

To: UCL Council members

From: UCL's LGBTQ+ Equality Steering Group (LESG)

Re: UCL confirming its withdrawal from the Stonewall Diversity Champions programme and the Stonewall Workplace Equality Index.

Executive Summary:

1. The decision was taken in a unilateral fashion by UMC, in disregard of the express views of wide sections of the UCL community, in disregard for due process and transparency.
2. Academic Board is not representative of the diverse UCL community and did not provide an opportunity for those most directly impacted by the decision to speak or otherwise contribute.
3. The argument regarding Stonewall as a threat to 'academic freedom' on which the decision appears to have been based has not been clearly articulated and is not supported by evidence.
4. We are concerned that this is the first stage in a process of dismantling UCL's commitment to any external benchmarking in the EDI arena (e.g. Athena SWAN and Race Equality Charter).
5. UCL's recent track record on EDI matters does not inspire confidence that the proposed LGBTQI+ Implementation Group would provide an adequate replacement to the Stonewall schemes.
6. We fear that the way in which the Stonewall question was handled with exclusive weight given by UMC to Academic Board sets a worrying precedent for future EDI matters.
7. UCL's LGBTQI+ Equalities Steering Group (LESG) has been side-lined during the debate on Stonewall and looks set to be further disempowered by the Implementation Group. This will eliminate a key mechanism by which the UCL Community can hold college accountable.
8. Academic Board and senior leaders at UCL have severely damaged the trust of LESG and many LGBTQI+ staff and students at UCL, who believe that their rights and safety have been knowingly devalued by the institution.

Recommendation:

That the assessment process for UCL's involvement with Stonewall be reviewed and that the process be carried out again, with full transparency.

Dear UCL Council Members

In December 2021, UCL University Management Committee (UMC) made the decision to cut ties with Stonewall entirely and not re-join either the Stonewall Workplace Equality Index (WEI) or the Diversity Champions programme. The decision was based on a vote by Academic Board (AB), which recommended that UCL should not re-join the Stonewall Diversity Champions programme (59%) or the Workplace Equality Index (57%). The abrupt decision to leave Stonewall without having an alternative in place, when there had previously been an intention to submit to the 2022 Workplace Equalities Index, demonstrates a lack of commitment on the part of senior leaders to protect LGBTQI+ staff and students.

We write to express our grave concerns about both the decision and the process by which it was reached, on the following grounds:

1. The decision was taken in a unilateral fashion in disregard of the express views of wide sections of the UCL community:

Prior to the vote at AB, the matter of UCL's relationship with Stonewall had been voted on by the EDI Committee, UCL's LGBTQI+ Equality Steering Group (LESG), Out@UCL, Friends of Out@UCL, UCU and Unison. These entities represent both professional experts on the matter at hand and members of the UCL community who are personally affected. In each case, members voted for UCL to re-join both the Diversity Champions Scheme and WEI. Most of these votes were self-organised, reflecting the critical importance of this issue to large sections of the UCL staff and student community, and some were passed with significant majorities.

We are unaware of any attempt at wider community consultation by senior management and it is unclear how the viewpoints and recommendations of the wider community were weighted when UMC reached a decision. What is clear is that UMC disregarded the recommendation made by its own EDI Committee, which reached unanimous decisions in favour of re-joining both schemes.

2. Academic Board is not representative of the diverse UCL community and did not provide an opportunity for those directly impacted by the decision to speak or otherwise contribute:

Although AB is in principle open to non-Professorial staff, there are relatively few non-Professorial members. This fact is critically important because the decision over Stonewall is not a purely academic matter. It is a question that also has profound impact on perceptions of equality, dignity, rights, security and support for arguably some of the college's most marginalised individuals.

Although the matter under discussion directly related to trans people's experiences and rights at UCL, there was no trans representation at the AB debate, as far as we are aware. Therefore, there was no opportunity to rebuff any spurious claims or to highlight omissions or inadequacies in the communicated paper or in the viewpoints expressed during the meeting.

3. The argument regarding 'academic freedom' on which the decision appears to have been based has not been clearly articulated and is not supported by evidence.

The main argument made at AB against re-joining Stonewall was an alleged threat to 'academic freedom'. This concept is being widely used without clear definition and as if it is in opposition to trans rights. However, questioning trans staff and students' right to exist should not be up for debate and is prohibited by the Equality Act 2010.

No evidence has been presented to date where academic freedom has been limited or hampered due to UCL being a member of Stonewall. Moreover, involvement in the Stonewall schemes simply provides UCL with external guidance on best practice about LGBTQI+ matters, without conferring any obligation to act according to that guidance. It therefore remains unclear how academic freedom could be impacted, however defined.

The focus of UMC is clearly to protect 'academic freedom' at all costs and we are deeply concerned that UCL will continue to use this opaque justification to support further questionable decision making in relation to its EDI responsibilities in the future.

4. We are concerned that this is the first stage in a process of dismantling UCL's commitment to any external benchmarking in the EDI arena.

During the AB debate, which was held via Zoom, there was an open discussion in the chat function about also withdrawing from the Athena SWAN and Race Equality charters (REC). We believe this is a regressive viewpoint stemming from the same lack of diversity and awareness in AB membership that has led to the decision on Stonewall.

Athena SWAN and REC are highly regarded and widely used benchmarking schemes, which recognise commitment and work towards gender and racial equality. We believe that abandoning the schemes would seriously undermine UCL's hard work and achievements in these areas and send a very negative message to the UCL and wider community, just as the decision to withdraw from Stonewall has.

5. UCL's recent track record on EDI matters does not inspire confidence that the proposed LGBTQI+ Implementation Group would provide an adequate replacement to the Stonewall schemes.

The Race Implementation Group, which is the model being proposed for the suggested LGBTQI+ Implementation Group, has been labelled a success by university management. However, it is not possible to find where the Race Equality Implementation Plan (REIP) is published on UCL's webpages and therefore staff and students cannot assure themselves either of UCL's commitments in this regard or its timeline and progress towards meeting those commitments. There is an interim report dated December 2020, but that report does not contain any clear timelines, despite the webpage claiming that it sets out "the priorities and actions for the next 12-18 months". It is impossible to pinpoint anything that has happened over the past 18 months or whether any progress has been made.

In addition, UCL commissioned the Eugenics Inquiry Response Group in 2020/21 and in July 2021 a monitoring team was set up to ensure that progress against the final Response Group Recommendations Report stayed on track. Six months on, there have been no updates, which again damages confidence that any progress has been made during that time and questions who is holding UCL accountable to fulfilling on what it has promised.

6. We fear that the way in which the Stonewall issue was handled sets a worrying precedent for future EDI matters.

Originally, the EDI Committee was supposed to have the final say on the issue and make the recommendation that the university acted upon. Instead, it was decided within a relatively short timeframe that the issue would go to Academic Board, as it was deemed 'too political' to be decided by the EDI Committee alone. We worry that, in future, this will set a precedent for other EDI-based decisions that might be deemed 'political' and 'divisive' and that bringing issues to the Academic

Board will be used as a tool to regulate any EDI recommendations made by the EDI Committee and respective steering/implementation groups in future.

7. UCL's LGBTQI+ Equalities Steering Group (LESG) has been side-lined during the debate on Stonewall and looks set to be further disempowered by the Implementation Group. This will eliminate a key mechanism by which the UCL Community can hold college accountable

LESG has a direct and tangible connection to the communities that it represents via its members and via the networks that it manages, such as Out@UCL and the staff-led UCL Trans Network. Despite being run entirely by volunteers, LESG has a history of impact including exhibitions, talks and events at UCL, external activities and events such as Pride, and work with other groups such as qUCL, EDI, and HR. The efforts of LESG were positively reviewed and recognised as a strength in UCL's previous Stonewall submission.

Going forward, we believe it is essential that the UCL LGBTQI+ community has an active voice and can help steer work or decision-making that directly impacts their experiences. We believe there must be a clear mechanism through which the college and the Provost's Office can be held accountable and that an empowered LESG can be instrumental in this. It therefore must be urgently clarified which functions are to be fulfilled by LEIG/LESG, and how it will be assured that the Steering capacity of LESG is not undermined.

8. Academic Board and senior leaders at UCL have severely damaged the trust of LESG and many LGBTQI+ staff and students at UCL, who believe that their rights and safety are not important to the institution.

In the current circumstances, we, along with the majority of LGBTQI+ members of staff and students, feel in no way represented by the senior leaders at UCL, whose responsibility it is to protect the rights and interests of all its staff and students. Now that we have no external group to monitor the progression of LGBTQI+ rights at UCL, our university has become increasingly unsafe. While staff and students are being told to use the Report and Support, it is not fit for purpose. Several students and staff have not used the tool because they felt unsafe doing so and were concerned that in particular trans-based concerns would not be heard or acted upon.

UCL is a place of work and study for people who are from marginalised vulnerable groups, and we condemn the decision of Academic Board and senior leaders and the manner of that decision.

LESG feels that the process that was followed by UCL to review its involvement in the Stonewall Diversity Champions programme, as well as the Stonewall Workplace Equality Index were highly flawed.

UCL's LGBTQ+ Equality Steering Group requests that the assessment process for UCL's involvement with Stonewall be reviewed and that the process be carried out again, with full transparency.

Yours faithfully

UCL's LGBTQ+ Equality Steering Group (LESG)