MENTAL HEALTH RESEARCH AT UCL

STRATEGY
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Mental disorders are widespread in the UK population, affect people throughout the life course and cost the UK economy £35bn per year. Almost half of adults in England have had a diagnosable mental health disorder in their lifetime. People with severe mental health disorder have a substantially reduced life expectancy compared with the general population and this mortality gap represents one of the greatest health inequalities in the UK. Approximately half of all mental health disorders have their onset in childhood and adolescence, yet we have inadequate understanding of the developmental trajectories of mental ill health. We also know that physical and mental illness are intertwined, but have a poor understanding of the mechanisms driving the links between them. Current treatments are effective for many, but not all individuals, and we need better understanding of varied causal pathways to mental ill health in order to identify new treatments and to target interventions and preventative strategies more precisely.

There are unprecedented opportunities for UCL to make a difference in mental health research. UCL is a world leader in neuroscience, genomics and pharmacogenomics, psychiatric epidemiology and social psychiatry, developmental psychopathology, evidence based treatments, primary care trials, behaviour change, and education. To fully realise its mental health research potential and impact, UCL needs to commit to securing and strengthening the current research base, in terms of current and future research leaders and the infrastructure that enables cross-disciplinary research. UCL should maintain and strengthen its engagement with non-academic stakeholders, including policy makers, practitioners and user groups.

Strengthening its research base will enable UCL to be maximally competitive in mental health funding calls that seek to address the
longstanding underfunding of this area, relative to research into physical illness. We need investment in specific areas where we lack expertise and capacity, which will enable us to further capitalise on our current areas of research excellence. In part this can be achieved by strategic cross-departmental appointments. There is also a clear opportunity to improve institution-wide coordination and communication and to enable effective internal and external collaborations, including with non-academic stakeholders. The newly established Institute of Mental Health at UCL will facilitate these aims.

Mental health research capacity is limited in the UK. UCL can lead in effecting a step change in providing training for the next generation of mental health researchers and practitioners. This training should capitalise on UCL’s considerable research and education strengths, enthuse the brightest students to opt for training in mental health research, and devise more effective ways of training and retaining research practitioners who are active in both research and clinical settings. UCL should also lead by example in championing mental health among its members, adopting policies that promote and protect mental health for students and staff.

Mental health is a key strategic priority for UCL. We are developing a world-leading programme of research and training that goes from basic science to applied innovation. Realising UCL’s potential in mental health research, education and policy will benefit individual and public health, healthcare services and society.
VISION

For UCL to be:

1. The world leader in innovative interdisciplinary mental health research across the life-course, with an emphasis on advancing our understanding of the mechanisms underlying the development of mental illness and resilience.

2. At the forefront of leveraging cutting-edge research findings to close the translational gap between basic research and clinical practice.

3. An internationally recognised centre for the development of effective policy, prevention and intervention programmes, in both the general population and clinical service settings, delivering real improvement in the lives of people with mental illness and their families.

4. Leading the development of innovative training for a new generation of mental health scientists and practitioners, with a focus on mechanistic research and evidence based prevention and intervention.

The UCL Mental Health Strategy has been developed by the Mental Health Strategy Working Group.

For more information, visit www.ucl.ac.uk/mental-health/strategy

Last updated January 2019