



# **Student Priorities for Wellbeing**

**2021-2022**



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## Introduction

The Student Priorities for Wellbeing Report is now in its third year and has been reporting throughout a time of turbulent change both within UCL and across the UK. The previous edition of this report, published in May 2021, considered the impact of the pandemic on UCL students' wellbeing. With various lockdowns and a move to a mainly online delivery model, the previous report had a particular focus on issues of mental health, isolation, and a lost sense of community, with these issues found not only in students across UCL or even throughout the higher education sector more widely, but also permeating other groups in the society.

Whilst the findings of this year's report are by no means unaffected by the Covid-19 pandemic, much of the circumstances surrounding student life at UCL are becoming more similar to pre-spring 2020. Online teaching and learning is still commonplace, however students are spending far more time on campus than they did in the 2020-21 academic year, and are able to socialise with fewer restrictions than was possible in the first 12 to 18 months of the pandemic. Concerns regarding issues such as employment and housing still have a profound effect on student wellbeing, however the nature of these concerns are not as overwhelmingly linked to the circumstances of the pandemic as they were in the previous academic year.

As with both previous versions of the report, the term 'wellbeing', often broadly used and open to interpretation, will be defined in relation to students and based on the definition provided in UCL's Student Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2019-21, which defines this as:

*"A state of physical, mental, and emotional health where a student is able to engage meaningfully in learning and contribute to their community. Wellbeing is personal and multifactorial, but typically includes feelings of being socially connected, a sense of direction and belonging, satisfaction with personal achievements, and low levels of anxiety."*

The main issues covered within this report are drawn from reviewing student feedback and data in relation to their wellbeing across core student surveys conducted in 2020/21 and 2021/22, as well as insights from national data regarding student wellbeing under the current circumstances.

Whereas last year's analysis of existing data was accompanied by separate quantitative data in the form of a wellbeing survey, this year's report includes qualitative data gathered directly from UCL students. In preparation for this report, Students' Union UCL ran nine focus groups on four different subjects: Accessibility, Community & Belonging, Student Experience Living in Private Rented Accommodation and Student-Staff at Students' Union UCL.

These focus groups were attended by a diverse group of over 50 students and provided valuable insights into their wellbeing and experience across a wide range of issues. Their testimonies are included across various sections of the report, with the aim of adding some much-needed context and first-hand accounts of how their wellbeing has been affected across different aspects of their time at UCL.

As with the two previous editions of the report, the report is divided into three sections:

- » Mental Wellbeing
- » Social Wellbeing
- » Physical Wellbeing

Across each section the report identifies both positive and negative aspects of student wellbeing, covering the student experience of both UCL and the Students' Union. The report aims to analyse the data available, outlining both areas of good practice and recommendations for improvement.

The themes covered in this year's report are similar to those in 2021, with six of the seven previous areas remaining identical across both reports. One change made to last year's report comes in the area that was entitled 'Finance'. Within the context of higher education this term may be confused with the specific student loans system 'Student finance', whereas the aim of this theme in the report is broader, covering all aspects of a student's financial outlook. With this in mind, this theme has been renamed 'Money' in this year's report.

An extra theme has also been added regarding 'Accessibility', which falls within the Mental Wellbeing section of the report. This theme draws from the fact that many of the ideas discussed last year such as the 'Mental Health' and 'Student Retention' issues related to how accessible students find UCL, and it is felt that this issue would benefit from some standalone consideration within this year's report. As this report becomes more established it is hoped that the themes can remain largely consistent across different versions, enabling for easier comparison between different years and allowing for a truer sense of the state of student wellbeing at UCL within any given year.

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**Welfare and International Officer, 2020-22**



## Progress Against the Recommendations from the Previous Report

In the Student Priorities for Wellbeing Report 2021, 11 different recommendations were made across the three main areas of student wellbeing; 4 for UCL, 3 for Students' Union UCL and 4 to be worked on in partnership. The table below represents an update on the progress of these recommendations as of May 2022. We welcome any further updates on the recommendations, especially in those areas where the status is unknown.

Recommendation		Updates
<b>For UCL:</b>		
Mental Wellbeing	Continue the commitment towards the University Mental Health Charter, particularly in relation to the areas of cohesiveness of support across UCL as well as inclusivity and intersectional mental health.	UCL is moving forward to gain the University Mental Health Charter Award, with a two-day site visit to be completed in June 2022.
Mental Wellbeing	Adapt career guidance provided to students, in order to reflect changes in the graduate landscape post-pandemic.	<p>UCL Careers have developed an operating plan for next year which reflects the employer model, such as making most of online opportunities. UCL is also in the process of embedding home working skills into Careers provision, preparing students for recent shifts in working patterns.</p> <p>Students had reported a drop in confidence due to a lack of face-to-face opportunities, so UCL Careers are working to bring more employers on campus and delivering more in-person events such as fairs and workshops</p>
Social Wellbeing	Prioritise space for student clubs and societies to carry out their activities on campus.	<p>This year, Students' Union UCL was were given some excellent new spaces by UCL in addition to those already in use, including the Haldane Room, Garden Room, Jeremy Bentham Room and Wilkins Terrace. Some of these spaces were for use were all day or all week, while others were just in the evenings.</p> <p>The Main Quad Pop Up is currently being re-purposed, and so the Union will no longer be bookable classrooms we have access to in the evenings and weekends.</p> <p>The Union has asked UCL room bookings to provide alternative rooms to replace this space, and are waiting to hear back. There have also had some recent issues with UCL staff bookings being pre-booked into spaces</p>

		offered to the Union, reducing the availability for student activity in those rooms.
Social Wellbeing	Investigate the possibility of providing more social study space across campus, enabling students to enhance their learning whilst helping in bringing back a sense of community across UCL after the pandemic.	UCL has undertaken some initial work on looking at the future of learning spaces, including a student survey conducted in December 2021.
<b>For Students' Union UCL:</b>		
Mental Wellbeing	Work towards upskilling student leaders (such as hall reps, welfare officers and academic reps) in mental health first aid, improving advice and information on signposting to support services available at UCL and the Union.	The Union has committed resource to developing training for student leaders in collaboration with Student Minds and MHFA England.
Social Wellbeing	Support clubs and societies with conducting in-person activity as this becomes possible in line with national guidelines.	The Union has continued to provide support and guidance to student clubs and societies on how to conduct their activities safely and within national guidelines.
Social Wellbeing	Provide alternative evening spaces (such as repurposing its cafes) for alcohol-free events throughout term-time.	The Union's Print Room Café offers a range of non-alcohol-free events with its dessert and ice cream offer.
<b>For UCL and Students' Union UCL:</b>		
Mental Wellbeing	Commission a project to look at reasons why students might be considering dropping out and interrupting their studies.	The Union and UCL are currently in initial discussions regarding this project, including what existing data can be used and the potential scope for further consideration.
Mental Wellbeing	Work in partnership to seek to return to pre-pandemic levels of student employment on campus as activity returns on campus, in order to support as many students as possible in readjusting financially following the pandemic.	According to Students' Union UCL figures, 374 members of student-staff were employed by the Union in the 2021-22 academic year. This is comfortably above the equivalent figure for the 2020-21 academic year (174), and is also above the figure for 2019-20 (311), suggested that current levels of student employment surpass pre-pandemic levels.
Social Wellbeing	Looks at accommodation data post-pandemic in order to gain a greater understanding of the issues faced during this period of great upheaval. This may include further surveys and research as required, open to a variety of student groups including those in University of London and private student accommodation.	Students' Union UCL are currently creating a Student Living Survey that will provide insight on issues faced within rented accommodation among UCL students, including those mentioned in the recommendation. This is in addition to research for this year's report, which included two focus groups for students living in private rented accommodation.

Physical Wellbeing	Permit the return of sport and physical activities across UCL sites as soon as it is safe to do so.	Sport and physical activity resumed across UCL in the 2021-22 academic year, including competitive sports fixtures, a Varsity Series with Kings that saw 28 fixtures across 13 different sports, and a fully open Bloomsbury Fitness Centre.
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## Section 1: Mental Wellbeing

### a) Mental Health

As more of student-life returns on campus, it is clear that the picture of student mental health is slowly beginning to change from during the heart of the pandemic. One of the issues which is beginning to be felt less severely than during the worst of Covid-19 is that of loneliness, which is described by the University Mental Health Charter as 'being shown to be the strongest overall predictor of mental distress in the student population', with more time being spent on campus playing a big part in this improvement.

In a survey on face-to-face teaching that Students' Union UCL conducted in January 2022, which received almost 500 responses, 54% of students (N=255/484) indicated that they wanted more face-to-face teaching in Term 2 than Term 1. Many highlighted the benefits that face-to-face teaching provides, such as more opportunities for social interaction and a contribution to student mental health. One undergraduate respondent commented that:

*"Being able to be in-person as much as possible is great for my mental health - it makes me get out of the house and talk to friends in person which is so important."*

Some small signs of encouragement can also be found in some of the most recent available national data on student mental health for this academic year. Student Minds, a student mental health charity, has conducted three waves of research on 'Student Mental Health in Pandemic', gathering responses from over 1,000 students. Whilst the percentage of students who reported that Covid-19 was having a negative impact on their mental health is still worryingly high (64%), this figure is significantly lower than in May 2021, when 74% of the respondents agreed with this statement. Respondents reporting a low life satisfaction in January 2022 is 20%, which is also lower than in May 2021 (27%), however this figure had crept up from 17% since the second wave in September 2021.

Within UCL surveys there are other signs of a stabilising picture of mental health since the pandemic. In the 2021 Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES), 63% of Postgraduate Research (PGR) students felt that 'the support for my health and wellbeing meets my needs (e.g. personal tutor, student support and counselling services)', which is in line with the sector at large (63%).

Despite this, there are still serious issues regarding student mental health in higher education (HE), with significant mental health inequalities existing even before the pandemic. According to a report from the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes published in May 2022, certain groups of students (students from households of low socioeconomic status, BAME students, mature students, LGBTQ+ students, care-experienced students) are at greater risk of suffering from poor mental health.

They report states that these student groups already experience lower entry rates, higher dropout rates and lower attainment, and thus mental health issues may further exacerbate disparities in HE for these groups. The report goes on to outline the virtues of peer support groups and networks, emulating group therapy processes, and suggests these can effectively support mental health in BAME students in particular, as well as that personal support can increase the impact of online interventions. It is essential that such interventions are explored at UCL, ensuring that mental health inequalities are dealt with wherever they occur.

**Key Statistics:**

- » 63% of Postgraduate Research students felt that ‘the support for my health and wellbeing meets my needs. (PRES)
- » 88% of respondents indicated that issues with money have had a negative impact on their mental health during their time at UCL. (Students’ Union UCL Cost of Living Survey)

**Recommendations:**

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

## b) Accessibility

The issue of accessibility is now in this report as a standalone section, however many of these issues were considered under the section on Mental Health in the 2021 report. Within this area many of the key indicators within UCL surveys have remained remarkably similar across recent years; in the 2021 New to UCL Survey the exact same number of students knew how to access to 'wellbeing, mental health or psychological support' as in 2020 (82%). The equivalent numbers for 'disability support services' also remained stable, only decreasing by 1% over the same period (78% in 2021 vs 79% in 2020). Within our two focus groups with disabled students the feedback on the visibility of services was slightly more mixed, with one student suggesting that they had seen a difference over their time at UCL in the visibility of services offered:

*"When I joined four years ago I didn't reach out because I didn't see any information, so I wasn't aware of what support was available, but I want to say that I think that's got better as time has gone on. For example, I took a year out because of poor mental health, and when I came back there was a lot more information as to where to reach out who to talk to."*

However, aside from the knowledge of how to access services it is also important to consider the potential burden of going through the processes of using such services as a disabled student. In an October 2020 report entitled 'Arriving At Thriving: Learning from disabled students to ensure access for all', put together by cross-party think tank Policy Connect and the Higher Education Commission, found that disabled students faced a number of additional pressures in comparison to non-disabled students, especially in having to apply for, be assessed for, organise and chase up the support they need. This was echoed within our focus groups, with the theme of bureaucracy consistently raised by participants. One student described their own experience with this service using the following analogy:

*"It's almost like speaking to a GP at times as in you can't get anywhere very quickly and sometimes they're a bit reprimanding if you try and ask questions."*

Once students were using the relevant UCL services to manage their disability, there is mixed evidence as to student opinion on the effectiveness of the support they are receiving. According to the 2021 PTES, 73% of students felt that they are 'receiving the support I require to help me manage the impact of my disability', however this figure is a much lower at 54% in the SES, suggesting a potential gap in satisfaction between disabled postgraduate students and those at an undergraduate level. Within our focus groups students often made the distinction between how well-equipped advisors were in dealing with complex conditions compared to simpler conditions or one-off needs. One student summarised this as:

*"There needs to be a bit more training for more complex needs, rather than just single conditions or less severe conditions because there can be a bit of lack of awareness when a condition is a lot more severe or if you've got co-morbidities... it's not that you expect people to be experts, but there needs to be a bit more awareness for the support staff in those areas."*

Another common theme that came up repeatedly was regarding the application of the Summary of Reasonable Adjustments (SORA). The Academic Manual states that 'once the SORA has been agreed with the student, it will be shared with the appropriate Department(s) or service(s), taking account of the student's preferences for the disclosure of information'. Students in our focus groups did not report difficulties in getting their SORAs agreed, but they did encounter issues in having these

adjustments applied by their lecturers, with their lecturers sometimes not receiving their SORAs at all. One focus group participant described their experience of trying to get their SORA implemented:

*“I now just send my own SORAs directly to my lecturers because they literally don’t get them. That has resulted in instances like in one of my classes where the class is actually on disability, and the first week two people couldn’t access the room, because it wasn’t booked in a wheelchair friendly space.”*

With regards to the role of Students’ Union UCL within supporting student accessibility, it appears that as with other services the level of awareness has remained similar in recent years. In the New to UCL survey 82% of respondents knew how to access ‘support and advice from Students’ Union UCL’, which is 2% lower than the equivalent figure in 2020 (84%). One area of uncertainty that appeared within our focus groups was over the role student representatives should play when students they represent are experiencing difficulties, as summarised by this student:

*“It would be nice to get better clarity about the role of student reps in mental health, just think about like points of contact. I’m a student rep for my course, but if someone’s to come to me with mental health concern I don’t know what capacity or like if that is my duty to take that on.”*

Despite these issues, the consensus from the focus group participants is that both UCL and Students’ Union UCL do care about student wellbeing. From the available evidence it appears as if the main issues relate to areas such as a lack of communication and bureaucracy, as well as a lack of clarity across the UCL community around areas such as SORAs or the role of academic reps in helping make UCL and its support services more accessible.

### **Key Statistics:**

- » The exact same number of UCL students knew how to access to ‘wellbeing, mental health or psychological support’ in 2021 as in 2020 (82%). (New to UCL).
- » 73% of postgraduate taught students felt that they are ‘receiving the support I require to help me manage the impact of my disability’, compared to just 54% of undergraduates. (PTES/ SES)

### **Recommendations:**

2. **Students’ Union UCL** to work on upskilling student leaders to equip them to support students and signpost to relevant services.

## c) Student Retention

The issue of student retention was of particular concern across the higher education sector during the pandemic, with UCL being no exception. This area was consistently mentioned during our previous edition of this report, with a survey conducted by Wonkhe and Trendence in October 2020 finding that around 1 in 8 UCL students had considered dropping out on a daily or weekly basis. On the surface, this issue does not appear to be as significant within the institution at present; according to UCL figures 98% of continuing UCL undergraduate students progressed to the next year of study, and this figure has not dropped below 97% since the 2018-19 academic year.

Across the sector, the most recent figures available from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) indicate that non-continuation rates for UK domiciled full-time entrants past their first year was at a five-year low in the 2019-20 figures (5.3%). However, it will only be in more recent data sets that we are able to see the impact of the pandemic in these figures. For the 2020-21 data the early indications are that continuation did not differ substantially from other years, with a decrease in the number of students who dropped out, but there is an increase in the number of students who did not gain their intended award and a slight increase in students considered dormant or writing up.

On the other hand, when taking into account the students who have considered dropping out, which in itself can be an indicator of poor student wellbeing and satisfaction, the picture is less positive. In the most recent Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) almost a quarter (24%) of respondents said they had considered leaving their course, up from 22% in 2020 and 21% in 2019. By far the most common reason given for this was 'mental/ emotional health', which affected a fifth (20%) of those who considered dropping out. The next most common response was 'difficulty balancing study and other commitments' (12%), followed by 'financial difficulties' (8%).

There are often specific triggers for students wishing to leave higher education, such as student finances. In a short survey that Students' Union UCL ran on the Cost of Living in March 2022, 40% of the respondents suggested that they 'have considered dropping out of UCL due to issues with money' (N=40/107). This figure is similar to the findings in the nationwide National Student Money Survey 2021, which found that 41% of respondents across the country had considered dropping out of university at some point due to money worries, indicating that this is by no means an issue exclusive to UCL.

Due to lack of information available on the issue of student retention compared to during the height of the pandemic, it is unclear how much the situation has improved both across UCL and nationally, with much of the available data painting a mixed picture. With this in mind, it is essential that both UCL and Students' Union UCL continue to monitor this area both in terms of non-continuation and students who are strongly considering dropping out, as this may be an indicator of poor student mental health and issues in areas such as finances or a sense of community and belonging.

**Key Statistics:**

- » In the 2020-21 academic year, 98% of continuing UCL undergraduates progressed to the next year of study. (UCL Tableau)
- » 41% of students surveyed across the UK had considered dropping out of university at some point due to money worries. (National Student Money Survey)

**Recommendations:**

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

## d) Money

The 2021 report highlighted that many students felt that finances were a significant factor on their mental wellbeing. As alluded to in the previous section of this report, it appears that many students still have issues with their finances this academic year. In the aforementioned Union survey on Cost of Living, 88% of respondents indicated that 'Issues with money have had a negative impact on my mental health during (their) time at UCL.' (N=94/107).

According to national research, this is not an issue that affects all students equally. Our 'Cost of Living' survey included comments from PhD students regarding the difficulties of managing their living costs on their stipend:

*"The low stipends mean that nearly all PhD students end up taking on extra work to top their salaries up to a sufficient level to live in London... This takes up lots of our free time, meaning we are constantly working and have much less time for leisure. No wonder peoples' mental health gets battered during their PhD! If UCL is really committed to student wellbeing I would suggest giving PhD students enough money so that they do not have to work extra jobs."*

In addition to this, the 2021 Student Academic Experience Survey, conducted by Advance HE, the Higher Education Policy Institute, and research consultancy YouthSight, found that students from state schools were more likely to be concerned about living costs and twice as likely to rely on a loan or grant to cover living costs, while private school students are mainly funded by family.

Even those who do receive a maintenance loan or grant were not immune from financial difficulty; according to Phase 5 of the NUS Coronavirus Research in 2021 which surveyed over 5,000 students, 64% of respondents reported having a student loan, but less than a quarter (23%) agreed that it covers their cost of living. This means that there are huge numbers of students for whom it would be valuable to explore financial assistance, however the number of respondents who indicated that they were aware of UCL Student Funding (which includes bursaries and funding advice) in the 2021 New to UCL Survey had dropped to 67%, compared to 71% in 2020. This figure was particularly low amongst undergraduate students, of whom only 61% were aware of this support service.

In the responses to our 'Cost of Living' survey, a lack of awareness was not the only issue raised with these services. When asked whether UCL 'provides sufficient support to help students with financial issues', only 13% of students agreed with this statement (N=14/107), compared to 52% who disagreed (N=56/107). One student who had looked into applying for the Financial Assistance Fund found the process 'degrading', and others also stated that UCL doesn't provide sufficient support to international students on tuition fees and scholarships.

One student also clearly outlined the crucial relationship between financial stability and wellbeing, this time indicating how their struggles with mental health at UCL, including difficulties accessing the relevant support had impacted their finances:

*"The cost of accessing mental health services was my biggest financial stressor last year. After the 6 sessions [offered by UCL psychological services] I was given the option to continue private sessions at the cost of £150/session, which was way out of my budget. I tried accessing counselling services through the NHS but was on a waiting list for 6 months, and by the time I was offered an appointment I had already interrupted my studies due to my mental health issues."*

It is therefore crucial to remember not just the impact that finance has on mental health and wellbeing, but also that if support with their mental health and wellbeing is not forthcoming then this will have effects on student finances. Whilst many issues regarding financial difficulties for students and its subsequent effect on wellbeing are consistent at a national level, anything UCL can do to help both materially and with information and support will lessen the impact of this within our student body.

### **Key Statistics:**

- » Less than a quarter of UK students with a student loan agree that it covers their cost of living. (NUS Coronavirus Student Survey)
- » 88% of respondents indicated that issues with money have had a negative impact on their mental health during their time at UCL. (Students' Union UCL Cost of Living Survey)

### **Recommendations:**

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

## e) Employment & Employability

It is difficult to underestimate the importance of Employment & Employability within the context of student wellbeing. This issue covers how prepared students feel for their post-UCL careers, a cornerstone of their UCL experience. When compared to the sector, UCL still performs strongly; it is still ranked the highest UK university outside of Oxford and Cambridge in the 2022 QS Employability Rankings, and its position in the global rankings has risen from 20, up from 22 in 2020.

The institution continues to perform strongly in its Employer Reputation (with a score of 98.7 out of 100) and Partnerships with Employers (90.2 out of 100), however it performs less well on its Graduate Employment Rate (61.4 out of 100, compared to 65.4 in 2020), and its Student Connections indicator (60.3 vs 61 in 2019), which is defined by QS as “summing the number of individual employers who have been actively present on a university’s campus over the past twelve months, providing motivated students with an opportunity to network and acquire information”.

When looking at student feedback on this issue in UCL surveys, a mixed picture is presented across different levels of study and different faculties. Almost two-thirds of respondents in the 2021 PTES said that ‘careers events I have attended or services I have used were useful’, and this figure was only slightly lower for penultimate year undergraduates who responded to the Student Experience Survey when asked the same question (59%). However, there was a significant divide in responses between levels of study on the question of whether ‘the career development on my academic course has lived up to my expectations so far’, with 56% of PTES respondents agreeing with this statement but only 36% of SES respondents doing so, a significant drop on the figure of 48% in 2019.

Within PGR students, UCL is performing broadly in line with national figures. Only 31% of the 2021 PRES respondents stated that they were ‘receiving advice on career options’, a seemingly low figure especially compared to the 77% who were ‘receiving training to develop (their) research skills’, but this is the exact same as the sector average. However, there was a significant variation in results from different faculties, with respondents in the IOE (21%) being less than half as likely to agree as those in Laws (48%).

At an institutional level, some encouraging steps are being taken to improve the services on offer to help students with their future careers and employability skills. In the ‘Education Priorities and Programmes’ paper as part of the 2022-27 UCL strategy, UCL outlined a project to ‘bring together several existing UCL activities and functions into a coherent Institute for Higher Education Development and Support (HEDS) to better support teaching, learning, skills and student outcomes’, including ‘careers and employability support for students’.

In its response to the paper the Union agreed that consolidating services into a single coherent institute may help ‘fragmentation of student skills support that is mentioned in the paper and making the services on offer clearer for students’. Student feedback received by the Union on this issue suggested that students ‘predominantly favoured a focus on skills development and enhanced careers and employability’ within the new institute. It will, however, be important that this new institute recognises a global skills and career market, and the Union’s response goes on to say that ‘currently relationships with employers can often be predominantly based in the UK, whereas many international students want support in starting a career in their home country or elsewhere in the world’.

It is also important to recognise another crucial element of the issue of Employment & Employability: that of students who work part-time alongside their studies. According to the NUS Coronavirus Research, one in three respondents (33%) had a part-time job last summer, with a further 20% looking for a summer job, and it is likely that this figure remains extremely high for those students who undertake work during term-time.

This includes many students who work for either UCL or Students' Union UCL, and a focus group with Students' Union student-staff members revealed that many had picked up significant skills undertaking their roles which they believe would help them in their future careers. One participant shared their rationale for picking up this experience, stating that:

*"If you're going into a job after university, you really should have some other skills other than just knowing about your course because you need to learn things like how to use your initiative, how to communicate with all the kind of skills we were just discussing which I don't really think your degree teaches you."*

Students also referred to other benefits of taking up such work, with many talking about the sense of community it created and the importance of this to mental health, particularly after the pandemic. According to one student:

*"One of the things I really like about it, which motivates me to stay on is the social aspect. I've made a lot of friends working in my job and I really enjoy it, so I guess following Covid and all that stuff it's been really nice to be part of the UCL Community in a way that it wasn't last year."*

The flexibility of such employment was often praised, which is generally a core principle of any roles offered due to them being exclusively for students. According to one participant:

*"Other jobs I've had in the past have been a bit inflexible in terms of when I have to work, how many hours I have to do, that kind of thing. And I really like fitting this around my uni schedule and other things I've got going on in my life."*

Whilst these part-time roles are not without some areas of improvement, such as the work-life balance and stress of supervisor positions for students, they provide a clear opportunity for students to gain experience and earn money in a flexible manner that compliments their course, and the roles should be encouraged by both UCL and the Union wherever possible.

**Key Statistics:**

- » 36% of undergraduate respondents stated that ‘the career development on my academic course has lived up to my expectations so far’, compared to 56% of postgraduate taught respondents. (SES & PTES)
- » 1 in 3 UK students had a part-time job last summer, with a further 20% looking for a summer job. (NUS Coronavirus Student Survey)

**Recommendations:**

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

## Section 2: Social Wellbeing

### a) Community & Belonging

As discussed in the 2021 report, one of the major consequences of the pandemic was the strong sense of isolation many felt given the restrictions in place throughout much of 2020 and 2021. Many UCL students reported a lack of a sense of community because of online learning and the inability to socialise in-person, and that this had a substantial negative impact on their mental health.

As may be unsurprising as students return to campus, much of the currently available survey data relating to community and belonging has seen substantial increases compared to last year, indicating that students felt more of a sense of community than they did during the pandemic. Within the New to UCL survey, 90% of respondents reported that based on their experience so far they 'feel welcome and part of the wider UCL community', which is a rise of 11% on 2020. Even bigger rises were found when asking specifically about social events and connections, such as the 21% score increase in the number of students who agreed with the statement 'I found the social events in the first week helped me to settle in' (79% vs 58% in 2020) and an 18% increase for whether students had 'been able to make social connections with peers in [their] department or on [their] programme' (81% vs 63% in 2020).

Encouraging figures such as this were often echoed within our focus groups related to Community & Belonging. Some students emphasized that the return of social events had helped to improve the sense of community they felt at UCL which then led to an increased sense of belonging:

*"This year there were many more activities where I was able to meet a variety of people from very different places... that diversity, and being able to see that diversity, makes me feel like I belong more because there is so many different people. It makes me fit in more."*

Though the most recent survey results have been more negative regarding this issue, these are more strongly linked to the student experience from the previous academic year. For example, in the 2021 NSS only 54% of respondents agreed that they felt 'part of a community of staff and students', down from 63% in 2020. The sector average also went down by a similar amount on this question over the same period, from 68% in 2020 to 59% in 2021, however it is worth noting that the most recent score in the Student Experience Survey for the same question saw an even sharper decrease (45% in 2021 vs 61% in 2019). It will be important to monitor such results in 2022, as this will give more of an indication of the current sense of student community as more activity has returned to campus.

Whilst the overall picture regarding community and belonging may be becoming more positive, it is worth noting that certain student groups are likely to struggle with this issue more than others. Within our focus groups, students spoke about how being part of certain demographics held back their ability to form a strong sense of community through micro-aggressions or a lack of awareness from other students, such as this Black British student who described her experiences:

*"I felt much more part of the community in secondary school and sixth form, and obviously that was because I didn't feel like an ethnic minority. When I came here it was kind of like everything started over again... Some of the questions I used to get in primary school, some of the ignorant questions I used to receive, I was receiving here again. And obviously it's not anyone's fault, it's just maybe I'm the first Black person that they've met, but I found it quite hard to have a community."*

A student also discussed the issues trans and gender non-binary students experienced, this time within their accommodation, citing the need for more awareness and education:

*“There’s people who identify as non-binary in my accommodation and people make jokes about it behind their back, so I think there needs to be more education around gender and things like that.”*

In fact, when analysing the election manifestos from Students’ Union UCL’s Leadership Race in March 2022, it was clear that for candidates running for Liberation Officer Positions that building a sense of community and belonging, particularly within marginalised groups of students, was extremely important. From candidates for the Women’s Officer role asking for a greater sense of community amongst the network of female students who can ‘find comfort in each other’s company and build of strong female relationships’ to candidates for the BME Students’ Officer role advocating for support for BME students to ‘feel more included in the UCL community’, creating a stronger sense of community within UCL for liberation groups was perhaps the most common theme across all manifestos.

It was also clear from our focus groups that other groups of students struggled with a sense of community at UCL due to their own circumstances. For example, this commuter student found it hard to find their place on campus due to not living with other students:

*“I live at home so I’ve never really got to experience this community. I would consider myself quite an introvert and I feel like UCL never gave us that push. I feel like I might not fit in, and just the fact I have to travel this long way, it puts me off.”*

Other students found that their work commitments made it harder for them, such as this postgraduate student:

*“I’m a postgrad student, I’m also working part-time and doing my masters. I really want to attend more of the postgrad events. It always ends up being during the day or at 5pm, and by the time I’ve commuted from work to uni it’s the end of the event. I really want to get to know more postgrad students, so it would be great if there were more frequent events at more flexible times.”*

As a sense of community hopefully begins to grow again amongst UCL students as we move away from the main impacts of the pandemic and into more in-person activities, it is important that all groups of students are able to share this sense of belonging, and that steps are taken to ensure that events or other initiatives cater to all students across the university.

### **Key Statistics:**

- » 90% of respondents reported that based on their experience so far they ‘feel welcome and part of the wider UCL community’. (New to UCL)
- » 79% of students felt that they had found that ‘the social events in the first week helped (them) to settle in’, a rise of 21% from the previous year. (New to UCL)

### **Recommendations:**

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

## b) Housing

Even as we move past the pandemic, the issue of housing still has a major impact on student wellbeing. Where UCL students are living has changed dramatically since last academic year; according to this year's New to UCL survey only 16% of respondents are living at home compared to 37% in 2020, with 24% living in UCL managed accommodation compared to just 15% last year. The number of students in a 'privately rented house/ flat/room' has also risen to 38% this year, compared to just 31% in 2020. As part of the research for this report the Union ran two focus groups for students living in privately rented accommodation, and many were positive about the support offered by UCL, with one singling out the UCL Rent Guarantor scheme for particular praise:

*"I think what was helpful was the UCL guarantors, and that was a really fast process for me which was super helpful."*

According to New to UCL, satisfaction figures amongst those living in UCL managed accommodation are up across five of the six questions, with the biggest rise being seen in the number of respondents who agreed that 'the UCL staff and student ambassadors checking me in made me feel welcome' (92% vs 83% in 2020), and that 'I am aware of all the support available to residents in my halls or house' (80% vs 72% in 2020). The only question that saw a drop in score from 2020 was whether 'my accommodation was clean and everything was in good working order when I moved in', with the number of respondents who agreed to this statement falling from 78% in 2020 to 76% in 2021, which was also the lowest overall score in this question area.

Regardless of the levels of student satisfaction with UCL accommodation, it is difficult to overstate the challenges of living and renting in London as a student even when only cost is purely considered. Last year the Greater London Authority published their "London Plan" which included specific requirements for student accommodation. The plan dictates that any new student accommodation built in London needs to be supported by a university, and must provide 35% of the beds at the NUS 'affordable' rent level for London. However, according to the 2021 Accommodation Costs Survey run by the NUS and Unipol, a student housing charity, the average annual rent for 'purpose-built student accommodation' is £9,488 in London, which is 62% higher than elsewhere in the UK. This is well above what NUS policy considered 'affordable' in London, which would be £6,810 (55% of the student loan amount). Within our focus groups with students who live in privately rented accommodation, many cited cost as a reason for renting privately, and one participant explained that:

*"Financials was a big reason in why I decided to rent privately. [Where I rent privately] is a lower price than the student halls, and yet closer to campus."*

External research has also found that certain groups of students living in student accommodation face particular issues with regards to wellbeing, mental health, and safety. Unite Students, a purpose-built student accommodation provider, and Halpin Partnership, a higher education consultancy, published Living Black at University, a report on Black students' experience in UK student accommodation. They found that more than half (54%) of Black students in student accommodation have been the victim of racism, and 64% of all students have witnessed racism within their accommodation. Black students reported a less positive experience in their accommodation overall, and negative impacts on their mental health due to racism.

There are also issues to be considered within groups of students in different living situations, such as those living at home or 'commuter' students. The Faculty of Social & Historical Sciences conducted

research on this group of students between December 2020 and April 2021, and they found that 44% of respondents felt that they are unable to study effectively at home. This presents more of an issue than it might for other groups of students as commuter students can find it more difficult to get into campus, with the most common commute time for this group falling between 51 to 70 minutes each way. These students also reported difficulties finding space on campus to spend time in between teaching sessions and a lack of places to store belongings. As mentioned in the previous section, this group of students is also more prone to feeling disconnected from university life and are particularly likely to lack a sense of community.

There were also difficulties for students living in privately rented accommodation. Within our focus groups, multiple students had either personally experienced or knew other students who had had issues with conditions of their accommodation not being resolved by landlords, and were therefore living in unsuitable conditions such as leaks or mould. According to one participant:

*“I had friends who’ve had horrific experiences. I know someone who moved ten times in the last two years, every four to five months she’s had to move. Once she moved to a place and she didn’t know about the dirt conditions. After two months she couldn’t stand it and she had to leave.”*

Many of these students were either unaware of or dissatisfied by the support offered by UCL, with many feeling like support was only available for those staying in UCL accommodation. According to one student:

*“The students self-help portal on the UCL website... some of it is very much particular to the people who stay in UCL accommodation. Not all of that is applicable to students who privately rent. If there is a clear path between finding this information on the UCL website... that would be helpful in finding it quickly.”*

Moving forward it will be crucial to ensure that support is provided for this group of students and that this is clearly advertised both online and on campus. As a whole, a tailored approach is needed to deal with the issue of housing within different student groups especially as the numbers of students in UCL accommodation, privately rented accommodation and at home begin to stabilise following the disruption due to the pandemic last year, ensuring that the relevant support is available and that all students feel part of a UCL community.

### **Recommendations:**

7. **UCL** to explore the opportunities on campus for more storage and social study space for commuting students.
8. **UCL** and **Students’ Union UCL** to promote support for students who live in privately rented accommodation, such as the UCL Rent Guarantor Scheme and the University of London Housing Services.

## Section 3: Physical Wellbeing

### a) Physical Activity

Remaining physically active is an indispensable part of overall student wellbeing. According to the latest research from the British University and Colleges Sport (BUCS) in 2020 entitled 'The Value of University Sport and Physical Activity', increased engagement in sport and physical activity has a positive effect on student retention, a sense of belonging and improved student wellbeing. These findings have been echoed at UCL; in a small survey conducted by Students' Union UCL in March 2022, an overwhelming 98% of respondents stated that 'the amount of physical activity/exercise I am able to do has a direct impact on my overall wellbeing' (N=44/45).

Sport and physical activity were hit as hard as any area of student life by the pandemic, however the available evidence from this year is that student activity is returning to pre-Covid levels. According to Students' Union UCL figures from May 2022, over 7,000 students are members of TeamUCL sports clubs which represents more than a 12% increase in 2019-20 (6,250). This year has also seen the launch of the TeamUCL leagues initiative, which provides competitive intramural sporting opportunities for students at UCL and has engaged over 500 active participants in the 2021-22 academic year, including over 75 individuals representing cultural or faith-based societies. Opportunities such as this provide a chance for students to create communities, friendships and support systems which may not be available elsewhere and are therefore vital in improving student wellbeing.

On top of this, activity among student groups who have typically had lower levels of engagement with sport and physical activity has also increased. The Project Active programme, which offers a range of low-cost weekly classes, social leagues and one-off events for students of all fitness levels, has seen increased engagement with postgraduate students this year, with 44% of participants who engaged with these events this year were from this group of students. Bloomsbury Fitness, the Union's gym facility, has also been fully open this academic year with one of the lowest membership costs in the area at just £25 per month, and is fully accessible for disabled students.

Students' Union UCL also received a £10,000 grant from Sports England to create opportunities for disabled students to take part in sport and physical activity. This is particularly an issue as Activity Alliance, the overarching body which represents the seven main National Disabled Sports Organisations (NDSOs), found that disabled people are almost twice as likely to not achieve the minimum recommended guidance of physical activity each week. This grant has helped contribute to a 97% increase in disabled students engaging with activities run by TeamUCL from 2019-20 to 2021-22. It has also contributed to the Fitness Sessions for Disabled Students programme which has offered 20 students a total 54 hours of personal training since October 2021. However, it is important to note that the funding for these initiatives is only on a fixed-term basis, and so new funding will be required to continue to develop this activity.

Despite these encouraging figures, there remain issues with the opportunities for physical activity at UCL that pre-date the pandemic. The sports facilities at UCL are far below the standard of other leading universities in London and across the country, limiting the Union's ability to further expand initiatives such as TeamUCL leagues. In addition, students must travel significant distances to attend training or to play matches or participate in competitions. One respondent who participated in the Union's survey in March 2022 summed up the effect this has on student wellbeing, stating that:

*“Sports teams have to travel too far to access facilities, which makes accessing physical activity a lot more difficult during busy or stressful periods such as exams or upcoming coursework deadlines.”*

On top of this, students who are a part of sports teams often face hidden costs associated with their participation aside from their membership fee, as the vast majority of activity takes place in externally hired facilities, meaning that access to the facility for use by the UCL community is not always guaranteed, and students will often have to pay for travel to reach their sports facilities. Developments on campus in recent years have also provided additional challenges; UCL has recently lost the use of the swimming pool and other sports facilities in the Student Central building, and the use of a sports hall at Astor College has also been lost through recent renovations, further limiting the sporting opportunities for students on or near campus.

An opportunity to remedy this issue has recently been presented as part of the UCL strategy for 2022-27. In UCL’s paper on Academic opportunities for targeted investment published in January 2022 new facilities for Students’ Union UCL, including a new building or new sports facilities was named as one of eleven potential target areas for investment, with the paper suggesting that existing sports facilities within UCL are ‘inadequate for a university of our size’.

When surveyed on the potential areas of targeted investment, almost 9 in 10 (89%) of academic representatives agreed with the Union’s response to this phase of the strategy, that a new Union building and new Union sports facilities would ‘most widely benefit the whole UCL student community across all disciplines and across all levels of study’. It is essential that improved sporting facilities are provided in order to make it easier for both competitive and recreational sport to take place at UCL, and these improvements would have a tangible impact on improving students’ physical wellbeing across the institution.

### **Key Statistics:**

- » 98% of students stated that ‘the amount of physical activity/exercise I am able to do has a direct impact on my overall wellbeing’. (Students’ Union UCL survey on Physical Activity)
- » As of May 2022, 7,000 students across UCL are members of a TeamUCL sports club, up 12% from 2019-20. (Students’ Union UCL)

### **Recommendations:**

9. **UCL** to prioritise investment in new sports facilities within future capital spending and any initiatives that stem from the 2022-27 UCL Strategy.
10. **UCL** and **Students’ Union UCL** to continue funding initiatives started with funding from Sports England to create opportunities for disabled students to take part in sport and physical activity.

## Recommendations

### Section 1: Mental Wellbeing

1. **UCL and Students' Union UCL** to look to implement the outcomes of accreditation for gaining the University Mental Health Charter, working in partnership to develop an action plan on improving student mental health.
2. **Students' Union UCL** to work on upskilling student leaders to equip them to support students and signpost to relevant services.
3. **UCL and Students' Union UCL** to continue to monitor retention rates and student feedback for any shift towards a considerable number of students who might be considering dropping out and interrupting their studies.
4. **UCL and Students' Union UCL** to promote the Financial Assistance Fund as a source of help for those students struggling with rises in cost of living, particularly energy bills, over the next academic year.
5. **UCL** to work to support and enhance postgraduate research student career opportunities and development through UCL Careers and the Arena Centre.

### Section 2: Social Wellbeing

6. **UCL and Students' Union UCL** to share and sustain initiatives to create learning communities now and in the future.
7. **UCL** to explore the opportunities on campus for more storage and social study space for commuting students.
8. **UCL and Students' Union UCL** to promote support for students who live in privately rented accommodation, such as the UCL Rent Guarantor Scheme and the University of London Housing Services.

### Section 3: Physical Wellbeing

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

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

# Student Priorities for Wellbeing

**2021-2022**

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