Education Committee

7 April 2022

Confirmed Minutes

Present:
Professor Kathy Armour (Chair)
Dr Ali Abolfathi; Ms Arifa Aminy; Professor Simon Banks; Dr Nicole Brown; Professor Sally Day; Mr Ashley Doolan; Dr Julie Evans; Professor Arne Hofmann; Professor Jane Holder; Mr Zak Liddell; Ms Blathnaid Mahony; Ms Viktoria Makai; Professor Chloe Marshall; Professor Paola Pedarzani; Mr Derfel Owen; Mr Mike Rowson; Dr Bill Sillar; Professor Sam Smidt; Dr Hazel Smith; Ms Lizzie Vinton and Dr Stan Zochowski.

In attendance: Dr Sam Duncan (for Dr Jo Fraser-Pearce); Ms Sally MacKenzie; Ms Katie Price; Ms Jo Stroud (for Ms Fiona Strawbridge); Professor Simon Walker; Ms Alison Edridge (Secretary) and Mr Rob Traynor (Assistant Secretary).

Apologies for absence were received from: Mr Ayman Benmati; Mr Ian Davis; Dr Jo Fraser-Pearce; Prof Alistair Greig, Ms Junqing Guo; Ms June Hedges, Dr Joana Jacob-Ramalho; Dr Rachel King; Dr Elvira Mambetisaeva; Dr Helen Matthews; Mr Shivam Mulchandani; Prof Norbert Pachler; Professor Aeli Roberts; Dr Fiona Strawbridge and Prof Olga Thomas.

51. Introductions and Responsibilities of EdCom over the next twelve months

51.1. The Chair welcomed colleagues to the meeting and congratulated everyone who had contributed to the successful Education Conference on 6 April 2022.

51.2. It was noted that according to EdCom's Terms of Reference, it was responsible for matters relating to the quality of the student experience for taught programmes, the definition of UCL's Education Strategy and compliance with the OfS condition of registration relating to participation in the Teaching Excellence Framework.

51.3. EdCom was informed that the government had recently confirmed to the OfS that it wanted the results of the next TEF exercise published in early 2023, which would mean a submission window in autumn 2022 as set out in the recent OfS consultation. EdCom would be responsible for overseeing the narrative part of the submission to explain UCL's metrics and a Project Manager would be appointed shortly to coordinate the submission preparations. Greater weight would be placed on the narrative in the assessment process providing an opportunity to explain weaker metrics given that the majority of the metrics cannot be improved at this stage. It was unlikely that UCL would be able to achieve a Gold award given its student experience metrics – which is disappointing – so the aim was therefore to maintain a Silver

award. In the longer term, however, it was noted that EdCom should expect UCL to be positioned as highly for education as it was for research.

51.4. There were persistent challenges for UCL with regards to data on the quality of the student experience and there would be a focus on this over the next 10 years.

51.5. The financial context was challenging as no further funding from government was expected and income from student fees would continue to reduce in real terms. It was not feasible to increase international student fees to the level required to plug the funding gap. EdCom's role would therefore be to remove barriers which were within the control of the institution in order to address the persistent difficulties that staff and students were experiencing and reporting.

51.6. The Chair observed that she had heard much about staff perspectives on education at UCL since her arrival but that the student voice on the quality of their education experience seemed to be less prominent. There was a desire for staff and students to work together to identify quick wins to address the persistent challenges faced by the UCL community and to deliver UCL's ambitions for education.

51.7. In relation to another issue raised by students, the SU Postgraduate Officer noted that she had received requests from students for reinstatement of the Student Learning Fund, which had compensated students in the past whose teaching had been cancelled due to strike action. The Chair noted that the savings arising from staff not being paid for days they were striking had been paid into the Student Hardship Fund to support students most in need and there was no mechanism to refund fees on a per lecture basis. The need for further mitigation would be determined once it was known whether the mitigations put in place by departments had enabled to students to meet their learning outcomes.
Action: Chair to meet with the SU Postgraduate Officer to discuss the approach to strike mitigation.

51.8. It was noted that UCL's TEF Silver award in 2017 was partly based on the explanations given for the metrics and the work being undertaken to improve them at that time. The 2017 submission would be available to assessors in the next TEF and it would therefore be critical to demonstrate in UCL's narrative the progress that had been made on previous commitments. Students would make an independent submission as part of the assessment process, and the ideal position is where the student and institutional submissions are broadly aligned.

51.9. The government was currently focused on ensuring that institutions were providing the in-person teaching that they had advertised to students for the forthcoming academic year. The Education Secretary had recently asked the OfS to carry out on-site inspections of universities where there were concerns about the amount of in-person teaching being provided or the quality of online provision. However, in the medium-term, there was likely to be more flexibility with regards to blended delivery, which

would enable certain activities, where appropriate, to be delivered online enabling staff to use in-person time with students more effectively.

52.   The Academic Board (AB) minutes and Actions Required for the Education Priorities and Programmes and Strategy Paper

52.1.   Received – the paper at EdCom 1 (21-22) containing the extract of the minute of AB's discussion on 15 March 2022 of the draft Education Programmes and Priorities paper, and the paper at EdCom 2, the Education Priorities and Programmes paper of the Strategic Plan. AB had charged EdCom with consulting on the draft paper and producing recommendations on an updated draft along with an Academic Impact Statement covering each component of the proposal separately. Following deliberation by AB, EdCom would be required to produce a final document, which would be considered by AB for final approval alongside all other Strategy documents.

52.2.   It was noted that an institution-wide consultation process on the paper was ongoing and would close on 29 April 2022. A Town Hall meeting attended by around 400 staff and students had taken place earlier in the week as part of the process. It was agreed that a parallel consultation by EdCom should not take place and that EdCom should consider the feedback received from the existing consultation. It would be useful for EdCom to focus on Project 1 (Engage with the UCL community to design and deliver a UCL Teaching and Assessment Framework) and the overarching principles on which agreement could be found in order to inform the rest of the paper. Concern was expressed about the timescales for consultation and the capacity of staff to absorb the proposals. EdCom was informed that the consultation process had been extended. An Enablers paper would be published in early May and work on the Strategy would continue over the summer.

52.3.   It was queried when the academic year structure proposals and move to semesters would be implemented as staff were concerned that there was insufficient time to prepare for this. It was confirmed that this is a medium/long term plan. In addition to the imperative to allow departments and faculties to prepare, consumer protection legislation required term dates to be published significantly in advance of students arriving so a plan to introduce semesters would be known 2-3 years in advance.

52.4.   The importance of clearly communicating the sequence of events for the development and implementation of the Strategy was discussed. There appeared to be a misconception that the paper was a fait accompli when it is written clearly as an intention to gather views on the proposed projects and whether they were the right ones. Further consideration would be given to how to better communicate this. **Action: Katie Price**

52.5.   In relation to Project 1, EdCom discussed what would be considered a reasonable amount of time for an academic member of staff to spend on teaching and research. There were various workload allocation models in operation across UCL and

variability as to the expectations for staff in particular roles to undertake teaching. It was suggested that it would be useful for the need to address workloads to be identified as a principle given the ambition for education to have the same status and success as research, and for education leadership roles to have better recognition. **Action: Chair to ensure this element is included in draft principles**

52.6. Student support needs had increased as a result of the pandemic and further work was required to ensure appropriate triaging of students to the right sources of support. It was not sustainable for academic staff to provide wraparound support to students, and they were not necessarily qualified to meet the range of support needs of students. This issue would be compounded by an increasingly diverse student intake.

53. Student Voice: What can we learn?

53.1. Ms Sally MacKenzie, Associate Director (Student Experience and Engagement Unit) gave a presentation on the key messages arising from the free-text student comments in the 2021 NSS and PTES. The presentation included a narrative of an international student called Grace and her experience based on amalgamation of actual survey comments from students. Challenges for Grace included navigating her programme and its organisation, making connections with other UCL students, accessing appropriate personal tutorial support, feedback on assessment, understanding assessment requirements and getting her voice heard by staff.

53.2. Key messages in the free-text comments included the following and they were supported by views expressed by students at recent focus groups:
- There were many positive comments about teaching and learning in the NSS and PTES and many students felt that staff had gone above and beyond during the pandemic.
- Taught postgraduate students reported more issues with student support than undergraduate students. Undergraduate students valued the support they received from Student Advisors and Transition Mentors.
- Assessment and feedback was an area of concern in both the NSS and PTES. In the NSS, quality of feedback attracted the highest number of negative comments and had been the lowest scoring qualitative question over the last 3 years. In the PTES, the highest number of negative comments related to the timing of assessments.
- Students reported that they felt lonely and disconnected at UCL and that it was difficult to make friends.
- There were a number of negative comments from undergraduate students about optional module choice and allocation, and the support provided for module choice.
- Programme structure was a common concern, with undergraduate students reporting that modules were disjointed and postgraduate students reporting that the second term was very busy and highly stressful,
- Students did not feel that they were listened to by staff and felt that their feedback would not result in positive change for them although it might benefit future students.

- There were a relatively small number of positive and negative comments about facilities.

53.3. The presentation concluded with what students were trying to telling UCL about their needs in the areas of assessment and feedback, organisation and management, student voice, student support and learning community. Overall, there was a mismatch between student expectations and what they were receiving, and a need to better manage student expectations.

54. Open discussion – the draft education paper in the context of current and future challenges for education at UCL

54.1. EdCom was invited to reflect on the presentation and the challenges identified. Concern and shock were expressed about the experience of 'Grace', for example being told by a personal tutor that UCL may not be for her and that when she sought tutor support she was told she should consider dropping out. The Chair noted that she had read all the free-text comments from NSS and PTES last year and many were very distressing. There was a disconnect between the perspectives of students and staff, but it was clear from the free-text comments that the issues raised were what students were experiencing from their perspective and that it was essential we became better at listening.

54.2. It was noted that UCL was ranked 130th in the country for Assessment and Feedback in the 2021 NSS. It was difficult for students to progress through their programme if they did not have timely feedback about how they were doing. Currently, students were often receiving feedback when they had nearly finished the next part of their studies and this was too late to inform their preparation for the next assessments. Assignments were often bunched together, particularly during the winter holiday period when students wished to spend time with their family, as well as at the end of the academic year. This was particularly difficult for students with caring responsibilities to manage. The current academic year structure was also challenging for staff. For example, staff were marking term 1 coursework assessments in the spring alongside teaching in term 2 and it was difficult to provide timely feedback to students. For modules not assessed until the end of the year, staff did not have timely access to information to identify how students were progressing and where awarding gaps were emerging.

54.3. It was suggested that a possible principle for the vision for education might be that UCL should be highly ranked in NSS and PTES for Assessment and Feedback and should be recognised for best practice within the sector. If this was agreed, this would be followed by work in Faculties to consider the reasons for student dissatisfaction, agree actions and identify good practice, which could be supported by institutional-level guidance. It was important to manage student expectations and provide consistency with regards to assessment and feedback, particularly where students were taking modules from different departments and experiencing significant variability. The solution to improving student satisfaction was not to provide more

feedback as this would just add to workloads, but to ensure that feedback was high quality and could be used by students in their future learning. For example, the revise and resubmit model used in research and also for dissertations, which provided formative and summative assessment opportunities alongside timely feedback that students were able to act on, could usefully be adopted for other types of assessment.

54.4. Many of the current challenges that staff and students were experiencing could be at least partially addressed by a semester system with assessment of modules taught in a semester completed by the end of that semester. This would also be in line with the expected future funding model that was set out in a recent DfE consultation on the Lifelong Learning Entitlement. No system was perfect and may require programmes to adapt accordingly, e.g. a revised approach might be needed for summer exams for term 1 modules which currently acted as a refresher to prepare students for the following year. There may be practice at other institutions that already had a semester system that it would be helpful for UCL to consider. It was clarified that there was no intention that a proposed semester system would extend the current length of the academic year for undergraduate students beyond the middle of June. Moving to semesters and completing assessments for modules within the semester in which they were taught would also provide a better experience for Affiliate students and would reduce administrative burden by removing the need for separate assessments and assessment deadlines.

54.5. The Chair noted that the proposed adoption of a standard module size of 30 credits had arisen from suggestions made to her by UCL staff. It could address the rather disconnected learning experience of many students, result in students being able to study in greater depth, reduce the bunching of assessments and reduce staff workloads as there were fewer components within programmes to manage thereby reducing administration. It was clarified that it was intended that if 30 credit modules were adopted, they would be delivered within one term/semester rather than across two. A member queried whether moving to 30 credit modules would make it more difficult to provide students with a high level of module choice. The Chair noted that UCL was currently unable to deliver the amount of choice that was advertised to students. A framework which permitted flexibility within a defined structure could be developed that would enable UCL to deliver what it advertised. There were examples of such frameworks within the UK and US that could be drawn on during the design process. A decision would need to be made as a principle about the amount of module choice that should be available to students and it was noted that we already have information from students on this.

54.6. Better module design was noted as a potential area that could improve the student learning experience. Issues that needed to be addressed included the use of formative assessment to support timely feedback, improving the way in which modules and learning outcomes were written, and ensuring that assessments were related to outcomes. There were existing tools for staff to support good module design

including assessment and feedback and it would be helpful to consider how staff could be supported to engage with these.

54.7. The Chair informed EdCom that she was planning to propose that UCL move away from the traditional anonymous end of term module evaluation form as this did not provide an opportunity to address issues to benefit the students who had raised them. The intention was to move to an ongoing 'dialogue' between students and staff through a module. For example, the focus could be on asking three questions on a weekly basis so that fixes could be implemented by the following week, such as 'Do you understand the module?', 'Do you understand the assessment?' and 'Can you access the resources?'. This could be supplemented by an end of term programme-level assessment by students, which would not be about evaluating individual members of staff but about ensuring that students were properly supported. Students would be taught to offer feedback in a professional manner, i.e. in a style that would be acceptable in their future workplaces.

54.8. Surprise was expressed about the relatively small number of student comments in last year's NSS and PTES relating to facilities which students had routinely complained about prior to Covid. Colleagues noted that there had been a loss of departmental space in recent years which led to staff and students becoming dispersed and was a barrier to building a learning community. The Chair noted that under-investment in the campus over several years had resulted in the quality of facilities becoming poor and it was now significantly behind many other institutions. UCL's tuition fee income was relatively high due to high student numbers so in theory it should be able to invest in improvements. However, it had a bigger research burden than other comparable institutions and tuition fee income was partly being used to support research.

54.9. There were a number of basic hygiene factors that needed to be addressed, which would improve the experience of staff and students. For example, if programmes were structured more effectively, this could reduce the high number of extenuating circumstances claims, which would free up staff time. It was noted that staff spent a significant amount of time writing student handbooks, which could be saved by improving the UCL student website and communications with students via other channels.

54.10. Members were broadly in favour of Project Three which would bring together Arena, with careers and student skills development to form a sector-leading Institute for Higher Education Development and Support. However, care should be taken to ensure that the work of Arena did not become diluted. It was suggested that this project could provide an opportunity to consider how student engagement with existing academic communication skills provision could be improved.

55. Vision and Aspirations for Education at UCL – draft 'principles'

55.1. This was discussed under item 54.

56. Next steps

56.1. AB had charged EdCom with consulting on the draft paper and producing recommendations on an updated draft along with an Academic Impact Statement covering each component of the proposal separately. Following deliberation by AB, EdCom would be required to produce a final document, which would be considered by AB for final approval alongside all other Strategy documents. The following was agreed:

   i.   EdCom endorsed the existing consultation on the Education Priorities and Programmes paper which would close on 29 April 2022. It would consider the feedback arising from the consultation and prepare a summary for Academic Board.
   ii. The feedback would be synthesised and themed for discussion by EdCom at its meeting on 9 June 2022. A presentation on the Enablers paper would be provided, which could be helpful in understanding how it was planned that student experience challenges identified by EdCom which were outside of its control would be addressed (e.g. physical and digital facilities).
   iii. The meeting on 9 June would take place in person and the time allocated would be extended to accommodate discussion of the Strategy and other EdCom business. EdCom would consider in due course whether it would be helpful to form sub-groups to consider particular themes.
   iv. Given that progress on any projects to improve education was reliant on the outcomes of Project One, it was agreed that in the summer term Faculties and departments would be asked to discuss and provide views on a set of draft principles, agreed by EdCom, on UCL's vision and aspirations for Education to inform a revised version of the paper
        Action: Chair to propose a first set of draft principles for discussion at the next EdCom meeting

57. Any other business

57.1. Derfel Owen, Interim Registrar, would be moving to the role of Director of Change and Improvement on 26 April 2022 when the newly appointed permanent Registrar took up their post and this was therefore his last EdCom meeting. EdCom noted its thanks for his contributions and wished him well in his new role.

58. Dates of Future Meetings

58.1. The dates of the EdCom meetings for the rest of the 2021-22 session were:

   - Tuesday, 26 April 2022, 14:00 - 16:30 on MS Teams
   - Thursday, 9 June 2022, 10:00 - 14:00 to be held in person (room TBC).
   - Reserved Meeting: Tuesday 19 July 2022, 14:00 - 16:30* on MS Teams

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