



Response to the Education Strategy 2016-21

UCLU
University College London Union

Introduction

The following document is UCLU's response to the draft Education Strategy 2016-21. This is our second formal response, following on from a submission in July 2015 which addressed the most pressing student issues as we saw them.

In compiling both of these responses, we have examined our policies, our mandates as elected officers, and the views of student representatives across UCL.

As UCL's strategy has been developed, UCLU officers have had the opportunity to feed in their thoughts by different means, including through formal meetings and informal conversations. We are pleased with the extent to which we have been involved with, and have already helped to shape, the draft being consulted on.

In our view, the draft Education Strategy is highly effective in identifying, in broad terms, key priorities for further development and improvement over the next five years. We welcome the headline objectives set out.

However, we have some concerns about the priorities set out under certain objectives, and would suggest different or additional priorities in some cases. In one instance, namely objective four, on student engagement and leadership, we believe the priorities and their descriptions require a comprehensive rethink.

Our response considers each objective in turn, setting out our thoughts on the priorities identified. We have aimed to provide a constructive response, that we hope will make the final strategy more fruitful, powerful, and ambitious, and ensure it has the full confidence of students.



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Education & Campaigns Officer

Objective 1 - To move towards personalised student support, from first contact to graduation and beyond

UCLU welcome the extent to which priorities we previously identified are reflected in this draft. We are very happy with the commitment to work on 'belonging'-based interventions and mentoring schemes for BME students to make UCL more welcoming, as part of an overall strategy to eliminate differential attainment. Additionally, our lobbying for improved support for students who do not use English as a first language appears to be reflected in an ambition to expand academic writing programmes and ensure all students have access to these.

We hoped that personal tutoring would be mentioned under this objective as here at UCLU we wish to see greater efforts to improve patchy and inconsistent personal tutoring. Improving personal tutoring at UCL will be highly complex, and whilst the work that has been done over the past year will help, there remains much to do. There does not appear to be a shared institutional sense of what personal tutoring is, or should be trying to achieve. UCLU believe that a strategic approach and commitment of time and effort will be required in order to ensure that the roles and responsibilities of staff and students in relation to personal tutoring are clear and fulfilled.

UCLU welcome the core course concept, though we have noted previously our hope that it will not be made compulsory. Doing so may provide difficulties for students who have paid employment or internship opportunities prior to beginning study at UCL. We would also like UCL to prioritise the accessibility of any online course that is developed, both for disabled students and for students who may lack web access, particularly if they are from countries with poor internet infrastructure.

The objective on academic writing, as presently written, does not explore the specialised support that students with severe difficulties with the English language may need. A generic programme of academic writing for all students, whilst very welcome, will not improve the experience of students facing such difficulties. We would be grateful for clarification on whether part of this work will provide this support, or whether additional steps will be required. We would like to find out more about the planned work on UCL Scholars, as we are presently yet to see the detail of these proposals.

Objective 2: To embed the Connected Curriculum across the university

The priorities outlined under this objective have been discussed extensively with UCLU over the last couple of years as the Connected Curriculum initiative has taken shape. We strongly welcome the continued commitment to this strategic approach.

It is very encouraging to see an explicit commitment to our joint work on Liberating the Curriculum given in this draft, and we look forward to seeing the results of this important work.

Our consultation response previously highlighted academic promotion and reward criteria as a priority. We have set out a view previously that parity of esteem between teaching and research will be vital in delivering the Connected Curriculum. Whilst this is outlined to an extent in the enablers section of the strategy document, UCLU feel that a specific comment under this objective would demonstrate UCL's commitment to resolving this complex issue.

Objective 3: To address and resolve the persistent challenges of assessment and feedback

UCLU believe that addressing assessment and feedback as a headline strategic objective is a bold and welcome response to student concerns. Highlighting a specific aspect of teaching and learning such as assessment and feedback in a strategic document is a big statement about how seriously UCL intend to take this issue.

Whilst ideally we would like to see some more concrete objectives set out, we understand that there remains work to do to assess the complex causes of longstanding, deeply-felt dissatisfaction with assessment and feedback. Ensuring that assessment criteria are available in advance and clearly-communicated is a good starting point, and should enable discussion between students and staff of potential issues in advance. We hope this will be the beginning of more ambitious work in the future to allow students and staff to jointly review and shape assessment criteria.

We would like to see more ambitious timescales than those the draft presently sets out. The current priorities envision completing a review of Assessment and Feedback by 2018, and beginning to implement the proposals in the years following this. We would hope it is possible to complete this review and begin to implement proposals earlier.

In our response, we highlighted a number of specific issues, including ensuring a wider range of assessment practices, reducing overall assessment load, and anonymous marking. We are not clear whether these are within the definition of the priorities already outlined, but would like to see them considered as part of this area of work.

A commitment to 'new forms' of assessment is interesting, though slightly unclear. We would like to see efforts to diversify assessment methods using existing methodologies as well as potentially introducing new ones. A number of students at UCL are assessed only on written examinations and would welcome the opportunity to develop other skills during the course of their studies.

Drawing on relationships with partner UK schools to inform transition around assessment is an interesting and welcome idea. We would like to see this work incorporate overseas schools too, given that over one in three UCL students are from overseas.

Lastly, whilst the focus of much of this work is on assessment, we would like to see continued efforts to ensure students receive feedback on their work in time to inform subsequent learning and assessment. We welcome the emphasis in the new Programme Leader role on rationalising assessment across different modules, and hope they have a role to play in ensuring this happens.

Objective 4: To create cultures of student engagement and leadership

UCLU very much welcome the overall thrust of this objective. However, as noted in our introduction, we found the description of student engagement and the planned objectives a little confused. We would very much like to see a clearer and more ambitious approach that aims for deep engagement and student partnership.

The supporting text contains important elements which we agree with; it notes the importance of involving students directly in the creation and shaping of policy and practice at all levels, describes UCL as a community of scholars, and begins to discuss notions of partnership between staff and students.

However, the text also describes students as ‘sophisticated consumers’, and notes a need for students to feel ‘rewarded for their financial and personal investment’. These concepts are fundamentally at odds.

UCL’s students are not entitled to expect to be an equal part of decision-making because of the money they will pay, but because of the rights and responsibilities students and staff have towards one another, as human beings inhabiting a shared university community. If UCL sees students as partners, it should tell them so, but if it tells them they are consumers, this will self-perpetuate. UCLU believe students are partners, and that this should permeate every aspect of policy, communication, and the priorities set out in this strategy.

As NUS’s *A Manifesto for Partnership* [2012] notes:

Conceiving of students as consumers is a thoroughly impoverished way of describing the relationship between students and their institutions, which ought to be one of mutual trust, care and respect. The power held by consumers is not the power to intervene and change things, it is the power to ‘like’ or to ‘recommend to a friend’, or to make a choice between five identical glossy marketing brochures. The consumer never grows, is never challenged, is never made to understand the vastness of the knowledge that exists and that has yet to be created. The consumer is not asked to imagine unthought-of possibilities.....

Simultaneously, the consumer model reduces complex interactions to mere transactions and de-values the role and expertise of educators.

Similarly, the QAA’s expectation for Chapter B5 asks universities to “take deliberate steps” to engage students “as partners in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience”.

Notions of student partnership, and deep, meaningful involvement with enhancement activity, are also in line with the thinking around the Connected Curriculum initiative. If UCL and UCLU wish the boundaries between producer and consumer to break down, then we must abandon the concept of students as consumers, and embrace a culture of partnership.

UCLU would like to see much more ambitious priorities outlined under this objective, in order to develop the culture and practice of partnership between staff and students.

The length at which student surveys are discussed would imply a continued emphasis on a transactional, 'You Said, We Did' approach to student involvement, which would reinforce existing divides between staff and students. As is rightly noted, surveys *can* be a part of student engagement if they represent a starting point, rather than an end goal. However, the draft strategy does not seem to envision further initiatives beyond this point, or is not specific about these.

Our ideal concept of student partnership involves the relationship between UCLU and UCL exemplifying the partnership between staff and students. That is why we were disappointed that UCLU, as the representative body of students, are not mentioned in this objective. We have already worked together for several years to develop the StARs (Student Academic Representatives) scheme, which ensures student representative structures are in place and provides training, support, encouragement, resources, and recognition for student representatives. Our Sabbatical Officers work closely with UCL in almost every aspect of decision-making to ensure students views are an integral part of decision making, and we also jointly support students' involvement in quality assurance and enhancement.

We should build on the successes of this approach. UCL and UCLU should jointly own and support initiatives for student representation and engagement, and mutually agree the way in which these will work. UCLU believe that enabling "students to participate in creating and shaping policy and practice at local and institutional levels" is at the heart of our mission as a Students' Union, and would hope to be jointly involved in the creation and delivery of new student engagement schemes.

We believe that a wide range of opportunities should exist for students to engage with, influence, and change their education, both individually and collectively, inside and outside of formal representative structures. Students will engage differently; as opinionated individuals, experts, researchers, and as representatives. We believe that for student engagement to be most effective, we should expand the opportunities available for individual engagement, but also ensure this feeds into collective, representative decision-making structures. This will require us to integrate the work of UCLU and UCL much better than is presently the case.

Whilst we welcome a commitment to continuing to find new areas to engage students in their education, committing to doing so solely under the ChangeMakers banner would represent a continued growth in student influencing and decision-making running parallel and separately to UCLU.

An ambitious set of goals for developing a partnership approach and more effective student engagement, in our eyes, would commit beyond what is presently set out to:

- Developing a joint UCL/UCLU Student Partnership Strategy, describing the different ways in which we will support students to individually and collectively engage with their education
- Developing a high-level, cohesive, joint approach to the planning, implementation, oversight, and integration of student engagement initiatives, including StARs, Changemakers, and other forms of student engagement.
- Ensuring decision-making is timed and structured in a way that is accessible to and instils confidence in students
- Developing clear and enhanced policy on student representation
- Continuing our joint work to deepen student involvement in quality assurance and enhancement

UCLU are aware that this is a critical take on this objective. We hope this is read in a spirit of constructive engagement, and look forward to working with UCL to get this right, as partners.

Objective 5: To review and revitalise our approach to postgraduate taught education

UCLU would like to see a clearer way forward on improving postgraduate taught provision set out. However, we understand the need to analyse before acting, and would not wish to suggest starting work before this thorough analysis is undertaken. The quality of postgraduate taught education appears to be more variable than undergraduate education, for a variety of reasons which should be assessed in full, and we very much welcome this objective as a whole.

UCLU believe that it would be wise to work closely with postgraduate taught students to identify 'quick wins' that can be worked on whilst a review is ongoing. Cumulatively, these could have a large impact. We would welcome being involved in a programme of work to do this during the early years of the strategy.

Part of this work could also involve looking at priorities identified under other objectives in the strategy that would have a particular benefit for postgraduate taught students and could be accelerated. For example, improving language support provision is much more key for postgraduate taught students, as they are here for a shorter period of time.

Similarly to objective three, we would like to see more ambitious timescales, and aim to have completed a review and implemented its recommendations prior to 2021.

Objective 6: To develop a teaching estate that is fit for purpose

UCLU are pleased that this objective captures many of the priorities we raised in our original consultation response, committing to improving the quality and quantity of space available to students, as well as the organisational issues which exacerbate space constraints.

We raised a number of other points in our original response which we are not sure will be taken forward. It may be that these have been considered, and would fit under objectives already outlined in broader terms, but they bear repeating at this stage.

We recommended bringing forward module selection to allow timetabling and room allocation to take place at an earlier stage. We also wanted to see a long term ambition to allocate physical space in such a way that as many departments as possible have a physical home and student space such as a common room. This will help to reinforce a strong sense of academic community.

We are happy to see the commitment to reducing the pressure on physical space. As more flexibility becomes possible, we would like the strategy to examine how this will enable UCL to reduce the pressure on students' timetables. We would be particularly happy to see commitments to ensuring students have a lunch break, minimising long stretches of classes without a break, and reinstating free Wednesday afternoons for as many students as possible.

Under this objective a clear student priority would be examination timetables. We strongly welcome the moves that have been made this year to publish these earlier, which will be hugely beneficial. However, some students still face difficult stretches of back-to-back examinations, which should be minimised or eliminated where possible.

We would like to see the final strategy include a clear commitment to improving the physical accessibility of the UCL campus. Our Try It! Campaign last year highlighted the barriers many disabled students face simply to navigate the teaching estate and reach the rooms in which their teaching is held.

Additionally, as this strategy is an overarching one, we feel it would be helpful to see reference to the excellent E-learning and Library Services strategies, elements of which are highly relevant to this objective.

Objective 7: To establish a digital learning infrastructure that connects students with each other, with staff, with research and with the wider world.

UCLU believe that this area of the strategy is ambitious and specific. It reflects a number of student priorities, and sets out plans for new initiatives, some of which appear to be sector-leading.

The commitment to taking forward lecturecast on an 'opt-out' basis is strongly welcomed by UCLU. We are aware of the legitimate concerns staff have on some specific issues, and would like to be part of shaping the opt-out criteria.

We would welcome a commitment of support for staff to use e-resources such as lecturecast as tools to augment face-to-face learning, rather than simply resources in their own right. This could include support for staff using lecturecast to 'flip' lectures.

We are also pleased to see reference to a 'connected learning environment' tool. In our initial response we expressed a desire that tools which facilitate online student interaction and/or peer-to-peer learning are developed, and we hope this can be included as part of this initiative.

As with the previous objective, we feel this objective could benefit from referencing relevant points from the existing E-Learning and Library Services strategies.

Objective 8: To expand our extra-curricular offer in response to student feedback about employability

UCLU are strongly supportive of this objective, and we agree that many students at UCL are thinking about and preparing for their future careers throughout their studies. The priorities set out under this objective are also welcome, though we do have additional comments which we hope are considered.

As a general comment, our initial submission highlighted our belief that many students enter higher education in order to open up employment opportunities they find personally motivating, meaningful, and fulfilling, not just highly paid. This strategy does not conflate the two, but this does sometimes happen, and UCLU believe employability is not just about typical graduate professions.

We also believe this strategy could reflect on the other benefits that extra-curricular opportunities offer which may not directly impact employability. This would include the support for physical and mental wellbeing they provide, and life-skills such as budgeting and dealing with difficult scenarios. Personal development can support employability indirectly, by ensuring graduates are well-rounded and resilient.

Whilst we are pleased to see UCL and UCLU's joint work through the VSU (Volunteering Services Unit) is mentioned, there is no mention of UCLU's other activities. We also support thousands of students who are involved in activities and take up leadership positions across our societies, sports teams, and representative roles. These students take on significant responsibilities and develop transferable skills, often through formalised training and development sessions. Additionally, we provide hundreds of paid employment opportunities for UCL students across our organisation in many different roles, which gives them direct experience of employment.

UCLU would welcome the opportunity to work with UCL in a joined-up way on how much of our activity could further support personal development and employability. As perhaps the leading providers and supporters of UCL students' extra-curricular opportunities, we have much to add to this work.

As an additional comment, two important ways of enabling students to take full advantage of extra-curricular opportunities are ensuring students have sufficiently flexible timetables, and providing space within which activity can take place.

We have reflected on this to some extent under objective six, but it is worth emphasising that a common, free Wednesday afternoon would allow much greater scope for all kinds of extra-

curricular activity. Similarly, access to space is vital for student-led activity to take place. The restriction on room bookings in the early weeks of the year is a particular difficulty for student societies who wish to engage their membership soon after joining, and is only one example of many sources of frustration that students seeking space for activity face at present.

Objective 9: To extend our global reach, reputation and impact from Life Learning through an extensive portfolio of cutting-edge short courses for career advancement and personal growth.

UCLU welcome this area of work and have few comments to add.

One area of concern we have is the potentially different demands that active professionals and full-time students may have of taught modules that are part of both types of programmes. In some instances, a tension may be introduced where requirements are different. We hope to see a commitment to supporting academic staff to develop sufficient flexibility to manage competing demands should they come about.

Additionally, we urge cautious and carefully controlled growth of additional programmes at a time when staff-time and teaching space are already close to capacity.

