

Student Priorities for

Education Report 2024

Contents

Foreword	1
Introduction	2
Progress Against the Recommendations	4
Teaching and Learning	10
Assessment and Feedback	17
Student Support	23
Department and Learning Community	28
Organisation and Management	33
Facilities	38
Recommendations	42
Endnotes	44

Foreword by Dr Kathryn Woods Pro-Vice-Provost Education (Student Academic Engagement)

Dear Students,

I am pleased to receive the latest Student Priorities for Education Report and want to thank all who contributed feedback through Staff Student Consultative Committees. Guided by our agreed Education Excellence Ambitions, The Senior Education Team together with newly created teams, including Education Services, Student Operations and Higher Education Development & Support Unit (HEDs) have had a productive year in addressing pinch points raised in previous student feedback.

Through the continuation and launch of new Education Excellence projects, we have made significant strides in:

- Bolstering student-staff partnerships, including through our new Student Staff Partnership Committee set up in 2023.
- Reducing operational and administrative burdens to support both students and staff more effectively through the Programme Excellence Project (PEP).
- Integrating leadership opportunities within the individual student experience, including through our new Extended Learning Opportunities Programme in Term 3.
- Connecting our cutting-edge research with the student body.
- Highlighting the distinctiveness of a UCL education through our practices.
- Improving academic support through our Personal Tutor Review.

Working in partnership with you, our students, is core to how we shape education and student experience at UCL. As we continue to make progress, I want to reaffirm our commitment to working with the Students' Union, elected Sabbatical Officers and Academic Representatives to improving the student experience for all students at UCL.

Best wishes,



Kathryn

Dr Kathryn Woods

Pro-Vice-Provost Education (Student Academic Engagement), UCL

Introduction

We are delighted to introduce Students' Union UCL's Priorities for Education Report 2024. The report draws on extensive in depth analysis of UCL students' educational experiences as they have been expressed at Student Staff Consultative Committee meetings.

These meetings are the primary forum for our Academic Representatives to meet academic teams, raise issues and share what works. Our reps dedicate 1000's of voluntary hours each year and we want to take this opportunity to thank them for their hard work and dedication to improving the student experience.

The report draws on qualitative analysis of 3,516 student comments from 194 sets of Student Staff Consultative Committee (SSCC) minutes, providing a comprehensive analysis of student feedback throughout the academic year. This year's report also draws on three focus groups conducted with students to explore key issues in greater depth, as well as extensive analysis of wider datasets and sector research over the past year.

The report also relies on our work as Sabbatical Officers in the education sphere over the past year and conversations we have had with students and their representatives, as well as the work we have done in partnership with colleagues across UCL to address these issues and improve the student experience.

While academic departments act on issues raised in SSCCs throughout the year, this report compiles recurrent themes together to share best practice across departments and makes strategic recommendations to UCL on how the institution can work to tackle the most widespread issues.

Last years Priorities for Education report saw a sharp increase in negative sentiment expressed by students in SSCC meetings compared to the previous academic year and before the pandemic.¹ Concerningly, this years' report reveals another slight increase in overall negative sentiment regarding education issues. Net sentiment in SSCC meetings, measured by subtracting the percentage of negative comments from the percentage of positive comments, worsened from -46% in 2022-23 to -49% in 2023-24. Many of the key issues raised are consistent with previous years, including the lack of social and study space for students on campus, the bunching of assessments, and concerns with the personal tutoring system.

Encouragingly, UCL have acknowledged many of the key issues as concerns and committed to a range of strategic reviews and projects to address them. For example, the Student Life Strategy offers a significant opportunity for Students' Union UCL and UCL to work in partnership to bolster student life and community with significant impacts for students' educational experiences, including through investing in departmental societies and delivering infrastructural improvements to support students learning conditions.² The Personal Tutor Review and Programme Excellence Programme, meanwhile, aim to greatly enhance students' academic experiences through addressing strategic issues identified.^{3,4}

This report offers insight on six key themes and highlights the sentiments, both positive and negative, raised most frequently within each theme. Paying close attention to and acting on these sentiments would go a long way to ensuring UCL and teaching staff are effectively addressing student feedback and thus improving student academic experience.



Shaban Chaudhary
Education Officer, 2023-2024



Issy Smith
Postgraduate Officer, 2023-2024

Progress Against Recommendations

In the 2023 Priorities for Education Report we made 12 recommendations across four key areas of: Assessment and Feedback, Department and Learning Community, Learning Resources, and Communication. We are grateful to UCL for the updates they have provided and their continued work to address issues highlighted in the annual Priorities for Education reports. We are confident that the recommendations made in this year's report will continue to shape UCL's institutional agenda to ensure that the student voice is being heard in the development of policies that have widespread implications for their educational experience. The table below provides an update on progress on last year's recommendations as of May 2024.



Assessment & Feedback

We recommended:

Whilst waiting for the new Curriculum Management (CM) software, staff should be encouraged to use the CHART tool across UCL. As last year, this should include asking departments to consider the timing of assessments when using the tool.

UCL's update:

The new Power BI reports produced by Student & Registry Services are already helping departments to see their spread of assessments and attached risk, and a new feedback tracker tool is being developed by Digital Education which will further help in this visualisation and review.

We recommended:

To support students to navigate the new assessment styles with confidence, departments should provide clarity on assessment formats through offering students access to past or model examples of assessments. Departments should also offer students the opportunity to practice assessments where appropriate.

UCL's update:

This recommendation is a part of the Refreshed Feedback and Assessment Principles circulated to Edcom and Faculty Education Teams in Term 2.

We recommended:

Again, when re-designing and reviewing learning outcomes for modules, departments should ensure that assessment criteria is aligned to Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) guidelines, and that programme teams are discussing these criteria with students in a contextualised manner.

UCL's update:

This recommendation is a part of the Refreshed Feedback and Assessment Principles circulated to Edcom and Faculty Education Teams in Term 2.

Department and Learning Community

We recommended:

Departments should assess their feedback loops to ensure that, when necessary, the student voice is empowered to bring about tangible change.

UCL's update:

New Staff Student Consultative Committee (SSCC) guidance on how departments should update students on how their feedback has been acted upon, issued for the start of the 2023/24 academic year; Proposal to change the name of SSCCs to Student Partnership Committees is currently working its way through the committee structure, with the intention that it will be implemented for 2024/25. The name change signals a commitment to improved partnership working with students focused on empowering them to bring about tangible change working with staff.

We recommended:

UCL should work with Students' Union UCL and the student body to ensure that existing Departmental Societies are well resourced and supported, and that new Departmental Societies can be built where they do not yet exist.

UCL's update:

A paper outlining a proposal for the development of new department hubs and societies model was considered and offered support by the Student Life Committee. This has led to an increase in department society affiliation numbers; 65 societies comprising 11,611 members in 23/24, compared to 62 societies comprising 10,331 members in 22/23. In 2024/25, UCL will work in partnership with Students' Union UCL to support faculty and department 'hub and society' pilots.

We recommended:

UCL and Students' Union UCL should work together to run an information campaign aimed at educating all students about the Faculty and Lead Departmental Representative roles as part of the Academic Reps system, and the value we jointly hold in amplifying the student voice.

UCL's update:

The SU organised the first ever Academic Representative conference in 2024, with keynotes from UCL senior staff and experienced Faculty Reps. UCL's External Engagement team has produced several pieces of spotlight comms in student communications focusing on the impact made by Faculty and Departmental Reps.

We recommended:

UCL should consider investment in new informal study spaces and student social spaces as part of the development of a new Students' Union building, to provide a central space on the Bloomsbury campus that students can use to help form a stronger community and sense of belonging at UCL.

UCL's update:

Work continues to progress on plans for the SU Building through the Campus and Estates Portfolio Board, as does accompanying work to improve sports facilities. Areas around Gordon square have been pedestrianised and outdoor furniture has been provide to offer students with improved outdoor relaxation areas.



Learning Resources

We recommended:

To ensure they can effectively utilise Lecturecast and resolve technical issues promptly, staff should be reminded of the technical support and training guides available and offered refresher training where necessary.

UCL's update:

UCL has been working on a new media (lecture) capture solution and policy that is expected to be implemented for the 2025/26 academic year.

We recommended:

Teaching staff should be reminded of the support, guidance, and resources available to them for providing effective Learning Resources, to help ensure that students receive the resources necessary. Steps should also be taken to monitor whether this guidance is being effectively implemented.

UCL's update:

Currently undertaking a review of online resources (initially feedback and assessment and then wider) to ensure they are up to date. Resources shared via training sessions and Faculty Partnership Teams as appropriate. 'Monitoring' would need to take place within the department, for example through Continuous Module Dialogue (CMD); peer dialogue; appraisals etc.



Communication

We recommended:

Continue communicating the value of Lecturecast in supporting student learning to staff across UCL.

UCL's update:

The introduction of the new media capture solution will be accompanied by a carefully designed and sustained communications and support plan, to ensure that staff and students are fully aware of its potential to enhance and improve equity of access to learning.

We recommended:

Continue advocating for closer coordination between programme and module leaders to enable consistent communications to students in their individual cohort.

UCL's update:

The second stage of the Programme Excellence Project is presently in its early stages, working with our academic community to define principles for delivering excellent programmes, which will later be reviewed and embedded into our taught programmes. We will ensure that how to enable a more joined-up experience for students is a key question addressed during consultation on these principles with staff and with students.



Teaching & Learning

Teaching and Learning continues to be an area of strategic focus for UCL, with the 2022-27 strategic plan stating that ‘we have undoubted strengths and excellent practice across the university, but [...] we are not yet consistently meeting the needs and expectations of our students’.⁵ As UCL’s teaching and assessment framework continues to develop, focused on developing a ‘UCL-distinctive, futures-focused, research-intensive education’, it is important that views expressed through student surveys and Academic Representatives are paid careful attention to.

Teaching and Learning received the highest proportion of SSCC data of any theme (N = 1160/3511). As with previous years, Teaching Delivery, Programme or Module Content, and Learning Resources were the key sub-themes. The results paint a mixed picture; whilst Teaching Delivery and Programme or Module Content scored the 7th and 5th highest of any sub-theme respectively, there were increased levels of dissatisfaction with Programme or Module Content and Learning Resources when compared to data from 2022-23. The important issue of Postgraduate Teaching Assistants (PGTAs) employment conditions is also raised in this section.

Teaching Delivery

33% (N = 388/1160) of the SSCC comments within Teaching and Learning relate to teaching delivery. Teaching delivery is one of the most important aspects of a student’s experience at UCL, directly influencing a student’s engagement, understanding, and overall learning experience.

Despite the proportion of positive comments remaining constant at 38% compared to last year, negative sentiment has grown from 52% to 56%. This negative sentiment contrasts with UCL’s 2023 National Student Survey (NSS) results, which track the views of final year undergraduate (UG) students. Interestingly, these results were overwhelmingly positive, with 84.5% of respondents satisfied with their teaching, 88.6% agreeing that teaching staff are good at explaining things, and 78.2% that teaching staff make the subject engaging.⁶ It is important to note, however, that with regards to all three questions, UCL remains slightly below the sector average, by 0.4%, 2%, and 3.1%, respectively.⁷

Students who expressed positive sentiments in SSCCs often praised the quality of the teaching they received. Students valued their tutors’ range of knowledge, attentiveness in giving advice, and the way the content was structured. One student commented that ‘students found lectures very interesting, competent, and engaging’, and another that ‘the cohort has found detailed slides very helpful and beneficial.’

Positive comments also praised the incorporation of guest lecturers and where there was a variety of teaching formats, with group work and seminars to complement lectures. One student stated that 'students enjoyed how the taught content was very example-based and they enjoyed having the variety of guest lecturers.' Another commented that 'students found seminars very useful to consolidate what they have learnt in lectures.'

Analysis of the SSCC data also revealed areas where teaching delivery could be improved. Many students expressed concern that modules were too fast paced, with students struggling to absorb large volumes of content covered in lectures. One Academic Representative commented that 'lectures are teaching too fast and there is a lack of explanation', while another stated that 'the module is too fast paced and challenging for those in the cohort.'

Some students commented that this led to the workload causing increased stress. The issue of a high volume of reading requirements was also raised, linked to the delivery of content in a short space of time. Additionally, students commented that lectures often run over the allocated time and that there was sometimes a disconnect between content taught in lectures and topics covered in seminars.

One student stated that 'students have found the weekly reading requirements overwhelming', and another that 'some module tutors were not keeping to the UCL hour'. The 'UCL Hour' is a UCL policy whereby all teaching and meetings should last 50 minutes instead of an hour so staff and students can take breaks in between timetabled sessions and move between buildings.⁸ Failing to stick to the UCL hour can leave students feeling rushed, overwhelmed, and frustrated.

The 2023 Student Academic Experience Survey demonstrates that an increased volume of workload is an issue impacting students across the sector. The survey found that the average number of working hours completed, having stayed fairly stable between 2019 and 2022, increased significantly from 30.7 hours in 2022 to 33.4 hours in 2023.⁹ This represents 'the highest number of workload hours (scheduled or attended) in any recent year'. The report stresses that 'it is important that workload volumes are realistic', particularly 'in the face of increasing time in paid employment'.¹⁰

The concentration of teaching in a short space of time is a problem acknowledged in the UCL 2022-27 strategic plan, which acknowledges 'the lack of new teaching in Term Three' and the need for 'spacing the undergraduate year out more consistently'.¹¹ Plans for a revised teaching structure for the academic year by 2026-27 which delivers greater spacing out of academic content throughout the year are therefore welcome.

In the SSCC meetings, students told us:

“The teaching was felt to be engaging and challenging.”

“The cohort is happy and find the course interesting. Tutorials are very clear and useful. The cohort has found detailed slides very helpful and beneficial.”

“There was some desire for the tutor to go slower during lectures, and reduce the amount of content within each lecture as the information can be difficult to process and follow.”

“Students enjoyed group work, having many guest lecturers and end of semester projects.”

Programme or Module Content

36% (N = 419/1160) of the SSCC comments within Teaching and Learning related to programme or module content, more than any other sub-theme and up 7.6 percentage points from 2022-23. Module content is central to a student’s academic experience, shaping the extent to which students feel engaged, expand their knowledge, and are being equipped with the skills needed for future success. Concerningly, there has been a substantial increase in negative sentiment, from 49% to 54%, with levels of positive sentiment remaining at 40%.

Where students expressed positive sentiments about their programme or module content, this was often because they found the workload manageable, found the curriculum relevant to assessments and practical real-world uses, and where the lectures and teaching were interactive. One student in Social and Historical Sciences, for example, reported that ‘students have appreciated that in most modules, the teaching has been relevant to the assessment’. Another student at the IOE, Faculty of Education and Society commented that students are happy where ‘there is lots of conversational practice and discussion in the class.’

Interestingly, one area of dissatisfaction was a perceived disconnect between module content and post-graduation employment. Here, some students reported that their module content did not adequately equip them with skills for their future careers. For example, a student in Brain Sciences commented that students ‘would have liked to learn [...] about the application of theory in real-world contexts’. Similarly, a student at the IOE, Faculty of Education and Society stated, ‘it was unclear how courses contributed to research skill development.’

Within the SSCCs, some students expressed concern that on some courses the material was too simple and that lecturers would often read off a worksheet which students already had access to.

This runs the risk of teaching not being as engaging and effective as possible in developing students' knowledge and skills. However, other students stated that 'the workload was sometimes overwhelming', again linking back to concerns regarding scheduling.

Encouragingly, UCL's Programme Excellence Project (PEP) is conducting a comprehensive review of UCL's teaching programmes. This review aims to address several of these challenges. In particular, it aims to create 'more alignment across different programmes' to advance UCL's 'educational priorities, such as research-intensive education[...] cross-disciplinarity, employability, and the Student Life Strategy'.¹² To help alleviate student concerns regarding skill development, an increased focus on research-intensive education and employability is welcomed.

In the SSCC meetings, students told us:

“Students reported finding the complexity of the debates/concepts confusing, especially in classes where they had no background [knowledge].”

“Students are happy with the content touching on a variety of subjects, and this has allowed them to gain new interests in these varied topics.”

“Some students feel that some modules have isolated topics which students don't feel prepared for and students are starting to skip modules to concentrate on core modules.”

Learning Resources

15% (N = 174/1160) of the SSCC comments within Teaching and Learning related to learning resources. Learning resources, such as lecture notes and Moodle content, are instrumental in facilitating independent learning and enhancing students' academic performance. Analysis from the 2023 NSS results suggests a good level of student satisfaction with learning resources. 89.4% of final year UG respondents expressed satisfaction, and 92.1% with library resources, up from 87% and 89% last year.¹³ In both cases these scores were above the sector average.

Within SSCC meetings, when students were positive about learning resources, they spoke about lecture slides being provided in advance of lectures. Students also praised staff who uploaded recordings and video resources to Moodle in a timely manner.

However, the SSCC minutes reveal a marked increase in dissatisfaction, with 77% of comments expressing negative sentiment, up by 10 percentage points against last year. For example, multiple students raised concerns regarding learning resources, such as reading lists and lecture slides, not being shared in advance of teaching hours. One student commented that 'many modules do not

release content and reading lists ahead of time, so students find it difficult to prepare.' Providing learning resources in advance of lectures would support students in getting the most out of their teaching time.

Another area of concern for students is the accessibility of digital resources. Unfortunately, this builds on the dissatisfaction discussed in the 2023 Student Priorities for Education Report, with the same concerns emerging.¹⁴ To explore this further, we conducted focus groups. Here, disabled students were invited to discuss their experience of education at UCL. In the focus group students reported overwhelmingly negative experiences and discussed the importance of lecture recordings being shared with students in a timely manner.

Students in our focus group raised that some rooms across UCL are not set up to enable Lecturecast, or that where they are the sound quality is often poor or doesn't allow transcription. Frustratingly for students, different departments were reported to exhibit different issues in this space. For example, whilst some departments do not use Lecturecast, others do use the technology but fail to upload them promptly 'or in time for good preparation for exams.' It should be noted that frustrations with Lecturecast was not confined to this focus group. In the SSCC minutes, 84% of comments relating to lecture capture expressed a negative sentiment.

Encouragingly, UCL are working on a new media capture solution and policy that is expected to be implemented for the 2025/26 academic year. If implemented effectively, such a policy would be welcome in addressing student concerns.

In the SSCC meetings, students told us:

“It would be good to have not only articles and books but also other formats, like podcasts or videos, to have a more diverse set of resources that can be used.”

“The department provides diverse and cutting-edge materials.”

“Many modules do not release content and reading lists ahead of time, so students find it difficult to prepare.”

Postgraduate Teaching Assistants (PGTAs)

88% of SSCC comments under the sub-theme of PGTAs expressed negative sentiments. Here, students expressed dissatisfaction with PGTA employment conditions. Areas of concern included late payments for work conducted, a lack of clarity regarding PGTA terms and conditions, and inconsistencies between departments regarding the volume of payment for preparation and marking.

To explore these issues further, we conducted a focus group with postgraduate research (PGR) students, enabling us to better understand how the dissatisfaction can be addressed.

Many students in our focus group expressed frustration regarding inconsistencies between departments. The issue of timesheets was of particular concern. In some departments students have to submit timesheets before being paid which is not the case in others. One student commented that 'filling in timesheets and getting them signed off takes up time[...] it feels unfair that we have to do this administration.'

Inconsistency in pay was also raised, with students stating that 'some departments pay more than others, creating a hierarchy'. One student commented that 'it varies so much across and even within departments. Some students are expected to do loads of teaching and given tonnes of work to do with not enough time to do it.' When students were satisfied with their employment conditions as PGTAs, it was often thanks to payment and contracts being clearly communicated. This best practice was reported within the Institute of Archaeology.

In 2020, UCL implemented a new code of practice for PGTAs.¹⁵ The code was welcomed by us and aimed to ensure 'fairer working conditions for Postgraduate Teaching Assistants', and seeks to ensure a greater degree of standardisation across different departments.¹⁶ There are, however, a number of inconsistencies between departments that remain despite the introduction of the code. All PGTAs are to be paid the same hourly wage. However, it is the discretion of departments to decide how much paid time to allocate to preparation and marking. If an insufficient amount of time is allocated to these activities, then PGTAs effective hourly wage is reduced.

The code of practice states that 'departments should promptly inform PGTAs the hours they will be required to work'. Yet it is clear that some departments are not implementing this guidance effectively and it appears that there is a lack of institutional oversight as to the implementation of the guidance. There are also inconsistencies regarding contract types, the method through which PGTAs are paid and the level of training and support they receive.

Positively, UCL's Postgraduate Teaching Assistants Task and Finish Group has looked into some of these issues over the past year. Their report states that the PGTA Code of Practice 'is heavily focused on the contractual side of their roles' and that there is a need for 'a clear document for staff to use to help foster more consistent approaches to PGTA use across UCL', particularly in relation to PGTA training opportunities and teaching standards.¹⁷

The proposed development of a new institutional PGTA framework which ensures greater consistency in levels of training provided, and aims to 'foster more consistent approaches to PGTA use across UCL', should help address some concerns that students have raised regarding discrepancies between departments and a lack of training. The new framework should focus on resolving contractual inconsistencies and in improving oversight of the existing Code of Practice

with regards to how departments are implementing pay for preparation and training, contracts, and the method through which PGTAs are paid.

In the SSCC meetings, students told us:

“PhD student reps have pointed out potential discrepancies in training and resources between different modules.”

“[there were] serious delays in payment for PGTA hours of up to 8 months.”

“Students complained about issues revolving around PGTA jobs, such as being informed of placements late or contracts not explicitly explaining payment or sick leave.”

Examples of Best Practice:

- Modules should incorporate a range of teaching methods, including guest lectures where relevant.
- The volume of content in each lecture should be kept to a manageable level, ensuring students are able to absorb and engage with the material effectively and that lectures do not exceed the length of the UCL hour.
- Learning resources should be provided in a timely and accessible manner.



Assessment & Feedback

As discussed in previous iterations of the Student Priorities for Education Report, Assessment and Feedback continues to be an area of concern. 20% (N = 735/3511) of all SSCC comments related to assessment and feedback, with negative sentiment increasing by five percentage points compared to last year to a total of 84%.

UCL's NSS results highlight the scale of change needed in this area, with only 68.6% of final year UG students responding positively to questions related to Assessment and Feedback.¹⁸ Sitting at 9% below the sector average, this represents a significant deviation from the sector average, and is the largest negative difference of any topic. This year's SSCC minutes also speak to the scale of student dissatisfaction with Assessment and Feedback. To examine this further, a focus group was conducted.

Significantly, UCL have now acknowledged Assessment and Feedback as an institutional priority, in the UCL Strategic Plan 2022-27, stating that there are 'long-standing concerns from students about over-assessment' and 'a high-stakes end-of-year exam period'.¹⁹

The main themes raised were assessment preparation and timing of assessment. Additionally, our research highlighted artificial intelligence (AI) as an emerging issue in relation to assessments.

Assessment Preparation

24% (N = 175/735) of the SSCC comments within Assessment and Feedback related to assessment preparation. Effective assessment preparation can help bolster students' understanding, confidence, and performance. Unfortunately, feedback remains overwhelmingly negative, with students reporting a lack of consistency across modules, lack of practice papers, and concern regarding new modules.

As cited in last year's report, students expressed frustration at the lack of practice papers. Based on SSCC feedback, students in Engineering Sciences (28%), Brain Sciences (16%), and Social and Historical Sciences (13%) are the most dissatisfied in this area. Students reported that practice papers would help increase their confidence in preparing for assessments. Understandably, this was particularly the case with new modules. Students reported being 'keen to have access to past papers across modules for practice', and stated that where there was a lack of practice papers they felt 'unprepared'.

Another area of concern was assessment criteria. Some students expressed a need for greater 'clarification on the content that would be covered in the exams' as well as on how the assessments

would be assessed. This is particularly the case where different modules employ different methods of assessments, meaning students may not have a prior understanding of what to expect. For example, focus group attendees raised the issue of changes in assessment mode after a module had been selected. Here, students were clear that they would appreciate clarity on how each module will be assessed before module selection commences. This could be particularly helpful for students with learning differences.

Where students were positive, it was often because they had received practice exam materials and clear guidance. One student commented that 'the department provides clear guidance on assessments which often includes extra tips and support[...] resulting in some high quality student work.' Through providing students with a comprehensive package of support, students felt empowered to succeed .

In the SSCC meetings, students told us:

“Students would like more clarity on expectations of formative assignments and clarity on when formative feedback should be expected.”

“[The] cohort felt supported in exam prep and [the] exam was pitched at [the] right level.”

“The students have asked if it is possible to have more practice for the project, for example a formative assessment, focussing on writing and structuring sentences.”

Timing of Assessments

As in previous years, timing of assessment continued to be a prevalent theme in this year's analysis. The timing of assessments is crucial in giving students appropriate planning time, minimising stress, and ensuring students are able to perform to the best of their abilities. 17% (N = 126/735) of SSCC comments within assessment and feedback related to the timing of assessment. Concerningly, levels of negative sentiment have increased from 83% in 2022-23 to 92% in 2023-24. Dissatisfaction in this area was also highlighted in focus groups conducted by Students' Union UCL.

The overwhelming feedback from SSCC minutes was that assessments are bunched together such that they cause great levels of academic pressure on students, with implications for student wellbeing. UCL's Refreshed Feedback and Assessment guidelines acknowledge this problem, referencing concerns around 'bunching at particular times that puts unfair pressure on students'.²⁰ Academic Representatives highlighted instances of students having 'three [assessment] deadlines taking place within two weeks', and expressed being 'dissatisfied with how coursework deadlines are spread out.'

Our focus group with students on the theme of Assessment and Feedback highlighted the lack of coordination between timetabling for coursework and timetabling for research submissions, as well as technical issues causing assessments to be moved at late notice. For example, one student reported that they 'had an exam get postponed because the website crashed', prompting the department to move it to the end of week which was not possible because international students were travelling, meaning it got moved to term three at the same time as several other assessments. The lack of communication, as well as the bunching that resulted from the technical issues, led to 'a lot of timetable stress'.

UCL's PEP is working towards addressing challenges in this area. The PEP references concerns raised in previous iterations of the Student Priorities for Education Report, and states that the PEP 'can support departments in spreading their assessments more evenly throughout the year'.²¹ If successfully implemented, students could expect to see a diverse range of assessment methods spread out across the duration of the module. This would be a welcome step towards addressing long held student concerns regarding assessment bunching.

Another issue raised regarding assessment timings was submission deadlines clashing with religious festivals, in particular a bunching of assessments reported around Eid which 'affected their workload as they could not engage and interact with their families'. UCL have policy on religious observance during exams, which includes the option of applying for academic adjustments, and states that the central assessment timetable team will, where possible, 'avoid days where work is prohibited for religious reasons'.²² Student sentiment suggests this is a policy which requires further monitoring to assess whether it is working as effectively as is possible.

In the SSCC meetings, students told us:

“Term 2 was very overwhelming, as all assessments took place in the end, resulting in multiple deadlines in a very short period.”

“[the department has] done some very good work on improving the assessment spread to make student workloads more manageable.”

“Students expressed unhappiness about the scheduling of multiple exams during the reading week.”

Artificial Intelligence (AI)

AI is a theme which did not appear significantly in SSCC minutes. However, the rapid growth in AI technology over the last 18 months has seen it become an increasingly pressing issue for HE

institutions to consider in relation to assessments. To greater understand current attitudes towards AI, the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) conducted a national survey to assess UK UG students attitudes.²³ The survey found that 53% of students had used generative AI to help with assessments, 13% to generate text for assessments, but typically editing the content before submission, with 5% of students using AI-generated text in assessments without editing.

Based on these numbers, many institutions have found themselves at a crossroads; they can no longer approach AI as a prohibited entity. Not only are a high proportion of students using generative AI, but research shows that its use in a wide range of careers is growing.²⁴ Consequently, HE institutions must now consider the benefits it offers when used ethically and appropriately. Importantly, students need to be supported to do this by their HE institution.

Encouragingly, UCL have produced guidance for departments for the use of AI tools in assessment.²⁵ This guidance outlines the 'need to recognise that AI will be used at many different stages in their learning process, including preparing for assessments', and therefore that 'the use of generative AI does not automatically constitute academic misconduct'. The policy seeks to clarify what is, and what is not, acceptable, introducing a three-tiered categorisation for different types of assessments. The guidance states that for some types of assessment AI tools cannot be used, for others it can be used in an assistive role, and for some forms of assessment it has an integral role and can be used as a primary tool throughout the assessment process.

Despite this guidance, focus group attendees highlighted the extent to which policies around AI vary between departments and the extent to which they reference UCL's generative AI guidelines. One student stated that their department closely reference UCL's guidelines, however the majority reported they did not and stated that there was often an outright prohibition of AI, or a lack of detailed guidelines around the circumstances under which it was permitted.

Showing what is possible in this space, one student reported that they had received guidance lectures and workshops on the use of AI which they had found helpful. Recent research from the University of Sussex highlights the importance of institutions making 'investments in both staff and student training [which] can allow universities to take advantage of these technological breakthroughs.'²⁶

It is crucial that UCL continues to take an approach that acknowledges the importance of AI, and seeks to integrate it into teaching and assessment, adopting an outright ban policy only where necessary.

In the SSCC meetings, students told us:

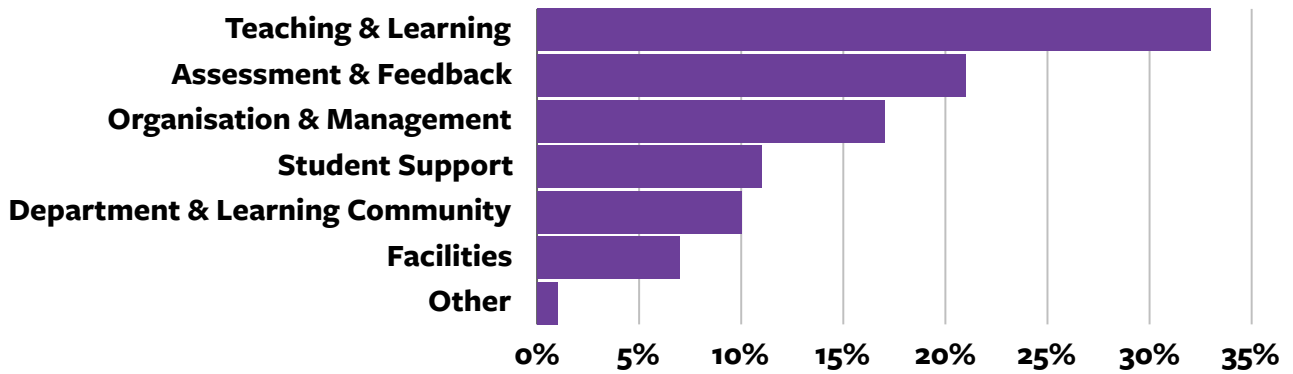
“There was confusion among students regarding the AI policy, particularly regarding what constitutes the appropriate usage of AI, such as proofreading and grammar-checking tools.”

Examples of Best Practice:

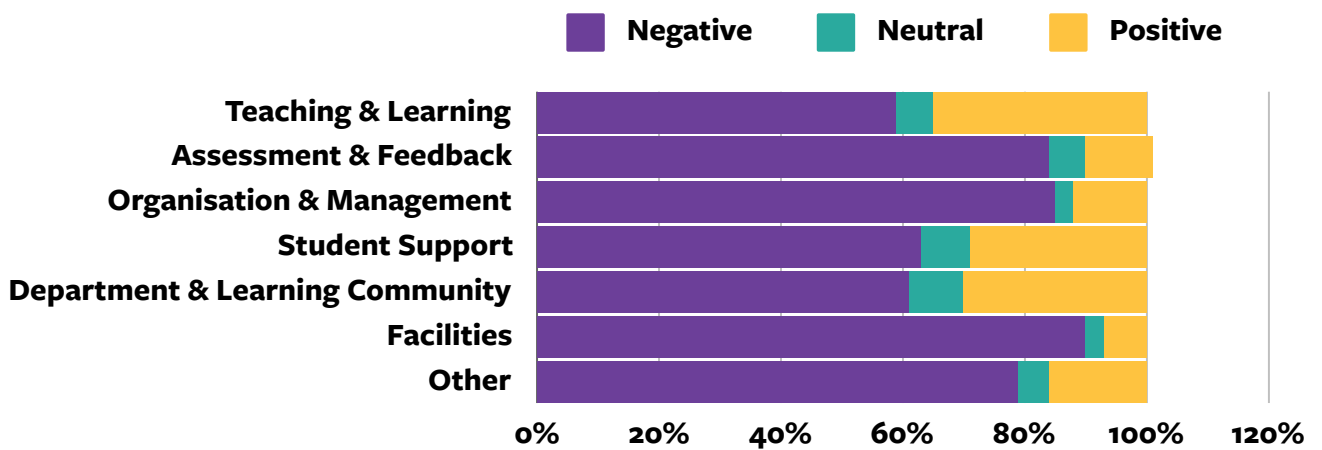
- Example assessment papers should be provided to help students familiarise themselves with the exam format.
- Departments should be mindful where possible of avoiding religious holidays when scheduling assessments.
- Departments should adhere to UCL's guidance on artificial intelligence as closely as possible, only implementing an outright ban on AI where absolutely necessary.
- Skills workshops on the effective use of AI should be provided to students.



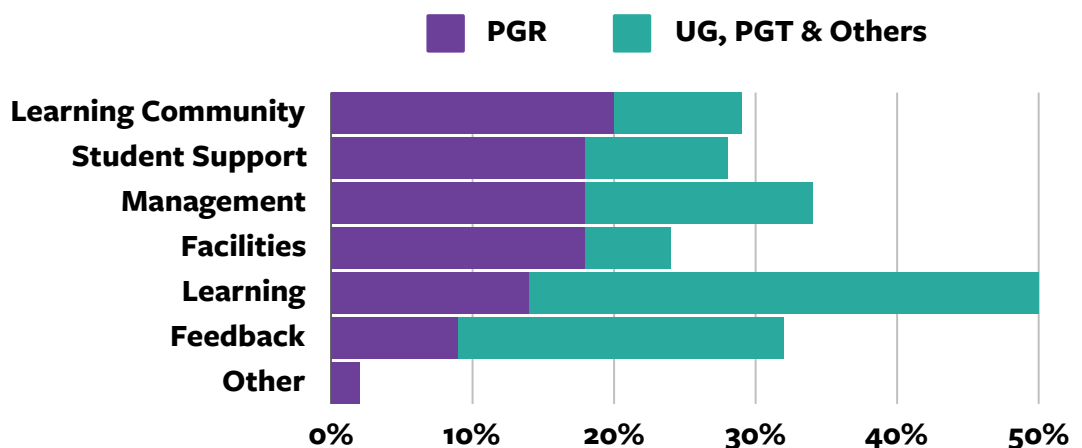
Proportion of Student Comments by Category



Sentiment of Student Comments by Category



Proportion of Student Comments by Category and Level of Study



Student Support

11% (N = 389/3511) of all comments related to Student Support. Student Support refers to the range of measures UCL implement to aid students in navigating their academic experience, including personal tutors, transition mentoring, and provisions in place to support disabled students. Encouragingly, there has been an increase in positive sentiment compared to last year, from 20% to 29%, with negative sentiment reducing from 65% to 63%. Two key sub-themes were student support processes and transition and induction.

Students emphasised the value of effective student support processes. However, there were concerns throughout the sub-themes regarding inconsistencies and gaps in support, particularly for disabled and postgraduate taught (PGT) students.

Within this section, disabled students' experience of Student Support is also discussed. In order to explore this, we conducted a focus group with disabled students on their educational experiences. The main themes emerging from this focus group included issues with reasonable adjustments and the physical inaccessibility of the UCL campus.

Student Support Processes

28% (N = 107/389) of SSCC comments within Student Support related to student support processes. Student support processes, such as structures, schemes and initiatives put in place to ensure students are supported throughout their learning, are essential for the wellbeing, academic success, and personal development of all students. Positive sentiment increased by four percentage points compared to last year, from 32% to 36%, with negative sentiment staying level at 56%. The majority of comments related to the personal tutor system. UCL have begun addressing these concerns through the personal tutor review.²⁷

As part of the personal tutor review, UCL conducted surveys in order to better understand the variation in how personal tutoring is 'conceptualised, delivered, and experienced' between departments. The survey results revealed that, while there are many exceptional examples of personal tutoring enhancing students' learning experiences, 'the personal tutoring system at UCL is not working well for most students and staff'.²⁸ Through this review, UCL aims to clarify the purpose of personal tutoring and, recognising the value of effective personal tutoring, evaluate how it can be enhanced to positively impact students' education and experiences.

Speaking to the value of personal tutors, SSCC comments highlighted the positive impact personal tutors can have on student wellbeing. When personal tutors are engaged students reported that they felt 'really supported', and able to approach them with confidence.

Departments who provided students with clear processes were praised for facilitating the personal tutoring system to work more effectively. For example, one department was commended for improving the process of booking personal tutor appointments to make it easier while another was praised for sending students clear instructions including a designated form to fill out in case their personal tutor is unresponsive.

However, as acknowledged in the personal tutor review, the current system is inconsistent. Concerningly, many Academic Representatives reported that students often did not hear back from their assigned personal tutor, or had minimal contact with them, with one Academic Representative reporting that the majority of students in their cohort had never met their personal tutors.

As highlighted in the personal tutor review, a key issue is that the role of personal tutors is often not clearly defined. One Academic Representative commented that students 'were not always necessarily aware of the intended relationship between a tutor and their tutees, or the role of the personal tutor more generally, and what they are there for.'

There were also numerous instances where students were simply not assigned personal tutors by their departments, or if they had been assigned, it was not until late in term. Transition periods, and the start of each academic year, are often the times where students are in the greatest need of support and so having a personal tutor assigned late in the term can be particularly problematic for students.

Where students did have relationships with their personal tutors, issues were raised regarding tutors changing halfway through the academic year. This often had a disruptive impact. For example, students reported being allocated personal tutors who were not affiliated with their department or who were located off-campus. They also reported long periods where personal tutors were away, and so students were not able to access support.

In the SSCC meetings, students told us:

“First-year students felt they were being supported in their modules and they were being contacted regularly.”

“Many students were still finding it difficult to contact their personal tutors.”

“Students [were] pleased with [the] approachability, support, and response time from personal tutors.”

Reasonable Adjustments to Assessments

The focus group conducted with disabled students on their educational experiences highlighted the issue of academic disability support and reasonable adjustments. UCL provide the option for students to obtain a 'Summary of Reasonable Adjustments' (SoRA).²⁹ The purpose of this document is to outline, on an individual basis, the reasonable adjustments UCL provides to students with physical, mobility, sensory, neurological, or mental health related disabilities.

Unfortunately, feedback revealed that SoRAs are being inconsistently applied within departments. Where students were positive about their experience with SoRAs, it was typically because they were being implemented successfully and there was effective communication between UCL Student Support and Wellbeing and the academic department.

However, other focus group attendees reported cases of adjustments students are entitled to often not being automatically applied. This led to students having to spend significant time and energy following up, resulting in delays and increased levels of stress. One student commented that 'some assignment SoRAs were not automatically applied and upon request, there were problems in the manual extension leading to loss of marks.'

In some cases, students reported professors and personal tutors being uninformed about what SoRAs are or not having the knowledge needed to adjust equipment and systems as required. One student stated that 'some teachers and personal tutors do not respect SoRAs and are ableist' and another that some 'personal tutors are uninformed about the existence of SoRAs.'

In the SSCC meetings, students told us:

“Those students who have SoRAs (Summary of Reasonable Adjustments) found the mitigations not quite met especially for optional modules. She asked whether SoRAs could be circulated to module convenors.”

“SoRA communication around deadlines [is] very easy to navigate.”

“Students are finding they are being rushed and not getting enough time to complete the practical and those students with reasonable adjustments are not being given the sufficient additional time to complete them.”

Transition and Induction

10% (N = 39/389) of SSCC comments within student support related to transition and induction. Students' induction is critical in ensuring students develop a positive sense of belonging and community at University, both socially and in relation to their departments. Transition programmes also play an important role in supporting students to make the transition between different levels of study, preparing them to successfully navigate increasingly complex academic content. Student views on this topic were divided, with 41% of comments expressing positive sentiments and 56% negative sentiments.

Despite student opinion in the SSCC Meetings being divided, encouragingly, the New to UCL survey demonstrates a high level of satisfaction with the induction process at UCL.³⁰ The New to UCL survey is open to all first year UG and postgraduate (PG) students and seeks to gather feedback on students arrival and induction experience. Results reveal that 93% of students are, on the whole, satisfied with their experience of arrival at UCL, 87% felt welcomed and part of the wider UCL community, and 88% agreed that they felt part of their departmental or research unit community based on their experience so far.

In the SSCC meetings, when students were positive about transition and induction, it was typically because of induction week activities. Students also appreciated being provided with clear information about the structure of the upcoming academic year. This speaks to students' desire for clear, consistent communication, a recurring theme throughout student feedback. One student commented that 'the students have a good idea of what the structure of the year is and it's been a smooth transition back into this academic year.'

Where students expressed negative sentiments, it was often due to a desire for additional induction events as they felt the current provision was insufficient. Students also reported that there was not sufficient information regarding academic expectations or knowledge required before initial lectures. One student in Population Health Sciences, for example, commented that 'background information could be available for applied students who lack clinical experience as students found some terms confusing.'

Transition support is particularly important for students entering UCL from one of the University's Widening Participation pathways. As per UCL's Access and Participation Plan, in addition to the Transition Mentoring offered to all students, students entering UCL via Access UCL, UCL's contextual admissions initiative, are provided with enhanced pastoral support beyond their first year. The University is also planning to implement a pre-enrolment programme for these students to bridge the gaps between student expectations and the actual university experience and to ensure that they are better prepared for university study and life.

A cohort often overlooked with regards to transition and induction is PGT students. Here, we have a cohort of students who are transitioning from the UG student experience to the PGT one. Whether they are joining from a different institution, continuing from UG study at UCL, or returning to study after a significant period, the institution should be set up to adequately support this transition. For example, a study completed on the PGT experience of induction at UCL found that only 68% of PGT students 'mostly agreed that they were prepared to begin PGT studies after induction'.³¹

The study, however, raised that despite the existence of numerous transition schemes for UG and PGR students, 'many faced alienation and isolation early in their transition'. Crucially, the report draws attention to the fact that the UCL MBA Mentorship Scheme provided by the UCL School of Management is the only one across UCL targeted at PGT students.³² Implementing transition schemes for PGT students across UCL would make a positive difference in helping PGT students feel better supported.

In the SSCC meetings, students told us:

“The students have a good idea of what the structure of the year is and it’s been a smooth transition back into this academic year.”

“The general level of administrative preparedness for the induction and first weeks of lectures was very low. Only finding out rooms on the day, [and] timetables changing.”

“Students found welcome talks and module selection sessions useful. They note that the picnic social was widely enjoyed.”

Examples of Best Practice:

- Departments should promptly communicate to students how their SoRAs will be applied within the department after the SoRA is in place, and ensure that the SoRA is consistently implemented without the student needing to self-advocate.
- Departments should have clear processes in place for what students should do when their personal tutor is unresponsive or away, and these processes should be communicated clearly to students.
- Implement transition schemes to help PGT students adapt to their studies.

Department and Learning Community

Students' sense of their Department and Learning Community is central to their wellbeing and wider academic experience. Providing institutional support to help foster community at the departmental level is a key goal we share with UCL. The Student Life Strategy, which we developed in partnership, represents the 'largest ever expansion of co- and extra-curricular experiences at UCL'.³³

One key priority project is departmental societies. The strategy recognises that 'departmental societies deepen students' sense of belonging in their department', seeking to standardise support and resources for departmental societies across UCL and roll out a departmental society development programme.

10% (N = 367/3511) of all SSCC comments related to department and learning community, with 30% of students expressing positive sentiments and 61% expressing negative. This represents a net improvement in sentiment, with positive sentiment having risen from 24% and negative sentiment increased from 56% last year. The three key sub-themes raised within Department and Learning Community were social and community, student voice, and common and study areas.

Social and Community

39% (N = 142/367) of comments within Department and Learning Community related to social and community, the most of any sub-theme within Department and Learning Community. The value of social and community cannot be underestimated; a students sense of community not only enriches their overall wellbeing and personal development, but is integral for their success within university and beyond. Student sentiment on this topic was divided, with 54% expressing negative sentiments, but positive sentiment having risen slightly to 32%, up from 31% last year.

Within SSCC meetings, students spoke highly of departments who had organised events. In particular, students appreciated when these events were consistently organised throughout all three academic terms. Students also commended clubs or societies within departments where students were able to organise and contribute towards events with departmental support.

Where students expressed negative sentiments, this typically focused on the desire for more social events. Some students also expressed that they felt siloed on their programmes and wanted to get to know other students across the department. One student commented that 'PhD students would like a more engaged community and would like more social events.' Linking to this, another common frustration for students was the lack of space for socialising. This is explored further in the common and study areas section.

Delivering on the departmental societies' priority of the student life strategy effectively would be a key step towards addressing student concerns with their sense of community within their department.

In the SSCC meetings, students told us:

“The social events had gone well with students appreciating the opportunity to integrate with other year cohorts.”

“Students would like more social events organised by the department.”

“Students [...] reported positively on interacting with students from other MSC programmes in the department.”

Student Voice

29% (N = 108/367) of SSCC comments within Department and Learning Community related to student voice. Student voice, ensuring that student concerns are heard and addressed within departments, is vital in empowering students to actively participate in shaping their educational experience and fostering a sense of ownership and improvement across the university community. Comments related to student voice expressed the most positive sentiment levels of any sub-theme, and the only one with a net positive sentiment, with 52% of comments expressing positive sentiments and 41% expressing negative sentiment.

Students were generally positive about the SSCC format, expressing satisfaction that the meetings provide Academic Representatives the opportunity to raise issues. One student stated that ‘SSCC is a very effective forum to raise issues’ while another highlighted their importance as ‘a useful way of keeping student reps up to date and active on departmental actions, initiatives, and priorities.’

Beyond SSCCs, students praised departments who implemented a range of feedback mechanisms, including mechanisms for quick feedback through methods such as pulse checks incorporated in lectures or surveys. Students were particularly positive in instances where staff had made changes based on the feedback provided. One student commented that ‘one recent improvement based on survey feedback was the implementation of introductory module videos at the start of term to help during the module selection process.’

Concerningly, student frustrations regarding this feedback loop have persisted. As seen in last year’s Student Priorities for Education Report, students expressed dissatisfaction when issues had been raised through SSCCs or other feedback channels yet there had been no tangible actions

taken. For example, one student reported that students in their cohort ‘felt that there wasn’t any transparency in the way changes were being made despite student’s willingness to give feedback.’ Implementing clearer processes for addressing student feedback across departments would help to address this concern.

There were also suggestions that staff could provide feedback mechanisms which are anonymous, as some students would feel more able to express honest feedback. Anonymous feedback channels would provide students with the opportunity to express previously hidden problems and provide faculty members with an alternative understanding of the challenges facing students.

In the SSCC meetings, students told us:

“Students reported they were pleased with their Student Academic Reps’ organisation to collect feedback, students felt like it was a bonding experience that had reduced anxieties they were feeling.”

“[students] also mentioned the issue of students not being clear on how their feedback is acted on.”

“Students [...] felt like their opinion has been heard from their student representatives and appreciate their student representatives’ efforts.”

Common and Study Areas

14% (N = 50/367) of SSCC comments within department and learning community related to common and study areas. Common and study areas have the potential to provide students with opportunities for focused work, collaboration, and social interaction, whilst fostering a sense of community. Concerningly, sentiment was overwhelmingly negative, with 90% of comments expressing negative sentiments. The main issue discussed within this sub-theme was the lack of space available to students at all levels of study. This is perhaps unsurprising given that UCL student numbers have more than doubled from 24,855 in 2011-12 to 51,058 in 2022/23^{34,35}As acknowledged in UCL’s recent ‘Size and Shape’ review, as well in the 2022-2027 Estates Strategy, this has placed increasing strain on campus resources.^{36,37}

Consequently, there is a clear need both for improved teaching and social spaces. There is a wide range of research on the importance of study and communal spaces to improve student outcomes and wellbeing. Repeatedly, students in SSCC meetings highlighted the lack of study space at UCL, both for individual and group work. One student commented that ‘due to the increase in student numbers there isn’t enough space available for group work within the department’ or ‘within the

main campus'. Several students also raised the issue specifically in relation to the IOE, Faculty of Education and Society, believing that the amount of communal student space available was insufficient.

There were also concerns regarding the lack of social communal space. Communal areas were reported to be strained due to a lack of availability in relation to student numbers and there were reports of communal spaces being reassigned as teaching rooms 'due to space pressures'. One student commented that 'communal areas are often too crowded,' and they 'would like more space to gather socially'. This was an issue emphasised in sabbatical officer manifestos for our 2024 Leadership Race, as well as in our Education Zone discussions.³⁸ Having improved study and communal spaces on campus would enable students to build a greater sense of community as well as fostering better conditions to enable their academic success.

Concerns around common and study areas was a key theme raised in our focus group with PGR students. In this focus group, many students raised that this struggle for space often led to a lack of a sense of community within their department, as well as a lack of connectedness with other PhD students. This was also highlighted in SSCC meetings, where 42% of comments related to common and study areas were raised by PGR students. They highlighted that even in departments where PhD common rooms do exist, there are often cases of disrepair such as 'broken furniture and lighting issues.'

In the SSCC meetings, students told us:

“Due to the increase in student numbers there isn't enough space available for group work within the department.”

“PhD students desperately need access to more bookable meeting rooms.”

“Students would like to have a common room where MSC students could meet with each other and PhD students.”

Examples of Best Practice:

- For departments to develop departmental societies as pioneering student-led hubs for extra- and co-curricular activities.
- For departments to implement changes that students request through SSCCs.
- For departments to create communal spaces for PGRs where possible.



Organisation and Management

17% (N = 584/3511) of SSCC comments related to Organisation and Management. Organisation and Management encompass important topics including communication, class timetabling, and departmental IT. These topics provide the structure necessary to enable effective teaching and learning at UCL and are the foundations of the wider student educational experience. Concerningly, there has been a substantial increase in negative sentiment compared to 2022-23.

Communication

Communication, in line with previous years, continued to be the most raised sub-theme within Organisation and Management, with 22% (N = 146/584) of comments within the theme relating to it. Clear communication between departments and students is crucial in ensuring students receive vital information and feel able to adequately plan how to navigate their academic commitments. Unfortunately, sentiment relating to communication was overwhelmingly negative, with 83% of comments expressing negative sentiment. This represents an increase of 7% compared to last year.

Where students expressed positive sentiment, they highlighted departments where information was communicated through multiple channels to ensure it was not missed, as well as praising staff who provided quick responses to students. One student commented that 'receiving information through multiple media means it is less likely to slip through the cracks'. Another stated that their 'cohort has been appreciative of the quick responses from staff'.

One key concern highlighted was timetables being released with late notice, or changes to timetables being made without adequate notice. In some cases, this lack of notice meant students were unable to attend teaching, leading to increased levels of stress. For example, one student stated that 'the timetable [...] came out quite late and some of them were unable to make arrangements for childcare when teaching is face to face'. Another raised 'a change in seminar time for some students, [which] lacked detail and context' and commented that 'the sudden change was stressful'. While it is understandable that changes to timetables are, at times, unavoidable, it is crucial that these changes are communicated as early and as clearly as possible.

Academic Representatives also raised instances of staff being slow or nonresponsive to student emails. As well as causing stress, this can often have negative impacts regarding students' abilities to adequately plan and complete their work effectively. One student stated that 'communication with the module leader has proven challenging, hindering our ability to seek clarification on various aspects of the project and report structure'.

Additionally, the number of lengthy emails has been highlighted as a problem. For example, one student felt that 'a list of all the deadlines for the upcoming academic year in one single document, alongside other key points of useful information' would be helpful. They also requested that the document features everything such as the conferences and not just academic deadlines. This student was not alone, with another noting that 'emails need to be more concise and to the point', citing that long emails can make it 'harder to fathom what actually is being said'. As outlined in last year's report, concerns around poor communication are not unique to UCL, with research by Advance HE and HEPI revealing that students across the UK are concerned over a lack of timely and appropriate communication.³⁹ To remedy this, staff should consider implementing more concise and clear communication practices, including summarising key actions at the end of emails. These practices should also be clearly defined to students on arrival.

In the SSCC meetings, students told us:

“Students expressed dissatisfaction with the slow response rate from the teaching office. [But] this is improving as there are new teaching office staff who have joined recently.”

“Communication around deadlines are very easy to navigate.”

“Communication from module coordinator and supervisors very lacking – formative assessment not told when occurring which impacts holiday breaks.”

Class Timetabling

22% (N = 128/584) of the SSCC comments within Organisation and Management related to Class Timetabling. Effective Class Timetabling is invaluable; through minimising timetable conflicts and ensuring that all changes are well communicated, UCL could provide its students with a learning environment that reduces stress and enhances student productivity. However, based on the SSCC comments, this is not being achieved. Similar to last year, students expressed dissatisfaction with the accuracy and functionality of the timetabling system, with 91% of the feedback being negative. The key concerns included back-to-back timetabling, timetable clashes, and missing information.

Many students reported that the timetabling system often displayed inaccuracies, leading to confirm and scheduling conflicts. For example, seminars were sometimes missing from the timetable, or modules with similar names were listed incorrectly, causing further confusion: 'The UCL timetable was reported to be inaccurate, leading to confusion and scheduling conflicts.' Such inaccuracies can lead to missed classes and difficulty in planning study schedules. Students suggested that updated timetables should be circulated promptly to avoid confusion and stress.

Importantly, when students were satisfied with Class Timetabling, it was often because their department was responsive, and issues were efficiently dealt with. One student remarked that 'communication around the timetable is clear and the small number of issues were dealt with quickly.'

Unfortunately, another key concern was the occurrence of timetable clashes. Students reported having overlapping classes or sessions scheduled too closely together without sufficient travel time between different buildings or campuses: 'Another important problem is the venue where the classes happen at is 15 minutes away from the place where we have our previous class. We have 1 hour to eat and arrive here, and a lot of people find it too tight.' Another student noted a similar issue, commenting that they often have to walk significant distances between classes that are adjacent in the timetable. As highlighted at the Union's Education Policy Zone, this issue was particularly problematic for part-time students who needed to balance academic and work commitments, for students whose courses are split between different campuses, and for disabled students.⁴⁹ On this topic, one student noted that 'some classes have overrun, which particularly affects part-time students as it interrupts potential working hours.' Effective scheduling is essential to prevent these clashes and ensure students can attend all their required classes without creating an additional burden.

Within the SSCCs, students also discussed that they frequently experienced long days with back-to-back classes and insufficient breaks. For example, one student highlighted that 'Friday was particularly busy with 8 hours of teaching scheduled.' For many students, this led to fatigue, reduced concentration, and made it challenging for them to manage their time effectively. Conversely, students who were happy with their timetable reported that it was because it allowed them to manage their workload.

Addressing the concerns raised by students regarding class timetabling is crucial for enhancing students' academic experience at UCL. Ensuring that timetables are accurate and delivered in a timely manner, while being mindful of students' diverse needs, can significantly improve their ability to attend and engage in learning activities. By implementing these improvements, UCL can help reduce the stress and confusion associated with current scheduling issues, thereby contributing to a more supportive and efficient learning environment.

In the SSCC meetings, students told us:

“Students highlighted the need for better scheduling and advanced notice to avoid conflicts with compulsory events.”

“Students are happy with the scheduling which allows them to manage their workload.”

“Some students have timetable clashes with weekly modules and block modules.”

Departmental IT

14% (N = 80/584) of the SSCC comments within Organisation and Management pertained to department IT. Efficient and reliable IT services are crucial for supporting the academic activities of students, ensuring they have seamless access to necessary resources and platforms. However, based on the SSCC comments, there are significant areas for improvement. The feedback on IT service was mixed, with many students expressing dissatisfaction with the functionality and accessibility of various IT systems and platforms.

One prominent issue raised by students was the inconsistency and usability of Moodle pages. Several students reported difficulties accessing reading lists and navigating the new layout of Moodle. One student noted, ‘the format on Moodle of collapsed topics is difficult to navigate and modules feel like one continuous long page,’ highlighting the challenges in finding specific information. Additionally, students mentioned that Moodle pages were sometimes not updated promptly, leading to confusion about deadlines and class materials. One student stated, ‘a lot of people are finding it difficult to organise themselves and saying the info on Moodle can be a bit all over the place and some things aren’t clear.’

Students also expressed frustration with the technical issues surrounding online learning platforms. For instance, the Mural Board platform was reported to slow down significantly when too many users were online simultaneously. Another concern was the malfunctioning SEAtS app used for attendance monitoring. This posed a particular stress for international students with visa requirements. One student commented, ‘the SEAtS app for attendance monitoring is not working correctly, and this is especially worrying for students on a student visa.’

Additionally, some students reported difficulties with accessing and using shared resources, such as shared computers which do not have a full suite of programmes installed. Others pointed out issues with the AV management in externally bookable spaces, which sometimes hindered the effective delivery of lectures and seminars.

Despite these challenges, there were positive comments regarding the responsiveness of IT staff and the improvements made in some areas. For example, the transition from 2U to in-house management of Moodle was appreciated, with one student noting that it made it 'much clearer which staff members to contact, and the information is also coming to students far quicker.' Additionally, some students found the Moodle forum to be a helpful tool, though they suggested it could be more effective if it were anonymised to encourage more participation.

In the SSCC meetings, students told us:

“Concerns about technical issues with attendance monitoring and potential visa implications if attendance is low.”

“Students were not happy with Moodle as it takes too long to load, pre-workshop content was slow loading.”

“The group find Moodle is clear and easy to follow.”

Examples of Best Practice:

- Departments should ensure timetables, and any changes to scheduled teaching, are communicated with adequate notice to students.
- Staff should ensure communication to students is concise and clear, expressed through multiple mediums where possible.
- Departments should ensure that Moodle pages are regularly updated with relevant class materials.



Facilities

7% (N = 257/3511) of SSCC comments related to Facilities. The two main sub-themes were teaching rooms and UCL buildings. Students generally felt negative about Facilities, with many of the frustrations captured in previous years - such as teaching rooms - persisting. Another growing concern for students is UCL buildings. Here, students highlighted issues with accessibility and maintenance. These aspects are vital for ensuring a conducive learning environment and supporting students' academic success.

Teaching Rooms

32% (N = 84/257) of the SSCC comments coded within Facilities related to teaching rooms. Students were generally dissatisfied with teaching rooms, with 95% of the comments coded as negative. This represents a 10% increase in negative sentiment in comparison to the previous academic year. Given the important role that teaching rooms play in providing students with an enjoyable, engaging learning environment that supports their overall academic performance, it is concerning that many students find their experiences do not reflect this ideal.

Unfortunately, many of the core frustrations expressed by students were also raised in last year's Student Priorities for Education Report. These included the location and layout of rooms and challenges with audio-visual equipment. For example, students specifically spoke about rooms being 'a bit small', 'cramped', and there being 'issues with the projector going off'. Poorly equipped or maintained rooms can lead to distractions, discomfort, and a lack of engagement. Insufficient space, outdated technology, poor lighting, and inadequate acoustics can hinder the ability to concentrate and participate actively. Additionally, a subpar learning environment can exacerbate stress and reduce overall academic performance, ultimately impacting students' educational outcomes and enthusiasm for learning.⁴¹

Almost half of the negative feedback regarding teaching rooms were raised by students in the faculty of Brain Sciences. The majority of their feedback related to rooms having poor temperature regulation, a lack of ventilation, and no windows. For example, one student commented that they '[couldn't] help but think that spending 7ish hours with no sunlight in a lecture context (i.e. your focus is on listening and not a lot of movement or practical activities) has a real impact on your energy.' Another student stated that 'The temperature is too hot and there is a concern this will get worse as we move into warmer weather', flagging that this was a particular concern for individuals within the cohort with health conditions or who might be pregnant.

This concern regarding a lack of natural light is unsurprising given that its importance in

educational spaces has been well-documented in literature. In 2015, researchers from the University of Salford found that good natural lighting was linked to better student performance, with positive effects on mood, behaviour, and concentration.⁴² If UCL wishes to enhance the overall educational experience and maintain a high standard of academic success, then they should look at finding a swift resolution for this issue.

When students were positive about their teaching rooms, it was typically because they were praising a specific room or were grateful that their module had a consistent room in a suitable location: 'Thank you for finding a consistent room for us, I am also really pleased it's in Torrington.' Interestingly, the importance of space was also referenced in Wonkhe and Pearson's 'Building Belonging in Higher Education' research. Here, students spoke about the link between space and a sense of community: '[our study space is] somewhere we all feel comfortable during our breaks or between lectures [...] instilling a sense of unification within the course and making us feel more like a community.'⁴³

In the SSCC meetings, students told us:

“Leaky, cramped, AV issues, no windows.”

“PhD room working well and more desks [have been] appreciated.”

“The room isn't sloped so you can't see the bottom half of the screen most of the time. It's too hot to learn!”

UCL Buildings

18% (N = 47/257) of the SSCC comments coded within Facilities related to UCL buildings. Like Teaching Rooms, UCL's buildings play an important role in ensuring that students have a positive academic experience whilst studying here. With regards to UCL buildings, in the SSCC meetings, students were primarily concerned with accessibility and the poor maintenance of buildings and facilities.

Within SSCC meetings, students expressed frustration that UCL buildings were being poorly maintained. For example, toilets and water fountains are frequently out of order and multiple rooms were reported to have leaks. Not only do these issues raise concerns regarding health and safety, but the processes for addressing them appear to be inconsistent. For example, one student reported that even when reports had been submitted, their issue persisted: 'The PhD office has been leaking for 2 years. This has been reported continuously to Royal Free Hospital Estates and to the Head of Department to no avail.'

UCL buildings was also a dominant theme within the focus group run by Students' Union UCL into the experience of disabled students. Given that disabled students remain systematically disadvantaged compared to their non-disabled peers, it is essential that these experiences are not overlooked.⁴⁴ Key points raised included hygiene and maintenance, construction and repairs, and information and planning. Concerns regarding inadequate communication underscored many of these points.

Specifically, poor toilet provision was one of the most discussed topics in the focus group. Here, students raised that disabled toilets are often not sufficiently stocked with the essentials (e.g. soap). These concerns regarding hygiene standards have also been raised in the SSCC meetings. For example, one student highlighted that the poor hygiene of toilets has been 'exacerbated by sanitary bins not being emptied regularly' and another exclaimed that 'the toilet next to [the lecture theatre] NEVER has soap.' Given that well-maintained facilities are essential for the health and safety of all students, this requires attention.

Another key issue raised in the focus group relates to campus lifts and disabled toilets being under construction for prolonged periods. In the focus group, it was clear that this significantly impacts disabled students at UCL by limiting their autonomy and reducing their independence. When essential features such as lifts and toilets are out of service for extended periods, it forces students with mobility issues to navigate alternative, often more challenging routes, which can be physically exhausting and time-consuming. This not only creates additional stress, but also diminishes their ability to participate fully in academic and social activities, leading to feelings of isolation and frustration. For example, one student highlighted the barriers that this presents for them: 'when I go to the science library half the time the lifts are closed, the toilets are closed and then it's like an isolated building. And to go to like someplace else can be a big hassle at that point for anyone who has accessibility issues.'

UCL's new Inclusive Environment's strategy aims to address these issues, with Aimie Chapple, Vice-President Operations writing, 'Inclusive environments are an important part of our overall Estates strategy, and whilst we know there is more work to do – this policy is an important step in ensuring that we build inclusive environments into our plans as we work together on the Master Plan for the University'.⁴⁵ Prioritising the implementation of the Inclusive Environment strategy would be an important step in addressing issues students have raised.

There is a need, however, to ensure that departments are abiding by the same principles UCL are looking to implement at an institutional level. Introducing a strengthened process of monitoring and accountability of departments over inclusive environments would help ensure consistency across UCL in working towards a more inclusive campus. The strategy also neglects the issue of the maintenance of accessible bathrooms. Prioritising this maintenance to ensure these are clean, stocked, and functional should be a priority for UCL.

Finally, it is important that when UCL implement policies and improvements that help address the

inaccessibility of campus, these are well communicated to staff and students. Improving communication strategies to ensure students are aware of resources such as the AccessAble UCL web page and updates to the UCL Go App would help ensure students are able to benefit from the improvements that UCL are implementing.

In the SSCC meetings, students told us:

“It was noted that the toilets in IOE were frequently out of order.”

“Raised question of accessibility of building ahead of interim and degree shows at the Slade.”

“[The hygiene of toilets] was exacerbated by sanitary bins not being emptied regularly.”

Examples of Best Practice:

- For UCL to ensure teaching rooms have the appropriate audio-visual equipment, layout, and seating arrangements to ensure students are able to fully participate in their learning.
- Departments should ensure their facilities align with UCL’s Inclusive Environments strategy, scheduling classes in well maintained and accessible teaching spaces.
- Departments should ensure clear communication with students where teaching spaces fall short of Inclusive Environments principles to help mitigate adverse impacts.



Recommendations

Learning, Teaching and Assessment

1. Move forward with the Programme Excellence Project so that programme diets, modules and assessments are more streamlined and comparable across UCL, to ensure students are supported in a fair and consistent manner to succeed.
2. Programmes should offer a diverse range of assessment methods (including authentic assessment) that are spread across the duration of the module with less bunching of assessments and more opportunities for developmental feedback in between assessments to enhance learning.
3. Promote greater use of lecture capture facilities to ensure more recordings are available to students, including those in smaller cohorts.

Postgraduate Teaching Assistants (PGTAs)

1. Prioritise the implementation of the findings and recommendations from the PGTA Task & Finish Group.
2. Ensure that all research students who support teaching and assessment are fairly recruited, trained and inducted, consistently supported and supervised, and timely and adequately remunerated and rewarded.
3. Establish clearer oversight and accountability for the employment of research students to support teaching and assessment activities, and ensure that there is consistent practice across departments.



Support & Community

1. Commit significant investment into student facilities as a priority such as the Students' Union building and sporting facilities, providing students a home away from home and supporting their wellbeing.
2. Deliver on the findings and recommendations from Review of Personal Tutoring Arrangements.
3. Conduct a review of how Statements of Reasonable Adjustments (SoRAs) are implemented in departments to ensure the burden does not fall on the student and they are supported in a timely and equitable manner so that they are able to reach their potential.
4. Encourage departments to build stronger communities amongst their research students, so that they feel connected and are able to support one another.

Timetabling and Facilities

1. Improve scheduling to ensure student timetables are delivered in a timely manner which is inclusive of the needs of the learner and supports their attendance with learning activities.
2. Prioritise the implementation of UCL's Inclusive Environments Policy and introduce a strengthened process of monitoring and accountability of departments over inclusive environments.
3. Prioritise the maintenance of accessible bathrooms to ensure that these are clean, stocked, and functional.
4. Improve communication strategies to ensure students are aware of resources such as the AccessAble UCL web page and updates to the UCL Go App.



Endnotes

- 1 Students Union UCL. (2023, May). Priorities for Education Report 2023. Retrieved from: <https://studentsunionucl.org/student-priorities-for-education-report-2023>
- 2 UCL (University College London). (2022). Student Life Strategy. Retrieved from: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/strategic-plan-2022-27/supporting-strategies/student-life-strategy>
- 3 UCL (University College London). (2023). Personal Tutoring Review. Retrieved from: https://www.ucl.ac.uk/teaching-learning/sites/teaching_learning/files/personal_tutoring_review_report_2023.pdf
- 4 UCL (University College London). (2023). Programme Excellence Project. Retrieved from: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/teaching-learning/education-excellence/programme-excellence-project>
- 5 UCL (University College London). (2022). Strategic Plan 2022-2027. Retrieved from: https://www.ucl.ac.uk/strategic-plan-2022-27/sites/strategic_plan_2022_27/files/ucl_strategic_plan_2022-27.pdf
- 6 UCL (University College London). (2023). NSS Results 2023. Retrieved from: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/teaching-learning/student-engagement/student-surveys-results/nss#Our%20NSS%20results>
- 7 UCL (University College London). (2023). NSS Results 2023. Retrieved from: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/teaching-learning/student-engagement/student-surveys-results/nss#Our%20NSS%20results>
- 8 UCL (University College London). (2024). The UCL Hour. Retrieved from: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/human-resources/making-hybrid-work/ucl-hour-all-meetings>
- 9 Advance HE. (2023). Student Academic Experience Survey 2023. Retrieved from: <https://advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/student-academic-experience-survey-2023>
- 10 Advance HE. (2023). Student Academic Experience Survey 2023. Retrieved from: <https://advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/student-academic-experience-survey-2023>
- 11 UCL (University College London). Strategic Plan 2022-2027, Academic Initiatives. Retrieved from: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/strategic-plan-2022-27/plan-contents/academic-initiatives#TAF>
- 12 UCL (University College London). (2023). Programme Excellence Project. Retrieved from: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/teaching-learning/education-excellence/programme-excellence-project>
- 13 UCL (University College London). (2023). NSS Results 2023. Retrieved from: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/teaching-learning/student-engagement/student-surveys-results/nss#Our%20NSS%20results>

Endnotes

- 14 Students Union UCL. (2023, May). Priorities for Education Report 2023. Retrieved from: <https://studentsunionucl.org/student-priorities-for-education-report-2023>
- 15 UCL (University College London). (2020). Postgraduate Teaching Assistant Code of Practice. Retrieved from: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/human-resources/postgraduate-teaching-assistant-code-practice>
- 16 Students Union UCL. (2020). New Code of Practice for PGTAs. Retrieved from: <https://studentsunionucl.org/articles/new-code-of-practice-for-pgtas>
- 17 UCL (University College London). (2024). UCL Postgraduate Teaching Assistant Task and Finish Group: Report and Recommendations.
- 18 UCL (University College London). (2023). NSS Results 2023. Retrieved from: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/teaching-learning/student-engagement/student-surveys-results/nss#Our%20NSS%20results>
- 19 UCL (University College London). Strategic Plan 2022-2027, Academic Initiatives. Retrieved from: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/strategic-plan-2022-27/plan-contents/academic-initiatives#TAF>
- 20 UCL (University College London). (2024). Refreshed Feedback and Assessment Guidelines.
- 21 UCL (University College London). (2023). Programme Excellence Project. Retrieved from: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/teaching-learning/education-excellence/programme-excellence-project>
- 22 UCL (University College London). (2023). Religious observance during exams
Retrieved from: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/students/news/2024/mar/religious-observance-during-exams>
- 23 Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI). (2024, February). Provide or punish? Students' views on generative AI in higher education. Retrieved from: <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2024/02/01/provide-or-punish-students-views-on-generative-ai-in-higher-education/>
- 24 Koutroumpis, P. (2023). Expert Comment: AI demand is booming for the right skills and for the technology 'glue-guys'. Retrieved from: <https://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2023-10-09-expert-comment-ai-demand-booming-right-skills-and-technology-glue-guys>
- 25 UCL (University College London). Using AI tools in assessment. Retrieved from: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/teaching-learning/generative-ai-hub/using-ai-tools-assessment>
- 26 University of Surrey. (2024, March). Universities at a crossroads with AI, says new study. Retrieved from: <https://www.surrey.ac.uk/news/universities-crossroads-ai-says-new-study>
- 27 UCL (University College London). (2023). Personal Tutoring Review. Retrieved from: https://www.ucl.ac.uk/teaching-learning/sites/teaching_learning/files/personal_tutoring_review_report_2023.pdf

Endnotes

28 Ibid.

29 UCL (University College London). Reasonable adjustments to your assessments. Retrieved from: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/students/support-and-wellbeing/disability-support/reasonable-adjustments-your-assessments>

30 UCL (University College London). New to UCL survey. Retrieved from: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/teaching-learning/student-engagement/student-surveys-results/new-to-ucl>

31 Campbell, K. The Postgraduate Taught Experience of Induction at UCL.

32 UCL School of Management. (2023, March). The UCL MBA Mentorship Scheme. Retrieved from: <https://www.mgmt.ucl.ac.uk/ucl-som-mba-mentorship-scheme#:~:text=The%20UCL%20MBA%20Mentorship%20Scheme%20aims%20to%20connect%20MBA%20students,expertise%20in%20their%20preferred%20sector.>

33 UCL (University College London). Strategic Plan 2022-2027, Student Life Strategy. Retrieved from: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/strategic-plan-2022-27/supporting-strategies/student-life-strategy>

34 UCL (University College London). Student statistics. Retrieved from: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/srs/student-statistics>

35 UCL (University College London). (2023) UCL Annual Review, Facts, figures and statistics. Retrieved from: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/annual-review/facts-figures-and-statistics>

36 UCL (University College London). (2022, September). 2022-2027 Strategic Plan consultation, UCL's size and shape. Retrieved from: https://www.ucl.ac.uk/strategic-plan-2022-27/sites/strategic_plan_2022_27/files/ucl_size_and_shape.pdf

37 UCL (University College London). Estates Strategy 2022-27, Executive Summary. Retrieved from: https://www.ucl.ac.uk/strategic-plan-2022-27/sites/strategic_plan_2022_27/files/ucl_estates_strategy_executive_summary.pdf

38 Students Union UCL. The Leadership Race. Retrieved from: <https://studentsunionucl.org/leadership-race>

39 Advance HE. (2023). Student Academic Experience Survey 2023. Retrieved from: <https://advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/student-academic-experience-survey-2023>

40 Students Union UCL. (2023, November). Education Zone, Minutes. Retrieved from: <https://studentsunionucl.org/sites/default/files/inline-images/EZ2302%20Minutes.pdf>

41 American Psychological Association. (2015). Stress in America: Paying with Our Health. Retrieved from: <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2014/stress-report.pdf>

Endnotes

42 Barrett, P., Zhang, Y., Davies, F., Barrett, L. (2015). Clever Classrooms: Summary report of the HEAD Project (Holistic Evidence and Design). Retrieved from: <https://tgescapes.co.uk/sites/default/files/1503-Salford-Uni-Report-DIGITAL.pdf>

43 Blake, S., Capper, G, Jackson, A. (2022). Building Belonging in Higher Education. Retrieved from: <https://wonkhe.com/wp-content/wonkhe-uploads/2022/10/Building-Belonging-October-2022.pdf>

44 Brewer, G., Urwin, E., Witham, B. (2023). Disabled student experiences of Higher Education. *Disability & Society*, 1–20. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2023.2263633>

45 UCL (University College London). (2023). UCL Our plans to create an inclusive environment across UCL. Retrieved from: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/2023/dec/our-plans-create-inclusive-environment-across-ucl>

