreeing that they found the social events in the first week helped them to settle in remained high at 79%. Furthermore, the number of students that had been able to make social connections with peers in their department or on my programme increased by 5 points to 87%. Students in our focus group on community and belonging highlighted the importance of welcome week, with one saying it "was quite effective to me, to meet new people outside of your course and get an introduction to the Union." Another student commented that since COVID the welcome period "[has] improved".

Another area of great importance to students' sense of community and belonging is their ability to build inclusive communities on campus, feel safe and challenge the prevalence of harassment, bullying, microaggressions and other harmful or inappropriate behaviour. Since 2014, the Students' Union have been running the Active Bystander Programme. This was initially aimed at tackling sexual harassment and sexual violence but has now expanded to cover a wider range of unacceptable behaviours. A recent evaluative report on the Programme cited a range of evidence that bystander programmes have a variety of positive outcomes on students' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours.²⁷ This included increased confidence to safely intervene when witnessing unacceptable behaviour and decreased rape-supporting attitudes and acceptance of rape-myths.²⁸

²⁵ [https://www.ucl.ac.uk/teaching-learning/publications/2020/apr/creating-sense-belonging-your-students#:~:text=Research%20indicates%20a%20sense%20of,their%20course%20\(Verschelden%202017\)](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/teaching-learning/publications/2020/apr/creating-sense-belonging-your-students#:~:text=Research%20indicates%20a%20sense%20of,their%20course%20(Verschelden%202017))

²⁶ [Belonging-and-inclusion-survey-Wonkhe-Pearson-Feb-22.pdf](#)

²⁷ [ABT Report 2022-2023 \(1\).pdf \(studentsunionucl.org\)](#)

²⁸ [ABT Report 2022-2023 \(1\).pdf \(studentsunionucl.org\)](#)

In term one of the 2022-23 academic year, 6,608 students engaged with either the online module or the live workshops, a total of around 13% of enrolled students. Data from September-December 2022 shows that 86% stated that they feel more prepared to intervene after attending the workshop. Continuing to deliver and expand upon the Active Bystander Programme is an area where the Students' Union can make a significant impact in improving student wellbeing. By empowering students to identify and safely tackle unacceptable behaviours on campus, students can contribute to creating a greater sense of community and belonging for all.

The cost-of-living crisis has presented major difficulties to students in building a sense of community and belonging this year, with many students unable to attend extracurricular events due to financial barriers. Aside from this, rising rent costs in Central London have led to an increase in students commuting longer distances. Given increasing travel costs, this has meant that many students are decreasing how often they travel to campus.

One student from the focus group commented that “a lot of [their friends] were avoiding coming to the university”. This is a theme that also came across strongly within the UCL responses to the RGSU survey. One PGR student said that “I’ve had to be careful picking when I actually go into uni... because of the cost of travel. I feel very limited”. Another stated that “due to high costs from Kent to London for study... I have had to get a part-time job to cover those expenses. I do not have time to socialise and have not been able to mingle with coursemates or join societies”. A third states that “I don’t socialise or go out because I cannot afford to. I try to keep my expenses to the minimum by buying just the basic groceries and traveling only when I need to attend lectures”.

Over the past year Students' Union UCL has done some initial work coordinating with other London Students' Unions to formulate a strategy for lobbying the Mayor of London for discounted tube fares, free bus travel and improved discounts on Santander cycle hire for students. This would help minimise the financial barriers that students face in travelling to university and participating in the university community. This is something the Students' Union will continue to work on over the next year. UCL should support the Students' Union in



this aim and seek to work with other London universities to help influence Transport for London and other transport operators to consider higher discounts for students.

The Student Life Strategy is a comprehensive plan for UCL and the Students' Union to work in partnership to deliver transformative improvements in extra and co-curricular activities for students and therefore improve students' sense of community and belonging. It sets out an ambitious range of targets for 2028 in the six priority areas of sport and physical activity, performing and creative arts, community volunteering, intercultural engagement, departmental societies, and vibrant student life in the heart of London.

The ambitious targets and commitment to working in partnership with the Students' Union, respecting the Students' Union's role as UCL's main delivery partner for extra-curricular and social experience for students, is extremely welcome. The strategy acknowledges the need to develop 'appropriate facilities that support an excellent extra- and co-curricular experience'. Central to this is the need for a new Students' Union building. The strategy pledges to 'review the Students' Union's social spaces, with a view to significantly increase capacity and enable the Union to play a more prominent role in social spaces across the campus'.

There is a wide range of evidence that social and communal spaces are important determinants of students' wellbeing and sense of community on campus. One study found that 'the development and maintenance of a community on campus is affected by spaces and buildings' and that 'overcrowding in common spaces prevents students from feeling part of a community and affects their well-being'.²⁹ UCL students have repeatedly highlighted the lack of space on campus as a key issue, with one student in a staff-student consultative committee (SSCC) meeting stating that 'we need common space... so that different programmes have space to meet each other', and another stating that 'students would like to have a space to sit down and have a chat'.

Delivering a new Union building would have a huge impact on student life in many ways; for example in enabling the Union to address the lack of adequate prayer spaces across campus, expand music practice and arts facilities, and providing adequate space for students to seek support and advice. The building would provide crucial social space and create a focal point for student life on campus, bringing the Students' Union facilities in line with what students would expect from a world leading university such as UCL. Prioritising the financing and delivery of a new Students' Union building is a key area where UCL could make a big constructive difference to students' sense of community and belonging.

Students' Union UCL Commitment:

To work to expand initiatives to provide free and low cost events on campus for students as part of the Student Life Strategy.

To continue its to work to influence the Mayor of London to deliver further discounts on travel for students.

²⁹ [How university spaces and buildings impact students | StuComm](#)

Recommendations for UCL:

UCL should ensure that the Active Bystander Programme continues to be a core part of new students' induction.

As part of the new Student Life Strategy, UCL should commit to deliver a new Students' Union building as a hub of student life and activities.

Support the Students' Union by working with other London Universities to lobby Transport for London and the Mayor of London to consider higher discounts for student transport.

Spotlight On: Transphobia

The Wonkhe belonging and inclusion survey found wide discrepancies in student wellbeing levels for different groups.³⁰ For example, while 35% of all students report feeling lonely, this rises to 52% for non-binary students, 54% for trans students, and 50% for disabled students. They also found that whilst 52% of respondents had been involved with clubs, groups, or organisations since starting university, this falls to 44% for Asian students and 35% for Black students. Data from the most recent New to UCL survey supports these trends, although the discrepancy is smaller: while 46% of white students said they had signed up to a club or society, this drops to 40% for Black and Asian students.

Transphobia has been identified by many student officers as a critical issue to tackle at UCL. Analysis of manifestos for the Students' Union 2022-23 leadership race found that tackling transphobia and supporting trans liberation are key priorities for students, particularly those running for equity and inclusion related roles. Two key issues were raised within these manifestos: the need to tackle transphobic attitudes amongst staff and students, and the impact of institutional decisions made by UCL on trans and gender diverse students.

One student officer described how “there’s an air of transphobia everywhere” at UCL, giving an example of students on his course constantly misgendering him and refusing to put their pronouns in their bios. Concerns over transphobia were also raised in the 2023 open National Student Survey comments, with students highlighting the need for more to be done to support LGBTQ+ students, the negative impact that leaving Stonewall programmes had on students' perceptions of safety and inclusivity, and, again, experiences of trans students being misgendered whilst at university.

Aside from the Active Bystander Programme, one way in which the Students' Union plays a role in tackling transphobia and other unacceptable behaviours is through the liberation networks. There are five liberation networks which bring students from different marginalised groups together to challenge and campaign against discrimination, oppression and inequality faced by themselves or others. The Trans Students' Network works specifically to support trans and non-binary students.

While the networks play an important role in supporting trans students, feedback from officers highlighted initiatives that the Students' Union could adopt to make the networks more effective. These steps included better publicising them on the website, making wellbeing or welfare officers available to the liberation networks as in clubs and societies, and more clearly establishing the role the networks play within the Students' Union. The Students' Union has committed to reviewing the structure and support for networks, as part of its review

³⁰ [Belonging-and-inclusion-survey-Wonkhe-Pearson-Feb-22.pdf](#)

of Student Officer positions in 2023-24.

As well as supporting the liberation networks, UCL and Students' Union UCL have also worked in partnership over the past year to deliver financial support for trans and gender diverse students through the Gender Expression Fund. The fund provides financial assistance for students to purchase items that will make them more comfortable with their gender presentation and improve their wellbeing. £3000 was designated for this fund in 2022/23 and £4,844 was distributed, with Students' Union UCL dedicating additional funding after demand outstripped supply. Students have reported that this fund has made a significant difference and it is important that UCL commits to continuing this fund in future years.

The other key issue identified is how institutional decisions taken by UCL have impacted feelings of safety and inclusion for trans students. Last year UCL made the decision not to re-join Stonewall's Diversity Champions scheme or make a submission to the Workplace Equality Index. Students' Union UCL responded to this decision by saying that: "we find this decision extremely disappointing, one we know will have a serious impact on our trans community in particular". One incoming officer said that this decision "sent a negative message to all trans students... and a lot of students are still upset about that and just don't feel safe". Two candidates for the Equity and Inclusion Officer role, including the student successfully elected, included a manifesto point on lobbying UCL to rejoin Stonewall.

Students' Union UCL Commitment:

To empower the Student Networks by continuing to improve and review structures around student welfare, community and belonging, to ensure they are more effective and prominent to all students.

UCL Recommendations:

UCL should work with the Students' Union to find a permanent funding source for the Gender Expression Fund, as current funding is only due to last to 2025.

UCL should rejoin the Stonewall equality scheme. For the duration of time that UCL are not part of a membership scheme, UCL should uphold its promise to implement and expand upon the commitments in the LGBTQ+ action plan.

Mental Health

UCL offer a range of services to support students facing mental health challenges. UCL's Student Support & Wellbeing offer a range of services, including free counselling, psychological support, workshops and advice on issues around disability, mental health and wellbeing. Students can also access a 24/7 Student Support Line, open 365 days a year, which provides immediate short-term counselling focused on practical solutions.

Previous versions of the Student Priorities for Wellbeing Report have recommended that UCL gains

accreditation with the University Mental Health Charter Award with Student Minds, a charter which sets out and monitors Universities commitment to principles of best practice. In December 2022, UCL successfully achieved accreditation, a significant achievement and a clear demonstration of the successful outcomes that can be achieved when UCL and the Students' Union work together in partnership.

Staff at UCL play a crucial role in supporting students' mental health. Students' Union UCL recent report, 'What Students Value Most',³¹ draws on qualitative data from the 936 nominations for this year's Student Choice Awards. Support staff nominated for an award were praised for leading with care and kindness in their interactions with students as well as for acting efficiently and providing support in a dependably swift and reliable manner. Students highlighted Personal Tutors who supported student mental health by providing a listening ear, practical advice, and effective signposting. Furthermore, the Union's Teaching Excellence Framework Submission³² highlighted that a student's Personal Tutor had a profound impact on their overall experience at UCL. When Personal Tutors were contactable, compassionate, and supportive, this was beneficial to students both academically and pastorally, as Personal Tutors are often the first point of contact for a student who may be struggling.

There is a wide range of evidence that student mental health problems have increased in the past year. The Cibyl 2022 Student Mental Health Research Study, which surveyed over 12,000 students, found that 81% of students are directly impacted by mental health difficulties, up from 60% in 2021.³³ 61% have experienced depression and/or anxiety and 43% said their mental health had declined since starting university.³⁴

Research by Endsleigh found that finances are the main factor impacting student mental health, cited by 46% as their main concern.³⁵ The NUS Cost of Living Survey found that 90% of students indicated the cost-of-living crisis had an impact on their mental health. Using data from the RGSU report, this seems to be consistent with the experiences of students at UCL. Here, 75% of UCL respondents agreed that their mental health has suffered due to the crisis.³⁶ The key factors driving poor mental health, including increased anxiety and depression, were the increased amount of part-time work students were doing, the reduced hours students are allocating to studying and socialising, and students worrying about how they will be able to afford to live both now and in the future, particularly in London. Students also expressed high levels of anxiety about graduate job prospects and whether the cost of living crisis would impact their ability to graduate with a high grade.

29% of UCL students who participated in the RGSU report said that they worked alongside their studies. On average, undergraduate students were working 11 hours per week, rising to 21 hours for Postgraduate Taught students and 26 for PhD students. Disabled, care experienced and estranged students were all more likely to be working higher hours than their peers. Many students highlighted the detrimental impact of working a high number of hours to their mental health. One UCL student commented that "I work two jobs, do a full time masters and all I do is worry about money", which is "devastating" and "so all-consuming that it's hard to explain to someone not experiencing it".

As well as struggling with the impact of having to take on more paid work opportunities, UCL students reported that they were also having to cut back on socialising. 80% of UCL students agreed that they have reduced the amount of socialising they do because they cannot afford to, with 56% having stopped taking part in extra-

³¹ <https://studentsunionucl.org/student-choice-awards-2023-what-do-students-value-most>

³² <https://studentsunionucl.org/sites/default/files/inline-images/TEF%20Student%20Submission%20-%20Students%27%20Union%20UCL%20%281%29.pdf>

³³ [Student Mental Health Study 2022 \(cibyl.com\)](#)

³⁴ [Student Mental Health Study 2022 \(cibyl.com\)](#)

³⁵ [Student Happiness Index 2022 : insights into students' happiness, optimism and motivation. | Endsleigh](#)

³⁶ [UCL data from RGSU Cost of Living survey](#)

curricular activities for the same reason. This is particularly concerning because of the link between socialising, extra-curricular activities and student mental health. One study found that activities which involved socialising with others were those most beneficial to the mental health and wellbeing of undergraduate students.³⁷

Students who attended our focus groups also highlighted the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on their ability to socialise and participate in extracurricular activities, and the impact this has had on their mental health. Several students reported that they “attended only free events”. Another student commented that “I think more free events would be really helpful”, particularly in first term while students are “figure out the budgeting of our living expenses, and especially for international students”.

UCL and Students’ Union UCL have worked in partnership to deliver the Student Activities Participation Fund, a pot of money which helps UCL students overcome financial barriers to participate in Students’ Union UCL clubs and societies and other co-curricular or extra-curricular activities. Students are awarded up to £250 towards costs including society membership fees and purchasing or renting specialist equipment or clothing. In the 2022-2023 academic year £24,338 was awarded to 131 students.

In the RGSU report, students commonly expressed that the anxiety surrounding being unable to afford basic necessities, and the resulting health and academic impact of this, was worsening their mental health. 21% said that they regularly go without food or necessities because they cannot afford them, and 18% have considered dropping out of university because they can’t afford to continue. Many students highlighted the direct impact on their mental health of worrying about their finances, while there is also evidence of a direct link between poor nutrition and worsened depression. The survey responses highlight the extent to which activities crucial to positive mental health and wellbeing are being curtailed by the cost-of-living crisis.

“My mental health and studies have been severely affected due to having to work too much and the pressure this adds.”

“I have had many sleepless nights plagued by financial anxiety.”

“It has been a rollercoaster... the worrying around money has increased considerably, and my mental health is in a delicate state.”

Spotlight On: Black Students’ Experiences of Accessing Wellbeing Support

There is a range of academic research on how institutional racism and discrimination can make universities toxic spaces for Black students, greatly impacting students’ mental health and well-being. In preparation for this report, a focus group was conducted with Black students about their experiences of accessing wellbeing provision at UCL. This focus group focused on the experiences of Black students when accessing support and wellbeing provision and the specific barriers they face in accessing those services. accreditation with the University Mental Health Charter Award with Student Minds, a charter which sets out and monitors Universities commitment to principles of best practice. In December 2022, UCL successfully achieved accreditation, a significant achievement and a clear demonstration of the successful outcomes that can be achieved when UCL and the Students’ Union work together in partnership.

³⁷ <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.647402/full>

One key barrier identified in the focus group was a scepticism of mental wellbeing services. This was often caused by negative racialised experiences, both at UCL and elsewhere. Negative experiences with staff at UCL, even if they were not staff working within the wellbeing services, often led to increased scepticism of all UCL services and staff, and directly impacted on students confidence to access these services. One student reported experiencing a racist microaggression from a member of staff when looking for the wellbeing centre and disability department at UCL. Another, when applying for a course at UCL, “was asked to take an English test despite being educated in the UK and was told that this was based on my surname statements”, which “made me very cautious when approaching UCL staff”. This highlights that experiences across different UCL service areas have an impact on students’ perceptions of and level of trust in Student Support and Wellbeing.

Negative experiences with wellbeing services at other universities also impacted students’ scepticism of UCL’s wellbeing services. One student, who is Somali, said that when they accessed student psychological and counselling services at a different university “they always asked for my ethnicity” and when they replied the counsellor responded by asking “do you have female genital mutilation”, a clearly racist and inappropriate question. Through these focus groups the importance of considering student mental health as a holistic experience, and recognising that negative experiences (whether those are with other staff members or even at entirely difference universities) will impact on whether students reach out for support during difficult times, was clear.

Another key barrier for Black students accessing wellbeing services was a lack of awareness of the services provided.

Alongside access, the biggest barriers identified through the focus group were the lengthy waiting times to access student psychological and counselling services and the time-limited support offered. One student said, “I’ve been trying to access support for about four or five months” until “I was actually at breaking point when I just called and said I can’t anymore”. At UCL students can request to be seen by counsellors from different demographics, such as a woman counsellor or a Black counsellor. The option to request a Black counsellor is



clearly valuable to students, however given the lack of availability of Black counsellors at UCL, students who request a Black counsellor are often faced with longer than average waiting times due to availability of staff. One student was told that no Black counsellors were available and was eventually assigned to a non-Black counsellor. The student stated that “[the counsellor] was great... but it was about 3 months to begin substantive work with someone”. Another student reported a waiting time of 5 months after requesting a Black counsellor. When students are able to access wellbeing provision, experiences were generally described as positive. However, the period of six weeks support that was provided was described by many as inadequate and “very short”, particularly for more complex mental health issues or traumatic life events.

UCL has taken significant steps over the past few years to improve the diversity of their staff team. The number of Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) permanent staff has increased by 200% since 2021. 20% of the permanent clinical practitioners are BAME. The service also employs additional sessional workers at times of particularly high demand, 20% of which are BAME, and have developed relationships with third party organisations such as Spectrum Life. When referring students to third party organisations students are able to specify the type of counsellor they would like to see, including race/ethnicity and gender.

UCL’s Student Support & Wellbeing state that all students will be seen by the service for an initial assessment within 2-3 weeks of registration and that the average waiting time for students to start ongoing sessions in the 2022-2023 academic year was 30 days. The team are aware of variable waiting times students face when requesting counsellors from racially minoritised backgrounds, and that waiting times can also vary depending on risk factors, the type of therapy best suited to the student and student availability.

We welcome the work undertaken to improve representation of counsellors from BAME backgrounds and we believe will make a big difference to students who benefit from requesting counsellors from racially minoritised backgrounds. UCL should continue this work and employ more Black counsellors specifically, bringing down waiting times for students who request a Black counsellor, to ensure that some of the specific barriers Black students face in accessing and benefiting from wellbeing support are tackled.

UCL Recommendations:

UCL should continue their work aimed at improving the diversity of their counsellors, and aim to employ more Black counsellors to ensure that students who request a Black counsellor do not face increased waiting times.

UCL to consider implementing cultural competency training for all UCL staff, to increase student confidence in approaching staff.



Physical Wellbeing

Physical Activity

There is a wide range of evidence that sport and physical activity are greatly beneficial to mental health and wellbeing. A recent review of academic studies concluded that sports participation is related to lower depression scores, increased opportunities to form relationships and develop a social support network, and better overall mental health.³⁸ This builds on the 2020 British Universities & Colleges Sport report which found that ‘providing opportunities for sport and physical activity are relatively low-cost with high return’ for improving student wellbeing, and that physical activity is key for both student mental and physical health.³⁹

In a survey conducted by the Students’ Union in March 2022, 98% of respondents stated that ‘the amount of physical activity/exercise I am able to do has a direct impact on my overall wellbeing’. The value of physical activity is also recognised by UCL’s Student Life Strategy, which states that ‘sport and other forms of physical activity build student communities, accelerate friendships, support physical and mental wellbeing, and help to provide a sense of belonging’.

The strategy sets the admirable and ambitious target of engaging of engaging 50% of all UCL students in sports and physical activity programmes by 2028. The number of students purchasing sports club memberships for Students’ Union sports clubs has continued to increase over the past year, with 7698 students purchasing club memberships as of May 2023, a near 10% increase on the 7000 students who had purchased a membership in May 2022. When free taster memberships are included, the number rises to 11,244 students. Reaching the 50% target, however, will require significant investment and for several key barriers to be overcome.

The Students’ Union’s Project Active programme plays a particularly important role in tackling key barriers to participation by engaging students identified as typically having had lower levels of engagement with sports and physical activity. The programme targets three groups of students: inactive students, postgraduate students, and women from a BAME background. The programme involves 14 weekly classes, women only and postgraduate only classes, social leagues and taster sessions as well as mass-participation events including This Girl Can Week and Postgraduate Summer. As of May 2023, the project engaged 2391 this academic year, of which 51% are postgraduates, 57% are women from a Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic background and 44% class themselves as inactive. In 2022 the achievements of the Project Active programme were recognised by British Universities and Colleges Sport (BUCS) who gave the Union an award for diversity and inclusion.

One key barrier to participation for students is financial, and some sports clubs have reported that they are considering increasing membership costs for next year due to their rising costs. Given the increasingly financially precarious situation students find themselves in this would likely result in participation in sports declining, at least amongst students from the most financially disadvantaged backgrounds. The Students’ Union have a sports clubs grant which plays a crucial role in giving societies the funds they need to avoid increasing membership fees. While the overall funding for sports at the Students’ Union has been increasing, the funding allocated to the sports club grant has been reduced in recent years due to financial pressures. The Students’ Union is aiming to increase grant funding for clubs, as and when this is affordable.

³⁸ <https://systematicreviewsjournal.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s13643-023-02264-8#Sec20>

³⁹ <https://www.bucs.org.uk/resources-page/the-value-of-university-sport-and-physical-activity-pdf.html>

Another key barrier to participation is the lack of adequate sports facilities for UCL students. As noted in last year's Student Priorities for Wellbeing report, the vast majority of sports activity at UCL takes place in externally hired facilities which imposes additional costs on students, both to book venues and to travel to them, on top of their membership fee. The facilities that do exist, such as the gym on the Bloomsbury campus, cannot cater to demand, meaning many students are put off using them. Access to facilities is therefore the key means by which financial pressures facing student societies can be tackled.

The Student Life Strategy pledges to 'consider investment in new facilities for sport' at UCL. A first key step would be investment in greatly expanding the Union's gym at the Bloomsbury campus as well in an expansion of smaller sports facilities across campus, for example through mini gyms in student accommodation and 'active campus' infrastructure. A second key step in ensuring all students have access to sports facilities would be investment in developing multi-sports facilities at the Lee Valley Hockey and Tennis Centre at the Olympic Park.

Recommendations for UCL:

UCL should invest in a significant expansion of the Union's gym at the Bloomsbury campus as part of a new Students' Union building and smaller sports facilities across campus.

UCL should invest in developing multi-sports facilities at the Lee Valley Hockey and Tennis Centre at the Olympic Park.



Recommendations for UCL and Students' Union Commitments

Recommendations for UCL:

1. UCL should work with the Students' Union to develop sustainable funding to support the Students' Union's hardship funds, including continuing to ringfence deductions from any future industrial action for Students Union hardship support.
2. UCL should continue to review postgraduate research stipend levels in line with inflation.
3. UCL should explore options to increase undergraduate bursary levels in line with inflation on an annual basis.
4. UCL should work with UUK and the Russell Group, to lobby the Government to increase financial support to students, including increasing the maintenance loan.
5. UCL should consider whether it can develop more roles for part-time student staff across its workforce, including in its professional services teams. UCL should consider enabling the SU to run more campus services to enable it to create more flexible and fairly paid student jobs on the campus.
6. UCL should liaise with the University of London housing service to ensure that the Private Housing Guide is updated more promptly and reflects current rental trends.
7. UCL should commit to a much lower increase in rents over the next few years. Ideally, UCL should implement a rent freeze across all its accommodation for the 2024-2025 academic year and ensure that there is strong and meaningful consultation with students and engagement with the Students' Union in the rent setting process. As a minimum rents in some accommodation should be frozen to respond to the tough financial pressures facing students.
8. UCL should raise awareness about the financial assistance fund and how to access it through a communications campaign
9. UCL should work in partnership with the Students' Union to develop a process for reviewing the guarantor rent threshold on an annual basis, ensuring it is reflective of the current rental market.
10. UCL should continue to invest in the staff team who process guarantor applications, ensuring that the team have capacity to process applications more quickly.
11. UCL should review the eligibility requirements for the contract length of the rent guarantor scheme. The scheme is currently capped at 12 months, but flexibility should be built in by allowing, on a case-by-case basis, for 18 month agreements to be considered if a student is unable to source a 12 month contract.

12. UCL should ensure that the Active Bystander Programme continues to be a core part of new students induction.
13. As part of the new Student Life Strategy, UCL should commit to deliver a new Students' Union building as a hub of student life and activities.
14. Support the Students' Union by working with other London Universities to lobby Transport for London and the Mayor of London to consider higher discounts for student transport.
15. UCL should work with the Students' Union to find a permanent funding source for the Gender Expression Fund, as current funding is only due to last to 2025.
16. UCL should rejoin the Stonewall equality scheme. For the duration of time that UCL are not part of a membership scheme UCL should uphold its promise to implement and expand upon the commitments in the LGBTQ+ action plan.
17. UCL should continue their work aimed at improving the diversity of their counsellors, and aim to employ more Black counsellors to ensure that students who request a Black counsellor do not face increased waiting times.
18. UCL should consider implementing cultural competency training for all UCL staff, to increase student confidence in approaching staff.
19. UCL should invest in a significant expansion of the Union's gym at the Bloomsbury campus as part of a new Students' Union building and in expanding smaller sports facilities across campus.
20. UCL should invest in developing multi-sports facilities at the Lee Valley Hockey and Tennis Centre at the Olympic Park.

Students' Union UCL Commitments:

1. The Union is aiming to introduce individual transferable skills plans for student staff and reviewing options to utilise different employment relationships dependent on the type of work.
2. Students' Union UCL should build on its existing work in supporting students by starting an informational campaign on private renting during the 2023-2024 academic year.
3. To work to expand initiatives to provide free and low cost events on campus for students as part of the Student Life Strategy.
4. To continue its to work to influence the Mayor of London to deliver further discounts on travel for students.
5. To empower the Student Networks by continuing to improve and review structures around student welfare, community and belonging, to ensure they are more effective and prominent to all students.



Progress on the 2022 Recommendations

In the 2022 Student Priorities for Wellbeing Report, 10 different recommendations were made across the three key areas of mental, social and physical wellbeing. Some were recommendations for UCL, some for the Students' Union, and others for both. We are grateful for the updates UCL have provided and the work they have undertaken to act upon these recommendations. We are particularly pleased that UCL have successfully achieved accreditation with the University Mental Health Charter, a key recommendation from last year's report which has and will deliver significant improvements for students' mental wellbeing.

Mental Wellbeing

We recommended:

UCL and Students' Union UCL to look to implement the outcomes of accreditation for gaining the University Mental Health Charter, working in partnership to develop an action plan on improving student mental health.

UCL's update:

In December 2022 UCL was awarded the University Mental Health Charter Award by Student Minds. A personal Tutor Review, led by a steering group with Students' Union representation, is taking forward implementation of the charter accreditation outcomes. Student Support and Wellbeing are also convening a senior oversight group to take forward the outcomes. We anticipate that the group will report to the People and Culture Committee and to one of the new sub-committees of Education Committee. It is a strategic priority that we continue improve our support for student and staff mental health and wellbeing.

We recommended:

We recommended: Students' Union UCL to work on upskilling student leaders to equip them to support students and signpost to relevant services.

Students' Union UCL's update:

We ran additional Mental Health Awareness training workshops during 2022 and 2023 to supplement the core training that club and society welfare officers receive, with a strong focus on signposting and resources. Additional masterclass sessions for academic representatives were also offered.

We recommended:

UCL and Students' Union UCL to continue to monitor retention rates and student feedback for any shift towards a considerable number of students who might be considering dropping out and interrupting their studies.

UCL's update:

A Student Access and Success Committee has been convened as part of the new Education Committee Structure and will provide a forum to discuss and address all students success issues, including continuation, progression and completion. Work is in progress to develop a data portal to support the upcoming Department Education Plans which will provide an opportunity to discuss all student outcomes.

We recommended:

UCL and Students' Union UCL to promote the Financial Assistance Fund as a source of help for those students struggling with rises in cost of living, particularly energy bills, over the next academic year.

UCL and Students Union UCL's update:

The Financial Assistance Fund has been promoted extensively in the 22/23 year to encourage students to ask for help in the following ways:

- It was highlighted in the Cost of Living Hub which was launched in 2022 to provide students with an overview of all sources of support to help them during this time.
- Promotion via the Student Advisors who are based within academic departments and act as a first point of contact for student wellbeing concerns.
- Features in multiple news items and articles including pieces by the new student journalists
- Highlighted as a specific source of support in UCL's response to students affected by global events such as the conflicts in Ukraine and Sudan
- Targeted email campaigns sent throughout the year to encourage applications from student groups most likely to be impacted by the cost of living crisis, such as those from low income households.
- The Student Funding Office, who administer FAF, has worked closely with the Students' Union Advice Service to ensure that students are signposted effectively to the best source of support, particularly given the expanded provision of funds from the SU.

We recommended:

UCL to work to support and enhance postgraduate research student career opportunities and development through UCL Careers and the Arena Centre.

UCL's update:

The Careers Researchers Team was remodelled with a team leader plus 3 staff to support PGR (and postdoc) careers including employer engagement and internships.

Social Wellbeing**We recommended:**

UCL and Students' Union UCL to share and sustain initiatives to create learning communities now and in the future.

UCL's update:

The Student Life Strategy was launched as well as the establishment of new Student Life Committee and Student-Staff Partnership Committee. A significant focus of these strategies is supporting student societies. We are currently in the process of reviewing regulations for student staff consultative committees to broaden the scope. One of the changes is the renaming of the committees to Student Staff Partnership Committees.

We recommended:

UCL to explore the opportunities on campus for more storage and social study space for commuting students.

UCL's update:

Storage: Smart lockers have been fitted in the basement of the DMS Watson Science Library, these are available for all students. There are additional smart lockers in the Library Hub of UCL East Marshgate.

Social Study Space: Additional social study spaces on the ground floor of DMS Watson Science Library are being fitted this summer. In the medium term we are exploring creating more social study space at the IoE library.

We recommended:

UCL and Students' Union UCL to promote support for students who live in privately rented accommodation, such as the UCL Rent Guarantor Scheme and the University of London Housing Services.

Students' Union UCL's update:

The Students' Union meets regularly with the Student Accommodation team and have been in discussions about enhancements to the Rent Guarantor Scheme. The SU collaborates with the University of London Housing Services on their annual Housing Week activities. These services are promoted by the SU in terms 1 and 3 when more students seek out accommodation in the private sector.

Physical Wellbeing**We recommended:**

UCL to prioritise investment in new sports facilities within future capital spending and any initiatives that stem from the 2022-27 UCL Strategy.

UCL's update:

The following commitment has been made within the 2022-27 UCL strategy: to prepare a business case for a new Students' Union building and sports facilities for consideration as part of the new investment framework.

We recommended:

UCL and Students' Union UCL to continue funding initiatives started with funding from Sports England to create opportunities for disabled students to take part in sport and physical activity.

Students' Union UCL's update:

Through investment in the Student Life Strategy the Students' Union have created a new staff post; Sports Development Coordinator (Equity and Inclusion) and allocated a dedicated funding stream to supporting the delivery of inclusive sport.

One of the five priorities for Y1 of the Sport and Physical Activity Strand of the Student Life Strategy is: Expand our disability sport programme providing opportunities for students with disabilities, alongside targeted initiatives for students struggling with their mental health.

Financial Wellbeing

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**Priorities
for Wellbeing
Report 2024**