

Response to UCL's Student Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2019-21

Introduction

The following document details Students' Union UCL's response to the draft Student Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2019-21. In drafting our response to this strategy, we have consulted our policies, officers' mandates, and the views of the 40,000 students we represent across UCL.

The Students' Union welcomes the opportunity to feedback and help shape this strategy, which sets out an ambitious set of objectives that aims to create a cohesive, university wide approach to health and wellbeing at UCL, something which the Union has been lobbying on for many years.

The Union believes that the strategy is, in the main, very positive. The draft strategy has identified key areas for improvement over the next two years, which are achievable and will improve the lives of students at UCL.

The Union is collating an annual Wellbeing Report to be launched in 2019 which will bring together quantitative and qualitative feedback from students and key support services within the university. As co-creators of an open and inclusive environment, the Union hopes to continue its collaborative work with UCL Student Support & Wellbeing (SSW) to create a report that will inform our work each year and contribute to the creation of an inclusive and supportive community. It is envisioned that the Wellbeing Report will be annual chance for the Union and SSW to work together on shared goals in improving the wellbeing of UCL students.

As UCL is aware, we have developed a new Strategy, 125 and Beyond, to guide our work through to 2021. As outlined in our strategy, we want to lead the way on improving student wellbeing at UCL. We believe that the Union plays an important role in every part of our students' wellbeing. Engagement with our different activities and services helps our students build support networks, skills and experiences outside of their studies. Active lifestyles are inextricably linked to better mental wellbeing and we are truly passionate about making all aspects of UCL campuses active, engaging and welcoming for our members.

As part of our commitment on leading the way on improving student wellbeing, the Union's Wellbeing Report will make recommendations about how to make meaningful change within the Union and UCL to improve the wellbeing of students and support they receive. We would welcome the draft strategy to acknowledge this work and commit to responding and acting on the recommendations arising from our Wellbeing Report.

The Union has some broader concerns about the avoidance of recognising poor mental health as a key factor in many students' experience and its omission from the draft strategy and instead using wellbeing as a catchall.

Our response has some overall comments and then key comments relating to each objective. Our response promotes ways to integrate the Union as a co-creator of an open and inclusive environment, with a constructive and meaningful response to the consultation. The Union is thankful for an opportunity to input on such an important subject to our current and future members.

Overall Feedback

The vision set out within the strategy is particularly powerful and gives a clear mandate to both the provision within UCL Student Support & Wellbeing and the wider university on the what wellbeing should and will be at UCL. In saying that, the use of ‘compassion’ here may not be best placed as in some cases this can have connotations with pity rather than empathy.

The Union welcomes its involvement in the strategy and believes that there are a variety of ways that we can co-deliver on a shared vision, not only through Project Active and Volunteering but throughout the Union’s wide range of services and activities.

There is no direct mention of mental health within the draft strategy, something that is a defining factor in many students’ lives. In the Union’s 2016 [Heads Up Report](#), which surveyed 7.5% of the total UCL student population, it was found that one in four UCL students suffered from poor mental health. This is a strikingly high figure and stresses the need for mental health to be addressed within this strategy.

The Student Health and Wellbeing Strategy is a key document for staff and students, and so the language and phrases used need to be clear – in this the Union believes that being explicit about what constitutes as ‘health’ is important and would favour the use of ‘physical, mental and social wellbeing’ throughout the strategy.

Objective 1

Addressing the need for a whole-university approach to student health and wellbeing is something that the Union greatly supports, we are committed to campaigning for a universal approach and are delighted to work with UCL on establishing a framework that will enable this.

In order for a whole-university approach needs to permeate every aspect of student life and should be embedded across all policies, cultures, curricula and practice. The draft strategy rightly identifies that senior management, academic units, professional services, the Union and students themselves need to take responsibility and actively contribute towards this endeavor. However, the Union as the representative body of our 40,000 students should be considered as a crucial partner in harnessing and delivering a truly whole-university approach.

The Union would welcome further commitment from UCL within the strategy to develop and deliver this whole-university approach.

Action 1A, the Union welcomes the establishment of this Strategy Group and look forward to being consulted on its composition. We feel that this group would be best served with adequate representation from students and that consideration is given to whether the group should be co-chaired by the Union to strengthen the commitment to working together on this whole-university approach.

Action 1D ties in closely with our priorities and the findings from our Heads Up Report which recommended the need for a “designated staff member should offer pastoral support and receive necessary training to manage students experiencing mental health distress”. The Union believes that UCL should invest in the training and development of staff across the University, to enable and empower staff to provide adequate support and guidance on student health and wellbeing issues. We would welcome a commitment to working closely with UCL on the development of this training and development offer such that it addresses the needs of the student population.

Action 1E, the Union leads on work with students on creating a culture of inclusivity, compassion and student wellbeing. The Union has spearheaded campaigns and initiatives to educate and support students in creating a supportive environment that champions wellbeing and would welcome the involvement of UCL, principally with Student Support & Wellbeing, to reach marginalised groups and grow our work in this area, alongside the Union's liberation networks.

Objective 2

Belonging is a key factor in a student's experience and lies at the heart of the Union's work and the recognition of its diversity within the draft strategy is great to see.

The Union goes to great lengths to welcome students to UCL over the first few weeks and would welcome the opportunity within this draft strategy to formalise how the Union's welcome activities supports and complements that of UCL's.

The use of the term transitioning in relation to adjusting to University conflicts with the use of the word for people transitioning gender. The Union believes a different term would be better suited here so as to not misinterpret this objective.

Alongside the commitment to reviewing the UCL Transitions Programme in the UCL Education Strategy, it would bring greater coherence for this objective to acknowledge the review and build on the outcomes of this review. Furthermore, greater alignment with the development of the UCL Introductory Programme would also improve upon taking a whole-university approach towards the welcome and induction of new students to UCL.

We would welcome greater clarification on the commitment in **Action 2F**, in terms of what this would look like.

Action 2G opens up a great number of opportunities for incoming students to meet and learn from the experiences of current students who share similar identities and experiences to them. The Union has a number of student networks, such as the Disabled Students' Network and Student Parents and Carers Network, that help students to settle in, build their knowledge and make meaningful relationships with current students. We would welcome acknowledgement of these existing student networks and a commitment to working together to improve the student experience.

Objective 3

Through our work with students, the term "self-care" is unsupportive of the creation of the university environment that the draft strategy is trying to develop across UCL. The term can be particularly concerning for students experiencing poor mental health where self-care, or the lack of, is not the reason for their poor mental health.

Action 3A is a really positive step, the Union has recognised that students engage well with wellbeing activities when this relates to their ability to succeed.

Action 3B would benefit from being reframed to outline more proactive work in response to issues of which affect UCL students, in the hope of assisting them to manage and overcome these challenges.

Action 3D aligns with many areas of work within the Union. Through our work on creating peer support relationships, the Union found that the networks most beneficial to students are those that they self-identify with such as, liberation networks, and clubs and societies. This commitment could expand its purpose to identify the Union as a key area for the development of student networks, embedding the Union as the main place for students to learn new skills and learn from each other during induction and beyond. This is something that is particularly relevant for our postgraduate and international students.

Objective 4

This objective is clear and aligns to the strategic vision. It explores the potential of UCL's student support services in order to support students with their mental health. We welcome the adoption of a care-based model to ensure that all students are adequately supported.

The Union looks forward to working with UCL on developing and delivering the range of activities outlined in this objective.

Objective 5

Action 5A, one of the key barriers to students disclosing a disability is the negative stigma attached. UCL should be proactive in destigmatising disability so students feel able to disclose and therefore be offered consistent and timely support on doing so. We would welcome commitments to working with us on combating this stigma so that we have a more accessible and welcome environment for students to disclose their disabilities.

Action 5C, we welcome UCL's commitment to further embedding an inclusive learning and living environment which benefits all students. The Union works within the social model of disability and would like to see this explored more explicitly within the strategy.

Objective 6

Great steps have been taken to further the understanding of wellbeing on the part of UCL staff, which has greatly benefitted the student body. Research students have often fallen in the gulf between student and staff provision, to see a more coherent strategy would support a greater number of our students.

Action 6B, the Union would like to see [Mental Health First Aid](#) and suicide prevention training to be mandatory for all UCL staff.

We welcome the development of the Student Health and Wellbeing Strategy, we look forward to working in true partnership with UCL on building an inclusive and supportive community amongst staff and students, that promotes wellbeing, enables academic success and underpins an inspirational student experience.