

Student Staff Consultative Committees

Trends in Student Feedback



May 2018

studentsunionucl.org/academic-reps

About this Report

The figures in this report are based on the comments recorded by Academic Reps at their SSCC meetings. The Union categorise comments which relate to a particular area of practice, and we note whether the comment is positive, negative, or neutral.

From this, we examine what students are talking about the most, and how they feel about those areas of practice. We use the quantitative figures as a guide, before digging down into the underlying student comments that make up these numbers to explore in detail exactly what students are saying across UCL.

This report highlights the priority score, which helps us to track students' priorities. This is a combination of the sentiment (i.e. the balance of positive vs negative comments for that category) and the frequency with which comments fitting into that category were found in SSCC minutes. Our report focuses on the highest priorities, and puts forward recommendations for action.

As well as UCL-wide recommendations, in this year's report, we have tried to provide more useful information about good practice relevant at a local level, for students and staff to discuss and consider.

Further detail is available on request, and we are happy to generate faculty breakdowns, or extract all comments for particular categories where this might be relevant. Contact us at reps@ucl.ac.uk.

Introduction

This report brings together the voice of hundreds of Academic Reps across UCL, speaking for tens of thousands of students. The report is a testament to their hard work and dedication. We look at the commonalities between what students are saying about their experience right across UCL, and where change and improvement at a university level can make the most difference.

One of the categories in this report which always comes out as a big positive is our Student Voice category. We don't include this in detail in our report, because positive feedback about Student Voice at our SSCCs should be a given.

As with the other categories we report on here, though, best-practice suggestions are clear. Students are pleased when their feedback is actively solicited and listened to, when they have opportunity to discuss how it will be implemented, when they're proactively involved with designing and implementing changes, and they can see actions being taken in a timely manner. Most of all, students are appreciative when their feedback is taken seriously and acted on promptly.

We identify, as we did last year, some key recommendations where UCL action will have a positive effect on students' experiences. Sadly, in some of these areas, we are repeating recommendations from last year, hoping they will now be acted on.

As we noted, students are appreciative when their feedback is taken seriously, and acted on promptly.



Sarah Al-Aride
Education Officer 2017-18

Overview

UCL's areas of strength, according to students, have remained fairly consistent between this year and 2016-17. The top three categories (Social and Community, Programme or Module Content and Student Voice) have stayed exactly the same. Another high-performing category was Transition and Induction. This has improved very significantly since last year and suggests a genuine improvement in students' experience in this area.

| Category | Priority |
|--|----------|
| Social & Community | 19 |
| Programme or Module Content | 14 |
| Skills & Employability | 2 |
| Practical & Academic Personal Support | 1 |
| Transition & Induction | 0 |

The most significant negatives identified by students have seen more change since 2016-17. Teaching Rooms and Class Timetabling remain consistent areas of concern. These estates issues clearly correspond to ongoing building works on campus alongside continuing expansion of the student population. Major space issues have been a significant source of student concern now for several years, particularly when this impacts on the quality of learning. It is worth noting that UCL Buildings has performed slightly less badly than last year, but this is only due to slightly fewer comments in this area overall. Uniquely to all categories within this analysis, not one single mention of UCL Buildings was positive.

On a more positive note, feedback no longer appears amongst students' top areas of concern. Whilst quality and timeliness of feedback still come out negative in our analysis, this suggests the major work that has taken place over the last several years may be beginning to see some success.

Finally, whereas last year's SSCC minutes noted a lot of dissatisfaction over late provision of exam timetables, this year we have seen high levels of concern over module selection. This year UCL published the exam timetable on time, but required module choices to be finalised earlier in order to allow this. The level of dissatisfaction amongst students over lack of flexibility with choosing and changing modules suggests that this solution has simply created a different but equal problem.

| Category | Priority |
|-----------------------------|----------|
| Timing of Assessment | -37 |
| Module Allocation | -45 |
| Assessment Criteria | -50 |
| Class Timetabling | -64 |
| Teaching Rooms | -85 |

Positives

Social & Community

For the second year running, Social and Community ranked top amongst students' most positive feedback. This is clearly an important area to students, and makes a huge difference to their experience at UCL. Whilst last year's comments tended to reflect departmental parties and social events, this year's feedback also saw students talking a lot about great academic events and co-curricular seminars that had improved their sense of belonging to a community.

A key theme this year was also broadening communities beyond departments or modules, and students have responded very positively to opportunities to meet, work with and learn from peers from different departments, year groups and institutions, as well as making connections across undergraduate, postgraduate and research levels.

Students told us:

'It was also reported that staff-student professional and academic relationships were very strong, and this was supported by a good Office Hours system.'

'The coffee mornings which have started this year are really useful and are a great idea.'

'One student mentioned the Departmental Seminar Series, and how such events are a fantastic added-extra for students.'

Points of good practice:

- Students enjoyed opportunities for community-building and collaboration outside the regular cohort, including with other programmes, year groups and institutions. This can be done within contact hours and in co-curricular events.
- Opportunities for taught and research students to meet each other were considered valuable.
- Offering a range of extra-curricular events, balancing between academic development and wellbeing.
- Mentoring systems are well-received, in particular for connecting first year students with students on the same programme in other year groups. This has been done well through in-person induction week events, and subsequently using Moodle.
- Little-and-often meet-up events like coffee mornings or ‘tea and cake afternoons’ for wider groups of students and staff to meet casually.

Programme or Module Content

This diverse category relates to the design and content of modules and programmes, rather than the delivery of teaching. Students commented on areas such as spread and focus of topics, difficulty level, and whether students found the material interesting and relevant. Students were often complimentary towards modules in their SSCCs, although comments can sometimes be vague or general. It seems from SSCCs minutes that students are not always prompted to provide more detail when feeding back positively.

Trends that have emerged from student comments this year include overall coherence and relevance, with appreciation for efforts to link topics together clearly and provide a strong sense of structure. In-keeping with UCL's world-leading research strengths, it is encouraging to see that students have also been enthusiastic about modules that draw on a variety of real-world research and industry connections.

Students told us:

'Feedback for the module is generally positive with students liking the practical skills they're using.'

'Students reported that overall they are enjoying the programme and diversity of the experience.'

'It was reported that Teaching Committee would be pursuing ways in which the curriculum can be de-colonized. This was welcomed.'

'The student representatives conveyed how the consensus is that the course is very helpful, and elicits reflection, both during and post teaching.'

Points of good practice:

- Ensuring that course content is relevant to wider contexts, usually industry or research, was praised by students. Ways in which some modules have achieved this include guest speakers, reference to industry, and drawing on diverse ideas and a range of expertise.
- Diverse and socially conscious curricula are valued. Teaching materials and reading lists should not focus only on the work of a narrow set of individuals.
- Students place importance on a clear, connected structure. It is particularly welcomed when this is made clear at the beginning and end of modules, or through use of concluding ‘summing up’ lectures.
- Hands-on and practical learning elements that allow students to actively build skills are considered very effective.
- Journal clubs are often popular. These are currently widely used in sciences, but seem to be rare outside of STEM subjects.

Skills and Employability

This category relates to how well students feel they are prepared for future careers through their in-course content, whether they intend to work in industry or go on to future study.

In STEM subjects and some areas within the Bartlett, students often discuss how well-equipped they are with specific technical skills, including training on industry-standard software packages and programming languages, which are an important focus. Across all faculties, students value academic and study skills sessions, including academic writing, and workshops on how to read and critique papers.

Students told us:

‘Students reported that the Academic writing class was invaluable and very much appreciated.’

‘The students found it very useful being taught how to read, interpret and critique scientific papers.’

‘Students are finding DataCamp an online education platform courses in Python and R very useful. Students can review each other’s work and feedback.’

Points of good practice:

- Students want a firm grounding in the most widely-used programming languages and software packages – this is essential in technical courses.
- Students consider any links between their learning and industrial partners incredibly valuable.
- Students in several departments place a high value on skills workshops, particularly academic writing. These seem to work most effectively on a one-off basis, or linked to particular projects such as dissertations, rather than regular ten-week modules.

Practical & Academic Personal Support

Practical and Academic Personal Support relates to the one-to-one attention students receive from academics, administrators and support staff. This relates to their in-course development and opportunities to talk about their own work, progress and particular academic questions, as well as practical support with any administrative processes and applications that they make. Students always appreciate prompt email responses from staff, as well as opportunities to get the most out of their education by having access to specific individual support and feedback.

In order to ensure good and equal support for students, it is good practice to implement structured policies and guidelines at department level. Indeed, students' comments tend to indicate that they prefer structure and designated one-to-one opportunities to 'open door' policies and ad-hoc support. Clear visibility of and adherence to office hours is important to students.

Students told us:

'They are very happy with the essay clinics and the fact that they are on their personal timetables so they are more encouraged to go to them.'

'He also holds one-to-one meetings after each class, which are very well received.'

'They were very happy with the support received by the Education Team; reminders for deadlines and other appointments were useful: staff always responsive and helpful.'

'Several students expressed their strong gratitude for the extensive and very helpful support offered by one member of staff during the application process both via email and in person, especially coming up to the deadline.'

Points of good practice:

- Clearly marked office hours which are carefully adhered to were mentioned by students in several departments.
- Accessible help with in-course administration and further study applications was valued.
- Formally scheduled academic support sessions are highly valued, whether run as presentations, discussion groups, one-to-one meetings, or in other forms.

Transition & Induction

Mainly relevant to Term One, this category covers all students' opinions on induction week generally, as well as specific feedback on how well UCL welcomes its many international students. Comments relate both to how new students are integrated into their social and academic communities and invited to bond as a cohort, as well as how thoroughly they are introduced to UCL's campus and resources. Students have also fed back on department-run induction programmes and resources, including transition mentoring and induction packs.

The appropriate materials and activities to ensure students settle into UCL and get to know each other quickly will vary by department and discipline. However, it's important to all students that their inductions are structured, well-organised and contain a good mix of social and practical activities.

Students told us:

'The students felt that the mixture of activities, trips and visits gave them ample opportunity to get to know each other, the academic staff and the department. They had felt very welcome indeed.'

'They liked going to UCL to enrol as a group. It made the process easier and was a good opportunity to meet each other.'

'It was noted that the tours of the various library resources was particularly valued by students.'

'Students agreed that offer-holder open days were very useful for them and they should be kept for future students.'

'It was noted that the department had produced an excellent document with suggestions for helping ease the transition between school and university for new students'

Points of good practice:

- One department was praised for facilitating its students meeting up and going through the enrolment process together in groups. This would not be difficult to implement (even just emailing a meeting point), but is a great way to use an otherwise tedious process as an opportunity for cohort-bonding.
- Involvement of senior undergraduate year groups in induction weeks, in any form from transition mentor programmes to short presentations during week one, is usually highly valued.
- Library tours have been well-received this year.

Negatives

Teaching Rooms

Ensuring students have appropriate, high quality teaching rooms has been a significant problem for some time now, and continues to be highlighted by students as a major concern. Complaints relate to quality and adequacy of rooms, including rooms that are too small for the number of students, insufficient desk space, forcing students to sit on the floor, malfunctioning AV equipment, climate control issues and broken facilities such as chairs and tables. Temporary solutions to relieve pressure on teaching rooms, such as using pop-up spaces and external space seem widely unpopular.

Students told us:

‘The issue of lack of table space at times for certain Seminar Groups was an issue.’

‘The air quality of the lecture room is very poor. It has been tested and the carbon dioxide is too high.’

‘The Wednesday morning class in the South Quad Pop-Up Hub is not conducive to teaching/learning, the triangular tables make it hard for everyone to see the whiteboard comfortably.’

‘The poor quality of lecture theatres is a reputational issue. A student representative had been told of it by a colleague before applying to UCL, as an issue that potential students should be warned of. It had also been mentioned in his DSA assessment that some lecture theatres could be an issue with his disability. It was agreed that this was important to minute.’

‘Location of the Module (Royal National Hotel) is causing lack of attendance because students are unable to see the screen and unable to hear as the speakers are poor quality.’

Points for improvement:

- It is difficult to note points that can be taken on board locally due to this issue largely lying centrally.
- Students do appreciate when problems, particularly relating to the quality of spaces, are reported quickly, and in some cases it is clear from minutes this has resulted in small problems being resolved relatively promptly. Some departments have clearly outlined processes through which students can pass such feedback on to estates via the department quickly.
- It also seems from the minutes that some areas of UCL have successfully managed to have rooms which are entirely inappropriate for the cohort size changed mid-module – it is worth making the request, even if the answer may be no.

Class Timetabling

This is a fairly straightforward category containing few surprises. Students this year have raised issues with timetable clashes, particularly regarding important or compulsory modules. There are also issues in the ways in which timetables come together overall, including lectures being scheduled too close together or too far off campus, meaning that some students have difficulty attending all of their teaching. There have also been several issues this year with poor organisation and last-minute changes to timetables, which has caused understandable frustration.

Students told us:

‘Six students have not been able to take two modules because of a timetabling clash. As one is a prerequisite for final year courses, students had to drop out of the other and take another elective.’

‘One year group reported that they found information sessions on assignments very helpful but it was difficult for them to attend if they were run after 5.00 p.m.’

‘Timetable clashes were a big problem during module selection and students had to make many changes to their choices.’

‘Issues were raised with the teaching schedule of the MSc (four sets of intensive block teaching each with back-to-back lectures). Students found this to be extremely busy and too compact, preventing them from being able to get to grips with the taught material.’

Points for improvement:

- Students were aggrieved by clashes between valued optional modules and more ‘important’ modules, i.e. compulsory, or prerequisites.
- Class timetables should take into account one-off events such as field trips and careers fairs.
- It should be ensured that the policy of beginning and ending classes five minutes before or after the hour is closely observed so that students have at least ten minutes to move between classes.
- Widespread use of lecturecast and promptly posted lecture slides and materials help students in alleviating timetable issues and are greatly appreciated.
- Wednesday afternoons should be kept free for extracurricular activities. This relates to all required learning opportunities and not just ‘teaching’.
- There is some indication that students do not appear to find “back-to-back” modules conducive to effective learning, and would rather courses were spread out.

Assessment Criteria

This category relates to how well students understand what is expected of them in their programmes, and how well they understand how to achieve and develop skills and knowledge. Clear, meaningful assessment guidelines are not intended only to instruct students on how to get the best marks, but at a deeper level, are essential to how they recognise their academic progress and make sure their education is directed and purposeful.

Students in all faculties this year have told us that they often find assessment criteria and marking schemes unclear, and are frequently unsure what is 'expected of them'. On the whole, it seems that while assessment criteria have been made available, in most cases these are generalised, rather than linking to learning outcomes. Expressed in a variety of different ways, the most important trend to highlight is that students want assessment rubrics to link clearly to their prospective learning development, in terms of what their module is aiming to achieve and why.

Students told us:

'One rep advised there was a feeling that the marking criteria for the presentations were somewhat ambiguous.'

*'A number of reps requested more detailed marking criteria'
'not all supervisors are in agreement with the grading criteria, which makes us unsure of what is expected and the grading sheet is really vague... we are guessing what we need to submit, trying to watch other groups, or ask other departments for advice.'*

'Students are not aware of the expectations for the module. They confirmed that there is no guidance for tutorial and coursework content, and what the marking criteria is, and also stated that this is a problem across multiple modules.'

Points for improvement:

- Despite often strenuous efforts across UCL to ensure detailed and fairly used marking rubrics are available to students and staff on a department or programme level, students appear to have a strong preference for module and/or assessment specific criteria.
- Students would find it helpful to have access to sample essays that have been marked and graded at different levels.
- Students have appreciated opportunities to practice and develop skills in preparation for their summative assessments. In some cases, students have reported that short formative pieces of a few hundred words have helped them to understand the assessment criteria, and in other cases essay writing and study skills workshops have helped them to clarify learning objectives.

Module Allocation

Students were particularly dissatisfied with module selection processes in the 2017/18 session, marking a change from last year. Some areas of concern relate to individual departments' support for students to make informed module choices. Others are university-wide and relate to UCL's IT platforms and approach to the module allocation system.

On a departmental level, students are mainly interested in the accessibility and quality of information given to them in order to help them choose their modules. They are looking for informative module descriptions that give an accurate and relevant picture of the module's content, as well as clarity about the level it is aimed at, with learning pre-requisites clearly flagged. Students want to see more information on module options early on, and options fairs and pre-induction online information tend to be well-received.

It was interesting to note that students in many departments also indicated that they would like more expectation management around popular modules. This included several requests for information on module size and cap numbers to be clearly posted on Portico, and realistic information on the likelihood of getting a place on the most in-demand modules.

Another theme was the organisational aspects of module selection. Students throughout all faculties were frustrated with module clashes and delays in having their options confirmed. The module selection process on Portico is not popular, and is generally considered to be unclear and unintuitive.

One change this year has been the introduction of the December deadline for selecting Term Two modules. Students understand that this was presented by UCL as the trade-off for providing earlier exam timetables, but there is a high level of dissatisfaction with this solution, expressed across the student body.

Students told us:

‘Final year students advised that the change to term 2 module deadlines seemed unwelcome across the student body. It was noted that although it may be nice to have an earlier examination timetable, the price to pay (of not being able to amend term 2 modules if students start and do not like them) was too high.’

‘Teaching starts before students have been told if their options have been approved, which is very confusing. Students have to assume that they are allowed to take modules, to start the lectures.’

‘The students didn’t feel they had much insight about the modules before they arrived at the start of term.’

‘There was confusion from many students about why the term 2 module registration deadline was so early. It was discussed that the early deadline doesn’t allow students to try out modules.’

Points for improvement:

- Students valued opportunities to learn about different modules before the selection processes through things like options fairs, online descriptions, and opportunities to meet with academics to learn about modules.
- Expectations for typically over-subscribed courses should be managed carefully; students are actively asking for realistic information on their chances, and this will help alleviate disappointment and frustration.
- Departments that have received praise for providing particularly helpful information on modules have tended to use more engaging formats, such as ‘introduction to modules’ sessions, taster days and videos promoting module options.

Timing of Assessment

This category is relatively straightforward, and does not contain any particular surprises in what students' value in how their assessments are timed and spaced. The main area of concern across UCL is 'bunching' of deadlines, with students feeling pressurised by having many simultaneous coursework deadlines. There seems to be a general impression that departments are not aware of how students' overall assignment timelines are looking.

Whilst each department is responsible for making sure its own coursework deadlines are reasonably spaced, many student concerns about assessment timing are similar throughout the university, with students generally favouring more staggering of deadlines.

Students told us:

'The assessments seem rushed as they're required to submit before Christmas rather than afterwards.'

'There are too many exams at the end of the year and some in-year assessments would be preferred.'

'Students feel that it is a very intense module with deadlines occurring at the same time as other modules'

'2nd year students feel their deadlines are clumped together and suggest distributing them more evenly.'

'Deadlines - bunched and could be spread out, it was advised that deadlines were provided to students at the start of term for planning purposes. Students requested the title and instructions of the essay assessment to be released sooner than planned.'

Points for improvement:

- Students generally show a preference for Term One assessment deadlines to fall after rather than before the winter break.
- Deadlines should be set with awareness of other departmental deadlines as well as high-intensity compulsory activities such as field trips, scenario weeks and presentation days.
- Modules should not all be entirely exam-based; variation between assessment types is appreciated.
- Students appear to be reporting multiple assessments across multiple modules; it is possible that a drive for greater diversity of assessment has simply resulted in more assessment, exacerbating this issue.
- Early release of essay titles and assessment criteria can help to alleviate assessment stress and compensate for multiple coinciding deadlines.

Recommendations

1. Teaching Rooms

Year after year, students have raised concerns about UCL's teaching spaces. Though new and refurbished buildings are slowly coming on-stream, UCL's student population also continues to rise. **Excluding the Institute of Education, student numbers at UCL have risen 21% just since 2013-14.**

Last year's report noted our concern that nothing is being done to ensure space is utilised effectively, which we reiterated in our interim February report. There has still been no progress in this area.

At the Union's Education Conference, students and staff discussed a variety of practical ways this could be tackled, and our recommendations draw on these.

It is baffling to the Union and to students that billions of pounds of investment is going into buildings, measures such as extending the teaching day are being considered, and yet the comparatively insubstantial investment required to ensure our current estate is used to its capacity has not been taken forward.

The solutions we are proposing will require significant senior support, as they will involve changes across many areas of the university. Despite the trickiness of some of the issues we outline, we urge UCL to finally grip this issue firmly.

To ensure students' experiences of Teaching Rooms improve, we recommend that UCL should *urgently*:

- a)** Ensure that booked rooms are actually used, that unused bookings can be reported quickly and easily, and that those using the system thoughtlessly face some form of consequence.
- b)** Ensure teaching is scheduled equally across the week, and that space is not underutilised on Monday mornings and Friday afternoons, as is presently the case.
- c)** Ensure that staff with multiple responsibilities cannot make themselves unavailable for teaching at certain times based only on individual preferences.
- d)** Investigate whether varied local and central ownership of teaching space currently enables us to use space effectively, and take forward changes in this area if it does not do so.
- e)** Invest in the systems required to carry out the above, including more sophisticated timetabling solutions if required.
- f)** Bring in experienced, senior, fixed-term project staff if the capacity to drive this work forward at pace does not exist, recognising the enormous impact this issue is having and will continue to have on students' experiences and UCL's reputation.

2. Module Allocation

The Union are delighted to see the examination timetable published on time this year, but were sad to see this only achieved at the cost of students feeling that they had insufficient time and information to make module choices for term two. On balance, students overall do not appear to have gained.

If it is possible in future to produce an examination timetable at a slightly faster pace, even by a week, a trade-off between producing an early exam timetable and enabling flexibility early in term two would be possible. If this is not possible, defining more clearly the circumstances in which late module changes should and should not be allowed, based on the first year of operation, should enable greater flexibility, and reassurance for students that they will not be ‘trapped’ in a module.

This change has highlighted the poor quality of information made available to students on many of their modules. Baseline standards for module information, alongside innovative practices such as making a sample lecture available electronically, must be taken forward with urgency.

Lastly, student feedback provides a clear steer that what students wanted most was guidance on where their expectations should be when selecting modules. UCL’s highly open approach to module selection is appreciated by students to an extent, but usually just results in disappointment and timetabling challenges.

Last year, we recommended that UCL should initiate a “*consultation with students on whether approaches to module choice should be more limited or capped, in order to provide them with a more accurate and honest assessment of what is realistic, and bearing in mind the positive impact this could have on the allocation of teaching space*”.

We strongly believe this is still required. Conversation at the Union’s Education Conference indicated that students are likely to be supportive of a narrower set of curated module choices, on which they have a strong possibility of being accepted, compared to current practice.

To improve students' experience of module allocation, we recommend that UCL:

- a)** Investigate whether systems or processes which would deliver an examination timetable at a faster pace are available.
- b)** Develop through consultation, and issue early in term one, outline guidance to students and staff on term two module selection.
- c)** Set out and ensure compliance with a baseline set of information about every UCL module.
- d)** Invest in the systems required to enable staff to easily offer sample online lectures from previous years as part of module information.
- e)** Start a consultation with students, or work with the Union to consult with students, on beneficial options for rationalising module choices.

3. Assessment Criteria

A significant amount of work has gone into ensuring students have assessment criteria available to reflect on. Despite this, a significant number of students report either not having assessment criteria, or having assessment criteria which they do not find useful.

Anecdotally, it seems that whilst some parts of UCL have developed criteria that describe generic learning outcomes, there is little linkage between the learning outcomes of modules and programmes and the assessment criteria which students are being given. Students would like assessment criteria relevant to each module or assessment, not one set of criteria relevant to every assessment.

This should not be a surprise when considered carefully; developing one set of assessment criteria for whole programmes or whole departments requires either very uniform assessment, or very vague criteria.

Both the indications from this year's student feedback, and our desire for diversified assessment, should point us towards the need to develop detailed and specific assessment criteria as a priority.

To ensure students have assessment criteria that work for them, we recommend that UCL:

- a)** Conduct research, or reappraise existing research into the kinds of assessment criteria most useful to students.
- b)** Ensure that learning outcomes within programmes and modules are accessibly written and relevant to a student audience, and encourage these to be shared with students.
- c)** Review the accessibility of learning outcomes to students, and the criteria which will be used when these learning outcomes are to be assessed, as part of the Programme & Module Approval process, encouraging linkage between learning outcomes and assessment criteria.
- d)** Take further steps to ensure all students have relevant, useful assessment criteria for every module on which they study.



Student Staff Consultative Committees

Trends in Student Feedback



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May 2018

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